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Theses on Platform Capitalism and Neoliberalism – Reflections on Global Trends From the (Semi)Periphery of Capitalism

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Abstract: The article reflects on "platform capitalism" in the form of interrelated theses. I argue that, through legal artifices and technological innovations, the lean platforms' modus operandi spreads precarious jobs while disseminating a neoliberal subjectivity among its "independent contractors". I aim to bridge two usually isolated scholarships, namely, critical neoliberalism studies and platform capitalism inquiries. I address the subject from a systemic view that places the global South as the primary locus of lean labour platforms. This approach leads me to question current theses on platform capitalism studies and propose new ways to understand its traits. The article draws on international bibliography on the topic, as well as secondary empirical data and my own research with delivery platform workers in São Paulo.

Keywords: platform capitalism, neoliberalism, platform labour, uberisation, self-entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

In the following text, I reflect on the dynamics of platform capitalism. One of the arguments I advance is that, while this configuration of capitalism may be examined through various phenomena – such as social media, targeted advertising, cloud computing, or data colonialism – platform labour must occupy a central place in any definition of platform capitalism. My objective, therefore, is to challenge the assumption that one can speak of platform capitalism without situating it in relation to the manifold and widespread platformised forms of labour – commonly referred to as "uberisation" (though not limited to the company Uber) – that underpin this model and have reconfigured wage labour over the past two decades.

To develop this argument, I contend that any comprehensive understanding of the overarching tendencies of platform capitalism requires an analysis of the global and systemic structure of capitalism, taking the global South as a primary site of inquiry. The fact that millions of ride-hailing drivers around the world work for a company headquartered in Palo Alto compels us to consider the international – and truly global – dimension that defines platform capitalism.

Given the scale and diversity of the global South, I focus on Brazil – specifically the city of São Paulo – as an especially revealing case. Since 2019, platforms have emerged as the largest providers of employment in the city, offering insight into the future of a platform-mediated working class and society. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive account of platform labour in Brazil – nor in other peripheral or semi-peripheral regions of capitalism – but rather to explore how certain peripheral characteristics of platform capitalism might illuminate broader global trends. I turn to São Paulo not as a unique or exceptional case, but as a site that may shed light on the

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present and future trajectories of platform capitalism and labour worldwide. As Susan Buck-Morss (2000, 229) noted, albeit in a slightly different context, “Brazil, not Sweden, was the model of the … future” in a “global capitalist system already in the process of restructuring according to neoliberal rules”.

A leitmotif that runs throughout this article is the relationship between platform capitalism and neoliberalism. As Malcolm Harris (2023) has observed, the history of Palo Alto is inextricably linked to anti-New Deal militancy, anti-communist paranoia, and anti-labour activism – in short, what Foucault (2010, 75) identified as neoliberalism’s characteristic *phobie d’État*. This lineage extends from Herbert Hoover to Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, culminating in Trump’s second term – run (almost) directly by Silicon Valley’s tech elite. Neoliberal worldviews – saturated with entrepreneurialism, libertarianism, and anti-progressivism – are embedded in the very core of the so-called Californian ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), however entangled they may be with countercultural or hippie ideals.

In this article, I am concerned not only with the economic interrelation of these phenomena – particularly in terms of financialisation, labour precarisation, and capital concentration – but also with their political consequences. My central claim is that platform labour constitutes one of the most powerful mechanisms for disseminating a neoliberal form of subjectivation throughout the social body, even among those most disadvantaged by its effects. This form, originally identified by Foucault as that of the “entrepreneur of himself”, stands in stark contrast to the formation of a working class in the Marxist sense[1]. Thus, platform labour produces a double and contradictory effect: while it disseminates the objective conditions of working-class existence, it simultaneously undermines the subjective political conditions necessary for class formation, implanting neoliberal subjectivities in their place. To put it bluntly: I am concerned here with platform capitalism as ideology.

Finally, a note on the style and form of the text. I chose to write it in the form of theses, inspired by the works of the Frankfurt School. Several critical theorists, such as Herbert Marcuse (1998), Max Horkheimer (1978), T. W. Adorno (2005), and notably Walter Benjamin (1999) resorted to theses, notes, fragments, and aphorisms as a critical way of approaching an object in an experimental manner, open to its immanent movements. By illuminating the constitutive facets of platform capitalism and neoliberalism through excerpts, my aim is to (de)compose a prismatic image of platform capitalism, addressing its various constitutive dimensions in an intertwined fashion within a single text.

2. Thesis 1 – Uber(isation) is for Everyone

Uber launched UberX in July 2012 as a strategic move to broaden its market reach by offering a more affordable ride option compared to its original premium service, UberBLACK. While the latter utilised luxury vehicles with commercially licensed drivers, UberX allowed drivers to use their personal, non-luxury vehicles. This was the moment Uber transitioned into a service with mass traction. While targeting the sphere of circulation (i. e., its customer base), this move also captures a fundamental operation within platform labour: it is for everyone.

The platformisation of labour is a general trend in twenty-first-century capitalism. The platform model allows for reductions in operational costs, insources a non-neglectable share of the expenses and risks of the business to workers, circumvents legal

[1] For two engaging papers that also established this bridge between Foucauldian insights, neoliberal human capital theories, and Uberisation, see Fleming 2017; Uysal 2023.

obligations (i.e., taxes and labour rights), sets up a much more precise and ubiquitous surveillance and control apparatus, and requires a low need for intermediary management stratum. This structure enables the direct allocation of surplus value to C-level executives and shareholders financing the model – all while obfuscating exploitative relationships and spreading the ideology of entrepreneurship.

Globally, research (Huws et al. 2017, 6) conducted in seven European countries estimates that a number that ranges from 9% (the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) to 22% (Italy) of workers are involved in some kind of platform labour. In the USA, 2018 estimates (Gallup, 2018) show that around 57 million people were part of the platform workforce to some extent, corresponding to more than a third of American workers. In Brazil, platforms represent the country's largest "employer" since 2019 (see Gravas, 2019). Research (Cavalcante, 2021) from May 2021 (under the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the genocidal actions of then-president Jair Bolsonaro) shows that over 32 million Brazilians, 20% of the national adult population, resort to some app as a way to obtain income.

Given that capital is the actual subject of the social relations that are moulded under its aegis and the "comparative advantages" brought by the platform model to its central carriers, the so-called "uberisation" of labour tends not to be restricted to one or another more or less precarious profession, but to spread through all possible employment relationships – unless countered by forms of radical resistance.

3. Thesis 2 – More Than Data

The emergence of data technologies has unlocked new paths to "rationalise" the organisation of production and consumption, implement biopolitical mechanisms to control workers, monitor and analyse consumer habits, streamline processes, reduce operational costs, and set up the mammoth yet termite-like apparatus that Shoshana Zuboff (2019) famously termed "surveillance capitalism".

However, the platformisation of capitalism cannot be defined exclusively by the raw material it processes – i.e., data. This is one of the theses proposed by Nick Srnicek (2017) in the book that coined the term "platform capitalism" to describe the form of capitalist corporation forged in the wake of the quantitative easing policies adopted by the U.S. government after 2008, which redirected investment toward the tech sector (for many observers, including the author himself, inflating the next speculative bubble). Srnicek argues that just as oil was the raw material upon which capitalist development relied throughout the twentieth century, data is the foundational substance of the current phase of platform capitalism. Its extraction, mining, utilisation, and trade, he contends, constitute the core of the model.

This conception enables a significant expansion of the scope of platform capitalism. Srnicek's framework encompasses not only companies typically understood as platforms – such as Uber, Airbnb, Facebook, or Amazon – but also those that rely on data extraction, processing, or application in production and circulation, even if they do not formally intermediate gig labour. Under this broader definition, corporations like General Electric, Siemens, and Monsanto also qualify as platforms.

Srnicek's arguments compellingly show the model's potential to expand beyond its expected span. Nevertheless, just as oil did not define the form of Fordist social relations, data alone does not determine the current configuration of capitalism. In itself, and without the labour that animates the platform's mechanisms – and, as I will argue, without the subjective forms they engender – data is incapable of driving the system as a whole.

In other words, there is no platform capitalism without what Trebor Scholz terms crowd fleecing: "the economic exploitation and mistreatment of unprecedented numbers of globally distributed, mostly anonymous, invisible, solo workers, all synced and available to a small number of platform owners in real time" (Scholz 2017, 108). Alongside nature, living labour in all its forms – productive, reproductive, and unproductive (all becoming productive the moment they are integrated into platform circuits) – remains an indispensable source of capitalist reproduction. Any definition of platform capitalism must therefore include the millions of uberised workers across the globe, who fuel algorithms with their labour[2].

The year 2008 was not only a turning point for monetary policies that flooded Silicon Valley with venture capital; it also marked the most profound systemic crisis of capitalism since 1929, compelling vast segments of the global population to seek their livelihoods in platform-mediated gigs[3].

4. Thesis 3 – Precarity Intensified

Platform labour represents an inflexion point in the history of labour precarity. It marks a further step in a long-standing process – depending on who "counts" (both in the subjective and objective senses, that is, who gets to tell the story and who is deemed worthy of inclusion in a group). This temporal framing can be traced either to the emergence of capitalism and colonialism or, more recently, to the 1970s crisis that marked the transition to the neoliberal, flexible paradigm.

Characteristics once considered atypical – such as the absence of an employment contract (even in the form of "independent contracting"), the lack of predetermined working hours, fully variable and performance-based remuneration, the absence of fundamental labour rights, and the possibility of dismissal without prior notice – are now increasingly transposed onto entire labour markets. These developments are legitimised through a novel technological apparatus and a juridical grey zone. Through this process, precarious conditions once confined to informal, illegal, "peripheral", or "marginal" sectors—affecting non-hegemonic classes, races, genders, and sexualities—are now universalised under the platform model.

This levelling, of course, occurs to the advantage of capital: from below. The middle-class cis-hetero white man who suddenly loses his job and is temporarily forced to drive for Uber in order to maintain his standard of living now finds himself positioned within the same continuum of precarity – albeit at a higher tier – as the young Black favela resident who delivers pizzas and legal documents, the Latinx maid working in hotel chains, or the immigrant who delivers food by bicycle to survive and save money in hopes of reuniting with family members left behind. Anticipating many of the new trends taking shape years later in platform capitalism, philosopher Paulo Arantes (2021) famously called this phenomenon the "Brazilianization of the world"[4].

The relatively high proportion of university-educated individuals alternating between periods of unemployment and platform gigs (see International Labour Office 2021,

[2] In volumes II and III of *Capital*, Marx describes an inter-capitalist struggle over the global mass of surplus value available. This hypothesis might help explain why "WhatsApp had 55 employees when it was sold to Facebook for $19 billion and Instagram had 13 when it was purchased for $1 billion (Srnicek 2017, 4)". These companies are possibly converting into their own profit a portion of the surplus value produced by firms like Uber, Didi Chuxing, etc.

[3] This does not imply that from now on one should simply disregard data to define platform capitalism. Like oil, it is crucial in any account of capitalism.

[4] In the introduction to their study, Surie and Huws (2023) advance arguments that align closely with Arantes' original thesis.

141), often living alongside historically marginalised groups, testifies to this development. It echoes a formulation by Robert Castel from the 1990s: “So rather than reducing unemployment, then, there is the danger of merely raising the level of the qualifications of the unemployed” (Castel 2003, 384) – or, in this case, of increasing the qualification level of platform workers, who remain one step away from unemployment, both prior and future.

5. Thesis 4 – Not New, Just Everywhere

Despite its elevation to an infra-legal and high-tech level, precarity is not the distinctive trait of this new configuration of capitalist enterprise established in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis – at least not its sole characteristic. On the one hand, precarity and its affiliated phenomena permeate platform capitalism and are installed at the heart of its modus operandi; on the other, however, they were not engendered by it, nor do they affect all types of platform-based labour equally.

The peripheries of capitalism were already submitted to all forms of precarity centuries before the emergence of digital platforms, as were non-white, non-male, non-national, non-cis-hetero populations in the global North – which certainly does not imply that platform labour is not precarious, as I have argued above. As these populations were already acquainted with the most openly plundering and violent elements of capitalism long before the invention of platforms at the turn of the second decade of the 21st century, it is untenable to claim that “uberisation” was responsible for generating precarious labour relations in the first place. Even in the global North, several studies (see Castel 2003; Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 1989; Standing 2014; Sennett 1999, among others) had already documented the deterioration of working conditions beginning in the second half of the 1970s – nearly four decades before Uber was founded in 2009. As Castel observed (Castel 2003, 414), even the positions stabilised during the “Glorious Thirty” began to be progressively destabilised.

In this sense, the phenomenon is not unprecedented – only its scale and configuration are. Insisting on precarity as the hallmark *par excellence* of platform capitalism risks reinforcing the figure of the white, cis-hetero, male worker from the global North as the archetypal wage labourer under capitalism – when, in reality, as Kylie Jarret (2019) has argued, from a systemic point of view, he is precisely the atypical form.

Thus, the formula “platformisation of work = precarity” constitutes a half-truth. The platform model certainly represents another inflexion in terms of the depth, legal framing, scale, and contemporary articulation of precarity. Nonetheless, single-handedly, it does not get to the heart of the question of what, after all, defines platform capitalism.

6. Thesis 5 – A New Race to the Bottom?

The race to the bottom of neoliberal globalisation is amplified by the technical and legal means inaugurated by platforms. Graham’s and Ferrari’s idea of a “planetary market” seeks to capture precisely this new scenario in which “[p]lace, proximity, and positionalities will never be fully transcended… but the planetary scale of connectivity means that they now matter in profoundly different ways” (Graham e Ferrari 2022, 5).

However, under this regime, some sectors of the global South workforce may even benefit – at least superficially – from access to higher remuneration paid by platforms and clients based in the global North. This occurs either through physical migration to these countries to work as a migrant workforce (often on platforms with minimal bureaucratic or contractual requirements, or where such requirements can be circumvented), or, more commonly, by executing “virtual” tasks. These include services such as design, graphic production, translation, voice-over, and dubbing: a wide range of

work that tends to demand more brain expenditure than muscles and nerves – though certainly not dispensing with the latter.

Due to disparities in exchange rates and the global financial hierarchy that positions nations unequally within monetary geopolitics, the arrangement remains highly favourable to platforms and clients in the North. They can pay significantly less to their "partners" in the South than they would if the same tasks were performed by workers residing in the North, subject to its labour standards and rights, and income expectations. From the opposite perspective, Southern workers may receive, in absolute terms, higher one-time payments than those typically available in their local economies[5].

This asymmetry is one source of resentment and xenophobia directed at the very victims of the platform economy. Such sentiment often emanates from segments of the technical-professional middle class who blame China for destroying domestic industries, or scapegoat Syrian refugees for the contemporary crisis, accusing them of flooding European job markets via agencies like Manpower. Yet it is precisely these migrant and outsourced workers who endure the most exploitative and precarious living and working conditions globally.

This global levelling down of labour standards had already begun with the onset of the most recent phase of financial *mondialisation* (see Chesnais 2004), when multinational corporations dispatched subsidiaries worldwide to capitalise on local "comparative advantages" – only to channel the extracted surplus value back to their Northern headquarters. Nonetheless, the "disruption" triggered by platforms is now twofold: one of a technological nature, that is, the exemption from the need for physical installation of fixed capital on the system's peripheries, since a single office is often capable of overseeing millions of platform jobs; and one of a legal nature, related to what Niels van Doorn has termed "immunisation", a strategy of "protecting these parties [clients and platforms] from the obligations that commonly pertain to an employment relationship", chiefly through "the increasingly contested practice of worker misclassification" (van Doorn 2017, 902). With this hi-tech and infra-legal achievement, it is no longer necessary to go hunting abroad for the most permissive labour legislation, whether in India, Latin America, Africa, or Southeast Asia, since it is possible to circumvent any current legislation; after all, the platform allegedly does not involve labour or workers but rather gigs and partners.

7. Thesis 6 – Ruins are not Level Fields

Despite the convictions of Silicon Valley libertarians, for whom all social problems can be solved through technological fixes – while strategically omitting the legal artifice that supports platforms and accomplishes the miracle of transubstantiating workers into "partners" – the levelling of conditions by the lowest possible standards under platform capitalism does not amount to a process of "*democratisation*". Quite the contrary. In line with the broader logic of neoliberalism, which provides the socio-economic terrain (Altheman 2022), juridical rationale (Tomassetti 2021), and cultural milieu (Freedland 2017) for the emergence of platforms, what we are witnessing is, to employ Wendy

[5] Data from the International Labour Organization (International Labour Office 2021, 54) indicate that the global division of labour and wealth is reproduced within platform capitalism: platform workers based in "developed" countries earn, on average, USD 6.10 per hour, while their peers in "developing" countries earn just USD 4.10. However, the impact of this wage disparity is often offset by exchange rate differences. Given that the Euro, US dollar, and British Pound are among the world's strongest currencies, the conversion of these earnings into local currencies can render the work seemingly advantageous for platform workers located in the global South.

Brown's (2017) terms, a process of "de-democratisation". This is part of a "stealth revolution" that leaves nothing – State, companies, society, familial configurations, individuals – untouched.

In this process, collective entities and rights are displaced by the figure of the isolated individual – "free" only in the sense of being left (to and with his own devices) to struggle against destitution. In lieu of collective bargaining and political representation through elected worker bodies, summary dismissals and the worker's unconditional submission to the dictates of a technological apparatus that presents itself as rational and neutral. Instead of a voice and a vote in company management, workers face algorithmic control systems designed behind closed doors, accessible only to a select few C-level executives. Instead of upward mobility or meaningful career trajectories, the platform offers a static structure devoid of advancement or careers. Without indulging in nostalgia for a pre-neoliberal capitalism in which labour was supposedly "well-ordered", the fact remains that platform capitalism exacerbates an already precarious socio-economic landscape – while dispensing even with the appearance of offering stable career paths or the promise of social mobility.

The condition of equality indexed by the lowest common denominator should not be mistaken for "democratisation". What it more accurately reflects is a scorched terrain – what Wendy Brown (2019) has called the *ruins* left behind by neoliberalisation, now embedded in the very design of platform corporations.

8. Thesis 7 – Conduits of Neoliberal Subjectivity

Just as precarity undergoes an inflexion within the platform model, so too does the mode of subjectivation it promotes intensify previous trends toward the fabrication of neoliberal subjects. Already under Toyotism, significant transformations in labour management and organisation aimed to integrate the worker more closely into the corporate framework, thereby diluting the structural antagonism between capital and labour. Teamwork, polyvalency, kaizen, quality control circles, and the introjection of managerial functions into multifunctional workers all contributed to the reconfiguration of workers as "collaborators"[6].

Platform capitalism represents the most recent and intensified iteration of this model – one that now subjectivises workers as "partners". Guy McClenahan, a Deliveroo courier in England and active member of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain, offers a compelling portrait of this condition. He underlines how he enjoys his work ("It's great to sit back, coming down a hill with the lights of the city spread out in front of you, the roads quiet late at night") finds satisfaction in it ("Most people would say that riding is their job satisfaction"); does not approach it in purely utilitarian terms ("people don't just do it for the pay"); describes a sense of freedom ("It's for the sense of freedom that you only get as a messenger"); all the while with no boss in sight ("it's great to have a job carving through the streets with no manager"). The chapter's title per se is telling: "*We Don't Hate the Gig Economy*, But It Must Change" (McClenahan 2017, 7, emphasis added).

If some of the core tenets of neoliberal entrepreneurial ideology had already taken root during the 1980s and 1990s via notions of the "lean corporation", the "network

[6] As Giovanni Alves observes, Toyotism engenders "[...] the capture of worker subjectivity by the logic of capital, which tends to become 'more consensual, more involving, more participatory: in truth, more manipulative.' A 'post-Fordist estrangement' emerges, with Toyotism, which has a greater manipulative density than in other periods of monopoly capitalism" (Alves 2000, 54-55 – my translation).

enterprise", and new management strategies inspired by figures like Elton Mayo and popular management literature – what Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) called a new "spirit" of capitalism –, then platform capitalism brings these ideals to an unprecedented level.

Under this model, the traditional employment contract (even in the already degraded "independent contractor" format) is replaced by a simple tick of the "Terms and Conditions" box. Labour relations and work processes are saturated with terms like "partnership", "entrepreneurship", and "collaboration". Remuneration is entirely variable, contingent upon individual performance, and detached from any institutional safeguards. Fundamental labour rights are absent, while the costs of work – vehicles, maintenance, devices, uniforms – are outsourced (not to a third party, but) to the workers themselves. Risks once borne by employers are now shouldered by individuals. Behavioural incentives and gamified rankings foster constant internalised competition, both against others and against oneself. Meritocracy is presented as the central logic: those who work more and work harder will, supposedly, earn more. The State and labour protections are reframed not as safeguards of collective well-being, but as obstacles to personal progress and entrepreneurial success. The entire system is designed to forge a specific form of subjectivity: one that Michel Foucault (2010: 226) termed the "entrepreneur of himself".

9. Thesis 8 – On Autonomy and Freedom (Within a Heteronomous and Unfree Arrangement)

In interviews conducted between 2020 and 2021 with bicycle delivery couriers working for platforms in the city of São Paulo, as well as through digital ethnography in WhatsApp groups involving hundreds of platform workers during the Covid-19 pandemic[7], I frequently encountered expressions such as "being one's own boss", "setting one's own working hours", "not having a boss" or listing "freedom" as the main advantage of platform labour. Such formulations are widespread and recur across many studies on platform capitalism (see Scholz 2017, 109; Moda 2020; Newcomer and Zaleski 2017).

When I asked one courier about the recent protests known as *#Brequedosapps*[8], he explained his absence as follows: "Why didn't I participate? I make bicycle deliveries. I have no expenses other than food and transportation. And I earn R$200 a day. What am I going to complain about?! I used to work in a company and earned R$60 a day, and today, I earn triple that! [...] I am nothing but grateful".

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, pointing not only to the low wages of other jobs, but also to the abusive hierarchical dynamics often found in them: "In the app, you work for yourself. If you go to work for other people today, they will pay you crumbles, and they don't require you to do just that one job; you must do a little bit of everything, as if you were a general assistant... In the app, you stay on the street, and no one is there to bother you, demanding stuff from you. Companies want to pay too little and demand too much".

Beyond the technological component (and other ideological factors I will explore below), one of the reasons many workers describe this visibly predatory model in terms

[7] For the full study, see Altheman 2021.

[8] The hashtag #Brequedosapps (loosely translated as "Breaking the Apps") refers to a wave of protests that began in Brazil in July 2020. Thousands of platform workers – primarily motorcycle and bicycle couriers – mobilised across the country demanding for improved working conditions, with the movement soon spreading to other Latin American contexts.

of “freedom” and “autonomy” may lie in their prior labour experiences: For many, past experiences of unemployment or wage labour involved levels of abuse and subordination equal to or greater than those encountered in platform labour.

The conversion of the boss into an impersonal algorithm and the outsourcing of managerial functions to the workers themselves appears, in this case, to be beneficial, since, for those situated on the peripheries of capitalism or who do not belong to the dominant races, genders, and sexualities in the centre, capitalist domination expresses itself not only through impersonal economic exploitation (that is, in the form of the surplus value booty that takes place behind the backs of social agents), but also through more overtly despotic forms of subordination. As a third interviewee illustratively put it when I asked about the advantages of platform labour: “The main one is [the absence of] the boss, right?! I think everyone hates their bosses”.

10. Thesis 9 – Labour Rewired: Material Transformations, Ideological Effects

These subjective and ideological effects accompany objective transformations occurring within the production process – in other words, they are not “mere” chimaeras.

A significant portion of the production apparatus is, in fact, transferred to the workers themselves – cars, motorcycles, bicycles, computers, smartphones, thermal bags, and so forth – even as the codes, algorithms, and software that govern the platform remain in the increasingly concentrated control of capitalists. At the end of a shift, workers return home with the same tools they used for labour, now re-deployed for leisure. This blurring of boundaries contributes to the perception that they “own” the means of production and encourages their self-identification as autonomous entrepreneurs and their own bosses.

Workers do indeed possess greater control over their working hours. Even if always under the threat of pauperism, they “can” log off when they “want”; “choose” the days and times that appear most convenient in light of personal schedules and goals; “define” the geographic areas in which they will operate; “establish” daily, weekly, and monthly income targets; “institute” rest days; and “opt” to work in different neighbourhoods – or even cities – as so-called “digital nomads”[9].

Remuneration is, in fact, performance-based. More time spent on the platform generally corresponds to higher pay[10]. Strategic decisions also affect earnings: workers must independently determine which part of the city to work in and at what times; which days of the week or weekends yield more orders; how to align working hours with customers’ paydays (and thus increased demand); how best to take advantage of platform incentives; whether to log into multiple platforms simultaneously, and so forth.

The complete atomisation of workers, who are no longer part of a team and have no direct manager[11], combined with the immediate and transactional nature of client-

[9] All verbs appear in quotation marks because these so-called “choices” are anything but free.

[10] Even for those who embody the Stakhanovite ideal of the “model worker”, platform labour often results in diminishing marginal returns. Logging more hours typically leads to proportionally more idle time – waiting without active orders – which, in turn, reduces the proportional hourly remuneration.

[11] An exception exists on certain platforms that introduce intermediaries between “partners” and customers. This is the case, for example, with the logistics operator model used by the Brazilian platform iFood. Nevertheless, this form of labour relation remains marginal within the broader landscape of platform work. According to iFood itself, only around 10% of its couriers operate under this arrangement (see Carvalho 2020).

worker interactions, fosters an ethos of individual accountability. Successes and failures are perceived as entirely personal. On the screen of their smartphones or computers, workers appear to rely solely on themselves for their financial outcomes.

Felipe (a pseudonym), a bicycle courier I interviewed in April 2021, summarised these dynamics succinctly: “You command yourself; you work the hours you want. If it's raining, you can switch off and leave. You command the day you want to work. In fact, you command your salary, too.”

In sum, these objective factors within the platform model directly shape a corresponding set of subjective orientations. They produce real transformations at the level of consciousness, which in turn materialise in workers’ actions and self-perceptions. Grasping this capitalist configuration requires a dialectical approach – one attentive to both the genuine novelties and persistent continuities of platform labour, its organisational structure, and its model of worker subjectivity. This includes comparisons with both Fordism in the global North and the long-standing techniques of precarity management in the global South.

11. Thesis 10 – Class Disarmed

The subjective effects of the platform arrangement are acute. The platform aims to promote unbridled competition within the members of the working class; to obscure relations of exploitation and domination behind an allegedly neutral technological apparatus; to forge “human capital” in lieu of workers compelled to sell their labour power; to propagate the ideology of self-entrepreneurship, with its corresponding ideals of meritocracy, performance, State-phobia, and volatility; to dismantle bonds of solidarity and class organisation; in short, through a network of technological, subjective and labour-based devices, it works to undo the awareness that our “society as a whole is splitting up more and more into two great hostile camps” (Marx, Engels, and Puchner 2009, 19).

The closing paragraph of McClenahan’s report mentioned above captures this ideological displacement: “We don't hate Deliveroo – we may resent them for how they’ve treated us, but overall, we want them to succeed – it benefits us as much as it does them. We'd like to form a good relationship with our employer, to the benefit of wages and profits across the board” (McClenahan 2017, 9).

This echoes what Alain Ehrenberg had already observed in relation to the sport-adventure ideology: the platform also seems to be part of this contemporary constellation “which consists of creating, in employees, a true entrepreneurial mentality, transforming them into supporters of the company for which [...] they work” (Ehrenberg 2010, 111 – my translation).

After five decades of steady neoliberalisation of the world, precisely when the structural chasm between the two fundamental antagonistic camps of capitalist society becomes more and more transparent, the platform model intervenes to fog this awareness by substituting individuals and class-based subjects with the real fiction of “human capital”.

This is a remarkable achievement, given that the platform faithfully replicates in its internal layout the overall class structure of neoliberal society: a rarefied layer of finance capital that funds the model and hovers above the company; a minuscule elite made up of founders and C-level executives; a thin middle stratum of administrative and technical staff; and a massive base of “partners” who, by design, have no prospect of advancement within the platform hierarchy.

Ehrenberg's provocation thus remains urgently relevant – perhaps even more so today than when it was first posed: “How did the corporation, this theatre of class struggle..., this instrument of domination of the big over the small, undergo such a decisive change in the collective imagination, to the point of representing a legitimate answer to most of our ills?” (Ehrenberg 2010, 14 – my translation).

12. Thesis 11 – Entrepreneurialism from Below

These ideological procedures aim to spread among the most precarious segments of the working class. Platform capitalism seeks to capillarise neoliberal subjectivity within the so-called “precariat” (Braga 2018), “sub-proletariat” (Singer 2022), or “class-that-lives-from-labour” (Antunes 2022). While an entrepreneurial ethos may be expected among (upper-)middle-class professionals working in technology, startups, and the financial sector, the novelty introduced by platforms is their ideological penetration into the lives of the most vulnerable workers – those historically identified as *viradores* (more on this below) – now included in the circuits of platform labour and, consequently, in the ideological frameworks of neoliberal society.

This is no minor achievement. These are precisely the sectors with the most to lose under any neoliberal project. Historically, neoliberalisation has been accompanied by dramatic increases in inequality, declines in the standard of living for the lower classes, erosion of real wages, cuts to social programs, the dismantling of collective support systems, and the mass incarceration of Black and poor populations (Wacquant 2009; Peck 2013; Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2011), among other measures that hit precisely the most deprived. One need only recall the letter written by André Gunder Frank (1976) to his former mentor Milton Friedman, just three years after the coup in Chile, in which he described what the so-called “Chilean miracle” truly entailed.

Platforms are not the only conduit for the diffusion of neoliberal subjectivity. They intersect with many others – ranging from neo-Pentecostal religious movements and the culture industry to new and old political parties, businesspeople-turned-politicians, libertarian think tanks, self-help coaches and gurus, and rebranded educational curricula. Yet they are arguably among the most powerful in terms of reach and depth.

Whether delivering meals by bicycle, on foot, or motorbike; driving passengers across cities; shopping for groceries; performing odd jobs; transporting documents; or running a host of personalised errands, a broad sector of workers who have long alternated between formality and informality, professional activity and unemployment, is now being absorbed into the operations of platform capitalism. Through this integration, the platform model seeks to inoculate the values and behavioural imperatives of neoliberal ideology into the poorest and most precarious populations of metropolises across the globe.

13. Thesis 12 - From Viração to Venture

Platform entrepreneurship is not the same as *viração* 2.0. “Viração” (Vee-rah-sao) is a Brazilian term that loosely translates to “getting by” or “making do” and is associated with a survival practice of historically marginalised populations. It has become a sociological concept[12] used to highlight the difference between the typical white, cis-hetero, male, global North, Fordist notion of “employment” and the myriad more or less precarious forms of labour characteristic of the global South and so-called “marginal” labour relations – contexts in which workers must find ways to survive by any means

[12] Brazilian sociologist Ludmila Costhek Abílio (see 2017; 2019) has developed many thought-provoking insights on the relationship between platform labour and *viração*.

available. In the Spanish-speaking world, the concept of “cuentapropismo,” in its more precarious manifestations, belongs to the same semantic field.

If, as I have argued above, platform capitalism generalises the peripheral, racialised, non-cis-hetero, and non-male labour condition, it would nevertheless be mistaken to treat the ideology of “self-entrepreneurship” it disseminates as merely a digital update of *viração*. It is not just a matter of finally recognising that the peripheries were “always already” entrepreneurial but simply unacknowledged. Between *viração* and platform entrepreneurialism, there is a decisive reversal of signs.

Viração has long characterised the condition of those excluded from even the minimal civilisational standards attained by the national working classes of the global North (who, it must be remembered, were themselves exploited by their national bourgeoisie). Lacking fully realised rights, stable employment leading to a collective identity, a unified political project, and basic guarantees of (non-anomalous) life reproduction, *viradores* always stood as the negative image of the Northern working class – particularly its white, male, and cis-heterosexual segment. As such, they bore witness to the fact that capitalism has always depended on economic violence that exceeds the “ordinary” extraction of surplus value.

Yet by enduring such deleterious conditions, they also represented the negative of capital and the ruling classes themselves. No serious observer would claim that a street vendor or a person scraping by through odd jobs in a third-world slum is a “self-capitalist”.

By contrast, the ideology of “self-entrepreneurship” refuses to acknowledge the existence of distinct social classes defined by their relation to the means of production. It seeks to level all individuals under the universalising fiction of “capitalists” – thus seeking to efface the markers of class exploitation and domination. Even those who possess virtually nothing – such as platform workers who lease the vehicles and other tools – are recast as capitalists by virtue of the only thing they do own: a unique set of “innate elements and other, acquired elements” (Foucault 2010, 227). From these, they are expected to extract income – if only they “try hard” enough.

In this way, entrepreneurial ideology turns the negative into a positive. It is no longer about overcoming the precarious and “underdeveloped” reality of *viração*; it is about activating the “entrepreneur” supposedly already latent in each of us. What once signified a condition beneath that of the “typical” worker is now repurposed as a command to transcend fixed categories of “labour” and “capital”.

Viração and platform entrepreneurialism may share similar objective precarious conditions, but they occupy opposing positions in political and ideological terms. The former marked the flipside of bourgeois society. The latter, its apologetic affirmation. The former was a peripheral condition; the latter, ideology.

14. Thesis 13 – The Platform Nexus

Taken together, this objective and subjective landscape suggests that platform capitalism represents the most comprehensive model of labour management in contemporary neoliberal society. At the core of this model lies a nexus composed of four mutually reinforcing components: juridical trickery, technological innovation, an inflexion in precarity, and the intensification of a neoliberal mode of subjectivation.

Individually, none of these elements is new. Precarity has long been the rule, rather than the exception, in labour (and life) under capitalism – predating the *Privatseminars* of Ludwig von Mises in Red Vienna, the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris (1938), the founding of the Mont Pèlerin Society in Switzerland (1947), the German postwar

social market economy, and even the 1973 coup in Chile. It also predates the entry of algorithms, smartphones, and information technologies into the realm of work.

Likewise, neoliberalism has consistently left in its wake large-scale precarity in labour relations and living standards – both in the global North and South – but not always through the application of new technological instruments. The relationship between productive forces and relations of production has always been central to the capitalist mode of production, long before the rise of neoliberalism.

Finally, the neoliberal objective of transforming "heart and soul through the economy" – as exemplified by Margaret Thatcher 's (1981) famous dictum – has been a core goal at least since von Mises' praxeology, explicitly articulated in the title of his foundational work *Human Action* (Von Mises, 1998).

What platform capitalism accomplishes is the inextricable entanglement of these elements. It is a highly precarious model of labour organisation and management, embedded in a specific technological configuration (algorithms, smartphones, data extraction, machine learning, etc.), made legally feasible by a regime of classificatory chicanery that rebrands employment as "partnership", and infused with a mode of neoliberal subjectivation based on the imperatives of entrepreneurship, autonomy, freedom, meritocracy, and perpetual competition. All of this is made viable by massive injections of financial capital, which in turn accelerate the concentration of capital and deepen inequality.

15. Thesis 14 – Disruption vs. Subversion

There is no such thing as a "fair" platform economy – just as there is no such thing as benevolent capitalism. The entire platform model is built upon multiple pillars: the (often illegal) extraction, mining, and transaction of data from users, workers, and commercial establishments (Srnicek 2017); the legalisation and intensification of precarious labour relations (Scholz 2017; Antunes 2020); the strategic "immunisation" from employment obligations (van Doorn 2017); aggressive tax evasion schemes; and, underpinning it all, speculative finance capital of the most volatile kind. Remove any one of these foundations, and the edifice collapses. Even with all of them intact, most platforms have yet to demonstrate financial viability, accumulating years of negative quarterly earnings (International Labour Office 2021, 63; Motta 2019).

The rise of the platform corporation has been enabled by a broader social context marked by poly-crisis: prohibitively expensive or non-existent public transportation systems; urban planning designed with capital as the *de facto* city planner; the contraction of the middle class, which, unable to sustain its former consumption patterns, turns to platforms for cheaper alternatives (the shift from the "cinema + restaurant" combo to "Netflix + UberEATS", as Callum Cant [2020, 67] illustrates); and a vast surplus population of unemployed or underemployed workers willing to accept the most exploitative conditions simply to survive.

If platforms were to reclassify their workers as employees, respect national labour legislation, and pay taxes without relying on legal loopholes, the prices of their services would rise significantly. As a result, the already squeezed middle class – their primary consumer base – would be priced out, or at the very least, drastically reduce consumption. In such a scenario, the platform model would be rendered unsustainable.

Attempts to rehabilitate the platform model – particularly through cooperatives that often operate within what Marisol Sandoval (2020) calls "entrepreneurial activism" – are, therefore, futile. Consider, for instance, Michael Six Silberman's "Fifteen Criteria for a Fairer Gig Economy" (2017), proposed under the auspices of IG Metall, Ger-

many's powerful metalworkers' union. These guidelines are revealing in their inadequacy. Some criteria are so minimal they concede the inevitability of abuse (such as those that merely stipulate the conditions under which non-payment might be acceptable), while others are fundamentally incompatible with the platform model – starting with the first: "workers should not be misclassified as self-employed if they are employed in practice". Criterion 14, for example, suggests that account deactivations should be reviewed by a human employee. No mention is made of the illegality of immediate, unilateral deactivations, or of the unpaid labour rights that follow. The only demand is that a human, rather than an algorithm, press the button. This alone exposes the level of degradation platform labour has reached.

Nick Srnicek's proposal (2017b) points beyond the platform model through the introduction of a universal basic income, aiming at the society in which this model operates and offering thus a broader horizon. But even this "radical and far-reaching solution", as he calls it, falls short. Any truly transformative solution must also confront the ongoing crisis of reproductive labour, the dismantling of public welfare, financial speculation, wealth accumulation and taxation, the commodification of basic rights – not to mention the abolition of labour altogether and private property, which today sounds lunatic.

Proposals for platform cooperativism, such as those advanced by Trebor Scholz (2016), often share similar limitations. After rightfully and powerfully stating that "the sharing economy is Reaganism by other means" (Scholz 2016, 6), Scholz echoes the *alteromundista* motto of the first editions of the World Social Forum, claiming that "A People's Internet is possible!" (Scholz 2016, 10). To this end, he advocates for platforms democratically owned by workers, achieved by "cloning the technological heart of Uber, TaskRabbit, Airbnb, or UpWork", and infusing them with solidarity and "reframing concepts like innovation and efficiency with an eye on benefiting all" (Scholz 2016, 14). However, even in these scenarios, crucial problems remain unaddressed, such as the persistence of neoliberal subjectivation and the structural function of platforms in absorbing surplus populations, not to mention the catastrophic environmental consequences of this model.

To put it pointedly: should we struggle for public, universal, and suitable transportation systems or for taxi cooperatives? For housing as a fundamental human right or for rent discounts in platform cooperatives like Allbnb? Are we fighting for a just and habitable world or for the fair redistribution of dividends coming from oil extraction[13]?

Rosa Luxemburg's reflection – quoted by Scholz himself – captures the structural trap of cooperative production in capitalist society with astonishing clarity:

The workers forming a cooperative in the field of production are thus faced with the contradictory necessity of governing themselves with the utmost absolutism. They are obliged to take toward themselves the role of capitalist entrepreneur – a contradiction that accounts for the usual failure of production cooperatives, which either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers' interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving (Luxemburg apud Scholz 2016; 12)

Even when they attempt to mitigate exploitation (without abolishing it), cooperatives cannot resolve a more fundamental problem: that labour itself remains the constitutive form of capitalist sociability. The problem lies not only in the quantitative unequal distribution of surplus value, appropriated by the owner of the means of production, but in the very abstraction of labour that underpins capitalist value production. A full-employment society – even one in which there are no corporeal bosses, but where abstract

[13] All examples found in Scholz 2016, 16.

labour persists as the dominant social mediator – is not an alternative to capitalist society, as Moishe Postone (1993) argued.

No matter how "disruptive", cutting-edge, or ethically rebranded, there is no technological fix for a social problem that is not technological in nature. This impulse – what Evgeny Morozov (2013) calls "technological solutionism" – rests on the assumption that apps and platforms can solve all types of human and social problems. However, as Christian Fuchs reminds us, the real solution "is neither an app nor a platform. It cannot be downloaded from the Internet or clicked on a mobile phone" (Fuchs 2021; 68).

Moreover, this approach fails to interrogate how technology itself is saturated with a broader societal project whose ends are already embedded in its means. As Herbert Marcuse (2002; 1998a) warned in the 1950s and 60s, technology is never neutral. The solution, therefore, cannot be technological. It can only come from political economy and its critique.

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