"We have always been in crisis"

An ethnography of austere livelihoods in Northern Portugal

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CHAPTER 2

Petty Entrepreneurs: Crisis between Autonomy and Dependence

It is Monday afternoon and I am making my weekly visit to one of the many garage-based textile workshops around Guimarães that seem to be the only regional remnant of what was once a booming textile industry. This workshop belongs to Elvira and is a 20 square meter garage on the ground floor of her family home. Three sewing machines, four piles of plastic-wrapped fabric and two or three women workers fill the space. As the owner, manager and main worker, Elvira sits in her habitual position, hunched over a sewing machine that makes such a racket that I have to raise my voice to announce my arrival. Elvira and the two women at the other machines barely glance up, their routine hand motions never stopping: feeding a T-shirt hem into the machine, pinching a seam, patting it as it moves along, turning it over, punching the string in again, patting it along, trimming off excess strings, smoothing it out. With a casual flick of her left hand, another T-shirt lands on the pile behind Elvira, while her right hand, shaking slightly, already reaches for the next, pre-cut piece of fabric that is to become a Zara TRF T-Shirt.

It is an hour before Elvira takes her first break, cigarette in one hand, coffee in the other. “That makes 200 to go on this order”, she says to me in the hoarse whisper that is the result of a decade of breathing in the toxins used in cotton dyeing without adequate respiratory protection. I ask about this order: how is it going? when is it due? It is due Wednesday at 9am and one of Elvira’s co-workers needs to take tomorrow off: “I don’t know how am I going to do it… it will mean no sleep tomorrow and Joao [her husband] will have to go to work on the machine, too”.

In 2005, when the factory closed that she worked for since she was 16, as had her mother and grandmother before her, Elvira and several of her female colleagues were approached by members of the sales department and invited to buy some of the lighter machinery at favourable rates, provided they would be interested in continuing to produce
for the factory’s main client: Inditex. In order to afford the purchase and set up shop, Elvira was instructed to report to the Centro de Emprego (Job Centre) as unemployed, and ask to be signed up for one of the entrepreneurialism courses that were just then beginning to be offered. Upon completion, she qualified for mini-credit which permitted her to purchase three sewing machines, some furniture and production accessories. Generally, all other textile materials necessary for the ‘finishing’ step in the production process (sewing and embroidery) are provided by the brokers who organize her orders.

Over the next hours of my visit, we talk about the last decade Elvira spent running this garage workshop; the orders she gets from Inditex middle men who are virtually all former employees at the factory; and how she has to compete with ever more ‘independent producers’ over prices that already aren’t “vale a pena” [are not worth the pain], meaning that they don’t allow her to make ends meet. Her work routine is as follows: 12 hour days, 6 days a week during slow times, 16 hour days, 7 days a week when there is pressure to finish orders. Eventually, I ask her about the future, how she imagines it and where she would want it to go: “The future?” She is shouting over the noise of the machines, but apparently also in agitation. “There is no future, child. The future is tomorrow when I finish this order!” And then suddenly she smiles—her stress and anxieties seem momentarily forgotten—“but I am my own boss, an entrepreneur. I earn my own money. No boss can tell me to go to work, or not. I bow to no one. I did what my mother, my grandmother, my father could not […] I am independent in my work. desenrasco-me”

In this brief account, a middle-aged woman working as a small, so-called “independent” producer of textiles in the Vale do Ave describes her working life. Central to her narrative is the organization of her work and production: her daily routine of overworking; her lack of a stable, sufficient income; her powerlessness to affect any part of the process; and the resulting stress, difficulty and competitions she feels forced to engage in. These themes anchor her account in the material and social realities of petty production and reveal the structural dependencies inherent in outsourced and subcontracted labour. But, as we see above, this account is paralleled and countered by an alternative one: that of the confident, proud, self-reliant entrepreneur with the ability to be her own boss, combined with a teasing disdain for the dependencies and subservience of the wage labour of her parents and grandparents’ generation. This

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13 Inditex: the multinational textile company that owns brands like Zara, Massimo Dutti and others. Inditex is a global fashion corporation headquartered in A Coruna, Spain that owns various popular fast fashion brands such as Massimo Dutti, Pull&Bear, Zara and others. Inditex and its sizable number of subsidiaries, contractors and associates maintain a presence in over 22 countries, with Portugal in the bottom one third in terms of production output. Inditex has also widely and publically been called out for its exploitative employment practices. For a recent article on the situation in Galicia, see (in Castellano): https://www.elsaltodiario.com/inditex/asi-tejio-imperio-amancio-ortega-inditex-mujeres-gallegas-precariadad-sin-derechos?fbclid=IwAR217NFtCMR9gUMMNqY-oWRbyDycgjYLADPVPxkkA6u3ZFkPF3sSN-2z

14 Desenrasco-me: 1st person singular of verb “desenrascar-se”: to sort oneself out; to be self-reliant. More info on the local meaning of the verb found below, in footnote no.16
projection seems to be what propels Elvira’s desire to continue the current work, despite its inability to actually provide a sufficient income.

In Elvira’s narrative, subcontracted labour in the fragmented textile industry appears alongside the desire for autonomy. In her description, Elvira seems to be representing two potential selves. One is the ‘petty producer’, whose precarious situation is the result of structural dependencies outside of her control, and whose future is beyond reach. The other is the ‘autonomous entrepreneur’, a rational, profit-maximizing individual in control of her own situation, whose multiple social identities have been replaced by a dynamic of economic self-interest and competition. This underscores a salient theme among the petty producers I encountered in the Vale do Ave.

For Elvira, these two representations work together as constitutive elements of her self-conception. Yet they are also potentially at odds with one another. They are two seemingly irreconcilable conditions, that are both dependent on and autonomous from the integral structuring themes of the living and working reality of petty entrepreneurs in regimes of sub-contracting. It is this contradiction, as well as its seeming convergence in the figure of the petty entrepreneur that I interrogate in this chapter.

It is important to note however that these two aspects of petty production do not involve an explicit choice between clear cut identities. Instead, I came to think about these conflicting identities as, to a large extent, the result of the contradiction between what is attempted and what is achieved by petty entrepreneurs. Like most of the other people in this thesis, Elvira and her family live in the realities of the livelihood crisis. In their context, it is felt most profoundly in the absence of socially secure, wage labour. It appears that whatever avenues of organizing for livelihood still exist in textile production—once the region’s main source of income—are now limited to the type of petty production Elvira engages in.

While petty entrepreneurs might aspire to autonomy and economic self-sufficiency, every element of their productive organization continuously reminds them that they are not that which they aspire to be. Given these constraints on the actualization of their aspirations, the question becomes: what is it that particularly makes this form of work desirable? What is it about the idea of entrepreneurialism that commands such aspirational momentum, and how is such momentum achieved in the first place? Moreover, what relations of the production and material conditions of petty entrepreneurs undergird this construction? Finally, what kind of subjectivity and future visions are being produced by this outsourced and allegedly independent production mode? These questions highlight the contradictory field of values, identities and self-worth that guide people’s behaviours vis-à-vis the state-led institutional and ideological incentives aimed at remaking them.

In the following, I will interrogate the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction between autonomy and dependence to find out what it reveals about the structural realities of petty production. In doing so, I consider the crisis of livelihood from the perspective of labour and subjectivity. I begin by giving an overview of the textile industry’s restructuring following the textile trade’s liberalization in 2005. Next, by his-
toricizing the concept of “desenrascar-se”, I suggest that the aspirational momentum of entrepreneurship lies in its promise of autonomy and personal power within a historical local reality that has been structured by dependence and clientelistic relations. I then proceed to contrast the entrepreneurialism ideology with the material conditions of petty textile producers and underline the effective impossibility of making a living from this type of work, by charting the daily lives of home-based petty textile producers who are subcontracted to multinational fast fashion corporations. Finally, I extrapolate the profound impacts on identity, cosmology and subjectivity that arise from the personal and economic logic of entrepreneurialism and highlight the exacerbation of these trends within the crisis of livelihood.

My argument is that the parallel experience of autonomy and dependence produces a continuous clash of identities which articulates itself as a fragmented, struggling subjectivity. By showcasing how the productive organization and micro-workshops interact with the ideology of entrepreneurialism, I display a shift in personal and governmental logic. In this context, what is effectively highly dependent labour controlled from above is recast as autonomy. This not only allows the state to increasingly withdraw from the responsibilities of social reproduction, but pushes petty entrepreneurs into blatantly exploitative work relations.

It is necessary to make a methodological distinction. As I will show in the following paragraphs, the fragmentation of production into mini and micro-units was a trend in the regional textile industry long before the term entrepreneurialism and its accompanying ideology of self-sufficiency came to be attached to these working regimes. In Portugal, unlike in Northern European countries, the attempt to remake long-existing forms of production along ‘entrepreneurial’ lines did not become a policy objective until the early 2000s (Barbosa & Ferreira, 2015; Ferreira, 2012; Hespanha, 2009). It was thus not, as Harvey would have it, an integral part of the rise of global neoliberalism, but came instead to be what Peck (2002) would term a “fast policy transfer”: an institutional and policy response to the sudden withdrawal of global capital from the regional textile industry following the expiration of the Multi-fibre Agreement (MFA).15 For the sake of clarity in the text to come, it is therefore analytically useful to separate the organizational and ideological elements implied in the lives of petty producers. In the following, I use subcontracting to denote the productive organization of a regional economy. While I use ‘entrepreneurialism’ as an ideology that is superimposed onto this pre-existing productive organization by reference to an ideal type of neoliberal subjectivity.

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15 The MFA was an international agreement regulating garment import quotas to OECD countries as well as global taxes and tariffs on all fibre-based products, including both garments, shoe-wear and other textiles—essentially the GATT of textiles. The effects of its lifting are further problematized below.
Micro Enterprises and the Fast Fashion Industry

In many ways, what I observed in the field between 2015 and 2017 appears strikingly similar in structure to descriptions of early 19th century textile producing areas across Europe and throughout the 20th and 21st century in the global south (Collins, 1988, Fernandez-Kelly 1993, Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Prentice, 2017) and Southern European peripheries. Here, production is organized around merchants and middle men who assign all or part of a productive step to a third party, in this case predominantly female homeworkers (Goddard, 1996). Historically, textile mills that contract with apparel companies have most often met production demands by farming out some of the work to smaller, less regulated factories and workshops, which in turn follow the same trend (Collins, 2002; Beckert, 2014). As a practice, this cottage industry into authorized and unauthorized subcontracting chains have virtually always been a structural reality in the garment and footwear industries, a fact also suggested by Collin’s historical overview (2002). The same is true for the textile industry in the Vale do Ave. Historically, home-based work in textile, footwear and other areas was also a frequent income supplementation strategy for households in northern Portugal, and these strategies are most often spearheaded by women (Whitaker & Howard, 1953).

However, several aspects set also today’s situation apart from these historical parallels and these differences impact homeworkers, households and families. With the expiration of the multi-fibre agreement in 2005, the textile and clothing sector has become subject to the rules of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 2005. After more than 40 years of import quotas, the textile sector is now fully ‘liberalized’ in the neoliberal sense of deregulation and tax-free trade. The previously protected European textile production was stripped of its exclusive access to OECD markets, opening them up to international competition. Taking into account historical trends, it appears that many of the patterns in subcontracting and home-work observed during fieldwork are an outcome of this liberalization. In the wake of trade liberalization and global production chains, opportunities for secure employment in manufacturing textile manufacturing shrank, a fact that many of my interlocutors lament. But in addition to the breaking away of a once secure source of income but a new ideal type of subjectivity was introduced: that of the entrepreneur.

Fast Fashion in the Vale do Ave

Moving through the Vale do Ave by train or car, it is hard to believe that this land characterized by dilapidated factories, smoke-free chimneys and idle machinery is still among the top textile producing regions in the European Union. This region is one of the last places in Portugal where statistically, work in manufacturing outweighs work in the tertiary sector. It is an enclave of industrial productivity in an economy otherwise dominated by the service industry. In 2015 the National Statistical Institute
of Portugal (INE, 2015) estimated that the Portuguese textile industry accounted for 6% of the country’s total global exports. This sector also constitutes a solid 12% of the national manufacturing industry output; when compared with other textile producing regions in the EU27, it is topped only by Romania’s top-down production chains (13%). Around 80% of Portugal’s textile production continue in its historical strong hold, the Vale do Ave Region. But of this apparently continuing production very little is immediately visible. How can this apparently post-industrial landscape still be among the top textile outputting regions in Europe’s south?

In the immediate aftermath of the expiration of the MFA in 2005, one can note a massive statistical increase in the declaration and foundation of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) dedicated to one or several production stages that are associated with textile satellite industries (INE, 2005; 2006, compare figures given in the historical section of the introduction). Although these companies fall under the SME statistical umbrella, alternative statistics from the Centro do Emprego in Braga indicate that the majority of these are, in fact, small or even micro businesses and even more frequently, start-ups or companies comprised of one person. So, the textile production that still takes place in the Vale do Ave no longer occurs in the now defunct factories but in the backrooms of people’s residences, their garages and sheds, the rented basements of shops or gyms, as well as in the few industrial parks that have sprung up on the outskirts of the larger agglomerations since the mid-2000s. Garment production happens, in short, in exactly the sweatshops exemplified by that of Elvira’s above.

An aspect that sets the Vale do Ave apart from other textile producing areas appears to be the dependence of a large part of the industry on one multinational corporation for incoming orders: Inditex and its various subsidiaries. One result of this monopoly has been a move away from the classic sourcing models of subcontracting. Prior to 2005, what subcontracting existed was predominantly in the CMT (cut-make-trim) model, which meant that all raw materials were provided by the fashion company and subcontractors were responsible only for CMT. Today, full-package outsourcing is the dominant model, in which subcontractors take over legal responsibilities for the whole finished product, from material sourcing to patterning, documentation and finally CMT. For Fast Fashion companies such as Inditex this arrangement is the only one they operate on since it allows for “adaptable network strategies, rigid contract controls and permits a high degree of influences, even dependence over suppliers and their orders” (Hilger, 2008: 12).

Regionally, the dominance of Inditex and its operational model have resulted in a ‘hierarchy’ among sub-contractors because only a handful of them have the capacities, resources and man-power to take on full-package outsourcing. These large subcontractors are, for the most part, formerly independent factories, which retain only core responsibilities, while all others steps of production, from weaving and spinning to sewing and embroidery are outsourced to a different satellite. During the time of my fieldwork, more than ten years after the expiration of the MFA, the manager of one of these Inditex associated factories summarized the situation:
for us it [outsourcing] has facilitated competitiveness on the global market. We learned the hard way, in this region. We were woefully unprepared for international competition. After the golden decade of the 90s, we had these terrible trading years and something had to change or we would have gone under [...] Our company’s objective has always been to produce quality products perfectly in line with market demand and since adopting these new production strategies, we—and our subsidiaries with us—have made great strides in achieving this aim. We have remained profitable where many others closed or relocated and that is thanks to relying on our production partners. [...] It is thanks to them [referring to Inditex] that we still have production [...] We must be thankful also to the government’s incentives toward facilitating autonomos’ [“subcontracting”] work, it has made our organization a lot easier.

As this quote indicates, the geo-relocation of factories has as much to do with the legal and economic infrastructure of particular countries, as it does with the real cost of production. Moreover, the manager is quite open about the role that government intervention played in making subcontracting bureaucratically possible and desirable. In the next section, I will look a little closer at how this seemingly market-driven fragmentation is entangled with entrepreneurialism as an institutionally-mandated moral infrastructure.

**Entrepreneurialism Goes Viral**

It appears as though one of the fundamental ways that neoliberalism “lands” (Kasmir, 1999: 382) in the northern Portuguese textile industry, is not just as a new playbook for competitive production, but as, like Harvey suggested already a decade ago, an ideology informing subjectivity (2007, compare also Potter, 2017). The proposition is intriguing because it indicates that along with representing a new stage of the capital accumulation, the entrepreneurial turn “has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (2007: 3). This suggestion implies that, in order for us as anthropologists to adequately understand the contemporary moment of capitalism, we need to do more than just consider the new conditions of possibility of social reproduction, material conditions and top-down restructurings. We also need to be attentive to the symbols, terminologies and logics that are agentive in producing a new, possibly neoliberal, subjectivity. My focus in this section thus lies on highlighting what the apparently universal trend of the glorification of entrepreneurs looks like in the Vale do Ave.

Existing scholarship on entrepreneurial ventures, especially from the Global South, has focussed on these enterprises ‘success’ in providing financial security and ‘empowerment’ for marginalized or poor populations (Rai and Ravi, 2011; Staples, 2006). In response to this trend, more critical approaches have shifted attention away from poverty reduction and focused instead on the instilling and proliferation of neoliberal ideologies and subjectivities, not only in the global south but the world over (Yurchak, 1999; Nevelling, 2006; Prentice, 2017). In this process, participants in entrepreneurial workshops, microfinance
plans or start-up programmes become “fiscal subjects” (Prentice, 2017) who perform a particular economic rationality, whether or not this provides sufficient income to live.

In this context, the constitution of small enterprises across the secondary and tertiary sector has been celebrated, on the one hand, as the ultimate aligning of the new, flexible internal division of labour (Fröbel et al, 1980), and as a panacea for austerity-hit and downwardly mobile populations on the other. In southern Europe particularly, a pre-existing trend towards fragmentation of the productive landscape has been diluted by reference to a new, ideal type of capitalist development, broadly modelled along notions of “the Third Italy” and its “regional economy” (Ghezzi, 2006).

Herein, the entrepreneurial turn is understood as a vindication of the non-urban, and non-central regions in Europe’s southern peripheries. Observing that entrepreneurial development germinated “spontaneously … in regions and localities whose economic performance, social division of labour and degree of state interventions was at an ‘intermediate level’, between old industrial centers and traditional rural regions”. (Hadjimichalis & Papamichos, 1990: 183). Economic networks existing in Italy seem to have created an ideal type of paradigm for “regional economies” and inspired the narratives, ideologies, and policy models that emerged in the period that followed Northern Italy’s early successes (Hadjimichaelis, 1987, 2006; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2004).

The flaws of such a transposition of ideals have been widely shown. Critics mainly highlighted that formal resemblances in organization or appearance can be the product of diverse and intersecting factors, the substance and articulation of which vary from site to site (Bagnasco, 1987; Cooke, 2013). These criticisms did little to reduce support for the idealised vision of industrial districts, however. Rather, designing and

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Figure 4: Campaign Poster “O Minho Empreende” [The Minho Region Endeavours], the subtitle reads: “Your opportunity starts here!”
fostering regions populated by self-reliant and mutually cooperating family firms became a policy objective across the EU (Cooke, 2013; Smith & Narotzky, 2006). They were seen to be perfectly in line with the flexible needs of capital and the withdrawal of national states from the responsibilities of social reproduction. Within this enthusiasm too, old critiques regarding southern European familialism (Banfield, 1954), clientelism, provincialism and patronage came to be recast as critical assets in the success of regional economies (Narotzky, 2006, 2007, 2015).

In Portuguese national policy in particular, increasing emphasis was laid on facilitating deregulated, fragmented production and working regimes since the early 2000s (Parente et al, 2012). Since the adoption of austerity and the state’s subsequent attempt to limit social spending, the trend increased towards encouraging the population’s economic “self-reliability” (Fernandes, 2013). At the time, entrepreneurialism also came to be funded by EU wide investment incentives and micro-credit options, and was turned into a European-wide object of policy (Ferreira 2012; Fernandes, 2013). Examples include nation-wide educational projects, funded research projects (Parente et al, 2012), and regional projects like “O Minho Empreende”, a state-funded project to foster budding Entrepreneurs, similar to the one Elvira attended. These were a host of projects aimed primarily at putting entrepreneurialism in the public eye and rendering it a “seductive” livelihood strategy (Prentice, 2018: 299). As the state becomes increasingly unable to satisfy the demands brought on by deindustrialization and mass unemployment, and compounded by austerity interventions, entrepreneurialism seems to offer an alternative ideology. And, it is an ideology that conveniently entails self-reliance and autonomy.
Making Entrepreneurial Subjects: “desenrascar-se” and the Promise of Autonomy

At the centre of most of these incentives, we find the figure of the entrepreneur. It seems crucial that we understand who he is, namely, that we understand how he is institutionally, aspirationally and ideologically constructed. This is also important because in dissecting the public representation of the figure of the entrepreneur we can begin to understand the aspirational momentum that the notion holds in the Vale do Ave. One of the clearest portrayals of the ‘ideal type entrepreneur’ I found during fieldwork was displayed in the entrepreneurialism workshops at the Job Centre in Braga, the district capital. The workshops described themselves as being offered for “job seekers who had business aspirations”. The workshop training coordinator constantly referred to terms like independence, devotion, love and the future. This emotionally effective terminology was discursively tied to the work of (being) an entrepreneur in general and to the capacity to desenrascar-se in particular. In the first class alone I counted 22 variations of the word “desenrascar”, while “independence” was repeated 15 times and “love” and “flexibility” mentioned 14 times each.

Using this terminology in combination with the strong emotional references portrays entrepreneurialism as a desirable road to self-actualization and prosperity. The entrepreneur is characterized as a figure of power and possibility. The promise in this projection appears as that of an entrepreneurial figure whose internalization of moral categories such as hard work, self-exertion, and self-exploitation make available, exclusively through one’s own effort, prosperity, social mobility and self-actualization: a Portuguese encapsulation of the ‘self-made man’. This depiction is the epitome of desenrascar-se: to make money doing what one loves, free from interference—self-realization through absolute self-sufficiency.

Yet, such a characterization is full of contradictions. There is the claim that “everyone can make money doing what they love” but then, on top of that beloved “doing”, one should have client orientation and value-added marketing skills. What instils the necessity of profitability into the equation is the insistence on love as the driving force of entrepreneurial projects while simultaneously demanding that they be defined by a market

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16 A Portuguese reflexive verb, in the Piberam Dictionnary of the Portuguese Language, desenrascar-se is literally translated as "to manage", "to fare (well)", "to fend for yourself”, "to get by". Yet neither translation quite captures the connotation of pride at being a ‘self-made man’ that the notion seems to imply in the Vale do Ave. As a concept, desenrascar-se has gained significant attention in media and politics during the course of austerity. A recent news item on Portuguese immigrants to France during the 1970s, for example, celebrates their perfect fit into the immigrant lifestyle due to their ability to “desenrascar-se” without help from the state (SAPO, 2/11/2013), suggesting that it is this quality that will help the Portuguese overcome the crisis. Another newspaper author observed that a need to “desenrascar-se” requires a pervious situation of “enrascado”, (being in danger/in difficulties), asking whether the current moment qualifies as being in danger, which provides the “desenrascar” (Publicco, 2179/2011 https://www.publico.pt/2011/09/21/p3/noticia/a-geracao-a-rasca-esta-a-conseguir-desenrascarse-1811797). As a capacity or characteristic therefore, being able to “desenrascar” might best be understood as the ability to persist and get by on your own means and resources. Those who claim desenrascar-se as a personal quality thus seem to signify their autonomy and self-reliability in the face of difficulty and struggle.
imperative. Love for what one does is not then, in itself, sufficient. It must be combined with hard work and the contortion of oneself to the desires of the market. We should also contrast the assertion of total self-sufficiency with the EU-backed mini credit schemes that are offered as 'seed money' to those completing the entrepreneur workshop.

This figure of the entrepreneur is portrayed as being caught in between irreconcilable contradictions, for example, between love for one's project and its market imperative, or between self-sufficiency and state-backed credit. It is a figure imbued with the very tension between autonomy and dependence that Elvira tries to reconcile. From this perspective, it might be possible to display the entrepreneurial figure as nothing more than an ideological construction: an ideal type that can be aspired to but never achieved. As ideology, the figure suggests itself as being in a position of power, wealth and potentiality, all attained through freedom from interference. Given this tension, how do we explain the aspirational momentum that the notion of becoming an entrepreneur seems to command in the Vale do Ave? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to examine, in parallel, the regionally-specific history of patronage (Weingrod, 1968) and the institutional influence that promotes entrepreneurialism.

**Historicizing Desenrascar-se**

In the previous chapter, I showed how memories of injustices and violence in the past are telescoped to make sense of the disposessions people face in the present. A similar pattern seems to be at work in the notion of desenrascar-se. Here, the attempt to be independent needs to be placed in its regional historical context. Historically, households have had to be pluriactive in order to make a living from the beginnings of textile industrial expansion until well into the 1980s. The social wage often lamented and longed for in US American and Northern European contexts existed in Northern Portugal only for a very short period in the 1980s and 1990s (compare the Golden Age narrated in chapter 1). While pluriactive livelihood strategies afforded a degree of independence to households, they also worked against them by using insecurity as an instrument of social control. One aspect of this control was found in people's continued dependence on patronage from those in power in order to successfully make ends meet.

It is the memory of these relations of subordination and subservience that partly inform the autonomy element in entrepreneurialism. Until well into the 1970s, domestic service work in the estates of industrial capitalists and petty nobility was a common source of income, especially for younger, unmarried women. Most parents preferred this

17 From the 1930s onwards wage repression was a core tool of the industrial conditioning and corporatist industry approaches of the Estado Novo dictatorship (Rosas, 1998). This was also a time in which unions had been consolidated into national syndicates and worker organization was demonized as „anti-national“ (Pina-Cabral, 1986). In the “land of peasants and workers” that the dictatorship imagined, social emancipation was to be subordinated to the ideal of national unity; a model of industrial paternalism that clearly defined social roles that preempted social conflict (Cortesao & Carvalho, 2012: 211; Pimentel, 2011). But the absence of a living wage also meant that virtually all household continued to rely on small scale farming and out-working arrangements in order to secure survival.
type of work for their daughters, since it was seen as being less dangerous and strenuous
than employment in a factory. Elvira, for example, vividly recalls how her grandmother
was a domestic servant in “the big house over the way” and would, even at an old age,
still “bow her head every time she passed the house” or met one of the family members.

Meanwhile, in the factory, subordination was also expected of the workers, who
were constantly confronted by their own substitutability due to the existence of a re-
serve army of the unemployed. In order to keep their jobs and secure employment for
their family, *operarios* [workers] often found themselves pulled deeply into relations of
patronage that extended far beyond the shop floor. This was especially the case with
male workers who might be requested to help on the agricultural estates of the factory
owners during harvest or when the factory lay idle. This ‘help’ was normally unpaid.
Many women also saw it as their duty to report to the “big house” on Sunday after
church “just to drop by and see if there was anything that needed doing” (Conceição,
Elvira’s mother). In return for this unremunerated labour, workers expected being able
to request of favours from factory owners, like salary advances in times of hardship or
an admission offer to an oldest son for the church school.

Patronage and its demands of respect and even servitude have thus long been a
structural reality for residents of the region. This social structure thoroughly informed
these people’s understanding of their place in the world, their abilities to achieve suc-
cessful livelihood and any future visions they might have.\(^{18}\) The drive to “desenrascar-
se” today is often linked with exactly these historical relations. Elvira’s pride that she
“doesn’t have to bow to anyone” stands in direct opposition to her mother and grand-
mother’s obligation to “bow” in order to get by.

Elvira has attained a degree of independence that her older family members would
have thought unimaginable but what makes her different, in her own mind at least, is
not merely that she sees herself as her own boss. It is that she does not feel bound by
subordination at all. One reason for the considerable traction of the idea of autonomy in
the Vale do Ave can certainly be found in its promise to transform formerly subservient
workers into bosses. The promise of autonomy suggests itself as financial independence
that heralds the upward social mobility, status and lifestyle congruent with being in a
position of economic power: somebody to whom respect and subservience is owed.

This is why the independence and self-sufficiency that is at the core of the entrepre-
nurial ideology appears as an appealing livelihood strategy in the Vale do Ave. As an

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\(^{18}\) In fact, the Estado Novo’s policies of rewarding friends and repressing enemies produced kinds of
differentiation that flitted the social ladder to permeate factory and employment relations. To be sure,
hierarchical relations were on the scene long before Salazarism came along, but during the dictatorship,
the extent to which patronage relations delivered the sense of protection and belonging that are inher-
enent in hierarchies, was fundamentally altered. Particularly among those who had little to bargain with
but their labour power, differentiation by association could turn into both a resource or a liability. Good
employees or home workers could ask favours from landlords, brokers or bosses. But for those in the
majority, who could not rely on favourable power influences mobilized on their behalf, surveillance, in-
timidation and repression were constant companions, as was the threat of being denounced and arrested
on some arbitrary charge. To this day, for example, former factory employees discuss their fear of being
denounced as communists and exiled to overseas colonies.
institutionally sustained moral infrastructure, entrepreneurialism holds considerable sway over exactly those populations whose class positions seemed, in the past, to make the possibility of gaining powerful positions improbable, if not impossible. In this way, entrepreneurialism can lace together the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction between dependence and autonomy. It latches onto a pre-existing socio-economic reality, transforms it so it will fit the novel moment of capitalist accumulation, and thus translates it into status symbols, consumption patterns, and definitions of self.

This is the case even more so due to the types of state-led ideological project that have become common place in austerity Portugal. The workshop at the jobcentre is one example of the attempt to remake local economic relations along patterns useful for the state in its attempt to curb social spending. In this sense, the entrepreneur is the most suitable model for the market economy, because she assumes the theoretical postulates of neoliberalism: personal effort, individual responsibility and the so-called equality of opportunities (Pfeilstetter, 2011). In summary then, in the Vale do Ave, self-employment under the banner of entrepreneurialism is rendered a desired-for livelihood strategy not only because it is among the few still available, but also because of state intervention and EU clout that put in on the public agenda. Self-employment, ‘companies of one’ and independent production at home have long been viewed as simply one way among many to make a living. The current fear of “returning to dependence” however works to move this model to a position of hegemony.

Combining Harvey’s insights with this historical analysis, we can see how the move from factories to home-based production has occurred in part due to state-led policies that aimed at combating unemployment through the promotion of entrepreneurialism as the ideal type occupation (Yurchak, 1999). It is these policies’ accompanying discourse that informs Elvira’s self-conception as autonomous—a reward that being an entrepreneur grants her, whether or not her business is actually providing her with sufficient income to get by.

But where does the entrepreneurial logic stand when contrasted with the material and social realities inherent in home-based production? And, more importantly, what does this oscillation between autonomy and dependence produce in terms of subjectivity and identity? Having established how entrepreneurialism has become a desired livelihood-strategy, the following sections attempt to cast light on the subjectivities, experiences and life projects of petty entrepreneurs by focusing on the example of Elvira and her family.

Precarious Production:
Petty Entrepreneurs’ Perspectives

Like many petty producers in the region, Elvira runs her sewing workshop from her garage. When she agreed to “continue producing” for Inditex, what that actually meant was the opening of a home-based workshop that lies very far down the line of an increasingly fragmented chain of subcontracting. In this way, Elvira became part of a
production landscape that is organized in a complex web of subsidiaries, all of who rely on commercial brokers assigning orders to different factories.

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Translated into the world of petty entrepreneurs, these shifts in productive organization are first and foremost experienced as precarity (Kasmir & Carbonella, 2014). As Benach et al (2014) highlighted, global economic restructuring and the realities of post-fordist production regimes result in two forms of “precarity”. First, precarious employment implies an erosion of the legal protections and social rights extended to workers as part of the post-World War II bargain between labour and capital (Dwer, 2004; Dean, 2006; Matos, 2010). Second, for those who never secured such rights, precarity manifests less in terms of transformations in working conditions, collectively bargained salaries or social protections (Benach et al, 2014). Instead, increasing precarization is a more subjective experience of accepting impossibility and insecurity (Collins, 2010), perhaps best epitomized by Prentice's summary of Caribbean garment workers’ “resigning to instability” (2017: 8).

While these observations certainly apply for Elvira, it is nonetheless useful to point out some features in which this regional system of production differs from those most commonly recounted in the literature. Two factors set current trends in the Vale do
Ave apart from former models. The first is the dominance of one single corporation, Inditex, holding effective monopoly over a region’s production and output. The other factor pertains to the increased powers of control held by wholesalers and merchant middlemen who facilitate communication and management between the corporation and the subcontractors at various levels. In combination, these factors make for a situation in which petty entrepreneurs are neither free nor entrepreneurial. They are also not in a structural or organizational situation from which it is possible to act according to the rational, profit-maximizing ideal that entrepreneurial ideology propagates. This puts into question the promise of emancipation from dependence that is entrepreneurial ideology at its most basic level. But it also allows for a glimpse of the petty entrepreneurs’ subjectivity outside the seduction of autonomy—an analysis I pursue after briefly highlighting the material and social relations of petty production.

**Organizing the Workshop**

Throughout my fieldwork, I visited Elvira’s workshop weekly. Next to the regular inquiries about family, health and well-being, our conversations usually revolved around similar themes: the impossibility of actually making ends meet; how much she gets paid for a T-Shirt today compared to what they got paid in the 90s; the absence of any bargaining power to effect the working hours or prices; a lack of security from not knowing if the orders will continue coming; her relationship to the middlemen who place the orders; her fear of tax inspections; the petty competitions she engaged in with other entrepreneurs in order to cheat them out of an order; and her pronounced lack of control over her own life. And of course, Inditex, that ambivalent, Janus-faced entity that, on the one hand, is the reason there is even still any work in textiles and, on the other hand, the driver behind the ever decreasing piecemeal rates and the maker of unjust relations of exchange.

More often than not, Elvira summarizes her situation as structured by several impossibilities. The first is that of existing in virtual invisibility. She claims that “Inditex doesn’t even know I exist”. A chance encounter I once had with a fast fashion representative who was visiting the region to find more factories for his network serves to underline this point. I was reading in a café and overheard the negotiations he was having about an incoming order and approached him to ask for an interview. He declined, referring to the company’s policy on interview prohibitions, but we made some small talk anyway. I was deliberately confrontational, having already learned that no future research opportunity would come from this contact, and asked straightforwardly about the company’s position regarding the exploitation of small producers, hinting it might be their corporate responsibility to care. His response was frosty, but deliberate:

To make this [the Northern Portuguese textile] industry viably competitive at an international level, it takes three things: cheap cotton, cheaper piece rates and the cheapest women. We take advantage of that. Without us, there would be nothing here.
In the wake of the ‘fast fashion’ revolution of the textile industry, the length of an order’s production cycle is now typically between 21 and 35 days from the successful bid by a factory to the delivery of a completed order to the representative responsible for shipping. For petty producers like Elvira, this means that timetables range from 10 to 14 days. Meeting these demands frequently means working through the night or “at a good rate” (Elvira) until midnight. Like many others, Elvira’s workshop is unofficial, that is, not a registered enterprise. As far as her tax records are concerned, she is a stay-at-home-mom. She explains this by referring to the web of bureaucratic and regulatory hoops she would have to jump through in order to produce officially: permissions, safety standards and private health insurance, but most importantly, the high tax-rate on her income, as well as needing to pay own social security. “No one gets rich doing this kind of work. The only way to gain any money—even if it is still not enough to live—is the way I do it. How most people do it… illegally”.

Elvira’s women colleagues hail from a dense network of relatives and acquaintances in the neighbourhood. She offers them a sewing machine, a space in her workshop and a portion of her orders. In return for providing the space and machine, Elvira withholds a percentage of their piece meal pay. She rationalizes this practice by reference to the size of the orders that she is able to secure and a single seamstresses’ inability to meet them by herself. The turnover of staff in the workshop is high, because every women worker has at least two or three other offers to work in similar set-ups, and every time there are no orders incoming, Elvira’s co-workers go to one of the other workshops in the hope of securing a few pieces there. Many also have other sources of income, most often from pluriactive households of the type I described in the previous chapter. Some are also trying to secure enough funds to set up their own home-based workshops. In the 19 months I spent visiting her workshop, I met a total of 16 different women working there, of which three came back relatively regularly for a month or so at a time. So unstable is the flow of workers, that Elvira is frequently forced to rely on unpaid help from her immediate family or beg the neighbours to help complete an order. Her mother, father and great-aunt live on the same property and, in general, her retired mother, Conceição, who lives next door, is her first go-to person when she needs support in completing an order. Her mother, who also worked as a seamstress in the same factory that eventually outsourced Elvira, has all the skills necessary for this type of work. Not infrequently, when an unexpected order came in, or the middleman decided he needed Elvira to complete an order larger than what they had agreed on (for instance when another subcontractor fell through), it was completed by Elvira, Conceição and Joao, Elvira’s husband in the early hours of the morning before collection of the completed work. On the days before collection, I have also seen Elvira’s daughters and son, supervised by Conceição, man the machines while Elvira took a break to eat, sleep or cook the family meal.

In many ways, the neighbourhood network of contacts that Elvira is able to rely on is characteristic of class networks described by ethnographers since the 1960s (see for example Epstein, 1969; Tilly, 1969). It is marked by geographic immobility, lifelong friendship and engagement in similar livelihood projects—all of which makes it a dense circle.
Yet Elvira’s network hardly ever stretches beyond these strong ties with her neighbours, kin and friends, and what weak ties she is able to mobilize are almost exclusively middlemen or former factory employees. On the upside, this means that support is easily forthcoming, new women workers are easily recruited and most often already familiar with the tasks to be performed. On the downside, this network is also enclosing in the sense that it can prevent Elvira from seeing and seeking possibilities outside it.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) remarked that modern networks are marked by “the strength of weak ties”. By this he means, on the one hand, that fleeting forms of association are more useful to people in encountering “bridging” connections outside of their own socially dense networks. On the other hand, he suggested strong social ties like loyalty and trust have ceased to be compelling because they can, as with Elvira, act as limitations. Canonical uses of Granovetter’s study, like the class maps I mention above, have tended to emphasize the close-knit character of neighbourhood networks while also focussing on their shortcomings. Elvira’s case highlights that, for homeworkers in the Vale do Ave, their reality is somewhat harsher.

To be sure, Elvira has access to a dense network of strong ties that can be relied upon. But unlike her middlemen, Elvira has almost no ties to the higher-up subsidiaries, former factory owners or managers of other firms. Today, as in the past, she meets them through a web of personal connections, relying for the most part on a former colleague at the factory. This woman had marginally more success with her workshop, in that her start-up capital was higher and she was able to purchase more machinery and thus, could accept larger orders and re-contract them to places like Elvira’s. So, if she wants to increase her profit, Elvira’s only option is to accept more orders, hire more women workers, and work even more hours herself. Her positionality within a dense, enclosed network does not permit moving beyond her current position. She can only engage deeper into relations that she is already part of. To move beyond her current position, she would need ties to other, higher up nodes in the regional economic organization.

Using the theories of the regional economy, it would be simple to identify Elvira’s problem as a lack of weak ties to members of other networks that can be manipulated into bridging resources (Woolcock, 1998: 165). But, it appears to me that the ethnographic findings permit extending the analysis. If we consider the networks involved in contract and outsourced “entrepreneurial” ventures from the perspective of Granovetter, it becomes evident that for someone like Elvira, strong ties within a dense network are the be all and end all of successful production. But these ties are not marked by mutually beneficial relations or the co-dependence that should, as Granovetter suggests, typify dense networks. Instead, just as Elvira is pushed by her suppliers to take on more than she can handle, so too, are these suppliers, and so are the women workers Elvira hires and fires according to the fluctuation of the orders. We may even suggest that, in this set-up, the personal relations between the different nodes completing the orders are unimportant, and could, theoretically vary throughout without inhibiting the continuation of production. What matters rather is that the order, around the competition of which networks are mobilized, does eventually get completed. In other words, the
networks and people in them are entirely replaceable so long as the needs of capital are met (Smith & Narotzky, 2006: 144).

Given the ultra-short-term, eternally fluctuating character of the fast fashion industry, it is perhaps unsurprising that the types of relationships that persist among its outsourced subsidiaries are equally volatile. What is surprising however is that the entrepreneurial ideology that currently typifies petty production, itself appears to caution against long-term commitment to the same association or person. In order to be successful, the entrepreneur must always be searching for new opportunities that promise profit maximization; he must be ready and willing to drop present commitments in order to jump at a new chance, to bend himself to a new desire of the market. Another way of phrasing this axiom would be to say that, in order to attain the riches commonly associated with them, entrepreneurs are obliged to continuously scour, mobilize and manipulate their network of weak ties for new, better business opportunities. Here, loyalty is recast as a trap in an economy characterized by competition, speed and incessant change.

But more importantly, what this ideology fails to reckon with is the fact that petty entrepreneurs like Elvira have no network of weak, “bridging” ties in the first place. The pauperized and dependent position of the petty entrepreneur makes it impossible for them to persistently scour for the next more profitable venture; even if they could, in terms of available time, their very positioning within the system of production still makes such attempts effectively impossible. Instead, petty entrepreneurs remain trapped within their dense network and are manipulated for higher output at lesser pay by their middlemen. The next section explores what this means for their capacity to reproduce themselves.

**The Work of Petty Entrepreneurs: pauperized, dependent, self-exploiting**

The ideal vision of the entrepreneur as it is propagated in most discourse imagines the figure of the “worker-owner” (Kasmir, 1999) as rationally acting, profit-maximizing individual who transcends the relations of production as well as the divisions of class identity. According to this image, the petty entrepreneur is both the maker of his own fortune while, at the same time, being his own slave. He is continuously working “to reproduce himself as both labour and capital”, as Chevalier (1983: 157), already 30 years before, observed regarding the case of petty commodity producers. This is an awkward, often seemingly impossible position, in which worker-owners not only struggle to be owners of both capital and labour, but also constantly grapple with the institutionally-sustained autonomy identity that obscures the dependence from powerful economic and political actors. Yet it is exactly this (hidden) dependence that inhibits their successful reproduction.

I have already remarked that Elvira has neither the social capital, nor the bridging social ties that entrepreneurialism requires for successful expansion and upward mobility. Instead of being free to choose her working hours and conditions, to be her
own boss and decide the terms of her business, Elvira depends on others: on merchant middlemen to farm out orders to her, on global corporation to set piece prices, on the strong ties to other women workers who will help her complete an order, and on family members to help out. Moreover, until she finally paid back the last instalment of her mini-credit in 2015, ten years after first qualifying for it, she was tied to the bank lenders and its progressively growing demand on her income. The very path Elvira had to take in order to become an entrepreneur constantly reminds her that the autonomy she aspires to is not only absent but emerges finally, as dependence.

In his book, *Lean and Mean*, Bennett Harrison shows how, in outsourced production, large corporations pass on dips in the production cycle to their weaker subsidiaries, and retain control by setting production and control targets (1994). Although each subsidiary is 'free' to meet these targets as they see fit, they are pressed to produce more than is within their immediate capacity, thereby getting squeezed ever harder. Through the rigid enforcement of order schedules and the setting of unrealistic output and quality standards, middlemen and wholesalers effectively hold managerial power over producers like Elvira. Hierarchical power relations thus remain firmly in place in outsourced production. They are simply less tangible. On the other side of the coin, too, when orders fail to materialize, Elvira's position as an unofficial subcontractor means that she has no access to claiming benefits, no right to register complaints and no bargaining power under existing labour law.

In terms of material conditions, the piecemeal rates that “the cheapest women” (fast fashion representative) earn are so low that they do not allow for social reproduction, let alone provide upward mobility. In order to even attempt to make ends meet, Elvira is forced to engage in intrinsically unequal relations of exchange that privilege “the rights of capital, while shrinking the rights of citizens” as Narotzky and Smith have shown for the shoe manufacturing sector in Spain’s Vega Baja region (2006: 338). In order not to not end up producing below cost, even Elvira herself has to pass these exploitative piece rates farther down the subcontractor chain in order to capitalize on the unequal exchange. She does so by paying her women co-workers less per piece than she herself earns and by relying on her family to complete orders. All the same, she is finding her effective income shrinking. Because of the enclosed nature of the network that she is part of, whatever avenues of profit-maximizing remain to her, all lie in further self-exploitation.

Here, institutional structure and control are not absent and petty producers are not free from them; the structures are merely less graspable and distinct. They set output expectations but withhold which avenues should be sought to achieve them. As a result, petty entrepreneurs are continuously trapped in a production cycle that squeezes their means of livelihood further and pushes them towards self-exploitation as the only means to make profit. The critical element in their successful reproduction ceases to be ownership of the means of production.

In her 2014 article, Nancy Fraser invites us to “look behind” Marx’ hidden abode of production, into the socially, culturally, economically given “background condi-
tions of possibility” (61) for expanded reproduction. She reminds us, with Wallerstein, that capitalism has often operated on the basis of “semi-proletarization” (60), in which value can be extracted by capital, for example because agricultural self-sufficiency allows the payment of non-living wages. Or, because, as Federici (2012) argued, women absorb the costs of social reproduction through their unpaid domestic labour which is naturalized in the domestic sphere (compare also Prentice, 2017). The question of expropriation—how value is extracted outside the labour market’s sphere of exploitation—here becomes the background story “behind the hidden abode of production” (Fraser, 2014: 62).

Surplus value is still extracted from petty entrepreneurs, of course. Instead of transpiring through the wage relation, their exploitation is produced by the inability to reproduce themselves as worker-owners. Here, extraction takes place not within the divide between wages and the (paid) value of the labour of workers. Extraction occurs, rather, through monopolized, unequal exchange, the participation in which is legitimized through the entrepreneurialism ideology. State-led regulation and power relations within the subcontracting network mandate unequal exchange. The core forces maintaining petty entrepreneurs at their petty level have little or nothing to do with their entrepreneurial capacity.

Within this frame, the hours that regulated the working day within the factory system are lost and entrepreneurial worker-owners become wholly responsible for their output. These in turn often lead, as with Elvira, to overexertion and health issues. As this dynamic requires worker-owners to exploit their own labour power to often unsustainable degrees, it still inhibits petty producers’ reproduction. Far from gaining the independence promised, they are caught in a position of dependence and pauperization managed from above.

Dependence remains a structuring theme of petty entrepreneurs’ experiences. From the perspective of capital, non-compensation of part of their labour is then no longer the definitive feature enabling extraction, as was arguably the case with wage labour. The relation between labour and capital is here not experienced in the “pure” ways (Bernstein, 2002), envisioned by Marx and once common among the industrial working classes. It is obscured by the less tangible, less graspable spectres of autonomy and self-sufficiency that disguise effective dependence.

At the same time and, as I displayed in the previous chapter, all the strategies out of this situation that are available to petty entrepreneurs—in subsistence, low-wage labour or petty rent—are themselves always-already subject to different forms of extraction, exploitation and regulation. In the working reality of petty entrepreneurs, regardless of what avenue of livelihood-making they choose, they meet increasing exploitation, unequal exchange and pauperization at every turn. Whatever they choose, capital wins. This case thus constitutes another example of the crisis of livelihood and its causation by one of the many faces of expanded reproduction in the current moment. In the next section, I take a look at what this experience of continuous downward pressure produces in terms of identity and subjectivity.
Subjectivities of Petty Entrepreneurs

What strikes me about Elvira and other petty entrepreneurs like her is the extent to which the contradiction between autonomy and dependence penetrate every detail of their lives, both inside the workshop and out. Realising the level at which this contradiction structures their life experience, I think it worthwhile to point out that while their material conditions might not change, something is indeed different. I suggest that what is altered lies in the social and subjective identities of small producers turned petty capitalists, and in the future visions of class and belonging that are available to them in this situation. It is this shift in subjectivities that I focus on in this section. This will be done by taking a comparative look at the lived experiences of Elvira and her mother, Conceição, and the narratives with which they make sense of these experiences.

From Wage Workers to Petty Entrepreneurs in (less than) one Generation: Comparing Generational Future Visions

From an early age, Conceição knew what her future would bring. This is not to say that her life followed a pre-determined linear path without difficulty or struggle, or even that she is able to narrate her life as a chronological path toward betterment. It is simply to say that she seems to have experienced and is certainly able to recount the events of her life from a position of certainty in moral and social terms, in which her experiences made sense to her both then and now. Conceição came up knowing that after the few years of school she was required to attend, she would enter the same factory as her mother—an event for which she expectantly awaited. She worked side by side with her mother to learn the trade and after gaining sufficient skill, advanced to individual work, first as a seamstress and later as an embroiderer. The repetitive routines at work did not bother her, but instead, provided the possibility to gossip and chat with her co-workers and were described by Conceição as occasions for sociality. When their supervisor criticized their work or chattiness they would work harder for some days, but eventually return to the normalcy of shop floor fun. When she heard that the factory was in trouble financially or with sourcing materials, she was moderately worried, along with the other workers, and when it was evidently doing well, she asked for a pay raise. She had ambitions for social advancement, and was happy to find them partly fulfilled in her marriage: She married a well-regarded man from the neighbourhood who was a foreman and thus, a better paid operator; after the marriage, she moved into his house, as was the norm, and fulfilled the expectations of their families by having children.

The strict division of labour in her home, as well as the regulations and rules at work, provided the scaffolding on which her personal feelings and dispositions were constructed. Although it might seem easy to dismiss Conceição’s life history as predictable and conservative, she certainly did not experience them as such. There were instances of dramatic and unexpected changes, situations in which she was faced with new, unprecedented challenges: the bread shortages during WWII jeopardized her
household’s sustainability for a while, much as did the milk rationing in the 1950s, Conceição was confronted with, and eventually mastered, many challenges as she went from child to child, or from learning how to operate a new machine to learning how to handle yet another abusive boss. She lived through food shortages, a dictatorship and a civil revolution, certainly not with ease, but with a considerable sense of certainty. What dramatic times and hardships there were did not seem to threaten her sense of being in the world or her idea of personhood.

When these experiences are added up to what she describes as “a Catholic will to suffer and turn the other cheek” as well as her “propensity for discipline”, the result is a life that makes sense to Conceição as a linear narrative in hindsight. She carves out a clear story for herself in which her experiences accumulate socially, materially and psychologically, and this narrative provides her with a sense of self that is structured by self-respect. She knew back during her working life, and knows now, that she is working class, but the knowledge begets neither resentment nor enmity. Instead, “knowing her place” and taking pride in where she comes from, form part of the meta-narrative that is imbued with both Catholicism and the propaganda of the Estado Novo. It permitted viewing life as stable, at times even with a purpose: to raise children, to work hard, to live in line with the dictates of the Catholic faith.

This kind of meaning is not available to Elvira. When compared to her mother’s life narrative, Elvira’s struggles become evident: she is not able to tell herself a story about herself that makes sense, nor does she find certainty in her past experiences. In order to make ends meet, Elvira has had to continuously readapt herself and her pretty production project to changing demands on piecemeal rates, production output targets and timetables. And she has had to do so while displaying the utmost confidence in her abilities, lest middle men and creditors cease to provide orders and money. In fact, she had to display immense confidence in her ability to accept instability and fragmentation in order to secure mini credit in the first place. Once she attained the funds, she was faced with the task of maintaining the business by working to keep ties with merchants, friends and family who help her complete her orders and manage the workshop. She did this all while continually over-exerting herself to meet the demands of the orders that kept coming in.

Instead of being stimulated by working on so many fronts, as the proponents of entrepreneurialism would have it, Elvira suffered emotionally from the overburdening of micro-managerial tasks and the maintenance of social relations, both of which are over and above that of her “real work” at the sewing machine. On the other hand, when no orders were forthcoming, she not only sat completely idle but felt the immediate threat to her livelihood and attempted to dissipate it by fostering her personal relations to other merchants. All the same, during the low periods she spent ample amounts of time in inactivity, often trying and failing to distract herself.

The lack of predictability, that is, of a secure future in the short and long term, thus emerges as one trait of the instability Elvira experiences. Her frequent assertion that “there is no future” displays the internalization of the very things she grapples with on a daily basis. The volatility that is the chronically unstable production cycles of the global
garment industry is experienced as a stressor that makes it impossible to meaningfully plan one's time. Elvira feels unable to create a sensible, enjoyable life around this uncertainty: hobbies, church, friends, children, meals, and even sleep must be managed around the dictates of petty production. Her intimate experiences appear to be structured by the same chronic instability that defines her working life. The contradiction between predictable routine and instability, dependency and autonomy, confidence and self-doubt appear to be woven into the very fabric of Elvira's life.

Although all these stressors are, in Elvira's discourse at least, overruled by the reference to and pride in "being an entrepreneur", they have tangible consequences. Unlike her mother, Elvira cannot see a clear place for herself or her family in the world that she inhabits. Her daily routines are experienced as endlessly unpredictable and exhausting. Imposed by the all-controlling super structure of international competition and market imperative that Elvira can do nothing to effect or modify, this situation leaves her with a sense of being suspended; a profound, seemingly eternal feeling of dislocation. In other words, the inherent instability of a crisis situation comes to be incorporated into her daily life.

One way of framing the difference between Elvira and her mother, might lie in their differing abilities to make themselves intelligible to themselves, as Arendt would phrase it. While Conceição is able to understand and narrate her life as an evolving path toward betterment, the achievement of which provides her with self-respect, there is no similar "teleological certainty" (Yurchiak, 2001) for Elvira. Instead, her experience is 'structured' by fragmentation, by oscillating back and forth between the conflicting identities of autonomous entrepreneur and dependent producer. Additionally, the continuous teetering between hyperactivity and idleness results in a disjointed experienced of identity that cannot coalesce into a cohesive and sense-making person. The absence of any 'big picture' of the future, in addition to sustained exposure to stress, threatens Elvira's capacity to form her life experience into a sustained narrative and leaves her with a fragmented subjectivity. Whatever story Elvira tries to tell to herself about herself breaks down with frustrating and predictable regularity. The type of metanarratives that connote moral, social or cosmological certainty, and which Arendt (1958) suggests that all humans need, are unavailable to Elvira.

Translated to the world of petty-textile producers, the entrepreneurialism ideology manifests itself as chronic instability. An instability, that in at least in appearance seems perfectly in line with the uncertainty and anxiety that structure crisis situations everywhere. Especially when contrasted with the experience of her mother, which was rooted in relatively stable production conditions, the shifts in Elvira's lifeworld become profound. Hers is a reality in which the shifts in productive organization that arrived with SME culture, 'adaptable' regional economies, and the 'entrepreneurial turn' are not just shorter than one generation (Narotzky & Smith, 2006) but so short, in fact, that they cannot be fully understood before they are already altering again. This trend is exacerbated by the ascent of global production chains, flexible accumulation and austerity's dismantling of the last vestiges of liberal citizenship (Dwer, 2004). We have seen above that this uncertainty becomes inherent in a system of value production and the cycles of capitalist accumulation. But it also makes future planning an unlikely, even impossible event, especially for petty entrepreneurs.
Subjectivity of Disguised Proletarians

The effects of neoliberal restructuring on identity and subjectivity have been best described by Richard Sennett, in his book *The Corrosion of Character*. In it, he deconstructs the many neoliberal projects aimed at reintroducing social and personal obligation into accumulation and production regimes. Sennett unveils how the values associated with flexible work—inconsistency, disloyalty, overwork, and competition—become dysfunctional when transposed to the intimate realm of the family or household (1998: 47-48). This is because they threaten the basic needs of human co-existence: empathy, cooperation, stability and belonging. He also highlights the way that the narrative of exclusively personal responsibility for one's economic success offers no narrative to make sense of failure, whether within the personal or professional realm.

This statement is intriguing because most of the petty entrepreneurs that I met in the Vale do Ave failed. They either went bankrupt, as in the case of at least 1/3 of the entrepreneurism workshop attendees, or because, as in Elvira's case, their ventures failed to provide the kind of upward mobility or income that was commonly expected of them. In spite of the sweeping self-confidence most of these entrepreneurs display at the outset of their projects, when the time comes to take stock of things and they find out just how far they are from what they had hoped or bargained for, they do not seem surprised. “Most of the time, I don't think about it and keep going […] I guess I kinda knew I could never have anything nice” is how Elvira describes her experience of failure. Like many petty entrepreneurs I encountered during field work, Elvira finds herself performing the role of a confident, convinced entrepreneur who believes in her business model. Yet, when her venture ends up not succeeding as expected, even though she is deeply upset, she is not really surprised. Instead, Elvira accepts this ‘failure’ as if some part of her had always known she would not really make it to being a successful entrepreneur like the ones she heard so much about.

Of course, one explanation of why petty entrepreneurs present themselves as self-confident would be the mini credit schemes they are always competing for. No one would, after all, provide credit to a potential entrepreneur who contemplates the potential of failure in her business plan. But I want to suggest that the moment of insight offered by the exposure to failure is important, because it allows petty entrepreneurs a brief and partial perspective on their real position in terms of class and reproduction (Haraway, 1988). When their projects fail, the muddy waters of *desenrascar-se* as power and possibility, clear for a moment to reveal the undercurrent in which all petty entrepreneurs swim: accelerated, dependent, and pauperized. In other words: wage labour disguised as independence.

Elvira’s lack of surprise at her project’s failure seems to result from her awareness of the difference between her starting point and that of the successful entrepreneurs. She has no contacts to other successful entrepreneurs or designers looking for someone to further their brand, and she has no friends or acquaintances among the CEOs and corporate leaders that head the European fashion scene. Of course, she had to buy into in the entrepreneurialism ideology or, at least appear to believe in it, in or-
der to secure the mini credit, but it was a conviction born of necessity, at best. Elvira suspects somehow that she is working class, or at least working for others. Despite her performance as an independent producer, her class position always reminds her of the inherent limitations to any business venture she might pursue. Yet the ideology of autonomy is pervasive enough to re-assert itself occasionally: for example, in the teasing disdain for the servile dependencies of her mother’s generation. Elvira’s is thus an uncertain positionality that stems from the actuality of being a worker-owner and from the institutionally-sustained moral infrastructure that mobilizes labour along fictional lines of self-responsibility, obligation and aspiration.

What the latching of the entrepreneurialism ideology onto petty production did then, was that it allowed for the constitution of an ‘entrepreneurial’ working class that does all the work previously done by the industrial working class. But it does so without requiring Taylorist discipline or panoptic surveillance. Petty entrepreneurs see themselves as individuals in persistent competition, not as a class or group of people that would, for example, stand anything to gain from collective bargaining. Pitting petty producers against each other on the free market ensures that the majority of them do not become rich and upwardly mobile, or end up being in a position to question how entrepreneurialism remakes their self-conception. In this sense, entrepreneurialism seems to be successful in informing a type of subjectivity, as Harvey suggests it must.

But my suggestion goes beyond this analysis of subjectivity as imagined by Harvey. I propose that their failure to be what they aspire to be provides a glimpse into petty entrepreneurs’ subjectivity and identity. Like her mother, Elvira is a budding racist. She scorns immigrants from Portugal’s former colonies and dismisses them as lazy leeches. Unlike Conceição, Elvira also includes what she thinks of as social parasites in this generalization: unemployed former factory workers, those in early retirement schemes and people who rely on others to live. To her, both immigrants and social parasites are ‘failures’. But she is also terrified of becoming one, and the constant worry of losing control over her life and work aggravates this fear. It is a fear that is built into her working life because the threat of dependence is continuously present. It suggests itself every time no orders are incoming and materializes in the strong ties to her kin and neighbour network. Dependence on others is a constitutive part of Elvira’s life.

Even though self-exploitation, stress, pauperization, and unpredictability are all faults endemic to the system of production, Elvira experiences them as personal failures. In trying to make a sensible life for herself, she ends up imposing the same exploitation and inequalities onto others that she herself is subjected to. She ends up acting like anything but a class-conscious individual. If it is true that her exposure to failure provides her with a partial appreciation of her position as entrepreneurial working class, then this realisation does not mean Elvira is able to act according to any kind of class consciousness. One interpretation for her behaviour lies in considering the managerial and structural prerogatives that are in place to push Elvira to express emotional attachment to her work (Donzelot, 2008). These
prerogatives get her to assume personal responsibility for systemic faults, and she even goes so far as to pass on the exploitation she herself is subjected to, to her women co-workers, many of whom are in an even more precarious situation.

The subtext of personal responsibilities imbues her work with such a deep meaning that it becomes visceral, invading the very tissues of her body. We thus end up with a situation where Elvira lives, quite literally, the internalization of the contradictions engendered by entrepreneurialism and petty production. Elvira expresses them emotionally, the conditions that structure her work having become character traits. These in turn come to bear on her subjectivity and self-conception. Her emotional and subjective experience is one of inconsistency and the internal contradiction between stress and inactivity. The very contradiction that also structures her working arrangement has become the epitome of her character, to such an extent that it comes to bear on her subjectivity and future vision.

The subjective and material ideals and goals laid out by entrepreneurialism are not merely unattainable, but are themselves untenable. This results from, on the one hand, the curtailing of economic possibility inside a highly dependent regime of production and, on the other hand, the ideal’s penetration into subjectivity to the level of the visceral. What remains important to remember, however, is that the lived realities, material conditions and subjective experiences produced remain wholly useful to the business of capital accumulation at large. It might even be argued that in continuing to assume the role allocated to them as entrepreneurs, petty producers, in fact, contribute to the continued expansion of contemporary cycles of accumulation. What is more, whether or not it provides the riches and upward social mobility commonly expected from it from the perspective of institutions, the entrepreneurialism project is highly functional. Its emphasis on self-reliance and independence permit the state to withdraw from the responsibilities of social reproduction and place them squarely with individuals, who in turn embrace the struggles to reproduce as personal defects.

Expanded Reproduction, Crisis and Subjectivity

As I pointed out above, subcontracting and self-employment were already existing trends in the region before the term entrepreneurship was applied to this host of different outworking arrangements. In the Vale do Ave, home-based textile production has long been a source of income for households, and this realization begs the question: what distinction can be made between petty producers and entrepreneurs? While there are no simple answers to these questions, I do think it necessary to reassert that the emergence of entrepreneurialism is both a capital-led incentive towards flexible production, and a state-led moral infrastructure aimed at producing self-responsible individuals. In the Vale do Ave in particular, entrepreneurship’s success was achieved
by appealing to the desire of workers wanting to escape the confinement of historical dependencies. In its promise for autonomy and wealth, this aspect might be what made entrepreneurialism a desired-for livelihood strategy where others were not.

On a broader scale, I find it useful to recall a comment made by Fraser in a 2017 interview to the effect that expanded reproduction's success has always relied on embracing the workers’ search for an alternative to Fordism. By “Fordism”, they may have meant state control, bureaucracy and the owners of capital in general. Insofar as entrepreneurialism marks the actualization of this autonomist dream, it is a perverse twist. It is one in which petty producers work harder, longer hours, with more responsibility and liabilities, for what is, in effect, lower pay, only to ultimately increase the profit of large multinational corporations. Meanwhile, and most recently with austerity, the state is busy dismantling the public services on which workers depend to get by (Collins, 2010).

Despite its broad appeal however, the logics of entrepreneurialism are contradictorily apprehended and only partially reproduced by individuals and households. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted the internal contradictions produced as people try to make a living under these conditions and the effect these have on subjectivity and future visions. The case of petty entrepreneurs is another example of the kind of livelihood-making project that remains available during the crisis of livelihood, and after deindustrialization and the rollback of social provisions. As with the return to the household discussed above, the entrepreneurialism route is also riddled with complications; an unfavourable and often arbitrary legal framework; and mandated from above. Similarly, the possibilities for social reproduction available in this route are subject to being squeezed ever further, even to the point where they disallow the making of a living.

At the same time, and in line with my findings in the previous chapter, all the strategies that are available to petty entrepreneurs to escape from this situation are themselves always-already subject to exploitation, dispossession or criminalization. This case thus constitutes an example of the working arrangements available for income generation in the livelihood crisis, as well as the subjectivities this reality produces. For petty entrepreneurs like Elvira, too, whichever avenue for livelihood making she chooses, she meets impossibility and pauperization at every turn. Moreover, the cyclical temporality with which Elvira makes sense of her livelihood underlines the persistence aspect the crisis of livelihood. So entrenched are the repetitive drudgeries of the present that the imagination of a way out—a “new order” as Koselleck would have it—is completely subsumed by the conviction that “there is no future”. The next chapter considers what the combination of a chronic lack of a future vision, sustained exposure to pauperization and eternal existence at the receiving end of structural violence and state-led regulation does to people’s health, well-being and conception of citizenship.