

Beyond the 'salary institution': on the 'society of performance' and the platformisation of the employment relationship

Federico Chicchi

Federico Chicchi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Business Law at the University of Bologna, Italy.

ABSTRACT

In this contribution the author discusses the intimate relationship between the crisis of the wage labour system of industrial capitalism and the growing diffusion of spaces of exploitation related to the explosion of digital algorithms and platforms. In other words, it is argued that capitalist transformation (in the post-Fordist sense) has had a decisive impact on the social relationship of subordination by inscribing the practices of exploitation of labour into an extended space that the traditional category of subsumption was not able to describe effectively. Even more specifically, work in contemporary society – a society where the digital paradigm takes on an unprecedented configuration through the platformisation of capital-work relationships – is forced to redefine itself as a mere performance, where performance means an activity that is basically stripped from the social protections of paid employment and is legitimised on a social level only by virtue of its immediate commercial usability. In other words, work in the society of performance is a subjective space deprived of the (formal and substantial) protective dimensions that were specified during what is sometimes referred to as the wage-earning society. At the same time, work is also a space subjected to an extraction of value according to a precise and renewed neoliberal logic that finds in the new urban fabric a place to renew its social hegemony.

KEY WORDS

post-salary capitalism, platformisation, cognitive work, entrepreneurship, wage-earning society, digital labour

Introduction

The increasingly important way in which digital platforms impact the organisation of production processes and the job market is closely linked to the ‘extractive logic’ (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019) and ‘post-waged’¹ context within which capitalist accumulation takes place today. To understand their transformative scope and their actual dynamics within contemporary capitalism, it is essential to analyse the platform phenomenon not in relation to its technological characteristics but from the perspective of its relationship to the overall quality of the social relations of production in neoliberal capitalism (Srnicek, 2017; Pace, 2018). Indeed, I argue that it is necessary to keep these two fundamental dimensions separate in analysing the nascent platform economy to ensure that the complexity of the phenomenon does not detract from understanding it effectively.² What I discuss in this contribution is the existence of an intimate relationship between the crisis of wage labour (and the salary agreement as it was determined in industrial capitalism) and the growing diffusion of spaces of value extraction governed by digital algorithms and platforms.

Moreover, it is evident that the contemporary metropolitan fabric, due to its structural characteristics, is configured as the *elective* space (although certainly not the only one) of emerging value extraction practices. In particular, it seems relevant to keep in mind how the revival of the propulsive role of urban space should be interpreted not only as an attempt by contemporary capitalism to overcome its increasingly serious endogenous crises, but as a real ‘design’ aimed at supporting a new expansive phase of accumulation, based on the exploitation of the transnational flows of value that are produced incessantly in large cities and are organised through digital platforms. As Neil Brenner pointed out in his latest work

from this perspective, then, the explosive politics of scale that has proliferated under contemporary capitalism must be viewed not only as an attempt to dismantle the tendentially nationalised scalar configurations that prevailed during the post-war accumulation regime and to resolve its cascading crisis tendencies, but as a series of relatively uncoordinated yet concerted politico-spatial strategies to establish stabilised, rescaled formations of the capitalist urban fabric that might support a new wave of expanded capital accumulation. (Brenner, 2019:85–86)

It is then possible, in my opinion, to identify the urban dimension as an essential context for the revival of post-Fordist capitalist accumulation. However, it is important

1 Starting from the 1980s the expansion of the factory logic into new social spaces and temporalities allowed capitalism to widen and, at the same time, reconfigure its base for the extraction of value chiefly in a post- and neo-waged sense. What have radically been transformed are the social mediations that presided over the encounter between labour and capital. In this regard, the most important issue is that in neoliberal society the social spheres of work and of life are engaged directly in the new dynamics of valorisation. This is exactly what the phenomena of precarisation and feminisation of labour point to: the becoming productive of social reproduction (see Chicchi, Leonardi & Lucarelli, 2018).

2 While it is not in the foreground of this contribution, it is nevertheless important to draw attention to the *workerism* (*operaista*) concept of *class composition*, a concept that, despite radical changes in the economic and social structure of capitalism, still offers an important methodological orientation.

to reconceptualise the urbanisation process which, starting from the complexity and intensity of contemporary digital flows, recombines them in new ways.

Urban restructuring in the neoliberal sense is therefore a process that directly questions the transformation of the capitalist productive system. However, this productive system does not take a single inevitable form; on the contrary, it manifests itself in a complex and variegated way, and is characterised by a highly elastic capacity for adaptation, both politically and spatially, according to the different trajectories of its development. In this regard, according to Brenner and Theodore (2005) it is possible to identify three distinct ways of interpreting neoliberal urbanisation. First, it can be seen as a process of definition of an unprecedented new form of urban governance. Second, it may be viewed as a spatial political strategy with a selective and differential character. Third, it represents a new rhetoric, a new ideology and a new social representation of the city.

These three dynamics are very useful because they produce a new urban geography of neoliberalism which enables a better understanding of the new organisation and the new imagery of work, as well as the new critical aspects of social reproduction. In particular, in recent years, it is the rhetoric on digital technology (in particular in the platform and Enterprise 4.0) that has provided the material and ideological force for the definition of so-called smart cities (Vanolo, 2014). For the purposes of this article, the most important feature of this debate is the attention it draws to the creation of new 'digitised' urban agglomerations, which create the possibility to operate new devices for the interpellation of the workforce and the consumer. In other words, I argue that the transformative processes of capitalism in the post-Fordist and neoliberal sense have had a decisive impact on the social relationship of subordination by inscribing the practices of exploitation of labour in a 'contest' that has become so large that the classic categories of subsumption are no longer able to describe it effectively (Chicchi, Leonardi & Lucarelli, 2018).

In contemporary society – where the digital paradigm takes on, for the first time, a fundamental configuration through the platformisation of capital-work relationships – work is therefore forced to redefine itself as a mere performance.³ By performance I imply an activity that is basically stripped of the social protection that is normatively linked to full-time/permanent employment and is legitimised on a social level only by virtue of its immediate commercial viability. Work in the 'society of performance' (Chicchi & Simone, 2017) is in this sense a subjective space stripped of the (formal and substantial) protective dimensions that were specified in the so-called 'wage-earning society' (Castel, 1995). It is, at the same time, a space subjected to a mandatory extraction of value according to a precise neoliberal logic that does not tolerate any

3 On the theme of the performative in the post-Fordist society the reflections of the Italian philosopher and semiotician Paolo Virno are important. However, the way I develop the concept of *performance* in this article is actually different as I retain the idea of a 'crisis' in the measurement of labour value. As Virno points out, starting from the centrality of language and cognitive skills in production, the measure of value is increasingly linked to the 'artistic' capacity of the *productive subject* to communicate and involve viewers. In other words, the activities of enhancement in post-Fordism require the presence of others and performance makes sense only if it is seen and heard (Virno, 2004).

subjective failure in this regard. In this sense, neoliberal governmentality and its *dispositifs*⁴ should, first and foremost, be seen as designed to shape the government of populations in accordance with the principle of competition (Dardot & Laval, 2009; Le Galés, 2016). Smart cities may thus be viewed as the privileged spaces of competition and of the governance of its conduct.⁵

The fundamental ways in which work is made competitive and reconfigured to function in an economy where digital tools are increasingly becoming prominent can be discerned in three specific processes involved in the long transformation of work and how it is performed: *cognitivation*, *entrepreneurialisation* and *diffusion*. In the next sections of this article, I will attempt to clarify and describe these and identify their fundamental dimensions, in order to draw attention to some features that make it possible to develop a genealogy of the platform economy within neoliberalism, no longer subsumed by the all-encompassing rubric of technological transformation. Finally, in the conclusion, I will argue that all these processes demonstrate how the platform⁶ does not only organise a new functional intermediation code for work relations (a new measure) but, overall, contributes to the social definition of a *performance culture* of the new productive subjectivity in the context of *smart cities*.

Genealogy of platformisation: the cognitivation of work in the society of performance

The ‘cognitivation’ of work, by which I mean the increasing use of intangible resources and skills in the valorisation processes of capital, represents a structural and transversal process in the contemporary productive world. It denotes a process whereby, through subjective work practices and experiences (albeit in different ways and forms according to the contexts and types of platform), the forms, functions and contents of work are altered profoundly. In this scenario, the relationship between worker and work, as it was previously organised according to the ‘operational’ and ‘abstract’ model of work, starts to be called into question because of their growing and progressive separation. This comes about on the one hand because of the presence of new professional knowledge within this relationship and on the other from the possibility of introducing new hierarchies of production practices based on the level of cognitive and symbolic complexity of tasks. Cognitive work, in this sense, can be described as an unprecedented rearticulation of this relationship (between the worker and his/her work), which today is being recombined in a growing resubjection of

4 This French term refers to the kinds of standardised procedures and templates which are imposed in order to control and shape governmental practices, including labour processes.

5 The concept of *smart cities* is much more complex than the scope of this paper permits. To learn more about its different characteristics, we refer to Alberto Vanolo’s (2014) text. One of the structuring elements of the issue, however, is certainly the relationship between the city and digital technology, which is also what interests us. In this sense: ‘the adjective “smart” is indebted to the concept of “intelligent city”, mainly involving the relationship between urban space and technology, and including issues such as the ability to generate innovation, transition toward forms of e-governance, social learning, and possibility to provide ICT infrastructures’ (Vanolo, 2014: 888).

6 The concept of ‘platform’ is used broadly here to denote its role as the main device for the enhancement and measurement of performance effectiveness via an algorithm logic.

work as well as in the constitution of a sort of 'social brain' (general intellect) of the increasingly *widespread cooperative knowledge* (Fumagalli, Giuliani, Lucarelli & Vercellone, 2019).

The main outcome, from a worker's point of view, is the return of a strong and decisive personal investment in work experience. This places the onus on workers to take direct personal responsibility for their careers, as foreseen and underlined by the neoliberal model. Empirical evidence has underlined how this process, obviously accentuated in a context of increasing scarcity of employment, generates a renewed attachment to work. But is it the job to which these values are attached? To which concept, idea or subjective imagery of work do these data refer?

The definition of cognitive work can be located in relation to three axes and it is from their intersection that the triangular space of cognitive performance work can best be clarified: first, the renewed passion for one's work; second, job uncertainty; and finally, the necessary continuous innovation of workers' professional knowledge (Chicchi & Simone, 2017). The relationships and means of articulation between these three fundamental definitional fields can therefore be said to represent the stakes (economic, social but also political) that need to be faced in the current situation. Depending on the proximate position of each worker within the bidimensional space formed by the three sides just identified, it is possible to highlight a specific emerging social condition (see Figure 1).

When workers are positioned towards the side of the triangle that connects skills innovation and employment uncertainty, then they can be seen as belonging to the so-called 'cognitariat' (Berardi, 2001). This refers to the return of a neo-Taylorised form of work that is more executive than creative, where the immaterial or knowledge resources do not support a professional profile, but simply guide the precarious and intermittent occupational trajectories of the subjects involved. By contrast, when they are positioned near the side that connects the poles of passion and skills innovation/continuous training, the work trajectory tends to take on the characteristics of professional self-employed or employee positions with a high content of symbolic capital. In the best cases, which are anomalies in the current job market, the trajectories drawn indicate the formation of the type of professional worker that Richard Florida assigned to the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), within which it is possible to find highly

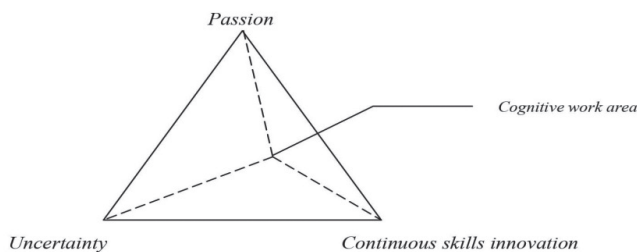


Figure 1: The triangle of cognitive work

Source: Author's elaboration.

performative subjects capable of moving easily among social and production networks and making the most of the conditions of extreme variability in the labour market. The last side of the triangle of cognitive work, the one that connects the summits of uncertainty and passion, denotes the formation of work activities characterised by a high subjective commitment, but at the same time also by a significant difficulty in stabilising income from work and balancing work with social needs. This area designates the types of activities characterised by the so-called *passion trap* (Murgia & Poggio, 2012) or even the 'economy of promise' (Bascetta et al., 2015) where subjective skills are rewarded, but not always, with benefits that are insufficient to provide any guarantee of economic stability or progression. Here, work in the artistic field represents a paradigmatic case. The world of research and training offers another example, though here tension between these vertices with the third, that of continuous skills innovation, is much stronger.

Although they are very heterogeneous, the experiences of cognitive work encompassed in this diagram can all be placed under the imperative of the *cult of performance*: for instance when workers suffer in a firm because of the application of new managerial or neo-Fordist managerial strategies (*cognitariat*), or, even more, when such strategies are instead absorbed by the imperatives of *employability*, or when the market dictates the *entrepreneurship of the self*. In this sense we could say that, in the subjective experience of the cognitive worker, the three points of the triangle are strongly correlated with each other, albeit in a way that varies from sector to sector and from case to case. In summary, the more the work is characterised by *expressive* and vocational elements, the greater the workers' need for training and continuous innovation and the stronger the need to expand their professional experience in order to increase the performance level (empowerment) of their economic activity.

Analytically, these expressive and vocational aspects of work seem to be key theoretical (and definitional) dimensions of the emerging model of work. Put another way, it could be said that subjectivity represents a fundamental element of contemporary work quite different from the objectified assembly lines of the past with their silenced workers. In this new scenario, a continuous demand for product and process innovation is an indispensable feature of the production of value in the post-Fordist 'social factory' (Tronti, 2006). Without considering this subjective dimension and its relevance in actual production process, it is not possible to comprehend the new form of work well. On the one hand, cognitive workers inscribe their work within a process that requires continuous innovation and a unceasing adjustment to market contingencies and therefore assume a posture with respect to work that is centred on their own individual aspirations. On the other hand, to generate value and acquire the knowledge they need, they must enrol, invariably, within complex practices and relationships of social cooperation and sharing, which are facilitated by the new digital paradigms (Huws, 2010). The way in which this relationship will be articulated in the coming years, including at the level of political and labour representation, will be decisive for the fate of the cognitive worker in the 'biopolitical metropolis' (Hardt & Negri 2009; Enright & Rossi, 2018; Cuppini, 2018).

Entrepreneurialisation: when work becomes enterprise

The new social imperative, founded on the efficacy of individual performance, assumes a concrete social form through the generalisation of enterprise as a subjective modality compatible with the productive needs of digital capitalism. In other words, performing subjects are (or must become) entrepreneurs themselves (Han, 2010).

At the beginning of the new millennium, Bob Aubrey, one of the most influential 'self-development managers', published a text significantly titled *L'entreprise de soi* (2000) which sums up, perfectly, the profound transformation of work that this article seeks to trace. Aubrey writes at the beginning of his book: 'Self-enterprise is a conception of the individual that is based on the discovery that man constantly increases his ability to know himself, to educate himself, to adapt to social contexts and to develop life strategies. In a word, it means being an entrepreneur of your own life' (Aubrey, 2000: 9; author's translation). The relative simplicity of the analysis of this concept, based on the empowerment of the self, obviously conceals the design of the neoliberal social and political model which in my opinion formed part of the foundation of what would later become the platform economy. To understand the quality of the performance subjectivity that derives from that, it is necessary to consider, on the one hand, the works of Michel Foucault on the birth of biopolitics and, on the other, the critical analysis of the French sociologist Robert Castel. In the apparently bizarre alliance between the figure of the therapist and that of the entrepreneur in Castel's work lies the key to understanding the current *post-disciplinary* order.

Foucault drew from German ordoliberal thought his concept of the creation of a society shaped according to the model of the firm. In particular, in the *Birth of Biopolitics* (1979), he contends that the basic idea of the ordoliberal project was to turn all social individuals into capitalists. In other words, the ordoliberal project would be to cover, euphemise, better yet transfigure, the social difference between the capitalist and the worker, showing how the latter can actually also be considered as an owner of a particular capital, called *human capital*. It is therefore necessary, as Foucault reiterates, that the life of each individual, including his intimate relationship with private property and with the devices of social production and reproduction, makes his life 'a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise' (Foucault, 2008: 241). The company coincides, then, in this sense, with a space of subjectification, where the coldness and cynicism of the training, and at the same time, ruthless competition find their most robust cultural and social reformulation. Therefore, following the widespread entrepreneurial process up to the subjective level, the individual himself becomes a *fixed capital* to be valued, an enterprise in which one has to continuously invest in terms of business strategy and self-management.

Because of the subjective suffering that is inevitably and evidently entailed in the medium and long term as a result of this process, Castel for his part, in an often-forgotten work, titled *La gestion des risques* (1981), draws attention to the necessity of bringing sociological analysis to the development and increasing diffusion of the techniques of psychological intervention in such contexts. These forms of intervention, overflowing from traditional psychopathological treatments, increasingly involve

techniques for controlling and directing subjectivity. According to Castel, a new type of post-disciplinary order is emerging that aims to strengthen the idea that the social is the result of a movement that puts the strengthening of direct responsibility for private initiative at the centre of its operations. In this sense, a new model of subjectivity is promoted, founded on the precise (scientific) measurement of its procedural effectiveness, which is, in turn, based on the development of the human potential of each individual.

To understand the impact of the contemporary digital platform on the redesign of work and how this work is experienced subjectively and socially, it is necessary to start from the erosion of the boundaries of work that lie at the heart of the capital-wage labour contradiction. This must be set against the fact that an increasing amount of work in contemporary production society is constituted progressively as an individual enterprise. The ambivalence of post-wage, precarious work, suspended between the nostalgia for a permanent job and the desire to promote more flexible and self-employed activity, must therefore be addressed in all its complexity, to avoid the risk of reading the new subjective quality of work only as the result of the corruption of dependent work and its traditional forms of solidarity.

In my opinion, this interpretation constitutes a serious error of analysis, largely dictated by a nostalgia for the Fordist industrial regime, an interpretative trap that must be avoided at all costs, not least to guarantee a future for our ecosystem. What is relevant here is that, although the new workers are on the one hand difficult to place in the legal and/or statistical categories of wage labour and are on the other hand increasingly driven to represent themselves as a particular form of individual enterprise, or, to put it in neoliberal rhetoric, as human capital, their behaviour is nevertheless not at all attributable, at least in the majority of cases, to being conceived in an exclusively individualistic cynical universe.

One of the aspects of great interest that emerges from the empirical analyses dedicated to this new form of independent work is the fact that this work, in addition to being characterised by the use of cognitive and intangible resources, defines an increasingly close relationship between the 'technical' dimension, characterised by the centrality of knowledge, the paradigm of the network and digital language, and the social organisation of its reproduction chain. In this regard, the relationship between the new work tools and the skills incorporated by the worker in the form of knowledge and cooperative dispositions/opportunities seems to be indicative of a form of relationship that can best be described by the currently fashionable term 'networking'. In other words, the professional tools of cognitive workers are no longer separable from the workers themselves, as they often were in industrial work. In some cases, the work and the means of production are recomposed in the body and mind of the cognitive worker. In Marxian terms, we could say that the variable capital and the constant capital used in production, based on the use of cognitive resources of different qualities, tend to recompose themselves in the bodies of the workers themselves, in the form of general and particular knowledge and relational, digital and cognitive skills (Marazzi, 2005). In other cases, the means of production have reverted to being directly owned by the provider, as in pre-industrial domestic work or as, today, in the case of platform workers such as food delivery riders. To be effective and operational, when the resource

is immaterial, these cognitive work tools need to inscribe themselves in a continuous circuit of production and reproduction which is intrinsically social, because it is based on the sharing of these tools among different users and on their propagation in different contexts of use and reuse (Rullani, 2004).

The context within which this becomes possible, by virtue of the concentration of the cognitive, competitive and affective flows that are established there, is undoubtedly the urban space. The centrality of the subjective element also gives the cognitive worker an unprecedented disposition, or social posture, which on the one hand profoundly modifies the way in which work becomes part of the social experience, and on the other hand disaggregates the collective dimension of work – in extreme cases to get rid of it totally; in other cases the impulse only to reconfigure it along new organisational lines. The latter opens up the possibilities for unprecedented social connections and solidarity practices, which, however, in order to be ‘consistent’ and produce these bonds among workers, must be supported and promoted at an institutional level.

Sergio Bologna and Andrea Fumagalli were among the first scholars to discuss the transformation of work towards an entrepreneurial model. In their famous volume *Il lavoro autonomo di seconda generazione* [The second generation of autonomous work] (1997) they described its main qualitative dimensions insightfully. First, according to these authors, independent work is characterised by an increased perception of risk by the worker. This includes the risk that is caused by the growing reduction of national social security systems but, more generally, that which is generated by the transformations of capitalist society that have taken place in the context of post-Fordism. Independent workers must be able to move in the market and, within certain limits, also be able to promote themselves and generate a demand for their work (Bologna, 1997). Trust in one’s professional skills and in the ability to build opportunities and social connections to put them into practice then becomes an essential element for supporting the worker’s spirit of enterprise and personal initiative. In this regard, Sergio Bologna invites us to bear in mind that self-employment will never receive full social political inclusion as long as its relational dimension continues to be considered as a sort of exogenous diseconomy and not as a structural component of the new jobs. Now that, in the ‘society of performance’, social relations have been effectively made visible, incorporated into the processes of value production, it becomes clear that this economic recognition of social relations depends on the radicalisation of the precarious conditions and humiliation of these workers (Armano, Briziarelli, Chicchi & Risi, 2017).

In public debate, another important characteristic of independent work concerns the way that it often seems in practice to approach the symbolic sphere of the company: it becomes a form of entrepreneurship. As far as Bologna and Fumagalli (1997) are concerned, to regard it as such represents a serious mystification of the status of second-generation self-employment, a mystification that must be strongly rejected, because it tends to legitimise not the enterprise as such, but the spread of job positions without any occupational or, more broadly, social protection. The transformation of the space and time of work, and, in particular, the difficulty of containing work within specific time segments and spaces means that the work becomes spatially and temporarily boundaryless (Turrini & Chicchi, 2014) a quality that is also characteristic

of the new self-employment. These transformations lead to an uncontrolled lengthening of overall working time and contribute to the difficulty the worker faces in distinguishing working hours from so-called 'free time'.⁷

This aspect raises the important question of 'control' by platform workers over the borders between the different spheres of social time. As Vili Lehdonvirta (2018) highlights, the absence of specific formal constraints (such as in Mechanical Turk) does not always allow for flexible planning of work activities. 'The removal of formal constraints sometimes exacerbated structural constraints, causing nominally self-sovereign workers to be *more* dependent on their employers' scheduling decisions' (Lehdonvirta, 2018:25). The author draws attention to one of the most important effects of what we can define as the *overflow of job*, that is, the increase in the pressure and weight of responsibility on the worker to meet the targeted productive objectives, especially when the work is carried out outside the framework of a conventional work institution.

In this sense, it should be stressed that second generation self-employment is mostly project-based, with its duration and remuneration often directly linked to the achievement of agreed goals (see also Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). This, of course, makes it difficult for workers to predict their income and forces them to differentiate their activities as much as possible, making it hard to plan their work and life careers in a coherent way. As Sergio Bologna (1997) graphically put it, a feeling shared by almost all independent workers is that of 'walking on the edge of a razor'.

Self-employment, it must be said, no longer represents a small portion of the current active population. In recent years it has spread enormously, not only insinuating itself transversely as a more mobile and flexible working style across a range of different production activities, but also in legal and quantitative terms. A recent empirical study by McKinsey Global Institute on independent work (2016) confirmed, for example, the growing importance, both in absolute numbers and with respect to subjective provisions, of self-employment in the context of the gig economy. In particular, the research, titled *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and Gig Economy*, based on data collected through a survey carried out in six different countries in the United States and in Europe, estimated that those who work under independent employment contracts, now represent between 20% and 30% of the active population, in absolute terms – more than 162 million individuals. Digital platforms have played a role in this diffusion of self-employment, thanks to the way that new mobile devices connect a very large number of workers and potential customers to each other and make a vast amount of data and information easily available in real time in the different activities undertaken.

In the author's view, one of aims of the new capitalism is to define and specify the frame of what we have called the 'society of performance' (Chicchi & Simone, 2017) starting from a questioning of the centrality of wage labour as a fundamental mechanism

7 The concept of domestication proposed by Bologna and Fumagalli in this regard describes the phenomenon of the transfer of work and the performance of extraction of value towards areas of social life that were previously considered unproductive or private and reproductive.

for extracting value, especially as the normative model of wage labour has become increasingly expensive, rigid and protected through the collective rules governing employment relationships. Self-employment, or at least work that no longer fits into a logic of social compromise and redistribution of wage-type wealth production, such as, for example, occasional or self-employment or even entrepreneurial work (with an individual VAT number), is suitable for an enormously more flexible, more mobile, more exploitative and considerably less expensive resource for the company that decides to use and/or purchase its services. In this context, the entrepreneurship of work, fictitiously promoted as positive and creative, can be seen as the other side of the process by which waged employment is fragmented and rendered precarious.

On job overflow or the boundaryless transformation of work

Another important dimension of the process of radical transformation of work (in the post-Fordist sense that makes it technologically possible and convenient to implement widespread platformisation processes) is the disappearance of the constant and direct relationship between time and value within the production processes. The amount of labour time required in production activities no longer necessarily indicates the transfer of a proportional and commensurate quantity of value to the final goods, but rather indicates that this relationship is becoming increasingly random and contingent (Fumagalli & Morini, 2009). The distinction between working time and non-working time or, in other words, productive and reproductive time, tends to disappear in the current subjective experience of work. The increasingly blurred boundary between private and working life makes it very complicated, from an experiential point of view, to distinguish clearly between them and thereby account fairly (in a distributive sense) for the value produced and retained in the professional and/or employment relationship.

Capitalism continually transforms itself and its value extraction processes. Post-Fordism is now irreparably in crisis and for this reason tends to produce fundamental ambivalences in order to continue functioning.

First, the extent of the exploitation of labour is widened and deepened, which makes it more pervasive and widespread. Indeed, the mechanism of exploitation reaches directly into the body of the worker through a subjective mobilisation that includes relational, symbolic, affective and intuitive resources. All this makes the boundary between what is productive and what should instead be considered exogenous to the execution of the task uncertain. 'The same notion of productivity becomes imprecise: the relationship between time and the quantity of produced value becomes difficult to establish, because not all hours of a cognitive worker are equal, from the point of view of produced value' (Berardi, 2016: 96; my translation). Work in the performance society is in this sense boundaryless; in other words, it is no longer quantifiable according to traditional measurement criteria. Another aspect of this, as Franco Berardi points out, is that the effect of this incorporation directly involves and impacts the worker's subjective desire, causing an overall and gradual *de-eroticisation* of subjectivity. This pervasiveness, compared to the separation between different social spheres that existed previously, opens up the risk that the very desire for which

capitalism at the same time has an extreme need is destroyed. This has the effect of qualifying the new processes of valorisation, producing goods that are aesthetically and symbolically charged. The resulting confusion between life and work also has consequences for the legal and formal aspects of work, which, going beyond the salary relationship, translates into new types of uncertainty, for example, in the so-called types of 'free' work (Armano, Briziarelli, Chicchi & Risi, 2017), which workers engage in not only on the basis of their immediate monetary interest, but also because they hope that they will lead to other improvements in their employment situation. At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult, due to the growing individualisation of careers, for workers to resort to traditional forms of trade union negotiation and dispute action.

The spatial and temporal confusion that results in work increasingly becoming a form of performance, however, also leads to the sedimentation of new, and mostly problematic, trajectories of subjectification of work. The new lines of escape from so-called wage labour and its pervasive and heteronomous exploitation devices are developing, above all, in the medium- and high-profile cognitive professions and in the younger generations, opening up a cultural horizon of work that is radically transformed compared to the recent past (Contarini & Marsi, 2014). Work, as we have been accustomed to think of it in the so-called short century, at least on a subjective level, seems, in fact, to no longer exist. The making, or rather the insinuation, of work as a singular personal vocation within the subjective theme of the desire of each to express their talents impels workers to design their identities in a more complex and fluid manner than in the past, mixing together passions, rights and symbolic and economic expectations to the point where the boundaries among their different and traditional spheres of social definition have become permeable. It is here, within the question of 'responsibility' towards the value of one's personal self-fulfilment, that the intrinsically and politically ambivalent subjective space of cognitive and performance work opens up: on the one hand, a tiring but self-centred space for personal design and realisation, and on the other a new space of humiliation and self-exploitation (see Lordon, 2010).

Platforms as a steering device and measure of work performance in the urban space

Online platforms, as pointed out by Ursula Huws (2014), are very efficient devices for the capture and commodification of social relations. However, their recent penetration into the reproductive and leisure labour markets would not have been possible if the boundaries between work and non-work had not been overcome by the processes defined above as the overflow of work. On the other hand, as Huws stresses, 'This blurriness of boundaries was by no means exclusive to online work, but a generation already primed to accept the interpenetration of "fun," "education," and the normal business of life online was ill-equipped to dispute such slippages in relation to boundaries between these activities and work in other spheres.' (Huws, 2014:22). In this article, I argue that platforms bring the technological level of value capture devices to the new social relations of post-wage type production, in the process upgrading them and thus contributing to the mutual reinforcement of the quality of the new post-Fordist accumulation processes. The same track of research

seems to have been well specified by Huws (2014) who points out that many large companies in the ICT sector have grown on the basis of a progressive commercialisation of a whole series of activities previously created outside a market logic as private, informal or public services.

It is also important to consider that the processes that support these transformations could not be implemented effectively if they were not inserted within metropolitan spaces. The urban fabric is an important space for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2012) and, simultaneously, as discussed above, the way cities are understood and interpreted in relation to social and economic phenomena has progressively changed since the neoliberal turn (Vanolo & Lombardi, 2015).⁸

It is furthermore necessary to ask how the three axes of transformation of work described above affect the growing penetration of digital platforms in the global economy, and, above all, to observe carefully the processes starting from which, in platforms, the relationship between two fundamental dimensions of capitalist accumulation is organised in an increasingly complex way: the control and/or governance of living labour on the one hand and, on the other, the practical methods of extraction, measurement and capture of the value that is thereby produced. This makes it possible to summarise schematically, starting from the three dimensions of transformation of the work identified above, some of the effects that can be clearly connected to the logic of the platform economy in an urban context, shown in Table 1.

The presence of the platform establishes an unprecedented mediation within the capital-labour relationship – due to the diffusion of the processes of automatic (algorithm-based) management of production practices – which makes it more difficult to cope with the private command and iniquity of the accumulation process. In other words, the digital platform is one of the ways in which capital has reconstructed the subordination of subjectivity to capital since the crisis of the wage institution (see Marrone, 2019). What I have tried to show here is that the platformisation process is not easily understood if we remain prisoners, on the one hand, of an interpretative scheme that limits itself only to the analysis of platforms mostly embedded on the technological question, and on the other, on a conception of the subordination relationship that is viewed only from within the Marxian concept of subsumption.⁹ This concept of subsumption, built as it is around the relationship of buying and selling (wages) of the workforce is called into question because it makes it difficult to theorise the exploitation that is exercised in connection with it, but externally to it. In fact, the platform is not only

8 Obviously, as many authors have pointed out, it is not possible to assume the formation of the neoliberal city as a linear and monolithic process. We do not have the space here to discuss the very rich debate on the complex relationship between urbanisation and neoliberalism; therefore we simply follow the idea that this relationship can be described using the interesting concept of ‘global assemblage’ (Vanolo & Lombardi, 2015). More specifically, following the argumentation of these authors, a ‘smart city’ can be considered as an engine of growth, sustainability and technological upgrades, a highly elastic technology of government that shapes cities and informs urban policies starting from the principle of competition. To this it can be added that it is also a space capable of supporting and organising new forms of digital work and post-salary extraction of value.

9 This is basically the question that was posed by the feminist movement to Marxism during the 1970s. On this important point and on the way in which the concept of *social reproduction* must be reinterpreted, see (among many): Ferguson (2019) and Federici (2020).

Table 1: Dimensions of work transformation and platform effects in smart cities

<i>cognitivism</i>	<i>entrepreneurialisation</i>	<i>overflow</i>	<i>Platformisation [and digital labour: on demand, micro tasking, free work]</i>
high mobility of production resources and global interconnection lines of the different local markets	atomisation and individualisation of careers	expansion of commodification to the sphere of social reproduction and leisure	
new hierarchisation of the global labour market based on the international division of labour in cognitive work	fragmentation of work and decreasing level of capital-labour conflict	free working (<i>and user work</i>), self-exploitation	
diffusion of new forms of <i>piece rate system</i> (on demand work, microtasking, crowdworking)	restandardisation of production processes – pervasive control (<i>endo</i> and <i>exo</i>) of the workforce – centrality of soft skills	availability 24 hours a day, <i>domestication</i>	
production of a post-industrial reserve army of cognitive workers	workaholics, social isolation and high diffusion of depressive psycho pathologies	<i>feminisation</i> of work: commodification of the social capital, difference and care skills	
exploitation of knowledge resources produced through social and/or informal cooperation; confusion and overlap between fixed and variable capital	unavailability of wage protection for increasingly wide bands of active population (crisis of wage institutions/welfare)	growing privatisation of public resources and services	
technological control and pervasive measurement of production practices	production of subjectivity as production of aptitude for the enterprise (commodification of the self)	difficulty, if not impossibility, of measuring the relationship between value and working time	
extraction and sale of data (big data, <i>training of algorithms</i> by workers and user profiling)	microeconomic processes: from rent to profit, from wages to income	work-life confusion	

Source: Author's elaboration

a technical device but a *machine* that deeply guides the functioning of subjectivity, ways of working and even the aesthetic dimension of the social world¹⁰ and therefore of consumer orientation in general. As Antonio Casilli has pointed out in his latest work on digital labour, this quality makes it possible to broaden the field of exploitation of work well beyond its traditional industrial definition, enabling the collection, analysis and continuous processing of data produced by users of the digital spaces of the platforms (Casilli, 2019). Such effects of innovation and accumulation of value were not even imaginable before the spread of platforms. This aspect is very important in establishing what we have understood here as *post-wage spaces of exploitation*. It determines a job market of *human-based calculation* and underpins the big data and algorithms that process these data. This is what Tubaro and Casilli (2017) call ‘digital labour’¹¹: low-intensity microtasks, distributed among thousands of users and often not recognised as work, but which help artificial intelligence extract value.

Conclusion

The radical transformation of work and its organisation according to the logic of digital platformisation must be linked to some fundamental processes of reconfiguration of the neoliberal development model. The main objective of these processes, which we have tried to describe in the preceding pages, is to create conditions whereby the process of value extraction can expand beyond the ‘resistance’ that the institutions of the wage society imposed on it under previous development regimes. Such a dynamic allows capitalism, on the one hand, to further fragment and therefore weaken the political mobilisation against exploitation (platforms are in this sense a device that specifies a form of neoliberal governance of the labour force starting from the condition of isolation in which it operates) and, on the other hand, to create the conditions of existence (and ideological representation) of social reproduction of the capitalist system that, especially in the neoliberal urban context, tends to make subjectivity more readily available to the *translation* of value into a private and proprietary regime. This development obviously requires that critical thinking renews its categories of analysis and its conflicting practices. First of all, it seems necessary to think about emerging social struggles by assuming that in the processes of social reproduction of contemporary capitalism there is a growing intimacy between the transformation of work in an entrepreneurial and digital sense and the design of new contexts of urbanisation. This supports the conclusion of Neil Brenner (2019) that it is only through a theoretical effort that aims at the definition of new *real abstractions* that we can today comprehend the transformations, protests, emergencies, hopes and imaginations necessary to rethink work, the city and their increasingly close relations in an alternative way, beyond the devastating neoliberal project.

© Federico Chicchi, 2020

10 As has been emphasised by many authors, the concept of the ‘smart city’ and its public policies has to do with the moral as well as the aesthetic representation of the contemporary city. On this see: Vanolo, 2014.

11 Following his convincing proposition, we can here define digital labour as all tasks performed by users of digital platforms, which are comparable to work insofar as they produce economic value, but which are not necessarily the subject of a contract or remuneration (Casilli & Tubaro, 2014).

REFERENCES

- Armano, E., M. Briziarelli, F. Chicchi & E. Risi (2017) 'Il lavoro delle relazioni. Commitment e processi di soggettivazione nel free work', *Sociologia del Lavoro*, 145, 1/2017.
- Aubrey, B. (2000) *L'entreprise de soi*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Bascetta M., et al. (2015) *Economia politica della promessa*. Rome: manifestolibri.
- Berardi (Bifo), F. (2001) *La fabbrica dell'infelicità: New economy e movimento del cognitariato*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Berardi (Bifo), F. (2016) *L'anima al lavoro: Alienazione, estraneità, autonomia*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Bologna, S. (1997) 'Dieci tesi per la definizione di uno statuto del lavoro autonomo', in S. Bologna & A. Fumagalli (eds), *Il lavoro autonomo di seconda generazione*, Milan: Feltrinelli:16–23.
- Boltanski, L. & E. Chiapello (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Brenner, N. (2019) *New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brenner, N. & N. Theodore (2005) 'Neoliberalism and the urban condition', *City*, 9 (1):101–7.
- Casilli, A. (2019) *En attendant les robots: Enquête sur le travail du clic*. Paris: Seuil.
- Castel, R. (1981) *La gestion des risques. De l'anti-psychiatrie à l'après-psychanalyse*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Castel, R. (1995) *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale: Une chronique du salariat*. Paris: Fayard.
- Chicchi, F. & A. Simone (2017) *La società della prestazione*. Rome: Ediesse.
- Chicchi, F., E. Leonardi & S. Lucarelli (2018) *Màs allà del salario: Lògicas de la explotaciòn*. Madrid: Enclaves.
- Contarini, S. & L. Marsi (eds) (2014) *Precariat: Pour une critique de la société de la précarité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest.
- Cuppini, N. (2018) 'The globalized city as a locus of the political: Logistical urbanization, genealogical insights, contemporary aporias' in T. Enright & U. Rossi (eds) *The Urban Political: Ambivalent Spaces of Late Neoliberalism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan:65–80.
- Dardot, P. & C. Laval (2009) *La nouvelle raison du monde: Essai sur la société néolibérale*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Enright, T. & U. Rossi (eds) (2018) *The Urban Political: Ambivalent Spaces of Late Neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Federici, S. (2020) *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*. Brooklyn, NY: Pm Press.
- Ferguson, S. (2019) *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction (Mapping Social Reproduction Theory)*. London: Pluto Press.
- Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foucault, M. (2008) *Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fumagalli, A. & C. Morini (2009) 'La vita messa a lavoro: Verso una teoria del valore-vita. Il caso del valore affetto', *Sociologia del Lavoro*, 115, 4/2009: 94–116.
- Fumagalli, A., A. Giuliani, S. Lucarelli & C. Vercellone (2019), *Cognitive Capitalism, Welfare and Labour: The Commonfare Hypothesis*. New York: Routledge.
- Han, B.-C. (2010) *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
- Hardt, M. & T. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2012) *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso.
- Huws, U. (2010) Expression and expropriation: The dialectics of autonomy and control in creative labour, *Ephemera Theory and Politics in Organization*, 10(3/4): 504–21.
- Huws, U. (2014) *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Le Galés. P. (2016) 'Neoliberalism and urban change: Stretching a good idea too far?', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 4 (2):154–72.

- Lehdonvirta, V. (2018) 'Flexibility in the gig economy: Managing time on three online piecework platforms', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 33 (1):13-29.
- Lordon, F. (2010) *Capitalisme, désir et servitude: Marx et Spinoza*. Paris: La Fabrique.
- Marazzi, C. (2005) 'Capitalismo digitale e modello antropogenetico di produzione', in J.-L. Laville, M. La Rosa, C. Marazzi & F. Chicchi, *Reinventare il lavoro*, Rome: Saperre:107-48.
- Marrone, M. (2019) 'Formalizzazione o accumulazione? Digitalizzazione dell'economia informale, informalizzazione del lavoro e dipendenza dalle piattaforme nel food delivery', *Sociologia del lavoro*, 154, 2/2019: 97-119.
- McKinsey Global Institute (2016) *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy*. Paris: McKinsey.
- Mezzadra, S. & B. Neilson (2019) *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.
- Murgia, A. & B. Poggio (2012) 'La trappola della passione: Esperienze di precarietà dei giovani highly skilled in Italia, Spagna e Regno Unito' in G. Cordella & S.E. Masi (eds) *Condizione giovanile e nuovi rischi sociali. Quali politiche?*, Rome: Carocci: 105-123.
- Pace J. (2018) 'The Concept of Digital Capitalism', *Communication Theory*, 28 (3):254-69.
- Rullani, E. (2004) *La fabbrica dell'immateriale: Produrre valore con la conoscenza*. Rome: Carocci.
- Srnicek, N. (2017) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tronti, M. (2006) *Operai e capitale*, Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Tubaro, P. & A. Casilli (2017) *Enjeux sociaux des Big Data*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Turrini, M. & F. Chicchi (2014) 'Precarious subjectivities are not for sale: The loss of the measurability of labour for performing arts workers', *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, 3: 507-521.
- Vanolo, A. (2014) 'Smartmentality: The smart city as disciplinary strategy', *Urban Studies*, 51 (5): 883-98.
- Vanolo, A. & P. Lombardi (2015) 'Smart city as a mobile technology: Critical perspectives on urban development policies' in M.P. Rodríguez-Bolívar (ed.), *Transforming City Governments for Successful Smart Cities*, Cham: Springer:147-61.
- Virno, P. (2004) *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Semiotext(e). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.