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Digital platforms and uberization: Towards the globalization of an administrated South?

LUDMILA COSTHEK ABÍLIO

Centre of Union and Work Economy studies (CESIT-UNICAMP) – Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil.
E-mail: l.c.abilio@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2332-8493.

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Abstract

The article discusses platform work based on the definition of uberization. This definition is understood as global trend that establishes new forms of work organization, management and control. The novelty catalysed by digital platforms refers to an algorithmic management which can be understood as a new form of control that operates in extracting and processing data from the multitude of workers, informed by the possibility of full mapping the work process. The work of cosmetic sellers is brought to the analysis in order to present typically feminine characteristics of work that are becoming generalized; also the results of empirical research with motorcycle couriers and their uberization in the city of São Paulo are discussed.

Keywords

Motorcycle couriers; Cosmetic resellers; Global South; Platform labour; Uberization.

Introduction

"It is time, finally, to cease being what we are not"
(Aníbal Quijano, *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*).

In this article, uberization is defined as a new global tendency of organizing, managing and controlling labour. Despite gaining visibility through platform labour (according to a definition by Van Doorn, 2017), uberization in fact transcends it. It results from decades of elimination of labour rights and from global dispersion combined with the centralization of productive chains and the liberalization of financial and investment flows. Concurrently, technological development has enabled the creation of new forms of organizing and controlling the labour process. However, digital platforms have catalyzed a new element that must be better understood and analyzed by labour studies: algorithmic management, which can be understood as the possibility of extracting, processing and managing data from a massive number of workers in a centralized and monopolized way. This has established new and obscure ways of labour management, based on a comprehensive mapping of the labor process and on a new type of subordination that includes predicting and inducing individualized behavior (Zuboff, 2019). The difficulty of accessing app-companies (this term was devised by Abílio, 2017) information about the ways platforms operate hinders understanding of how labour management has been conceived and executed. However, based on uberized workers' viewpoints, we recognize the appearance of a new form of control (Abílio, 2017; Abílio, 2019; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Rosenblat, 2018; Möehlmann and Zalmanson, 2017).

Thus, when we talk about uberization we must simultaneously look into algorithmic management and the processes of labour flexibilization and precarization. As we will discuss later in this text, these two elements have led to the creation of a massive contingent of just-in-time workers (Abílio, 2017; Abílio, 2019; De Stefano, 2016) who are socially unprotected and expected to bear the risks and costs of their activities. These workers live under permanent uncertainty regarding remuneration and workload and are subordinated, according to a new logic, to companies with high monopoly and centralization powers (Slee, 2015).

We must first look carefully into the definitions of uberization, just-in-time workers and algorithmic management. These concepts have become increasingly complex and central to work in peripheral regions. We must be careful when applying categories such as flexibilization, precarization and now, uberization, to the risk of obscuring the structural precariousness of the world of work in Southern countries or overlooking elements that are commonly seen as marginal or unimportant (Abílio, 2018; Casilli, 2018). The approach on which this analysis is based is that uberization should be understood as a tendency to generalize certain characteristics found in Southern labour markets and which have recently become more visible after spreading to central countries and among qualified workers with higher earnings (Abílio, 2017; Abílio, 2019). This analysis is based on empirical research carried out with cosmetics sales representatives and concluded in 2011 (Abílio, 2010, Abílio, 2011; Abílio, 2014) and on ongoing research about motorcycle couriers in São Paulo city over the past five years (Abílio, 2019). The research on cosmetics sales representatives has shown that labour flexibilization can be understood as a generalization of central elements that define a type of work that is typically female and peripheral. Nowadays, these elements have been potentialized and enhanced by algorithmic management and uberization (Abílio, 2019). Meanwhile, the research on motorbike couriers has enabled us to highlight the deep restructuring in labour caused by the arrival of app-companies in this field of activity.

Uberization: A tendency beyond the platformization of labour

Despite the visibility brought by the company Uber, uberization is not restricted to the transport

sector nor to digital platforms. The approach presented in this paper has been developed since 2007, when terms such as crowdsourcing, sharing economy and gig economy had not been created yet. The research on cosmetics sales representatives working for a single company, Brazil-based Natura - which has become a global giant following the acquisition of Avon International - had already raised questions regarding platform labour, that at the time, however, were analyzed from the viewpoint of informality and exploitation in a type of work that is traditionally female (Abílio, 2010; Abílio, 2011; Abílio, 2014). The research was based on interviews with 23 sales representatives from different socioeconomic profiles in São Paulo, as well as one in Paris and another one in London. We also conducted semi-open ended interviews with five company employees and former employees and observed meetings between the company and the sales representatives.¹ In 2007, there was an army of 200,000 sales representatives and this number grew exponentially in that decade: by 2011 there were over one million sales representatives working for this one single company.

After studying an occupation that remains traditionally female and socially invisible, we recognized a type of labour control that is based on the management of a multitude of informal workers, barely recognized as workers, facing the blurred frontiers between work and consumption. This organization and control of work would gain a definition coined by Jeff Howe (2006, 2008): crowdsourcing. The growth of the army of sales representatives further highlighted the following question: how can a company organize its entire distribution system through an army of one million informal workers? Based on Howe's description and analyses, we concluded that a new form of organization and control had appeared in the world of work that included new forms of worker engagement and mobilization. Rather than operating with a pre-established workers' contingent, this type of organization can grow indefinitely. Rather than a contract, there is adherence to work; formally speaking, instead of existing pre-requisites there are personal abilities, capabilities and strategies that can ensure success and permanence in the job.

Thus, crowdsourcing can be seen as a new form of labour control and organization. Its definition is complex, as it involves an increasing lack of distinction between what is work and what is not, as well as between work and consumption. It also poses challenges about recognizing and categorizing new forms of value-creation and their relationship to activities that can hardly be identified as labour and which at the same time, engage a multitude of users. Crowdsourcing can be understood as a new type of outsourcing that accompanies and is intertwined with the disappearance of labour forms. It causes dislocation from a professional identity forged by work to amateur work instead (Dujarier, 2009). This definition describes a type of work devoid of a well-established labour form, which is highly flexible and which moves between consumption, leisure, unpaid labour and temporary work.

When informality becomes information

The activity of cosmetics sales representatives is performed by a multitude of informal workers, in a work that does not have the form of work. It allows us to shift the excessive focus on platforms to the world of labour and its transformations. As cosmetics sales representatives, and the Direct Sales System as a whole, involve traditionally female jobs, they do not have the same type of social visibility as Uber's multitude of drivers.

The Direct Sales System operates within the law and is regulated on a national basis. There is also an international organization (WFDSA) for the companies that use this mode to sell and distribute their products worldwide. Thus, the army of sales representatives is legally informal. Rather than being a type of work, the representatives' labour is presented by cosmetics companies as an exercise in sociability

¹ The research on sales representatives was part of a PhD in Social Sciences taken at IFCH-UNICAMP between 2007 and 2011 and financed by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

and as a means to promote beauty and even environmental responsibility. In the case of application-companies and their multitude of uberized workers, the absence of legal guidelines on workdays, on exclusive dedication to one application-company and on procedures for labour execution helps boost the celebration of entrepreneurship and defense of the lack of working ties in platform labour.

The sales representative job is highly malleable, flexible and far-reaching. The 25 in-depth interviews carried out with sales representatives showed different types of relationship to the activity, as well as different perceptions and possibilities of earning money and protecting themselves against the risks involved in this activity. The resellers have very diverse socioeconomic profiles in terms of age, income, race and occupation. In the same way that the Uber Black category creates a distinction between drivers according to their car prices (this also operates from the consumer side, as passengers pay more to ride in a more expensive car), Natura created the Crystal Sector. This category encompasses sales representatives from the São Paulo elite and middle class who sell their products and move among people with a higher purchasing power and therefore can differentiate themselves from the unqualified and low-income representatives.

Thus, the sales representatives maintain different types of relationships to a highly-permeable labour form that enables them to do other types of work and to exercise different forms of sociability while performing what could then be considered as amateur work (Dujarier, 2009; Abílio, 2014; Abílio, 2019). A teacher can sell cosmetics between classes; a house cleaner sells to her employer and to her neighbours during working hours; a housewife sets up an informal store on the ground floor of the house where her husband keeps an accountant's office and becomes one of São Paulo's top sales representatives; a 60-year old typist who left her profession 30 years earlier and became a full-time cosmetics representative. Like the Uber driver who is working to pay for the car that has become his work tool, the representative sells her products to be able to consume these same products, as she perceives her remuneration as a discount on the prices of the products she wants to buy.

Thousands of people have become amateur managers of their own homes by joining Airbnb, millions of drivers have become transport professionals by joining Uber and thousands of unemployed or underemployed youngsters have become bicycle couriers by joining Ifood, Rappi, UberEats (an activity whose main element is exhausting physical force). Similarly, over the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of women have resorted to selling cosmetics. In all these cases, adhesion means engaging in activities that incur risks and costs and at the same time, offer no guarantees, rights or protection. The malleability and flexibility of these activities enable the establishment of different types of labour relations, as well as different possibilities of real remuneration.

For the companies, this flexibility in the form of labour is well controlled and managed: the sales that take place outside the cosmetics factory are translated into managed information within the company. Information technology has enabled informality and just-in-time production to become intertwined and feed each other. Each representative is a number on a register of hundreds of thousands of workers. The orders are pieces of information, while the order inflows are a set of automated data that determines what, when and how much will be produced. The company operates on low inventory levels and high innovation rates. Production pace is determined by sales pace. Risks and inventory costs are scattered inside the drawers of the sales representatives. They sell the products through informal relationships devoid of pre-established determinations or legal guarantees, while being formally committed to the company through a bank payment slip.

Crowdsourcing and the global and controlled dispersion of labour

This type of traditionally female and socially invisible work used by the company Natura displays the central elements of crowdsourcing. Flexibility and an absence of definitions and distinctions between

what is and what is not work and what is and what is not labour time are evidence of this activity's wide dissemination. In addition to this lack of definitions is the adherence factor, as the sellers' school and home spaces, as well as the time spent on other jobs and on leisure, end up being colonized by sales. For these reasons, it is no longer possible to establish a boundary for analysis. However, these ambiguities are nothing new for women. According to a more in-depth analysis developed in Abílio (2014 e 2018), the blurred boundaries between what is and what is not labour time; the home space and the work space; what is and what is not work; what is paid and what is unpaid labour are, in different ways, the structuring elements of domestic work, household services and reproductive labour. However, the novelty here is that these elements are subordinated to a company that operates with these indistinctions in an organized, managed and productive manner. In fact, these elements are managed through the transformation of activity performed by a multitude of informal workers into the information that determines the pace of the production line.

The dissemination of labour throughout platforms demands a strenuous exercise in understanding and defining the categories that structure it (Casilli, 2018; De Stefano, 2016; Srnicek, 2016). Nowadays platform labour involves different economic sectors, types of service and labour forms. According to Antonio Casilli (2018), digital labour encompasses the tasks carried out by human users on websites and applications and which are platform-based and mediated by algorithms. Independently of the degree of recognition of its labour form, the definition of digital labour is based on the fact that it produces wealth for the companies. De Stefano (2016) has established two analysis categories based on the relationship between labour and territorialization as a means to understand multiple labour relations and the challenges they pose regarding regulation and categorization. Crowdfwork includes labour relations provided and concluded online. Basically, there is no need for a pre-established physical location where the work will be executed. A Turker can accept and complete the tasks set by Amazon Mechanical Turk anywhere. Meanwhile, work on demand (De Stefano, 2016) is work offered online, but which has to be completed within a pre-established physical territory. For example, an Uber driver cannot work anywhere, only in the city where he is and where the order originated from.

Over the past four decades, the convergence between technological development, labour flexibilization and the globalization of productive chains combined with policies to eliminate workers' rights and protections have consolidated the global dispersion of labour without loss of control over it (Bernardo, 2004; Harvey, 1989; Ritzer, 2008). When George Ritzer (2008) created the term McDonaldization, he was aiming at the import and expansion of Taylorism to the service sector. However, McDonaldization did not refer only to the Taylorization of the third sector pointed out by Harry Braverman (1974). It also refers to the highly organized and subordinated dispersion of labour. When analyzing the McDonald's corporation, the author shows how this lean company has managed to fiercely subordinate and control the production of its suppliers (from lettuce to meatpacking plants), globalize its distribution through franchises and at the same time, hold total control over standardization, production, distribution time and the prices of its products.

Labour dispersion and the centralization of control do not involve companies only but workers as well, and are the central element in Toyotism. Home office is a clear example of controlled dispersion, as it transfers the management of labour time and workspace to the workers themselves. However, the transferal of management to the worker does not mean loss of control over labour. The introduction of targets and bonuses, as well as profit and results sharing evidence new forms of labour control based on the successful dispersion of management to the worker, who contributes to the increasing of his own productivity.

Platform labour has led us to think about global outsourcing and the creation of a planetary labour market that is, however geopolitically defined (Graham and Anwar, 2019). This is a global phenomenon which in addition to producing new types of specificities and inequalities within national contexts is also

determined by these same contexts. This occurs through the establishment of a transnational space for labour exploitation that despite being constrained by territorialization (which has been increasingly restricted to labour and not to capital), remains disconnected from national labour regulation and social protection mechanisms. The prospect of a planetary labour market (Graham and Anwar, 2019), as well as the categories drawn up by De Stefano (2016) and Casilli (2018), support the recognition and investigation of a digital labour geopolitics. Following this perspective, is necessary to analyze how companies appropriate by monopolistic practices of local and national specificities, how international division of labour is produced and reproduced through this new form of labour dispersion and control. What is at stake here are new means of territorialized concentration of labour demand and a geopolitically defined dispersion of labour force (Casilli, 2018; Graham et. al., 2016). This also raises new possibilities and challenges in organization and resistance. We have already witnessed a global Uber drivers' strike, in which the participants recognized themselves within city boundaries and managed to bond and organize according to space-based criteria. This may raise the question: which means of organization would the dispersed online Turkers adopt?

Regarding the search for the right terms and definitions, the perspective here is less concerned with criticizing or discussing the limits of the definitions that currently involve digital labour, platforms, uberization and the global South, and more focused on contributing with instruments for critical perspectives. Following Ursula Huws (2003), our current difficulty in naming these processes is less due to the absence of an adequate term and more to do with little clarity regarding the horizons guiding our analyses. No term will ever adequately or precisely categorize these transformations. What is at stake here is the need to point out the processes that have been crystallized by these definitions and the critical horizons guiding them.

In this article, the South category summarizes socially invisible work, that has been recurrently associated with the margins of development and with social disposability, and which has historically been linked to black people, more specifically, black women. In Brazil, black women are at the bottom of the social pyramid, doing the lowest paid jobs, mostly working on an informal basis and performing domestic services. The dispersion and centralization movement mentioned earlier has prompted the dissemination of labour characteristics that despite being typically peripheral, have recently become subordinated to new means and have acquired new forms of visibility.

Algorithmic management and the consolidation of the just-in-time worker

The definition of just-in-time worker (Abílio, 2017; Abílio, 2019; De Stefano, 2016) exposes the core of new forms of control, management and exploitation. These new forms assign a new level of complexity to labour flexibilization by consolidating the transfer of risks, costs and responsibilities to the workers while simultaneously eliminating protections, rights and guarantees. It has become possible, in a managed, rationalized and productive manner, to convert a multitude of workers into informal workers who are available for work but are only used according to the companies' needs.

The image of the available worker remunerated according to the exact use of his labour power is not new. In fact, it has been a constant fixture in the permanently conflicted relation between capital and labour. This conflict has historically materialized in the battles between attempts to reduce workers to labour power that should be used efficiently in time and space and the recognition of workers as human beings who are entitled to rest during and outside their working day, who should have access to guarantees and rights related to their own social reproduction, to grow old with dignity, etc. It is also materialized in the struggle to reduce labour's porosity, and in the disputes around the limits or deregulations of the working day and the intensity of labour. In this tug of war, the rope knots have been tied according to

definitions of justice and dignity that have been under permanent dispute and movement and which have never been universalized. Uberization seems to consolidate the reduction of the worker to a mere production factor who, as a person, is entirely responsible for his own social reproduction. While there are no guarantees such as remuneration, workload or hours, the worker is also expected to be available whenever necessary. As this consolidation creates a fuzzy idea of what labour time is, it can also mean that every hour is potentially labour time (Abílio, 2014). Being a just-in-time worker means being an Uber driver who is logged in 12 hours a day in a queue of hundreds of drivers at the airport waiting for a fare (Machado, 2017). We are now witnessing the routine of bicycle couriers, who cycle around the city 12 hours a day, seven days a week awaiting the next delivery job (Aliança Bike, 2019). Being a just-in-time worker means falling ill due to anxiety and burn out, as shown by studies about the workers at the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform, who spend 24 hours a day connected to the platform awaiting a task that might come from the other side of the world (Bergvall-Kareborn and Howcroft, 2014).

Detailed analysis is required of the elements underlying the premise that the available worker will only be used according to an exact level of demand. Firstly, it is important to emphasize that “exact level of demand” does not imply defending a general equilibrium – which is supposedly abstract and neutral – between supply and demand. Nowadays, the liberal notion of general equilibrium is crucial for app-companies to present themselves as mere mediators and promoters of a simple and self-regulated convergence between supply and demand. It also underlies the idea that the use of algorithms in labour management is based on neutral randomness.

According to Gillespie (2014), algorithms are coded procedures guided by desired results. Thus, rather than perceiving them as “abstract technical achievements”, we should “unpack the warm human and institutional choices that lie behind these cold mechanisms”. When looking into the app-companies and their multitudes of uberized workers, one must focus on labour control. Amid a powerful process of informalization, the urgent and necessary question should be: who owns the power to define labour rules and how do they operate? In their analysis about algorithmic management, Rosenblat and Stark (2016) refer to the asymmetry in power and information as a crucial element in structuring Uber’s control over its workers. Based on the monitoring of discussion forums and on interviews with drivers, the authors pointed out how the rules that guide labour distribution in space and time and the possibilities of remuneration are permanently changing, while the ways in which these rules work and what they are based on remain obscure to the workers. There is no clarity even regarding what the actual rules are.

According to Zuboff (2019), one of the elements in surveillance capitalism is the technological possibility of fully mapping-out the different stages of the labour process. This provides not only a quantitative change, but a qualitative transformation to the ways in which labour can be organized and to the rationality underlying its management. Furthermore, management here refers to the possibility of codifying and transforming everyday life into data that will be processed, managed and utilized for purposes that remain unclear to citizens/consumers/workers.

Nowadays, the discourse about entrepreneurship and freedom of choice has been disseminated by uberization (Rosenblat, 2018; Abílio, 2019) to the extent of it becoming a basis for legal arguments in favour of the non-recognition of an employment relationship. However, what is really at stake here is a form of subordinated self-management (this issue is analyzed in-depth in Abílio, 2019). Here self-management means that the worker is submitted to an obscure and constantly changing form of management that defines/determines how much he can earn and how long he will have to work for. As a result, he is expected to develop survival and adaptation strategies to decipher and adjust to the ways in which labour is organized, distributed and remunerated, while trying to benefit from it. These strategies are also predictable and can be integrated into management. We also must take into consideration the fact that the worker has virtually no power to interfere – not even to negotiate – in the labour distribution and remuneration rules. In its relationship to crowdsourcing, algorithmic management can fully map out

the distribution of this crowd of workers, as well as permanently assess their productivity, and constantly and ubiquitously, track the dynamics of demand. It establishes obscure, informal and humanly defined procedures that determine and alter the distribution of workers in time and space, whilst benefitting more productive workers and punishing those who do not fit into rules that have not even been agreed upon.

Rather than being hired, the uberized worker joins. Thus, he cannot be fired but is rather deactivated. When we exit the obscure field of algorithms and return to the cosmetics sales representatives, meanwhile, it becomes evident that competition is a powerful instrument that regulates the activity's everyday life. Informal mechanisms are at work behind labour surveillance and incentives to the adoption of personal strategies to ensure productivity and permanence in the job. Although deactivation is not a common operating element in the case of cosmetics sales representatives, competition and sales difficulties can lead to drop outs and to the creation of personal strategies such as giving up part of the remuneration in order to sell more. Meanwhile, bonuses, awards and rankings are ever-present, prompt the sales representatives to work and bear initially unforeseen risks and costs in order to achieve a good ranking. In the case of algorithmic management, ranks and bonuses are incorporated as a management method through programmed and automated elements of data formation, extraction and management. These elements are used to define procedures and results to be obtained in a process of permanent feedback between the workers' actions, consumer vigilance (Abílio, 2017) and labour management.

The term gamification (Scholz, 2013) describes the type of rationality used in the new forms of labour informalization. It consists of transferring risks and encouraging productivity, which are also new forms of control over labour. This gauntlet thrown to workers makes it clear that nothing is guaranteed, not even remuneration for work done. The worker is expected to take risks, which basically means working for free in the hope of receiving a bonus that may or may not be paid. In the same way that the application-company defines the rules of the game, it can also define the winners. One of the interviewees, Mauro, 39, has been working as a motorbike courier for the past 15 years. His description of how his productivity is managed shows that he is aware of being subordinated, surveilled and controlled:

On rainy days such as this morning, they send me a message at 9 a.m.: 'if you deliver eight orders between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m., you get an extra R\$ 50'. If not, you won't get a bonus (...). Me, you and another motorbike courier are working there, we need to deliver eight orders each to get the bonus. You and I have already done seven and the other courier has done four. Who will they give the next orders to? To the other guy.

This worker has exposed that something that is perceived as algorithmic randomness could in fact be a form of programmed distribution. As long as the black box of algorithmic management remains unopened, these assumptions will remain hypotheses that may be confirmed or not by the experiences of male and female workers or be labelled as urban myths and legends (according to the somewhat disappointing definition by Möehlmann, Zalmanson, 2017). According to Zuboff (2019), these companies have been the real winners when it comes to defending their privacy to the detriment of citizens' privacy.

Motorcycle couriers: From the family man's "wild" life to amateur labour

*"Our profession is being turned into a gig"
(according to a motorcycle courier, Gig – the uberization of work)*

This empirical research into motorcycle couriers has been carried out since 2014, which has allowed us to observe the uberization of their work closely.² In 2014, I applied 50 multiple choice and

2 The research on motorcycle couriers was carried out in three stages. The first took place at the Economics Faculty of the University of São Paulo (USP), as part of post-doctoral research financed by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) between 2012 and 2015. This stage consisted of 50 semi-structured

open-ended questionnaires to motorcycle couriers in different neighbourhoods in São Paulo city. The strategy was to approach them at their rest/waiting spots around the city. Some male workers and a female worker agreed to talk outside working hours, which resulted in five interviews based on life stories study (Revel, 1998). In 2019, I conducted another two interviews with motorcycle couriers which were also based on the method mentioned above and which was part of the Informality in Contemporary Brazil project conducted at Perseu Abramo Foundation.

In 2014, the research showed that motorcycle courier was a typically male job and that, while including many youngsters, youth did not predominate. A third of the interviewees was younger than 30 and the other two thirds was between 30 and 60. Regarding educational background, 35% had complete or incomplete primary education and 47% had concluded high school. None of the 50 interviewees had been to university.

Regarding working days, 90% worked over eight hours, 50% worked over ten hours and 20% usually worked between 13 and 16 hours a day as motorcycle couriers. When it came to remuneration, there was significant variation: between R\$ 500 and R\$ 4,500/month: 30% earned between R\$ 500 and R\$ 1,500/month; 40% between R\$ 1,300 and R\$ 2,000/month; 20% between R\$ 2,500 and R\$ 3,000/month; 10% more than R\$ 3,000/month. However, there was a consistent element when it came to household per capita earnings: 80% received per capita household earnings lower than R\$ 1,500, of whom 60% received less than R\$ 1,000 and 39% received less than R\$ 800.

This variation in remuneration was based on the workers' experience and on the type of relationship with the job. Before the uberization process, motorcycle couriers worked under different types of contracts and forms of remuneration. Although these practices are still being enforced, they have been reduced by the monopoly created by the app-companies and the ensuing increase in the multitude of self-employed motorcycle couriers. Workers can be directly hired formally or informally by one company: for example, a real estate brokerage. Alternatively, they can be hired as outsourced workers by a motorcycle courier company, which supplies delivery services to this theoretical real estate brokerage. In these arrangements, which they describe as "contract work", the motorcycle couriers usually receive a fixed salary. There is also a type of labour contract defined as "sporadic", whereby the workers receive a wage floor plus an extra sum for each delivery. This arrangement includes both formal and informal workers.

Before the arrival of applications, contract workers would usually opt for lower remuneration accompanied by job security and an easier workload. What is at stake is the difference between having a fixed wage or being paid by delivery. Many interviewees would say, "I used to be a sporadic worker, but after I got married and had kids I switched to contract work". For the sporadic worker, the remuneration is pursuant both to the company's labour supply and to the worker's knowledge of the city and ability to make deliveries. Under this arrangement, the worker is permanently required to weigh up the risks and the remuneration.

In addition to being responsible for the upkeep of their motorbikes and be expected to drive "annihilating space by time" (Harvey, 1989), motorcycle couriers must have a series of skills that include performing bureaucratic tasks such as notarizing documents in registry offices and collecting signatures on documents; banking tasks, such as paying bills, collecting checkbooks and carrying money; delivery of personal items, such as books and medical exams; transporting and delivering delicate products such

questionnaires applied to motorcycle couriers, of whom five were São Paulo-based workers who answered in-depth interviews based on life stories study. Additionally, I conducted an open-ended interview with the founders of Loggi. In 2018, I conducted two in-depth interviews with motorcycle couriers - one in São Paulo and another one in Campinas - which are part of ongoing post-doctorate research at the Centre for Trade Union and Labour Economics Studies (CESIT) of the Campinas University (UNICAMP) and financed by The Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Additionally, I have received some funding from the Perseu Abramo Foundation as part of nationwide research into informal work in Brazil, which I supervised between 2018 and 2019.

as flowers and food; and carrying heavy objects such as water gallons first on their motorbikes and then completing the delivery manually.

At the time of the 2012 research, pizza delivery people did two jobs and food delivery was considered as an odd-job, a complementary income. In fact, some of the interviewees differentiated being a motorcycle courier from delivering pizza. Food delivery people used to work in a restricted sector and deliver one type of product only.

Five years later, a significant number of outsourced companies have gone bankrupt due to competition from application-companies. Loggi entered the São Paulo-city market at the end of 2013, is currently worth US\$ 1 billion and has over 25,000 registered motorcycle couriers. This year it has launched an ambitious plan: to be able to deliver anything anywhere in the country within 24 hours (Fieser, 2019). As described in another news report, “the company’s aggressive expansion strategy ranges from foot transport to delivery by boat” (Stachewski, 2019, online).

In 2014 when the research with motorcycle couriers started, delivery applications were still a novelty. Most of the interviewees worked for outsourced delivery companies or were directly employed by small businesses. Most of them received the category’s wage floor plus remuneration per delivery.

According to the in-depth interviews conducted in 2014 and 2019, the motivation behind the workers’ choice for an application company is mostly to eliminate the mediation of outsourced companies. However, growing workers’ adhesion to applications and the centralization and monopolization achieved by some application-companies has established a new type of competition and created a permanent factor of degradation in labour conditions and remuneration. As explained by Mauro, the motorcycle courier mentioned earlier:

You might find it strange that I only mention Loggi, but they have conquered the market, you have to work till midnight, the work day has increased... before we would have targets, me and several of my colleagues would set the R\$ 300 a day target... I will be able to reach this figure by 6, maximum 7 p.m.’... and we managed to do it... today you can’t do it anymore. We always say, it’s different for single guys, who have no family, they can work as long as they want. But today Loggi practically forces you to work till midnight, 11 p.m., in the streets.

Mauro’s statement illustrates subordinated self-management: although uberized motorcycle couriers establish their daily targets, the duration of their workdays is entirely dependent on how the work is distributed among them. Times of economic crises and growing competition further enhance the precariousness of being a just-in-time worker.

Uberized work has clouded the distinction between what is and what is not labour time, as well as between paid and unpaid labour. Being available for work waiting for delivery jobs has become an unpaid work time that requires the worker to permanently seek strategies to guarantee more labour. In other words, they have to engage in the task of deciphering the constantly changing rules of algorithmic management. Back to Mauro:

I used to get a lot of delivery jobs, it didn’t used to be so stressful, I didn’t used to get so anxious about it. Nowadays, I get more tired riding my motorbike around and spending money without earning anything than when I actually get some work. Oh my God, over the past year the stress, the anxiety, the tiredness, the back pains and my mental state, everything has got much worse, because I spend most of my time riding around on my motorbike rather than actually working, because you are forced to keep on the move.

One of the competition tools used by companies is to lower the value of work. According to Mauro, the workers are not organized to deal with this devaluation. The more workers individually join the applications, the more they can collectively see the value of their working hours being reduced. The arrival of applications such as iFood, Rappi, UberEats and Glovo in the market has changed the characteristics of

labor supply and of the workers' profile. Establishments that traditionally did not use delivery services, such as supermarkets, small restaurants, ice-cream parlors, among others, are now doing so. This scenario has also introduced new forms of subordination and monopolization of these same establishments (Madureira, 2020). Food delivery is no longer just a gig for motorcycle couriers – it has become their main job. The economic crisis has turned unemployed, underused and precarious workers into uberized motorcycle couriers. Something that was experienced as a profession now can be identified as another precarious, unstable, improvised and temporary attempt to guarantee one's survival.

In São Paulo, in order to become a motorcycle courier at Loggi the driver must be registered as a motorbike courier with the transportation authorities, own a white motorbike that is fitted with a red number plate and which cannot be more than five years old, and be registered as an individual micro business entrepreneur. As these requirements, which can be very costly for the workers, are not demanded by all application companies, Loggi has created a way to facilitate worker adhesion. The Loggi Start Programme enables unregistered workers to register in the application and work for the platform for up to one year, but for a lower hourly rate. Mauro's statement shows how there has been a change in the workers' professional profile and in their relationship to labor:

This is how it works: unregistered workers have up to a year to sort out their situation. However, instead of doing that they continue to work and to make money under slave-like conditions. It's absurd... for instance, there is this warehouse with delivery jobs that pay R\$ 38. But man, in order to make some money you have to ride a lot, like deliver 15, 20 packages, it's too much work for R\$ 38. I look at these guys and I say: you are nuts. [A Loggi Start motorcycle courier drives past us] You see, a Loggi Start courier fully loaded, this is humiliating, the packages are sticking out of the trunk, these guys are an easy target for robbers. I refuse to do that.

The profession of motorcycle courier has always been precarious, with few registered workers, as well as being unhealthy and risky. Far from the clichéd image of the mad dog, these professionals face daily discrimination while having to work in conflict-ridden and violent street traffic, while permanently mobilizing their skills and strategies to ensure better remuneration. Casilli (2018) points out a shift in category, from work to micro task. Based on an analysis of the sales representatives' work and inspired by Dujarier (2009), this type of work can fit into the amateur work category. Malleability, widespread dissemination and the loss of pre-established labour forms constitute the basis of a shift in workers' professional identity: from motorcycle courier to being one of thousands of application temporary delivery people.

The uberization of these workers' labour must be understood in its double-faceted nature: monopolization and new forms of management, labour control and subordination. We are witnessing the transformation of the motorcycle courier into a just-in-time, amateur worker. Before all this, these couriers would, amid already precarious and risky conditions, spend their time playing dominoes on the courtyard of an outsourced company while waiting for the next delivery job (and receive a wage floor whilst fully aware of the job distribution rules). Now, these motorcycle couriers have to drive around the city awaiting a job call while competing with a huge multitude of motorcyclists – and to make matters worse, they simply do not know how the rules of their own work operate. Instead of getting paid a pre-defined amount based on distance and time, or contractually established remuneration, they now work under unclear and fluctuating definitions of their work value, bonuses and incentives to drive in rain, snow and the middle of the night. The lack of legal definition and regulation of the working hours feeds the need to work seven days a week, over 12 hours a day. More importantly, it expands unpaid labour time. This has resulted in a loss of socially established labour forms, as work becomes a permanent gig that takes up the workers' entire life.

Conclusion: the productive monopolization of a generalized peripheral way of life

Although platform labour still has a small participation in European economies, it has been growing fast (Huws et al., 2018). The expression of gig economy has been used as an analytical umbrella-term to describe these occupations that are mediated by/subordinated to application companies. This definition has also been dangerously imported to the Brazilian reality, thus obliterating and blurring structural elements pertaining to the local world of work that have been appropriated and subordinated to new types of logic.

According to the evolutionist and structuring dualities pointed out, among others, by Quijano (2000), such as development and underdevelopment, center and margins and formal paid work and informal work, the peripheral way of life has been associated with backwardness, with the leftovers of development and with the margins populated by those who have not been or cannot be integrated into modernization - such as young black bicycle couriers coming from the favelas, maids and motorcycle couriers.

The definition of South here refers to elements such as the creation of individual survival strategies, the constant shifts between different types of occupations, the accumulation of different tasks, a lack of definition as to what is and what is not labour time and the performance of unpaid labour, as well as the uncertainty and permanent absence of guarantees regarding remuneration. These are nothing new to workers of the periphery. However, despite playing a central role in capitalist development and accumulation, this way of life has been persistently invisible.

When we analyze from a peripheral viewpoint, it becomes clear that the uberization process has allowed application companies to subordinate, on a massive scale, and appropriate, in an organized and productive manner, a form of self-management that had already been integrated into the way of life of peripheral male and female workers. The “life on the edge” once led by motorcycle couriers has been subsumed, controlled and managed by a few companies that have simultaneously monopolized the sectors where they operate. Furthermore, they have transformed everyday survival strategies developed by those living in permanent precariousness into managed data, thus incorporating a shoestring way of life (Castel, 1998) into a monopolistic and rationalized form of management.

Thus, the peripheral way of life has become centralized and productively manageable. Additionally, the generalization of labour’s typically peripheral characteristics have become a global trend for labour organization and control. However, the recognition of these characteristics as a global trend does not mean that they are restricted to the gig economy. In fact, this term crystalizes the fact that the South’s “invisible” way of life has arrived in the North, also in a subordinated and monopolized manner. Based on Casilli’s (2018) approach, whereby invisible productive activities become visible, we must reach beyond in this regard and acknowledge the fact that the elements that have structured peripheral workers’ lives have become a general trend through flexibilization and work casualization. Uberization materialises a qualitative change to this flexibilization by combining algorithmic management with the reduction of workers to just-in-time workers. Therefore, it is important to point out that uberization is not restricted to the unskilled and low-income labour offered by the platforms. It is in fact a powerful movement that has become a general trend in the world of labour. However, this generalization is not homogenous: the production, reproduction and strengthening of inequalities also take place within uberization. We are in fact witnessing a widespread dissemination of typically peripheral labour characteristics, and their newly acquired visibility might finally lead us to acknowledge their central role.

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