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ROADIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DIGITALISATION OF INEQUALITIES AND PRECARISATION IN FOOD COURIERS

Abstract

Food couriers working the evening and nighttime shifts are a special case of platform-mediated work, and an under-researched category of contracted workers in the digitalised platform economy. Drawing on a night ethnography, the paper focuses on the strategic role that migrant and non-migrant gig workers play in supporting communities in four cities: Bucharest and Oradea in Romania, and Cork in Ireland. London, the fourth locality, is the “glocturnal” city in Europe, with a long history of immigration and an exceptional status due to its high demand for migrant workers 24/7. This ethnographic account aims to impact the emerging field in the digitalisation of labour migration and contribute to debates on digitalisation of inequalities and precarisation of nightworkers.

Keywords: platform work, food couriers, night ethnography, inequalities, precarisation, Europe

List of abbreviations

CNCS – Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (National University Research Council)

COVID-19 / SARS-CoV-2 – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2

DLMP – Digitalisation of Labour and Migration Project

PNCDI – Planul Național de Cercetare, Dezvoltare și Inovare (National Research, Development and Innovation Plan)

UEFISCDI – Unitatea Executivă pentru Finanțarea Învățământului Superior, a Cercetării, Dezvoltării și Inovării (Executive Unit for the Financing of Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation)

VC – Venture Capitalist

Platform cooperativism insists that we'll only be able to address the myriad ills of the sharing economy—that is to say platform capitalism—by changing ownership, establishing democratic governance, and reinvigorating solidarity.

Trebor Scholz (2016). *Platform cooperativism*.

Introduction

In roughly over a decade, performing gigs in the “sharing economy” or “platform capitalism”, has become a world-wide phenomenon that promised much and delivered little for the workers managed by platform algorithms (Schor 2020, Scholz 2016). Venture Capitalists (VC), the progenitors of the sharing economy, hijacked its potential for bringing about “a new way [to] work”, i.e., it clamped down on the freedom to determine when one works and how much, and (mis-)classified work contracts of “independent contractors” (Schor 2020: 148; Zia *et al.*, 2021). Schor (2020) explains how Big Tech platforms extract large amounts of labour from gig workers through dependence, disempowerment, and inequality — in stark contrast to what was initially promised. Digital platforms consist of algorithms or mathematical computations that connect buyers with sellers via monetary transactions. “Platform” or “gig” workers often hired as “independent contractors” in many countries around the world, intermediate such transactions on piece-by-piece fee basis paid by platform companies. The “piece” in this waged labour form is called a “gig” in the sharing economy.

In the United States (US) owners of and investors in widely used platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Postmates, and Airbnb make fortunes on the back of as in “gig workers”, many of whom are partially or totally dependent on these “platform parasites” (Schor 2020: 71). For example, US-based gig drivers, would work up to sixty hours per week and not break even with Uber. Postmates couriers reflected on the \$2.50 they made per hour “against the millions and billions made by [the company’s] owners and investors” (Schor 2020: 10). Platform work is thus, shown to magnify independent contractors’ precarity by several degrees: reproducing (as opposed to disrupting) entrenched inequality, precarious work, involuntary unpaid work, and structural discrimination. Schor (2020) highlights how the hashtag #AirBnBWhileBlack went viral after a Harvard study found that African Americans were 16 percent more likely than “whites” to be turned down by Airbnb hosts. Whatever the gig or platform promises, the

only ones to prosper from digitalisation of inequalities are capitalism and VCs. In this context, the current investigation begins from the premise that “sharing economy” involves little if any, actual sharing.

BoltFood, Glovo, Panda, Uber or Freenow are digital platform transport operators in Romania which in a very short time have become entrenched in the everyday and night life, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. From the initial design stage of my research, I was interested to find out how “new” this “new way to work”, i.e. being your own boss, the freedom and flexibility that ‘alternative transport’ (Bolt) and food delivery (Glovo) companies were advertising was really the case for digital platform workers experienced. The preliminary questions remained focused on who is working the unsociable hour? Who are the people working day or night doing food deliveries? Who was more likely forced into such work? And ultimately, what types of inequalities do they experience? And what do platforms demand of the workers?

Heiner Heiland (2020: 34), argues that food delivery couriers (thereafter, “couriers”) have a special place in platform-based work, for their possibilities to “reinvigorate solidarities” (Scholz 2016). While this is unarguably the case when compared with atomised cloud-based workers in “crowdwork”, both couriers and ride hailers for Uber or Bolt are place-bound (DLMP 2022), i.e. the street, a banal place, is the concrete space where the gigs take place. Hence, it seems reasonable that in this ongoing study to adopt an overarching field perspective that hosts the common subjectification modes in workers earning from either type of platform (food dispatch or ride hailing), who report similar pressures resulting from the demand-based algorithmic management. Starting with most visible of the demands that platforms, such as Bolt, put on digital platform workers, the main ones that contribute to exacerbation of inequalities are: a) 24/7 availability – working 24 hours per day and 7 days per week for the platform they are hired for (not employed, as promised); and b) rating system that measures workers’ service quality, on the one hand, by the users/customers, and on the other, by the platforms. Some of these demands are specific to platform-mediated work, others can be found in domestic work.

Fields of research

This ongoing investigation studies the effects that digitalisation of inequalities has upon precarious “gig workers”. Digitalisation not only changes inequalities, but it also changes the reproduction of inequalities. Hence, specific attention is given in this investigation to the gendered-based inequalities and division of labour of women (randomly included here). Reportedly, women are absent from worker-cantered studies within the platform economy or sharing economy research agenda (James 2021). In a recent study by Howcroft & Moore (2018) just one female is included in the study on parcel delivery courier; and Cant (2020) disproportionately discusses experiences of 15 males and only one female in her research on Deliveroo Brighton. In the latest count by Al James (in Press), “women working in the gig economy” get mentioned less than 1 per cent in the 9.7M publications on digital labour. How is this possible? Why does this happen?

One explanation withstanding is that empirical exclusion is embedded in the long-standing construction of economy as ‘male’ and ‘women’ economic activities devalued or excluded from the ‘essential’ categories. Yet, “over 64 million women worldwide find gig work through digital labour platforms, with many motivated by widely touted ‘emancipatory’ platform possibilities for reconciling paid work and family” (James 2021). Therefore, to understand the relationship between gender and the ‘gig economy ...discrimination’ (Barzilay and Ben-David 2017: 427), some of the gender specific questions about platforming women night workers’ experiences will be addressed later.

Design

Drawing upon inequalities, precarity and migration scholarship combined with anthropological and political economy perspectives, this ethnographic project impacts the emerging field in the digitalisation of labour migration, and contributes to debates on digitalisation of inequalities and precarisation of workers. Methodologically, I collect the empirical material via the *Researcher’s Nightworkshop* method, which I developed in my previous research on migrant night labour in London’s New Spitalfields market (MacQuarie 2021). To achieve a near-lived and on-the-ground experience, I employ non-participant observation

and listening, and I combine the following tools to engage with the participants: *schmoozing* or informal conversations with participants, following Jansen and Driessen's (2013) approach to the "hard work of small talk"; audio-video recording in the locations where wo/men (randomly selected for this piece) work – wait for orders or chat with other workers, or entering the site (dark kitchen or depo); *night walking* (with or without interviewing) along the streets where the outlets or depots are located; and *cyber-notes* (pedometer Pacer app to record distances and routes) – some of which I will refer to later in this paper

Out on the streets, day or night, the data collection methods included non-participant observations or "hanging out and doing stuff"; "schmoozing" with Bolt or Uber drivers, either as a customer or as an observer in restaurants or "waiting areas". "Doing the hard work of small talk" or having informal conversations with drivers or couriers (Jensen and Driessen 2013), is very useful to ethnographers when seeking for participants. I also collected ethnographic material via audio and video recordings. In-person and online, semi-structured interviews were carried out with couriers in all three cities, with activists and researchers of platform labour and migration. Except for one participant, all names have been anonymised to preserve their confidentiality.

More importantly, this ethnographic account offers thick descriptions that shift from the immediate, tangible, and on-the-ground life experiences, to the intangible, rendered as palpable relationships between humans and machines to make meaningful, but general claims about a culture, society, and human life more broadly (Geertz, 1973). Specifically, the mini-"impressionistic portraits" randomly selected here, offer high possibilities to connect through the particular of the "narratives of the immediate" (Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle 2007: 76-95), to the larger issues concerning the relationship between humans and algorithms. In fact, the people who wield the algorithm managers are responsible for the daily and nightly experiences of precarity and inequalities of those at the receiving end – riders who are "totally or partially dependent on these platforms" (Schor 2020). Building on the scaffolding made of empirical insights, this bottom-up approach will lead to thematical analysis of gendered, invisibilised precariousness explored in the next phases of the investigation.

Analytically, in my paper I experiment with a novel perspective that grasps platform work as contingent to forms of work (e.g., domestic work or street-based day or night labour), that historically have been gendered,

and by and large performed by high segments of migrant populations arriving in countries with unequally distributed labour systems. Hence, in the initial phase of this investigation, I aimed to study platform-mediated workers in Romania from a relational perspective, i.e. to approach the IT sector as part of a larger and unequal labour system whereby couriers are essential in supporting the IT. Romania is a country where “the majority of the population still has problems achieving a decent minimum standard of living”, and every youth in the country desires to become an IT worker.¹ While not an exceptional player in the Eastern European IT landscape, following the Czech Republic, Romania is nonetheless an important player, leading ahead of Poland, Bulgaria, and Croatia, in terms of productivity and size of the sector. Yet, the Romanian IT sector relies on the multiplication of underpaid precarious labour in platform work via such support services, whereby in this larger and unequal labour system IT is celebrated, and the workers in other sectors of the Romanian economy remain marginal and invisible. Whereas the Romanian government proudly declared that “IT was the darling of the Romanian economy and the triumphant sector in the pandemic that hit in the first half of 2020”², there was no mention about the essential role that gig workers had during the pandemic in support of the entire Romanian nation under the lockdown.

As my fieldwork developed, I became acutely aware that couriers supported to great degree the entire Romanian society and not only the Romanian IT sector. Thus, my objectives broadened to capture those gig workers offering transport of persons (e.g., Uber or Bolt drivers) and food delivery services offered by platform companies (e.g., Deliveroo, Glovo, Panda or Tazz). As such, while I still consider the initial design and framing pertinent for this inquiry, given the methodological challenges (e.g., limited fieldwork conditions) to access opened locations in the late evenings or at night (curfew started at 22:00 during these latter lockdown phases of the pandemic), and to reach out to migrant riders on the streets of “smart cities” in Romania, I was forced to shift my focus, not only in terms of framing the research, but also in terms of locations and streets more abundant in migration histories (such as Cork, in Ireland, and London in the UK).

Food delivery is a special case of platform mediated work in the so-called sharing economy. Couriers have become visible in the public eye during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic context has brought to surface the reality of the ‘under-belly’ workers who became essential in supporting entire societies during this health crisis. Despite being exposed to health risks, couriers painstakingly carried out their work to

support the rest of the (less vulnerable) populations immobile in their own homes. During the two years of the pandemic everyone became more and more dependent on foods delivered fast to their doors, and as such the numbers of couriers at Deliveroo, Glovo, JustEat (or Takeaways), Panda and UberEats grew exponentially (Popan 2021). Consequently, my research advances three key messages:

a) platform mediated work offers new kinds of support to dependent food couriers, but only to merely hang on at the edges of the sharing economy;

b) the digitalisation of work through platform algorithms only exacerbates the existing inequalities through precarisation of working conditions and

c) the streets provide the couriers with both a workplace and space, yet they expose the symptoms of the digitalised inequalities experienced by them in terms of health inequities and lack of social worth.

More broadly, therefore, this study will contribute to the understanding of contemporary capitalism that attempts to discipline and extract labour from what may be called disposable bodies – this is a hugely important aspect of capitalism. This investigation builds on my previous anthropological work on capitalism and manual labour in London's food chain distribution. Then, my analysis focused on the mechanisms of destruction through labour extraction from the workers at night, in a wholesale market of fruits and vegetables, at the New Spitalfields market in East London (MacQuarie 2018). Now, the focus is on couriers, the next node in the food chain distribution, after grocery producers and other food products, the wholesale traders, and dispatchers. In this vein, today's capitalist working environment dispossesses the workers of their bodily and social capital contributing to their diminishing sense of social worth, lack of respect and fairness, and unfair allocation of resources. In short, increasing structural inequalities. For this broader scope a set of questions are to be asked: What does it mean to be a deliverer or 'carrier' when your manager is applies an algorithm that monitors your every move? And is it justifiable for the algorithms to rationalise decisions based on bad / good ratings to exclude workers off the platform or to extract maximum amount of labour from their exhausted bodies?

Boarding for Fieldwork

Once upon a time in Oradea

I boarded for fieldwork in Romania, while the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing measures were still in place throughout 2021 and early 2022 (e.g., lockdowns and curfews). As social distancing rules relaxed and travel was permitted again, I boarded a plane flying from Bucharest in southern Romania to Oradea, a city at Romania's western border. Bolt transport company registered its first hired drivers in Oradea, in July 2021. Like other parasite platform companies making unfulfilling promises to those onboarding, its activity grew exponentially and so the number of drivers, especially those "totally or partially dependent" of platform companies like Bolt (Schor 2020). Regardless the label, digital platform or gig worker or Ride hailer, are rented drivers on individual contracts with the platform company.

Drivers like Sara, are rented to drive customers travelling from A to B. One July morning, and days after Bolt opened for business in Oradea, I hired Sara to take a colleague and myself to a village nearby Oradea. As a Bolt customer, you hire the driver and not the car. As a Bolt customer renting Sara's service in Oradea, I travelled in her car to the villages nearby and parts of Oradea city where centres with adults with disabilities were placed. I was inspecting these centres for another project. This was my first encounter with a female driver offering "alternative transport". As I explained to Sara about my research plans, she agreed to participate in the study. After leaving Oradea we kept in contact over the phone. She has sent me several video materials, photographs, and screenshots of her Bolt application that she used to communicate with the Bolt platform and her customers. This is Sara's story as Bolt driver.

Sara, a woman in her 50s, appears pleasant and in control of her vehicle in the busy morning traffic. Between 2002-2020, Sara operated a "people transport" company together with her late husband. They transported Romanian migrant workers from Oradea, Romania to Milano, Italy on 15-16h journey. In the early part of 2020, when Sara's husband died, the company was handed over to their son. Her son, his wife and her grandchild leave separately, but Sara is not allowed to visit her grandchild after having had several altercations with her daughter-in-law. Instead, she drives to visit her 80 years old mother once a week in a nearby village. In July 2021, Sara was forced by her new circumstances to find alternative ways of living. Grieving for her late husband, and out of work, Sara learns

from her mechanic that someone in town is hiring new drivers. That is how Sara met John who registered her as a driver on his fleet approved under Bolt requirements.

Bolt drivers, like Sara offer an alternative method of transporting between taxing and car renting. The drivers register their car and if they pass the 45-point test by Bolt, they begin working as registered Bolt drivers, pay all the expenses needed to maintain his/her car and tax contributions. As a third party in this agreement, Bolt offers good discounts at the beginning to attract customers. For example, my first trips with Sara attracted me 20% discount per trip for being a new customer with Bolt; Sara received the full fee for the ride independent of my discount; Bolt deducted its 20% cut from Sara's earnings, for each ride we took. Each party seems happy. In this arrangement there is a hidden party. We call him John. In real terms, John takes 10% from Sara's earnings, deducted from her total number of rides at the end of each week. Bolt took 20% of Sara's earnings. From what was left, Sara needed to fuel up her car, support any immediate car expenses to keep the car on the road (e.g., car tax, road tax, insurance, tolls). No digital platform owns cars, bikes or restaurants. Yet, these companies control the people's ways to work, while the contracted workers, like Sara, provide their own goods – cars, push bikes or mopeds. Despite the top-down set of relationships between platforms and workers, the latter benefit from this kind of new support – digital training, payment, and opportunity to shape their income (Zia *et al.* 2021). As in Sara's experience, the transition she makes from long-route driver of a mini-bus transporting workers to Italy, to short rides in Oradea, has its advantages:

Bolt is easier compared to transporting passengers on long distance journeys, like I used to do. And I used to load my mind with all those stories that people freely off loaded during the 15-16h journey. The Bolt trips are short. Many young people use it and they're not into chit-chatting. I never had a customer older than 50. The young ones prefer Bolt because it's not like taxi. When they call the driver, they see the price. Unlike with taxi. They see the price, if they like it, they confirm the ride. Others said that prices for Bolt are the same as the usual taxi. At first Bolt was cheaper with 20% to 30% cheaper than your usual taxi fare.

Sara says, however, that John (the middle man) told her after four months that “both, my company and you will be fined by ITM (Inspekția Muncii),

the regulatory body of labour in Romania, if you work over the 4h. And we can't risk that. "In the first few weeks," Sara explains, "I could work as many hours as I wanted, but now I'm limited to 4h per day and maximum 24h per week. And this week, after working 4 months part of his fleet he tells me we need to stop next week. I don't know anymore..."

During one of our trips, Sara tells me, "I picked one male customer earlier, and I gave him my usual: Hello! He says, "do we know each other?" No, I say, but that's how I start my ride greeting everyone. He says, I thought you know me because I'm also a Bolt driver. So, this one owns his own fleet in Cluj. He said that I should open a SRL and work for him. So, I was blocked and did not know what to say. I don't understand why John told me I must stop working for him, but this guy says that I could work for him. Sara, it turns out, picked up a fleet owner from Cluj-Napoca (Cluj, thereafter). Sara says that he taught her "how she should open her own limited company and work for him". So, I was blocked and did not know what to say. I don't understand why John told me I must stop working for him, but this guy says that I could work for him." In November 2021, Sara's situation with her intermediary fleet owner she was registered with, changed even further. She explains:

My feeling is that if I open a limited company (SRL), I will [again] go through middle men like John and this other guy with the fleet in Cluj. They take their cut and it's still not OK. But, if I could work on my own (without an intermediary), that would be the best. These middle men and their fleets live on our backs. This guy from Cluj told me that he has even more people in his fleet than John, which is also confusing for me as John I must stop working for him. In the end, this guy comes here to recruit drivers from Oradea to work for him on his fleet registered in Cluj. I'll investigate how to obtain that code – CAEN – to see how I can start on my own so I really feel I am my own boss like before.

However, the capitalist adage, *compete or die striving*, is transformed by the platform algorithm into "permanent tracking and rating of work" of gaming, e.g., each task is a competition, each game is a prize.³ Put differently, the algorithms rate the workers' performance, and customers rate drivers and couriers independently. Mostly, the rating decides the fate of the workers resulting in unfair dismissals by the platforms without giving the worker the rights to appeal. On some occasions, Sara explains:

One customer cancelled her trip because she had to pay more than it showed on the app at the pick-up point. She gave me a bad rating. My rating went down from 5 to 4.5. Although it was not my fault – not the fault of the driver, but the app. The Bolt application picked a GPS route that was more expensive for the client. But I got the poor rating, not the Bolt app.

And in another scenario, Sara was to blame too because:

This customer complained that the price was so high; when there's demand, the algorithm raises the price of the same route. One said to me today that he can only pay by card and he's without options that's why he needs to ride with me, otherwise he would not, because the prices have gone up generally.

There is an agreement among the researchers like Juliet Schor (2020), who argue that sharing platforms can build bridges and not only walls. Yet it is up to the people creating and using these technologies to imbue them with these values. As one of her respondents says, "It's not the tool, it's the person that wields it, I promise" (p. 174).

Remote ethnography

After one month, I left Oradea, but I continued the conversation with Sara over the phone and the messaging service WhatsApp, to follow her real-time experiences and progress with her application as independent driver, and other entrepreneurial activities. Once established the WhatsApp communication, I was able to receive up-to-date information from Sara. This included her routes, prices, short films of the streets on the way to her customers – but never images or conversations with her customers. Doing the ethnography remotely, at times, allowed me to interact with my participant in real time. One day, when Sara's Bolt display was not red (signifying high demand in her area), we began talking about her experiences transporting customers during the pandemic. *Has this pandemic affected your relationships with the customers?* I ask her, this time over the phone.

No, I haven't had any problems. But I didn't have any long rides either. This makes it a bit simpler because I don't have the customers sitting in my car for long time. On average the ride takes about 10min or less. But

of course, the time I need to get to the customer is not paid. I take trips on a 2km radius. If a trip comes up 5km away from where I am, I refuse it. Working for the Bolt platform is easier compared to long distance transport of passengers that I used to do for many years.

Just like much of the life in Romania, was still on hold or reduced to minimal business activities due to lockdowns, so was my fieldwork reduced to online research or telephone conversations with Sara when I tried to learn more about her life behind the steering wheel. I asked her once: *can you tell me what happens when you're behind the wheel and you need the toilet?* Sara laughs and says:

It's a bit tricky. When I need the toilet... I ask the client, are you in a rush? If they say, yes, then I go on and wait till I finish the ride. If they say no, then I say that I really need to stop for toilet. Most say that it's OK. I used to stop for example, at Kaufland (a supermarket). But I can't anymore. They won't let us now unless we show the COVID certificate. I didn't do the vaccine. I wanted to wait and see. I did also an antibodies test, and I have plenty. So, I'll wait a little longer to get the vaccine. ... So, I now stop at petrol stations on the way to the customer's destination.

So, has the pandemic changed your way of work?

I'm not afraid. I wear the mask all the time. I have sanitiser all the time. For example, one customer said, she does not have the mask, so I gave a spare one. I have spare ones on me all the time. You know, just so things work.

What about your relationships with the customers during this pandemic? Have these been affected in anyway, I asked Sara?

No, I haven't had any problems. But I didn't have any long rides either. This makes it a bit simpler because I don't have the customers sitting in my car for long time. On average the ride takes about 10min or less. But of course, the time I need to get to the customer is not paid. I take trips on a 2km radius. If a trip comes up 5km away from where I am and the cost of the trip is small, I refuse it. So, it's between 5 -10 min journey. Look, this week, I picked up one ride after another ... so it worked out about 4 trips an hour. Five is rare – it means the city traffic needs to be quiet.

During ordinary times too, Sara faces occurred situations that could affect her rating. In the end, it is the driver who will be penalised, not the user/customer. She insists to share this one-time event. “Let me tell you what happened today”:

I went to pick up a girl. When I get there, I see a woman, but she is not looking at me. I let the customer know in the app that I arrived. She replies: ‘I am in the car’. I say, how come you’re in the car, when there’s no one in my car. I just arrived. The woman asks the driver that picked her up how is that possible? It turns out that the driver picked up the wrong customer. There were two orders for Bolt on the same street. My customer went into the wrong car because she did not check the number plate. While I am on the phone, she’s asking the driver: did you have an order for this address? And the driver says, yes, I did. Do you go to a wedding? She says no, I am going to Transylvania Street. At that point the driver turns around and drops my customer and picks up his customer. The woman was laughing, but I said to her, I don’t find it funny because you jumped into another car without checking the number plate. I should have let you go to the end of that trip, outside of town and see how you would like to come back to town from there and then see if it was still amusing. I got a bit annoyed here... Later, I posted in the group, to ask if it other drivers faced this situation – your customer to be picked up by another driver - but no one else had been in this situation before. I felt a bit embarrassed because I thought no one will believe me.

You’ve been telling me about your work in the day, but *do you work at night?*

No, we don’t get higher rates on the night shift, but there are areas where the demand is higher like in Nufărul district. The screen gets red, and colleagues say let’s go there. When we get the red code displayed on the Bolt device’s screen it means that in certain areas there is a high demand for drivers.

Sara’s story brings to the fore another type of parasites, the intermediaries or middlemen, those who get a percentage of workers’ earnings. They are the hidden part of this relationship between the platform, the worker and the customer. After all, Sara is not really her own boss, she can’t work as and when she likes, and she doesn’t get all her earnings. For me, her story opened a new direction of investigation on the functioning of the adjacent

sectors, like the food dispatch, that supported not only the IT sector in Romania, but the whole nation. Instead of concluding here with Sara's story, I reiterate Schor's (2020) proposal to reboot the sharing economy with new platform algorithms offering a fairer share to those marginalised workers like Sara. But the incorporation and activation of these values depends on the people who create and use these technologies. It is with the people who program the algorithms that change begins.

Intermediaries like John resemble less of bridges and more of parasites, taking shares to the disadvantage of platform drivers, and in favour of "parasite corporations", the only ones prospering from digitalisation of inequalities. Therefore, only a legislative overhaul in countries on the semi-periphery of globalisation could turn the work law to work in favour of "alternative transport". From a political economy perspective, this would mean that work laws would stall reproduction of inequalities, thus changing the way to work on digital platforms, which so far have "create[d] markets by exerting control over workers while denying these workers basic employment rights" (Barns, 2019). Political will would not only restore the gap between the promises and realities in platform work, but more importantly it would demonstrate that digital platform workers, otherwise hailed as "key" or "essential" workers would remain so, not only during crisis but also in ordinary times. However, there is an altogether different answer to preventing the widening of digital inequalities. In the eyes of a well-known Bucharest-based, Romanian political theatre director and academic (David Schwartz), who explains that unions might have the answer in their pocket (but is there anyone ready to listen?). In the next section, on the special case of couriers in platform mediated work, David Schwartz's position indicates that multiplicities are marked by digitalisation of inequalities exacerbated in different ways across borders whether in London, a global city, or Bucharest at the margin of globalisation.

On-the-ground ethnography in Bucharest

Figure 1. Nightscoping in Bucharest

This screenshot was taken from the mobile app Pacer © Pedometer application. It shows the nightwalking distance, average speed, duration. The 15.3 km is the equivalent of 19,397 steps took under 5 hours. An average walker registered with this mobile app takes 10,000 steps in a day.

Around January 2022, as less restrictive measures of social distancing were being introduced, this context allowed me to do nightscoping in Bucharest in the Romanian capital. The first nightwalking I took in Bucharest was on the 5th January 2022 and entailed 15.3 km of walking from 150 Mihalache Boulevard to 1 Calea Victoriei and back. During the 4 hour and 26 minutes return trip I took photographs of various sites, some were open challenging the lockdown regulations, while those in the hospitality sector being hit the hardest, were shut or working to limited

capacity. During nightscoping on streets of Bucharest, I encountered night workers soldering tram lines and saw messages on the doors of undertakers “open 24/7”. As per Figure 1 above, The Pacer Pedometer app monitored my nightwalk and measured the distance by the number of steps (19,397) and a loss of 1456 calories, at an average speed of 3.4 km per hour.

Digital work landscape is rapidly changing in Romanian “siliconised cities” like Cluj or Bucharest (McEnroy 2019), and more migrant food carriers can be seen on the streets of these smart cities (Popan 2021). However, during the pandemic one could hardly find any migrants on these streets, unless they were African students in Romanian universities visible on the streets of Cluj, or Chinese and Sri Lankan workers on construction sites, hardly visible behind the buses’ windows. The latter, manual workers are provided private modes of transport. Thus, they can be seen on the public roads in buses provided by the work agencies that employ them due to lack of local labour force. On the contrary, most riders on scooters flood the streets and pavements with a metallic green, red, yellow, orange or black boxes hanging on their backs taking shortcuts to clock the delivery within the promised time by the algorithms. While still affected by lockdown-inflicted immobility, I roamed the streets in the late evenings and at night to search for couriers working for Glovo, Panda or Takeaways (i.e., JustEat).

Moreover, in the last week of February 2022, the news that Russia invaded Ukraine has put a stop to ordinary life, and what followed ended many lives. The ukrainians lucky enough to flee their homeland found refuge in Romania, which became a transit country for many continuing to travel as far away as possible from the war. As the whole world became gripped by this unfortunate and sad event, business never returned to the “usual” because of the pandemic, and now (at the time of writing) because of the war in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, the advent of the “fourth industrialisation” or digitalisation of work has not, artificial intelligence may ease the workers’ lives, as David Schwartz, a political theatre director of Bucharest Dispatch, explains,

The Marxist vision, that industrialisation, digitalisation and [sooner or later] artificial intelligence will ease the life of workers, turns out to be a dystopic reality. Up to a point, perhaps it was true. The problem is who weilds the machine. More, in whose interest – who is it for? Corporates? If it is [for the interest of the latter], then it will definitely lead to exploitation. I have no doubts. It is happening. And it less and less veridic to think that machines will ease the lives of workers.

Even personally, say the application system that I use to apply for funding is based on digital platforms. We work three times more than when we did it on paper. The platforms breakdown. No one knows how to solve it. IT is outsourced. No one can reach out to the IT helpdesk. It's a bureaucratic nightmare. This shows that digitalisation does not necessarily mean progress or better life.

More, I did interviews with couriers for my show "Bucuresti Livrator" (Bucharest Dispatcher). I found out that their greatest nightmare is communication with platforms, like Glovo [widely operates Romania]. You cannot reach anyone unless it's to do with the order. It's a bit like dealing with the banks. When they call you, they find you immediately. When you call them, you wait for hours and cannot resolve the issue.

Interestingly, David Schwartz explains,

I don't know what was promised by the sharing economy VCs in the West. But in Romania, only the horror version of platform work arrived. For example, Glovo workers told me that when they start, they know it's going to make their lives miserable. Only the naive and the young take it lightly. Why?

Because Glovo subcontracts local firms. Many couriers start thinking they will open their own company. They have entrepreneurial dreams, if you think about it. They start with an illusion to escape their poverty. The more experienced take it as an emergency solution to make ends meet. But the rest have very low expectations.

Consistent with worker-centre studies on "women working in the gig economy" (Howcroft 2018; Cant 2020; James in press), David Schwartz also found that:

The number of women working on platforms grow. Slowly, their numbers grow, as I see them on the street. I only interviewed two women.

Furthermore, in line with my fieldwork observations in Oradea and Bucharest, David Schwartz also admits that there are very few migrants delivering food for platforms like Glovo or Panda.

There are many students; many are doing this only to complete their income; semi-dependent, as many are helped by families.

For Bucharest Dispatcher, I did not speak to migrants as my team included only white Romanians. The theatre wouldn't allow me to take

on collaborators. So, I could not explore this. But I see more and more migrants on the street.

An interesting and somewhat expected effect triggered by platform work promises is the growing rural-urban or internal work migration, which has grown exponentially during the pandemic. As David Schwartz found to be the case:

There are about 50% of the couriers who come by vans from the rural areas. For example, one came by train. They put the bike on the train, travel 2h by train and in the evening travel back to their village. For these people 2-3K RON is a lot. They could not make this money somewhere else.

Worthy to note, explains David Schwartz,

The couriers travelling from the nearby villages, perhaps think that their children could go to school or even high school if they make 3,000 RON⁴. We don't know that for sure. We need some sociological studies to collect this kind of evidence [to explain this surge in rural-urban labour migration].

David Schwartz makes the poignant observation that among the Glovo workers, "there are many of old age. Some are even pensioners. Some are working in security. And they complete earnings with [food] deliveries." Continuing, David Schwartz, draws parallels between the poor working conditions of platform workers, and the experiences of workers in supermarkets. Drawing from another political play from his repertoire, "Lucrător Universal" (Universal Worker), David Schwartz says that:

I took lots of interviews with workers and union reps. Also, with managers from Carrefour, Metro and Mega Image. The latter is described in worst terms by the employees I interviewed. Mega Image pays 70% less than Carrefour and has an anti-sindicate policy like Auchan). This was to compare conditions of work between the two companies.

First, explains David Schwartz:

The working conditions are terrible in supermarkets like Carrefour, Lidl or Auchan. For example, Lidl in Bucharest, you don't know where you work tomorrow. Tomorrow you might start in Pantelimon. The morning

after in Pipera and finish a late shift Voluntari, and so on. They don't know how many hours work where. As long as the hours mount to 40h, Lidl is within the contract terms. You also do not have an idea what work you'll be doing. You could carry pallets in one shop, be a cashier in the next or sweep floors.

Secondly, David Schwartz explains further:

Workers who do not belong to a union are on higher, slightly higher salaries but working conditions are inhumane. Auchan has an anti-sindicate view, declared openly. For example, it destructed the union of a food store chain, Real which had 3000 union members. The Lucrator Universal was about that exactly. How this happened! Dismantling a union. The life as a supermarket worker, working conditions and union role.

Thirdly, returning to the topic at stake, and on the backdrop of what David Schwartz has just shared about supermarket workers, I asked him if we can even consider *collective action among couriers* as a tool for resistance? In his reply, there was very little hope, if support from the union was not considered, because:

Unions are the last barrier in the face of capitalism (as no political parties exist yet [to take on the capitalists], and there are no chances for me to make one, I sought to engage with Unions. Unions are the source of resistance. Despite the [internal] problems, some corrupted and so on. ... I went to collaborate with one union. One Union director in the commerce sector, where salaries are miserable and working conditions are miserable, says that one way for the [platform] workers to ensure they have better working conditions is to take on only Union-backed jobs.

Concluding, David Schwartz reflectively and poignantly puts across a moment of repose:

We spend between a third or half of our lives at work. But we do not talk or watch films or plays about work. Love or home occupies less time in our lives, than we might think. I would like to show the public what happens at work. No matter what the profession or the job role.

Strikingly, the activist and political theatre director's poignant remark, raises awareness of the importance of time (with its (ine-)qualities) spent

in work, and provokes his public to think around the challenges and (dis-) pleasures of experienced by many while spending such big amount of time at work, and in particular of the precarious working conditions of those shelving our food in supermarkets or delivering the food to our doors, rain or shine. In the same vein, this paper invites social scientists researching problems with platform mediated work and inequalities surrounding this fast-changing field to look beyond the symptoms of inequalities noticeable on the street, to envision a future sharing economy that could improve the livelihoods of workers through a new, refreshing, re-booting approach to digital platform labour.

In Schor's (2020) words, however, her study's most significant and provocative intervention points at the sharing economy's democratic possibilities. The original dream of offering "a new way [to] work" can be a reality, Schor argues. Schor says that we can turn losers (workers) into winners, if we put the platforms into the hands of their users and workers via "platform cooperativism," a concept formulated by Trebor Scholz (2016). Schor says further, that "if we swap out the owners and investors and give their shares to workers" (Schor 2020, p. 148), then the "promise of a new way to work" can be realized because "cooperatives allow members to take control of their own work lives, with policy determined by democratic policies" (Schor 2020, p. 169). By this, Schor means that the future can be one of "democratic sharing."

Boarding for fieldwork in Cork (Ireland) via London

Around April 2022, international travel became possible again. I was able once again, to board a flight for Cork via London, to complete a Visiting Fellowship in Ireland. Cork and London became my next field sites. In each of these locations, I observed similar patterns in platform mediated work to the ones I knew in Oradea or Bucharest. The similar stories of precarious working conditions and inequalities that begun to surface offered more ground to infer that regardless which side of the channel I was, I became acutely aware that inequalities spread along the streets and in the public eye and across borders. Drawing on mounting evidence from various disciplines in the emerging field of digitalisation of labour and migration, the next section assesses the conclusions reached by social scientists researching in these areas.

Food dispatch, a special case in the sharing economy

Heiland (2020, p. 34) argues that platform mediated food delivery labour is a special case of platform labour. Unlike the online “crowdwork” or “microtasking” work that is mostly hidden, couriers are visible in the public and media, and thus spatial fragmentation is limited. Also, because couriers meet and talk during the waiting time at the frequented restaurants and while waiting to pick up orders made at the “ghost kitchens” or “dark stores”, i.e., warehouses set up by one of the largest food delivery platforms, Deliveroo. Despite the massive investments of these platform parasites, in the technology of micro-management and control on the ground by their algorithms, precarious workers can act solidarity that goes beyond advice and offers potentiality for “mutual urbanism” on the street (Hall, 2021), and during the long and unbearable weighting of waiting or as reported by other scholars in “painstaking immobilities” (Urry, 2017, in Popan 2021).

The majority of food delivery riders flooding the streets in developed countries are migrants. Their “precarious presence” in Suzanne Hall’s (2021) view is one of the “markers of marginalisation”, i.e., migrants live and work at the “edge territories” of cities. On the basis that “histories of migration landings in urban peripheries, and immersions in a fragmented labour market intersect to shape the marginal condition” (Hall 2021, p. 116), the focus of this section is to highlight the unheroic resistance of street-based couriers in the face of digitalisation of inequalities. Put differently, this article explains why food couriers’ case makes one “notice precarity differently” through assessment of lack of access to social, economic protection from the platforms, and diminished sense of self-worth and retribution by the “mainstream” society for the work they carry out during chronic and ordinary times (Precarity Lab 2018).

I met Johnathan, a courier from Brazil with Italian passport in a MacDonalds restaurant in South East London. He was waiting for an order. I was waiting for the right moment to speak to a migrant courier. Johnathan is in hi 30s, and out on his second shift, delivering food at night. “I work in two jobs”, says Johnathan.

In the morning, I prepare the bakery products for the restaurant. In the afternoons and late into the evenings, I deliver for Uber Eats or Deliveroo. ... Look, it's past midnight and I'm still in this McDonalds waiting for an order. It's been an hour since we spoke and [I'm] still waiting. I don't work [on] Sundays. That's for my family. But I am away from the family most days.

This way, it pays the bills. ... I buy my own insurance and I pay for the moped insurance. These companies don't pay anything for us.

Johnathan and other platform mediated food delivery workers are a “precarious presence” on the streets. Moreover, the streets are sites “from which to analyse [capitalism’s] violence and see varied social and economic reconfigurations.” The street, one of the most banal places, is where “encounters with capitalism” take place daily nightly in plain sight (Achille Mbembe, in Hall 2021).

Put different, these workers are not hidden behind factory walls or in warehouses. Yet, despite being so visible on the streets they seem to remain absent for the authorities, unless immigration raids are executed, as it has been the case in several cities in the UK. How can one not notice inequality from the side or edges of the street when it is so blatantly visible, yet ‘unnoticeable’ to city councillors, labour regulators and managing authorities? In the same vein as the Precarity Lab (2019, p. 80) scholarship, and that of geographers (James 2022) on worker-centred platform labour, this research invites scholars to “notice precarity differently” and the furthering inequalities. Their “engagement with the yearnings and lived realities” (Precarity Lab 2019, p. 80) of migrant platform workers, and especially of precarious women is yet to be reconned with.

However, platform mediated labour is very lucrative for VCs, and businesses like Deliveroo, UberEats or JustEat are worth billions of US dollars on the stock market. The platform growth is driven by the customers’ demand. As the markets’ demands grow, the VC prosper even more by expanding the business model into other (plat)forms. By continuing to explore other nodes in the food chain distribution (e.g., ghost kitchens), the fast-pacing and fast-expanding food delivery platform model is very noticeable. For example, companies like UK-based Getir, have been branching out into fruit and vegetables warehouse storage and on-demand deliveries, while Deliveroo has expanded its billion-dollar business through the creation of Deliveroo Editions or “dark kitchens”.

At the Dulwich site, in the London Borough of Southwark, Deliveroo Editions hosts five dark or ghost kitchens where food is prepared and delivered to customers who placed orders with these prestigious restaurants: Five Guys, Pho, Chilango, ShakeShack, and Honest. The would-be customers can only place orders online via the restaurants’ website. Deliveroo drivers pick up the food prepared within the walls of two units between 12:00 and 23:45. The five kitchens are separate,

and there is only one front desk. Each order is bagged and sealed with Deliveroo Editions sticker and placed on the shelf belonging to the respective kitchens. Each completed order is brought down to the front desk, and picked up by Deliveroo riders only. As I wait to speak to someone from the front desk, I observe through the window that all riders waiting on their motorbikes by the front entrance are men of different ethnicities chatting with one another.

JustEat, initially a Danish founded platform has relocated to the UK in mid 2000s and operates differently from the above. The couriers are employed and among the hierarchy there are “captains” whose role is to oversee the activity on the streets and in the restaurants where couriers wait for deliveries. The JustEat algorithm takes the decisions and observes every move of each of the workers assigned within a 5-mile radius. In April, at the same McDonalds restaurant in Camberwell Green, London where I talked to Johnathan, introduced earlier, I met a JustEat captain, Sacha who has a different story to tell.

On this Friday, Sacha is on duty to patrol on the 5-mile radius surrounding the depo near Oval, London. As I enter this McDonalds, she sits and looks at her phone app JustEat. As we begin to talk, she describes herself as an Indian woman from Mumbai, in her 40s, married and with two children (the boy is 14, and the girl is 6 years old). Sacha was an accountant in India, and now she is one of the only three women “Captains” out of 50 based at the Camberwell/Oval depo. As a woman, she says,

It's no different to do the job of a captain. But, women do not work on this job because there is a misconception about women that they should do housework. When you have a “can do” attitude, you can do anything. I can do anything.

I ask her: since there are only three women and 50 men captains, do you think this is a coincidence or because the top level management at JustEat perceive women not as capable as men on the same position? Sacha replies:

No, I think women can be as good captains as men are. In the JustEat hierarchy women also occupy senior positions, but the 3 women captains are the first to join the ranks above the bikers, since the company opened the Oval depo. More may follow?!

Sacha continues:

As woman, it's no different to do this job, says Sacha. But women do not work this job because there is a misconception about women, that they should do housework instead. But when you have a 'can do attitude' you can do anything. I can do anything. I work part-time, contracted for 20 hours per week. Yesterday, I worked ten hours. Today another ten. ... and tomorrow, Saturday, I instruct ten new comers! [sic]

Sacha discloses that a captain's pay rate is £10.15 per hour (just below the Living Wage⁵ rate for London), and she gets paid to ensure that orders are fulfilled, and if there are any problems signalled by the algorithms, she is the contact on the ground. She explains:

Today is my turn to oversee our couriers' activity in this McDonalds, at Camberwell. I ensure that orders are picked up smoothly; for this to happen, couriers must stay within their designated area ready to pick up the orders; I watch and resolve any problems with the food packages. Generally, things do run smoothly.

In Hall's (2021, p. 116) view, "streets accrue ... layers of ... complexity of a world of work." My research on the everyday inequalities in the street, is not unlike Hall's (2021), and it complements her research on migrants leading a marginal life on the edge territories of the street economies decided at the centre". As Hall (2021, pp. 5-6) does, this investigation questions:

Whether street self-employment and its precarities is different from recent articulations of a casualised urban labour market, sustained by technological platforms, such as Uber and Deliveroo that trades off the "entrepreneurialisms" required of marginalised cultures.

Moreover, in agreement with Hall's (2021, p. 5) argument, "street livelihoods in marginalised and ethnically diverse parts of the UK [as well as in other European] cities also reveal the human dimensions of the splintering of: a) an insecure labour market with its pronounced impacts on BAME⁶ groups; b) social disparities permeate these edge territories with surges in childhood poverty, steep cuts to public services, and growing practices of displacement associated with "regeneration"; c) on the streets

at this edge territories “laid bare the rise in inequalities and the punitive strike of austerity governance. In provision of Halls (2021) findings, the empirical material, and this preliminary analysis, supports the case for furthering the investigation into complexities of platform work, and the kind of precarity and inequalities intertwined with power relations that are not always immediately visible.

However, my last stop for data collection was in the Irish context, specifically the city of Cork. Situated in the south-west, Cork hosts one of the three oldest Universities in Ireland (Trinity College Dublin, Queens University Belfast, and University College Cork). Cork is the second largest city by population in Ireland and attracts very high numbers of international students every year, many who choose Ireland to study English in the language schools.

For example, a high number of Brazilian and Turkish citizens choose to study English in Ireland due to the bilateral agreements between the two countries, which facilitate student visas that allow them to work 20 hours per week. Among these, English language students, Yildirim, Ozcan and Ozgür of Turkish origins compensate the work they do in the daytime with evenings and late-night shifts on platforms like Deliveroo, UberEats or JustEat. Yildirim is a Turkish male with degree in data science from a prestigious Turkish university, but came to Ireland to study English. He works as a concierge in the daytime and wishes to further his education with a Masters’ degree in data science from Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. Deliveroo nevertheless, offers little-to-none support to its “independent contractors” like Yildirim, except for providing one-time, bare minimum equipment.

In three months, I did 5,000 km on my (electric) push bike; I got the clothes and the box for free for the first time, paid by Deliveroo. But after you have to pay; if the box tears up, which it does after a few months, from the rain and cold - you pay for it when that happens. (Yildirim)

Besides, “we are modern slaves, and we work unprotected. Also, Police knows that we are doing illegal work. If they want to collect us, they can do it anytime”, says Yildirim. Moreover, as a student on precarious wages, Yildirim, like Johnathan and many other food couriers, need to take a second job to break even. As a Deliveroo courier, Yildirim merely makes end meet, but he has no other choice but continue working, despite the

precarious conditions and sometimes poor physical health that he struggled with during the pandemic:

I had covid and still worked with 38° temperature; I covered my mouth and went on; I know the cover doesn't work, but who could stop working; I needed to pay the bills. So, I worked while infected with covid. What could I do? I pay 700EUR rent just for one room, and expenses on top. I told my landlord that it's too expensive and he said I can go if I don't like it. Everything is so expensive in this town. (Yildirim)

Another Turkish worker, Ozcan was an accountant by trade, in Turkey, where he returned by the time, I ended fieldwork in Cork. In Figure 3 below, the Deliverro device that Ozcan and other couriers are using shows the only available outlets open past midnight in the light purple colour and in sexagonal shapes. The device also displays the "Not busy" message sent by the algorithm-based system. These kinds of messages are updated every five minutes. The algorithm's advice to couriers in a "not busy" area is to try "exploring other areas nearby" with busier restaurants. He says to me one late night that:

You see where we are now. Waiting to pick up orders in an area where only Lebish kebab and Shake Dog diner are still open past midnight; but no one places any orders; everyone is out partying; it's not like in the pandemic. But you see, the app shows us the only places still open. If I get an order now, it pays 1.4 x per order. 3 orders in one hour and I make 10EUR. But no one placed any orders. I might have to call it a day. (The time when this talk took place shows 00:08 on his Deliveroo device. See Figure 3 below).

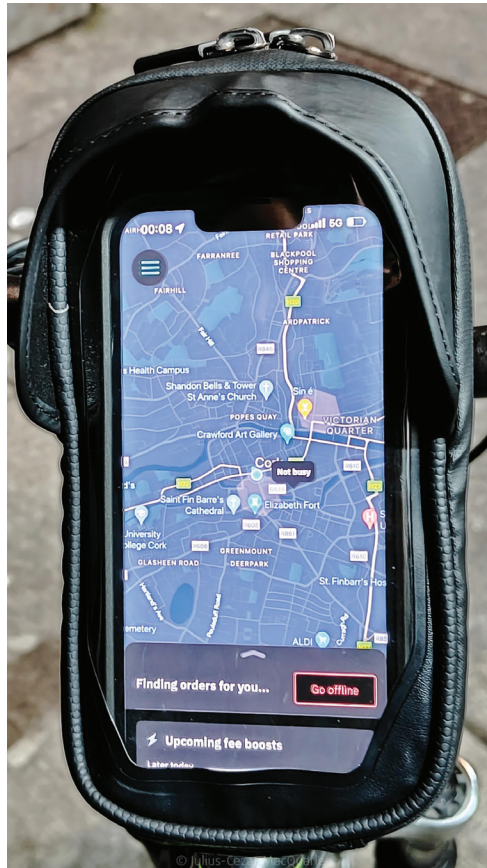


Figure 2. The Deliveroo device

The Deliveroo device indicates a 'Not busy' time of service. In light blue, it indicates that only three food outlets are still open to take orders at that hour of the night.

Uzgun is another Turkish male whom I spoke to, and he explains the "semi-illegality" aspects of their work and immigration status (De Genova 2018). Turkish migrants are allowed to work maximum 20 hours per week while studying English or any other undergraduate or graduate studies. But *"all of us work more to pay the bills. So, we have come to Ireland legally, but we are in illegality when it comes to work hours and for not*

paying the taxes. But that's the only thing that makes it worth for us to go on working like this. Otherwise, money is too thin". Furthermore, he explains, "we are not entitled to register with companies like Deliveroo because of our student status. So, we all work on borrowed accounts for which we pay between 40-60 Euro per week". You see, Uzgun continues,

The name displayed here (on this Deliveroo device) is not mine. I borrowed this device from another Turkish guy. He went on holidays in Turkey. He rents his device every time he goes away. It's not fair in a way, because he makes money while on holiday from renting a machine that I cannot even register for. It's not fair, is it?!



Figure 3. Three young males in Cork sitting on electric pushbikes

Building a scaffolding

The street, the most banal of all places, displays symptoms of inequalities in every city. Couriers are bound to concrete places (e.g., streets, restaurants, customers' house doors). During crisis they were the indispensables delivering hot food to entire communities. Yet, in ordinary times they have become expendable due to drop in customers' demand, which inevitable leads to platforms dismissing couriers unable to pick up orders. The couriers who participated in this preliminary study, and those whom I

observed speeding with, on hold or waiting for food orders, speak of their precarious presence at the edge of the digitalised economies. Irrespective of the city where I immersed in for fieldwork, either in Oradea and Bucharest, two Romanian “smart cities” on the semi periphery of globalisation, or in Cork, a small city in south-west of Ireland, commonalities of inequities are displayed in both terms, spatially (e.g., relentless waiting for orders) or temporally (e.g., deep into the night or lunching between two shifts or workloads back-to-back). London, as the “glocturnal” city (MacQuarie 2018), offers couriers (by and large migrants), more opportunities to swap the platforms that are greater in numbers and profiles (e.g., groceries stores, dark/ghost kitchens, food or alcohol). But conditions of work are equally precarious as found in small cities.

Digitalisation or the “fourth industrialisation wave” has changed not only production of work, but also how inequalities are being reproduced. Far from easing the working lives of platform mediated workers, according to activist and academic David Schwartz, in Romania, “only the horror version of platform work arrived”. The preliminary findings in this study, therefore indicate that: a) despite the positive outlook that platform mediated work promised (e.g., new kinds of support and training), the most dependent food couriers merely hang on at the edges of the sharing economy; b) the digitalisation of work through platform algorithms only exacerbates the existing inequalities through precarisation of working conditions and c) the streets provide the couriers with both a workplace and space, yet they expose the symptoms of the digitalised inequalities experienced by them in terms of health inequities and lack of social worth. The old, unfulfilled promises of the sharing economy (i.e., platform capitalism) need to be thrown, and a new set of values need to be programmed into the algorithm managers.

Out with the old, in with the new sharing economy

It goes without saying, that Schor’s proposal that “democratic sharing” or a form of “cooperativism” is possible in digital platform economies, but its implementation will be exceedingly difficult to carry out in practice. Compain *et al.* (2019) rightly identify three major challenges in the implementation of cooperativist platforms: finding long-lasting economic and financial models, uniting communities, and mobilizing supporters and partners. These second and third challenges, the authors add encouragingly,

could nonetheless become part of the solution. Moreover, Schor (2020, p. 150) does see a future for “democratic sharing” but also other options, such as “state regulation”. Yet, for that to happen, a “reboot of the sector is both desirable and possible” and that it “would need to go deeper into sharing” (Schor 2020, pp. 162-163). But how feasible are these reforms when cooperativism, sharing, and collaboration are mostly voluntary activities? Moreover, how far can someone stretch their external income, savings, and unemployment benefits to fund a cooperative endeavor, especially during the project’s precarious developmental phase? Schor’s dependent platform workers, after all, barely break even from their gigs.

This limitation rules out, in my view, the possibility of creating successful cooperatives (see Stocksy for an exception). Especially, for gig workers living on meager wages, when “cooperatives or associations are generally not particularly lucrative” and have difficulty paying salaries and attracting contributors (Boudes *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, the current lack of political attention and innovation have indirectly ensured domination by Big Tech and its lobbyist allies. For example, the *Platform Cooperativism Consortium* announced recently that it had received a \$1 million grant from the Google Foundation. While this development may be seen as a vote of confidence in cooperativisation, it can just as easily indicate the opposite: the lack of support for the movement, meaning that it must go against its very nature in accepting such donations.

It is also entirely possible that a tech giant such as Google could become the owner of this platform. Cooperative platforms already face dominant for-profit actors, low user commitment, overworked project leaders, and limited political will to enter a strong social dialogue. In this context, a future “sharing economy” without actual sharing seems almost inevitable. If, however, public-facing institutions (charities, foundations, service providers, and governments) and Social and Solidarity Economy organizations (SSE) were to form structures that actively support developing projects (Compain *et al.* 2019), then we could see the existing form of platform capitalism shaped into a legitimate, feasible, and democratic model of cooperativism. This new version of the “sharing economy” would be far closer to a mode of democratic control for platform members rather than those current arrangements facilitated by Big Tech. In the eyes of Schor (2020), sharing platforms can build bridges, not simply walls.

It is up to the human behind the machine to input a higher value into the algorithmic code. Hence, for the future of the sharing economy, like Schor, I believe that we need to reboot and reload a new trust-based,

peer-to-peer transactional algorithm, that sets rules for middleman-free and equities between parties (user-worker-platform), and democratic decision-making shared among comparativists of similar membership.

Onboarding new investigation avenues

This study goes beyond the intersecting categories of lived precariousness, wo/men migrant and working on digital platforms. Onboarding new methods, it will produce an inclusive analysis of the lack of ‘power and privilege’ (Crenshaw 1989), the forms of ‘oppression and inequality’ and differential inclusion that women face in platform work, a heavily masculinised environment. However, it is beyond the purpose of the current study, thus suggestions of further investigation avenues are proposed below.

Thematically, further investigation needs to address the gendered aspect of platform work, such as the “relationship between gender and the ‘gig economy’ ... discrimination” (Barzilay and Ben-David, 2017: 427). This inquiry will thus focus on the next stage of the research, on women’s contribution to this “new way of working” on platforms and included in equal measure to their male counterparts more comprehensive worker centred analysis. Therefore, building on the Researcher’s Nightworkshop (2021), the next steps will continue with day and night observations of women riders to apprehend various aspects of platform mediated food delivery.

Analytically, it will be supported by intersectional theory, as it seeks to capture not only bodily experiences but also identity processes, language, and gender norms in their every day and night encounters between men and women riders (Collins and Bilge 2016; Anthias 2012). Moreover, Wacquant’s (2015) flesh and blood sociological approach will be employed to objectify the sensorial, emotional, and intellectual, in the future stages as the analysis aims also to make palpable and visible night-to-night embodied issues of abuse, physical exhaustion, stress, and lack of child nursing experienced by women migrant workers. More broadly, the investigation will contribute to conversations that had been taking place, by adding an analytical nightwork lens in the fields of migration and precarity. In this vein, the inquiry will build on the literature that has already addressed female subjectivities in migration and precarity, such as: migration scholars applying gender lens to show

growing concerns about migrant women in the paid care work sector (Fedyuk, Bartha & Zentai 2014); also, the causes related to the unequal gender distribution of childcare and household duties that underscores the role of working mothers in the labour market (Fedyuk 2015); and last but not least, the reason behind migrant women's experiences of abuse is that they cannot easily move out of precarious work into employment that guarantees access to decent work (Pillinger 2006, 2007), which impacts negatively on their mental and physical health (Costa 2006). The next stage of this ethnography envisions high possibilities for solutions to the growing invisibility of women migrants working the night shift in a male-dominated in digital platform work.

NOTES

- ¹ Guga, Ș., & Spatari, M. (2021).
- ² Translation by the author from Romanian. "IT-ul a fost vedeta economiei românești și sectorul-câștigător al pandemiei în prima jumătate din 2020. IT-ul a crescut, pe volum, cu 12,4% în primele 6 luni din 2020, prin comparație cu aceeași perioadă din anul precedent" Online at: <https://www.zf.ro/banci-si-asigurari/it-ul-vedeta-economiei-romanesti-sectorul-castigator-pandemiei-prima-19654861> Accessed 02.07.2022
- ³ Digitalisation and Labour Migration. Humboldt University. Berlin. Online at: <http://platform-mobilities.net/en/start> Accessed 02.07.2022
- ⁴ RON or Romanian Leu is the Romanian currency. It's exchange value is €1 = 4.94 RON. Available at <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=1&From=EUR&To=RON> Retrieved 04.07.2022.
- ⁵ The real Living Wage is an hourly rate of pay set independently and updated annually (not the UK government's National Living Wage). London Living Wage rate has recently been increased to £10.85.
- ⁶ BAME is the bureaucratic acronym for Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic used to describe other groups who are non-white. BAME also includes "other white", such as Eastern Europeans working and living in the UK).

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