THE MEANINGS OF UBERISM:

Work platforms, informality and forms of resistance in the city of São Paulo

OS SENTIDOS DO UBERISMO:

Trabalho plataformizado, informalidade e formas de resistência na cidade de São Paulo

_____

Ruy Braga*

Douglas Silva**

Abstract
In light of the new coronavirus pandemic, our objective is to analyse the relationship between the current wave of the "platformisation of work" and the traditional forms of being a poor and peripheral worker in São Paulo, highlighting the representations and expectations of young black and peripheral workers with regard to their future work trajectories. In addition, we will explore some of the changes in app-based delivery work routines brought about by the current pandemic. With that in mind, we will present data collected during field research we carried out between January and October 2020, based on ethnographic investigation techniques applied to a group of approximately twenty young workers who meet daily at a specific location of Avenida Paulista in the city of São Paulo – although we maintained systematic and regular contact throughout 2020 with only seven of these young men.
Keywords: Platformisation of work. New coronavirus pandemic. Informatily. On-demand workers.

Resumo
No contexto da pandemia do novo coronavírus, o objetivo do artigo consiste em analisar a relação entre a atual onda da "plataformização do trabalho" e as formas tradicionais de ser trabalhador pobre e periférico em São Paulo, destacando as representações e expectativas dos jovens trabalhadores negros e periféricos no que diz respeito ao presente e ao futuro de suas trajetórias ocupacionais. Além disso, exploraremos algumas das mudanças nas rotinas de trabalho de entrega baseadas em aplicativos trazidas pela atual pandemia. Para tanto, apresentaremos dados coletados durante a pesquisa de campo que realizamos entre janeiro e outubro de 2020, com base em técnicas de investigação etnográfica aplicadas a um grupo de vinte jovens trabalhadores que se reúnem diariamente em um local específico da Avenida Paulista na cidade de São Paulo – embora tenhamos mantido contato sistemático e regular ao longo de 2020 com apenas sete desses jovens.
Palavras-chave: Plataformização do trabalho. Pandemia do novo coronavírus. Informalidade. Trabalhadores de aplicativo.

Introdution

The new coronavirus pandemic disrupted our times and produced a serious social crisis. Its apparent meaning is the generalised fear of the imminence of death that now knows no national frontiers. However, what the pandemic signified goes far beyond that. Worldwide, the

_____

* Ruy Braga é professor titular do Departamento de Sociologia da Universidade de São Paulo (USP). E-mail: ruy.braga@usp.br

** Douglas Silva é bacharel em Ciências Sociais pela Universidade de São Paulo (USP). E-mail : douglas.santos.silva@usp.br.

precariousness of the living and working conditions of poor workers, especially informal workers and immigrants, has revealed the most common problem of what we might call the pandemic's class boundaries, separating protected from unprotected workers, white workers from black workers, and national workers from undocumented workers.[1] Thus, a widening gap of inequality can be seen between, on the one hand, those protected professionals who can work from home offices, and, on the other, the precarious workers forced to expose themselves to the risks of infection because they depend on public transport and work side by side with their co-workers.[2]

The commercial production of goods and services in the current context of a health emergency has foregrounded among sociological concerns the conflicted relationship between the economic requirements of capitalist accumulation and the non-economic needs of social reproduction.[3] This conflict has long been at the centre of inquiries and research on the working class. It is sufficient to mention the work of Marxist historian E. P. Thompson (2012), among many others, to grasp the importance of this theme, which has been part of our research agenda for the past 10 years. For Thompson, the historical formation of the English working class went through successive moments of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of collective identities and organisational forms.

In the fluid process of "self-building", backward-looking collective identities were challenged by new historical circumstances, as was the case, for instance, when egalitarian cultural traditions and authoritarian national values overlapped. The different groups that formed the subaltern classes were unevenly challenged by the normative conflict that emerged as a result of the redefinition of the borders between the national and the international, the economic and the political, the past and the future, but, above all, between who "we" and "they" are.[4]

---

1 When we look at the structures of production of goods and services in most countries in the global North, we become aware of the way in which health systems and food production networks depend on immigrant workers. According to some recent surveys, a quarter of hospital workers and a fifth of health and social care staff in the UK, for example, were born abroad (KOTECHA, 2019; NUFFIELD TRUST, 2019). In the United States, immigrant farm workers were considered "essential" during the pandemic, despite the fact that the vast majority are undocumented, that is, eligible for deportation by the immigration authorities (JORDAN, 2020).

2 This situation of great risk to the health of subaltern workers can readily be found both in the global North and the global South. Contrary to what is commonly said about the risk posed by the pandemic being universal, workers are by no means all "in the same boat". Furthermore, the effects of the pandemic on the working poor go far beyond workplace-related health risks, extending to the dilemmas associated with unemployment and uncertainty about labour income.

3 For the purposes of this article, we understand "social reproduction" as the ability of working families to ensure food, clothing, housing, health care and education.

4 If the trends related to the increase in social inequalities remain stable, as the data on income concentration in different national contexts during the pandemic suggest, the social crisis generated by the current pandemic will certainly fuse even more features of the "self-building" of the new working classes with aspects related to the "dismantling" of the old-fashioned Fordist classes. In the midst of this process of class "self-rebuilding" on a global scale, we will surely witness a strengthening of social movements willing both to challenge and defend the borders that separate the "we" and the "they".

In our opinion, a similar normative conflict, arising from that conflict between accumulation and reproduction and capable of challenging the boundaries that separate "us" from "them", seems currently to be insinuating itself, driven by the global precariousness of the conditions that ensure the social reproduction of workers. Hence the importance of investigating the reconfiguration of the collective experience of the "precariat".[5] This reconfiguration is located at the intersection of the normative conflict brought about by the decline of the standard of Fordist solidarity and the strengthening of the dynamics of social dispossession that makes work precarious and threatens the reproduction of the working class itself.

In light of the above, our objective is to analyse the relationship between the current wave of the "platformisation of work" and the traditional forms of being a poor and peripheral worker in São Paulo, highlighting the representations and expectations of young black and peripheral workers with regard to their future work trajectories. In addition, we will explore some of the changes in app-based delivery work routines brought about by the current pandemic. With that in mind, we will present data collected during field research we carried out between January and October 2020, based on ethnographic investigation techniques applied to a group of approximately twenty young workers who meet daily at a specific location of Avenida Paulista in the city of São Paulo – although we maintained systematic and regular contact throughout 2020 with only seven of these young men.

The platformisation of work and the new informality

First, it is necessary to highlight the relationship that defines the current moment, that is, the relationship between, on the one hand, the increase in job insecurity associated with the dismantling of the safeguards that used to protect labour, and on the other the trend toward the "platformisation" of work associated with the transformation of the hegemonic business model of companies that, in its turn, is reconfiguring the relationship between the informal and the formal economy across the world. It is worth recalling the ILO study by Adascalitei and Morano (2015) that analysed 642 changes introduced in the labour systems of 110 countries in the period between 2008 and 2014. The authors found that, among countries that reduced labor protection, the unemployment rate increased by 3.5% on average compared to 0.3% among countries that maintained levels of worker protection. In 55 percent of cases, the objective was to reduce employment protection, something that had an impact on the entire population and produced a long-term change in the regulation of the labour market.

This is a truly global trend whose objective is to devalue the workforce by the deepening of insecurity in relation to the legal protection of labour, the dependence on technology companies,

5 By "precariat" we mean that section of the subaltern classes formed by the amalgamation of the latent, flowing or stagnant populations of the working class, plus those middle sectors who are in the process of proletarianisation, notably the social groups formed by young people in more or less permanent transit between the increase in economic exploitation and the threat of social exclusion. For more details, see Braga (2012).

the commodification and individualisation of work, the increase in inequalities of class, gender and race, and the weakening of communities where working families live. In this sense, it is worth noting that the global rise of so-called "uberism" from the mid-2010s onwards coincided with the peak of the cycle of social upheavals led by impoverished and underemployed working youth between 2011 and 2015 (see Karatasly, Kumral and Silver, 2018).

Even if unintentionally, the global rise of the new model interacted with the cycle of revolts in a negative way: if young people demanded more social protection, they reaped more job insecurity. Here is the sociological challenge posed by this new situation: how to interpret the interaction between the increase in social unrest among young workers, on the one hand, and the sedimentation of a work regime that is refractory to traditional forms of labor protection, on the other. By uberism, we understand a regime of labour control made possible by the dynamics of dispossession of labour rights through the platformisation of work, in other words, the subsumption of workers to the logic of the algorithmic cloud monopolised by startups bankrolled by large venture investment funds such as Uber, Rappi and IFood. However, young workers do not passively interact with platforms. On the contrary, they pursue their own personal goals through the platforms and, in this sense, they co-produce their own labor subordination.

This social dynamic of co-production of the social relations of capitalist production can be considered "hegemonic" ("coercion coated in consensus" in Gramsci words) in a certain sense. Although, in general terms, we are experiencing a moment of deconstruction of bureaucratic labor protection relations characteristic of the Fordist era, and the new relations of production commodify work, while deepening the dependence of young workers on the despotic decisions of the algorithmic cloud. In short, it is a way of exploiting labour through a combination of modern digital technologies and archaic strategies, aimed at weakening labour protection and whose main exponent is Uber (for more details, see Hill, 2015).

In fact, the platformisation of work goes far beyond the type of platform represented by the passenger transport company. Advertising platforms such as Facebook and Google, cloud platforms with a strong interface with industry, such as Amazon, and spatial platforms such as Uber itself, have exponentially increased their market value, employing hundreds of thousands of workers around the world. There is, of course, a striking diversity of work characteristics behind each type of platform. The main trends identified in the literature highlight three major types of platform work: quick-work, freelance work and territorial work (for more details, see Srnicek, 2017; Huws, 2020; Grohmann, 2021; Vandaele, 2018).

The best-known company employing quick-work on a large scale is, without a doubt, Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), a platform where workers register to perform elementary, repetitive and fragmented tasks, without any type of truly volitional content. The tasks are often limited to "teaching" (machine learning) the algorithm to differentiate nuances related to a variety of situations, something that only a human being would be capable of doing. In a nutshell, workers perform activities that would cost the corporation more to automate if carried out by

Artificial Intelligence. To put it differently, the worker devotes hours to the task of connecting codes to certain products or interpreting certain data and often is paid in cryptocurrency, which gives them access to certain goods and services that circulate and take place on the internet. The AMT platform coopts workers spread across the world, thus creating a truly global group of precarious workers subsumed by its algorithm.

The case of freelance platforms is somewhat different and is organised around the exploitation of qualified professionals rather than repetitive tasks. On the pretext of mediating between clients and professionals (thereby doing away with the actual presence of the company and allowing for more effective service), these platforms promote a dynamic of work Taylorisation that denies the worker any access to labour rights and subjects him or her to the despotism of the "clients", who in turn are "free" not to pay the worker if they consider the work to be unsatisfactory according to their own parameters.

In 2019, we carried out exploratory research on one of these platforms, specialised in providing tools for the work of architects involved in apartment renovation projects. The professionals spent up to 14 hours a day assembling projects according to the demands of the client, who was not at this stage bound by any contract. According to reports collected in the field, only one out of every ten projects submmitted by the architects was eventually approved and paid for. After signing the contract, the architect detailed the project and passed its execution on to another team coordinated by the company, which also provided all the furniture required by the renovation, as well as the workforce employed in the renovations. In contrast to the recent past, in which an architect had some degree of autonomy and got paid as the work went along, the platformisation of his job displaced him, in professional terms, to a clearly precarious and subordinate position.

It is territorial work platforms that are best known to the public, and indeed this new platform work model has been named after one of them, Uber, even if the most visible faces of uberism include also such corporations as UberEats, Rappi and iFood. Since their employment relationship with drivers and on-demand workers is not recognised, there are no social security contributions, no labour rights or benefits, nor are these companies obliged to recognise or negotiate with trade unions. They are supposed to be tech companies, but they are in fact delivery companies.

These companies are at the forefront of a system of accumulation that feeds on the increase in the informal sector of the economy brought about by the unemployment crisis that began in 2016. According to the Locomotiva Institute, there are currently around five and a half million platform workers in Brazil. The majority of on-demand workers are male (around five percent are women), young, black, from the urban peripheries, and they represent around a quarter of the country's self-employed workers (INSTITUTO LOCOMOTIVA, 2020). In addition to not being protected by labour and social security rights, they are subjected to long working hours, extreme pressure to increase their pace at work, a high incidence of work-related accidents, and low pay.

Although they mobilise a much larger contingent of workers than most economic sectors, application companies do not consider themselves the employers of these workers, whom they euphemistically call their "partners" – in other words, they are merely the means of promoting the encounter between, say, restaurants, couriers, and consumers. Thus, these companies seek to distance themselves from any type of employment relationship. On-demand workers are "on their own", including with regard to providing their own working tools, such as motorcycles and bicycles. All too often, these workers go into debt to buy a motorcycle in order to be able to work.

Furthermore, despite their supposed freedom to live and move around in cities, platform workers undergo explicit forms of labour subordination through electronic control, which monitors and defines their access to the platform, their pace of work and even their movements, thereby controlling their potential earnings. They are also subject, at any moment and without any justification, to a variety of sanctions, such as stopping sending orders to them. These companies use urban equipment, the city's streets and asphalt, everything that belongs to the community, for purposes of accumulation, with no compensation being offered to the city, or its workers and restaurants. They have specialised in a logic of accumulation by dispossession, the main purpose of which is to avoid any responsibility with regard to the protection of workers.

These characteristics of platform work, widely discussed in the relevant literature (SRNICEK, 2017; VANDAELE, 2018; HILL, 2015; HERR, 2021), illustrate the magnitude of the changes that have taken place in the world of contemporary work. However, it is important to point out that the reconfiguration of collective identities and class interests brought about by the platformisation of work is a reality that also depends on the workers themselves, as part of their collective self-rebuilding. In other words, it depends on the workers' own experience. Thus, given the distinctive features of on-demand work, a look (even if just an exploratory one) into the praxis of these workers and their own perceptions of delivery work in a context of pandemic crisis can prove a useful way of approaching this class reconfiguration from the point of view of those below.

We first need to understand that app-based delivery has become the main gateway to employment for young people in the Brazilian labour market. However, contrary to what happened until recently with the old informal types of employment relation, which tended to precede the formalisation of a worker's status, the new informality, which is dominated by large transnational corporations, does not have the attainment of formal employment on its horizon. Instead, the future we now see unfolding, especially for young people entering the Brazilian labour market, is one that more or less permanently reproduces the job insecurity associated with informality.[6]

---

6 After all, at a time when "random insertion" (GUIMARÃES, 2006) in the labour market has become the rule for young people threatened by the unemployment crisis, the experience of holding a minimally stable job, one capable of ensuring a standard of social integration, seems unimaginable to the working poor. For more details, see also Martins (1997 and 2001). This framework helps us to understand why app-based work has become part of the common vocabulary of the media, an essential service for certain strata of the urban population, and part of the survival grammar of the popular classes living on the margins of the labour market.

What we are witnessing, more than anything else, is the dismantling of the promise of Brazilian salary citizenship as it was established about 70 years ago (CARDOSO, 2018). In order to problematise this process of social disintegration, we need to understand the meanings attributed by the workers themselves to their own lived praxis, bringing to the fore the tensions inherent in the relationship between precariousness and the work platform. This is especially true in the context of the current health crisis, which, in the Brazilian case, quickly turned into a socio-reproductive crisis, with 19 million workers living in a situation of chronic food insecurity (REDE BRASILEIRA de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional, 2021).

Youth, occupational trajectories and precarious work

Young on-demand workers offer a very vivid portrait of that part of the Brazilian population that was most affected by the pandemic crisis: a predominantly young, black group from the urban peripheries.[7] Within the broad spectrum formed by digital platform workers, delivery couriers – or riders – have particularities that are worth highlighting. Thus, if we consider app drivers, for example, we will notice that they are characterised by a particular age and profile and by a marked occupational trajectory. Having a driver's license and the possibility of using a car, as well as affording the cost involved in carrying out their activity, including paying for car insurance, are all part of a profile of an adult worker who has been expelled from the formal labour market by unemployment. Thus, these workers resort to app-based jobs as an alternative source of income.

The profile of on-demand workers is different. On the one hand, it is a traditional profession in the capital of the state of São Paulo; however, as is argued by Abílio (2019), digital platforms have been displacing the established companies in the sector, whose relationship with workers was based on formal employment. Thus, a significant part of this group of workers resulted from the transformation of former formal couriers, who found themselves forced to migrate to platform work. In addition, according to data collected in the "Profile Survey of App-based Bicycle Deliverers", carried out in 2019 by the Brazilian Association of the Bicycle Industry among 270 delivery riders of the city of São Paulo, it is possible to see a deterioration in the working conditions and remuneration of these workers (ALIANÇA BIKE, 2019).

This group is made up of young people who are faced with numerous difficulties on entering the formal labour market and whose occupational trajectories include unemployment and underemployment as a major common denominator. Aged between 18 and 22 on average, these young people are, for the most part, in their first job (26 percent). Most of them are black (with 44 percent describing themselves as dark-skinned, and 27 percent as actually black), have completed either high school (53 percent) or elementary school (40 percent), and live on the

---

7 According to the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (continuous PNAD) for the third quarter of 2020 – the period in which the field research that underlies this chapter was carried out –, while the general unemployment rate among the Economically Active Population (EAP) was 14.6 percent, in the case of the 18-24 year-old group it was as high as 31.4 percent (IBGE, 2020).

outskirts of the city of São Paulo (ALIANÇA BIKE, 2019). To sum up: the typical delivery rider is Brazilian, male, black, aged between 18 and 22, managed to finish high school, has experienced unemployment and, faced with a lack of alternatives in the job market, decided to be a delivery worker every day of the week, 9 to 10 hours a day, for an average monthly salary of 992 reais. (ALIANÇA BIKE, 2019, p. 6).

Given the characteristics of subaltern work that mark the activity of on-demand workers, often faced with their first job experience, some of the evaluative and volitional aspects involved in the subjectivity of these young workers are worth discussing. In this connection, the survey led by Aliança Bike (2019) provides us with preliminary information about the on-demand worker's perceptions of the dilemmas and advantages of this kind of work. Thus, when asked about the "main advantages" of making deliveries (or "drops") using a bicycle and an app, 32 percent of respondents answered "quick employment, with no selection process"; 30 percent opted for "flexible hours" and 5 percent riposted, in spontaneous response mode, that the main advantage was "not having a boss" (ALIANÇA BIKE, 2019, p. 17).

On the other hand, in relation to the problems faced in their daily activities, 40 percent of respondents mentioned the lack of traffic safety, 30 percent the lack of adequate infrastructure, 19 percent the lack of public safety and 4 percent the lack of adequate traffic signs. "Time lost between calls" (31 percent) was the most frequently cited problem, followed by "fear of being mugged" (27 percent) and "fear of being mistaken for a mugger" (21 percent) (ALIANÇA BIKE, 2019, p. 22). In other words, the fear of social violence that goes hand in hand with informal street work is prominent in these predominantly black workers' perception of their job.

On the basis of this preliminary data, we decided to develop a case study using ethnographic research techniques in order to identify the guiding axes of the occupational experience lived by on-demand workers in the city of São Paulo. In order to do that, we explore their reflections on the relationship with digital applications in comparison with previous work experiences, in addition to seeking to discern future expectations regarding their occupational trajectories. This is an understudied area in the literature that has specialised in platform work.

In short, the work of on-demand workers brings to the fore the dilemmas of the platformisation of work and the importance of racial and generational gaps in the reconfiguration of the collective experience of these workers from the urban peripheries. Therefore, the main challenge is to understand the displacements in terms of representation of young people, looking in particular at the mismatches between the platform work and their own occupational expectations. This task goes hand in hand with the effort to grasp the current situation of informal labour in Brazil, by means of an analysis of the relationship between job precariousness and digital work platforms. To this end, during the field research carried out between January and October 2020, we maintained systematic contact with seven (out of a group of 20) young on-demand workers whose activities are concentrated in the Avenida Paulista area, the main thoroughfare in the city of São Paulo.

General profile of on-demand workers in our field research (2020)

Name (fictitious)	Age	App Company	Education Degree	Place of residence in the city of São Paulo
Francisco	26	IFood and Rappi	FHS[8]	Tucuruvi
Roberto	24	IFood	FHS	Ipiranga
Kleber	19	IFood and Rappi	FHS	Taboão da Serra
Lucas	22	IFood	FHS	Taboão da Serra
Higor	17	IFood	FHS	Taboão da Serra
Marcelo	18	IFood, Rappi and Uber Eats	FHS	Taboão da Serra
André	17	IFood	AHS[9]	Taboão da Serra

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The table above lists some of the on-demand workers contacted in 2020, both before the pandemic and after March 22, 2020, when a more restrictive quarantine was imposed in São Paulo. Our ethnographic approach to the work of these young men is exclusively focused on the Avenida Paulista area. The area has many restaurants in addition to commercial and residential buildings, and so the on-demand workers tend to gather in large numbers along the avenue. We observed and interviewed the workers at two in person meeting places: on the sidewalk in front of "Shopping Center 3" and at Praça Oswaldo Cruz (O.C. Square). The first location had, at least before the pandemic, one peculiarity: on this sidewalk, right on a corner, there was a municipal digital clock. The workers gathered around this clock, for there was a small opening in it, and when they unscrewed it they found out that it had an electrical socket. The Municipal Guard didn't stop them from recharging their cell phone. Every day some of them plugged in their charger cables, and they all stayed there at "the point" – as they called the place on the sidewalk of the shopping mall –, holding their smartphones, talking and waiting for new orders.[10]

You could observe a certain solidarity, having partly to do with sharing the use of the street clock. This feeling was extended to the sharing of meals, cigarettes, marijuana, and tips about work. All of them participated in a WhatsApp group, knew each other by name and nickname, and went to work at the same place almost every day. It was common for groups of 20 young people to sit in this place, waiting for an order to arrive.

---

8 Finished high school.

9 Attended high school.

10 On such in-person meeting places see, for example, Woodcock, 2021.

The fact that they wore similar clothes and used the same slang denoted a specific identity, collectively constructed from the cultural references of the city's periphery. In general, they wore bermuda shorts and the brands of T-shirts popular among young people from the peripheries (Quiksilver, Oakley, Hang Loose, Cyclone, etc.). They always wore branded trainers and caps, and often listened to funk music on their cell phones. This pattern of behaviour is typical of young people from the peripheral neighbourhoods of São Paulo.[11] Our immersion in field work allowed us to develop a fruitful connection with three young workers: Francisco, Roberto and Kleber.[12] The common factor among them is that they became on-demand workers after being fired from their outsourced jobs.

With Kleber, for example, we had long conversations at "the point" that allowed us to gather abundant information about his occupational trajectory, his experience as a deliveryman and his expectations for the future.[13] In 2018, he worked as a subcontractor in a metal work factory. His departure from the factory, he said, occurred at a time when he had fallen ill. When he returned to the factory after a period of medical leave, he was fired. This occurred three months before the interview and is what led him to start making deliveries. According to him, the work at the factory was heavy, because, despite his having being hired as a cleaning assistant, he "did a bit of everything", from cleaning the floor and walls of the place to carrying heavy materials, which he considered inappropriate.

When asked to compare the factory with the delivery service, Kleber was adamant. He complained about the factory's rigid, monotonous and predictable routine. He claimed not to see himself engaged in that kind of activity in the future. He attributed this incompatibility to the age of the workers with whom he shared his daily life, the pace of work, and occupational expectations. He also stated that as an outsourced worker he received less than as an on-demand worker. His salary at the metal work factory had been 1,200 reais, whereas in deliveries he was able to "make between 1,500 and 2,000 reais a month", delivering orders most often by bicycle, but also by scooter or even on foot. The workday was a little longer than the 9 hours he put in at the factory, but it was tolerable.

As for the delivery work, Kleber also highlighted the physical wear and tear and the insecurity of the job. He said that, although there was exposure to traffic, rain and sun, as well as the ever-present risk of accidents, all this was made up for by the freedom to set his own schedule, take moments of rest during the workday, and be able to choose where and how to work. This is an observation that emphasizes, despite all the limitations imposed by the companies, the

---

11 The fact that researcher Douglas Silva is young, black and from a peripheral area has obviously made it easier to have access to the group of on-demand workers, to the point that he was mistakenly believed to be one of the young workers, at least at the beginning of the field research. Whenever that happened, he mentioned the research project, which was generally well accepted by the group.

12 Respondents' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

13 When we first met Kleber, in January 2020, he was 19 years old and had been delivering for the IFood and Rappi apps for just under a year.

creative and relatively autonomous way in which young delivery workers appropriate the city and their own activity.[14]

At the factory, Kleber related, he was not even allowed to talk to his co-workers. If he arrived late to work, he was immediately given a warning. If he was absent due to illness, he was reprimanded by the management. He complained about authoritarian control over the workers. When faced with layoff at the factory, becoming a delivery rider emerged as a temporary activity that would bring in some income until he was able to start his own business.

It is possible to detect a degree of similarity with the case of Francisco, with whom we were in close contact in the period immediately before the pandemic. The event that led to the app-based delivery work was the loss of his outsourced job. He started making deliveries in early 2019 as a way to supplement his income, while working as a call centre operator. However, the company went out of business, and what had been a means of supplementing his income became an "emergency exit" to escape the reality of unemployment. Regarding deliveries, he pointed out that the main advantages were the ability to remain physically fit and the freedom to smoke spliffs, which he frequently did during deliveries, including while riding with other on-demand workers: "It's to relax my nerves (…) but I don't even get high anymore … It just relaxes me. I've smoked since I was 14 years old, right?" (Francisco, 26).

Making a comparison with telemarketing, he noted:

> Telemarketing is difficult, you see? (…). There is no way for you not to get tired, because there are services where you use your mind. For example, in telemarketing I used my mind a lot. I came home tired, stressed, my mind tired, you see? Here in the app I tire my body, bro, but that's all. I have a peaceful head and stuff. Super peaceful, you see? (...). Tomorrow, if I want to I will wake up in the morning and go. And it's not slave work, you see? Look, I'm making about 2,000 reais, give or take. (...). So bro, look, a guy who makes 2,000 reais pedaling and resting, doing everything I'm doing, even taking time off every second … Then there's this guy who works like Monday to Saturday, six hours a day, and earns 1,200 reais. That was me in telemarketing… (Francisco, 26).

Francisco's daily working hours used to vary. During one of our interviews, in early August 2020, he described his daily work in detail. In short, he turned on the application at five in the afternoon, when, according to him, the "rush hour" of orders begins, and turned it off at eleven at night, after his last drop. On that day, his income was just over 50 reais. The young man claimed to work between 6 and 9 hours a day. However, he pointed out that this was

---

14 In this sense, as Herr accurately underlines: "Bicycle couriers appropriate the city in a spontaneous and creative manner. Similar to Burawoy's (1979) workplace games, couriers play with urban spaces (KIDDER 2009). Going from A to B using a bicycle in a space that is designed for motor vehicles fosters the couriers' tacit knowledge. This tacit knowledge not only includes a mental map of the city, with bypasses, fastest routes and so forth, but also the handling of the bicycle in the city traffic. This affects the individual's construction of autonomy and thereby impacts how workers perceive their work relationship . They might feel autonomous in their performance, even though they are controlled and poorly paid . We can assume a similar social dynamic in platform food-delivery" (HERR, 2021, p. 43-44).

due to his experience as a deliveryman. When he started working exclusively in deliveries, he usually worked 12 hours without interruption, owing to the interval between one order and the next. Over time, Francisco learned the best times and routes, which increased his efficiency, and so reduced the number of hours spent cycling the streets. Thus, his experience taught him to manage his routine, working through the most advantageous hours and days to work. According to him, he was so pleased that his biggest dream was to be able to purchase a motorcycle in order to increase the pace of deliveries: "(…) when I have my own motorcycle, then it's something else, bro. Then, yes, it will be a whole new ball game" (Francisco, 26).

The opinions collected in the interviews with the two young workers about the relationship between formal employment and informal delivery work show a change in the expectations of young people in relation to their first job. Both highlighted greater flexibility, the feeling of freedom and, in the case of app-based work, the absence of despotic control. In addition to the increase in income, this is a discursive elaboration based on their past experience as outsourced workers submitted to managerial despotism and operating outside active trade union representation.

Thus, for example, Higor, a 17-year-old man interviewed at Largo da Batata on September 2020, said there were two main reasons why he began to make deliveries:

> I started here as soon as I finished the [young apprentice] contract with the [outsourced] company in February. I hadn't even made any friends at the company. So I was at home doing nothing, and I'm a person who, like, can't stand still, you know, you always have to be doing something, because otherwise I'm going to go crazy. Then I said bro, you can make some money on them deliveries: I'm going out into the street to make the deliveries and see what happens. Then, given that I was underage when I first started, I used someone else's [app ID] account, you know, legal age and all that, and always doing everything right, so as not to get the guy in trouble, or myself for that matter. Although it's like 'Ah you can't', but you have to do it, right? It's life. And so that's the only way to use the account, using somebody else's name. (…). But it wasn't out of necessity, no. (…). At home, everyone works, and I'm doing this to work also, so I don't have to depend on them. (...). It's to buy my things, for my independence. (Higor, 17 years old).

Similar reasons were given by Marcelo, an 18-year-old interviewed at Largo da Batata at approximately the same time. He had been working with digital apps since he was 17 years old and also needed to use the registration data of an adult family member.[15] When asked about his contribution to the family budget, he pointed out that, in the event of his becoming inactive, "everyone will pitch in", that is, his role in the household budget was ancillary. Thus, his motivation to continue making deliveries consisted, above all, in the possibility of "(…) buying my stuff, to buy this or that, so that's it, bro" (Marcelo, 18).

---

15 It is worth mentioning the curious fact that, in his family, "Everyone works like this, with an app, bro. My brother grinds away with a motorcycle app, my dad is an app driver too. [...] And my mother works as a cleaning lady at a gym." (Marcelo, 18).

Regarding the future, making enough to purchase a motorcycle is often referred to as a "dream" and is a sign of progress for bicyclists, a way to move up to "a higher position", as was reported by Abílio when he interviewed a young deliveryman from the city of Tiradentes region (ABÍLIO, 2020a, p. 589). The desire to progress in the app-based delivery sector is apparent in our interview with Francisco, quoted above. This is also the case with André, a 17-year old young man now entering the labour market that we interviewed in October 2020 at Largo da Batata, who, due to his age, also uses the registration information of a third party. Asked about his reasons for starting to work with these apps, he expressed his desire to buy a motorcycle: "I started because I have goals to accomplish, right? Like buying myself a motorcycle, move up a little in life, because work opportunities are getting difficult nowadays, right?" (André, 17).

Also worth mentioning is the case of Lucas, a 22-year-old black man who, in August 2020, had been making deliveries through James Delivery and IFood apps for eight months. Before that, he had worked as a waiter with a formal contract in a restaurant in the Itaim Bibi neighbourhood of São Paulo and made deliveries as a way to supplement his salary, which, according to him, was "(…) very low and barely enough to cover basics". When the restaurant closed because of the pandemic, the young man made delivery his main activity. At that time, Lucas had managed to buy a used motorcycle and was waiting to get his license to start making motorcycle deliveries:

> I always worked in the restaurant business, right? But then, my prospects with the deliveries seem so good, that I'm going to start investing. So I already have a motorcycle at home, which I bought myself, but I'm waiting to get my [driver's] license. (Lucas, 22).

What changed during the quarantine? The scoring system and "#BrequeDosApps"

With the arrival of the pandemic, you could see a sharp increase in the number of on-demand workers on the streets. The Shopping Center 3 "point" was always crowded. According to our interviewees, there was, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, an increase in the income of couriers, especially – given the increased demand for supermarket home deliveries – among those who worked with the Rappi app.[16] However, among those who usually worked with the IFood app, there was a drop in income, given the fact that this app is geared toward the meal delivery sector.

In April 2020, we stepped up our presence both at Praça Oswaldo Cruz and Shopping Center 3. At Praça Oswaldo Cruz, the benches had been turned into resting places for the on-demand workers. Many would take out their lunch boxes and, for that short period only, turn

---

16 When the app-based deliveryman is paid to go to the supermarket, make a purchase and deliver it to the customer's home, he gets a better pay.

off their cell phones, because, as many of them reported, refusing orders while online causes applications to block them temporarily. Some time in the first weeks of April, a deliveryman arrived at the square, got off his bike and sat down on the flowerbed with the others. He said that until that moment he had made close to 100 reais in deliveries. He added: "(...) I'm going to rest a little longer here and wait to complete the other 100 reais. (...). Rappi doesn't stop, bro. (...). I was talking to a friend who told me that he had just reached the weekly goal of 300 reais in just one day." Everyone in the circle started laughing, because they "made this amount in just one weekend". The delivery man who told the story complained that he had spent 70 reais on the bicycle that week. The pedal had broken off, and he had also bought a mudguard.

From what we could conclude from the interviews, a 20 reais grocery delivery is considered to be good. In addition, there are tips, which seem to be common. In this regard, the young couriers showed that there are different strategies for getting tips. Many claimed that wearing a mask, something relatively new in April 2020, increased tips. Others said that what counts most when it comes to tipping is being nice and friendly towards the customer: "Whenever I exchange ideas with a customer, he adds more [to the amount of the delivery]."

In relation to the two main applications, Rappi and IFood, many on-demand workers mentioned a drop in orders for meal delivery during the quarantine: "We're not getting anything, it's difficult for those who are only working with IFood". Roberto, 24, said that the number of delivery people working with Rappi had increased a lot, due to supermarket purchases, but for those using IFood and Uber Eats the situation had quickly deteriorated. He himself, who only worked with IFood, had to register with Rappi. However, approval "had not been given yet and was taking longer than usual". When we spoke with Roberto again, in mid-June 2020, about the variation in earnings during the pandemic, he told us about differences in how each app pays and how they manage the deliveries. Comparing IFood and Rappi, he pointed out that Rappi pays the deliverers better:

> Rappi pays well, and the mileage is low, you know? And IFood, man, it's 5.90, 6.90, 7.90 reais, you know? And [this] for you to do 3.2km, 4km. And I accept, you know, I don't make a fuss. Like I used to, being choosy. That's because I kept choosing Rappi's, huh, bro, saying it was only 1.8km... [...] Rappi, bro, is 5.9 reais for 500 meters... 7 reais for 1 km. In other words, 3 rides with Rappi took me as long as a single one with iFood, got it? (Roberto, 24 years old).

But, despite the higher average pay per mileage, after the early phase of the pandemic, back in April, Rappi introduced a scoring system that ranks on-demand workers in the app itself. According to Roberto, the scoring system was first set up to distribute the best journeys in the best locations among those who have the best scores, that is, those who have done more of the "worst" races, which are the most poorly paid and involve the longest distances. Grocery purchases are usually the ones that pay the best rates. However, with the scoring system, these

orders only go to the deliverers with the highest score. Despite the scoring system, several reports from deliverers showed that there was no dissatisfaction with Rappi, because the score was relatively easy to achieve. For Francisco, for example,

> (...) I needed to reach 57,000 points to work at Paulista. But it's quick, real quick. One drop would be, say, 5,000 points, you know? Then I got me like 8 drops or 7 drops and it goes up 37 thou, you know? These drops are quick. You've made 10 drops, it's going to be a nice total. (…). But they allowed me to work the hours I wanted. Like yesterday night I was working for IFood only, so I called to check on Rappi. So that at half past six they opened Rappi, that's the peak hour, just to make a couple of drops. At seven-thirty they closed the schedule thing again. (Francisco, 27 years old).

This comment shows the way in which Rappi's scoring system operates in accordance with the delivery demand of each region, thus conditioning both the volume of work and the average income of couriers. This characteristic of the delivery system had already been pointed out by the research report of the Interdisciplinary Labor Reform Studies and Monitoring Network (ABÍLIO *et al.,* 2020), in the context of the fluctuations of on-demand workers's income during the pandemic. The responses to 252 online questionnaires addressed to riders (bicycle and motorcycle couriers) from 26 Brazilian cities in the São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Recife and Curitiba regions showed that during the pandemic there was a decrease in income for those on-demand workers who put in up to 9 hours of work a day. However, those who worked more than 12 hours a day had an increase of around 30 percent. In other words, the scoring systems punished those who worked less while rewarding those who worked more.

The changes brought about by the pandemic were not limited to the new scoring system. Unexpectedly, on the 1st and 25th of July, 2020, the delivery riders surprised many press analysts by holding two nationwide protests, known as "#BrequeDosApps" (literally, "app break"). Although mobilisations of on-demand workers are frequent in countries like Spain and Colombia, these were Brazil's first national mobilisations. In about 10 Brazilian capitals, deliverers gathered in streets, squares and avenues, blocking roads in order to call public attention to the main item in their agenda: readjusting the rates paid by the app companies.

The success of the July 1 mobilisation – the July 26 protest was significantly smaller… – can be gauged by the fact that precarious workers, who had hitherto been largely invisible in the urban setting, despite their garish jackets and backpacks, attracted press attention and forced the app companies to respond to their claims. As to its impact in terms of the volume of deliveries, there are indications of a degree of awareness on the part of consumers that was reflected in a decrease in the number of orders throughout that day.

It is worth pointing out that these two mobilisations were carried out by the on-demand workers themselves, without any centralised coordination, and that they were felt all across the country. They were driven by informal networks, often formed in spite of the opposition of trade union leaders. It is no coincidence that one of the first discussions in the sector's WhatsApp chat

groups was to decide what to call the July 1 movement: "strike" (based on traditional forms of trade union mobilisation)? or "break" (signifying the blocking of deliveries)? The second option prevailed.

Many young riders who had been unable to participate actively in the movement on the days in question, due to travel difficulties or the specific locations where it took place, showed support to the movement's aims. This was the case with our interviewees, who, although they were not able to join the "motorcycle rally" of couriers from different parts of São Paulo, expressed support for the movement's main demand: to readjust rates. In the course of our conversations, however, they showed no interest in joining the sector's trade unions or the social movements that emerged during the bikers' mobilisations:

> I don't even know about any trade union, I have to do my gig" (Kleber); "I don't have time for that" (Higor); "I'd rather ride than mess with politics" (André); "I went there, in front of MASP [São Paulo Museum of Art], because the 'bros' want an [rate] increase, 'cause it's low, but I don't want to participate [in the Movement of anti-Fascist delivery workers] because it is takes too much of your time (Marcelo).

Final considerations

In summary, even when successful, such mobilisations show the political fragility inherent in the current moment of reconfiguration of collective identities and class interests. There is, in fact, a recurrent pattern in the mobilisations of the global precariat: enthusiasm for direct mobilisation, combined with apathy towards participation in collective organisations. After all, this is a collective experience that is still being formed and still under discussion, in the process of shaping and being shaped by neoliberal hegemony. Markedly inorganic in nature, the mobilisation of riders seems to be evolving in the midst of a language that often swings between the confidence that comes from direct action and the disbelief that progress may result in any kind of long-lasting victory.

It could hardly be any different: such an incipient and fragile political culture will never be able to thrive except within borders erected on the collapse of trust in traditional forms of class solidarity. Our field research will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of this fragility. Our premise is that the field organised according to the traditional forms of Fordist solidarity – trade union action in particular – and the relationship of these precarious workers to the sphere of labour rights have grown weaker over the last two decades as a result both of outsourcing and unemployment, to the point of being reduced to zero among younger workers.

From then on, a whole period began, marked by a normative conflict in which the old rules of labor protection were being deconstructed and no longer attract young workers and a new normativity has not yet been conquered. A social dynamic marked by the fragmentation of the initiatives and efforts of young workers is interrupted by outbreaks of rebellion with little

organizational results. Legitimate aspirations for freedom during the workday clash with a greater dependence on despotic decisions made by algorithmic clouds. And this is all happening at a time marked by high rates of unemployment and underemployment of work, which deepens the feeling that there are no alternatives to platformization. Accumulation, social reproduction, subordination, revolt and aspirations for self-determination collide in an unstable equilibrium.

In short, the class self-rebuilding that is currently underway is still at an embryonic stage, which is why relatively successful protests such as "#BrequeDosApps" are incapable of reversing today's lack of representation among delivery workers. This is a challenge that only a new coalition, one involving trade unions, urban social movements, public authorities, the labour courts, consumers and the workers themselves will be in a position to address in a positive way. The deepening of inequalities brought about by the current pandemic makes this task more urgent than ever.

References

ABÍLIO, Ludmila. Uberização: do empreendedorismo para o autogerenciamento subordinado. **Psicoperspectivas**, Valparaíso, v. 18, n. 3, p. 1-11, 2019. Disponível em: <https://www.andeangeology.cl/index.php/psicoperspectivas/article/viewFile/167 4/1079>. Acesso em: 5 dez. 2019.

ABÍLIO, Ludmila. Uberização e juventude periférica – Desigualdades, autogerenciamento e novas formas de controle do trabalho. **Novos Estudos CEBRAP**, São Paulo, v. 39, n. 3, p. 579-597, set./dez. 2020.

ABÍLIO, Ludmila. C *et al.* **Condições de trabalho em empresas de plataforma digital**: os entregadores por aplicativo durante a Covid-19. São Paulo: REMIR, 2020.

ADASCALITEI, Dragos; MORANO, Clemente. **Labour market reforms since the crisis**: drivers and consequences. Geneva: ILO, 2015.

ALIANÇA BIKE. **Pesquisa de perfil de entregadores ciclistas de aplicativo.** São Paulo: Aliança Bike, 2019.

BRAGA, Ruy. **A política do precariado**: do populismo à hegemonia lulista. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2012.

BURAWOY, Michael. **Manufacturing Consent.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

CARDOSO, Adalberto. **A construção da sociedade do trabalho no Brasil**: Uma investigação sobre a persistência secular das desigualdades. São Paulo: Independently Published, 2018.

GROHMANN, Rafael. Plataformização do trabalho: entre a datificação, a financeirização e a racionalidade neoliberal. **Revista Eptic**, Aracajú, v. 22, n. 1, p. 106-22, jan./abr. 2020.

GUIMARÃES, Nadya Araujo. Trajetórias inseguras, autonomização incerta: os jovens e o trabalho em mercados sob intensas transições ocupacionais. *In:* CAMARANO, Ana. (ed.) **Transições para a vida adulta ou vida adulta em transição**. Rio de Janeiro: IPEA, 2006. p. 171-197.

HERR, Benjamin. Delivering Food on Bikes: Between Machinic Subordination and Autonomy in the Algorithmic Workplace. *In:* MOORE, P. V.; WOODCOCK, Jamie. **Augmented Exploitation Artificial Intelligence, Automation and Work.** Londres: Pluto, 2021. p. 55-81.

HILL, Steven. **Raw Deal**: How the "Uber Economy" and Runaway Capitalism are Screwing American Workers. Nova Iorque: St. Martins Press, 2015.

HUWS, Ursula. **Reinventing the Welfare State**: Digital Platforms and Public Policies. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA. **Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios.**

Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/>. Acesso em: 25 jan. 2020.

INSTITUTO LOCOMOTIVA. **Compras por aplicativos têm alta de 30% durante pandemia**. São Paulo: Agência Brasil, 2020.

JORDAN, Miriam. Farmworkers, Mostly Undocumented, Become "Essential" during Pandemic. **New York Times**, Nova Iorque, 10 abr. 2020. Disponível e: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html>. Acesso em: 10 ago. 2020.

KARATASLY, Sahan Savas, KUMRAL, Sefika; SILVER, Beverly. A New Global Tide of Rising Social Protest? The Early Twenty-first Century in World Historical Perspective. *In:* **Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting (**as part of Mini-conference on Globalization in Uncertain Times). Baltimore, 2018.

KIDDER, Jeffrey L. Appropriating the City: Space, Theory, and Bike Messengers. **Theory & Society**, v. 38, n. 3, p. 307-328, 2006.

KOTECHA, Vivek. **The NHS's Workforce Shortages Illustrate the UK's Dependence on Migrant Labour**. Centre for Health and the Public Interest, 19 ju. 2019. Disponível em: <https://chpi.org.uk/blog/the-nhss-workforce-shortages-illustrate-the-uks-dependence-on-migrant-labour>. Acesso em: 20 ago. 2020.

MARTINS, Heloísa H. T. S. O jovem no mercado de trabalho. **Revista Brasileira de Educação**, São Paulo, v. 5-6, p. 96-109, maio/dez. 1997.

MARTINS, Heloísa H. T. S. O processo de reestruturação produtiva e o jovem trabalhador: conhecimento e participação. **Tempo Social - Rev. Sociol. USP,** São Paulo, v. 13, n. 2, p. 61-87, nov. 2001.

NUFFIELD TRUST. **One in Four Hospital Staff Born Outside the UK, New Nuffield Trust Analysis Reveals**. Londres, 4 dez. 2019. Disponível em: <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/one-in-four-hospital-staff-born-outside-the-uk-new-nuffield-trust-analysis-reveals>. Acesso em: 10 ago. 2020.

REDE BRASILEIRA de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar. **Inquérito Nacional sobre Insegurança Alimentar no Contexto da Pandemia da Covid-19 no Brasil**. São Paulo: Rede Penssan, 2021. Disponível em: <http://olheparaafome.com.br/>. Acesso em: 10 abr. 2021.

SRNICEK, Nick. **Platform Capitalism.** New York: Polity Press, 2017.

THOMPSON, Edward P. **A formação da classe operária inglesa**: a maldição de Adão. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2012.

VANDAELE, Kurt. **Will trade unions survive in the platform economy?** Emerging patterns of platform workers' collective voice and representation in Europe. Working Paper. n. 5. Bruxelas : European Trade Union Institute, 2018.