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At Least I'm My Own Boss! Explaining Consent, Coercion and Resistance in Platform Work

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Abstract

Platform work has grown significantly in the last decade. High-profile legal cases have highlighted the grey area which platform work inhabits in terms of the employment relationship and have raised concerns about the quality and conditions of work. Platform operators claim they are neutral intermediaries, yet often control over scheduling and tasks lies with them. This article presents a theoretical framework that integrates macro and micro-level analyses to account for the production of hegemony and playing out of consent, coercion and resistance within platform work. It does so by rearticulating Burawoy's concept of hegemonic despotism by drawing upon Foucauldian notions of neoliberal governmentality and reasserting the centrality of Gramsci's work in understanding power and hegemony, in particular the concept of contradictory consciousness and the dialogical contest between hegemonic 'common sense' and 'good sense', which constitutes our understanding and sense-making in the social world.

Keywords

Burawoy, consent, dialogical self, Foucault, gig economy, governmentality, Gramsci, hegemony, labour process, taxis

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Introduction: Paradox and missing theory

It is estimated that, in the UK, 2.8 million adults worked in the gig economy in 2017, 56% of whom were aged 18–34 (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018: 5). Worldwide it has been suggested that up to 48 million workers have engaged with online platforms to access work (Kuek et al., 2015, cited in Wood et al., 2018a). This rapid growth of gig work comes wrapped in a paradoxical narrative on the experience of labour control in platform work. On the one hand, because gig work ‘involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals and/or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate the matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment by tasks basis’ (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018: 4), it is hailed by its supporters as allowing workers greater control over, and autonomy within, their working lives. On the other, it is seen by its critics as a highly exploitative and pernicious new form of employment casualisation that strips workers of their statutory rights and collective protection while deepening further the ‘commoditisation’ of labour (see Forde et al., 2017; Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018). This contradictory tension is commonly acknowledged within both academic studies (Sutherland et al., 2020) and in the field of public policy (Broughten et al., 2018). These seemingly contradictory beliefs are also found to co-exist on the gig ‘shop-floor’ (Wood et al., 2018a; Woodcock and Graham, 2020).

Despite a plethora of empirical work in recent years mapping and exploring work and employment in the gig economy, there has been little accompanying theoretical debate (Joyce, 2020). Moreover, this absence has had consequences for the quality, form and potential of debates about platform work to date. Indeed, Joyce (2020) characterises it as ‘platform work’s theory problem’, which he argues has resulted in studies commonly over-generalising and excessively extrapolating from limited empirical data marked by a tendency towards varying degrees of technological determinism.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to take up the challenge of developing a theoretical framework that integrates macro and micro-level analyses of the production of hegemony and the playing out of consent, coercion and resistance within platform work. In other words, a theorising of the regimes of labour control that is also able to account for the nexus of ideas, interactions and events that make, amend and unmake workers’ attitudes and behaviours. It does so by rearticulating Burawoy’s (1985) concept of hegemonic despotism by drawing upon Foucauldian notions of neoliberal governmentality and the ideological construction of atomised individuals or even ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Du Gay, 1996; Holborow, 2015). By incorporating insights from Foucauldian concepts of power and hegemony into Burawoy’s broader schema, it builds upon the work of Vallas and Hill who draw upon Foucault’s theory of governmentality to theorise power in organisations (Vallas and Hill, 2012) and the reconfiguration of worker subjectivity (Vallas and Hill, 2018). The article also reasserts the centrality of Gramsci’s work in understanding power and hegemony, in particular the concept of contradictory consciousness and the dialogical contest between hegemonic ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’, which constitutes our understanding and sense-making in the social world (Crehan, 2016; Gramsci, 1971).

The article begins with an overview of how Burawoy and Foucault conceptualised consent as an expression of productive power. The next section provides a new

theoretical framework for understanding contemporary expressions of consent. The article then considers how this can be applied to platform-mediated taxi services.

Hegemony, consent and worker subjectivities

Burawoy and Foucault are concerned with how consenting subjects are constituted via complex social interactions, and the related forms of power or hegemony that act upon and against counter-hegemonic expressions of subjectivities, which for Burawoy represent the historic interests of the working class. Both use categories redolent of Gramsci's analysis of how the dominant ruling class is able to elicit consent from the *subaltern* (Crehan, 2016; Gramsci, 1971). Burawoy brought Gramsci's hegemony to the workplace, famously deploying the 'game' metaphor to illustrate workers' consent to engage in managerial productivity goals via social interactions on the shop floor (Burawoy, 1979). Thus, in the context of a working class in the western world that had made key advances in the post-war period, in which labour was to some extent protected from market despotism, the social relations that constitute the labour process act as a site for the production of consent. This is power in a positive sense, with workers engaging in meaningful actions that both alleviate the alienation of the capitalist labour process (see Brook, 2009) and result in their consent to increase the rate of exploitation through increased productivity and/or expending even more labour power in the service of capital (Burawoy, 1985). Like Foucault, Burawoy is interested in how subjective experiences of power can mystify underlying relations of control by reinforcing dominant notions, such as neoliberal assumptions about the inevitability of the market and authority of management, and thereby reproducing them. This creates the pre-conditions for a perceived coordination of interests between different classes (capital and labour) with underlying relations of domination obscured and naturalised via political and civil institutions. For workers, this is reinforced through workplace rituals that fuse the rational desire to alleviate their alienation and/or pursue their interests – both embodied in the 'game' – with the rationality of capitalist production (Burawoy, 1979).

Foucault's concept of power began with a definite focus on power as a relational process operating at the micro-level. His later lectures on governmentality, however, acknowledged that power also had to be understood as operating out of macro-necessity at the level of governments and elites (Jessop, 2010). Governmentality draws attention to how objects of power are rendered governable via a new 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) that calls upon individuals to become amenable not only to being governed but also to governing themselves. Positive, productive power, therefore, creates self-governing, responsible citizens who willingly engage in practices that support the logics pursued by governments, and is disseminated through a complex web of macro and meso-institutions, akin to Gramsci's (1971) notion of civil society.

Around the same time that Foucault was lecturing on neoliberal governmentality, Burawoy (1985) was observing how the external socio-political conditions for consent within the labour process were being eroded by the beginnings of what we now understand as neoliberalism. Instead of hegemony, a new hybrid regime of hegemonic despotism was identified in which consent was predicated on fear of job loss. As Burawoy was declaring the end of the hegemonic regime, and a turn to more coercive forms of control

at work, Foucault was grappling with the creation of the neoliberal subject through a central ideological ‘technique of power’ – human capital theory promoted by elites in the US (Vallas and Hill, 2012). Foucault sketched out how workers and citizens could be called upon to reposition themselves as ideal economic actors by generalising the economic logic of the market to all areas of life, including the self; a technique of power that strikes at the very heart of subjectivity (Foucault, 2008). Indeed, neoliberal governmentality is also a core ideological component of what Burawoy (1985) refers to as the political apparatus of production. The cultivation of a mentality of enterprise, underpinned by an ‘emotional intelligence’ (Hughes, 2005), is such that the investment in the production of the self – the entrepreneurial self – becomes a requirement of self-fulfilment, just as workers can become invested in the production of a surplus. In short, it demands what Hughes (2005: 603) calls a ‘reinvention of character’.

For Burawoy, however, the changing nature of production politics from the 1980s signalled a reassertion of coercive domination at work. The subsequent long-term process of deregulation, financialisation and weakening of employment and welfare protection in the western economies has left workers even more exposed to market despotism. Platform work is a particularly harsh form of contemporary wage–labour that leaves workers brutally exposed to the market, and therefore is an exemplar of Burawoy’s observation of growing despotism in the workplace. Yet the very concept of hegemonic despotism, a deliberately paradoxical description of a new production regime, directs us to consider the complexity of the experience of labouring under capitalism in all its managerial forms. Indeed, Burawoy (1979) alerts us to the way in which workers draw upon a range of resources to make sense of their situation and which can mediate the experience of managerial control and constraint. On the other hand, the concept of hegemonic despotism, with its emphasis on coercion, suggests a particularly fragile, shifting, even negotiated consent, that leaves little space for the playing out of hegemony – positive power – within the labour process.

Governmentality and the politics of production

Burawoy’s incomplete and partial account of hegemonic despotism opens the conceptual space that governmentality can fill. In order to establish this, it is necessary to revisit how production regimes shape the way in which the subjective experience of the labour process distorts the reality of its underlying relations, only partially revealing its exploitative features. For Marx (1976), the capitalist labour process is typically characterised by market despotism, since the ‘freedom’ to sell one’s labour is accompanied by the socio-economic necessity of entering into the wage–labour relationship. This is power in a negative, repressive sense, where the disciplinary power of the market is reinforced within the factory by harsh sanctions. The direct experience of the labour process within the early, 19th century factories in Britain was despotic, an experience that created the conditions from which the collective organisation of workers would emerge, thereby setting the scene for gaining the range of workers’ rights and protections that characterised most of the second-half of the 20th century and provided the basis of the hegemonic regime. The demands of the early labour movement reflected this partial understanding of the nature of capitalist exploitation. The lived experience of factory workers drew

them towards demands such as ‘a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’, a slogan that Marx strongly critiqued since it ignored the exploitative basis of the wage–labour relation through which surplus value was abstracted at the point of production (Marx, 2003).

The labour process that Burawoy observed allowed for some amount of autonomy on the shop floor, which changed how work was subjectively experienced, opening a space for the worker to positively ‘invest in labour’ (Burawoy, 2012). This positive orientation to the labour process occurs both because of and despite the alienation that characterises the capitalist labour process. This is because the construction of the self that occurs within the labour process is the result of a dynamic engagement in meaningful activity, albeit within unequal and antagonistic social relations (Brook, 2009, 2013). As workers seek to resist the loss of control that occurs with the subordination of labour to capital, they defend their self-worth in a variety of ways, not all of which, as Burawoy (1979) highlighted, undermine the goal of profit maximisation. Subjectivity, therefore, is understood to emerge *within-against* the relations of production, which direct the human capacity for creative labour towards the realisation of surplus value. In this way, workers’ ‘games’ are a reaction to, and against, the domination and control embodied in the capitalist labour process – the source of alienation – while simultaneously reproducing those same social relations. Thus, the contradictory relation between subjective experience and objective social relations expresses itself in an historically specific form that both mystifies capitalist exploitation and establishes an institutionalised hegemonic coordination of interests. Paradoxically, this hegemonic regime was premised on the strength of the labour movement in western economies during the early decades of the post-1945 period.

Burawoy’s theorisation of hegemonic despotism, on the other hand, departs from this understanding of the deep dialogic interrelationship between subjective experience and objective social relations. Therefore, the hegemonic dimension is not conceptually consistent with Burawoy’s understanding of hegemonic power as positive and productive in manufacturing consent. Instead, consent is not only ineluctably tied to market despotism, but subsumed by it since the ‘coordination of interests’ is premised upon the threat of job loss through re-localisation and thus speaks more to coercion and despotism than to hegemony and consent; a unidimensional rather than hybrid concept. However, hegemonic despotism has been deployed elsewhere in a way that suggests a more conceptually consistent approach. Notably, Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) trace the way hegemony is reinforced via ideological means within conditions of market despotism and coercion. Furthermore, while Vallas and Hill (2012) acknowledge the rich analytical insights that Burawoy brings to an understanding of power and hegemony in the workplace, they argue that Foucault’s governmentality provides a more compelling theorisation of how workers’ subjectivities are reconfigured under neoliberalism. However, due regard also needs to be paid to Foucault’s overemphasis on the individual subject’s atomising experience of governmentality at the expense of understanding it as a contested social process with the potential for collective – counter-hegemonic – resistance (Holborow, 2015). Nevertheless, these insights pave the way to a more symbiotic synthesis between hegemony and despotism – a radical reworking of hegemonic despotism – in order to comprehend the construction of worker subjectivities within contemporary experiences of work, and to understand the mechanisms by which the mystification of exploitation takes place, and how the tension between hegemony and despotism may more readily lay bare to

workers the actual nature and consequences of their social and technical relations of production.

Neoliberal governmentality helps to refocus attention towards a Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony within which the subject is constituted within and outside of the labour process through a complex mosaic of institutions, ideologies and practices that make up political and civil society. In Foucauldian terms, these are techniques of power that act as ‘educators’, adapting individuals to new social contingencies (Foucault, 1980, 2008). The internalisation of new discourses and norms requires that these discourses and norms are subjectively reconstructed in such a way as to enable individuals to make sense of their daily lives and thus provide a meaningful frame of reference by which to engage in purposeful social action, which is an essential feature of the conceptualisation of power as productive. Gramsci’s (1971) concept of contradictory consciousness embodies this idea of a practical consciousness by which individuals are continually seeking to make sense of their experience by negotiating between handed down or imposed/dominant ‘common sense’ ideas, and ‘good sense’, which emerges organically from individual, and collective, experience (Crehan, 2016). Workers’ ‘personal meanings’ that transpire experientially in daily social interactions in the workplace are thus in a perpetual, enduring contested conversation – ‘inner speech’ – with imposed, externally derived ‘social meanings’ that are promoted by managers and other powerful voices external to the workplace (Brook, 2013). According to Gramsci, ideas from above:

influence moral conduct and the direction of the will, with varying efficacy but often powerful enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a position of moral and political passivity. Critical understanding of the self therefore takes place through the struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. (Gramsci, 1971: 333)

The clash between personal and social meanings constitutes a dialogical self (Brook, 2013), since the neoliberal self is not simply handed down and absorbed, rather it exists as a realm of tension and contradiction, a dynamic interrelationship between the experientially derived organic good sense of the subaltern and the hegemonic common sense of the ruling class (Crehan, 2016; Ives, 2004).

The expectations and purposeful aspirations that make up personal meanings emerge as an encounter with social meanings in concrete historical settings. In the contemporary context, the influence of human capital theory is expressed in the weight accorded to ‘employability’ – underlaid by emotional intelligence and a reinvention of moral character (Hughes, 2005) – as an outcome of both education, and personal and professional development (Moisander et al., 2018). Thus, the discourse of employability and prioritising the labour needs of business is increasingly embodied in the self. These normative ideas and behaviours are then tested and enforced by the tightened conditionality under *workfare* state welfare systems (Greer, 2016) in which active labour market policies are embedded with practices aimed at encouraging new employer-friendly norms and standards of behaviour corresponding to notions of the entrepreneurial self. These are then

reinforced by disciplinary sanctions against recalcitrant benefit claimants among the under-employed and unemployed (Boland, 2016). From this emerges not only the context of market despotism, but also the rationalisation of *homo economicus* and the entrepreneurial self (Holborow, 2015). Hegemony and despotism are thus intricately entangled within contemporary labour regimes, simultaneously creating both positive and repressive power with conditionality attached to welfare benefits most starkly illustrating the entanglement between repressive disciplinary power and positive biopower. State welfare regimes readily employ discourses that serve to stigmatise those resisting the construction of a new subject aligned to common sense notions of the self as solely responsible for their economic and social fate (Greer, 2016; Holborow, 2015).

It is this new subject, forged from distinct yet intertwined practices of power, that enters into the labour process, vulnerable to market coercion but also schooled in the discourses of flexibility, employability and entrepreneurial thinking (Hughes, 2005), all aimed at eliciting consent to exploitation by capital. Moreover, what is called self-exploitation, such as bogus self-employment, becomes the ultimate expression of freedom in the labour process, since it seemingly obviates the need for a manager or boss. Within the discursive armour of neoliberalism *being your own boss* is raised to the highest pinnacle of labour market freedom (Holborow, 2015), irrespective of whether workers' experience of the labour process is one of continued control and exploitation. This experience of heightened control and exploitation challenges the 'common sense' that encourages individuals to accept their jobs and working arrangements. It is within this contested space that discourses and ideas of ways of living become sites of dispute over meaning as personal meanings evolve dialogically through in-work encounters and interactions with mechanisms of labour control (management), co-workers and service-users (Brook, 2013).

This hegemonic despotism differs radically from that posited by Burawoy, as it relies upon techniques of power aimed at the internalisation of ways of being that engage and act upon positive drivers towards purposive action. The notion of power here corresponds more to that which underpinned the hegemonic regime. However, following both Gramsci and Foucault, it cedes more conceptual space to contradiction and tension since hegemonic ideas are never simply and unproblematically internalised (Brook, 2009). They are filtered through the personal meanings that reflexive individuals – who are both reflexive and possessive of agency – attach to these ideas as they seek to secure a dignified sense of the self within a labour market and welfare system that continually threatens to discipline and punish non-compliance by plunging them into poverty. In platform work, the modus operandi of which is premised upon repackaging the employment relationship as entrepreneurship, how are discourses of self-entrepreneurship to be sustained by a subjective experience of work, since the digital platform, the basis on which 'self-governing' individuals can access the market, also constitutes the means by which the subordination of labour takes place? The platform algorithm is both the means by which control over labour is ceded to capital, and the means of reclaiming control, according to the discourse of the platform owners. It is from the resulting conflict between experientially derived meanings and social meanings that a collective good sense, borne from a shared experience of alienated labour dressed up as its opposite, can emerge to conduct the counter-hegemonic struggle. The content of this struggle and the way 'counter

hegemonies' deploy social discourses from below is contingent upon the dialogical co-construction of new critical understandings of the self by the collective worker as part of a social class compelled to continually seek ways of escaping, or at least alleviating, the dehumanising consequences of alienated labour (Brook, 2009, 2013). The next section explores this further by drawing upon recent research on drivers working for ride-hailing platforms, predominantly based in North America, and mainly covering Uber drivers.

The case of platform-mediated taxi services

Ride-hailing platforms have become ubiquitous in recent years. Uber is the best known of these platform-mediated taxi services, although other ride-hailing platforms such as Lyft have also emerged. Like other digital platforms, sourcing-in workers to buy into their brand, Uber employs discursive markers aligned with notions of a self-directing, enterprising individual, promising freedom, flexibility and 'turnkey entrepreneurship to drivers' around the world (Uber Newsroom, 2014, cited in Rosenblat and Stark, 2016: 3763). Uber's website claims that 'driver-partners' can set their own schedule and operate in a boss-free environment, driving as much as they want and making as much money as they want, and that 'opportunity is everywhere'. Drivers are positioned outside of the organisational boundaries of the platform, occupying instead a place in the market (Roberts and Zietsma, 2018), and are simultaneously constructed as entrepreneurial partners who can be mobilised to resist regulatory curbs on Uber's activities (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). This discursive constitution of drivers as entrepreneurs is evident wherever Uber or other ride-hailing platforms establish themselves (Jamil and Noiseux, 2018; Prassl and Risak, 2016; Vaclavik and Pithan, 2018).

While the literature on platform-mediated taxi services makes much of the subordination of drivers to algorithmic control, perceptions of entrepreneurial fulfilment free of the constraints of the standard employment relationship do appear to have some relevance to how drivers position themselves in relation to the platform. Drivers in Vaclavik and Pithan's (2018) study in Brazil valued the opportunity to engage in self-management, being independent and not having a boss, while in Roberts and Zietsma's (2018) study in North America, drivers embraced a narrative of the economic agent as shaper of his or her destiny, viewing low income as an individual failure to meet the challenge of seizing market opportunities. Less compelling, but relevant nonetheless, Uber drivers in the UK are more likely than other platform workers to feel that they are their own boss (CIPD, 2017). This accepting orientation to platform-mediated taxi work suggests a positive alignment with dominant hegemonic discourse in which entrepreneurship is presented as a superior and freer alternative to direct employment. However, the affective personal meanings attached to this form of work need to be viewed alongside experientially derived meanings forged not only out of the interactions with the platform, but also with broader social phenomena that constitute contemporary production regimes. So while autonomy and the freedom associated with 'not having a boss' is a common motivation for taking up this kind of work (Jamil and Noiseux, 2018), this has to be set against experiences of traditional employment, where lack of flexibility and poor pay is compounded by daily interactions with a physical manager (Vaclavik and Pithan, 2018). Platform owners are well versed in how to exploit this by contrasting the flexibility and

possibilities they offer with the rigidity of more traditional ways of making a living (Roberts and Zietsma, 2018). The entrepreneurial self, therefore, becomes a compelling technique of power for platform owners as it promises to harness intrinsic capacities to work creatively and autonomously in contrast to a traditional direct-employment labour process, which constrains these. Internally coherent personal meanings that drive individuals towards purposeful action can overlap with objectified social meanings that appear as naturalised common sense. Positive accounts of being autonomous and boss-free exist alongside an acknowledgement of algorithmic control constraining autonomy in a faceless labour process. A feature of hegemony is its instability, since even enduring hegemonies of power are open to contestation in space and time, a product of the dialogical contest between 'common sense' and 'good sense' forged out of experience. This plays out most dynamically within the interactions that take place with the platform during the labour process, creating a complex social space within which hegemony can be both reinforced and contested.

The various ways in which drivers are subject to algorithmic control have been well documented. A major innovation of the ride-hailing apps is the ability of platform owners to remotely shape and standardise the service provided. Mathew (2015), documenting the struggle over the subsumption of labour of New York taxi drivers, observes that while assembly line workers were compelled to resort to games to exercise agency, taxi drivers continuously thwarted the attempts of taxi fleets to gain control of the labour process. In the past, fanciful technologies such as 'hot seats' were deployed to monitor the intake of passengers, only to be met with similarly innovative ways of resisting surveillance of work. Contemporary technology of course is more sophisticated, extending the reach of platforms so that they can shape more precisely when and how drivers work and how they interact with passengers. A key feature of platform work is asymmetry in access to information, one consequence of which is having to make decisions about accepting ride requests without information about the destination, depriving drivers of the knowledge needed to evaluate whether the ride is worth accepting (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). This is a serious limitation to work autonomy (Mathew, 2015), which is compounded by other practices that undermine self-directed labour, such as the requirement to accept rides within 15 seconds and the threat of 'deactivation' if too many rides are rejected. As with other forms of platform work, it is the platform that sets standards for work through a series of interrelated practices whereby the labour process becomes subordinated (subsumed) to big capital (Joyce, 2020). Control over the labour process occurs by a combination of both threats (sanctions and deactivation) and more subtle ways of manipulating behaviour through algorithmic 'nudges', such as using dynamic pricing ('surge pricing'), to draw in drivers where there is high demand.

Mason (2018) provides an illuminating account of how algorithmic control operates on the individual psyche of drivers, based on her experiences as a Lyft driver. She describes how platforms deploy techniques of gamification in order to direct the labour process. Gamification is the application of game design elements, such as competition, reward and the quantification of user behaviour, in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011, cited in Woodcock and Johnson, 2018). Applied to the labour process, gamification is a soft form of labour control aimed at increasing the psychological investment in and engagement with tasks and behaviours desired by management.

Lyft's algorithms, for example, generate 'challenges' for drivers, urging them to complete a given number of rides within a given time frame in order to earn/win a bonus, or unlock 'gold' or 'silver'-level rewards such as fuel discounts. Bonuses tend to be higher at times of greater demand for rides, and the app dynamically reacts to individual targets, which increase as targets are met. One way of keeping ratings up is to provide 'extras' for passengers. Mason (2018) describes stocking up on water and sweets after receiving a lower rating than usual, interpreting her behaviour not only in relation to enhancing her earnings potential and avoiding bonuses but also in relation to a strong internal drive to engage in the game. She explicitly draws upon Burawoy's (1979) game metaphor to explain the consent to engage in the platform management's game. However, top-down manipulation of worker behaviour makes gamification a very different phenomenon from the coping games that emerge organically from the shop floor, in that they serve to engage the drivers directly in behaviours *designed* by management, behaviours designed to reinforce hegemonic ideas around the individual economic agents competing with others. Drivers maintain enough autonomy to make some decisions, since they are free to choose not to engage in 'performance enhancing' activities. Thus, drivers are called upon to make evaluative judgements in some areas of the work, but the app pushes their behaviour towards an alignment with corporate interests (Shapiro, 2018).

The nudging tactics of platforms, together with the harder elements of control, constitute a labour process in which key features of the wage-labour relationship are present. It is the platform that controls the quality and quantity of labour available to customers. Feedback from customers is used to alert Uber of slippage in standards, prompting the platform to send drivers 'tips' for keeping passengers happy. These can range from not speaking on their phones, to holding umbrellas to protect passengers from the rain (Kirven, 2018), or even instructing drivers to be more conversational during rides (Jamil and Noiseux, 2018). When standards of customer service include the delivery of items left behind in taxis, impinging on drivers' unpaid time, the significance of externally imposed performance metrics becomes even more evident. The theoretical significance of acknowledging the nature of the exchange between platforms and drivers as a wage-labour relationship lies in how this relationship shapes the experience of work and thus the meanings attached to the labour process and the interactions that occur during the labour process. The subsumption of labour that occurs within the wage-labour relationship renders the process of labour and the product external to the worker, the process by which the worker is alienated from her work (Brook, 2009; Ollman, 1976). Meaning, or fulfilment, is derived from the interaction with the app rather than from labour itself. Engagement in externally imposed games, which are premised on social meanings steeped in neoliberal assumptions of human nature and inevitability of market competition, provide a source of psychological comfort, while simultaneously reinforcing the externalisation of labour. Stocking up on water, providing sweets for passengers, opening doors – all these activities are not an extension of the worker deploying her creative capacities in her interactions with customers, rather they are extensions of the algorithm and a means to feed the ratings. There is an uneven triadic service relation (Lopez, 2010) in which the driver's interaction with the customer is mediated and policed by the platform owner's through its arm's length techniques of control. The driver experiences the

triadic relation as contradictory – their normative self is constructed as free while simultaneously beholden to external, managerially imposed norms of behaviour.

How this contradiction is managed and rendered coherent will necessarily vary depending upon myriad factors that shape how we understand the world, from macro-level political systems to micro-level individual circumstances. For some, Uber offers a sense of freedom and opportunity, a ‘safe space’ in the context of economic hardship (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020). In Atttoh et al.’s (2019) study of Uber drivers in the US, using Uber as a ‘side hustle’ to maximise income depended upon a fusing of personal and social meanings, with monetisation of ‘commutes to work’ and of leisure time seen as a natural response to the unlimited opportunities offered by Uber, so much so that even the healthier option of riding a bike to work becomes an opportunity lost. Similarly, Roberts and Zietsma (2018) report that part-time platform drivers welcomed the opportunity to gain a supplementary income that allows them to pursue more personally fulfilling activities. Thus, the entrepreneur of the self directs alienated labour inwards towards the self. Under the auspices of neoliberal hegemony, life outside of the market is increasingly elusive, as individuals are called upon to relate to themselves as extensions of capital in all areas of their lives (Holborow, 2015), thereby distorting human nature at the altar of commodity fetishism (Brook, 2009; Ollman, 1976). That this can be experienced positively, as a sense of being both in control and able to afford extra things or to pay off debts, does not take away from the exploitative and subordinating reality of the wage–labour relationship. What it does signal is that the reflexive social and creative human provides an alternative personal meaning that contains the seeds of a counter-narrative that can challenge the notion of an entrepreneurial self that reduces individuals to appendages of capital; a dystopic dialectical outcome, albeit fragile, in which our humanity is seen to depend upon that which dehumanises us.

The emergence of an organic collective sense is more likely to be located among drivers who rely on platforms as their sole source of income and who experience more acutely the difficulties in navigating algorithmic control in order to make a living wage. However, the possibility of forging a collective counter-view is compromised by the isolation inherent in the job, with drivers in some cities unlikely to physically encounter other drivers (Atttoh et al., 2019), a situation exacerbated by the construction of drivers as in competition with each other rather than as co-workers. However, as with other platform work, encounters do take place within digital spaces. For the most part these are virtual encounters, often fragmented and without unions but independent of the platform owners (Wood et al., 2018b). They allow drivers to share experiences, provide pay and tax advice and even advice on how to ‘perform’ labour, such as judging the types of interaction passengers want. Indeed, the opaqueness of platforms as employing organisations makes online forums an important space to exchange tips and advice. Inevitably, they also provide a space where hegemonies are enacted, debated and contested, indirectly through competitive but fraternal ‘games’, and directly through heated exchanges on the nature of the work and the relationship of drivers to platform managers (Roberts and Zietsma, 2018). Forums provide a space for ‘communities of coping’ (Korczynski, 2003) but also for misbehaviour, overcoming the isolated and competitive nature of the work (Reid-Musson et al., 2020), and thus a potential space for communities of solidarity and resistance (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020).

Conclusion

This article seeks to develop a theorisation of the production of hegemony and the playing out of consent, coercion and resistance in platform work. The starting point is Burawoy's influential theorisation of hegemony in the labour process, which is central to his 'politics of production' schema. However, Burawoy's conceptualisation of hegemonic despotism is limited in capturing how workers' consent, compliance and resistance plays out under the changing economic and political conditions of neoliberal capitalism, especially for platform work. In addition, hegemonic despotism is often used, mistakenly, in contemporary analyses of work as shorthand for describing the emergence of coercive labour regimes, thus emptying it of any dialectical content. A key question addressed, therefore, is how can workers' consent be accounted for where much evidence suggests that a significant part of the gig economy workforce is actively choosing platform work, despite the poor working conditions associated with it.

Burawoy's politics of production provides a response to this question, on condition that the concept of hegemonic despotism is rendered analytically consistent with conceptualisations of hegemony that draw attention to the way discourses and practices create subjectivities amenable to dominant forms of capital accumulation under neoliberalism. Foucault's (1980, 2008) theorisation of the way in which the material and discursive practices of neoliberal governmentality construct normative acceptance among individuals helps to fill the conceptual gap within hegemonic despotism. It does this by providing an explanation of how hegemony is constructed through techniques of power at macro-levels (government policy and discourse) and meso-levels (platforms) that shape individual subjectivity by normalising dominant understandings of the social world and behaviour. Neoliberal governmentality in this way is a constituent part of the political apparatus of production, acting upon subjectivities both outside and within the labour process, co-existing alongside despotism. The conditions which underpin despotism are also present outside and within the immediate labour process; outside, through socio-economic developments (e.g. offshoring and welfare conditionality) and within, through coercive workplace practices (e.g. algorithmic control and imposition of sanctions). These two fields of hegemony and despotism, outside and inside the labour process, illustrate how production politics at the firm-level mirror the politics of production at the macro (state) level (Burawoy, 1985). On the one hand, the neoliberal state withdraws from many of the welfare and regulatory functions typical of the post-1945 period, but nonetheless is engaged in the 'conduct of conduct' of neoliberal subjects, which enables platform owners to withdraw from the direct employment relationship, while simultaneously tightening control over the labour process.

The positive orientations that many platform workers harbour towards this form of work represent a reaction to, and flight away from, alienated labour. Paradoxically, it is in leaving the security of the standard employment relationship that it is claimed freedom is achieved. A key pillar of the hegemonic regime, regulated standard employment relationships, is thereby characterised as a marker of constrained labour under 21st century conditions of work. However, the attachment of platform drivers to the promise of autonomy and freedom recounted above does not indicate a simple one-way internalisation of dominant hegemonic narratives. It reveals instead the complex way in

which subjectivities are constructed and social events are imbued with personally relevant meanings which enable individuals to achieve an orderly existence in which they have some semblance of control (Brook, 2013; Knights, 1990). Gramsci (1971) recognised that while the power of hegemony was felt with varying efficacy, it was powerful enough to produce a contradictory consciousness born of the ongoing dialogical tension between hegemonic common sense versions of the social world and the personal meanings constituted within and against hegemonic narratives (Crehan, 2016; Ives, 2004). The experience of platform drivers illustrates this contradictory consciousness, framed ideologically by discourses of power that entangle freedom with notions of the entrepreneurial self and are enacted personally as experientially derived meanings that hinge upon both freedom and control in a contemporary version of hegemonic despotism. The deep-seated desire to escape managerial control, a fundamental feature of the capitalist labour process, is seized upon by hegemonic forces and turned into its opposite with tightened managerial control experienced as a necessary exchange for freedom from the boss.

Therein lies the centrality of Gramsci's consistently dialogical approach to power and hegemony, the basis upon which agency is affirmed. Burawoy (2012) explicitly drew upon Gramsci in bringing hegemony into his analysis of power and consent in the labour process and, as Vallas and Hill (2012) point out, there is significant similarity between Foucauldian and Gramscian conceptions of the state-individual relation of domination and hegemony at work. By bringing into the mix Gramsci's concept of contradictory consciousness and the dialogical clash between hegemonic 'common sense' and 'good sense', the complex interplay between oppressive dominant structures and the enactment of power relations at the micro-level becomes a space of contestation with the potential for transformative change. The symbiotic reordering of the overlapping conceptualisations of hegemony, regimes of labour control and emerging subjectivities constitutes a theoretical frame of reference from which to understand how dominant political and managerial ideologies are at least partially absorbed as rational responses by workers to the challenges of the labour market and work regimes. Since the common sense of the powerful encapsulates only a partial and contradictory understanding of the social world, this rationality is by its nature limited and thus open to counter-hegemonic ideas and struggle (see Scholz, 2017) via the forging of alternative collective understanding based on the good sense and shared experience of co-workers (Brook, 2009, 2013).

The empirical research presented here is a snapshot among a growing body of research on platform work, and is predominantly North American research, the birthplace of human capital theory. Other national contexts may produce different forms of hegemonic despotism revealing a 'differential movement of neoliberal subjectivity' (Vallas and Hill, 2012: 188). The challenges to the platform business model within taxi services in European countries, and the appeals to formalise what is in all respects an employment relationship, suggest that this may well be the case, necessitating a further rearticulation of hegemonic despotism to take account of variegated politics of production. That said, the continued deterioration of the standard employment relationship across many national economies highlights the need for its defenders, principally trade unions, to deepen and extend their efforts to support counter-hegemonic struggles among the growing numbers of platform workers.

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