A Bodily Normativity for Neoliberal Work: A Social Philosophy Approach

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ABSTRACT Labor and the workplace have undergone profound transformations over recent decades. This paper discusses normative demands stemming from the social suffering inherent to neoliberal workplaces worldwide, while also addressing ideological resistance against institutional responses to labor abuses and domination. First, we explore the elusive nature of the stressed and exploited body at work, through a dialogue with the psychodynamic approach of Dejours, a Bourdieu-inspired account of bodily domination by Moreno Pestaña and Herzog's case for economic democracy. Second, the paper addresses new forms of labor, such as the platform and gig economy, and the behavioral dynamics characteristic of them. It also considers social differences and inequalities as decisive factors in the concrete effects of this transformation, as well as the impact of technological design. Finally, it addresses how current forms of work organization exhibit a concretely corporeal dimension that affects the mental and physical health of workers in the form of injury, disease, exhaustion, stress, and deskilling, among others. It concludes by positing a normative response to neoliberal labor domination, at both a legal and political level.

KEYWORDS labor domination, bodily domination, platform capitalism, psychodynamics of work, workplace violence

RESUMO O trabalho e o local de trabalho passaram por transformações profundas nas últimas décadas. Este artigo discute as exigências normativas que emergem do sofrimento social inerente aos ambientes de trabalho neoliberais em escala global, ao mesmo tempo que aborda as resistências ideológicas às respostas institucionais face aos abusos e às formas de dominação laboral. Em primeiro lugar, exploramos a natureza elusiva do corpo estressado e explorado no trabalho, por meio de um diálogo com a abordagem psicodinâmica de Dejours, com a análise da dominação corporal inspirada em Bourdieu proposta por Moreno Pestaña e com a defesa da democracia econômica formulada por Herzog. Em segundo lugar, o artigo examina novas formas de trabalho, como a economia de plataformas e a gig economy, bem

como as dinâmicas comportamentais que lhes são características. Considera-se ainda o papel decisivo das diferenças sociais e das desigualdades nos efeitos concretos dessas transformações, assim como o impacto do design tecnológico. Por fim, analisa-se como as atuais formas de organização do trabalho apresentam uma dimensão concretamente corporal que afeta a saúde mental e física dos trabalhadores sob a forma de lesões, doenças, exaustão, estresse e desqualificação, entre outros efeitos. O artigo conclui propondo uma resposta normativa à dominação laboral neoliberal, tanto no plano jurídico quanto no político.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE dominação do trabalho, dominação corporal, capitalismo de plataformas, psicodinâmica do trabalho, violência no local de trabalho

Introduction

In recent decades, a growing group of social philosophers (Dejours, 2009, 2013; Deranty & Dejours, 2010; Moreno Pestaña, 2015, 2016; Herzog, 2024; Llaguno, 2023) have emphasized the central role that the domination of the body plays in contemporary social relations, particularly under neoliberalism, even in cases of so-called immaterial work. These accounts highlight the benefits of intersectional approaches in forging potential paths to emancipation. However, efforts to relate forms of individual and common resistance with a normative reconstruction of labor rights have not attracted significant attention within the scholarship addressing, both theoretically and practically, present models of labor and their social recognition. Yet such a hybrid approach (López Álvarez, 2023; Sánchez Madrid, 2023, 2025; Navarro Ruiz, 2021) attentive to both subjective demands and normative goals, provides a key opportunity to reimagine the workplace as a more livable and socially viable space, insofar as it demands that the public political agenda recognize the central role of the body in human development and social construction. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate regarding normative responses to bodily exploitation and domination in global workplaces, focusing on the power dynamics driven by AI tools and algorithms that increasingly dissociate the working subject from the basic needs and reproductive demands of their own body.

This paper begins with an overview of three paradigms (Dejours, Herzog, Moreno Pestaña) to explore the body's fundamental role both in all work, as well as in ensuring social reproduction, with the aim of emphasizing the body's importance in sustaining labor in the 21st century on a global scale. The second section sheds light on the impact of AI tools and algorithms on the workplace–especially in the logis-

tic-related sectors– which perpetuates other patterns of intersectional injustice. The third section engages in a normative reconstruction of labor law that accounts for the violence experienced by working bodies in recent decades, concluding that the normative order should track the historical evolution of labor to identify the aspects most in need of institutional intervention. Finally, the concluding remarks underscore that the emergence of new labor rights should always align with a cultural enlargement of the meaning of work and the reframing of a political labor movement which not only acknowledges reproductive work as valuable, but also prevents the exploitation of the working subject forced to choose between caring for their own bodies or for those of their customers.

1. The political and normative role of the body in the neoliberal transformations of the workplace

Recent transformations of work and the workplace have overshadowed the role of the body in both reproductive and productive activities. The growth of a global services and logistics market, and the consequent increase in so-called immaterial work, has radically reshaped the workspace through the introduction of AI tools and algorithms. These developments have not only fueled fantasies of the body as a basic material condition of labor, but also led to new forms of bodily exploitation and domination (Christiaens, 2023; Richardson, 2024). Here, we seek to counteract interpretations that relinquish any hope of emancipating the body in the neoliberal workplace, by addressing forms of resistance impeding a full-fledged subsumption of the conditions of life to financial value chains. Thus, according to Jaeggi (2017), contemporary critical theory should open the "black box" of the neoliberal economy, which largely determines current forms of labor, to shed light on its failures rather than attributing them to allegedly human causes. Such an approach challenges the alleged abstraction of any social context of neoliberalism, while denouncing the way that neoliberal work constructs a new, self-exploitative ethos that deeply undermines the conditions of social reproduction.

Various scholars have recently addressed the difficulties in fostering an awareness of the limitations and potential of the dominated body, a state increasingly normalized under the accelerating pace of neoliberal production and delivery timelines. We select three positions that are not known for having established a regular dialogue with one another, yet allow for an assessment of the wide range of avenues available for mobilizing normative tools that counteract harm and resist the correlation of forces unfavorable to workers in neoliberal labor contexts. The purpose of this section is therefore not so much to conduct a comparative study of all of them, but rather to highlight concepts, objectives, and methodologies of interest for outlining the normative dimension of the critical approach developed in the article. The first account (Deranty & Dejours, 2010; Dejours, 2009, 2013) stresses the anthropological damage wrought by excessive productivity, arguing that the human condition cannot adapt to unrestrained patterns of productivity and acceleration. In this vein, an important sign of the circumvention of the body in most contemporary workplaces is the suppression of independence and reciprocity underpinning labor productivity and workplace experience (Llaguno, 2022; González Ricoy, 2025). Conceptual analyses of bodily domination and exploitation have addressed different but intertwined features of this complex phenomenon (Moreno Pestaña, 2025; Dejours, 2023, and Herzog & Schmode, 2025). This section will focus on the major contributions of each, aiming to outline a conceptual framework for the normative reconstruction of bodily exploitation at the workplace.

Dejours, drawing mainly from the work of Michel Henry, seeks to resituate the material conditions of cooperation within the perspective of the individual subject. Dejours' psychodynamic approach to labor-related pathologies posits a sort of *reminiscence* of the subjective and objective conditions of 'meaningful work': work that provides rewarding development for the subject through their productive activity.[1] In this vein, Dejours claims that "living work" —in contrast to meaningless work— requires meeting basic human and social needs and thus must be grounded in a substantive concept of labor. However, this theoretical framework is deeply Eurocentric, and not easily adapted to global contexts, insofar as it focuses on forms of labor suffering in countries such as France, which possess a strong labor culture, no matter how critical their situation may be due to the pressures inherent in neoliberal

1 It would be a matter for another paper to further inspect to what extent Dejours' approach focuses on the structures and conditions of so-called productive work, while neglecting reproductive work.

rationality.[2] Dejours' psychodynamic approach to labor focuses on a subject yearning to be emancipated from alienated patterns of productivity, while also seeking recognition for her own performance. In this way, this account prioritizes some work activities, at the expense of others, as not all workplaces are able to be transformed through such awareness-raising practices. According to these conceptual tenets, both accountability and recognition appear as key features of rewarding jobs, while the lack thereof is seen as a failure on both an individual and a collective scale.

Yet many contemporary jobs, particularly in the logistics sector (López Calle, 2020), completely pervert the idea of assessment, reducing it to a mere tool to increase productivity devoid of any dialogue with the working subject. Even if Dejours partially disregards the phenomenon of the subject's incapacity to reconstitute a sphere of demands that can withstand the labor exploitation experienced, he offers an inspiring critique of evaluation systems that neglect the body's role as a mental and a material entity for the sake of fulfilling the demands of production. Though the body often remains unseen in the material process of production, its skills, endurance, suffering and resistance provide crucial feedback throughout working life, which must be made visible in any successful evaluation of job performance. A merely quantitative assessment neglects the complete work experience, insofar as it disregards not only the bodily skills and capacities necessary for production itself, but also the emotional reward employees receive from their labor.

The second paradigm mentioned draws on the Bourdieu-inspired neo-marxist approach of Moreno Pestaña (2015, 2016, 2024), who spotlights the progressive transformation of the body into a commodity alienated from any subjective autonomy. Neoliberal labor markets display manifold examples of the intersection of social class, race and gender to make appearance essential to professional success or failure. His approach stands in opposition to those of many Marx-inspired theorists highlighting the powerlessness of the neoliberal subject to substantially change the pace, outcome, and framework of evaluation of their jobs. On the contrary, Moreno Pestaña applies a classical Marxist analysis of social and economic domination and exploitation to raise

2 In any case, we make this observation not with a critical intent, but rather as an assessment of a state of affairs that confirms the validity of theories particularly linked to the analysis of labor harm in specific territorial settings, while also recognizing the need to combine them with proposals that are more attuned to the complexity of demands and contexts faced by workers in other parts of the world, such as the Global South

awareness of the outsized dependence of workers on their appearance and on external evaluation. Differently from Dejours' account, he does not mainly take a phenomenological approach to the role of the body in labor contexts, but rather draws on the positions of critical thinkers such as Marx, Althusser and Bourdieu to outline an original and stimulating paradigm for grappling with the naturalization of domination globally. Thus, he exposes the fact that increasing aspects of human life have become a sort of capital that threatens the prospects for living a good life under neoliberal capitalism, and argues that the difference between *capital* and *resources* must be preserved, even under extremely exploitative conditions (Moreno Pestaña & Romero Cuevas, 2022). Such an account clearly points to a Marx-inspired potential for the reconstruction of the social grammar of labor and the workplace to challenge the allegedly unchangeable structures of a precarious and exploitative job market.

In a similar vein, Herzog (2024; 2025) advocates for "economic democracy" and "lifestyle parity" to shed light on "bodies at work" as an essential feature of contemporary labor. Thus, she urges highlighting the often neglected role of the body as a material and mental entity subjected to different forms of intersectional injustice and thus requiring protection. According to this analytical approach, Herzog addresses how basic material and mental needs are met in many workplaces, ranging from logistic and delivery jobs to domestic work. Moreover, she claims that an "economic democracy" ought to provide subjects enough leisure from productive work to care for their families or to engage in fulfilling activities of their choosing (in the event that they are not committed to any family care). In fact, she proposes that a democratic workplace must fully recognize the body as an element that must be reconsidered and also emancipated from manifold sources of exploitation and burn-out, which leave it exhausted and unable to develop beyond its productive duties.

With regard to the "reproductive labor", Herzog (2025) avoids both minimalist as well as maximalist positions affirming that individuals should define their own care responsibilities. For example, many parents decline to outsource childcare, viewing such a decision as detrimental to the bond between parents and children. Herzog, however, does not limit her account of the pathologies of contemporary labor to elucidating the value of reproductive work –following feminist voices such as Federici and Fraser, she also takes issue with the implicit "care" obligations of

many jobs (especially, for example, in the healthcare sector). In this case, she also suggests unpacking the tacit "duties" underpinning the business strategies of such companies, and proposes state intervention to promote more democratic workplace structures (Herzog & Schmode, 2025). Thus, Herzog and Moreno Pestaña share some key concerns about the concealment of bodily exploitation not essential for job performance. Both claim that such professional activities must take into account the rights of the living and healthy body while also acknowledging that some sorts of work, such as unpaid care work, require reserving time and energy as well. Both theorists understand bodily cooperation as something learned through practice. This stance, which relies more on objective transformations, stands in contrast to the position of Dejours, who emphasizes the power of subjective reflection to counter the nearly pathological framework of subjects' work duties through the shaping of democratic practices (Dejours, 2025), particularly when these workers are assessed by external devices unable to grasp the aspects that make work meaningful and, together with others, constitute networks of mutual support and resistance against control apparatuses that dismantle any rewarding or meaningful dimension of their labor.

The three paradigms considered above offer an overview of how social philosophy of labor has addressed the bodily domination and exploitation often experienced in contemporary workplaces, as well as when caring for family members and others in subjects' affective networks. These proposals not only increase awareness regarding the injustices faced by workers trapped in exploitative labor frameworks, but also raise normative claims for more democratic work environments, able to reconcile the productive and reproductive efforts expended in both the workplace and the home. Moreover, these approaches draw on disparate methodologies from the social and human sciences to call for an institutional awareness of the bodily conditions underpinning and sustaining all labor. The following section will address the impact of algorithmic technology on the workplace, with particular focus on the normative challenges presented by this radical change of the structures of production and recompensation.

2. Algorithmic technology and a new regime of power for boosting labor productivity

Algorithms and information communication technologies (ICT) are nowadays ubiquitous features of our contemporary work panorama, which can be further framed within the more general concept of "digital capitalism". This new socio-economic configuration is the result of an on-going process of globalization, characterized by a persistent over-production crisis which (even under changing geopolitical conditions) shows no signs of receding (Benanav, 2020). One response to this economic landscape has been the implementation of lean production focused on cost-reduction, designed to optimize both distributive and commercial processes. As many scholars have already pointed out, logistics and ICT technologies are essential to this aim. Throughout the 20th century, logistics have played a pivotal role in the economy thanks to innovations like intermodal freight transport via cargo containers (Mau, 2023), while ICT technologies have enabled the coordination of workers and their distribution along the supply and production chains. Both tools reduce delays, optimize manufacturing and supply and demand flows, and increase profit margins through targeted advertising and other marketing strategies. This trend also manifests in the growing importance of human resource management (HR) and communication-optimizing tools such as *Slack* (Pfeiffer, 2021, p. 177 ff.).

For these reasons, terms like "digital capitalism" –or more concretely– "platform capitalism" should not be understood as a new regime of capitalist accumulation, as some have claimed (Rifkin, 2015). Rather, they represent the latest expression of financialized capitalism, which began in the 1970s with the dollar no longer backed by gold. Nevertheless, the pace and scale of technological change (characterized as a "fourth industrial revolution" [Schwab, 2016]) raise questions regarding the exact delimitations of this form of capitalism. Despite this essential elusiveness, "platform capitalism" can be described, for the purposes of this paper, as an economy led by companies "that increasingly rely upon information technology, data, and the internet" (Srnicek, 2016, pp. 11-12).

From a business strategy perspective, the platform economy differs from traditional industry in three main aspects (Cuppini *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). First, there is a shift from the control of resources to their orchestra-

tion. In this model, owning the elements of the value chain is no longer necessary; rather, platforms generate networks that facilitate interaction between co-producers and consumers, encouraging them to share assets. Second, the focus moves from internal optimization to external interaction. While this may seem to contradict earlier claims regarding the digital economy, this shift must be considered through the lens of the notion of "complexity", developed by researchers at the Santa Fe Institute in the 1970s. In a more overarching reflection on traditional physics, these scholars proposed a new ontology to understand dynamic (or "complex") systems, arguing that order emerges "not as a balance of forces in a closed system but as an emergent outcome of dynamic interactions" (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2025, p. 11). This conceptual framework, and the understanding of elements as "generative, even creative and intelligent" is precisely that which was put into practice –through code and data– in the digital revolution (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2025, pp. 11-12). This explains digital labor's shift from hierarchical control to behavioral governance (as is evident in the tactic of nudging, which will be addressed later). Thirdly, platform capitalism has moved from customer-value to ecosystem-value business models, in which value resides in the network itself, and its vast quantities of curated user data. These users are central elements of an ecosystem "facilitated by ICT and digital technologies" (Cuppini *et al.*, 2022, p. 3).

In this paradigm, power is concentrated in a handful of dominant actors,[3] reshaping the global labor landscape. Key to their success is platforms' role as a form of infrastructure that allows for the coordination of work, enabling a multifaceted and continuous negotiation of the boundaries of "standardization and flexibility in work" (Richardson, 2024, p. 11). These platforms can be applied to different geographies and business models, given that they make use of a variety of technological assets (fundamentally: algorithmic management, workforce' outsourcing, datafication, ranking and rating systems) that are highly adaptable to various legal and social backgrounds (Pirone, 2024, p. 58).

This formal abstraction helps explain the wide range of employment to be considered –in fact, the exact scope of what must be considered "platform work" is up for debate (Zuckerberg, 2022). Notwithstanding, there is some consensus in that platform work shares certain common-

3 Both the acronyms GAFAM and BATX are exemplary in this sense. Both stand for the major American (Google-Apple-Facebook-Amazon-Microsoft) and Chinese (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi) companies that dominate the tech area.

alities: i) paid work is organized through an online platform, ii) three parties are involved (platform/client/worker), iii) the aim is to carry out tasks or solve specific problems iv) labor is outsourced, v) jobs are fragmented into tasks, and vi) services are rendered on demand (Eurofound, 2018).

Turning to the impact of platform labor on worker subjectivity, features commonly associated with the post-Fordist labor regime –flexibility, autonomy, self-realization through work– have been perverted by algorithmic control. Despite the self-perpetuating nature of technology, its role in social domination is not automatically determined (Klur & Nies, 2023, p. 20). As obscure as algorithmic design may be, it is always possible to adapt it to comply with business objectives. Algorithms are thus subordinated to managers, helping them fulfill their traditional managerial functions: controlling information, allocating tasks, and evaluating worker performance (Muldoon & Raekstad, 2022, p. 9). What distinguishes these systems is their panoptic potential: their capacity for effective and continuous control is greater than was possible with any previous technology. And this difference is used strategically.

Research confirms that algorithmic technology is used less to directly monitor and continuously control workers, and more to foster competition among them (Farrell & Fourcade, 2023, p. 23). They are also used to streamline and accelerate work processes, as a means to incentivize workers submissiveness (Klur & Nies, 2023, p. 25). This extreme rationalization and optimization of labor processes heightens work intensity, which is further exacerbated by the near-instant feedback mechanisms of digital markets (Klur & Nies, 2023, p. 28).

This paradigm shift must be seen as a new regime of power, one that reconfigures "agency" and "sociality". As noted earlier, platforms operate as infrastructures that seek to reprogram patterns of social interaction (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2025, p. 118 ff.). Rather than hierarchically controlling our movements and actions, platforms seek order from below, with products designed to exploit "not only the mode of interaction, but also the goals and motivations of players" (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2025, p. 119). With the ultimate aim of profit revenue, platforms effectively construct a new social logic (Ak, 2025, pp. 3-4), designing new work practices, purifying interactions into categories, and manipulating these by nudging certain behaviours. Moreover, the increasing influence of apps designed around "clustered publics", is generating a more fragmented and isolated society (Gerbaudo, 2024, pp. 12-14).

All this suggests a new "psychological contract" in platform capitalism, able to go beyond the Foucauldian model of the "entrepreneur of oneself" (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2024, p. 100 ff.), in which the company has lost its role in organizing and coordinating a labor force. The firm becomes a more flexible, remote infrastructure managing quasi "self-employed people competing for market shares" (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2024, p. 106). This situation, which is, of course, mediated by factors such as the diverse locations of each worker and enterprise, displays a renewed materialization of the subjectivity of human capital. Workers are frantically pushed to be faster and more efficient, (Pirone, 2024, p. 58; Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2024, p. 107), but simultaneously optimized through the quantification of their own biological processes. What's more, dominance over these biological processes is often seen as a symbol of status,[4] and accordingly, the workforce is disciplined through strategies of gamification and information control (Christiaens, 2023, pp. 29-35; p. 83 ff.). Mechanisms of rating, scoring, and assessment are now of paramount importance, turning workers into financial assets evaluated within asymmetrical relationships between both the platform and the customer (Chan, 2022, p. 4). In this way, platform capitalism turns self-assessment into a "practice of subjectivation" that defines the worker's subjectivity (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2024, p. 110). Here we confront a new modality of neoliberal labor practices that translate "virtue" into a permanent practice of self-evaluation, self-optimization and self-assessment able to effectively exploit all fields of capital (erotic, social, economic, etc.) (Moreno Pestaña, 2016).[5]

This new labor regime can also be seen in various empirical studies published in the last few years. While the increase in flexible, remote work makes it harder to generalize across jobs and sectors, there has clearly been an acceleration of the pace of work and an intensification of supervision as a result of the aforementioned algorithmic tools, which optimize labor efficiency by reducing downtime (Wood, Graham et al., 2018, p. 6 ff.). Furthermore, it appears that mobile employment (as opposed to remote or office jobs) (e.g. *Uber*, *Glovo*, *Just Eat*) are related

4 The proliferation of the so-conceived "best" morning routines is quite representative of this optimization culture. A salient and distinct example is Ashton Hall's viral morning routine (https://www.instagram.com/ashtonhall/reel/DHmSS6SRJIl/).

5 The tension between the heteronomy of the market, and the imperative of self-assessment, self-evaluation and self-optimization, is visible in our cultural practices, which are often identified with a flourishing culture industry that is increasingly driven by algorithms. Furthermore, this experience of the self and its obligation for permanent self-actualization has also extended to politics, with increasing social segmentation and algorithmic echo-chambers, that are also contributing to a more polarized society (Farrell & Fourcaude, 2023, p. 231).

to worse working conditions and reduced labor protections (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024, p. 32). They are also often carried out by migrant workers whose legal status is either tenuous or limited by state regulations, as a result of diverse factors, such as i) low barriers to entry for new platform workers, ii) exploitation of legal loopholes or, iii) illegal renting or sharing of worker profiles (Van Doorn, 2017; López Calle, 2020; MacQuarie, 2025). This situation is not limited to courier and food-delivery services, and can also be seen in care platforms (*Helpling*, *Care.com*), which exhibit similar dynamics and practices in terms of discipline and control of workers (Van Doorn, 2022).

Working from home poses drawbacks as well: studies have shown that those who work remotely report increased isolation due to working irregular hours, as well as a feeling of arbitrariness caused by a lack of control of their labor –experiences they describe as alienating (Rodríguez Modroño, 2024, p. 34; Casili, Tubaro, et al., 2024; Wood 2018). These responses are symptomatic of the deregulated status of platform work, which remains structurally disembedded "from the cultural and legal norms that would limit its commodification" (Wood, Graham, *et al.*, 2019, p. 15). Encouragingly, some governments are beginning to address these issues, as in Spain's "Rider's Law" (RD 9/2021, May 11th), or the platform economy database launched by the EU.[6]

All things considered, it is clear that technological development does not necessarily alter social structures, especially those related to gender inequality (Kohlrausch & Weber, 2020, p. 25 ss.). For instance, it has been reported that a clear gender salary gap persists within platform work, and that women are often less successful in freelance gig-work, both quantitatively (they are less often hired) and qualitatively (they are overrepresented in low quality jobs) (Adams & Berg, 2017; Berg & Rani, 2021; Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). These outcomes stem from the continued devaluation of reproductive work (still often considered women's "natural domain"); patriarchal norms of what is deemed "socially acceptable" for "respectable" women (Bailur, Natabaalo, et al., 2022), the lack of adequate social infrastructure to support women's ability to

6 The database can be consulted in https://apps.eurofound.europa.eu/platformeconomydb/. Additionally, with regards to the Spanish Rider-Law (RD 9/2021, 11th May), it must be noted that the results have not been as successful as expected (Rodríguez-Piñero, 2023). The difficulties for its inception (due to numerous factors, ranging from the scarce resources of the Labour Inspection and judicial instances to the economical dynamics –and legal trickeries– of the platforms) have yielded a somewhat deceiving outcome. Nevertheless, the hardships encountered furnish some important lessons about the contemporary work panorama, in which labour law has lost its capacity to set stable, all-embracing standards for the labour market, a topic addressed in the following section.

work,[7] and the dismantling of the social infrastructure of care, which demands women "fill in the gaps" in reproductive work (Pulignano & Morgan, 2022, pp. 119-120). This situation forces women to juggle unpaid and paid labor, and often leads them to accept those jobs able to be easily combined with other duties, such as simple, fragmented tasks that can be carried through the day, or part-time work.[8]

A gender lens can be extended to other aspects of technology as well, such as the development of AI. Implicit bias in Artificial Intelligence is a common concern of theorists (Micklitz, Pollocino, *et al.*, 2021), but this consideration should go further to reimagine a feminist approach to technology enabling new, progressive possibilities. If technology is to be used in the service of emancipation, the discriminatory exploitation of labor for the benefit of tech companies must first be dismantled (Kitchin, 2024, p. 31). With this aim, feminist thinkers such as D'Ignazio & Klein (2020) and Kitchin (2024) emphasize the need to analyze the constitutive conditions of power relations within technology, making use of the classic feminist concept of situated knowledge (Haraway [D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 83]). They argue for reshaping these power relations and for acknowledging the co-creating power of subjects (Kitchin, 2024, p. 31; Chan, 2022, p. 7).

In sum, there is no such thing as "raw data", neither a singular way of using data, nor a fixed imperative to "capitalize" or "monetize" it (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 52). On the contrary, the use of this data depends on the ends we pursue, the values we uphold, the voices we represent, and even the emotions we deem relevant to our goal (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 87 ff.). The aim is to assume both the ambiguous character of technological tools (algorithms, data), as well as their impact on society, to serve the goal of emancipation. In this way, it is ultimately a matter of providing for the common good: a task that includes questioning technology's ends, as well the inequalities it causes when limited only to certain privileged few.

7 Something that can be as simple as guaranteeing access to public restrooms for all genders (Bansal, 2023, pp. 40-41).

8 In fact, one of the main reasons women engage in gig-work is to combine these jobs with other duties (EIGE & Eurofound, 2023).

3. How to address contemporary bodily domination? A debate regarding legal and political challenges

The preceding analyses have revealed the extent to which the organization and conceptualization of work have changed, as well as how this structures the subjective experience of labor. The current landscape appears almost unrecognizable compared to previous labor eras. At the same time, these transformations highlight the persistent centrality of the problem of work, whose psychological, normative, and political complexity remains a challenge for contemporary social philosophy. Paradoxically, as work has come to occupy an ever-growing portion of individuals' lives, it has simultaneously faded from theoretical discourse. The dominant languages of capitalism's "new spirit" has rendered categories traditionally linked to "labor" obsolete, pushing toward its symbolic and material eradication: as Jean-Philippe Deranty notes, commenting on Dejours' positions, "the neoliberal and managerialist contemporary mode of capitalism tries to base its domination over work upon the repression, or the invisibilization, of working" (Deranty 2011, p. 84).

In line with the framework established by Foucault for the philosophical consideration of neoliberal rationality, analyses tend to focus on subjectivity, forms of calculation, and the governance of behavior. With remarkable foresight, Foucault centered his critical approach to neoliberalism on the model of entrepreneurial subjectivity and human capital theories, which radically altered, to the point of unrecognizability, conventional (particularly Marxist) language around labor. The widespread prominence of notions like "interaction," "collaborative economy," "algorithm," "flexibility," "clients," "users," "ratings," or "credit" signals a shift toward a financial capitalist order whose patterns of subjectivation and social relations seem distant from previously central concerns like "subordination," "alienation," or worker "exploitation." This dual process of dematerialization and depoliticization of labor relations aligns with the fading relevance of work itself as a core object of critique: reflections on platform labor and algorithmic relations often adopt the characteristically disembodied, light, weightless tone of financial interactions.

Yet, as Marx's analyses underscore, a fundamental aspect of critiquing capitalism lies in examining the corporeal roots of domination

(material needs and impulses), its reproduction through bodies, and its effects on them (Fracchia, 2005). The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism does not invalidate this framework, but it does demand an analysis of the specific modes of bodily governance under the neo-managerial regime, as well as its link to increased suffering, workplace precarity, and exploitation. The key is to capture how, beneath the frictionless language of platforms and "voluntary" interactions, older forms of personal dependency resurface.

Alain Supiot has meticulously studied the management model he terms *governance by numbers* –the latest iteration of the modern utopia of a technical, impersonal administration of human life, conceived as a kind of "government machine." Crucially, the transition from the post-war welfare state to governance by numbers marks a radical shift in Western normative structures, dissolving the understanding of law and the state as domains exempt from the logic of calculation and measurement. The extension of economic metrics to the production of legal norms leads to failures of governance and a regression to relations of allegiance and subordination. Unsurprisingly, this model applies acutely to neoliberalism's reorganization of labor: as labor rights, like other normative principles, cease to belong to the realm of the incalculable and are instead subsumed into cost-benefit analyses, their value becomes contingent on economic outcomes. Simultaneously, work itself is increasingly subjected to quantification and perpetual evaluation.

We have already mentioned the foundations of Dejours' psychodynamics of work and other related theories. Among these is the acknowledgment –aligned with Supiot's work– of the constitutive aporias inherent to any attempt at individualized quantification of work quality. Work is never reducible to the more or less precise execution of a task, but rather involves an interplay of resistances and strategies to overcome these, constant adaptation to the unforeseen, and a deeply collaborative dimension.[9] In any case, as noted earlier, new labor organization frameworks impose perpetual evaluation as a condition for worker autonomy, making use of the infinite quantification enabled by technologies that capture, classify, and disseminate detailed performance data. Like Fordism, post-Fordism aspires to a "scientific" organization of labor –but no longer relies on the mechanical model of physical force and bodily discipline. Instead, it shifts "to a system of self-adjusting inter-

9 These aspects of work also explain the inherent indeterminacy of employment contracts.

acting units automatically responding to signal inputs and feedback, as programmed by computer algorithms" (Supiot, 2017, p. 145).

Under post-disciplinary capitalism, these mechanisms no longer seek only the external, identificatory surveillance of bodies, as Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish*. In contemporary panopticism, the subject no longer sells their labor-power as their "property," but is simultaneously the agent and object of their actions –compelled to calculate their moves, self-assess performance, address errors, and pursue self-improvement (disposition, attitude, temperament, training). Mark Fisher (2009) termed this the "privatization of stress": neoliberalism's promise to dismantle Fordist bureaucracy has instead intensified self-surveillance to unbearable levels, demanding exhaustive self-reporting and eroding workplace safety measures. Workers now operate in a situation of generalized competition, enabling constant performance ranking. Following Nicoli and Paltrinieri, we may argue that we now witness a form of "subjectivation *through* evaluation", a new modality of a Foucauldian "government of souls". In this paradigm, the subject is configured as a *subject of value*, both evaluated and evaluator, under what the authors call a political economy of self worth (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2024). In all its forms, the contemporary entrepreneurial subject is a "quantified self," as theorized by scholars like Phoebe Moore (2015).

The social function of these labor measurement systems is not to enhance the quality of work, for multiple reasons. First, the quantitative language of these systems is radically disconnected from the reality of work: while Taylorism relied on the direct expropriation of workers' knowledge and a strict division between those who labor and those who design labor, post-Fordism exacerbates this divide by devaluing knowledge itself. It replaces knowledge with a sophisticated array of metrics and rankings in which the subject can no longer recognize the reality of their activity (Deranty, 2011, p. 82)[10]. Supiot captures this process with the metaphor: "replacing the territory with the map" (2017, p. 169).

The second reason governance by numbers fails to improve work quality is that the imperative to meet indicators tends to supersede achieving actual objectives. The proliferation of evaluation procedures

10 "The new managerialist mode does not operate in this way. It purely and simply retracts all value from trade knowledge. The effect of domination is radical: the new workers no longer have anything to oppose, since the language they are forced to speak (the language of abstract quality standards, of procedures developed externally, of numerical evaluation to the hundredth degree, of projects, of purely individualised performance, and so forth) is radically heterogeneous to the specific, qualitative language—sometimes difficult to express discursively, but founded in a collective experience—in which trade knowledge is articulated" (Deranty, 2011, 82).

redirects activity toward fulfilling assessment parameters rather than adequately performing work. Some examples include hospitals systematically favoring low-complexity procedures to manipulate performance metrics while neglecting demanding cases, or academic institutions gaming publication systems through questionable practices like gift authorship, text recycling, and strategic citation manipulation (metrics are routinely equated with "quality"). Herein lies the paradox of quantified quality-measurement systems: their implementation creates conditions that undermine genuine quality or replace it with its *representation*.

Conversely, measurement procedures directly exacerbate labor *precarization* and *intensification* of work. The managerial shift redefines employment contracts, which can no longer be understood as a consensual exchange of obedience and productivity for economic security and citizenship rights. Demands for flexibility and adaptation to economic fluctuations impose labor relations marked by heightened insecurity: streamlined hiring and firing, conditional wages, eroded workplace protections and rights, fragmented collective bargaining and weakened labor law enforcement. Here, precarity becomes a fundamental hermeneutic category (Standing, 2011; Benach *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, labor intensification cuts across all occupational strata, extending beyond precarious employment. Increased work rhythms and physical acceleration are compounded by mental intensification –escalating cognitive/emotional demands, tight deadlines, problem-solving pressures, and psychological preparation. The intense subjectivation of post-Fordist labor, culture of self-responsibility, and perpetual self-evaluation blur work's boundaries on different levels: work is no longer confined to a fixed time, space, or activity but expands limitlessly into *all* time, space, and required tasks (Pérez-Zapata, 2019).

Analyzing these transformations entails an immense theoretical and practical value. It reveals the so-called "autonomy paradox," wherein escalating work demands –harmful to health and personal relationships– are perceived as freely chosen commitments (Serrano *et al.*, 2016). Where autonomy, training, and recognition, central to new labor cultures, were once seen as promoting well-being and fulfillment, they now expose workers to overexploitation, helplessness, and myriad work-related pathologies. Importantly, these remain *corporeal* effects, rooted in subjects' lived dispositions and their participation in an asymmetric power system prioritizing profit over the satisfaction of needs.

Current evidence confirms that precarity and intensification damage workers' health, a central concern for future public policy (Benach *et al.*, 2016). The unlimited expansion of job demands is linked to an increase in muscular, skeletal, cardiovascular, and immune system diseases, as well as disorders such as depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, and difficulty sleeping (Pérez-Zapata, 2019). The individualization of responsibility for managing excessive workloads heightens stress, fostering physical and mental disorders linked to chronic overwork and heightened time pressure –the two main risk factors for mental well-being in the European Union (Labour Force Survey, 2020).[11] The demand for constant attention is intensified by the use of portable devices, which compel workers to maintain perpetual responsiveness to messages, instructions, and alerts. The sexual division of labor forces women to simultaneously sustain both productive and reproductive labor (unaccounted for in performance metrics), intensifying temporal domination and gender-specific pathologies. As a whole, overcoming Fordist "rigidity" has reintroduced personalized forms of domination and universalized bodily exhaustion –which, by requiring medical and pharmaceutical treatment, becomes itself a profitable commodity (Méndez, 2022).

Yet exploitation's material consequences are not limited to bodily harm: as living entities, bodies are never merely passive objects of suffering. They develop defensive reactions, including desensitization to suffering in oneself and in others, emotional attachment to one's own exertion, and heightened tolerance for violence against those deemed "lazy" or "freeloading." This resentment, or "negative solidarity" (Read, 2024), shaped by social perceptions of suffering, has been politicized by neoliberalism's manufactured insecurity to become a central affective driver.

Proper diagnosis of this situation is essential in order to determine which courses of action and institutional procedures could potentially reverse the domination of working bodies. The individualizing, psychologically or biologically based view of the harm that work produces in individuals must give way to institutional and structural analyses. In this vein, a universal basic income is frequently proposed, as its implementation would significantly enhance individuals' bargaining power and their ability to freely organize their existence. Similarly, a reduc-

11 *Burn-out* was included in 2019 in the WHO's International Classification of Diseases, defined as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" and characterized, among other aspects, by "feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion" (ICD-11).

tion in work hours is also an oft-mentioned solution, especially when linked to predictions about work automation and the potential development of post-work societies (Deranty, 2021; Benanav, 2020). Other reflections on a post-work future, like the recent contribution by Hester and Srnicek (2023), serve to highlight an often overlooked aspect: the considerable portion of human "work" devoted to the preservation and care of bodies, and to sustaining the infrastructures necessary for their social existence.

Contemporary labor domination and its associated struggles demand various complementary normative strategies. On the one hand, it is necessary to redefine labor law under radically transformed conditions. The growing informality of labor relations accompanying new productive models ensures asymmetry in work relationships and severely limits traditional systems of protections and guarantees. Labor loses the relevance it held in legal, constitutional, and political discourse since the Great War in favor of concerns centered on employment: subjected to a quantitative evaluation based on indicators and rates, employment becomes the object of specific public policies that fail to take into account work's "social" dimension. The growth of *employment* becomes the central element of governmental truth-telling (*veridiction*, in Foucault's terms).

Economic calculation has extended to legal codes, conditioned by international demands to create environments attractive to capital and ensure debt repayment. Labor regulations across different territories ("economies") undergo evaluation and ranking systems, like those published annually by the World Bank in their Doing Business reports, creating what Supiot calls a true *market of legal products*.[12] On the other hand, labor regulation no longer targets collectively disciplined factory workers but rather isolated individuals forced to react to information and demands. In this context, it is essential that legal protections be extended to cover all work modalities, including self-employment, platform work, and cooperative work. Back in 1999, when the European Union was still debating its "social" orientation, the report prepared by an interdisciplinary team of experts coordinated by Supiot proposed lines of labor law reform in this direction: the idea of a "labor force

12 "What is unique to neoliberalism –and sets it apart from classical liberalism– is the way it treats the law in general, and labour law in particular, as a legislative product competing in an international market for regulations where a race to the bottom in social, fiscal, and environmental standards reigns supreme. Rule of law is thus replaced by law 'shopping', subordinating the law to economic calculations rather than vice versa" (Supiot 2017, 14).

membership status" [*statut professionnel*] sought to go beyond understanding work as employment and to recognize the different forms of work a person can perform throughout their life: market work, whether waged or self-employed, but also work in the service of the general interest, associative work, and care work. A specific type of rights would be linked to this occupational status, "drawing social rights" [*droits de tirage sociaux*], intended to guarantee freedom in labor activity, such as rights to training, care and work-life balance, work mobility, or extended leave. Linking economic security to social solidarity, rather than to the individual ownership of "capital", is a central element of interest (Supiot, 2001). Today, expectations for a social turn in Europe have drastically diminished, but the report's guidelines remain critically relevant. On a smaller scale, national and international policies regulating minimum wages or the economic dependence of false "self-employed" workers could be a step in the right direction, particularly where the welfare state retains some normative strength. While enterprise-level collective bargaining is destined to lose prominence as labor law's core (Supiot, 2021), court rulings on new forms of labor (especially platform work) have shown potential to modify working conditions and impose limits on companies, whose viability often hinges on exploiting fiscal and labor loopholes (Christiaens, 2023).

That said, conceiving the body as merely an object of legal protection has proven to be limited to focusing more on work conditions (wages, hours, protection against the loss of work) than on work itself. But the current work scenario necessitates moving definitively beyond the dominant model of the Fordist period, which assumed the quantifiable and technical character of work and was primarily oriented toward regulating the conditions of its exchange. If the goal is to address contemporary labor violence, we must reconsider work as a complex material activity, linked to bodily practices, power relations, and the shaping of subjectivity, whose purpose and organization must be subjected to public debate. In many sectors, workplace violence arises from the decomposition of collective spaces where: i) practical knowledge about activity and its "correct" execution is generated; ii) the limits of legitimate demands are collectively decided; iii) work-related suffering is recognized, interpreted, and mobilized; and iv) solidarity bonds are established. While the postwar welfare State decommodified areas of social reproduction and institutionalized certain social solidarities, it simultaneously limited egalitarian work organization and economic democracy. As we have

argued when discussing the positions of Herzog and Moreno Pestaña, work's material experience speaks of collective practices and interdependent bodies: here, we can also contend, with Adorno (1973, p. 277), that freedom does not consist in suppressing objective determinations, but in acting collectively upon them. Alex Gourevitch renews republican political thought by grounding it not in the general principle of freedom as non-domination but in real practices of collectives organized against domination, historically expressed through work stoppages and strikes (Gourevitch, 2016). According to Gourevitch, these struggles serve to expose and resist the dual domination inherent to labor: personal domination in the workplace and structural domination that renders workers vulnerable to exploitation. These forms of collective action exercise power by demanding cooperative control over the productive process, its rules and conditions, beyond conventional republican labor constitutionalism. Here, legal normativity articulates modes of collective organization and power that ensure rights' fulfillment and efficacy. Following Alexis Cukier, this entails not only democratizing work, but also extending work's associative forms and deliberation from shared practices to democratic procedures themselves. Conceiving of work's political centrality as a *dynamic centrality*, meaning that "work is the main vector in the reproduction and transformation of social relations, and, therefore, the main instrument of political action", supports this thesis: "if we want to radicalize democracy, we must give priority to democratizing work" (2021, p. 183).

Resistance practices necessarily emerge from conditions produced by power structures. Current struggles against bodily domination and exhaustion need not prompt a return to the paternalistic protections of welfarism, nor do they aim to revive 1970s-80s demands for workplace autonomy. Instead, they seek *democratic control* over labor, articulated through the language of vital *needs*. Demands for collective decision-making over work conditions, including cooperative reappropriation of evaluation parameters and algorithmic governance of bodies, are articulated through material concerns of time, life, and care. As noted, work's transformation under digital and financial capitalism often exacerbates existing gender and class inequalities and dominations. Consequently, social struggles emerging from bodily realities increasingly transcend traditional unionism's frameworks in both their demands and practices. Care and domestic workers play key roles in

these struggles, which seek to redefine the meaning of "work" and its relationship to livable lives.[13]

Conclusion

Under advanced neoliberalism, a phenomenon central to contemporary critical theory. It focused on the ambivalent attitude of neoliberal workplaces towards both the materiality and the elusiveness of the human body, insofar as the increasing pace of production and delivery attempt to mitigate bodily obstacles through lifelong training aimed to radically transform the individual experience of the body and reduce dependence on cooperative structures. As the three sections of this paper outline, in keeping with a tradition of anchoring normative discussions in concrete socio-historical contexts, a socio-philosophical account of labor should prioritize institutionalizing the demands of bodies so as to guarantee their viability and subsistence in a social context of diversified and decentralized activities. This entails a radical shift from the tendency to place the burden of accountability on the working subject, who see themselves forced to privatize the effects of the failure of their labor. Furthermore, countering the forms of domination and dependence underlying the neo-managerial workplace and its algorithmic system of control requires a multi-pronged intervention, calling for the establishment of new rights, increased democratic control over work, and enlargement of the definition as work. Precarity, acceleration of production and delivery schedules, and AI and algorithmic devices have provoked harsh consequences for the global workplace, disparately affecting, as usual, the most vulnerable social agents. Thus, the continuing crisis of labor urges an accurate analysis of the effects of organizational models predicated on dissociating and quantifying productive bodies, privatizing and feminizing care, intensifying work, and life's consequent exhaustion in its struggle for preservation. Addressing these factors in isolation will not suffice to produce a sound society and labor framework. On the contrary, the patriarchal and authoritarian structures that underlie these forms of neoliberal capitalism require analysis in any critical theory of labor, as this paper attempted to do. Tracking how the nature of demands and mandates directed at work-

13 Similarly, in the age of credit capitalism, these forms of unionism (or "biosyndicalism": Laboratoria, 2022) increasingly connect with movements focused on debt policy's life-dominating effects, particularly in housing.

ing bodies changes in increasingly demanding labor contexts allows for a critical perspective on mechanisms and environments that present themselves as neutral and objective. Such analysis can guide institutions and governments in developing interventions that protect workers not only from the expropriation of their labor power, but also from the erosion of their perception of, and relationship with, their own bodies. The institutional, union, governmental, cultural, and civil responses necessary for labor to reclaim its position as a meaningful and democratic aspect of social life must shape the present and future of any contemporary normative reflection on labor.

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