“Subordination and autonomy: an out of date debate?
Lessons from European cases”

In the past, it was easy to distinguish between subordination and autonomy at work, the latter stressing a non-wage situation for the worker, who could be considered as a freelancer. On the contrary, the subordinated worker had to submit to a boss and receive a wage from him. Nowadays, the situation is not as clear. In many cases, the apparently independent worker is more autonomous than the registered autonomous one, and he is requested to be so.

The first part of the paper will emphasize the meaning of autonomy and underline the phenomenon of hybridisation that characterises the labour market today. According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living Working Conditions (1996), “autonomy refers to the possibility a worker has to control either the method of work or the order in which a job has to be executed”. Etymologically, auto-nomy does not mean “to do anything”, nor yet to allow someone to do so, but rather it means “to give oneself one's own (auto) law (nomos)”. In relation to job situations, autonomy is demanded of workers and does not differ greatly from the idea of responsibility. They are highly social issues; they depend on the social context they are related to.

Even in extreme situations, capitalism needs the worker to be autonomous. According to Castoriadis, “the struggle of men against reification is necessary for capitalism to carry on. An (industrial) fabric where workers are mere wheels, solely the executing machines of management orders, would stop within fifteen minutes” (Castoriadis, 1975: 149). So it belongs to the individual to give meaning to his actions; even in heteronomy, workers are not the “owners” of their work objectives. The subject does not disappear at all. Autonomy is an interiorised constraint, a self-limitation; it corresponds to “giving oneself one’s own laws, being conscious of doing so”.

Autonomy highlights the capacity to define one’s professional identity and to build the capacity of acting; moreover, it stresses the fact that, because work rules are necessarily incomplete, workers have to interpret and complete them. Autonomy seems to be the consequence of labour organisation transformations more than the result of the individual’s decisions. The individual has to become the person responsible for his own destiny and sociability.

The second part will develop several European cases so as to highlight the fading separation between subordination and autonomy, among them “transitional markets” and the Italian “co.co.co”. Both of these cases demonstrate the difficult task of dividing work situations. Consequences in terms of labour rights are taken into account the changing situation. “Transitional markets” consist of a negotiated rearrangement of all the working hours and activity in a country or a region” (Gazier, 2003). The second example, the
“co.co.co.” (collaborazione coordinata e continuativa) in Italy, results typically from the hybridisation of the labour market: the worker is neither autonomous nor independent, but both at the same time. The idea of autonomy stresses the mobility that the individual must have in order to plan his own future. It deals with the tendency towards individualisation in work situations.


European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1996, Time Constraints And Autonomy At Work In The European Union