Original article

The reorganization of app-based delivery workers' job: new-old forms of control in Arapiraca, Brazil

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Abstract

With the rise of digital platform work, there is a challenge to understand the work process of app delivery workers. Given this, this research aims to analyze the reorganization of labor among delivery workers in Arapiraca, Brazil. This is a qualitative research study in which six interviews were conducted. The analysis considered the following dimensions: the work process, forms of control, and collectivity. The study found the formation of groups of delivery workers as an alternative to large delivery apps. In these groups, an administrator is present. There are strategies for collective organization, facilitated by digital social media. However, the presence of the administrator implies the coexistence of elements of vertical organization, with delivery workers being subordinate. These workers have a daily working day longer than 8 hours and earn between one thousand five hundred and two thousand reais (R$) per month. The work of delivery drivers, even with the use of new technologies, remains precarious. This reflects the conservative modernization typical of the periphery of capitalism, blending some technological innovations with old relationships.

Keywords: Delivery workers; Groups; Labor; Uberization.

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La reorganización del trabajo de los repartidores a domicilio: nuevas-viejas formas de control en Arapiraca, Brasil

Resumen

Con la expansión del trabajo en plataformas digitales, surge el reto de comprender el proceso de trabajo de los repartidores a domicilio que utilizan aplicaciones. Ante esto, esta investigación tiene como objetivo analizar la reorganización del trabajo de los repartidores en Arapiraca, Alagoas, Brasil. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, en la que se realizaron seis entrevistas. El análisis consideró las siguientes dimensiones: el proceso de trabajo, las formas de control y la colectividad. El estudio encontró la formación de grupos de repartidores, como alternativa a las grandes aplicaciones de reparto. En estos grupos hay un administrador. Existen estrategias de organización colectiva, facilitadas por las redes sociales digitales. Sin embargo, la presencia del administrador implica la coexistencia de elementos de organización vertical, con los repartidores en una posición subordinada. Estos trabajadores tienen una jornada laboral diaria superior a 8 horas y ganan entre mil quinientos y dos mil reales (R$) al mes. El trabajo de los repartidores, con las nuevas tecnologías, sigue siendo precario. Esto refleja la modernización conservadora típica de la periferia del capitalismo, que combina algunas innovaciones tecnológicas con relaciones antiguas.

Palabras clave: Repartidores; Grupos; Trabajo; Uberización.

2

1. Introduction

The metamorphoses in the contemporary world of work constitute responses by capital to its contradictory nature, taken to its extreme consequences in the face of its absolute limits, which are now activated by the structural crisis of capital. The capital is compelled to reinvent itself to address its contradictions through the reconfiguration of strategies, including the incorporation of new mechanisms. Broadly speaking, considering the last 40 years (although there are spatial and temporal variations worldwide), capital's responses have materialized in productive restructuring in synergy with various forms of neoliberal state advancement on an international scale (Mészáros, 1995).

To move forward with our specific object of analysis, we will briefly highlight elements that align with productive restructuring, particularly within the framework of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1992). In this regard, the process of Uberization emerges as the most recent expression of precariousness typical of flexible accumulation. That is to say, the rapid expansion of digital labor platforms constitutes a convergence of processes that were already underway earlier, in the context of the structural crisis of capital, complicating labor precarity through technological innovations (Abílio, 2020).

The flexible accumulation regime shapes the form of work organization based on the ever-changing demands of the market, serving as a countertrend to the mass production and standardization of the old Taylorist/Fordist models (which have become increasingly less common since the mid-1960s). The concept of a versatile worker capable of performing multiple roles in response to market demands emerges within this regime as an apparent reconnection of the working class with its subjectivity, once lost in the rigid mechanisms of scientific management. However, what is established is a dynamic that compels the worker to utilize their creative potential in the service of increasing productivity. Thus, the restructured capital shifts the responsibility of "self-control" of the process to the working class (at least in some aspects), but within the boundaries set by capital itself (Mészáros, 1995).

Clearly, the restructuring is heterogeneous and has legal and political implications, as it would not be feasible within the parameters of labor laws that were in place regarding the conventional employment contract between employer and employee. New, mystified forms of this employer-employee relationship are forged, primarily because the new subjectivity of the working class (captured by capital) internalizes the idea of the end of the conventional worker figure, now supposedly elevated to the status of a collaborator or individual entrepreneur.

This specific process brings visibility to what has been called the precarity of labor, understood as the legal and political reinstatement of the structural nature of capital (exploitation of the working class through the process of valorization), which is amplified by productive restructuring. The most evident expression of precarity occurs through temporary and unstable

3

forms of worker employment, or through the refunctionalization of informality through the fallacy of entrepreneurship or other similar mechanisms. These dynamics lead the unemployed working class towards these forms of subordination to capital, given the collapse of the traditional employment contract and, consequently, the labor rights that could be achieved in different circumstances (Canettieri, 2023; Huws, 2020).

Uberization represents a point of continuity in this process since it enables large companies to offer their products and services through a network of precarized workers who are enticed by the idea of "being their own boss" (Huws *et al.*, 2017). Through the technology of their platforms, these companies connect workers (drivers, delivery workers, among others) with consumers, portraying themselves as mere intermediaries in the process. However, they manage it through the use of artificial intelligence, which subordinates the worker to their interests, even though there is no officially recognized employment relationship (Huws, 2020).

This form of work organization has been called on-demand work by application, uberization, or platformization. On-demand work occurs when a company offers services through online apps, but the service is performed in a specific location (Schinestsck, 2020). The terms platformization and Uberization are alternatives for the same work dynamic. Regarding the term platformization, we believe that its use is broad, as it can cover dimensions outside the world of work (the platformization of life). When it comes to the world of work, the term uberization may be a more concrete alternative, alluding to Uber's pioneering spirit and following the trend of other names created throughout history to refer to models of work organization (Fordism, Toyotism, Walmartization, etc.). All three terms are acceptable, and here we have chosen to use the term uberization, as it emphasizes the case with the greatest impact on the world of work.

Among the various uberized activities, the delivery of goods (especially meals) by workers using motorcycles or bicycles has gained prominence in recent years, with considerable expansion during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to social isolation and the increased need for home delivery of products. Nevertheless, the detrimental effects of this precarious form of work have expanded, including lower potential earnings, increased competition among workers, and exposure to health and life risks, all of this outside the realms of social and labor protection. With some social visibility, even in mainstream media, new social responses have emerged in the pandemic context, many of which have been initiated by workers themselves, such as the delivery worker protests in Brazil in 2020 (Grohmann, 2022).

It is from this context that new forms of (self) organization of delivery workers' labor emerge (or at least, are potentiated). We are referring to the emergence of collectives and cooperatives of delivery workers, a movement that constitutes working-class responses to the advancement of labor Uberization (Grohmann, 2022; Huws, 2020; Soriano & Cabañes, 2020). This condition is symptomatic of the dialectical nature of history, rooted in class struggle, where on

one hand, capital provides its responses to the structural crisis, such as the Uberization of labor, and on the other hand, workers seek new strategies of resistance, albeit within the possible limits of the social metabolism of capital (Mészáros, 1995).

Some authors (Borghi *et al.*, 2021; Grohmann, 2022; Srnec *et al.*, 2021) highlight European experiences where delivery workers have created cooperatives or collectives inspired by principles of solidarity and horizontal labor management in an attempt to achieve greater independence from large digital platforms. The formats vary, as some collectives have their own platforms (owned by the workers), while others rely on interaction mechanisms through social media. The example of Coopcycle (a federation that includes several courier cooperatives), in France, stands out in conducting the alternative of using their own platforms (Srnec *et al.*, 2021), having developed its own software for the use of its associated cooperatives, expanding across Europe and gradually reaching North America (Grohmann, 2022).

In the Brazilian context, some cooperatives and collectives have emerged, but the use of their own platforms is still in its early stages, mainly due to the development costs involved. Grohmann (2022) analyzes the cases of the cooperatives Senõritas Courier and Pedal Express in Brazil, demonstrating that they do not use their own platforms and do not have short-term plans to do so. The alternative is the use of social media for communication and organization of work, a process that may impose limits (which structurally already exist) on their autonomy but does not entirely prevent the construction of paths for collective resistance.

Notably, the experiences analyzed have emerged in large cities, gaining more visibility, although even in these cases, there is still a need to expand studies on their possibilities and limitations. However, given the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of the process, it is essential to pay closer attention to the experiences that are emerging in small and medium-sized cities. In these areas, the interplay between old and new elements involves specific analytical peculiarities, particularly in the economies of the capitalist periphery, as exemplified in the case of Brazil.

On the periphery of capital, there are particularities in the way the working class is (over) exploited, highlighting pronounced expressions of the social issue, especially evident in class inequality and other inequalities within the nation-state, including disparities among its regions. In smaller municipalities, in regions historically marked by pronounced social problems and technological lag, the effects of labor precarity can become even more pronounced. This is the focal point of the premise that led us to this research, with the aim of analyzing the reorganization of delivery workers' labor in response to Uberization, in a medium-sized city located in the interior of northeastern Brazil: Arapiraca, state of Alagoas (AL).

5

2. Methodology

This research is structured using a qualitative approach, developed in Arapiraca, Alagoas, Brazil. In small and medium-sized cities in Northeastern Brazil, motorcycles are a primary means of transportation, which explains the significant presence of motorcycle couriers (moto boys) and motorcycle taxi drivers (mototaxistas) in Arapiraca, even before the expansion of delivery services via digital platforms.

The research setting is the city of Arapiraca, Alagoas, in northeastern Brazil. With a population of 234,309 (estimated in 2021), it is the second largest city in its state, behind only Maceió, the capital. Its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is R$ 19,389.15 (calculated in 2018) and the Municipal Human Development Index (MHDI) is 0.649 (recorded in 2010), which makes Arapiraca a well-situated city in the reality of the northeastern interior, being a regional reference in economic, political, and cultural terms (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2021).

The city has a few streets in the central neighborhoods with a higher concentration of restaurants. Near these establishments, groups of motorcyclists, usually delivery drivers, have been gathering, waiting for calls on the app. These motorcyclists were the subjects of this research, interviewed using a semi-structured interview script prepared by the researchers, which contained both objective questions to characterize the respondents and, substantially, open-ended questions about the work of the delivery drivers.

Data collection took place between January and June 2022, involving adult delivery workers who volunteered and were registered with a delivery app. To do this, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Following the first interview, we recognized the need to explore a new element that had emerged during our fieldwork. This is about the collective dynamics (existence of groups) established among delivery workers in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, as reported by the first delivery worker interviewed. These groups are informal in nature, as they are not legally recognized. They are clusters of delivery drivers in a WhatsApp group, managed by one person and supported by a physical base in the city center.

This issue required methodological adaptations, such as visiting the physical base of the group mentioned by the first interviewee, located in the city center, where we could make observations that were recorded in the field diary. Following the visit, we scheduled two more interviews with delivery workers from that group, one of them being the group administrator (who is also a delivery worker). We became aware of the administrator's role during the visit. In the meantime, we also learned about the existence of another group, with a base located in the same area of the city, which led to another visit. After additional observations and field diary entries, three more interviews were scheduled, including two with delivery workers from the

group and one with the administrator (who, in this group, did not work as a delivery worker). This brought the total number of interviews to six, supplemented by the records of the visits.

It is worth remembering that qualitative research values the density of interviews rather than quantity. Therefore, it is possible to analyze a smaller scope of respondents, especially in exploratory studies, those whose objective is to approach the object and construct hypotheses to be investigated later (Sebe Bom-Meihy & Holanda, 2014). For these reasons, the number of six interviews proved to be relevant for this phase of the research. In addition, the interviews are complemented by observation of the functioning of the groups, as well as by dialogue with data from other studies.

The analysis was grounded in historical-dialectical materialism, focusing on the contradictions that exist within the analyzed experiences while also considering the mediating contradictions between the specific case studied and the social totality.

Several dimensions were considered: the labor process, forms of labor control, and the collective nature of the experience. These dimensions structure the discussion of the article, preceded by a section characterizing the interviewees and the research field. We also drew on scientific literature about the work of delivery workers, particularly in the emergence of collectives and cooperatives, even though the groups analyzed here have significant differences from these experiences, as we will point out in the analysis.

7

3. Findings
3.1 The interviewees and the research field

All interviewees are male, aged between 23 and 41 years old, with experience as members of some group (average of 7.5 months). All of them also work through the dominant digital platforms in the market, except for one of the interviewed administrators, as he is not a delivery worker. One of the delivery workers combines this activity with another occupation (security guard), with formal employment. Another delivery worker also serves as the administrator of one of the groups, and three interviewees are solely delivery workers. The sixth interviewee is not a delivery worker but serves as the administrator of the other group. He also mentioned being an entrepreneur in other productive sectors, although he did not specify which ones.

Both groups were created during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, supporting the argument that this situation catalyzed the process, leading workers who were pushed out of the formal job market or from other precarious sectors to work as app-based delivery workers. This was especially due to the increased demand created by the new restrictions on gatherings and the normal operation of commerce and services. At the same time, the degradation of this category was exacerbated by the expansion prompted by the health and social crisis, necessitating

responses from various social complexes, including the workers themselves (Grohmann, 2022; Soriano & Cabañes, 2020).

The process of the origin of these groups in Arapiraca constitutes a mosaic that carries the history of motorcycle usage (with a considerable presence of motorcycle taxi drivers and couriers in the past), the expansion of Uberization in the delivery activity (more broadly, we would include the expansion of the use of information and communication technologies in general activities, including social media), the repercussions of the pandemic on the world of work, and a certain level of development in the commercial and service sectors.

The groups will be referred to as Groups A and B, and they have similar structures. Both have a physical presence in the city center, consisting of a small room with seating, sofas, and a bathroom. Group A has 30 registered delivery workers, while Group B has 33. Being registered means that the delivery worker was added to the WhatsApp group and must pay a weekly fee of R$ 20.00 to the administrator, which grants them the right to use the physical facilities of the base.

There is always a second WhatsApp group in which the representatives of the commercial establishments recruited by the group administrators participate. Up to the time of this research, there were 256 establishments in Group A and 210 in Group B. As can be seen, the groups are similar, as is their operation, as discussed below.

8

3.2 Work process

A snippet from the interview with subject 1 summarizes the delivery worker's day:

I wake up at five in the morning, have breakfast, go to the gym, do my college [distance learning] stuff, and come to the base at eight [o'clock]. I take a break at three [o'clock] for lunch, rest, and come back at six [o'clock] to work until midnight (subject 1, personal communication, Jan 28, 2022).

When we calculate subject 1's daily working hour, we arrive at the striking result of thirteen hours. Although the number of hours may vary, all interviewees stated that they work more than eight hours per day, reaching up to fifteen hours on very busy days. In the case of subject 2, who has another job, he maintains the routine of working with the group every day, except for the morning, when he works the entire previous night on a shift. Even on those days, subject 2 still works about eight hours as a delivery worker (in the afternoon and evening): "When I'm on night duty the previous night, I only get to the base in the afternoon, around two or three hours. Then I also stay until 10, 11 o'clock, sometimes I go until midnight" (subject 2, personal communication, Feb 19, 2022).

As already discussed in academic literature (Huws, 2020; Volchik *et al.*, 2020), one of the points that characterizes labor exploitation in the gig economy is the extension of the workday, largely due to the fallacy of "be your own boss and set your own hours." However, in the precarious terrain of low-paying gig work, extending the workday becomes inevitable for increasing income. As findings from this exploratory research suggest, in the case of the analyzed groups, even with a strategy that attempts to compete with the dominance of large platforms, it is not possible to mitigate the (self) extension of the workday. This is because it is inherent to the flexible accumulation pattern, regardless of algorithmic management.

Nevertheless, it's essential to monitor the potential for horizontal organization in some collectives (Grohmann, 2022), as well as to connect with traditional working-class organizations (Borghi *et al.,* 2021), as a means of resisting dominant platforms. These companies often encourage workday extension through engagement triggers (Abílio, 2020). In the Arapiraca experience, self-organization on an alternative platform (a widely used social network) seems to be a step in that direction, even though it comes with all the limitations already reported in the literature (and other unique limitations) due to capital's control over labor within its socio-metabolism.

The alternatives created by the Arapiraca delivery workers are still closely connected to dominant platforms since many orders come through those platforms, and only then are passed on to the WhatsApp group they are part of. Additionally, group members still maintain dual roles, as in the case of subject 2 and subject 4: "I stay here at the base, one eye on WhatsApp and one on 99 [delivery app], whichever comes first, I take" (subject 2, personal communication, Feb 19, 2022); "I don't want to give up [the app] because when there's nothing in the group, I get orders from the app" (subject 4, personal communication, May 14, 2022). In the case of subject 5, he is registered with two apps but rarely takes orders from them: "I have 99 and *iFood,* but it's rare for me to take orders from them; I prefer the group" (subject 5, personal communication, May 14, 2022).

The alternatives to the major platforms do not exclude dual roles, although some delivery workers gradually stop or reduce their activity through these platforms. At the same time, it should be considered that the experiences of self-organized delivery workers in Brazil still show signs of being in their early stages, especially in terms of autonomy, where this issue appears to be fragile when compared to the European context, particularly in the absence of a platform owned by the delivery workers themselves (Grohmann, 2022).

Regarding the earnings, all of them mentioned receiving R$ 5.00 per delivery in nearby neighborhoods and between R$ 7.00 and R$ 8.00 in more distant neighborhoods. To get an idea of their monthly income (which fluctuates), we should consider the daily quantity of deliveries. Several studies have shown the low earnings of delivery workers, which often range from half to one Brazilian minimum wage, that is, approximately R$ 750.00 to R$ 1,500.00 per month, despite

9

working more than eight hours per day (Canettieri, 2023; Filgueiras & Antunes, 2020; Machado & Zanoni, 2022).

Subject 1 mentioned making between 10 and 15 deliveries daily, and on better days, it can go over 20. Subjects 2, 4, and 5 confirmed this pattern, with subject 5 reporting the highest number of deliveries, reaching thirty-one on the same day. This delivery driver summarizes the income and expenses dynamics:

I make around four hundred [*reais*] per week, so it's about fifteen hundred per month, sometimes two thousand. Then I spend around 60 [or] 70 [*reais*] on gasoline per week [about 10 *reais* per day], plus the 20 [*reais*] we must pay for the base (subject 5, personal communication, May 14, 2022).

In other words, per week, the delivery driver has expenses ranging from R$ 80.00 to R$ 90.00 (including the R$ 20.00 paid to the group administrator), which reduces their monthly earnings. In addition to this, there are expenses for motorcycle maintenance – according to one of the interviewees: "I spend between 100 to 150 *reais* on motorcycle maintenance per month" (subject 2, personal communication, Feb 19, 2022), buying a helmet, boots, raincoat, bag, and, in some cases, motorcycle rental. Therefore, precarity also manifests itself through the erosion of wages, amplified by the transfer of many costs that were previously borne by the employer and are now the responsibility of the delivery driver.

It is worth noting that subject 3 also holds the position of group administrator. He reports that, between earnings from deliveries and the fees received from group members, after deducting expenses for the base (primarily the rent for the commercial space, R$ 650.00), he manages to earn four thousand *reais* per month. Additionally, subject 6 is not a delivery driver and has businesses in other sectors, choosing not to disclose his monthly income. Furthermore, subject 2 has another occupation, which supplements his income, but within the group, he functions solely as a delivery driver. Indeed, within the dynamics of the groups, the administrators (subjects 3 and 6) operate in a different context, as the groups provide them with additional income, whereas the delivery drivers solely receive payment for each delivery they make.

It is worth noting that payment per delivery resembles what, in the critique of political economy, is referred to as piece-rate wages. As Souza (2022) points out, piece-rate wages constitute the most suitable form of wages for capital, transformed here into wages per delivery, in a type of relationship that appears to have eliminated wage labor but keeps it alive in an enigmatic form. In this form of wages, it creates the perception that the more one works, the more they can earn, when capital appropriates a portion of the worker's labor time with each delivery. Therefore, the greater the number of deliveries, the greater the amount of unpaid labor time that is appropriated by the capitalist (in this case, by the large digital platforms).

The fact that employers are concealed through these new forms of organizing work does not eliminate their existence. In fact, within this group-based format, a sort of collective ownership (comprising all the owners of various establishments) is created. They request deliveries from the delivery drivers on WhatsApp and pay for each delivery. When the groups of delivery drivers were formed, the symmetrical opposite was also formed: the group of employers.

It's worth noting that the payment is made individually to the delivery driver by the owner of the establishment, which reinforces this relationship of indirect subordination to the small business owners in Arapiraca. In this regard, subject 1 compares it to another time when he worked exclusively for a restaurant:

> I used to work as a permanent delivery driver for a restaurant, with proper registration and all. It was better because I had a fixed salary, and the owner valued me more because he knew me; we were together every day [...] Now, with each delivery, it's someone different, and no one wants to provide assistance if they don't know you (subject 1, personal communication, Jan 28, 2022).

This experience reflects the historical aspect previously mentioned, regarding the existence of delivery work before the platforms, but in a different format. Based on this preliminary analysis, we presume that the scenario has worsened, with a deterioration of working conditions and relationships. According to subject 4: "Our work is tough, it's precarious, we're in it because we don't have anything else" (subject 4, personal communication, May 14, 2022). This statement suggests that some delivery workers recognize the precariousness of their work, even describing it as an aggressive process, as indicated by the term "tough," which conveys a sense of violence. It is also suggested that even when seeking collective alternatives for organization, the determination of this reorganization arises from capitalist labor antagonism and the production of structural unemployment. In the quest to escape from this, the working class is thrust into precariousness, forced to survive, and compelled to provide new responses of resistance, all while accompanied by symmetrical counterparts stemming from capital.

Dialectically, these experiences cannot be discredited, even though they have their limits. According to Cant (2019), the collectives, even informal ones created in recent years, reveal a new picture of class struggle, as they indicate that delivery workers are not passively accepting algorithmic exploitation. Certainly, we are analyzing very embryonic experiences here, within the context of a medium-sized city that has not undergone all the stages of restructuring production through the classic path of advanced capitalism.

11

3.3 Forms of control and collectivity

The issue of labor control through what has come to be known as *algorithmic subordination* is a central element of the Uberization process. Several empirical studies have gathered data on how this form of subordination materializes within the Brazilian context. Machado and Zanoni (2022) conducted a study involving 226 workers employed by location-based platforms that require in-person service provision, such as passenger transportation, deliveries, household services (e.g., electricians, plumbers), domestic labor, and caregiving. Their findings revealed the presence of at least four distinct control mechanisms exerted by these platforms: customer ratings, geolocation tracking, work frequency, and connection time. Among these, customer evaluation (28.71%) and GPS-based location tracking (26.03%) emerged as the most prominent forms of control, indicating a strong reliance on digital surveillance and performance scoring to regulate workers' behavior.

Additionally, Machado and Zanoni (2022) highlighted a contradiction between the perceived autonomy of these workers and the actual constraints imposed by the platforms. While many workers reported feeling free to accept or reject tasks, they also recognized that refusal often results in punitive consequences. Responses regarding perceived punishments—particularly among location-based platform workers—indicated significant repercussions, such as a reduction in future job offers (31.8%) and varying degrees of account restrictions, including temporary or permanent deactivation (33.51%). These findings underscore the subtle yet coercive mechanisms that shape labor relations within platform work, revealing how algorithmic management limits genuine autonomy.

12

Yet, the emergence of informal groups coordinated by an administrator through social media platforms (such as WhatsApp) seems to produce certain shifts in this form of control, as observed in the case under analysis. We now turn to this in detail.

The account given by subject 3, the administrator of Group A, was crucial in understanding how this type of organization works in Arapiraca. In summary, there are two WhatsApp groups, one consisting solely of delivery drivers and the other with the addition of representatives from businesses (often the owners themselves, as many are small enterprises).

In the group of delivery drivers, the organization of the work process takes place collectively. Every day, a list is created in the order of preference for the next delivery request based on the order in which they arrive at the physical base. This list is constantly updated and posted in the WhatsApp group. However, they can make swaps among themselves based on mutual convenience agreements. They also use this group to communicate about traffic conditions, unexpected delivery issues for another driver to take over, and to notify each other about the opening and closing of the base.

In the other WhatsApp group, the establishments make delivery requests and receive information about which driver will handle the service. They can also file complaints, request support from a second driver for the same delivery in case of issues and share other relevant messages within the group. Since the drivers are part of the WhatsApp group where the business representatives are, there is transparency regarding incoming orders. It is up to them to select the driver who will make the delivery based on the list established in the other group.

The decisions about who enters and leaves the groups are the responsibility of the administrator, as well as receiving feedback from the establishment owners regarding the performance of the delivery drivers. Regarding this, subject 3 mentioned, "I've removed a delivery driver from the group because the owners complained that he was always late, arrived drunk [sic], or high" (subject 3, personal communication, Feb 19, 2022).

The interview with subject 6 reveals some different elements in the organization of group B, as follows:

> Delivery drivers are not part of the group of restaurant owners [...] I gained access to this group through my existing relationships. I used to be a waiter, then a maître, and later had my own restaurant. I know people in this industry in the city. [...] On the other hand, the motorcycle delivery drivers agreed to the project (subject 6, personal communication, Jun 02, 2022).

13

In group B, it is noticeable that the demands are under the control of the administrator, and there is no transparency regarding delivery requests. Thus, when comparing the two groups, it becomes evident that the administrator plays a role in both cases as an intermediary that weakens the autonomy of the delivery drivers. However, in group B, this issue is exacerbated, causing the group to adopt the characteristics of the administrator's ownership rather than forming a collective organization, despite some degree of collective organization being present dialectically.

Some level of collectivity persists in group B because the way the delivery drivers organize themselves among themselves is similar to that of group A, with the determination of the order of deliveries among them, criteria for exchanges, and sharing of some relevant work-related information, demonstrating the existence of mechanisms of self-organization, although ultimately, they remain subordinate to the administrator.

Therefore, we found that the level of collective solidarity is expressed in an incipient and occasional manner. The structure and dynamics of self-organization coexist with traces of vertical organization, expressed in the figure of the administrator. In this regard, we recall that in piece-rate paid work, the interposition of intermediaries is facilitated, a parasitic worker who exercises control over other workers, in a kind of subletting of exploitation. Despite the differences, especially historical ones, in some way, metamorphically, this intermediation is present in the contemporary work of delivery drivers, which can be replaced by algorithms on large platforms or remain in the form of a human agent among the workers themselves (Davis & Hoyt, 2020; Souza, 2022).

In this analysis, the hypothesis that mediation between capital and delivery drivers remains subordinating gains strength, even without the sophistication of artificial intelligence. Furthermore, in its absence, old strategies (the intermediary agent) gain prominence, mixed with other technological strategies, as is the case with the use of WhatsApp to assist in organizing work. The resurgent process of conservative modernization on the periphery of capitalism is reaffirmed, with a tangle between old informality and mutations stemming from the technological age, which also appears to mix with other traditional elements of small and medium-sized cities, as exemplified in the case investigated here. This hypothesis also reinforces the importance of continuing to pursue more horizontal management approaches, particularly in the development of platforms owned by collective worker organizations.

The existing models of collective experiences are diverse, with other examples featuring a figure like the administrator. Grohmann (2022) demonstrates the existence of collectives in Brazil in which one of their members plays a differentiated role in management and decision-making. However, it is important to note that the experiences analyzed here, given the stage of the movement in Arapiraca, differ from the experiences analyzed in Europe (Borghi *et al.*, 2021; Grohmann, 2022) as they do not have the legal status of a cooperative, nor the organic and political character that could give them the status of a collective.

In this sense, the term "group" indeed seems more appropriate, as it indicates the incipient collective and self-managed nature. At the same time, it highlights the predominance of commercial character in the face of a vertical structure of the groups, resembling more of a commercial venture led by the administrator. Even though, in the case of group A, this character also works as a delivery person, he profits from his role as an administrator. In other words, the administrator is the old middleman who receives payment (in this case, indirectly) for organizing the workers to meet the needs of a collective of employers, indirectly and dialectically created in these experiences.

The mercantile character embodied in the presence of the administrator becomes evident in Subject 1's statement: "The group has a new administrator for about 6 months now because the old one sold the group for three thousand [*reais*]" (subject 1, personal communication, Jan 28, 2022). Subject 3 indirectly confirmed the purchase: "I've been in this for a short time... 5 or 6 months" (subject 3, personal communication, Feb 19, 2022). The group, therefore, takes on the status of the administrator's business, which can be sold the right (informally) to use the network of "solidarity" created there. In other words, the potential collective network created has a price, revealing its functionality in the capital's process of valorization. This functionality reaches the small bourgeoisie of Arapiraca, relieving them of the need to hire (albeit precariously) a fixed delivery worker.

In the case we analyzed, the distinct role of the administrator also originates from the type of social relationships developed in smaller cities. Subject 6 states that:

> There are people who try to create a group like mine but can't. I did it because I know the restaurant owners, I've worked a lot with them. To get involved in this business, you have to have knowledge of the city (subject 6, personal communication, Jun 02, 2022).

14

The underdevelopment of nations in peripheral capitalism, especially in their poorer regions, combined with the personal nature that work (professional) relationships can take in smaller populations, may paradoxically hinder the technological development of the bourgeoisie itself, as well as the modernization of relations (at the service of capital) (Kohli, 2009). At the same time, this archaic character influences the strategies of struggle and resistance of the workers, with informal relationships and weaker bonds of solidarity prevailing. This hypothesis requires further examination in subsequent studies.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, in other cities and parts of the world, this process of interaction among delivery workers has evolved towards the creation of more dynamic, horizontal organizations with greater potential for resistance against capital (Huws, 2020). Therefore, the experiences in Arapiraca and similar-sized cities should be subject to ongoing analysis and action in order to monitor and develop their potential.

4. Conclusions

We have observed that the experiences in Arapiraca began to emerge in the context of the pandemic but were also shaped by other transformations in the contemporary world of work. They differ from cooperatives and collectives that have been the subject of analysis in other studies or in the political discourse within the delivery worker movement, as they exhibit more pronounced features of subordination to capital (mediated by administrators), commercialization, and weakening of collective solidarity.

It is worth highlighting the search for a technological alternative to the major platforms (iFood, 99Food). WhatsApp revealed its communicative potential, streamlining service demands and organization. However, the intermediate intermediately reproduces old forms of subordination, limiting the potential for collective organization. As shown in this study, low earnings and limited autonomy persisted within the mixed model observed (with demands arriving both through informal groups and through major platforms).

This study is limited by its exploratory nature, which calls for further research in broader contexts and the examination of other forms of collective organization. New elements — such as the regulation of the occupation, the legal and fiscal constraints imposed on platforms, and the potential recognition of employment relationships — should be incorporated into the future research agenda concerning this field of study.

Finally, we emphasize the need to extend the analyses beyond the European context, with a closer examination of the periphery of capital and, within it, its peripheral regions, to avoid monolithic conclusions that fail to account for the heterogeneity of the social totality.

15

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16

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