Digital Labour, Informal Unionism and the Rise of a New Workers' Subjectivity

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1 Introduction

Digital work in general, and even more when it is included in the ecosystem of a platform, has characteristics that are largely no longer attributable to the traditional capital-labour dynamics as they emerged after World War II. The various institutions of industrial citizenship and the mediation of industrial relations, within this relationship, seem for the most part unable to stem the command that capital exercises on work and its social forms of organization. Power is becoming increasingly pervasive and widespread, acting on an atomized workforce for the most part unable to exercise the traditional representation rights. As highlighted by a promising literature forming around labour conflicts, these obstacles have not only forced to abandon traditional union approach but have imposed the search for new grounds of political action and for new union practices.

The scenario becomes even more complex if we consider the central role played by digital infrastructures, capable not only of defining stringent organizational perimeters, but also of exercising new forms of control and solicitation of *living labour* (Musiani, 2022). To understand the pervasiveness with which this happens—far greater than what was known in the past—it becomes necessary to look at platforms not only as economic actors. More than a new business model capable of establishing itself as a hegemon in the global market, especially following the pandemic crisis, they seem to take the form of fundamental infrastructures around which not only the economy, but society as a whole tends to reorganize itself (Borghi, 2021).

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Platforms, as Ursula Huws (2014) pointed out, have emerged thanks to their ability to capture and commodify social cooperation. At the same time, their recent penetration into the market—for reproductive labour, leisure, etc.—would not have been possible without the erosion of the boundaries between work and non-work resulting from the post-Fordist transformations of the economy (Chicchi, 2020; Marrone, 2021). On the other hand, Huws highlights how this loss of borders is by no means exclusive to digital work, but characterizes an entire generation already inclined to accept the interpenetration between 'fun', 'education', and virtual life. In this sense, platforms use digital technologies to elevate value capturing 'to the level' of the new post-wage social production relations in ways reinforcing accumulation processes.[1] Extreme attention is required to observe the two fundamental dimensions of neoliberal capitalist accumulation: the control and/or governance of *living labour* and the practical methods of extraction, measurement, and capture of the value this produces (Harvey, 2003). The logics of platform, on the other hand, seem to deeply redesign the very assumptions of the business process, radically changing the way in which work is employed and, therefore, exploited. As Paltrinieri and Nicoli (2019) have recently argued in this regard, the ownership relationships typical of capitalist firms come to blow when one is within an economy dominated by platforms. In particular, the ownership of the means of production is completely overturned: "where the platform-firm no longer appears as a group of assets that are already owned, but as an institution in which ownership corresponds to governance" (Ivi, p. 802). The most interesting and innovative aspect of the question consists, for our purposes, in the progressive internalization of market mechanisms and how these influence the relationship between company ownership and work. This not only relates with the fact that platform workers are demanded to use their own means of production to provide the service (i.e., cars and bikes as in the case of Uber or Deliveroo), but to the whole (economic and social) cost of labour which is completely (or almost) on workers shoulders. The return of piecework (and of other post-wage remuneration mechanisms) as the main model of remuneration represents one of the (de) regulatory and post-wage aspects that makes worker exploitation extremely convenient within platform economy. In this perspective we should keep in mind that "the economic model of the platform is not limited to expelling labour from the firm; it simultaneously integrates the labour market into the platform, through the generalization of competition between independent workers" (Ivi, p. 810).

This implies aspects—such as the extreme competition between workers or the blurred boundaries between subordination and autonomy, productive and unproductive time, training time and actual work activity time—that also makes it very difficult to shape conflicts. Difficult, but not impossible, as the global mobilization of riders and drivers evidently shows. To understand the way in which riders and drivers have

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[1] When we speak of a post-wage society, we are referring to the irreversible crisis of what we can call the institution-wage (Chicchi and Leonardi, 2021). In a nutshell, what comes to an abrupt halt with the crisis of the wage institution is the progressive integration of the working class into the consumer society, the upward dynamics of social mobility and the effectiveness of public welfare systems in guaranteeing social protection and security (Castel, 2003).

distinguished from the rest of platform workers and managed to challenge the organizational capacity of the algorithm, it is therefore necessary to carefully analyse its emerging phenomenologies in a new perspective. In other words, it is a matter of highlighting not only the ability of workers to counter-use digital technologies in ways that escape algorithmic control, but also that of building aggregation in the "blind" spaces of the platforms. Of particular interest, in this regard, is how platform workers tend to face the contradiction between an unprecedented level of surveillance and of atomization by building *communities of struggle* (Però, 2020) that challenge both material and subjective dimension of precarity. Initially formed to provide self-support in a context with no social protection whatsoever, they often began spaces where conflicting initiatives and practices have been developed by workers. In other words, platform workers' communities also became "an inclusive and participatory space where workers experiencing multiple forms of oppression can receive and provide support to each other, co-develop a contentious collective identity, plan and undertake industrial action, while acquiring confidence, self-esteem, a sense of empowerment and embeddedness alongside gaining material rewards (such as better pay and conditions)" (Però & Downey, 2022, p. 3). In this perspective, the struggles of platform workers, rather than simply demanding the access to the prerogatives of the wage society, place at the centre a refusal of individualization and the extreme forms of exploitation characterizing platform regimes. Therefore, investigating the "rupture" of algorithmic subjectivities it is not only a question of looking at the organizing practices adopted to challenge algorithmic management, but also of the tension that emerges from the clash between the narratives they propagate and the cooperative subjectivities emerging inside and through the space infrastructured by the platforms.

The research on platform labour that the Plus project has carried out in some of the most important European cities has allowed to investigate both the pervasiveness of the digital regime of labour and how this has been challenged by workers. To capture this ambivalence, we will try to deepen some of its fundamental characteristics with reference to the way in which digitalization impacts—with different modalities and outcomes—on the subjectivity of work. However, we are convinced that analysing workers' mobilization is not simply a question of legal recognition, today shamelessly hindered if not completely extraneous to the platform economy. In this tension we also want to undercover the formation of a space of subjectivity to work which by "vocation" is constituted on the margins, if not totally outside, the coordinates of the traditional relationship between capital and labour (Mezzadra, 2021).

2   What is a Platform? The Reasons of a Contested Definition

Platforms have become a ubiquitous presence in both economy and society, but its meaning is still unclear. As argued by Gillespie (2010, p. 3), the popularity of the term platform relates to the fact that is "specific enough to mean something, and vague enough to work across multiple venues for multiple audiences". In this sense platforms ambiguity contributed not only to escape normative limitations, such as those related to traditional labour standards, but also to gain legitimacy and attract consent on their rapid rise. Retracing the genealogy of platforms then represents a necessary step to develop a critical understanding of its functioning and of the role they achieved.

According to Casilli, the origins of the term can be traced in the theological and political sphere. During XVII in UK the term platforms has been firstly employed to try to unify the fragmented Puritan movement in "a mix of civil and religious beliefs" (Casilli, 2020, p. 57). Almost contemporary, the Diggers movement developed their 'platform' as a radical program, today perhaps ironically based on the abolition of private property. In the same field, Gillespie (2010, p. 4) highlights the popularity the term had in the post-ideological transformation of the American political parties. In this sense, the platform follows the traditional political "agenda" that has characterized large part of the twentieth century, usually associated with obscure élite decisions, in favour of a more open and grassrooted democratic process. In this sense: "the term retains a populist ethos: a representative speaking plainly and forcefully to his constituent" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 5). In all these cases however, platform meant "a raised, level surface designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place" (ivi, p. 5), characterizing the concept with progressive features of neutrality, openness, inclusiveness, and flexibility.

A first spillover happened in the field of computing and media studies. In this context, the platform for excellence was Microsoft Windows that since the 90s began to spread both within and outside the economic sphere. As Plantin and his colleagues (2018) highlight, in this sense platform meant an easily accessible and flexible infrastructure where users could interact and modify according to their needs. About ten years later, computing developments emancipated the term platform from the hegemony of Microsoft Windows and became popular to indicate the functioning of peer-to-peer interfaces. The most popular of these is surely Napster, protagonist in the early 00s of the famous trial with the American band "Metallica" which, as observed by Tomassetti (2018), has been the case to provide the first legal argument around the definition of a platform. While the accusation was that of favouring piracy, Napster argument was that of being a—neutral—digital infrastructure with no responsibility for the contents exchanged. In this perspective Casilli (2020, p. 56) points out how the closest ancestor of the platform was the "informatic architecture" which became obsolete simply because "architects were not there anymore".

However, it is when the term platform entered the economic scenario that leapt forward becoming a ubiquitous presence in our society. Among the first use of the term, we have the Silicon Valley *smart* manager where platform indicated a way of "creating value by bringing together two or more types of actors and facilitating interactions between them" (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016, p. 22). What lies at the heart of this perspective are the possibilities provided by digital technologies, in particular algorithms, to process a big amount of data rapidly establishing as many linkages as possible and improving the quality of transactions. Digital platforms soon became then the most revolutionary product of the so-called "second age of the machines" (Brynjolfsson, McAfee, 2018) or elsewhere "the fourth industrial revolution". Management theories have also often related them to "disruptive innovation" processes where a "company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses" (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 45). In other words, technological developments have provided the opportunity to compete in the market to new emerging actors, while deeply transforming the dynamics of the market itself.

This radical view of technological development has *met in* the so-called *Californian Ideology* a mix between "the free spirits of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies" holding an "impeccable libertarian political perspective" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 44). To have a sense of this view it is enough to give a look to the title of popular texts like "Collaborative Consumption. That is, what's mine is also yours" (Botsman & Rogers, 2010); "The Wealth of Networks. How Social production transforms the market and increases freedoms" (Benkler, 2006); "Free. The Future of a Radical Price" (Anderson, 2009). The view expressed in these books is most known as *sharing economy* and clearly unfolds a post-capitalist imaginary where digital technologies would make obsolete some of the most typical aspects of capitalism, such as money, private property, social hierarchies, labour command, social inequalities and the like.

However, the initial enthusiasm on *sharing economy* rapidly vanished. Even before the struggle of riders and drivers showed their exploitative conditions, for Sundararajan (2016, p. 26): "the intertwining of financial investment and the emergence of platforms with large private investments has convinced many that the ideals associated with the sharing economy that preceded 2010 can no longer be sustained". In his view, platforms are also more complex than just new forms of corporation, representing a "hybrid between the horizontal nature of the free market, impersonal and freely accessible, and the traditional business model based on hierarchy of production and control of labour" (ivi, p. 77). In this perspective, we may see how digital platforms continue some of the general tendency already consolidated in the global economic scenario. First, that of fragmenting the labour process in ways that facilitates outsourcing not only part of the production, but even single microtasks (Casilli, 2020). Secondly, that of escaping standard employments, at the same time benefiting from the post-wage society and pushing further the crises of its institutions. Thirdly—as we further see—the ability to develop new forms of labour control based on indirect forms of control and manipulation of subjectivity that allow them to extract value from social cooperation. Looking at these aspects, it appears evident how digital platforms did not come from nowhere but are prolonging logics of

exploitation already structured in the economic scenario. What is new is the ability of capitalism to expand such logics beyond the context where originated. This is especially the case of the platforms we selected in the study—Deliveroo, Helpling, Airbnb and Uber—providing a *digitalized* version of services historically associated to the informal sphere of the economy. It is not a coincidence if these platforms have risen in the aftermath of 2008 financial crises, which is when financial capitals started to pay attention to sector once positioned at the margins. However, very little benefits go to workers that on one hand experience industrial labour control once reserved to the manufacturing, and on the other are maintained same condition of poverty and insecurity characterizing informal employments (Marrone, 2019).

Highlighting the deep roots of platform capitalism it does not mean we should underestimate its discontinuities. Firstly, this refers to the ability to extract, elaborate and employ an unprecedent level of socially produced data, which is something that has often associated platform capitalism as part of the "extractive drift" of capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). Again, this is anything new if we consider how Italian *operaismo* has already investigated the ability of workers to produce information other than just product goods (Alquati, 1975), but what is new here is the scale in which this happens. This is for example the case of platform such as Facebook where the content spontaneously uploaded by user makes it possible to sell profiled advertising spaces (Srnicek, 2016). This however does not happen only within social network, but it is a characteristic of all platforms of digital labour (Casilli, 2019). In other words, riders, drivers and all the other platform workers are not only exploited for their service provision, but also for the data they produce all the time they interact with their devices.

Nonetheless, as argued by Zuboff (2019) platforms do not just socially extract data, but they also use them to encourage behaviours which comply with their productive needs. An aspect that has also been stressed by STS's interest towards digital infrastructures (Musiani, 2022). Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic most dramatic days we have in fact experienced the ability of platforms to penetrate "the heart of the society", reconfiguring a wide range of activities, from social life to education or entertaining, that very much exceed the traditional economic sphere. Each human activity is not simply "materially" translated into digital means but goes through deep qualitative transformations that address social life according to platform needs. The influence that platforms have in our society makes them something more than just a new business model. Employing Mann's (1984, p. 189) definition of "infrastructural power" we may say that platforms have reached the same ability of the State "to effectively penetrate civil society and logistically implement policy decisions throughout the territory" attributes to "the infrastructural power". As Plantin et. al. (2018) points out, the ubiquity and the level of interdependence they reached should move us to pay interest to the process of "infrastructuralization" of digital platforms. In other words, we may say that platforms are emerging as a crucial infrastructure around which not only the economy, but the whole global society is reorganizing.

The reason why platforms are still surrounded by ambiguity then is not the result of a lack of research but reflects their ability to cross borders between economy

and society, between production and reproduction, between the social and the political. Defining platforms means limiting their power, and this makes the definition task a structural component of the fight against platform capitalism (Woodcock, 2021). However, investigating platforms does not simply mean understanding the functioning of their technical structure, but undercovers the politics they hold; it means finding the social order they tend to create and, eventually, how this can be challenged. This necessarily leads to the following section of the chapter where the notion of "platform subjectivities" will be investigated.

3   The Platform Subjectivity

Platform labour process follows innovative command lines. This opens to new scenarios both from the point of view of the *logic of exploitation* (Chicchi et al., 2016) and regarding the possible actions of contrast and resistance. While on one hand algorithms impose conditions of operation according to rigid and predetermined modalities of task execution (for example, how algorithms instantly calculate the route that riders have to follow or the obsessively specified way in which pickers operate in Amazon warehouses), on the other hand, they leave to workers' margins of autonomy in defining times and modalities of their working activities. This apparent paradox indicates one of the key characteristics of platform work. Digital technologies have the peculiar ability of realizing a close relationship between the proactive inclinations of workers' subjectivity and the "objective" task execution. This relationship also determines the formation of an unprecedented subjective condition which results on the one hand from the pressure of algorithmic subordination to the rhythms and times of labour process, and on the other hand from the injunction to assume a formal self-employed occupation.[2]

The question of how *time* is governed and therefore brought within the practices of valorization of digital capitalism is pivotal to understand these processes. Firstly, it has to do with the ability digital connections and information flows have in crossing the traditional boundaries of the social life sphere. Lifetime and working time here, for example, are irremediably confused, often becoming inextricable. It is no coincidence that the difficulty in governing the relationship between the different social temporalities emerges from PLUS fieldwork as one of the most obvious difficulties of platform workers' biographies. This confusion also makes it difficult—if not impossible—to protect one's *intimacy* from the pervasive and constant extraction of sensitive data that platforms realize to encourage the improvement of their algorithmic devices (Casilli, 2020). In addition, the operating time of the service activity is measured in all its analytical aspects and subjected to a spasmodic performance imperative. This measurement, however, no longer only concerns the mere execution

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[2] It is within the subjective tension that occurs in this dependence-independence double-bind relationship that the phenomenon of the so-called free work insinuates itself (Cfr. Armano et al., 2020).

of the task but also insists on the broader subjective context (such as emotional, relational and symbolic qualities) within which the same productive task is being determined (Casilli et al., 2023). In this sense, the concept of *quantified self-expresses* in a way—at the same time stimulating and disturbing—the new subjective constitution deriving from these transformations.

This schizophrenic and paradoxical way of *questioning* (in the Althusserian sense) the subjectivity at work is, however, far from understandable if we do not carefully observe how this unprecedented mixture between command and self-solicitation to work is articulated within platforms. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand how they coexist in the escape from waged employment with a strong individualizing and libertarian push towards "do it oneself", where "the involvement of the whole person in the performance of work with forms of exploitation more intense than the past, as they are based on self-accountability of the individual (self-exploitation)" (Armano et al.,2020, p. 110). In other words, we can notice here a key role of the genealogy of the platform on workers' subjectivity. This latter originates on the one hand in the rhetoric of the *sharing economy*, now completely subdued, and, on the other, in the consequent and growing opening of a post-wage scenario where the so-called freelancing is its architrave: "In this setting, work is done mainly autonomously and on a self-employed basis. In the socialisation carried out by lean platforms, the subjectivity and the risk have become central and the tendentious model is that of freelanced work on a global scale. The production of Subjectivity 4.0 is marked by these processes" (Ivi, p. 107).

The crucial point in the formation of this work subjectivity seems to be, therefore, the intense confusion of the distance between a blind operative obedience and a compelling imperative to subjective autonomy (making appear the subject as a kind of *human capital*). This confusion hides a subjective contradiction that is not easy to manage without risking the detriment of the formation and the spread of new psychopathological conditions (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, 2022). It has recently been highlighted in this regard: "one of the fundamental conditions for the possibility of new forms of enslavement is in fact the «black box» effect, the result of the non-transparent, if not decidedly opaque, character of the new technological requirements, concerning both the design and the use of digital tools" (Menissier, 2022, p. 91, *our translation*). The intrinsic opacity of the digital device, according to Menissier, would lead to the concrete risk of defining, within contemporary society, a new *voluntary servitude* where "the algorithmic society is part of the paradigm of innovation characterised by new forms of capitalist exploitation and by the continuous change that makes traditional social forms (and in particular those of dependent work) obsolete" (Ivi, p. 93). The new subjective posture of the platform worker thus fluctuates between a condition of rigid obedience to the procedural imperatives of the algorithm and the search for an autonomous and individualized career, exposing many to a serious and chronic risk of precariousness: "If extraction of value takes the form of a digital despotism that seems to reproduce the formal subsumption of labour in the first stages of capitalism, the exploitative relationship seems now to be presented in the paradoxical form of a subordination in autonomy" (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2019, p. 811).

Certainly, the quality of this condition also depends on the type of platform in which we operate. In Helpling, Deliveroo, Uber and Arbnb, for example, the relationship between obedience, precariousness and entrepreneurship of himself is articulated in ways that are often significantly different (let's think how different riding a bike can be in respect of renting a room or apartment on Airbnb), but in all cases the process seems the same: the forming of a new norm that invest the subjectivities in—only apparently—paradoxical ways.

Another important aspect of the new "digital subjectivity" is its key role in exiting most of the traditional social and economic relationship between firm and market, favouring a hybridization tendency: "In twentieth century companies, employee remuneration was shielded from price and demand fluctuations. Employment contracts protected them from the market—to such an extent that some authors have identified 'anti-market' characters in these work organizations. On the contrary, digital platforms, as market-to-company hybrids, do not mitigate market shocks but adapt to fluctuations by adjusting their prices according to changes in supply and demand" (Casilli, 2020, p. 204, *our translation*). The unmediated exposure of platform workers to the market (and consequently to the financial logics characterizing contemporary capitalism) also conditions its subjective and social constitution. Once again, the temporal coordinates of platform subjectivity shape in a new form. The financial logics predominating in platform capitalism, the way in which they determine how value is appropriated and measured, give very different characteristics from those usually attributed to industrial and/or manufacturing capitalism. This process can be described, in a nutshell, through the concept of *assetization* (Adkins et al., 2020; Birch, 2017). This changes the temporality through which the extraction of value is determined. We could say that it changes the quality of time involved in the measurement of value. This is no longer exclusively defined in terms of the processes of commodification of labour lying at the base of the logic of exploitation described by Marx in the Capital. The temporal space expands by virtue of the new social centrality of finance that, in the fluctuations the moment of credit and the moment of debt, creates a new and open space of valorization that strongly insists on the "potential" conditions of workers, not only on their current ones. A space that is characterized by a temporality that makes the opening towards future expectations its new hinge of operation, while at the same time, on the subjective level, makes the uncertainty one of its distinguished features. This is the space organized by the algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013), on both a social and subjective level, according to its new normative and predictive schemes. In this sense, the way in which Jarrett uses Feher's work (2007, 2017) is useful to understand how:

"in the contemporary economy, the figure of the free labourer has ceded to that of human capitalist; the worker who invests in and leverages their capacity within the economy. This, he argues, has become the dominant subjective form as workers seek to develop or appreciate the value of the self as a form of currency in the marketplace. The kind of subjectivity this assumes does not presuppose the distinction between the inside of the marketplace and the outside—between the spheres of production and reproduction; work and leisure—that is integral to the idea of the free labourer" (Jarrett, 2022, p. 96).

Therefore, what is crucial in platform economy, with respect to the formation of subjectivity, is not only the theme of self-exploitation (or so-called *voluntary servitude*) but also what implies the *assetization* of the workforce: a process where employers can assess the "subjective potentials" of workers and through which workers themselves can be involved in the continuous development of their potentials. It is therefore from here, from the formation of this new space of valorization, that we consider fundamental to try to question the way in which the workers organize their *struggles for recognition.*

4 Informal Unionism and the Struggles for Recognition

One of the key factors that has made platform capitalism popular is the struggles of riders, drivers or Amazon pickers, among the others, that have accompanied its rise in the economic scenario. This opens up an evident contradiction with a labour regime characterized by an unprecedented level of labour control. Platformization not only confounds the feature of workers in ways that exempt the possibility to access to social protection, but also to traditional means of labour struggle. However, instead of eradicating labour struggle, the necessity for workers to informally organize has represented an opportunity to experiment tactics and approaches that differs from those usually available among traditional unions. Far from representing a *smart* "unionism 2.0", the informal unionism experimented by riders and drivers adopted a register that historically belonged to the struggle of those subjectivities "living on the border of wage society" (Castel, 2003, p. 341). Differently from *struggles for redistribution,* that necessary imply the possibility for workers to get access to a form of industrial citizenship, *struggles for recognition* refer then to the possibility for individuals to be recognized at full title as members "participating in the process of realization of the society" (Honneth & Fraser, 2003, p. 31). Despite riders and drivers being just a minority of platform workers, our conviction is that they are a fragment reflecting the ways in which labour conflicts are transforming—and not disappearing as it is often misspoken—in the post-wage society. In other words, more than a model to follow, "they participate actively in a dynamic regime of ongoing struggles for recognition" (ivi, p. 57), following the action of unpredicted subjectivities and the effectiveness of unconventional strategies.

Understanding how riders and drivers have been successful in challenging platform power means trying to make visible the connection they have with other workers' struggle, removing them from the heroic aura in which they are often enveloped. The concept of recognition has already largely been debated in many social and political theories. However, the same can't be said for labour studies, where this concept has been limited to marginal subjectivities—such as migrant, women, informal workers, etc.—when not sceptically seen as an influence of identity politics or a step back from "real" class struggle. Things seems to be changing as the demand of recognition has been associated to powerful social conflicts, such as feminist or anti-racist movements, or to labour struggle lying at the core of global

capitalism. According to Honneth and Fraser (2003), struggles for recognition represent nowadays a structural component of neoliberal globalization. However, they are anything new. According to Pizzorno (1980), they were a key component of the peculiar conflictuality workers movement showed in Turin FIAT plans in the late 60s. Their demands—notably the vast majority coming from southern Italian migrants—could not be simply explained by a demand of redistribution. It was a more general claim of dignity for their condition that could not be formally contained by wage increases or the like. By demanding recognition, the target of their struggle was a more general transformation of the Italian society ensuring fair work and a decent life to the emerging working class that was forming through internal migrations. Here we are not far from the "Not for us but for everyone" slogan that has characterized the struggle of Italian riders and that clearly identify a stake moving beyond the simple demand of formal rights (Borghi et al., 2021; Borghi & Murgia, 2022).

However, the concept of recognition is useful not only to understand the demand of platform workers, but also to explain the path followed to escape digital control. Paraphrasing Honneth's articulation of recognition this regards the struggle of delivery workers in at least two directions. Firstly, a "moral" and intersubjective dimension where recognition is more intended in the moral possibility for "subjects to recognize each other in their peculiar needy nature" (Honneth, 2010, p. 33, *our translation*). Secondly, an "ethical" and institutional one, where subjects enter the public sphere "allowing subjects to value each other through the qualities that contribute to the reproduction of the social order" (Honneth, 2010, p. 33, *our translation*). The "dialectic" between these two dimensions of recognition is particularly evident in the case of riders and drivers struggle, where the intersubjective dimension of recognition has created the necessary premises to influence institutional action and this has reinforced their struggling subjectivity.

Thus, the despotic power of algorithm did not impede the formation of *community of struggle* (Però, 2022) that often emerged in an informal dimension, which is outside traditional unionism. It is not a case then that many have highlighted the key role played by solidarity practices to overcome the obstacles to union action (Maccarone & Tassinari, 2022). Interestingly, these self-organized communities of workers proliferated in the space left by platform tendency to escape traditional employer obligations. This is the case of bike repairing support (Cini & Goldmann, 2021), of legal mutual support (Marrone & Finotto, 2019) or in sharing knowledge of misbehaviour practices, i.e., using of bot (Peterlongo, 2022). The unpaid time waiting for delivery or task assignment (Marà & Pulignano, 2022), the branding clothes they have to wear (Chesta, Zamponi & Caciagli, 2019), the digital tools they employ (Leonardi et al., 2019), from conditions of exploitation became means and opportunities to build up an intersubjective "class" dimension. During PLUS research we found similar dynamics happening not only among Uber drivers or Helpling cleaners, but also on Airbnb hosts where, although the peculiarities of the platform, digital platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook are widely employed to provide mutual support or to overcome algorithm information asymmetries (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In other words, the digital subjectivity is not only the ground for expanding subjugation, but it is a contested terrain for subjectification processes.

The forming of self-help groups is however not enough to talk of "communities of struggle". As Però (2020, p. 904) defines them they are "geared towards mutual support but also, crucially, towards campaigning, mobilisation and informal bargaining" (Però, 2020, p. 904). This is complicated in the platform context, usually populated by a variegated workforce, including young, students, migrants, women and others, with very different social needs. This has been a key obstacle for traditional union dynamics, requiring informal unionism to experiment new organizing approach to mobilize them. This is for example the case of the use of social movements tactics, such as rally or boycotting campaign, that have facilitated intersubjective recognition and the mobilization of workers. Traditional tools such as workers are undermined by the functioning of the platform, but this does not mean they are ineffective (Pirone, 2018, 2022)Under the lens of recognition, instead of economically harming employers, they are essential in generalizing processes of counter-subjectivity and in allowing workers to "look at themselves", as Goodwyn refers to as a key process in the formation of social movements.

The result is a mobilization towards which not only riders or the other platform workers identified, but a much broader groups of precarious workers. This was possible also thanks to previous mass social movements against precarity—such as those that have animated Euro May Day—that have inspired the possibility for riders to emerge as a symbol of a "dangerous class" (Standing, 2011). This connection is what allowed the struggle of riders and drivers, especially in Europe, to motivate local, national and continental institution to regulate the sector. Put differently, it is when the intersubjective dimension of workers meets the critical sense sedimented by social movements that the struggle for recognition become able to impact "the standards of social esteem that benefits certain occupations" (Honneth, 2008, p. 51 our translation).

However, the concept of recognition also presents its limitations. Firstly, as argued by Casilli (2020, p. 244): "These mobilizations have a common goal that is basically quite circumscribed: not to challenge the power of platforms, but on the contrary to have digital workers' bond of subordination to them recognized in order to formalise a contractual relationship that they insist on denying, thereby improving working conditions and remuneration". Moreover, platform workers struggle has been limited to a relatively small number. Most workers, as stated by Huws (2020), do not belong to this group, but operate in the most hidden and fragmented dimension of remote workers and, in many cases, have platform activities as a secondary source of income. This makes the idea of a third labour gender—distincted by both self-employment and subordination—simply not applicable, indeed increasing the risk for other groups of workers to be misclassified as "platform workers". Nonetheless, neither the neoliberal think thankers nor the union representative offers a satisfactory solution to the problem of digital work remuneration. While the former, by promoting the sale of data per unit, contributes to undervaluing the contribution of users, the latter ignores the non-ostensive dimension of work on platforms which makes it impossible to quantify their exact contribution.

The paradoxical impossibility to quantify workers' productivity in the digital context is even more evident in the case of data extraction. As Mezzadra (2021)

argues, this is key in undermining the efficacy of the social protection that originated in the Fordist. In his view, digitalization contributed to further levels of "multiplication of labour" outside its traditional borders. The result is a structural component of platform work to continuously form "grey zones" where formal and informal dimensions are inextricably overlapped. What he stresses is not only the difficulty to provide a formal response to a regime of production that expands exploitation within everyday life, but also to include the *potential workers* whose role is essential in platform labour process to make workers easily replaceable and blackmailable. Thus, to challenge the roots of platform powers is not enough to give social protections to those formally working, but this needs to apply to all those who may potentially be captured. It is for this reason that the proposal of basic income or minimum wage (still missing in many European countries) receives new lifeblood in a context of platformization.

5 Conclusions: Subjectivity and Conflict Within Digital Platforms

The struggles for recognition are thus the workers' way of attempting to break the paradoxical injunction that the platforms incessantly practise against them; an injunction overlapping demands for subordination and instances of discretion and autonomy during the exercise of their various activities. This condition, which prefigures a situation of 'subordinated agency' (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021) or, put differently, of 'performance wage' (Marrone, 2021), is the essential starting point to investigate the way in which digitalization is impacting post-wage workers subjectivity. On one hand, this has crucially impacted the subjection of workers, squeezed between a pervasive digital control and a constant push towards entrepreneurialism and *assetization*, On the other, this has also been marked by counter-subjectification processes that have been able to overturn both digital tools and the exclusion from traditional means of workers' representation characterizing the post-wage scenario. Beyond the growing and consolidated, but still localized, experience of platform workers' conflict, the problem of how to build their coalition in a context in which labour subjectivities (and their needs) are very heterogeneous is still there. Looking across the main distinction between local (work is mostly carried out in an urban context in an on-demand manner) and remote (or micro-tasking, work is carried out via the Internet) platform labour, the dimensions fragmenting the condition of the platform worker appear the most varied. The activity performed, the variety of algorithms and platforms model, the different employment relationship, age, gender, the quality of the worker's soft-skills, ethnicity and their various life trajectories, results in an extremely variegated workforce. For these reasons (and many others) it is certainly not possible to trace a precise and unitary subjective profile of the platform worker.

At the same time, we think it is possible to observe the shapes of a specific labour disposition by experimenting new and effective conflictual practices (Into the black

box, 2022; Marrone, 2021; Woodcock, 2021). Such a disposition is captured by what we have defined above as struggles for recognition. With this we mean not only the demands of social rights and protections (via recognition of subordination) distinguishing its formal dimension, but also the cooperative and/or *commoning* practices trying to use the network effect to realize more radical forms of sharing and co-management (Huws, 2020; Scholz, 2016). In the background, however, it is interesting to observe the formation of a subjectivity that, although harassed by hard and extremely precarious working conditions, is still able to express its aptitude in a post-wage scenario (Chicchi et al., 2022). In short, we believe, as Sandro Mezzadra (2021) recently pointed out, platform labour inaugurates a new conflictual season, assuming a configuration that, in tension with the transformations that the platforming of the economy introduces in contemporary capitalist society, is substantially organized beyond the traditional industrial claims and representative spaces. This is perhaps what is at stake in the emerging conflict of working on digital platforms and that in the coming years will deserve to be observed with great interest.

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