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Subjectivity in the “Gig Economy”: From the Entreprecariat to Base Union Militancy.

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Contemporary work has been transformed. This can be seen most sharply with the rise of the so-called “gig economy”, which involves workers tying together of different forms of short term and unreliable work in order to make ends meet. Instead of long-term (or even reasonably short-term) work contracts, contemporary employment is becoming more precarious and increasingly mediated in a digital context. These kinds of arrangements are facilitating the rise of the Entreprecariat, which ‘refers to the reciprocal influence of an entrepreneurialist regime and pervasive precarity.’[[1]](#footnote-2) The entrepreneurialist regime is an ideological construction that promises freedom – often pitched as flexibility – achieved through sheer willpower and hard work. It builds upon the idea of *Homo Economicus* – that people are rational and self-interested agents who will seek to maximise their own utility and profit. It is an attempt to convince workers that their own conditions are not due to the structure of society, but solely down to their own agency. Take, for example, a recent advert from *Fiverr* – the ‘Freelance Services Marketplace for The Lean Entrepreneur’[[2]](#footnote-3) – featured a portrait of a gaunt and tired-looking worker with the following text:

You eat a coffee for lunch.   
You follow through on   
your follow through. Sleep   
deprivation is your drug of   
choice. You might be a doer.

You – as the idealised “gig worker” – do not need the support of minimum wage legislation or holiday pay (let alone sick pay!) as you are a ‘doer’, drawing on your entrepreneurial skills to get ahead, unlike the supposed *don’t*-er, who are unwilling to take initiative.

The idea of the Entreprecariat has been popularised following the 2008 financial crisis. In the context of what Paul Mason has described as a ‘jobless recovery’,[[3]](#footnote-4) there has been a rapid rise of ‘platform capitalism’,[[4]](#footnote-5) in which companies have tried to outsource their labour force through legal loopholes and online systems. The success of these platforms relies on massive investment from venture capital along with a deliberate and sustained suppression of labour costs. The model has been given the ideological gloss of flexibility, something that is constantly pushed by so-called “gig economy” platforms like Deliveroo. For example, on their application page, Deliveroo explains that prospective riders will be ‘self-employed and free to work to your own availability.’[[5]](#footnote-6)

The reality of that flexibility is a precarious relationship with the Deliveroo platform. Rather than being taken on as a worker, the companies relies on the contractual trick of forcing workers to become designated as self-employed independent contractors. This means there is no guarantee of work and the company does not have to pay minimum wages, holiday or sick pay, and does not supply the equipment used for the work. The purported flexibility of this kind of work involves the transferral of risk from capital to labour, with very little in return. There is no opportunity for entrepreneurialism, with the work dictated by the demand for food delivery. While the labour process is controlled via immaterial smartphone apps, the work itself is definitely material. The food has to be sourced from ingredients and cooked into meals, and these then have to be transported across the physical environment of the city. This movement is powered through the burning of calories on a bicycle or the burning of petrol on mopeds. It requires long shifts, regardless of the weather and traffic, and risks injury and accidents.

The power of the Entreprecariat subjectivity has not lasted long in the “gig economy.” Despite the marketing gimmicks about flexibility and the promise of liberation that would come from being a self-employed independent contractor, the grim realities of this kind of precarious work are increasingly coming to the surface. Instead, a new subjectivity is being formed in the offline spaces of these online platforms. In the case of Deliveroo, workers are assigned meeting points to ensure the fastest delivery times, and they have been using the spaces across the city to organise. In Workerist terms, the technical composition of work has clearly changed (that is the organisation of the labour process, the use of technology, management techniques, and so on), but the political composition of workers is now changing too – with new forms of class struggle emerging.

In the food delivery section of the “gig economy” there have been a series of wildcat strikes across Europe. These have turned the flexibility of self-employment from a tool of management to a strategic strength. By falsely categorising these workers self-employed, they no longer need to ballot for strike action under egregious trade union regulations. Their refusal of work has been transformed into a new wave of militancy, with Deliveroo riders in the UK joining the IWGB and IWW, Foodora riders in Italy organising with SI-COBAS, and in Germany with the FAU.[[6]](#footnote-7) These workers, many of whom do not have experience organising in mainstream trade unions, are now experimenting with new forms of base union militancy. These rank and file organisations have very different structures to mainstream trade unions, starting from workers’ self-organisation and action.

The success of the new business models in the “gig economy” means that the experiences of this kind of work are becoming increasingly common across different sectors. The model is an attempt to force workers to take on more risk and less pay, often with digital surveillance and control. But there is now an alternative to the Entreprecariat subjectivity of trying harder, working longer, and drinking much more coffee. Rather than individuals competing to get ahead, a new collective subjectivity of the ‘doer’ is being formed. This is the worker who refuses, who talks to other workers at the meetup point, who starts a WhatsApp group, who writes a leaflet, and who takes the first step to organising that refusal into an antagonism with management.[[7]](#footnote-8) This new subjectivity is being forged through the collective struggle for counter-power at work.

1. See: http://networkcultures.org/entreprecariat/what-is-the-entreprecariat/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See: https://www.fiverr.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future*, London: Penguin, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Nick Srnicek, Platform Capitalism, Cambridge: Polity, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See: https://deliveroo.co.uk/apply [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB): <http://iwgb.org.uk/> - Industrial Workers of the World: Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England (IWW): https://iww.org.uk/ - SI-COBAS: <https://sicobas.org/> - Freie ArbeiterInnen Union (FAU): <https://deliverunion.fau.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For more on the strategy of refusal, see Mario Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal,’ 1965, available here: https://libcom.org/library/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti [↑](#footnote-ref-8)