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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PLATFORM WORK: THE CASE OF DRIVERS AND COURIERS

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Background

Platform work challenges Marxist academics. The main question that arises is: does platform work create value? Some authors claim not only that the work performed by platform workers creates value, but also that the activity of users on Facebook and Instagram, for instance, is a source of value (Fuchs, 2014). This perspective, however, has already been heavily criticized by theorists affiliated with the theory of value, with whom we agree (Kangal, 2014; Bolaños & Vieira, 2014; Comor, 2015).

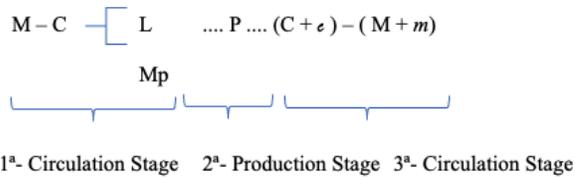
There are also those who argue that the theory of value is not capable of explaining platform work (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). And there are those who claim that digital platforms are purely rent-seeking companies, an expression of the parasitic nature of current capitalism (Dowbor, 2024; Christophers, 2020).

Discussion

In *Capital*, volumes I and II, Marx (1984a,b,c) shows that capitalism is a system that produces commodities, and to produce them, there must be people who only possess their labor power to sell on the market (proletarians) and people who own the means of production and are able to buy labor power (capitalists).

The three phases of the capital circulation process are described in the formula below, in which M is money, C is commodity, L is labor power, Mp is means of production, P is productive capital, C+ c or C' represents commodity added with surplus value, and M +m or M' is money added with new value.

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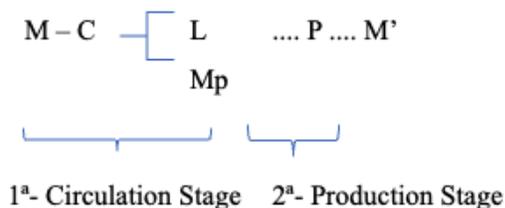
In the two phases of capital circulation, in which there is no production of surplus value, only a transmutation of the form of value, money fulfills a fundamental aspect, since it is through the transformation of the commodity into money that the value contained in it is realized. The monetary aspect is fundamental to understanding whether or not value is generated in this activity. Thus, the perspective according to which value would be created in the activities of internet users is shown to be in opposition to the labor theory of value.

In the production phase, surplus value is produced through the productive consumption of labor power, means of production, and raw materials, and part of the value of the machinery is also transferred to the product.

However, there are autonomous industrial branches that do not follow this formula. As Marx (1984c, pp. 55) explains: “Among them, the only sector that is important from an economic point of view is that of transport and communications, which encompasses both the transport of goods and people, and the transmission of news and postal service”.

In these branches of production, the useful effect produced is inseparable from the production process itself. People and goods move through space using the means of transport, and their movement is the production process itself. Their useful effect is enjoyed precisely during the production process; there is no other object of use different from this.

In this system, money buys commodities (labor and means of production) that are consumed productively and transformed back into money. There is no final product, no commodity resulting from this production process:



It is observed that there is no second phase of circulation, because there is no production of a commodity detached from the production process itself that needs to be sold or its value realized. The value generated by the production process is either

consumed individually and disappears or is added to the value of the commodity being transported.

It is argued that this is the the case of drivers and couriers through digital platforms. In the case of drivers, value is created at the moment of transport. The process goes directly from production to money plus surplus value, to money-capital. In the case of couriers, value is added to the transported goods. This value is formed by the transfer of value from the means of transport to the labor process and by the new value created during the labor process itself.

Marx (1978) also distinguishes between two types of subsumption of labor under capital: a) formal subsumption, the modality of labor already developed before the emergence of the capitalist relation, and b) real subsumption, which is the real mode or character of labor under capitalism.

The real subsumption of the worker to the capitalist occurs when there is a complete rupture with the previous production model, production opposed to producers, the real producer as a mere means of production, and material wealth as an end in itself. With the real subsumption of labor to capital, there is, therefore, a complete subordination of the worker: economically, politically, and socially.

The lack of autonomy is felt by the workers. One of the interviewees compared their daily life on the food delivery platform to a prison in a closed regime. The workdays are grueling and the work is intense, expressed in the feeling of tiredness and exhaustion, as this worker stated: "It's tiring, I work about 10 to 12 hours a day, depending... because there are days when I work harder, but it's not always (A)."

Another worker recognizes that their supposedly autonomous status is completely false: "They portray us as self-employed, but we are not self-employed, we work for them (B)."

Emphasizing the lack of autonomy, one worker highlighted that there are penalties for rejecting deliveries: "I know that if you depend on just one app, for example, iFood, and you reject a lot, it will penalize you. It won't give you many options. That's why I chose not to stay with just one. Because I know it punishes a lot" (C)

This was a theme addressed by another courier: "The app gives the illusion that you can earn a lot, but there comes a point where it starts cutting the orders, they start punishing you for things you don't do, like canceling a customer who isn't there, a store that's closed" (D)

All interviewees reported working around 9 to 10 hours a day for at least six days a week, totaling a minimum of 60 hours per week. It was found that some work 80 hours a week. As this worker demonstrates: "It's literally slave labor here. I work from 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM, Monday to Monday, without a day off" (E).

Conclusion

The hypothesis of a purely rent-seeking nature for this activity did not seem adequate to us, since this would only be possible if there were no control over the work and subordination of these workers, with the platform acting only as an intermediary. The interviews revealed a complete subordination of these workers.

Also, this research confirmed that there is extraction of surplus value in drivers and couriers work. This activity is situated in the formula of autonomous industrial branches, in which the useful effect produced is inseparable from the production process itself.

It was found that there is no production of surplus value in the work performed by users on social networks, because for value to be realized there must be an exchange of the commodity or service for money. Also it needs a relationship of subordination and dependence to the platforms.

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