

Out of the Standard. Towards a Global Approach to Platform Labour



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This chapter challenges a taken-for-granted split in the platform critical studies: the analysis of platform labour in terms of informalization in the Global North and in terms of formalization in the Global South. Far from totally denying regional specificities in the territorialization of platform capitalism, the author tries to build a bridge between contexts defining a common logic operating through conjunctural geographies: the specific labour process implemented by platforms requires an active engagement by living labour in terms of self-entrepreneurship. This engagement can be produced through the disruption of standard labour as well as through the commodification of informal labour. In both cases, workers have to deal with an acquired dependence from the platform infrastructure. This logic, nevertheless, does not preclude the possibility to overturn self-entrepreneurialism into resistances and exit strategies.

1 Local Investigations and Global Dimension

Considered mainly as a business model, a larger part of the critical studies on digital platforms focused on value production and the role that living labour has within it. There has been a flourishing of investigations on finance and data accumulation by big corporations (Birch et al., 2021; Klinge et al., 2022), or on labour management and working conditions in lean platforms or crowdworking (Pulignano & Franke, 2022; Tubaro et al., 2020). In particular, investigations on the labour process in platform

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capitalism adopted a situated approach focused on (the comparison between) specific case-studies. So nowadays, we have a puzzle of studies ranging from Africa to Latin America, from Europe to Asia that embrace the multiplication of labour in platform capitalism.

Nevertheless, all the pieces of this puzzle seem scattered on the ground, they still do not fit in a whole picture. Comparative studies often focus on differences, with less attention on the capacity by platform businesses to spread and operate at the global level. The appreciation of local specificities, clearly important to understand the effective working conditions in a context, risks being detrimental to the definition of more general commonalities in both platforms' expansion and operation.

In particular, there is an apparent gap between the so-called Global North and Global South. Platforms are generally perceived as a driver of formalization and—sometimes—of improvement of the labour market in the Global South, while considered putting pressure on labour rights in the Global North. For this reason, in the first case platform labour has been depicted as an opportunity against poverty, while in the second case it is more reported as a further path of a longer-time historical process towards precarization.

On the other side, platforms have undoubtedly reached a global dimension. It is not just a matter of a business model adopted by many companies all around the globe, what is relevant is also how same companies operate and compete globally and how living labour adapt its strategies to such transnational dimension. Even if it is quite accepted that Silicon Valley represented the place of birth of first platform companies and even if it is clear that they developed partially different business models (Boyer, 2021) reshaping principles already adopted by other labour paradigms (Piletić, 2023; Steinberg, 2021), these pioneering experiences have been replicated and innovated by other companies all around the world. We may refer to transportation sector as illustrative. Uber is undoubtedly one of the companies that disrupted the ride-hailing and food delivery services, but its “digital twins” spread all around the world, like Bolt (founded in Estonia), Ola (India-based) or Didi (China). At the same time, some companies expanded their operations beyond the birth country with an international projection (Stallkamp & Schotter, 2021). Uber operates in more than 10,000 cities in about 70 countries, Bolt embrace about 50 countries from Lebanon to Tanzania, Ola serves more than 250 cities across India, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, while DiDi currently operates in China, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Panamá, Argentina, Ecuador, Perú, New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, and Dominican Republic.¹ The geographical distribution of the platforms' operations is not homogeneous, these companies develop strategies to select promising markets and try to establish there. This is not a guarantee about their success and there are cases where companies preferred to quit a country to focus more on others, e.g., Uber shut down in Israel or

¹ All the data are taken from Uber, Bolt, Didi and Ola official websites, consulted the 31st of August 2023.

Didi in South Africa when they acknowledged it was impossible to gain a leading position in these countries. What I want to stress, anyway, is that there is a growing number of services that are platformized in a similar way all around the globe by a quite limited group of companies that started to serve one country and then expanded at the international level adapting to different labour and legal regimes (for a detailed picture about the global distribution of platform capitalism see ILO, 2021, Chap. 1).

These premises lead us to the questions I will consider as the starting point of this chapter: How is it possible that platform labour could be perceived so differently between the Global North and Global South? Does this imply two different logics of platformization or, beyond the patina, may we identify a common rationale?

The aim of this chapter is to formulate some theoretical proposals that can contribute to the definition of a global approach to platform labour. Put it differently, as platforms act globally, we need a global approach capable of identifying a general logic to explain—and not to hide—regional specificities.

Obviously, I will not take for granted the fact that there is one common logic. As well as I do not want to underestimate context peculiarities. For this reason, I will start reviewing the way platform labour is framed in Europe, from its burst to the debate on its regulation. I will argue that this debate is based on the theoretical premise that there is a standard labour as general paradigm of labour regulation under capitalism. The consequence of such perspective is that other forms of labour are considered just exceptions or deviations from the norm.

Then, I will partially criticize such an idea especially if we refer to non-Western countries. First, I do not deny this historical trajectory could be right for Europe, but it is not the only one possible. Where Keynesian paradigm of Welfare State did not—partially or at all—took root, there platform labour took advantage of informality more than deregulation. Secondly, the boundaries of informal and formal labour are more porous and constantly negotiated.

Consequently, I will try to propose some inputs to fill the gap between North/South analysis towards a global approach. Specifically, I will suggest focusing on the hustle dimension of platform labour as a common prerequisite both to informality and precarization. Put it differently, platform capitalism' global dimension is the product of some general operations capable to adapt to different legal and social backgrounds and reshape them towards an interconnected labour regime.

In conclusion, I will propose to assume the notion of dependence as promising concept to catch the common dimension of platform labour at global level. Dependence entails a vertical relationship between workforce and firm but consider the possibility of self-organization inside a set of norms.

2 The Evolution of Platform Capitalism in the West

It is generally assumed that platforms as business model² emerged in US from and after the financial crisis of 2007/8. Clearly, they did not come from nowhere but represent both a further step in the commodification of the web and a consolidation of digital firms after the dot-com bubble. Anyway, I do not aim to trace a genealogy of platform capitalism here.³ Rather, I want to focus on the evolution of platform capitalism in the West since it burst until nowadays. To sum up, we may label this process as a shift from the platform revolution (Parker et al., 2016) to the platform age. The rise and stabilization of platforms as business model impacted starting from some specific sectors (communication, local services) and then imprinting its features on labour in general. Put it differently, the success of some corporations—from Amazon to Uber, from Meta to Airbnb—favoured the spread of a platformization of labour, meaning that «because of the increase in digitalization and connectedness at work, the use of platforms and algorithms as mechanisms of coordination has spread to more traditional work settings» (Fernández-Macías et al., 2023: 3).

This achievement has not been reached smoothly. New and renewed professions questioned the way labour has been organized and regulated by platforms (Woodcock, 2021). In this sense, probably food delivery riders represent the subject who more

² According to Boyer (2021: 4), there is a diversity of platform business models. Nevertheless, I will refer to them more homogeneously considering some common but variable features (to be infrastructures for the match between two or more groups, to be based on network effect, to use algorithmic management or digital control, to foster workers' self-activation).

³ Michael Cusumano et al. (2019:16) resume platform genealogy in this way: «Most people know the names of companies that shaped the evolution of platform strategies and business models. Intel (established 1968), Microsoft (1975), and Apple (1976), along with IBM (1911), made the personal computer a mass-market phenomenon during the 1980s and early 1990s. A second wave of firms from the mid-1990s built Internet software and services on top of the personal computer, led by Amazon (1994), Netscape (1994), eBay (1995), Yahoo (1995), and Google (1998), as well as Rakuten (1997) in Japan and Tencent (1998) and Alibaba (1999) in China. In the next decade came social media, pioneered by Friendster (2002) and MySpace (2003), and then Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006). More recently, billion-dollar start-ups, such as Airbnb (2008), Uber (2009), and China's Didi Chuxing (2012), have brought great attention to the “sharing,” or “gig,” economy. They match smartphone and PC users with providers of rooms to rent or cars to ride as well as an almost unlimited number of other products and services. We now refer to all these firms as platform companies, even though they are not all the same».

According to Brad Stone, first pioneers of so-called lean platforms—the ones furnishing sectoral services at urban level—like Uber and Airbnb profited from the internet infrastructure built by Big Tech like Amazon or Google: «the juggernauts Uber and Airbnb did not generate this technological wave, but more than any other companies [...], they rode it and profited from it. The two companies, both in San Francisco, their headquarters only a mile apart, are among the fastest-growing startups in history by sales, overall market value, and number of employees. Together they have scrawled in the annals of entrepreneurship the most memorable stories of a third phase of internet history—the post-Google, post-Facebook era of innovation that allowed the digital realm to expand into the physical one» (Stone, 2017: 4).

These are clearly Western-centric genealogies of platform capitalism, I am mentioning them as European platform ecosystem is mainly based on US firms. Nevertheless, other genealogies are possible, for example, focusing on China (Zhang & Chen, 2022) or Japan (Steinberg, 2019).

openly confronted platforms, not just in the West but at global level (Trappmann et al., 2020). At the same time, the growing economic—and political—power acquired by these companies stimulated policymakers to intervene both to ensure customer their privacy, workers more protections, and states fiscal revenues.

For the regulation theory, when there is a socio-economic innovation, this moves through three main steps: the burst with its pressure on market and state to modify existing working conditions and policies, the conflicting reaction of society proposing alternative solutions, finally the regulation by the State of the new socio-economic regime (Boyer, 2021: 20). Adapting such scheme to the evolution of platform capitalism in the West, we may try to identify the features of these three steps. In this case, we may say that it essentially moved from a platform-based market where firms took up a grey zone in the labour and market regulation, to a platform-regulated market where firms responded to conflicts and debates mainly through self-regulation. Now there could be an evolution in progress—if we think about legislative initiatives at a national and supra-national level like the so-called Riders Law in Spain or the European Directive on platform labour—to a state-regulated market that—hopefully—would guarantee fairer working conditions.

In the first step—the platform-based market—the grey zone was not a vacuum, more a crack in the law. Indeed, such companies often presented themselves not as enterprises but as marketplaces. According to David Evans and Richard Schmalensee (2016: 3), «what these businesses have in common is that they all connect members of one group, like people looking for a ride, with another group, like drivers looking for passengers. [...] They operate under a different set of economic rules. Traditional manufacturing businesses, for instance, buy raw materials, make stuff, and sell that stuff to customers. But matchmakers' raw materials are the different groups of customers that they help bring together, not anything that they buy at all. And part of the stuff they sell to members of each group is access to members of the other groups. All of them operate physical or virtual places where members of these different groups get together». In this case, terms and conditions of use replaced formal contracts. Anyway, this is not simply a stratagem to avoid the acknowledgment of labour rights to workers. It entailed the principles of a different organization of the labour process. To put it simply, platforms consider labour-force as a commodity to be sold on the market that is implemented through their infrastructure presented simply as a technical tool. Petar Marčeta (2021: 69) identifies two streams of labour-force neo-commodification in platform capitalism «as the data technology-driven commodification of labour, which encompasses both the recommodification of labour through the undermining of the standard employment relationship (SER) and the expansive commodification of previously uncommodified labour».

In the second step—the platform-regulated market—companies confront with protests and dissatisfaction by workers who, among other things, challenge the premise they are simply users of a service. In this phase, platforms cannot ignore complaints and problems but try to avoid the definition of industrial relations or the institutional legislation granting some improvements with the aim to both mitigate the conflict and pre-empt regulation. This processes has been described in terms of

auto-constitutionalisation, entailing «the articulation of fundamental rationality principles (*idées directrices*), as well as the development of a binary meta-code (*distinction directrice*, akin to “constitutional/unconstitutional”) for testing the validity or legitimacy of decisions made and actions taken by the service provider» (Sheffi, 2020: 501).

In the third step—the state-regulated market—institutions are stimulated to restore a certain balance between capital and labour through a regulation that would guarantee more rights—not mere concessions—to be exercised autonomously by workers. This regulation seems currently developing in Europe on different geographical scales.⁴ First, we had urban attempts to balance platform power with workers’ claims. Think about Bologna’s *Charter of fundamental rights of digital labour in the urban context* or Barcelona’s *Declaration of Sharing Cities*. Cities, indeed, are the main space of platform labour territorialization (Cuppini et al., 2022) and so local administrations have been highly stimulated to intervene according to their (limited) prerogatives. Anyway, the poor strength and application of such agreements made them inspiring example for further initiatives but practically quite ineffective. So, some EU governments carried on sectoral initiatives (Aloisi, 2022: 7–10) to favour collective contracts (Italy) or directly passed laws (Spain). Finally, we may register the ongoing European debate about a directive on platform labour (Donini, 2022; Tullini, 2022), a measure based on a general presumption of employee condition that potentially could be valid for all platform workers.

3 The Independent/Employee Dilemma

What is worth relevant here is not so much if these legal processes will effectively approved and improve the working conditions on platforms, but the fact that all the regulatory initiatives about platform labour—at urban, national or supra-national level—share the same main critical dilemma: may we register platform workers as independent contractors, or do we have to consider them as employee? Indeed, «the vast majority of labour lawyers have concentrated their research on the issue of platform workers’ classification into either of the existing categories of employees or self-employed workers» (De Stefano & Aloisi, 2018: 41). So, the debate is mainly focused on the workers’ classification more than on the contents of such regulation, preferring theoretical issues about the “nature” of the working relationship to the identification of the protections that practically would benefit workers: labour unions report platform labour as bogus self-employment and push for its qualification as waged labour; business companies often still claim to be matchmakers and state they have no employees but associates; political parties swing between one pole or another, sometimes proposing a third way.

⁴ This modelling, of course, could be further complicated considering other variables beyond the spatial dimension of regulation, for example the extension of its application (from single sector to all platform labour).

In all these cases, the debate is highly conditioned by the fact that generally in Europe the gateway to ensure social protections is the classification of workers as employees: «The traditional social protection model—premised upon the archetypal full-time, open-ended relationship or contract between a worker and a single employer over a long time span—is under-inclusive and fails to be adaptable when it comes to providing income over the life cycle and mitigating the risks of poverty and social exclusion among the self-employed and their families» (Aloisi, 2022: 17). Unfortunately, in many cases platform labour is labelled under variegated non-standard forms of work. As platforms often deny workers entering into «the realm of employment», they are therefore «excluded from fundamental principles and rights at work such as freedom of association and collective bargaining or protection against discrimination or unlawful dismissal. Moreover, many self-employed workers have no pension rights and they have no insurance rights» (De Stefano & Aloisi, 2018: 44). This means that the discussion has been extremely polarized on the alternative between empowering existing legislation to include new forms of labour or innovating law with innovative solutions. In any case, it has to be acknowledged that a universal and unquestionable assessment of the worker classification is quite difficult.

My interest, here, is not to solve the dilemma—is it possible?—rather to focus on the main premise of such debate and to investigate it more deeply. Indeed, this assumption that the employee condition is the sole gateway to full social protections relies on its historical identification as the standard of labour regime in the West. According to the International Labour Organisation (2016), standard labour emerged in a specific part of the world—Europe—in a specific historical period—the nineteenth century—as part of a larger process that included not just the formalization of the labour relationship through a contract subordinating the free living labour to the command of the capitalist boss and so distinguishing between the workforce and the enterprise, but a more general organization of the State and the market around the fact that such labour contractualization could guarantee workforce reproduction on family base.⁵

What I want to underline here is that this identification of the employment relationship as the standard of labour regime is not a universal truth but the product of a particular capital/labour negotiation that took place under specific circumstances—and class struggle has been a fundamental part of these circumstances—and gave result to specific solutions—like the Keynesian welfare state model. It is meaningful

⁵ «The idea of [...] a “standard employment relationship” comes from the legal regulation or “contractualization” of the employment relationship, which began to emerge in the United Kingdom and other European countries in the latter half of the nineteenth century, shaping the legal distinction between employment and self-employment. [...] The regulation of employment came to be viewed as “standard” as it was part of greater transformations in the world economies and in business. With these transformations came the understanding that the work would be sufficient to satisfy a person’s “fundamental needs” and would therefore provide a stable and adequate income sufficient to take care of a growing family, provide security against unforeseen events that could impede the ability to work, and offer security in retirement. As a result, the design of the social insurance systems that accompanied the employment relationship came to be based on the assumption of a full-time, indefinite and subordinate relationship» (ILO, 2016: 10–11).

that the same ILO (2016: 11) admits that «in the last few decades, however, significant organizational changes have occurred and business practices arisen that have put pressure on the notion that the employment relationship is exclusively bilateral, as well as reducing the grip of legal tests based on strict hierarchical control».

4 De-Westernizing Labour Paradigms

Until now I focused on the Western evolution of platform capitalism and the way the public debate conceives platform labour in Europe. My aim was to show how it is more and more difficult to apply to platform-based jobs the notion of standard labour that shaped the access to social protections and labour rights during large part of twentieth century. Rather, this notion seems to be strictly connected with a specific labour regime—Fordism—and a specific negotiation between capital and labour—resulting in the Welfare State—that nowadays have been partially dismantled in the West.

Analyzing social movements against the wave of neoliberal precarization at the beginning of the new century, Bret Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008: 54) reminded that «precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm. [...] If we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization. [...] we must revisit the whole Fordist episode, its modes of labour organization, welfare support, technological innovation and political contestation. Far from the talk of neoliberalism as exception, a deep political consideration of the concept of precarity requires us to see Fordism as exception». In this sense, nowadays platform labour is often conceived as an exception, a further step into neoliberal policies of labour flexibilization and welfare disarticulation, attempting to a previous model placed out-of-history as the standard. The point—in my opinion—is to revise such assumption focusing more on the way capital is re-organizing nowadays accumulation processes to understand how labour is framed and which frictions this new paradigm generates than on the definition of a reference point for the classification of platform labour.

What is relevant to underline here is how in Europe too there is no more something like a standard of labour: on one side, the self-employment condition expanded more beyond the form of micro-business of bogus self-employment; on the other side, the employee condition is no more capable to guarantee the protections historically ascribed to standard labour. Sergio Bologna (2018) undoubtedly has been among the first to look at autonomous labour as a new form of workforce organization in the post-Fordist era (Amin, 1994). He identifies a new generation of self-employed workforce surging from the crisis and dismantling of Fordist paradigm. These renewed condition of self-employment showed different characteristics than the self-employed conceived just in terms of micro-business, combining forms of hetero-direction with self-organization. In this sense, platforms clearly embedded

alternatives economies (think of the peer-to-peer movement) or cooperative organizations (the commons)—where the workforce had searched for more independence from capital’ command—into profit-based gig and sharing economy—where workers’ partial self-management is part of the firm logic (Ferschli, 2017).

The employee condition, on the other side, has been more and more eroded of its prerogatives that previously characterized it as the standard, from a salary adequate for family-based social reproduction to unconditional social protections. It has been absorbed into the cost-saving logic of outsourcing that affirmed from the 80 s. The example of Uber drivers in Lisbon could be illustrative (Pirina, 2022). Indeed, even if generally the employee condition is considered the most protected, the government of Portugal introduced in 2018 the requirement to enrol drivers for digital platforms through a kind of third-party company. This regulation, nevertheless, did not protect drivers from the same problems as other platform workers.

These critiques to a supposed standard of labour seem to be more relevant and crucial if we look outside the Western part of the world. In this case, employee condition has never been a standard labour while so-called informality is still the largest labour condition in many countries. If we refer again to ILO classification of labour (2016: 15), it emerges that «rather than making a distinction between standard and non-standard employment, most discussion of labour markets in developing countries has focused on whether employment is formal or informal. [...] formality and informality are umbrella terms for a diverse set of employment arrangements». In the ILO’s *Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation* (2015) informality is described as referring to all workers that are—in law or in practice—not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements. This condition is ascribed by ILO particularly to so-called developing countries, where the workforce is often framed as self-employed, casual workers, homeworkers, or domestic workers. This does not mean that formal and “standard” wage employment does not exist in these countries, but it is limited to the public sector or big international companies (ILO, 2016). In this case, the dualism formality/informality is conceived in terms of contractualization, even if I think it is important to underline how the absence of the latter does not mean that there are no norms framing labour. Anyway, platforms are often praised by international organizations and policymakers as a tool for labour formalization in non-Western countries, meaning the possibility for the State to demand for taxes and for workers to appeal to courts for rights.

The point is that these two narratives—the one about the progressive precarization of labour in Europe and the one on the possibility of formalization of labour in non-Western countries—do not overlap, rather they dig a gap between the West and the Rest⁶ and we miss to understand how platforms are shaping a global market operating all over the world at the same time. On one side, platform labour is conceived as a dismissal or a misclassification of the paradigm of standard labour. On the

⁶ I am referring here to the famous critique of Stuart Hall (1992) to the West-and-Rest «system of representation», meaning with this a political-historical, not geographical, construct. Clearly, the Rest entails countries and context that vary profoundly but here the aim is to highlight the limits of European approach to platform labour if applied to non-Western countries.

other side, platform labour is presented as a useful contractualization to achieve more labour standardization (Kuek et al., 2015; OECD, 2023, Chap. 5). The point, I suggest, is to move beyond the paradigm of standard labour and to frame specificities of platform capitalism where «social reproductive activities and needs are increasingly incorporated into the “integrated circuit” of capital accumulation» (van Doorn, 2022: 14) and satisfied through the digitized labour of a self-entrepreneurial workforce—more than through welfare, public services or salary. This implies to de-Westernize labour paradigms considering the conditions of standard labour—Fordism and Welfare State—as particular historical and geographical episodes of negotiations between capital and labour we cannot universalize (Mezzadra, 2021).

5 Entrepreneurialism Between Precarization and Informality

So how to fill the gap between platform labour studies in the West and the Rest? Let's go back to what platform capitalism is, «a variegated and contingent outcome rather than an ahistorical, immutable economic regime» (van Doorn, 2022: 4). Abstracting for a moment from specific contexts, we may say that platforms are based on some flexible and resilient operations (algorithmic management, workforce' outsourcing, datafication, ranking, and rating systems) that can be territorialized in different ways, adapting to different legal and social backgrounds (Cuppini et al., 2022). Put it differently, «platforms come to mediate relations between market, state, and civil society actors, perpetuating or indeed intensifying some dynamics while recalibrating others» (van Doorn, 2022: 14).

Again, a good example is furnished by food delivery riders who are, at the same time, active in almost all World countries and, in many cases, struggle with platforms for same claims (safer working conditions, higher fares, fair working time). Nevertheless, the way their working conditions and labour process are framed may vary according to local peculiarities: they may be employee or self-employed, paid by piecework or by hour, have regular shifts or do logged labour. These peculiarities, obviously, influence both their work and protests but not the structural features of platforms' operations that keep stimulating their self-activation under algorithmic management. This may help to understand why food delivery riders, even if active in very different socio-legal contexts, experimented forms of communication and alliance at global level towards common goals. At the same time, this perspective may help to understand the multiplication of labour (Mezzadra, 2021) in the platform capitalism: while standard labour is defined on the Taylorist mass worker, platform workers are extremely differentiated between themselves, not simply according to the location but also to the company. As a food delivery rider may have a varying classification in different countries, at the same time a rider and a driver may differ in their working conditions. There is not a paradigmatic platform worker we may identify in a specific profession or another.

Mark Graham defines such assemblage of general operations and local specificities as a conjunctural geography, «a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate. These geographies ultimately allow platforms to concentrate and exert power. They can link themselves to the local to concentrating reward, and retreat to their ephemeral digital dualisms when abdicating responsibility» (Graham, 2020: 454). This dynamic of territorialization/deterritorialization may occur in multiple ways. Nevertheless, here I would like to stress how it generally developed with different strategies in the labour market of the West and of the Rest.

In Europe, as already seen, platforms took advantage of the long wave of neoliberal policies that modified the labour market and eroded labour rights and social protections once granted to supposed standard workers. Aleksandra Piletić (2023) identifies some policies—the wave of privatizations started in the 80 s and the austerity regime imposed after 2008 financial crisis—as well as some processes—the commodification of social reproduction and the casualization of labour—of this historical path.⁷

Outside Europe, platforms profited mainly from the vivid forms of self-organization and activation proper of informal economy. Sometimes the label “informal” is associated with illegality or black market. Other times it is simply reduced to a chaos with norms or habits. This is clearly an underestimating perspective. For example, Verónica Gago studied the relationships between neoliberalism and informal economies in Argentina and highlighted how capitalism embedded forms of popular entrepreneurship. She names this apparently impossible assemblage a baroque economy, «a growing web of informal activities with entrepreneurial dynamics (at a popular and business level, and with both acting at a transnational scale) in a context where rights are made flexible and taken away» (Gago, 2017: 38).

In both cases, the precarization of standard labour or the valorization of informal labour, the anthropological paradigm of self-entrepreneur based on hustle practices is sponsored and consolidated. The figure of the self-entrepreneur who fruitfully employs his/her social and human capital is not a novelty, but platforms found the way to implement such anthropology in the urban spaces where they meet masses of «hypercontingent labour» (Piletić, 2023) available to actively engage with platforms standards and aims. Put it differently, platforms are empowering and spreading a convergence of workforce towards forms of self-entrepreneurialism at global level. At the same time, this logic of general operations and local negotiation contributed to create a planetary market of platform labour (Graham & Ferrari, 2022). This is

⁷ «The success of digital platforms should then be understood, on the one hand, as inherently wedded to broader, neoliberal trends towards flexibilization, precarization and casualization of the wage-labour nexus, compounded by the rapid growth in un(der)employment post-2008 crisis. It must also be situated within the decades-long privatization, marketization and individualization of reproductive tasks characteristic of the neoliberal era, compounded once again by post-crisis austerity cuts, resulting in the inability of households to meet their reproductive needs. Platforms have operated by “plugging in” to both dynamics: Capturing un(der)employed workers in desperate need of work and responding to austerity-ravaged reproductive needs of individuals and families, oftentimes by providing low-cost labour and services» (Piletić, 2023: 5).

valid not only for micro-workers who may access labour from everywhere in the World just connecting on the web, but also for local-based workers who organize their life projects considering the possibility to work for a platform offering same job but in a foreign country. In this sense, platforms—because of their generally low-entering barriers and the search for a hypercontingent labour—became part of a set of mobility infrastructures (Altenried, 2021) that allow workforce flows around the Globe.

6 Acquired Dependence

The argument I sustained may led to a different evaluation of the platform labour than the mere comparison—in a detrimental or meliorative direction—with standard labour. What I wanted to highlight is the common logic operating through the different context where platforms territorialize, a logic based on conjunctural geographies and self-entrepreneurial anthropology.

This leads us to the final point of this chapter, how to name the peculiar combination of formalization and informalization, territorialization and de-territorialization operated by platforms. One proposal could be to retake and expand the notion of dependence.

Yann Moulier-Boutang (1998) in his historical analysis of the evolution from slavery to waged labour presented dependent labour as a macro-category to address labour under someone else' direction, then distinguishing between free and unfree (dependent labour). This dependent labour may be articulated into different forms. Differently from being totally regulated, platforms stimulate workers to actively adapt to standards, practices, and expectations. Put it differently, they mix direct and direct control (Mengay, 2020). It is not simply an external discipline, it is mostly an inner self-control to fit the expectations of platforms. «To classify the nature of the activity, judges must assess the role of apps that design constrained conditions of possibilities, rather than focusing on the formal obligation to provide work and perform an assignment» underlines Antonio Aloisi (2022: 11).

As a consequence, it is relevant to review the way we think about formalization and informalization: we cannot identify them as a mere dualism or reduce to the (absence of) contractualization; rather we have to blur their boundaries. In Europe too, before being recently platformized, some local-based services have been organized mainly informally, like in the case of food delivery that were furnished as an in-bound service by restaurants through casual workers. On the contrary, also in the so-called Global South some platforms informalized professions that previously were more legally structured, as in the case of local private transportation. Formalization and informalization seem to co-exist in platform labour, not simply in legal but also in managerial terms. While there are variable legal frameworks—from national contracts to users' terms and conditions—applied, many social protections—form safety insurance to retirement contributions—are totally informalized and charged on workforce. Similarly, some parts of the labour process are more organized than

before—think of the customer’ evaluation, for example—while other are less standardized—a good example is the lack of a fixed working time on many platforms. So, the point is the assemblage that platforms produce of formalization and informalization, the way this combination has varied in front of previous labour regimes and the effects produced on working conditions and social reproduction. These assemblages allow platforms to both furnish standards—mainly through formalization—and to stimulate workforce active engagement—more because of informalization.

Moreover, what is relevant here is to understand the source of this dependence. According to ILO (2016: 98), «dependent self-employment refers to services that are performed for a business under a contract that is different from an employment contract. Such workers depend on one or a small number of clients for their income or receive detailed instructions regarding how the work is to be done». In a sense, platforms seem to centralize such multi-sided relationships. Since the definition of matchmakers, it is clear that platform workers depend on the digital infrastructure, without the platform as organization centre there is no access or limited access to the market: you are not forced to use it but cannot do enough without. This infrastructure establishes the effective articulation of algorithmic management and self-entrepreneurialism, eroding margins for workforce autonomy.

In this sense, Michael David Maffie (2021) talks about an acquired dependence workers have from platforms, a condition—I would add—imposed through specific contextual policies—neoliberalism as well as developmentism—that disrupt other labour regimes and produce a commodification of the workforce exerted through a variable mix of algorithmic management and self-entrepreneurialism. Even if once established it is hard to be broken, such hierarchy is not irreversible, as actions of exit—to break platform intermediation—and voice—to demand for changes—demonstrated. The fact that such dependence is not innate but produced and constantly reproduced allow living labour to elaborate alternative strategies than the mere compliance with platforms’ norms. The actions of voice (Heiland, 2020) challenge the self-entrepreneurial anthropology of platform labour, addressing platforms as responsible for workers’ conditions and proposing a different articulation of formalization and informalization, e.g., defining better social protections. The actions of exit (Maffie, 2021) challenge the centralization of control on labour, attempting to gain workers more margins of autonomy in the labour process organization. What would be interesting to be analyzed in further researches is the relationship between these strategies of resistance and the general logic underpinning platform labour to understand which are the limits and the advantages characterizing the different practices of protest in the platform capitalism.

In conclusion, the definition of a global approach to platform labour would favour not simply the empirical investigation of specific case-studies, but would also support workers’ transnational processes of solidarity and collaboration in the struggle for improving their condition.

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