

Inequalities

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Introduction

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This issue of *Inequalities* is dedicated to the impact and consequences of digital platform labor on inequalities and the system of inequalities. Platform capitalism is the result of long-term socio-economic transformations in the wake of the transition to a regime of flexible accumulation. Developments and innovations in the electronics industry, in ICTs, and in digital technologies have played a significant role in these transformations. With the advent of the second machine age and the digitalization of just about everything (Brynjolfsson, McAfee 2015), the pervasiveness of digital technologies in the various spheres and activities of social life has had multiple effects at the economic, social, cultural, and ecological levels. But the digital sphere is not neutral: its consequences on the entirety of social life and on the world of work do not derive directly from new technologies, but from the capitalist conception and application of them. Contrary to a perspective founded in “technological neutrality”, the digitalization of labor is not simply a technical matter in which technical means dominate over capital. In digitally driven labor transformation processes, the technological element appears on the surface to prevail over the social relations that actually subsume it.

From a technological point of view, the digitalization of work is driven by digital discoveries and innovations in the context of increasingly complex ICTs, increasingly powerful computers and information systems, and total connectivity. However, these technologies are

conceived and used for the appropriation of the value produced by living labor – today more rarefied than dead labor, but precisely for this reason more essential than ever to the production of value. The activation of an extensive range of activities and services brought about by the expansion of platforms and the vertical and horizontal integration of the entire economic-productive process into industry by means of automation, robotization, and digitalization have taken place within a context of extreme centralization, in which economic-productive process is almost totally controlled by a market logic aimed at generating profit. These are the main factors behind the production and reproduction of inequalities.

On the one hand, digital technologies have opened up once unimaginable opportunities and spaces for – albeit technologically mediated – communication between people and organizations. On the other hand, they have had severe consequences on working conditions (Antunes, Basso, Perocco 2021). Thus, digital platform labor represents a space in which are condensed the broader tensions and contradictions of the accumulation regime and contemporary modes of production.

From the perspective of the production and labor process and the transformations of workplaces, the implementation of digital technologies has given new emphasis to studies on capitalist command and control in these spheres, linked first to mechanization, then to robotics and automation and their potential effects on the replacement of the labor force by machines (Frey, Osborne 2013; Kagermann 2015). Other studies have highlighted the degradation of work, increases in working hours, the intensification of work rhythms, and the fragmentation of work into micro-tasks increasingly mediated by information and digital technologies that opacify the employment relationship (Aneesh 2009; Antunes 2023; Huws 2014; Pfeiffer 2018; Scholz 2016).

Some studies have also pointed out the international division of digital labor (Fuchs 2014), characterized by processes of capital accumulation based both on a multiplicity of modes of production and exploitation of labor (forced labor, extra-salarial coercion, servile labor, degraded labor, etc.) and on an economic-productive continuum ranging from mines where raw materials are extracted to digital infrastructures to cloud computing (which depends on the intense exploitation of manual and intellectual labor and of nature).

Uberization and platform labor, and thus the digital proletariat, fit into this framework (Antunes 2023; Chicchi, Marrone, Casilli 2022; Huws 2019; Woodcock, Graham 2019). This includes on-demand platform workers performing jobs in home delivery, urban transport, housing, and cleaning services, as well as workers employed in crowdwork (click workers) who contribute, among other things, to the training of Artificial Intelligence systems, such as machine learning, by completing specific micro-tasks (Casilli 2025; Gray, Suri 2019).

The digital driven new morphology of work is characterized by reductions in employment status and labor protections, lower wages, the intensification of work, the increased surveillance of workers, the assimilation of a performance logic imposed by algorithmic mechanisms of evaluation and classification, and the widespread conception of these forms of work as a free “provision of services” by workers who conceive of themselves as self-employed, and masters of their own working lives (Aloisi, De Stefano 2022; Crouch 2019; Schor 2021). It is based, at productive-organizational level, on a more intense application of the Taylorist factory, using information technology to transfer from the industrial to the tertiary sector the managerial systems and times and methods used in factories, thus ensuring tighter control, higher speeds, and the standardization of white-collar and tertiary work. The algorithmic organization of platform capitalism, based on the dual production and extraction of value, according to which the accumulated data contribute to an increase in the monetary value of the service offered, means that datafication and labor exploitation are consubstantial, creating a very close link between labor performance and data value chains (Casilli 2025).

Authors of this number of *Inequalities* address issues and processes of the aforementioned relationship between digital platform labour and inequalities. The chapter “Platform Capitalism: Experimental Laboratories and the Struggles for the Regulation”, authored by Ricardo Antunes, Marco Gonsales, and Murillo van der Laan, analyses labour in informational-financial capitalism, focusing particularly on the phenomenon of uberized work. It explores the conflicts associated with it and its nature as a labour experiment that presents similarities with proto-capitalism. Then, the chapter “Entre informalité et salariat: tensions et inégalités au sein des mobilisations collectives du secteur de la livraison à Bruxelles”, by Victoria Rakotomalala and Zephyr Vitali, offers insight into the tensions and inequalities emerging within the collective mobilizations of home delivery workers in Brussels, furthermore it explores the problematic link between informality and wage labor, and the question of workers’ awareness of their own condition. The third chapter, “Inequalities in the Platform Labor Market: A Study on Stratifications in the Italian Food Delivery Sector”, by Nicola Costalunga and Luigi Di Cataldo, focuses on labor inequalities in the food delivery market in Italy; it analyses the differentiation of working conditions and the social composition of riders to identify different employment models and their social stratification. Mirko Scardoni’s article, “The System of Inequalities in Food Delivery Services: The Case of Riders in Tuscany”, examines inequalities affecting riders in Tuscany, including physical risks associated with the activity, organizational risks stemming from algorithmic management, and risks linked to the workers’ national origin. The perspective broadens with the chapter “Use

and Regulation of Brazilian Territory in Platform Capitalism: Technical-Financial Subordination of the Popular Economy and the Production of New Social-Spatial Inequalities”, by Lucas Guide and Matheus Dezidério Busca, which investigates the relationship between platform capitalism and the use and regulation of urban territories in the Global South, focusing on Brazil and the conflicts between the network logic of platforms and the territorial logic of local communities, highlighting the exploitation of regulatory gaps. Finally, the article “Trabalho plataformizado e avanço das desigualdades educacionais no Brasil”, by Soraya Franzoni Conde, Cílson César Fagiani, Fabiane Previtali, and Rosana Mendes Maciel Moreira, analyses the impact of platform work on the advancement of educational inequalities in Brazil, with particular attention to the repercussions on teachers and students from popular classes.

With this issue, *Inequalities* aims to offer a critical and in-depth tool for understanding the challenges and contradictions of digital platform labor, stimulating further debates and studies on a fundamental issue of contemporary society.

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