Materialities of Digital Labor in the Global South and Communication Invisibilities

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Abstract: The book *The Privilege of Servitude: The New Services-Proletariat in the Digital Age*, by Ricardo Antunes, offers a reading of the mutations and contradictions of the world of work, through the materialities of digital labor and the morphologies of the “class-that-lives-from-labor”, in a dialogue both theoretical-conceptual from the Global South and in a conjunctural analysis of the last years in Brazil, including the bourgeois counterrevolution and the devastation of the labor in the Temer government. The review aims to make Antunes’ book dialogue with communication research.

Keywords: digital labor; world of work; Global South; social classes; communication.


Palavras-chave: trabalho digital; mundo do trabalho; Sul Global; classes sociais; comunicação.
In a time when Brazil faces the ascension of the far-right politics, the destruction of the pact built in 1988 and of the project of an antonomous, democratic and progressive country, which, as Murdock\(^1\) points out, includes the end of deliberative democracy, the most recent book by perspective Ricardo Antunes, *O Privilégio da Servidão: o novo proletariado de serviços na era digital* [The privilege of servitude: the new services proletariat in the digital age]\(^2\) is not only an encouragement, but also a potent diagnosis - realistic and aimed at seeing “light at the end of the tunnel” – about contemporary Brazil, from the point of view of the world of work. Its power comes mainly from the centrality, in the analysis, of the concrete and material life of working people and from the dialectics, which takes into account the historical process, always contradictory. Antunes starts the book\(^3\) stating that it now seems that we live in a “dark age”, but recently – about 2013 – the situation was marked by a so-called “era of rebellion.” The author then asks himself: “who could say that the system of social metabolism of capital, with its era of counterrevolutions, is the end of history?”\(^4\)

If it is not the end of history, we must: a) denaturalize and face “capitalist realism”, in the sense of not taking it as the only possible mode of production and way of life, in a moment when the “neoliberal governmentality”\(^5\) penetrates all spheres of life\(^2\), which means a confrontation with the destructive logic of capital; and b) think and propose ways of resistance – since, according to Huws\(^6\), there is no control without resistance, relatively to today’s world of work.

In this context, *The Privilege of Servitude* joins other recent works, such as those by André Singer\(^7\) and Laura Carvalho\(^8\), in their attempt to understand Brazilian political-economic context and its crisis. However, its focus is neither on Lulism, nor on the economic matrices of the last decade, but on the class struggles and the new morphology of the working class with a bourgeois domination oscillating between “overexploitation” and “coup”\(^9\). Caio Prado Júnior\(^10\) already described the “super exploration of the workforce” and the transformation “on top” in Brazilian peripheral capitalism. But Antunes draws mainly on Florestan Fernandes\(^11\) to discuss bourgeois counterrevolution in the contemporary scenario. In this context, we recover Fernandes\(^12\), for whom the Brazilian bourgeoisie is neither modern nor a champion of civilization, always protecting its own interests, which includes taking advantage of persistent inequalities. In a conciliatory arrangement through the unification of the dominant classes, there is no definitive rupture with the past. What in fact exists is a slow, molecular and surreptitious process of devastation and deconstruction of labor with Temer-Bolsonaro\(^13\).

This book by Antunes\(^14\) is thus the consolidation of a research process started in his previous work *Os Sentidos do Trabalho*\(^15\) [The meanings of work]: a book of maturity presenting both the categories for understanding current work conditions versus digital technologies and the analysis of precariousness and flexibilization of labor in Brazil. It argues that precariousness is not static, but “a way of being intrinsic to capitalism”\(^16\). The author offers a look from the Global South to the world of work without avoiding the dialogue with authors

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\(^3\) Idem, p. 16.

\(^4\) Idem, p. 16.


\(^12\) Idem, p. 262.


from the North, both classic and contemporary. Antunes then presents the consolidation of the argument that the “end of the labor society” was a European-Habermasian delirium²⁰, exposing both the new morphologies of the world of work – proletarian of services, freelance jobs, infoproletariat and digital labor – and the persistence of global precarious labor. Indeed, there is no talk of “end of work” in China, India or Brazil (even Europeans have faced it more concretely in the last decade).

The precariousness of labor, as something embedded in the capitalist mode of production, turns employment contracts previously considered “atypical” - freelancers, PCs, zero hour contracts, intermittent jobs, outsourcing – into the rule of bourgeois counterrevolution in Brazil. This is in line with what has already been diagnosed by other authors in the Global North, such as Boltanski & Chiapello²¹ and Dardot e Laval²². The imperative of flexibility is the basis for the productive reorganization by business management, involving the individualization of work situations and harassment as management strategies. The latter topic has also been studied by Gaulejac²³. Based on these concepts, and taking as examples some concrete cases, such as that of call center workers, Antunes seeks to relate how the technologies of the twentieth-first century are articulated with working conditions of the twentieth century.

According to Huws²⁴, the debate is centered on digital labor and its concreteness, that is, its inseparability from productive processes and the economy in general. As Antunes²⁵ points out, “Online activities are advancing, increasingly entering the complex global production chains.” The “so-called ‘virtual’ activities are dependent on and have strong connections with the materiality of the world of work”²⁶. This concept of “re-embodiment”²⁷ of the digital may be related to other works, such as Jack Qiu’s paper on the circuits of labor involving the production of iPhone at Foxconn²⁸, and also the Chinese “digital” working class²⁹. The author therefore does not condone hegemonic visions idealizing the world of work inspired by an “ideology of the Silicon Valley”³⁰.

In the field of sociology of work, Antunes³¹ takes a step forward analysing the impact – always dialectical – of digital technologies (what he calls “digital age”) on work activities and productive processes. However, he could benefit from a better dialogue with communication research to advance his arguments. In a theoretical sense, the digital, though important throughout the explanation, appears only as an appendix in his book. This can be verified in less developed expressions such as “digitalized and technologized society”; however, we may always consider technology as a result of human labor, as Vieira Pinto³² puts it. The same happens with “financial capitalism of the information age”, an expression suggesting that information is somehow detached from the production process, which recalls metaphors idealized mainly in the 1990’s based on a non-historical understanding of technological communications, as Ampuja³³ notes.

Certainly, this is not Antunes’s view – especially because the author deals with new forms of expropriation of value related to digital labor, but these expressions, put in a naturalized way, are indications of lack of a greater dialogue with other

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15. Idem
17. ANTUNES, idem.
22. DARDOT; LAVAL, op. cit.
27. HUWS, 2011.
31. ANTUNES, 2018, p. 50.
researches in the area. The same applies to the expressions “digital slavery”, studied by Qiu34, and “uberization”, analysed by Scholz35, Slee36 & Rosenblat37. Regarding uberization, Antunes calls it a “private global wage-earning company disguised as deregulated work [...] appropriating the surplus-value generated by the services of drivers”38, behind the mask of an application, in line with what Srnicek39 says on platform capitalism. Let us consider Antunes’ ideas as a starting point for thinking: What is really new in the so-called “uberization” in reference to proprocesses of production and communication, including those involving value extraction? How do these issues vary depending on the type of platform involved – in terms of Srnicek40, there are advertising, industrial, product, cloud, and lean – the latter exemplified by Uber itself and AirBnB? How are the labor-consumption dynamics41 involved in these platforms and the conditions and contradictions of “uberized” work, as Scholz42 & Rosenblat43 see it? How to advance in interrelationships between platforms – defined by Srnicek as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact”44, which is also analysed by van Dijck, Poell & Waal45 – and the materiality of digital labor from the point of view of working people? However, even without this broader dialogue involving research on work and digital technologies, Antunes46, contributes to the communication research, because he deals with the “internet of things” – something fetishized and idealized in the field of communication47 – in a critical way and from the point of view of labor. For Antunes, the internet of things symbolizes the “informational-digital” control of production, resulting in “the expansion of dead labor, with digital machinery – the ‘internet of things’ – as the building block of all manufacturing process”48. Advances in this field can be achieved if we consider that data extraction has key functions in capitalism and communication nowadays, as Srnicek49 and Turow & Coulton50 observe when they highlight, the role of communication in the “datafication”51 of production. According to Srnicek, data can “educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms; they enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; they allow for the optimisation and flexibility of productive processes”52. Data can still be used for control and surveillance of workers, and according to Fuchs53, personal data of users can serve as fixed and circulating capital. 

From the above context, especially in relation to the internet of things, we can infer that if communication is still a blind spot in sociology of work research, so are the points of view of production and world of work for communication research. This is especially true for researches whose central objects are the digital media, as if they were detached from the productive processes and the value chains. Still regarding the “absence of communication” in Antunes’ work, we highlight three points. The first is the sensitive chapter on photographs of global precarious labor, in which he describes films about the current scenario of the world of work, which could yield a more in-depth analysis, from a communicational perspective, beyond mere description. Next, we highlight the description of
“permanent freelancers”, defined by the author’s meaning: “freelancers who become permanent but have their rights circumvented and hide themselves from newsrooms when companies undergo work audits”54. There is, in Antunes’ own exemplification, a relationship with the world of work in communications, especially with journalists, although there is no dialogue with researches that explored this theme in communication55, showing the contradictions of working as a freelancer, including “permanent freelancers”, in a world of work marked by digital technologies and labor flexibilization.

A third point is the Antunes’s detection of a “new corporate dictionary” with terms such as “resilience”, “collaborators” and “goals”56 – as a counterpoint to destructive management in relation to the world of work. This is because corporate grammar had undergone changes since the end of the 1990s, as Figaro57 points out regarding the appropriation of senses by business discourse. This dimension of communication/language about work58 has been a concern for studies on the world of work in communication, including taking language as a market, in the sense of Rossi-Landi59, of observing “what are the regularities that govern the circulation of words, expressions and messages, starting from the values by which they are consumed and exchanged”60. This means that there is value in the circulating signs, which compose a grammar that, on the one hand, convenes 61 people to act in certain ways (to be flexible, innovative, disruptive, resilient, entrepreneuring) to the detriment of others, in order to prescribe successful people. On the other hand it also justifies62, the ways of being and existing in capitalism as attenuators of the “privilege of servitude”63. Thus, the communicational blind spot in the work of Antunes64 prevents from seeing communication as an articulator and auxiliary arm of the capitalist mode of production65, including the financial one, through the circulation of capital.

The circulation of capital is analyzed in Antunes’s work, including the role of means of transport in the circulation of goods. In this sense, Antunes66 correctly points out, from a Marxian view, that there is a production process involved in the circulation process.

The author theorizes issues regarding time of production time of circulation and surplus-value production process, considering that the transport industry “becomes essential for the concretization of material production and the realization of surplus-value”67. However, Marx himself68, in the Grundrisse, highlights the central role not only of the means of transport, but also the means of communication – something forgotten by Antunes69 – in relation to the circulation of capital. That is communication, both as a means of production70 and as circulation, operates in the capitalist mode of production as extractor of surplus-value, including “datafication of production” mentioned previously.

Another issue addressed by Antunes, besides that of circulation of capital is financialization, considering “financial capital at the summit and deregulated labor in productive value chains”71. An important point is the non-displacement of financial capital in relation to productive capital, since “financial capital itself operates in the productive sphere (and controls it)”72. In this sense, only
the so-called “fictitious capital”\textsuperscript{73} – already present in the third volume of Marx’s *Capital*\textsuperscript{74} – would be separated from production. However, again there is invisibility regarding the role of communication – without prejudice to the author, since this issue does not figure in his research agenda – in the process of financialization, which Sodré\textsuperscript{75} calls “financialization of communication”.

As we can see, the new (and old) forms of extracting surplus-value in contemporary capitalism, including digital labor, as part of the scope of Antunes ‘work, in line with from Huws\textsuperscript{76} research, highlighting the relevance of the Marx’s low of value today. In this context, is also inserted the debate on material and immaterial labor, in which the author asks: “Do or do not these activities, considered to be predominantly immaterial, have connections with the complex mechanisms of the law of value currently operating in their valorization process?”\textsuperscript{77} Antunes then observes new mechanisms of extraction of overwork in activities considered as “immaterial”, and frontal opposites to statements such as those of Negri & Hardt\textsuperscript{78} or Gorz\textsuperscript{79}, regarding “immaterial labor”, which extirpate both value and “redundant, messy, vulnerable materiality”\textsuperscript{80} of humans, especially in the Global South context. According to Antunes\textsuperscript{81}, André Gorz

by making immaterial labor as dominant and even decisive in present-day capitalism, and unrelated to the generation of value, ended up creating an obstruction that precluded the possibility of understanding new modalities and forms of this law, which are present in the new proletariat of services (cybertariat or infoproletariat), who performs activities of highly immaterial profile, but that are a constituent part of the creation of value and are more or less embedded in the material work [...]. It is worth remembering that formulations that hyper dimension the immaterial labor and convert it into a dominant element often disregard the empirical trends present in the world of work of the global South.

In our view, a work’s product is considered intangible or digital does not mean that production processes are “immaterial” because, as Huws\textsuperscript{82} states, “cultural products such as books, films, ‘science’ or advertisements - and the ‘ideas’ they contain (at least to the extent that these are a conscious result of mental effort) are also the products of human intellectual and physical labor”. According to Tosel\textsuperscript{83}, “the immaterial is a form of materiality as the symbolic also is” and results in products of many orders that depend on the work – which is always mental and bodily – of men and women in the productive chain of value. In the same line, Marcos Dantas\textsuperscript{84} completely refutes the category of “immaterial labor”, stating that

the informational work is material, since it is the transformation, through the human body and its mind, through appropriate prostheses (tools and technologies), of materials carrying signs that contain value for the sign they carry. Labor is immaterial only if it is done by God in the act of creation...\textsuperscript{85}

This perception of digital labor is shared by Huws\textsuperscript{86} and Scholz\textsuperscript{87}. For Huws, the internet depends on power generation, circuit breakers, satellite launch, “the construction of the buildings in which they are designed and assembled
and from which they are marketed⁸⁸, among other material products. In this regard, Scholz⁹⁹ states that “digital labor is everything but “immaterial;” it is a sector of the economy, a set of human activities that is predicated on global supply chains of sweated material labor”, which means human activities carried out through various devices and platforms.

This is not exactly like Antunes’s⁹⁴ view, as the author states that Marx himself, in the unpublished chapter of Capital⁹¹, already dealt with the existence of “non-material production”, therefore it was something that did not exist. However, he does not consider this category as having the dimension attributed to it by Gorz⁹² and Negri/Hardt⁹³, in reference to the extraction of value and production/circulation of capital. In this context Antunes⁹⁴ understands expressions such as “knowledge-based society and immaterial labor as manifestations of the complexity achieved by the division of labor, in which co-exist both intellectual and manual activities, creative ones and more routine-like as well.” Can we question the separation between material-immaterial, manual-intellectual (as shows Sohn-Rethel⁹⁵) and creative-routine labor? To what extent do these expressions, as they stand, help us to understand the “dialectical dance”⁹⁶ of the contemporary world of work without falling into reductionisms or adjetivations? As Huws observes⁹⁷, “Why is there the desire to classify these workers? And particularly, why now?”

Contrary to these classifications Antunes’ offers another contribution, since Os sentdos do trabalho [The meanings of work]⁹⁸, which is the category of “class-that-live-from labor”, that is, an enlarged view of the working class, considering its heterogeneous composition, reconfigurations and new morphologies of class. Managers of capital, small entrepreneurs, urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, and those who live from interest and speculation, would be excluded from the working class, in the author’s view. This view of “class-that-lives-from labor” thus reaffirms the centrality of the class struggles and of social classes in contemporary society⁹⁹, taking into account mutations in class formations.

For the author it is a curious fact that discourses on decentering of class categories and work should appear precisely at a time when “there is an enormous increase in the group of social beings who live from the sale of their workforce on a planetary scale”⁹⁰. For Antunes, “the center of social transformation is still rooted in the whole working class”⁹¹, so it is essential to avoid certain fractures or class divisions. This means understanding its complexity and heterogeneity, as follows: a) its relations with racial, ethnic, generational and gender issues, which have an “increasingly globalized conformation”⁹²; b) the connections between “stable” and precarious labors, and between nationals and immigrants⁹³; which are considered as fractures imposed by capital on the working class; and c) the problem of defining middle classes.

Regarding middle classes, Antunes cites Bourdieu⁹⁴ – something rare in his works – even if briefly, stating that “the middle classes, in addition to their distinctions and typical structural oscillations, are defined to a significant extent by cultural, symbolic, consumption values⁹⁵.” This observation leads us
to reflect that a refinement (or greater problematization) in the relationship between Marxism and Bourdieusian theory would be productive. Still on middle classes, another point that would yield more focused empirical research (as is Ronsini’s research in the communication area) is, from a bourdieusian perspective is the issue posed by Antunes that “the consciousness of the middle classes often appears to be consciousness of a non-class”.

Finally, the conceptual and empirical portraits brought by Antunes reveal a concern to understand the conditions, contradictions and complexities of the current world of work, connecting concepts discussed mainly in Europe and North America to a national and the global South perspective with a look, that simultaneously realizes the “privilege of servitude” at the present stage of devastation in the world of work, but also has a perspective – as a “light at the end of the tunnel” as a meaningful life both inside and outside the world of work. As for our role as researchers, we try to understand and diagnose the world of work, but also to reconnect effectively to the “daily life of men and women who live from their work” without getting snooty in our institutional spaces and small “field powers”. And as for the concrete life of social subjects – as Lukács says, “Science grows out of life, and in life itself”.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**


