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IN SEARCH OF THE GOOD LIFE: WEAKNESSES OF THE EVER-STRONGER GLOBAL PLATFORM ECONOMY

Abstract. The article contributes to the theoretical debate on the current state of the global economic system and the implications it holds for the (re)distribution of social and economic power. The theoretical framework of the discussion builds upon critical accounts of the rise of platform capitalism – an economic and social system founded on digitalised work. The imagining of futures is based on the mapping of possible actors and paths of the continuation or disruption of ongoing trends. Although digitalisation in principle holds the potential to foster economic growth and reduce inequalities, the accelerated development of the digital economy in the last few decades has been accompanied by unequally distributed positive and negative economic outcomes. Overcoming the precariousness of work and life as a universal problem should be founded in simultaneous local, short-term, partial resistance and attempts to limit the negative impacts and spread of precariousness on one hand and conceptualising and promoting comprehensive and universal solutions to precariousness on the other as part of a general rethinking of the social, political and economic order of our age.

Keywords: digital technology, digital economy, precarious work and life, platform economy, platform capitalism, economic power, economic inequalities

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Introduction

The debate on economic systems forms part of intellectual discussions on social change in the quest for a better society or following Aristotle what is defined as a “good life”¹. In specific historical contexts, such discussions point to the tension between the reality as it exists and alternatives that can be imagined and may be seen as “a thought experiment” (Butler, 2004) responding to the urgent need to find new ideas and theories to explain and conceive the “brave new world” around us (Beck, 2000). Economic and social changes in the 20th century led to growing economic inequalities, political and social uncertainty, and individualisation. Wars and political conflicts, health and economic crises and environmental catastrophes at the beginning of the 21st century are adding to precarity on the global level. We analyse precarity² defined broadly and qualitatively as a deviation from what is the civilisational consensus on a decent life (Kanjuo Mrčela, 2021)³. Based on these premises, we consider the potential and risks of technological and economic development in the early 21st century and whether they can be dealt with in order to achieve more of a “good life”.

The COVID-19 pandemic, apart from being a huge health challenge, triggered an unexpected social and economic experiment on a global scale. In all areas of the planet, businesses, educational, cultural and other institutions as well as individuals moved a vast part of their activities to the virtual world. More than ever before, work and other parts of everyday life became supported by digital technologies and a large share of the global workforce was pushed into working conditions that are increasingly like those of platform workers. Analyses of this unexpected and abrupt change call for a consideration of the pace and direction of the further development of the digital economy. In this article, we contribute to the debate on the prospects of (re) distributing economic power in the aftermath of the pandemic by analysing selected empirical data and critically examining recent economic trends. We

¹ Aristotle (350 BC) develops the theory of a good life in *Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle defines a good life as living well and doing well... »he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life«. Aristotle acknowledges that not all of prerequisites of a good life are in hands of individuals and that the role of the state (political organisation) is to support the good-life opportunities for people. Aristotle argues that a good life is “the end of the city-state” (Miller, 2017).

² The original meaning and (quantitative) definition of precarity in social science and left-wing activist discourse – Bourdieu’s precarity (used in 1963 in Algeria to distinguish between workers with permanent and precarious jobs) – that since the 1970s has been used by Western European left-wing movements to draw attention to the exclusion of young workers from permanent jobs, seems to be too narrow, and has been abandoned in sociology because it does not allow for the comprehensive analysis of work in the context of the capitalist arrangements of today (Alberti, Besa, Hardy et al., 2018).

³ Kanjua Mrčela (2021) presents the concept of precarity to a Slovenian audience. Some of the explanations from that article are presented below.

discuss changes of working and living based on technological and organisational innovations embedded in recent changes in the capitalistic global economic system. We want to outstrip the simplistic logic of “inevialism”⁴ of economic systems based on advanced technologies (Zuboff, 2019) and confront widespread myths concerning technology and the knowledge-based economy. The increasing economic inequalities are hidden in the myths that present recent economic developments as either power-distribution neutral or even as directed at equalising economic power by claiming that knowledge is replacing ownership and that technological advancement is opening up new opportunities in the economy for a greater number of participants. Some authors (Klein, 2020; Anderson, Rainie and Vogel, 2021) warn that the current social experiment might become a new paradigm of working and living, where teleworking, on-line education and tele-health provide huge opportunities for strong multinational hi-tech companies and privileged actors and cause the precarisation of work and life for workers and their families. The digital fast-forwarding happened during a global pandemic in a world economy that was already troubled by problems of economic inequalities. A discussion on actions needed that will ensure the public interest and serve the global community is underway.

We intend to contribute to this discussion by critically reflecting on and bridging gaps between different literature and data sets. The theoretical framework of the discussion builds on a critical (sociological) account of capitalism, especially the neoliberal phase that paved the way to development of platform capitalism. To understand what the future may hold, we present some new and developing ways of regulating digital/platform work and existing ways of imagining possible alternatives that “move from extractive to cooperative platform capitalism” (Scholz, 2020).

The article starts with a short review of critical accounts of capitalism, continues with an explanation of platform capitalism⁵, a presentation of the latest trends in the precarisation of work and life on one side and the concertation of economic power on the other, and some recent attempts to counter these trends. The article ends by presenting the conclusions of the analysis.

⁴ Zuboff (2019) explains how technological inevitability does not exist. In a critique of surveillance capitalism's use of the logic based on the old motto of the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago (“science finds, industry applies, man conforms”), she concludes that “technology is not and never can be a thing in itself isolated from the economics and society... technologies are always economic means, not ends in themselves”.

⁵ We use the term platform capitalism in this article while referring to the economic and social system that implies certain power relations, while platform/digital economy is used while referring to the functioning of the economic system. We also use terms stemming from the sources/literature we use.

An overture to platform capitalism

Capitalism, as a distinct historical social system based on institutionalised inequalities of power, has been critically analysed from the outset (from Marx, 1867 and Engels, 1868) until today (e.g. Harvey, 2007; Žižek, 2007⁶; Davis, 2017⁷; Klein, 2017). Analysis of capitalism is at the core of social sciences efforts – from 19th and 20th century classics to the contemporary search for the prospects of a post (trans) human conception of society and the economy (Fuller, 2011) and the analysis of precarity as “a bad organisation of life... because it does not provide humanly worthwhile living conditions and because humanly worthwhile living conditions are unevenly distributed” (Butler, 2012)⁸. Such analysis determined the differences and borders between social science disciplines. Swedberg and Granowetter (2001) criticised the “economic imperialism” – the dominance of economic analysis of the economy – and saw this dominance as an outcome of the inappropriate division of labour between economists and sociologists in the 19th century; namely, the time in which economists have studied the economy, and the sociologists “society minus the economy”. Bourdieu (1986) criticised economic theory that defined interests only in mercantile relationships, while leaving all other power inequalities outside of the analysis, and thereby prevented a holistic analysis and change in the power distribution in the economy. Although Varieties of Capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice, 2001) pointed to different types of market economies, 40 years of a seemingly objective, non-ideological analysis of the economy proved to constitute efficient mainstream economics support for a certain economic doctrine and a certain type of capitalism – neoliberal capitalism.

Even though the precariousness of work and life in capitalism has been the only reality throughout history for most people around the world, the neoliberal phase of capitalism has added to the worsening of (standards of acceptable) working and living conditions and to a more unequal distribution of economic power globally. Harvey (2007) explains how neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse at the turn of the centuries enabled a redistribution of economic power – it returned power to the class that had lost it after the Second World War during the rise of social democracy. He argues that this change has been made possible by the ‘naturalisation’ of neoliberal ideology. The adoption of the political ideals of individual choice and freedom

⁶ Žižek (2007) sees political inequality, economic exploitation, and injustice as the key features of global capitalism.

⁷ Angela Davis (2019, 1981) defines capitalism as a global system based on extreme forms of inequalities: slavery and colonialism.

⁸ Butler’s (2012) distinction between good and bad lives speaks thus as much about the location of individuals’ lives in the structure of life chances as about the social structure itself.

was the essence of the attempt to re-accumulate capital and to emerge from the crisis after the 'golden period' in the 1950s and 1960s⁹. Although the new accumulation was not achieved, the class power of those who had lost it in the post-war period was revitalised and the control over accumulated capital was redistributed. The neoliberal hegemonic discourse was particularly evident in the change in the functioning of the state (by agreeing to fiscal discipline states, have acknowledged the primacy of (international) finance over the welfare of citizens), in the attack on educational institutions and the media (funding useful business problem-solvers, e.g. private think-tanks, instead of basic scientific research and education in public institutions), and in the definition of the role of individuals in society, as manifested in the individualisation of (self-) entrepreneurs and consumers.

The broad international debate on precarity (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011; 2014) begins when the flight of capital from the national contexts of developed industrial countries during the financialisation phase of capitalism brings negative effects for individuals and entire economies, which represents a major twist in economic and political discourse. The concentration of wealth since the 1970s has substantially worsened the economic position of the lower and middle class in developed countries (e.g., in the USA, see Chomsky, 2017).

The totality of the "creative destructiveness" (Harvey, 2007) of the neoliberal phase of capitalism, shown in the privatisation, financialisation, management and manipulation of global crises, and states' redistributive policies. Contrary to the common interpretation of the neoliberal 'withdrawal' of the state from the economy, state regulations in fact supported the neoliberal turn. As Fligstein (2005) explains, using the iconic example of the US economic model of 'free markets' and 'free enterprise', it is the strong, long-standing and systematic involvement of the US state as regulator and financier that is the main explanation for some of the features that characterise the US economy today. For example, the success of high-tech companies in Silicon Valley is significantly more due to decades of systematic state funding of scientific work, mostly for the needs of the US military industry, than to the dynamism and entrepreneurial initiative of individuals. Today's prevailing understanding of increasing shareholder value as the dominant and legitimate principle of US corporations and as a 'natural' fact of operating an (efficient) economy under free market principles ignores the fact that the dominance of this principle is due to legislation and tax

⁹ *The 'standard employment relationship' was a historical exception during the 'golden years of post-Second World War capitalism for part of the workforce, while precarity is the norm in the history of capitalism (Bremner and Van der Linden, 2014). The current focus on the precarity in the 'developed' part of the world reflects what Judith Butler (2012) calls the 'biopolitics' of the world – the power structure that organises life and assigns different degrees of precarity to people whose "lives matter" more or less.*

regulation evolving especially during the Carter and Reagan administrations Foucault (2008) described neoliberal government interventions as “no less powerful, frequent, active and continuous than in any other system”. The consequence is the precariousness of work and life of workers as a “way of domination” and structuring the economy that “forces workers into subordination” (Bourdieu, 1998: 85). Beck (2000) defined the neoliberal phase of capitalist development in the 1970s as one that has caused the normalisation of uncertainty in both the economy and in the lives of workers and their families. Uncertainty is no longer a deviation from the normal functioning of the economy, but its primary characteristic. The “political economy of uncertainty” (Beck, 2000) is becoming the operating principle of the economic system and of the individuals within it.

Platform capitalism: the growing presence of a new business model affecting work and life globally

Platform capitalism is an economic and social system based on the emergence and proliferation of digital platforms and platform-organised (digital) labour. The appearance of the platform economy is generally linked to the development of information and telecommunication technologies, which are becoming ever more indispensable for both the business operations of companies and people’s everyday lives. Platforms may be seen as intermediaries between consumers, advertisers, service providers and producers. The growth of the platform economy is linked to decisions by individuals and other economic actors to move their activities online based on (at least presumed, if not real) benefits for all involved. However, due to the business model being based on the management, collection and use of information, the platforms themselves benefit greatly and the most of all.

Critical analyses of platform capitalism view it as a type of economic system that radicalises the unequal power relations between labour and capital based on the emergence and expansion of platform companies and platform work (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Murillo et al., 2017; Eurofound, 2018; Eurofound, 2021a). Wark (2021) explains these new power relations as the new class arrangement – the emergence of a new ruling class – “vectorial capitalists”, whose power is provided by the privatisation and control of information and a »hacker class« that when faced with the emergence of more aggressive labour rationalisation and commodification encounters difficulties with building solidarity. Far from having the positive characteristics that some of the names used for this new type of economy suggest (such as the sharing economy; on-demand economy, collaborative consumption, Do-It-Yourself – DIY – economy, collaborative economy), the platform economy (or gig economy)

relies on the externalisation of operating costs and risks, the precarisation of work and monopolising of information provided by both workers and consumers. A meta-analysis of some of the more prominent work platforms (Kanjuo Mrčela and Črtalič, 2020) described the core elements of the business model used in the platform economy:

1. *Worker status* – the essence of the business model of online platforms is the absence of an employer–employee relationship; risks and responsibilities concerning a worker’s “employment” situation are transferred to individual workers, which continues the trends of breaking the links between those who organise work and those who actually do the work; workers are atomised subjects in competition with each other.
2. *Payment and financial risk* – workers are only paid for work that is recognised as successfully completed; there is a risk that they will not be paid for all of their work effort; there is a large amount of unpaid work (looking for work, performing mandatory tests, writing feedback on assignments) and other work-related expenses for workers (purchase and maintenance of work equipment, payment of a commission to the platforms to be able to be assigned the work tasks/perform work, social security expenses and taxes on income from work on platforms; the financial advantage enjoyed by platform workers from less developed countries due to global pricing is in fact only a by-product of lowering the price of labour for workers from (for now) richer environments.
3. *Working conditions* – an extreme form of flexibility; contrary to the myth of workers’ autonomy, there is no real freedom to determine one’s working hours, to choose the location, content and other working conditions; there is constant monitoring of employees through tracking and a system of performance ratings¹⁰; platforms directly and indirectly control the working hours of their workers their efficiency, productivity and the quality of work performed; the platforms have led to the development of a 24-hour economy in which workers put in additional hours of paid and unpaid work in their private time, thereby blurring the boundaries between private and professional life^{11,12}; only workers who have financial and social security outside the platforms or are members of a small

¹⁰ The digital platforms use automated systems to assign tasks, to monitor, evaluate and take decisions for the people working through what is known as “algorithmic management”.

¹¹ The blurring is conditioned not only by the self-exploitative practices of workers who tend to work when work is available and by the great amount of unpaid work mentioned earlier, but also by the practices of platforms that might offer bonuses for those who work during socially and family unfriendly hours (offline platforms) and encourage working that suits clients in the global North, which does not coincide with the normal working day of those living in the southern hemisphere (online platforms; Haidar and Keune, 2021).

¹² Haidar and Keune (2021) note three tendencies in the organisation and control of the labour process on platforms, namely: using the productive capacity of labour solely in the service of capital, “algo-

group of 'superstars' who manage to obtain continuous and better-paid work on the platforms (because they have the financial and other conditions to do so) have an opportunity to exercise freedom and independence; most platforms do not care about safety and health at work¹³; transferring the concern for health and safety fully to workers brings serious consequences for the health and safety of workers, service users and the wider environment (e.g. in cases of drivers, caregivers or domestic service providers at home etc. themselves, their clients and the public could be threatened); some of the pre-existing inequalities and discrimination based on gender, race and nationality are not being resolved, while new, platform-specific ones are being developed (e.g. there is high gender segregation by occupation and a noticeable wage gap between the genders while the system of performance ratings plays a big role in (new) discrimination on online work platforms)¹⁴.

This business model based on lowering the costs of labour and worsening the working conditions is not used only by tech companies. Reducing the standards of work and payments and extracting information from customers are becoming features of conventional businesses as well.¹⁵ The mentioned business model is experiencing exponential growth in the last decade, especially during the pandemic years, even though it provides standards of work that are being questioned and contested.¹⁶ We present some data on the platform economy's growth and changes in working conditions in general that accompany such growth.

The number of workers involved in platform work is rising around the world and in Europe. Available data shows that before the COVID-19 crisis about 2% of all working individuals in Europe (aged 16–74; in 14 EU Member States) were performing platform work as their main job, and 6% of all working people considered platform work to be an important part of their income, and at least 8% of workers performed this form of work

rhythmic management" and blurring the distinctions between work and life, working time and free time, intensifying the tendency towards the actual subsumption of society under capital.

¹³ *The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2017) reports that online platform work poses a range of pre-existing and new OSH risks, both psychological and psycho-social.*

¹⁴ *Lehdonvirta et al. (2021) explain how the use of biopolitical technologies (e.g. GPS tracking, requesting 'selfies', photos and videos of the workers' faces or information about civil status, illness) grants the platforms the power to reintroduce discriminatory practices along the lines of class, gender and ethnicity.*

¹⁵ *Adascalitei (2021) reports how the use of AI systems and applications is extensive in other parts of the economy, not only in platform-based businesses. Walmart (retail), the largest private employer in the USA, is investing heavily in customer intelligence and already has almost as many data centres as physical distribution centres (Wark, 2021).*

¹⁶ *Authors who analyse entrepreneurship think that "in 2020, platforms are becoming the infrastructure of economy and therefore the context that includes 'new dimensions of uncertainty'" (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021).*

at least once a month (Pesole et al., 2018). Differences between EU countries were considerable (from 0.3% to 20%; Eurofound, 2018a: 12). The latest European Commission data (2021) show that over 28 million people in the EU are working through digital labour platforms and that it is expected that by 2025 the figure will reach 43 million. It is also important to stress that platform workers are already a bigger group than is commonly acknowledged – besides the very visible Uber taxi drivers and food delivery riders, the work of a rising number of domestic workers and intellectual workers is being channelled via applications such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork or others. There are also many workers who act ‘behind the scenes’ to support visible platform services. Analyses of the work needed at platforms revealed phenomena such as “fauxtimation”¹⁷ and fake artificial intelligence (Taylor, 2018, 2018a) that add to the power imbalances between workers and the organisers of the work on platforms. Taylor (2018) states that what appears to be automation often conceals a great deal of human labour. The myth and ideology of automation hide the labour of people who are contributing to the process – some of them free of charge as customers¹⁸ (themselves doing tasks that workers were previously paid to do, like placing orders in restaurants, using self-check outs etc.) or workers who are now having more unpaid tasks that were previously done by other workers) and others who are invisible to customers /consumers (e.g. the hundreds of thousands of workers who screen and censor digital content on social media feeds or those who, although underpaid, do a better job than robots.). The other part of the workforce attached to platforms are workers who in different ways are employed by big companies that have the core of their business on platforms. Zukerfeld (2021) reports that Amazon, for example in March 2020 employed 798,000 behind-the-platform workers. The rising strength of companies like Amazon means an increasing number of ‘standard’ workforce depends on them as well.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated both job insecurity and the volume of platform work, with a vast number of activities shifting over to platforms (OECD, 2020). The public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 were responsible for considerable changes in the organisation of work and other spheres of life. Supported by information and communication technology, hitherto marginalised forms of work, such as working from home, became widespread and normalised (Eurofound, 2020; 2021) and for many workers this uncontrolled and unregulated digitised work from home has led to overburdening and reduced the quality of

¹⁷ The word was coined by the writer and artist Astra Taylor; it combines the word “faux” (meaning fake) with automation.

¹⁸ Taylor (2018) explains how this is commodification of labour, leisure and sociability; a source of power of “culture industries” (such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit).

their lives.¹⁹ In the circumstances of the traditionally gendered division of paid and unpaid (household and care) work, this precarisation has particularly onerous effects on women, especially mothers. Recent research on the European level confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a significant increase in the use of ICT at work (home/telework), while it is predicted that (at least) a hybrid work organisation is more likely in the future than a complete return to the way of working we knew before the pandemic (Eurofound, 2020; Samek Lodovici et al., 2021).

Eurofound (2020) reports that prior to the pandemic homeworking accounted for a relatively small share of paid work in the EU (less than 1 in 20 employees worked in this way on a regular basis in 2018, and less than 1 in 10 worked occasionally). In July 2020, almost half of EU respondents (48%) had already worked from home for at least some of the time during the pandemic, and more than one-third (34%) had worked exclusively from home. During the pandemic, working from home became the new reality for workers in many more sectors and occupations than was the case before the pandemic.

Consumption (ordering or buying goods and services) online also grew during the pandemic. The share of individuals aged 16–74 in the EU-27 who ordered or bought goods or services online for private use in 2019 was 60%, 14 percentage points higher than in 2014. The share of Internet users who made online purchases in the 12 months preceding the survey in 2020 varied considerably across the EU, ranging from 42% of Internet users in Bulgaria to 91% in the Netherlands. Considering all individuals in the EU aged 16–74, the share of online shoppers in this group was 64%, with Denmark having the biggest share (89%) and Bulgaria the smallest (31%).

These figures must be seen in the light of analyses which have revealed that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the ‘classic’ and yet unmet health and safety risks at work were intertwined with an increasing number of risks associated with new technologies for which we do not yet have any clear coping strategies. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems. Already before the pandemic, the ubiquity and accessibility of workers everywhere and all of the time (the “24-hour economy”; Hutton and Giddens, 2001) was based on demands to increase productivity, efficiency and speed. Even pre-pandemic, we spoke about an “epidemic of overtime

¹⁹ Kenney and Zysman (2016) point to the historical repetition of the putting-out system of home-based artisanal workshops that preceded the factory organised work in the industrial and urban era – digital labour platforms are reversing this development and are moving work back to the individual households. Lueng et al. (2021) argue that the global character of labour platforms is leading to a new international putting-out system of labour (NIPL) that allows a reduction of the costs of labour, management, supervision, equipment and real estate and to transfer many of the risks traditionally borne by employers and investors onto the shoulders of Southern workers.

based on electronic communications” (Secunda, 2019), a strong “culture of connectivity” (Hesselberth, 2017), “online slavery” (Terranova, 2020), how we are becoming hybrid, technological/biological beings who do not have the right to disconnect. This type of work, which was benefitting employers, was a reality for a growing yet still minor share of the working population. During the pandemic, many employers in most sectors around the world could be seen to adopt ICT-organised work. Most workers have, for the time being, retained their status and most of the rights that come with that status, but the problems they have encountered are similar to those reported by workers in platform companies (such as unclear boundaries between work and private time, social isolation, lack of adequate working conditions etc.). The demands of working and living ‘remotely’ and digitisation during the pandemic have accelerated consumer and business behaviour, which looks set to continue in the post-pandemic era (Mattioli, 2020).

Recent trends in the concentration of economic power

Analyses of platform capitalism and the power relations between labour and capital developed thus far point to the radicalisation of inequalities in a context where power is based on the privatisation, concentration and control of information along with the rationalisation and reduction of labour costs (Burnett et al., 2008; Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Murillo et al., 2017).

The platform economy’s market share is expanding rapidly. According to the European Commission, in 2015 revenues from platform work in Europe were twice the level of the previous year (EUR 28 billion, Williams and Horodnic, 2017). The European Commission (2021) reports an estimation that revenues in the digital labour platform economy in the EU had grown by around 500% in the preceding five years. Despite the development of many European and other platforms, the platform economy is still dominated (regarding number of users and visibility) by large US platforms such as Uber and Amazon.

Analyses show that high-tech companies offering platform services during the COVID-19 crisis enjoyed excellent business results as the value of their shares has risen considerably (Financial Times, 2020; ABC News, 2020). More work and business on the Internet than ever before have contributed to some companies’ remarkable business success in a period otherwise characterised by human and economic catastrophe. Companies that have gained the most (with a net market capitalisation of more than USD 1 billion in 2020) include Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Alphabet, Netflix and others, which are growing based on the platform economy business model (Financial Times, 2020). Longitudinal comparative analysis also

shows that the platform economy's importance is rising. Among the top eight public-stock companies with the largest market capitalisation in the world in 2009, only one was an online platform (Microsoft), while in the first quarter of 2019 there were six platforms (Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet - Google, Facebook, Alibaba Group). Thus, the pandemic crisis has seen a continuation of the pre-existing growth trends of the platform economy.

The impact of the platform economy on economic inequality can be estimated by considering evidence on the income/wealth distribution during the time of the platform economy's rise. It has been shown that the trend of rising inequalities globally was reinforced in the time of the pandemic. The World Inequality Report 2022 shows that the wealth of the richest individuals on the planet has grown by 6% to 9% per year since 1995, whereas average wealth has grown at 3.2% per year. Since 1995, the share of global wealth possessed by billionaires has risen from 1% to over 3%. This increase was exacerbated during the COVID pandemic, with 2020 marking the steepest increase in global billionaires' share of wealth on record (Chancel, Piketty, Saez, Zucman et al., 2022).

Analysis of Chancel, Piketty, Saez, Zucman et al. (2022) shows that economic inequalities have increased during the last few decades around the world²⁰ and that contemporary global inequalities are close to early-20th century levels. The gap between the average incomes of the top 10% and the bottom 50% of individuals within countries has almost doubled, from 8.5x to 15x. This sharp rise in within-country inequalities happened despite strong growth in the emerging countries. Analysis shows even greater inequalities within countries compared to the significant inequalities observed between countries. Data on wealth inequality across the world thus show an extreme concentration of capital (CEA, 2017).²¹

An international research team (Tomaskovic Devey et al., 2021) analysed the rising workplace inequality²² and discovered that it occurs when firms with powerful market positions simultaneously outsource production and services to temporary labour firms, subcontractors, global supply chains, franchisees, independent contractors, and other low-wage firms. Firms like Apple, Amazon, Marriott, McDonalds, Uber and Nike are prominent

²⁰ *Inequality has risen more in some developed countries (e.g. the USA, UK, Canada) than in others (e.g. Japan, Italy, France (Chancel, Piketty, Saez, Zucman et al., 2022)).*

²¹ *The total wealth of billionaires around the world rose by USD 5 trillion to USD 13 trillion in 12 months (Thorbecke, 2021; The Times of India, 2021).*

²² *Analysis was done on roughly 25 years of administrative records covering more than 2 billion job-years nested within more than 50 million workplace-years for 14 high-income countries: Canada, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, South Korea, Sweden and the United States. It discovered that the between-workplace share of wage inequality is growing in 12 out of 14 countries.*

examples of this combination of market power and externalised labour. This study also showed that in countries with weak or declining labour market protection inequality between workplaces rises the fastest. In contrast, widespread collective bargaining coverage and high minimum wages reduce inequalities between and within firms.

Haidar and Keune (2021) highlight the global inequalities caused by online platforms that “are largely populated by workers from the global South but orchestrated by capital from the North, leading to exploitation, dependency, inequalities and discrimination”. However, as exploitative as they are, online platforms are often regarded by workers from the South as providing them with more and better work opportunities than are present in their local labour markets. Online platforms are also attractive for the most vulnerable labour market participants in the global North (e.g. migrant workers) for whom online platforms offer at least the promise if not the reality of better job opportunities compared to those in the host country (Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). Accordingly, online labour markets perpetuate existing labour market inequalities.²³

Fleming (2017) describes the phase that follows the neoliberal phase of capitalism as an even more severe system for the majority – a ‘wreckage economy’ characterised by the disintegration of public space, the impoverishment of social services, the isolation of the elderly, the precariousness of the young, and the normalisation of crisis.²⁴ Wark (2021) states that this worse-than-neoliberal, more-radically-problematic economic system we are living in is no longer even a form of capitalism, but an economic system that is responsible for systematic ecological devastation, the accumulation of electronic waste, unpaid reproductive labour and a multitude of just nominally ‘immaterial’ labour practices around the world. Wark’s (2021) provocative claim that “capital is dead” offers a pessimistic warning about the possibility that capitalism has already been rendered historical but that the period that is replacing it is worse than capitalism.

Wark describes a new political economy that runs on information asymmetries as a form of control. While the vectorial class owns the vector along which information is gathered and used and does not need any more land/factories, the hacker class – anyone who produces new information out of old information (and not just people who code for a living, but all the

²³ In 2016, 61.2% of global employment was informal employment. However, in Western Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia such informality was below 20%, while it was 53.1% in Latin America, 68.2% in Asia and the Pacific and 85.8% in Africa (ILO, 2018 in Haidar and Keune, 2021).

²⁴ Fleming (2017) describes the emerging economic order as a “theatre of cruelty in new forms of gig economy” and a “brutalist paradise of self-serving individualism” where “any sense of ‘public good’ has been squashed”.

“producers” – producers+users)²⁵. Zuboff (2019) critically refers to this “new economic order” based on an asymmetry of power as “surveillance capitalism” and “a titanic struggle between capital and each one of us” and “a direct intervention into free will, an assault on human autonomy”.

Srnicek (2021) explains that platforms are »rentiers«²⁶ that do not contribute to productive investments but are strongly increasing their own income, undermining growth by extracting value from the productive economy. In this sense, they perform in line with and as a continuation of the strongest financial institutions during the financial phase of capitalism. While speaking about power relations, Srnicek sees that rentiers’ investments in their infrastructure produce intra-capital shifts of power and exacerbate the inequalities between workers: those employed at non-platform firms who are losing and those working on platforms who have the potential (not necessarily realised) of better working conditions.

The above analyses and data regarding changes during the last several decades show how global inequalities have increased, and the precariousness of work and life has been normalised (become unquestionable) and naturalised (become seen as a natural, not a social phenomenon), even in parts of the world that, for a period, were a positive exception (and a desired model) regarding working and living standards. It seems that the platform economy based on the accepted discourse of precarity is becoming more than just a ‘business model’ for a certain part of the economy – it is becoming a way of life and thinking about future life. This is related to the strong trends of individualisation and the decline of the great theories of the 20th century that, despite ignoring many social inequalities, provided a common plan for the organisation of life that transcended individual atomised lives. The process of individualisation has led to the radical “responsibilisation” (Fleming, 2017) of the workforce based on an extreme version of self-interested individualism (workers are willingly taking the responsibility and risks of entrepreneurship without realising the asymmetry of the power relations in which they participate)²⁷.

²⁵ Regarding the »free labour« of users, it is interesting to see Srnicek’s critique of the free labour theory based on Terranova (2020) in Fuchs (2014) that defines the time spent by users on social media platforms as “time that produces value in the form of data commodities that are sold to advertisers” (Fuchs, 2014: 89–90). Srnicek sees these activities as useful for platform owners, but instead of defining the platforms’ power based on appropriation, he proposes an explanation based on the notion of rent and distinguishes between three prominent mechanisms of rent in the contemporary digital economy: intellectual property rents, advertising rents, and infrastructure rents (Srnicek, 2021).

²⁶ As the rentiers provide a new obstruction to accumulation, Srnicek (2021) expects an emerging antagonism between fractions of capital (platform owners and the non-platform companies that increasingly depend on them and pay them rents) as rentiers possess different class interests than productive capitalists or workers do.

²⁷ Leung et al. (2021) show how successful is the discourse of entrepreneurial spirit and individualism

It seems that there is a strong need for a new common plan. Butler (2012) states that “our shared exposure to precarity is but one ground of our potential equality and our reciprocal obligations to produce together conditions of liveable life”. We present some of the emerging institutions and actors that hold the potential to contribute to better conditions for ensuring more liveable lives for all.

In the quest for alternatives: regulating, organising and changing the platform economy

As noted in the introduction, a tension exists between the current state of the platform economy and possible alternatives to the present reality. The framework for analysing existing developments could be described as “a ‘Polanyian’ double movement in which the destabilizing and destructive effects of unchecked corporate power and market development eventually generate political and regulatory responses to constrain private actions by new economic actors as they threaten the social, political, and economic order” (Cioffi, Kenney and Zysman, 2021).

Based on a comparative study of working conditions at microtask platforms (ILO, 2018)²⁸, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) proposed a list of principles for improving working conditions on digital labour platforms, including the following: addressing employment misclassification; allowing crowdworkers to exercise their freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, applying the minimum wage that prevails at the workers’ location, ensuring transparency in the payments and fees assessed by the platform, ensuring that independent workers on the platform have the flexibility to decline tasks, covering the costs of lost work in case of technical problems with the task or platform, establishing strict and fair rules to govern non-payment, assuring that terms of service agreements are presented in a human-readable format that is clear and concise, informing workers about why they receive unfavourable ratings, establishing and enforcing clear codes of conduct for all platform users, ensuring that workers have the ability to contest non-payment²⁹, negative evaluations, qualifi-

imported from the West and promoted by platforms in that part of the world with traditionally collectivistic values (China and India). Part of the success of this trend is explained by the opposition to feudalist ethos (in India) that the platforms represent.

²⁸ *The ILO survey (conducted in 2015 and 2017) provided data on pay rates, work availability, work intensity, rejections and non-payment, worker communication with clients and platform operators, social protection coverage and the types of work performed by platform workers from developed and developing countries of from the global North and global South.*

²⁹ *Proposed solutions that should help eliminate the precariousness of the work and life of platform workers generally include the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI). On one hand, a UBI can be understood as a guarantee of a minimum decent life for all, regardless of individuals’ employment status,*

cation test outcomes, accusations of code of conduct violations and account closures, establishing a system of client review that is as comprehensive as the worker review system, making sure that task instructions are clear and validated prior to the posting of any work, enabling workers to be able to view and export a complete human- and machine-readable work and reputation history at any time, allowing workers to continue a work relationship with a client off the platform without paying a disproportionately large fee, ensuring that customers and platform operators respond to worker communications promptly, politely and substantively, informing workers about the identity of their customers and the purpose of the work, and assuring that tasks which might be psychologically stressful and damaging are clearly marked by platform operators in a standard way. The ILO (2018) report recommended three additional criteria for adapting social protection systems so that crowd workers have access to social protection coverage: 1) adapting social insurance mechanisms to cover workers in all forms of employment, independently of the type of contract; 2) using technology to simplify contribution and benefit payments; and 3) instituting and strengthening universal, tax-financed mechanisms of social protection.

Several other international and national regulatory and policymaking institutions are involved in the discussion and actions regarding the (attempts and plans of) regulation of the online/platform work and platform economy (EU-OSHA, 2017). The European Parliament Resolution on fair working conditions, rights and social protection for platform workers (2021) lists problems of platform workers and proposes standards for securing workers' rights that hold the potential to safeguard the European economic and social model as the minimal working standards for platform workers and imposes the minimal working standards for all the workers (see Kanjuo Mrčela, 2021a). The resolution covered the following areas: fair and transparent working conditions, a healthy and safe working environment, adequate and transparent social protection, representation and collective bargaining rights, training and skills, and algorithms and data management.

On 9 December 2021, the European Commission (2021) issued its proposed new Directive regarding platform work with a specific focus on improving the working conditions of platform workers that will be in line with the fundamental rights for workers stated in Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Directive contains three main objectives:

but this would require that it actually be universal. "Universality" bounded to certain (developed) countries may be seen as an illustration of a possibility of change, but it does not help to change the (global) system based on inequality, exploitation and violence. A UBI can also be understood as a means for maintaining the existing system and existing consumer patterns. In a technologically changed environment and given the new global division of labour, a UBI can be seen as a measure that creates/maintains the consumer capabilities of individuals, even though they do not have a paid job.

1. to ensure that people working through platforms have - or can obtain - the correct employment status considering their actual relationship with the digital labour platform and gain access to the applicable labour and social protection rights;
2. to ensure fairness, transparency and accountability in algorithmic management in the platform work context; and
3. to enhance transparency, traceability, and awareness of developments in platform work and improve enforcement of the applicable rules for all people working through platforms, including those operating across borders.

According to the European Commission, actions to address the risk of misclassification are expected to see between 1.72 million and 4.1 million people reclassified as workers. The Directive introduces new material rights for people performing platform work who are thus subject to “algorithmic management” (information on automated monitoring systems and decision-making in a concise, transparent, intelligible and easily accessible form, using clear and plain language; existence of regular monitoring and evaluating the impact of individual decisions taken or supported by automated monitoring and decision-making systems; explanations for decisions taken or supported by an automated decision-making system that significantly affect the platform worker’s working conditions, and access to a contact person designated to discuss and to clarify the facts, circumstances and reasons having led to the decision, information and consultation of platform workers’ representatives regarding decisions likely to lead to the introduction of substantial changes in the use of automated monitoring and decision-making systems). The Directive stipulates that digital platform must declare work performed by platform workers to the competent labour and social protection authorities and to share relevant data with those authorities and that the relevant authorities be given access to relevant basic information concerning the number of people working through digital labour platforms, their employment status, and their standard terms and conditions. Under the Directive, platforms must ensure that workers can communicate with each other and can be contacted by representatives of persons performing platform work through the digital labour platform’s digital infrastructure or similarly effective means. The ambition of the Directive is to cover all platform workers, all forms of digitally-mediated platform work, “irrespective of whether that work is performed online or in a certain location”. Initial reactions to the proposed Directive point to its importance on one hand and to limitations on the other. Cioffi, Kenney and Zysman, (2021) estimate that this EU initiative could be an important step in regulating the powerful multinational platforms and see this as the “beginning of a transformational process that is likely to reorder old and generate

new political economic interests, identities, coalitions, and conflicts at the sectoral, national, regional, and international levels". De Stefano and Aloisi (2021) view the proposed Directive as an ambitious document that has good prospects due to the wide consensus emerging in policymaking and public opinion that supports the regulation of platform work. These authors note the fragmentation of the front of platform companies since on one side some major operators are openly challenging the proposition, foreseeing detrimental consequences for their profitability, but on the other, some have already started to comply with national laws about employment status and rights. Countouris (2021) concludes that the proposed EU directive on platform work that is about to emerge is welcome, yet insufficient and no substitute for national action. The chances that international standards and regulation are to be accepted (and respected) are embedded in the balance of power between capital and labour in Europe and globally.

In the absence of statutory regulating mechanisms, platform workers are increasingly trying to respond by themselves to the problems of platform-organised work. Haidar and Keune (2021) stress what determines the construction of these responses: the forms of control exercised by the platforms, the power resources of workers and unions, union traditions and strategies, and governmental interventions, specific geographical configurations of the labour market, culture and institutions. The authors identify four types of responses: 1) 'pro-status quo' where workers engage in limited actions in different forms of digital associativism (social networks and forums for sharing information and tips) with the sole aim of improving the conditions in which they operate in the labour market); 2) 'reformist', which are diverse in demands, organisational forms, a variety of repertoires of action (many are associated with digital technology but also strikes) and meanings with the chief objective of party reforming the functioning of and relationship with the platforms; 3) 'standardisation', in which workers organise to combat the asymmetry of power relative to the platforms, questioning the idea of autonomy and with the main demand of changing the status of workers from independent contractors to employees, and for bargaining over collective labour agreements; and 4) 'disruption', based on the vindication of autonomy along with the workers' ability to organise their labour process independently in an alternative model to the prevailing platform one (e.g. cooperative platforms).

Some research findings advocate the group agency of platform workers as the only viable strategy for improving the position of workers in platform capitalism. The ILO (2019) explores four organisational structures that provide support to platform workers: union renewal strategies and new organising initiatives, worker forums, worker centres and cooperatives. Recent exploration of evolving forms of collective resistance and representation of

workers in several European countries (Vandaele, 2021) discovered organisation along two dimensions (online vs locally organised platform work and the logic of membership vs logic of influence), including old and new actors like mainstream trade unions³⁰, grassroots unions, worker-led or union-led platform co-ops, labour market intermediaries, and new digital communities. Some cooperative initiatives are organised internationally as for example a visible academic-led initiative of “platform cooperativism” (Scholz, 2016; 2020). The initiative is supporting an alternative to radical exploitation and precarisation “based on the fusion of technological progress and democratic and solidarity principles in a ‘platform cooperative’”.³¹

Conclusion

While analysing current trends regarding changes in the global economic system, we neither ignore the economic development that has been achieved, nor romanticise the past during which a large part of the world’s working population on the global periphery did not benefit from the advantages of an earlier economic model that only applied to a minority in the global centre³². We have seen that changes in economic politics and discourses in the last few decades have exacerbated the position of workers in the global centre, contributed to the convergence of (standards of) working conditions globally at a lower level, and triggered additional imbalances in power distribution between economic actors. We showed that although digitalisation in principle holds the potential to foster economic growth and reduce inequalities (i.e. among classes, genders, between the global South and global North etc.), the digital economy’s accelerated development over the last few decades has been accompanied by an unequal distribution of positive and negative economic outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the last 2 years has caused hardship and economic and social problems for many workers and their families. Considerable parts of economies have faced problems that have led to many (small) business closures, problems and uncertainty in some sectors, harder work and an increased workload in the health and care sectors and, for many workers (especially young), the precarious labour market

³⁰ An example is the Fair Crowd Work initiative (for more, see <http://faircrowd.work/>).

³¹ 10 Principles for Platform Cooperativism are: Collectively-owned platform cooperatives; decent Pay and Income Security, Transparency & Data Portability, Appreciation and Acknowledgement, Co-determined Work, A Protective Legal Framework, Portable Worker Protections and Benefits, Protection Against Arbitrary Behaviour, Rejection of Excessive Workplace Surveillance, The Right to Log Off (Scholtz, 2016).

³² Even in parts of the world where the norm of full-time paid formal employment with the prospect of a lifelong career has been the norm, a huge amount of work has been done outside the formal economy and/or has been unpaid (e.g. women’s care and domestic work).

situation has worsened. In contrast, we have witnessed the additional and unprecedented growth and increased profits of already super strong high-tech companies (e.g. Amazon, Google). To understand the negative effects of the digital transformation, we described the forces that have enabled it. The extremely rapid changes in the organisation of work and life on the global level that we have experienced in the last years would not have been possible without decades of technological but also political and economic changes that allowed the precarisation of work and the concentration of economic power. To paraphrase Klein (2017), the platform economy is not a surprise, but is the culmination and expected outcome of neoliberal policies that should have been stopped long ago³³. The platform economy builds on the previous forms and the economic logic of 'atypical' work (such as homework, part-time work³⁴, mini-tasks, on-call work, intermediated work; zero-hours contracts etc.). A major part of the analysis presented gives many arguments that support the assumption that the pandemic will permanently change our lives in a way that makes the measures introduced during the quarantine permanent and beneficial to billionaires in the IT industry. The radicalisation of the unequal power relations between labour and capital has proven to be a tendency the pandemic crisis has contributed to by normalising working conditions and consumption habits on the global level, whereas before the pandemic they were the exception and confined to parts of the economy. Yet, some of the presented data reveal the reaction of organised labour and the tackling of these trends "in order to turn the tide from neo-commodification to a new emancipatory future" (Marčeta, 2021). As we have seen, some streams of social scientific thought and social activism are formulating responses and solutions that seek to resist the uncontrolled rise of the platform economy. The theorising of positive social change is influenced and informed by progressive social practices (such as initiatives to establish legislative frameworks for platform enterprises and teleworking (European Parliament, 2020; European Commission, 2021; Lane, 2020; Freshfields, 2021)), newly organised workers' action and the creation of new democratic enterprises (ILO, 2019; Scholz, 2020). Attempts at overcoming the precariousness of work and life that have been detected currently take the form of mainly local, short-term, partial resistance and efforts to limit the negative impacts and spread of precariousness. Even if the proposed national and international protective regulations do help to reduce the power asymmetries and secure some employment and social

³³ After the US presidential elections in 2017, Klein (2017) commented that "Trump is not a surprise, but a culmination – the expected outcome of neoliberal policies that had to be stopped long ago".

³⁴ Future analyses are needed to determine how much the feminist debate on feminised underpaid and undervalued precarious work such as care work, domestic work or part-time work could be informative and useful in understanding and challenging platform/gig/crowd work.

rights for platform workers, the widespread presence of practices and discourses of precarious work in the global labour markets will constantly jeopardise the effective application of already existing and new regulations that are intended to improve the working and living conditions of platform and other workers. It may be expected that profitable new ways of work organisation and digital management mechanisms especially pertaining to platform workers are likely to spread extensively. As we have seen, the development of an ever-stronger platform economy is based on changes in the scope and division of the power held by economic actors and institutions. While states, nationally organised trade unions, and other previously powerful political actors sized to effectively protect workers, a fundamental characteristic of a growing part of the workforce is its atomisation and isolation. Therefore, the likelihood of implementing proposals that expect states or precarious workers themselves to resist and overcome precariousness is limited. The success of emancipatory political action today depends on identifying, forming and operating effective coalitions of actors able to resist existing forms of domination and to establish and use power to create a “good life”. Further analysis will show how the next phase of economic change will establish the “balance between dynamism and humanism” in contemporary capitalism (Reich, 2001).³⁵

Overcoming the precariousness of work and life as a universal problem is to be founded in simultaneous local, short-term, partial resistance and attempts to limit the negative effects and spread of precariousness on one hand and conceptualising and promoting comprehensive and universal solutions to precariousness on the other. The former forms part of a general rethinking of the social, political and economic order of our age in line with Butler’s (2021) claims that the current times demand that we imagine a whole new way for people to live together in a world of “radical (social and political) equality” based on the recognition of interdependence.³⁶ This explains why the conceptualisation and promotion of comprehensive and universal solutions to precariousness are becoming central to contemporary discussions on work in an age of growth of the platform economy.

³⁵ *The idea of the need for a balanced distribution of economic power was already present in classical analysis of the functioning of the capitalist economic system. Max Weber (1978 (1920)) pointed to the need for a balance of power among strong states and the cosmopolitan capitalistic class in order not to destroy the economic dynamism and to prevent exploitation and political turmoil.*

³⁶ *When Butler (2012) reflects on Adorno’s call for an urgent rebellion against a bad life (a life that, as Adorno says, is so “deformed and distorted” that no one can live humanely), she advocates a policy in which actors use various acts of radical democracies to live a “good life” with others.*

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