A new subjectivity in digital platform capitalism?
Marginal notes on power and conflict in the time of algorithms

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BOOKS REVIEWED
Della Porta, D., R.E. Chesta, and L. Cini. (2022) *Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age: A Comparative Perspective*. London: Policy Press. ISBN: 978-1529228243. 157 pages.
Armano E., M. Briziarelli and E. Risi (eds). (2022) *Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Subjectivities*. London: University of Westminster Press. ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-914386-12-1. 258 pages.
Jarrett K. (2022) *Digital Labor*. Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN 13: 978-1-5095-4519-3. 247 pages

KEY WORDS
digital labour, subjectivity, platform capitalism, assetisation, struggles for recognition, algorithms.

The transnational mobilisation of couriers, drivers and other platform workers has emerged where it was least expected. They have not only challenged the discipline of the digital labour regime, characterised by pervasive surveillance, the exclusion of traditional labour rights and a prominent anti-union approach often adopted by platforms; but also long-term social processes, such as trends towards a structural decline of unionisation that is accompanying the loss of relevance of class politics.

Yet, with very few resources, often mobilising towards informal unionism, they have not only revealed the exploitative nature of digital platforms but have also obtained unprecedented outcomes for the so-called 'precarious class'. This raises the question of how platform workers have been able to challenge digital platforms' power. How have they managed to overcome the structural obstacles to their mobilisation? Why did social theories fail to predict their coming?

The response given by Della Porta, Cini and Chesta in their book *Labor Conflicts in the Digital Age* (2022) is that platform workers' mobilisation has revealed the deficiencies of both mainstream Industrial Relations (IR) and social movements theories. The former still focus mainly on traditional unions, emphasising de-unionisation processes instead of developing a serious understanding of the role played by emerging actors such as informal unions. The latter seem to have dismissed the topicality of class conflicts probably too early, associating their decline with the replacement of identity conflict as the main field of social movements. However, understanding platform workers' mobilisation does not require any 'new theory'. The authors rather suggest hybridising existing theories, making use of classical authors to build a dialogue that can ultimately provide a toolbox to understand how labour conflicts are transforming in the digital age.

In this perspective, one of the key concepts they employ is that of the 'struggle for recognition'. This concept is taken from Alessandro Pizzorno's (1978a, 1978b) analysis of workers' protests during the hot autumn in Italy in 1969–70 According to this analysis, recognition is a preliminary step for emerging social groups in the struggle over redistribution, which is the struggle for their specific interests. However, identity is not the mere result of charismatic leadership, and neither does it emerge spontaneously from the contradictions of the labour process. Workers' counter-subjectivity is itself the main product of the struggles for recognition. Rather, recognition should be seen as an outcome obtained by workers that keeps nurturing their mobilisation.

Despite being initially formulated in a different context, this concept is key to understanding the struggles of food couriers, Amazon workers and Uber drivers that have been taking place recently. The reasons for their mobilisation are not found by the authors in the impact that digitalisation had on the labour process and working conditions. As they argue, this has actually posed several obstacles towards unionisation: while on one hand, digital technologies have harshened conditions of labour exploitation, on the other they have intensified the fragmentation and the dispersion of the workforce. Digitalisation has also crucially contributed to the shaping of an extremely variegated workforce, such as that characterising platform workers, that rarely is able to act as a distinguished 'class'. It is just a small minority of this workforce that has been able to make its voice heard. For the rest, 'digitalisation continues to produce a large majority of totally isolated workers, such as the global 'click' workforce, who remain silenced despite the conditions of exploitation that characterise their situation. The factors pushing platform workers to mobilise, then, should not be sought in the features of their labour processes, nor in their socio-material conditions. A more prominent role is played by their identities, which has contributed to the formation of their subjectivities; an identity which has not only escaped the narratives of 'flexibility'

and 'sharing' provided by digital platforms but has also somehow revolted against the command of these platforms.

Struggles for recognition must therefore be seen as an important lens for understanding how platform workers have been able to overcome the obstacles towards mobilisation. First, this concept shows us how platform workers have managed to deal with the complexities of their precariousness, which is building a subjectivity that is able not only to mobilise but also to develop specific demands. In this regard, key components explored in the book are the solidarity practices, which, as evident in the case of food couriers, have played a crucial role in the development of processes of mutual recognition. Second, recognition processes have been pivotal in challenging the individualising narratives that have accompanied the implementation of digital technologies, making visible those conditions of exploitation that usually remain hidden and radically changing their public perception. In this sense, while on the one hand, the mobilisation has involved just a small minority of the total platform workforce, on the other, forms of solidarity can also be found among the more dispersed platform workforces, such as 'clickworkers'. In other words, counter-subjectivities and processes of recognition can be registered across the whole spectrum of the platform workforce, albeit with different degrees and intensities.

Less clear is the role played by digital technologies in this. From a first angle, the authors suggest that they have accelerated existing social and economic transformations, such as those already investigated in the analysis of global value chains. This means that, beyond providing new disrupting tendencies, digitalisation has enlarged the extent of already existing processes of labour degradation, social fragmentation and legal displacement. However, this can't be all since the implementation of digitalisation processes is evidently much more articulated than just a process of subjection. To address this point, a second angle emerges from the reflections of Della Porta, Cini and Chesta: the role digital technologies play in the processes of recognition – on the side of subjectification. An example of this is the use of messaging groups, which seems to be a constant across all different kinds of platform work. Such groups have been crucial for making possible both solidarity and mobilisation practices. Nonetheless, this potential is never expressed solely within the limits of the labour process but requires different spatial articulations, such as those involving, for example, the urban dimension and the resources this can provide for mobilising workers. Recognition processes do not happen only in the digital space, then, but across multiple dimensions, both online and offline, institutional and non-institutional. It is across these intersections that workers' counter-subjectivities are formed.

This expresses one of the most evident paradoxes of platform capitalism: on the one hand, it can expand exploitation far beyond traditional spaces (and forms) of production; on the other, it is also determinant in shaping counter-subjectivities and in offering them the necessary resources to mobilise. The work of Della Porta, Chesta and Cini is, then, an indispensable tool to focus on this – only apparent – contradiction. To understand labour conflicts in the digital age, they pay particular attention to workers' 'class' identity, how this is formed, the processes of subjectification it may activate and how this can critically influence the destiny of platform capitalism. However, this approach means (and this is probably the biggest merit of their work) that

the pervasiveness of digital connectivity emphasises the tendency of social structures to be more porous, with the precarity of labour increasingly becoming a broader societal issue that goes beyond the pure economistic claims, to embrace a broader democratic and political issue. (ibid.:135)

This, in a nutshell, encompasses the relevance that the struggle of platform workers has not only for them, but for everyone, and encourages future studies that can further hybridise IR and social movement theoretical approaches.

The originality of platform workers and their ability to organise conflicts and claim rights have now become an important element of the new global political reality. This novelty indicates that the practice of conflict, though taking entirely different forms compared to the industrial past, is far from disappearing from the economic and social horizon of capitalism. This leads us to a second crucial question that we would like to propose, based on the analysis of two other important recent texts on digital capitalism. The first volume we refer to here is *Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Subjectivities* (2022), a significant collection of research works edited by Emiliana Armano, Marco Briziarelli, and Elisabetta Risi. The second is *Digital Labor* (2022), a monograph by Kylie Jarrett. These two volumes, among the already abundant and rich scientific literature on the emergence of platform capitalism, share the idea that the rise of digital technology as a new fundamental social infrastructure entails a transformation that must be observed well beyond the traditionally understood economic and productive context, because it directly impacts how subjectivity and social relations are organised and reproduced in historical time.

Could it be that the digital revolution involves a true mutation of 'forms of life' (Jaeggi, 2018) and processes of subjectification? If this is the case, would it not be essential to reinterpret how the relationship of subordination and, more generally, the exercise of power is inscribed today within the relationship between capital and labour? In this regard, the truly rich volume of Armano et al. adopts an analytical perspective that we find convincing: algorithms do not become part of our lives solely as mechanisms that externally impose or provoke preordained social behaviours; instead, they are capable of penetrating deeply into the very processes that determine how desires and social identities are constituted. In other words, 'The pervasive power of these devices attracts, persuades and often forces millions of people, companies, and public institutions into adopting a "digital presence" and engaging in digital self-promoting performances' (ibid.:2). The concept of 'digital presence' proposed here (which also resonates with much of the literature in phenomenological anthropology), is useful for understanding how today every worker and every social subject, in order to trace a trajectory of recognition of their skills and competencies, must not only come to terms with and learn to use digital languages and tools but also 'blend' them with their own lives, adjusting values, orientations, knowledge, and attitudes based on the possibilities that these devices prefigure and make socially available.

As the editors of this book aptly point out, citing the Italian *operaist* Romano Alquati (1994; 2021) in their excellent introduction, algorithms should not only be seen as machines that perform calculations and computations at incredible speeds but also as technologies that can profoundly alter the relationship between human capability

and the means of production. This profoundly affects subjectivity not only because it governs the workplace algorithmically in a renewed neo-Taylorist style (Delfanti, 2021), but also because of its capacity to value human attitudes and capabilities that are situated within what was once defined as the sphere of social reproduction.

> *Such active combination consists in the concatenation of – agencement – between human and digital machine, or to return to Alquati, it connects the ability of the living human with the procedures encoded in the algorithm, which pervade and structure different productive and reproductive activities, from increasingly digitised work to social media in urban spaces and in everyday life. Active combination is thus a fundamental part of the process of extracting value while simultaneously modeling subjectivity. (Armano, Briziarelli & Risi, 2022:4)*

According to this view, what is emerging within the digital space of neoliberal capitalism is a subjective condition that, as the authors of this volume propose, can be called 'algorithmic subjectivity'. As many authoritative commentators (Foucault, 2004; Dardot & Laval, 2009) have already highlighted, one of the fundamental characteristics of neoliberalism is its 'constructivist' quality. In contrast to the naturalism of classical liberalism, this 'model' is characterised by political initiatives aimed at producing not only the action of the governors, but also the individual conduct of the governed in line with the needs of the market (Dardot & Laval, 2009). In the neoliberal project, it is not a matter of freeing the market from governing functions but rather of orienting these functions towards the active construction of the basic conditions for its functioning. In other words, as has been stated countless times, it is not a question of governing the market but of governing for the market (Foucault, 2004).

Algorithmic subjectivity, therefore, is primarily the result of the construction of a new subjective quality that arises from the neoliberal imperative of competition. This imperative finds in the development of digital technology the technological 'component' to support, and thus achieve, post-Fordist capitalist accumulation, which is based, on the subjective and phenomenological level, on the figure of the entrepreneur of the self and the continuous and strategic accumulation of human capital. Hence, platforms, understood in this sense, become tools for constructing social environments rather than merely reflecting them. A fundamental concept for understanding the production of subjectivity in platform capitalism is thus, as proposed by the authors of this volume, the concept of 'affordance', first introduced by psychologist James J. Gibson in the late 1970s and crucial for understanding how subjectivity and digital machines interact today (Gibson, 1977, 1979). In a first approximation, affordance refers to the properties or characteristics of an object or environment that suggest the possible actions that an individual can undertake with/in it. In other words, affordance describes what an object or space offers or 'allows' an individual to do while using it. As Armano, Briziarelli, and Risi emphasise, based on the important work of Zizi Papacharissi (2011), 'Affordances can be defined as the "socio-technical architectures" of platforms, which imply their capacity to shape the agency of human actors' (Armano, Briziarelli & Risi, 2022:4). Using this approach, it is possible to understand the type of power that algorithms can exert on life. This power, characterised as having a new, positive nature rather than being merely interdictory and disciplinary, has been effectively defined by

legal philosopher Antoinette Rouvray as 'algorithmic governmentality' (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013). In this view, the power of platforms, based on the massive collection of user data, has the ability to predict and guide behaviour in mostly imperceptible and seemingly neutral ways.

The increasingly systematic use of data mining and profiling by platforms reveals a significant shift within neoliberal rationality. The focus on predicting behaviours is accompanied by a strategic and tactical shift in the objective of governance: algorithmic 'statistical government' no longer aims to dominate the real, to tame the hardness and slipperiness of data, but to structure the possible, to reach and even saturate the virtual. The result, of course, is not the complete disappearance of disciplinary and orthopaedic power exercised by institutions over bodies, but that the latter are subordinated to a broader and more subtle strategy of power whose main goal is to structure the field of action of the possible, thus imperceptibly fixing what bodies can or cannot do. The fact that signs (and machines, objects, diagrams, etc.) constitute foci of proto-subjectivity means, as Rouvroy suggests, that they also make it possible to solicit, incite, encourage, or prevent some actions, thoughts, affects, or favour others. 'Furthermore, as a sign of the general neoliberalisation of social life, we receive instigations from multiple sources to remain flexible and to keep improving ourselves to better respond to market fluidity and the imperatives of a flexible kind of accumulation' (Armano, Briziarelli & Risi, 2022:7). These are some of the issues that are explored and developed in the valuable contributions gathered together in this volume. While heterogeneous in approach and disciplinary perspective, the chapters that make up the two sections of the book (which is divided into 'Theoretical foundation' and 'Case studies') manage, taken together, to develop a coherent and convergent argument that addresses these questions.

The issue of algorithmic subjectivity is further explored, in a different but equally stimulating way, in Kylie Jarrett's *Digital Labor*. In the first part of the book, the author frames – conceptually and empirically – her approach to the phenomenon of so-called digital labour: 'I will define digital labour as the work of users, platform-mediated workers, and formal employees that generates value within the digital media industries' (Jarrett, 2022:28). She then interweaves its complex phenomenology with the forms of exploitation, commodification, and alienation that these workers face today. An important and convincing part of Jarrett's work indeed examines how the exploitation of labour is reorganised in platform capitalism. In other words, the volume 'explores how digital labour involves the exploitation of the whole of the self – from the intellect to embodied performance to affective states' (ibid.:33).

In this regard, and particularly concerning the topic of algorithmic subjectivity that we are interested in exploring in this review, Jarrett makes precise reference to the work of the French philosopher Michel Feher (2009; 2018), making a convincing case for the value of his arguments. Using the concept of 'human capital', it documents the different ways value is drawn from those aspects of self typically considered inalienable or outside capitalism. It links these processes to the feminisation of the economy and the increased demand for reflexivity in the workplace. However, rather than lament such incorporation as the commodification of subjectivity in the service of capitalism, it

proposes interpreting this as a process of assetisation as described by Michel Feher (2018). It thus offers a re-reading of the exploitative dynamics of digital labour through a more 'agential lens' (Jarrett, 2022:33).

Feher's work, and more generally that of other scholars who study the concept of 'assetisation', emphasises how the increasing centrality of finance in contemporary economic life profoundly impacts and increasingly informs the logic of how social practices are organised. In this sense, it is necessary, as Jarrett argues, to shift the focus of analysis from the classic concept of commodification to the concept of assetisation, which allows for a better understanding of the complex dynamics activated by and within digital labour.

However, it is Jarrett's firmly feminist perspective that adds the greatest value, enabling her to grasp some of the fundamental aspects of the social transformations of labour in platform capitalism. The evident processes of labour fragmentation characterising certain platform practices are not enough to fully represent the quality of digital labour, which is simultaneously becoming more affective and more immersive. Alongside, and even beneath, the increasingly widespread phenomenon of 'micro-tasking' (Casilli, 2019), there is a new feature of labour deeply intertwined with neoliberal mantras, reconstructing the texture of subjectivity engaged in labour through the imperatives rendered unavoidable by the centrality of reputation management. Specifically,

> it is alignment with entrepreneurialism itself – a generalised economic imaginary grounded in the demands of neoliberal, post-industrial capitalism – that is incident. What this means, though, is that a deep-seated affective investment in being entrepreneurial that may lie at the core of a worker's sense of self becomes another asset belonging to a company. It is what secures that worker's commitment to the firm and thus the retention of their human capital. It means, though, the enrolment of that worker's subjectivity in contemporary capitalist logics as desire and affect – some of the most intimate, inalienable aspects of subjectivity – becomes economic. (Jarrett, 2022:142–143)

In this way, the 'ideal self of the digital worker' is moulded and remoulded with a view to real or potential investors – or stakeholders (Feher, 2018: 63) – which could be the companies that might hire them, a venture capitalist who might finance them, a member of the public who might follow them, a brand that might collaborate with them, or a customer who might give them a good rating. Within this framework, workers are, as Feher once again observes, interpreted not as producers but 'as entrepreneurs of themselves or, more precisely, as investors in themselves, as human capital that desires to appreciate and valorise itself and, therefore, to allocate its competencies accordingly'. Workers become both investors and investees in their working subjectivity. In this sense, in digital capitalism,

> a worker who is marketing their assets is not selling their power to a platform to do with as it wills but opening those assets to a valuation by the marketplace. This value, however, cannot be entirely produced or captured by the enterprise that exploits it; the value of that asset is merely tapped into and channeled and remains in important ways bound to the subjectivity of the worker. (Jarrett, 2022:161)

Jarrett's volume is truly rich in insights and analyses on the transformation of labour in digital capitalism and, even though it does not present data from its own empirical research, it manages to shed light on the hidden folds that take shape within the still-forming context of the new digital platform capitalism.

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