# From the virtual class to the click workers: the transformation of work into service in the era of digital platforms[a]

## *Da classe virtual aos trabalhadores do clique: a transformação do trabalho em serviço na era das plataformas digitais*

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**ABSTRACT**

Contrary to the fantasy of a virtual class of workers free from work, the flexibility of micro-task services, performed by all users of digital platforms, only benefits companies in the Silicon Valley.

**Keyword:** Digital work, virtual class, precarious entrepreneur, digital platforms

**RESUMO**

Ao contrário da fantasia de uma classe virtual de trabalhadores livres do trabalho, a flexibilidade dos serviços de microtarefas, realizadas por todos os usuários de plataformas digitais, beneficia apenas as empresas do Vale do Silício.

**Palavras-chave:** Trabalho digital, classe virtual, empreendedor precário, plataformas digitais

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DCULTURE AND DIGITAL ethos were anchored in a fundamental misunderstanding: that the "Californian" model of free enterprise would comprise an ideology that combines both pro-market liberal rights and libertarian lefts derived from the twentieth-century counterculture. In reality, the digital we know and its philosophy of work activity were born in reaction to these aspirations and represent their dismantling.

## THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE *VIRTUAL CLASS*

It was in the eponymous essay published in 1996 by Richard Barbrook and Andrew Cameron that the concept of *Californian ideology* was articulated for the first time with the recognition of a *virtual* social class destined to become the equivalent of the elite of the skilled workers of the 20th century. These *hi-tech artisans* would not only be well-paid, but would also have a considerable margin of autonomy in choosing the content, location and temporality of their work. Imbued with the values of the Californian hippie counterculture, they blur the line between employment and creative freedom.

The virtual class would be composed of visionary consultants, specialized developers, engineers and computer scientists, as well as video game designers and communication specialists in any field (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994). At the end of the last century, according to Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein, companies in the Silicon Valley remained dependent on this new social subject whose job was to invent original products, design software or create cultural content.

The key professionals, the *sublime*, as the economist Bernard Gazier (2003) would call them a few years later. With them, we would have witnessed the resurgence, in the center of the digital economy, of the elite workers of the first industrialism, free to undertake professional careers consistent with their individual *desires*. Jumping from employer to employer, these *web innovators* would alternate phases of unpaid work, for fun or for the community, with phases of profitability (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007).

New type workers evolve in a context of flexibility in which they take advantage of the market benefits and are subject to the vagaries of economic cycles. They do not live in the refusal to work that characterized the generations of militants of the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary, work would have become the main route of personal fulfillment for most members of this virtual class. The first brick of Californian ideology would thus be laid, with the invention of a paradoxical figure of the worker freed by work, whose only center of gravity is an unstable occupation. A flexible job for a worker who has personal bargaining power on equal terms with

their main employer. A worker who can say no, who is not subject to the discipline that applies to the mass of wage earners.

## OPEN PATH FOR JEFF BEZOS

Perhaps it is between Palo Alto and Santa Clara that the ambition of the work culture of digital companies has been formulated. However, it is between Seattle and Boston that their techno-economic infrastructures were defined. On September 27, 2006, Jeff Bezos' plane takes off from Seattle and lands in Boston to speak at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Bezos, 2006). At that time, the CEO of Amazon still did not have a shaved head and pumped biceps. It is his geek incarnation that takes the stage to present the three pillars of his commercial empire. His online catalog, of course, but also Amazon Web Services, his service for storing and analyzing internet traffic data.

He saves the best for last: Amazon Mechanical Turk, a human labor service on demand. More precisely, it is a system that makes human workers carry out, for economic incentives of just a few cents, *microtasks*, that is, routine and under-valued activities that would normally be performed by machines. But the machines, the billionaire recalls, are not able to achieve what they promise if no one teaches them. That is why we are talking about *machine learning*. Human teachers are not computer experts, but hundreds of thousands of workers who provide any small examples each.

The name Bezos chose for his service is a tribute to the Turkish chess player automaton, the "first artificial intelligence" which, in the 18th century, would have had the ability to simulate the mental processes of human opponents. But inside that robot, a player made of flesh and blood was hiding. Likewise, Jeff Bezos explains, without any shadow of irony, that inside Amazon Mechanical Turk multitudes of workers are hidden. Paid per piece, they label images, copy text fragments, record small audio files. They improve the algorithms and feed the databases.

Like their virtual class counterparts, they are not guaranteed to have a job. They work "when they want". But their choices are limited to simple and fragmented tasks that do not require advanced skills, their paces are dictated by the relentless logic of just-in-time and their fees are starvation wages. They are not sublime, but *workers* of modern times. "Roughly speaking", concludes Jeff Bezos, "humans as a service".

And one of his competitors, Lukas Biewald, founder of the Figure Eight service, develops this intuition: before digital platforms, he explains, it was difficult to sit workers for ten minutes, giving them an activity, and then dismiss them. But with micro-task services, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs can identify them,

promise them a very small amount and then get rid of them (Marvit, 2014). This is undoubtedly the flexibility that members of the virtual class aspired to, except that it seems to benefit only entrepreneurs.

## FROM PRODUCT TO SERVICE

If the skilled and free virtual worker embodies the dream of working in the Silicon Valley, Jeff Bezos' employee is the scary answer. In today's digital culture, the sublime work of the virtual class remains, precisely, a virtuality, a possibility that is difficult to achieve. On the contrary, what seems to be everywhere is hard work, producing raw data, so simple that it can be done by the mere click of a finger – in short, *digital labor*.

This work can start on Amazon Mechanical Turk, which remains a central service for the American platform, but continues on the Chinese, African and European counterparts, where micro-entrepreneurs of precarious workers sometimes pay less than a penny for performing atomized tasks. It is also among non-taxi drivers that we find this type of work. Between runs, this job generates a lot of data for the mobile apps with which they make a living. Their GPS helps to improve geolocation software, their reputation scores and their gains operate the dynamic charging algorithms that make these services so convenient.

But *digital labor* is also installed in our most playful digital uses. Unpaid, each of us performs it when responding to reCAPTCHA. These small digital windows**,** which compel us to recognize the image of a pedestrian crossing or to transcribe deformed words, use our responses to improve Google Street View or Google Books. Under the pretext of *demonstrating that we are human*, we agree to reduce ourselves to a *human servant*.

According to one of the protagonists of this new economy, the founder of the micro-employment platform Fiverr, the basic idea is to transform the independent labor market into a market "for the purchase of services comparable to the purchase of products from online sales sites" (Lawler, 2017, para. 4). But, let us be clear, this is not a commodification of human productive gestures. The complete assimilation of work into merchandise (therefore, into a thing) is a notion that has a long history. After 1880, when American economist John Kells Ingram urged his contemporaries not to consider work as "an independent entity, separate from the worker's personality. . . . as a commodity like wheat or cotton", the phrase "labor should not be seen only as a commodity or as a commercial article" would make its appearance in the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 and, finally, in the Declaration of Philadelphia of

1944, which would give the International Labor Organization its founding principle: *labor is not a commodity* (O'Higgins, 1997, p. 226).

However, the risk that work will be reduced to *something* separate from its creator is less pressing in the context of today's digital economy. Everything that Internet users produce with their clicks and navigation is strictly linked to their personality – *personal* data that link *affinities* to the *opinions* and *preferences* expressed on platforms. When we stand beside the user, as close as possible to their connected daily life, we realize that their work habit of producing data and information is really a *servilization*, that is, the transformation of their routine into services provided to digital platforms. Amazon Turk's microtasks, app drivers' GPS routes, content generated by social media users are monetized; personal data is used to train and calibrate machine learning processes. These services contribute to the market valuation and to the huge profits of the Gafam (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft). All with absolute flexibility.

There is not even a commodity, a material object that the worker can hold on to at the end of the transaction that requested their work. Everything is evanescent, everything is precarious.

## PRECARIOUS ENTREPRENEUR

According to the English jurist Jeremias Prassl (2018), the transformation of human work into service is made possible by a repertoire of rhetorical tricks that are first manifested in the contracts that platforms sign with their worker-users. Carefully formulated, the general conditions of use (GCU) of applications and websites characterize these services as intermediaries and workers as *salespeople*, *suppliers* and even *independent entrepreneurs*. "Work", sums up Prassl (p. 4), "is renamed entrepreneurship and labor is sold as a technological solution".

In addition to GCUs, there are interfaces, experience design, platform functionality, which carefully rule out the possibility of a stable salary relationship between owners and users. Almost a quarter of a century after the analysis of Barbrook and Cameron, the digital economy offers *gigs*, *schemes*, *small jobs*, fast and fun presentations: scores, *likes*, challenges and social features transformed into a fun engagement game with a digital interface. Behind *gamification* and ease of access, the desire of platforms to govern and control their users is outlined between the lines. This algorithmic management is manifested through practices of verification, quantification and confirmation of the services provided (Rosenblat, 2018): the express delivery person must deliver the meal within the deadline determined by their mobile application, the micro-employee must maintain

a certain precise score on their Internet portal and even the free consumer of information that combines words and images in reCAPTCHA must respect a certain level of accuracy before being able to retrieve their document in the cloud. Platforms have not only found a way to motivate users to get the job done, but also to easily verify if they are performing the tasks assigned to them at a certain pace and according to heterodetermined standards.

Although legal systems around the world have learned to respond to employers' attempts to mislead workers as independent entrepreneurs, the technological and economic stratification of digital platforms today makes it difficult to demonstrate the place of subordination and the bonding relationship, in each case, with the main employer. That is why *digital labor*, carried out by freelancers or workers, or even by user-workers who ignore it, demands entrepreneurial skills from both those in charge and those who carry it out: management of commercial relations, search for new business opportunities, listening, communication, adaptability.

The transformation of work into service and the fusion of workers into entrepreneurs go hand in hand. The *precarious entrepreneur* neologism (*entreprécariat*), which asserts itself today in Europe, summarizes these two aspects of the historical dynamics in which the ideology of the work of the platform economy giants is located. The cognitive dissonance between the aspirations embodied by the entrepreneurial attitudes of the sublime who wish to be *the bosses of themselves* and the reality of the platforms that force them to work without meaning and whose forms of remuneration escape them, according to researcher Silvio Lorusso (2018), "reflects a society in which everyone is an entrepreneur and nobody is safe" (p. 20).

## HIDING THAT SUBORDINATION THAT CANNOT BE SEEN

The transformation of work into service is echoed throughout the economy. Although Jeremias Prassl (2018) describes the new nervous centers of the internet economy as spaces in the market where work is purchased, these transactions can move away, in the economic context shaped by the technology giants, from the ideal way of voluntarily transmitting a property right to third parties.

At the end of the last century, Jeremy Rifkin (2000) described this trend in his book *L'Âge* de *l'Accès*. According to him, contemporary capitalism would have renounced its historical ideological marker, namely, property rights over productive resources. Land, capital and even work are no longer considered wealth that capitalists have, to become services to which capitalists have access.

In a world where markets are giving way to digital platforms and networks, suppliers – including these labor suppliers – are no longer expected to hold a specific good or skill that can submit to the classic logic of purchase or sale. The new productive resources are therefore rented, lent, entrusted in exchange for a subscription or registration fee. If industrial actors gradually stop selling in order to share and pool resources with other companies, why should platform *entrepreneurs* not do the same in vast supplier-user networks? The announced end of individual rights to private property over goods is articulated with the supposed intended end of the subordination bond of workers.

However, a specific subordination to *digital labor* is emerging on digital platforms. It is not an economic and social dependence of an employee on the employer, but subordination that does not guarantee the stability of an occupation, nor the social responsibility of an enterprise manager. It is only a *subordination* in the etymological sense of the term, that is, the *delegation* of tasks to be carried out to servicialized human *beings*. A *technical subordination* articulated along an invisible chain whose connections are the many prescriptions of use that weigh on the worker-user.

Most applications and digital services today depend, at this point, on the implicit injunction made on users to produce content, data or services that require *triggers* on their interfaces. The experts in persuasive design and ergonomics that optimize platforms are striving to systematize knowledge about these triggers. They qualify them as *stimuli*, reminders or even *calls to action*, consisting of messages "that tell people to act immediately" (Fogg, 2009, p. 6): take a photo, insert information, accept a contact, perform an activity – orders that emerge from the platform for users. Social platforms that bombard their members with messages that invite them to connect to their profile; those that send notifications to users noting that urgent action is essential to unlock a pending transaction... These alerts are always expressed in the imperative (*connect*, *click here*, *do this task*), embodying what the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (2015) defines as "appeals for solicitation". They are triggers, addressed exclusively to a user and, in most cases, require them to perform a productive gesture.

Several authors have pointed out that these notifications are at the center of the changes in contemporary capitalism and its care processes (Licoppe, 2009). The technical subordination created by them consolidates a process of ordering productive tasks performed by the platform users. The multiplication of *stimuli* and requests that require an immediate response imposes a rhythm and priorities that are heterodetermined to the worker.

The workers' aspirations to emancipate themselves from subordination, to recover the margins of autonomy lost at the end of the union struggles of the second post-war period and in the neoliberal expansion of the end of the 20th

century were initially manifested in the dream of a virtual class. Entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley presented an ideological counter-proposal that consists of more restricted and less well-protected work. Contrary to the autonomy praised by the "*sublime*" vision of work imagined by Barbrook and Cameron (1996), Kroker and Weinstein (1994), the implementation of a controlled and enriching action for both the economy and society is currently showing itself impossible because the platforms rest on the need to organize the action of their humans, transforming them into services. M

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