Embodied Precariat And Digital Control In The ‘Gig Economy’
The Mobile Labour Of Food Delivery Bicycle Couriers

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Gig economy and gig work

The affective experiences in ‘smart’ work environments:

Feelings → Actions
Solidarity / Entrepreneurialism
Summary

1. The gig economy and the food delivery sector
   • Deliveroo and the online food delivery industry
   • Struggles and protests

2. The power of algorithms
   • Algorithms underpinning 'platform capitalism'
   • Part of the broader 'smart cities' agenda

3. Methods and fieldwork
   • Manchester Deliveroo WhatsApp group
   • Other field sites: observant participation (Deliveroo rider in London: January - March 2018); online ethnography of Youtube videos on 'how to make money with Deliveroo'; interviews with riders.

4. Entrepreneurialism & solidarity vs Deliveroo

5. Global resistance and alternatives
   • FairWork Foundation and The Transnational Courier Federation
   • Technological sovereignty and the prefiguration of a different future
   • Coopcycle
Cycling and work
Gig economy and gig work

Facts:

- Seven million platform workers worldwide
- Work valued at US$5 billion per year
- 11% of UK labour force have earned income from digital labour platforms
- By 2025, one third of all labour transactions will be mediated by digital platforms

(Graham and Woodcock 2018)
Deliveroo

- Food delivery company.
- Serves as an intermediary between customers and restaurants.
- Customers order online food from a restaurant and riders deliver it as quickly as they can.
- In most cases, riders are not considered employees, but freelance workers performing ‘gigs’. 
1. Gig economy and food delivery

Deliveroo

- 15,000 couriers (UK); 35,000 (globally)
- Male (93%)
- 18-34 years old (73%)
- The company revenue increased by 600% in 2016 and by 116% in 2017 to a total of £277 million
- Fastest-growing company in Europe between 2013 and 2016.
1. Gig economy and food delivery

- 500 self-employed riders working for Deliveroo in Manchester
- The company works with over 900 restaurants
1. Gig economy and food delivery

- over 60 strikes across Europe alone in the last two years
1. Gig economy and food delivery
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2. The power of algorithms

Platform capitalism

'The platform has emerged as a new business model, capable of extracting and controlling immense amounts of data, and with this shift we have seen the rise of large monopolistic firms. Today the capitalism of the high- and middle-income economies is increasingly dominated by these firms' (Srnicek 2016, 6)
2. The smart cities agenda

**Efficiency versus surveillance**

- Digital and big data to 'know and manage the city' – part of Deliveroo et al's appeal amongst city leaders
- Providing unparalleled opportunities to design and enact more efficient, sustainable, competitive and open cities
2. The power of algorithms

Frank is made up of machine-learning technology, which predicts the timings of every order. The timing for every single order is different, depending on:

- the specific dish that is being prepared;
- the location of the restaurant;
- the time of day and the day of the week;
- the number of riders on the road;
- how many live customer orders there are;
- the distance from the restaurant to the customer
3. Methods and fieldwork
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

Echoing the strike

- payment conditions
- travel distances
- long waiting times to collect orders
- work hazards such as accidents or inclement weather
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.1 Payment conditions

Deliveroo: 'Distance-based fees takes into account how far each order will take you, offering a different fee for every order and a fairer system, paying more for orders that take you further'.

Deliveroo: On average across the UK, fee per delivery riders earn £12 per hour
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.2 Waiting times

Deliveroo claims to predict waiting times and reduce them by using a complex algorithm involving: ‘how many riders are nearby; how many times the delivery might be rejected; how long it would take a rider to arrive; the size of the order and how long they’ll take to prepare it; how busy the restaurant appears to be’
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.1 and 4.2 Payment conditions & Waiting times

→ Solidarity tactics: Rejecting orders and informing the others
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.1 and 4.2 Payment conditions & Waiting times

→ Entrepreneurial tactics: Working for several companies
→ Entrepreneurial tactics: Working 8 hours a day, 7 days a week
→ Entrepreneurial tactics: Avoid busy areas

'The only problem I see with Deliveroo is that the fees keeps going down but even at the lowest fee £3.60 you’d get about £11 per hour. No delivery guy in the face of this earth earns that. 55 hours of £11 will give you £2k a month. My friend, you know full well £24k a year is more than enough to provide for a family. And even put some savings aside. We live in a society where people love to play the victim and we are all guilty of it. I once thought that no one would hire because I’m an immigrant' (Online interview, 17 May 2019)
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.3 Freezing stats on leave

→ Solidarity and Entrepreneurial tactics: rent the app
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.4 Contract termination

→ Solidarity tactics: online petition

‘Just a few days before Christmas 2018 Deliveroo chose to terminate the contracts of over 100 of their workers with no notice or right to appeal, on accusations of fraud. No evidence of these allegations was provided to terminated workers’ (IWW Couriers Network)
4. Entrepreneurialism and Solidarity

4.5. How to be a successful 'Roo'. Tips via YouTube, Reddit, own experience

→ Entrepreneurial tactics

- Wear the kit
- Know when to push harder and when to take it easy
- Be assertive when you get to restaurants/
  Don’t stay in the waiting line with the rest of the customers
- Get a cheap bike
- Work at the right times
- Wait in front of busy restaurants, such as fastfoods
- Do not do cancel a session within 24 hours
- Don’t follow the road rules
5. Resistance and alternatives

Transnational resistance

- the abolition of the piecework system
- hourly wage / fair pay
- transparency in the platforms’ use of algorithms and user data / fair management
- fair conditions (health and safety)
- fair contracts (transparent and concise terms and conditions)
- fair representation (the right to organise in collective bodies)
5. Resistance and alternatives

Can unionisation be achieved?
Is unionisation enough?

- physical space of the city
- unionisation tradition
- tradition of unions in supporting short-term and part-time workers
- profile of workers and lack of political culture
- high turnover rates amongst riders
5. Resistance and alternatives

Transnational resistance

- not just resistance but a positive alternative
- Platform cooperativism: 'instead of optimizing the online economy for growth and short-term profits for the few, we need to optimize the online economy for workers and all people' (Scholz 2018, para. 7).
5. Resistance and alternatives

Prefiguring alternatives
Prefiguration is ‘linked to creativity, subversion, playfulness and to the development of alternative relationships and ways of living’, all the while stressing ‘the experimental, productive and innovative characteristics of anarchist practices that challenge and seek to replace or challenge hierarchical and oppressive social forms’ (Kinna 2017: 201).
5. Platform cooperativism as alternative

Transnational alternatives

- Scope: to foster solidarity between coops, to reduce their costs thanks to services pooling and to create a common force to advocate courier's rights
- They pool the platform software, the smartphone application and a so-called commercial offering
Thank you!
Questions?

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