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## Interdependence of digital platforms, development of technofeudalism and work precariousness in the Gig economy

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to present the results of an analysis that explores the interdependence between digital platforms and the development of technofeudalism and work precariousness within the Gig economy, examining how digital platforms influence the establishment of technofeudal power structures. Digital platforms have transformed traditional employment by promoting freelance work and facilitating the transition to flexible, short-term work arrangements. This model introduces significant challenges, in particular, insecurity, “algorithmic control” and a lack of worker protections. Platforms often control access to work, dictate wage structures, and retain ownership of workers’ data. By analysing case studies such as Glovo and Uber, this paper illustrates how these platforms create a system that encourages “self-exploitation” under the guise of autonomy and entrepreneurial freedom. This dynamic contributes to technofeudalism, concentrating power among platform owners who profit significantly, while workers become vulnerable and dependent on these digital systems for income. As a result, they face unstable wages, reduced autonomy, and isolation due to algorithmic management. This research advances our understanding of digital labour practices and provides a theoretical framework for interpreting power and inequality in the gig economy. It highlights the need for regulatory changes to ensure fair treatment of short-term and freelance workers.*

**Keywords:** Gig economy, digital platforms, work precariousness, technofeudalism

**JEL Codes:** J24; J44; J81; J82; M54

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### 1. Introduction

Technological changes have always been the trigger of transformation in all areas of human society. This especially applies to the wider application of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), whose rapid development has led to radical changes in all areas of work and employment. For example, the

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adoption and application of Edge technologies such as Artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), continuously accelerate the development and implementation of digital platforms in the Gig economy (Webster & Ivanov 2020). It is evident that digital platforms are significantly transforming traditional forms of employment. The aforementioned trend is also indicated by the results of numerous researches, which point out that an increasing number of people opt for the aforementioned work modalities, whether it is a primary or a secondary occupation. Working on the platform, has become extremely popular and widespread due to the benefits it offers (autonomy in work, flexibility, etc.), but numerous negative sides of this way of functioning have been identified and documented, one of which is the work precariousness (Barratt et al., 2020). Several eminent authors point out that the development of the "new economy", in fact, neoliberal ideology, and with it the work precariousness, has led to extreme proportions. For example, many of the risks of the liberal market have been shifted, from digital platforms to workers. Also, platforms are promoted as a place where employees have the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills, but reality and valid data confirm that under the euphemisms of "*freedom, flexibility and autonomy*", work precariousness becomes „*a complex, ubiquitous phenomenon*" (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020; Shibata, 2020). The problem that also comes to the fore is the building and maintenance of business reputation in the mentioned way of functioning. Although seemingly independent in their work, employees today declare that reputation in the "online space" has become a category that they can hardly influence. Employees on platforms such as Glovo, Uber, etc., face difficulties every day, trying to "satisfy" customers and the algorithm, to progress further.

All of the above indicates that the entire functioning system of the Gig economy is going in the direction of creating technofeudalism, i.e. "*platform capitalism*", where large companies, especially technological ones, begin to dominate the global market, subduing all who are economically weaker (Henkle, 2024).

## 2. Materials and research method

The analysis and conclusions presented in this paper are based on sources that are the result of previously conducted research. The data sources and the presented conclusions are based on a qualitative analysis of the content of numerous textbooks, scientific papers, websites and valid and reliable printed and electronic documents. The case study analysis method was also applied in this paper.

### 2.1. The Objectives

This paper aims to research and present the characteristics of the interdependence and links between digital platforms and the development of technofeudalism in the Gig economy. The aim is to explore and present the results of the analysis of how digital platforms influence the establishment of a technofeudal power structure, transforming traditional labour relations by creating dependence between the digital platform and workers, and how all of this together affects the emergence of work precariousness.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Contemporary determinants of the Gig economy, technofeudalism and work precariousness.



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The Gig economy is one of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and represents a type of completely liberal market where employees move from project to project or job to job, making short-term contracts with employers. According to Milosevic et al (2021, p.50), "Gig economy refers to the engagement of labour in temporary and occasional jobs". The main participants in the Gig economy can be classified as follows – "platforms, workers and consumers". In general, from the employees' perspective, the Gig economic system resembles some kind of "financial hobby" in which workers constantly "collect money" by working on a part-time basis. This way of working further leads to "massive, essential precariousness" (Behl et al., 2022; Agrawal, Bhukya, 2022; Friedman, 2014). The contracts between the employer and the employee in the Gig economy, are short-term and the work is paid according to performance (Agrawal, Bhukya, 2022). In most cases, Gig workers are treated as self-employed, so they do not "enjoy" any form of social assistance, paid sick leave, pension insurance, etc. (Bajwa et al. 2018; Cabrelli, Graveling 2019).

The above trends are conducive to the emergence and further development of technofeudalism. Yanis Varoufakis (2024), the main creator of this term, in his book entitled: "Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism", argues that this transformation, made possible by the financialization of economies, algorithmic control and political complicity, marks a reversal of capitalism's historical shift from feudal rent to entrepreneurial profit. Technofeudalism represents a modern form of domination that replaces control of land with control of digital spaces while maintaining inequality through privileges such as tax breaks and monopolies over data and technologies such as Artificial intelligence (Varoufakis, 2024). This structure is similar to historical feudalism and encourages corruption, manipulates political processes, shapes new social norms and uses media dominance to influence public consensus Varoufakis (2024). Technology companies such as Google, Amazon, Uber, Glovo and other large digital platforms are taking control of key aspects of the digital economy and social interaction. These companies create a kind of "digital fiefdoms" in which they have almost complete autonomy, managing access to data, content and users, which makes it difficult for states to adequately regulate them and establish a balance between private interest and public good and potentially leads to political and social destabilization.

Critics question this framework, suggesting that the concept of technofeudalism may oversimplify the systemic complexity of contemporary digital capitalism. Yet, the critique highlights significant socio-economic shifts in which digital monopolies erode market competition, exploit labour and challenge the regulatory powers of the state, fueling inequality and undermining democracy (Varoufakis, 2024). Consequently, this is new areas of research are constantly opening up regarding the impact technofeudalism on work on the platform and the health and well-being of employees. This type of functioning can be characterized as extremely atypical and a common denominator cannot yet be established (Bajwa et al., 2018; Goods et al. 2019).

The term "precariat", the first time was used by a group of French sociologists in the 80s of the last century, to describe cohorts of workers who do temporary and seasonal jobs (Bourdieu, 1998). Also, in the 90s of the last century, the sociologist Bourdieu (1998), wrote about the direct connection between neoliberal politics/economy and work precariousness. In his opinion, work precariousness will be "enthroned" in almost all business segments and spheres of society. In such conditions, it will be increasingly difficult for workers to make stable, predictable career plans (Bourdieu, 1998). In general, the trend of precariousness was described as very progressive even in the last century, with strong impacts on the life and work of employees (Carmo et al, 2014). The European Commission defined work precariousness as one whose duration is less than a year, characterized by low income, low level of



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intellectual work, long/unpredictable working hours, bad working environment, etc. Also, there are other bad outcomes such as minimum flexibility in the agreement with the employer, poor advancement conditions, and lack of control over work activities (Frade et al., 2004; Kalleberg, 2011). The author Standing (2011), made a great contribution to this field, emphasizing that this class "blooms" in the conditions of neoliberalism and increasingly strong market competition. Specifically, people who are constantly on the "periphery" of employment and material security are considered a precarious class. Standing (2011) contextualized the class division of modern society as follows: 1.1% of people belong to the "elite class" that controls all money flows, 2. "Salariat" enjoys full employment and all benefits on that basis, 3. The "professional class" includes workers in technocratic structures whose mobility through the social ladder practically does not exist, but they have job security, 4. "Conventional working class", which in the opinion of the author, is constantly decreasing, otherwise represents a pillar of the development of every society, 6. "Precarious class" consisting of "armies" of unemployed people in constant search for a business identity. Standing (2011) states that the conditions in which the precarious class lives and works can be described as follows - unstable labour market, employment problems, insecure work, income instability, inability to acquire knowledge and skills, lack of trade unions and labour unions.

In addition to the above, there are a large number of definitions of work precariousness, but they all have a common denominator, which is that it is not conditional for employees. Thus, work precariousness is described as unstable and insecure, with a minimal (sometimes non-existent) level of benefits and protection at work; a job that puts employees in an economically precarious position and does not give them the possibility of career mobility (Kalleberg, Vallas, 2018; Mai, 2018).

### **3.2. Interdependence of digital platforms, technofeudalism and work precariousness**

The emergence of digital platforms has enabled consumers and providers of goods/services to connect more efficiently. The most common form of digital platforms offers the option of providing services on demand (on-demand physical service), which includes the most common services that require the physical presence of the supplier of goods/services. Through the aforementioned type of platform, service providers deal with the distribution of goods/services that consumers have ordered online, such as food delivery, cleaning, babysitting, home repairs, etc. On platforms for freelance work, everything is done online by employees who have skills in specialized areas such as accounting, translation, illustration, etc. So-called "crowd-work" or "micro-work" platforms represent the latest form of organizing digital work. Employees perform tasks that Artificial intelligence is unable to complete. Also, these micro-jobs are mostly repetitive and do not require special skills (data entry, secret buyer, quality testing, answering calls and emails, etc.) (Lehdonvirta et al. 2019). The constant uncertainty of employment makes the members of the digital platforms, anxious and stressed, which was especially evident during the period of boom of the Gig economy. In particular, since the emergence of platforms as a basic feature of Gig business, working conditions have worsened in every sense - workers have a lot of short-term work arrangements, are paid below the subsistence minimum and have no protection at work. Employers monitor work exclusively algorithmically, which further worsens the already bad state of the workforce (Standing 2018; Muntaner, 2018; Arcidiacono et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019).

From the political economy point of view, the neoliberal order "dominated" on a global level, so the rights of corporations, especially ICT giants, came before the rights of workers, which greatly initiated the further strengthening of technofeudalism. Following the mentioned trend, employees through digital



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platforms in the Gig economy and in the era of technofeudalism, chronically lose their power. Author Zwick uses the term "*digital proletariat*" to better describe the class of employees who work in this harsh random environment of technofeudalism (Zwick, 2018). The author Bérastégui (2021) states that in accordance with the aforementioned typicality of work in technofeudalism, numerous difficulties faced by employees can be singled out. All of them stem from three main sources - physical and social isolation, algorithmic management and an uncertain career path. Some of the difficulties employees face in Gig economy and the era of technofeudalism (Bérastégui, 2021) are:

- Physical isolation in this type of work model is indisputable - even on-demand platform system, the contact between workers and clients is minimal and most of the interaction is done through applications and algorithms (Duggan et al. 2019; Ritschel 2019). Gig workers rarely communicate even with their colleagues. A survey conducted on a sample of 456 workers in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, showed that 74% of respondents rarely or never communicated "face-to-face" with their co-workers. Also, the majority declared that during working days, which they describe as highly demanding/intensive, they feel lonely and isolated (Jamie and Musilek 2019);
- Employees on the platform are also faced with the problem of professional relationships, i.e. finding reference models, mentors, etc. This arrangement makes it difficult to form a consistent professional identity. On the other hand, people who have a strong business identity have better both business and private achievements. Likewise, it is a shock absorber for business stress, protects against depression and business burnout (Joyne 2017);
- Work through digital platforms consists of several routine and mutually unrelated actions, which leads to the creation of a sense of meaninglessness of work. According to research results, over 50% of employees on the platform suffer from some type of social anxiety that is more intense than the rest of the population (Twenge et al. 2018; Ophir et al. 2019);
- Their precariousness and unstable conditions represent a bad prerequisite for achieving a "business-private balance". Working on the platform keeps the employee alert 24/7;
- In the Gig economy, the so-called collapse occurred, and psychological contract - the tacit agreement between the employer and the employee is almost always broken with the dominance of the so-called "algorithmic bureaucracies" (Vives et al. 2013), which again favors the development of technofeudalism.

### **3.2.1. Creating a positive personal reputation on digital platforms as a source of work precariousness**

Acquiring and maintaining a business reputation in the Gig economy is becoming an increasingly topical issue. For example, on a platform like Upwork, freelance employees receive ratings from clients upon completion of work. Based on these ratings, a database is created based on which the algorithm calculates the average rating of the employee's work, thus creating a recommendation for his further engagement. The aforementioned system of creating reputation serves as a reliable tool of control and supervision, but it creates significant pressure and causes insecurity among employees (Lehdonvirta et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019a). The authors Wood & Lehdonvirta (2022) researched to prove the hypothesis that platform employees are under increasing pressure about the consequences of the newly created "reputation system". The sample included 70 respondents of both genders with an average age of about 35 years, with a college or university degree. Respondents were living in cities such as LA, San Francisco, London, and



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Manila, and they were engaged in different jobs, on different platforms. The goal of the research was to review their experiences related to the algorithm of evaluation and ranking of employees based on client satisfaction with the services provided (Wood & Lehdonvrita, 2022). Based on the obtained results of the aforementioned research, Wood & Lehdonvrita (2022) drew the following crucial conclusions: according to the respondents, getting future jobs depends to a large extent on the number of "stars" received from service users. Another problem is the "issue of distribution of power", because according to the respondents, the "voice of the client" has more weight and power than the "voice of the employee", which can put them in a subordinate position, especially if it is taken into account that clients make mistakes in some cases, or they even behave maliciously when giving ratings/stars.

The main conclusion of this research segment is that the labour market in this domain is becoming socially unregulated, as well as that employees experience continuous fear related to the instability and uncertainty of their business reputation. The results of the research indicated that the work precariousness on the platform is undeniable and that as a result, employees very often try to maintain their ratings by accepting jobs below the real/market price, just to get good ratings. In one word, employees in the Gig economy are to a significant extent conditioned to invest additional emotional strength to better connect with the client, which is ultimately a more significant cost for the employee compared to the employer, which also favors the development of employee uncertainty and favors the development of technofeudalism (Bucher et al., 2021; Rahman, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2020; Gregory, 2020).

### **3.2.2. Glovo: a case study of Interdependence of digital platforms, technofeudalism and work precariousness**

Glovo is a technology company founded in Spain with the following mission: "*building the largest marketplace in your city to give you access to anything in minutes*" (Glovo, 2024). To realize the mission, the company developed an application to process requests and deliver goods and services to its customers in over 23 countries with a delivery network of 61,000 couriers (Glovo, 2024). As the company grew, so did the number of couriers hired to process orders and deliver various products to clients' home addresses. In addition to certain positive effects of Glovo's business, as well as the application of other digital/mobile applications in business, which were published in numerous previously scientific, professional works and publications, on the other hand, it is necessary to look at the significant negative aspects of this way of doing business. The most significant negative effects of this way of doing business, such as Glovo's business, are related to "precarious work". Namely, the main characteristic of a courier engaged in work at Glovo is precisely work precariousness, because the level of income that the employee achieves is insufficiently predictable. Also, most of the couriers in Glovo are obliged to provide their own vehicle, as well as to finance the daily expenses of their business obligations, such as gasoline, vehicle depreciation, food, etc., from their own funds. Glovo delivery people are aware of the fact that the income they will receive that month also depends on the achieved productivity, so the issue of self-rationalization of work inevitably arises as a questionable/disputable one. To earn as much as possible, they organize their working hours during peak traffic times, try to position themselves as close as possible to the places of the heaviest traffic, always making sure that they are always polite and smiling when in contact with customers. In other words, everything depends on them (self-organization). In such a mode of work, they often neglect and suppress their needs. (Barratt et al., 2020; Galière, 2020; Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Vieira, 2021). Authors Morini et al. (2014) and Vieira (2021) call this behavior "self-exploitation behavior" (Morini et al., 2014; Vieira, 2021).



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The next problem that significantly affects the phenomenon of work precariousness is that "algorithmic management" makes decisions about the promotion of an employee based on the number of stars with which he is evaluated by clients. Slowly but surely, employees become participants in the "game" that is constantly being upgraded. Unaware of the fact that all the power is in the hands of the employer, every day they try to become "favorites" of the algorithm. The situation went a step further, so the author Duball (2023) created the term "gamification", which implies that workers are manipulated every day, not only in terms of long working hours but also in terms of potential earnings (Gregory & Sadowski, 2021; Galière, 2020; Duball, 2023). Gamification of the work process inevitably leads to self-exploitation.

The author Vieira (2021) analyzed the collected responses of delivery people working for the Glovo platform in Spain, in the period from February 2020 to January 2021. The initial position, which was confirmed based on the obtained results, was that precarious work is ubiquitous in the working environment of couriers. An additional problem that affects work precariousness is the impossibility or difficult possibility of joining any labour union/syndicate that would possibly protect their rights, which certainly results in the strengthening of uncertainty, but also represents an excellent ground for the further development of technofeudalism.

### **3.2.3. Uber: a case study of Interdependence of digital platforms, technofeudalism and work precariousness**

Uber is a company founded in the USA with the following mission: *"We are a tech company that connects the physical and digital worlds to help make movement happen at the tap of a button"* (Uber, 2024). To realize the mission, the company developed an application and transportation network for millions of users worldwide. According to the information on the official website of the company, Uber is actually *"A global platform built on the world's largest mobility network"* (Uber, 2024). Uber infiltrated some markets around the world, conquering the competition in no time. The reason for this situation is, of course, the lower price of traditional taxi services. However, it must be taken into account that Uber's digital platform is minimally legally regulated. The mentioned can be explained by the fact that the entire business and therefore the pricing policy of Uber is different than the classic taxi service (Stenovc, 2016). The Uber platform is one of the most obvious examples of the sharing economy, and as such it is based on digital communication. The service belongs to one of the most profitable and it can be argued that it has introduced radical changes in the transport industry. In particular, Uber offers its customers low prices thanks to digital technologies (app). According to Travis Kalanick (founder of the company), Uber is not a traditional taxi, it is a smartphone application that helps people share expenses (Hamari, 2014). Also, among certain positive effects of the business of both Glovo and Uber, from the perspective of the topic of this research, it is necessary to look at the negative aspects of this way of doing business, which largely relates to work precariousness.

In the aforementioned context, the authors of this paper sublimated presented the secondary results of two important studies in this area, which were previously published by the authors Ribbans (2023) and Kute (2017). Both surveys were conducted on the territory of South Africa. The first research was carried out in the period from 2013 to 2021 year, while the second research was conducted in 2017. In both researches, the interview method with Uber employees was applied. The authors aimed to prove that drivers in Uber suffer from work precarious, as well as all the consequences that follow with that status (Ribbans et al., 2023; Kute, 2017).



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The results of these two aforementioned studies indicate that, as in the case of Glovo, Uber employees are declaratively presented as business partners, and the official website promises a lot as "be your boss", "earn good money", "drive whenever you want". Although the promises seem "tempting", the situation in practice is not exactly like that. The platform is strict about equipment when starting a business, but the employer does not equip the employee in any way (vehicle or smartphone). First of all, drivers are required to own vehicles that are not older than ten years, they must have air conditioning, a radio, and four doors, and they must pass an inspection and get a certificate. Special emphasis is placed on possessing the so-called hedge back vehicles that are very economical when it comes to fuel consumption. The driver has the choice of whether to buy or rent the car, depending on what he considers to be more profitable. However it should be emphasized that Uber does not own a single vehicle. However, the driver is obliged to forward 20% of his earnings to the company. Also, after being admitted to the platform, the drivers go to training sessions where special emphasis is placed on shaping behavior; in other words, the person needs to be "shaped" to be eligible to perform this service. Also, Uber's scoring/ranking system indicates that the employer has panoptic control over drivers as well as they are scored through the application, all to find out if they adhere to the agreed rules. Also, the application on the mobile phone provides all the data about the driver - vehicle model, and registration number, but also the points (rating) he has received up to that point. The customer scoring system is very questionable - if a driver has ratings that are lower than 5 during a certain period (they should not fall below 4.7), the algorithm can remove him. The question arises as to whether in this case the employees are sent to additional training, or whether they are excluded from the service. On the other hand, the Uber platform points out that the described system is not discriminatory and that keeping "excellent" drivers is the only way to maintain the quality of the service, which will then be recommended to both customers and people looking for a job. Accordingly, employees are never "clear" whether they will have a job and how much they will earn. The client is given much more attention than the driver, so misconduct by the party is rarely questioned.

The general conclusion of this case study is the same as in the previous one and indicates that despite numerous apparent benefits, employees are still significantly exposed to risk, uncertainty and business precariousness, resulting in fewer rights and lower bargaining power, which ultimately favors the strengthening of the power of ICT companies, that is, favors the further development of technofeudalism.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is certain that the entire system of functioning of the Gig economy and work through digital platforms is conducive the development of technofeudalism, and leads to numerous negative consequences such as precariousness, loneliness, feelings of uncertainty, etc. A special problem in this domain is the strengthening of "algorithmic management", which leads to worse business relations on the line between employees and management, and even moving away from the concept of the traditional workplace. All the claims stated in the paper indicate that a completely new order called "*technofeudalism*" or "*cloudalism*" is being created at the level of the global economy. ICT companies are largely responsible for its emergence and development. A large number of eminent authors, and especially critics of technofeudalism, indicate that the mentioned companies, which are also the owners of digital platforms, are increasingly "parasitizing", dealing primarily with the rental of digital space on the platforms with the payment of the so-called "cloud rent". In addition to scientific and professional sources, the aforementioned statements and claims are also supported by citing various research results presented in the case study of Glovo and Uber companies. One of the arguments is that, for example, the company Uber





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conquered its competition without owning a single car in its own fleet. In general, the authors of this paper state that a completely "new class of capital owners" is being created in the global economy, which has a privileged position thanks to the ownership of technology. The privileged position in technofeudalism refers to the dominance of technology companies over traditional judicial and legislative powers, leading to suppression of legitimate speech, erosion of legal protections and exploitation of users. Due to the above, in recent years the term "neofeudal" can be encountered more and more often, which accentuates relations of inequality, with the additional statement that inequality has "enthroned" in society, as well as that the path to a stable job and existentially acceptable income is increasingly difficult. This is precisely the reason that the authors of this paper point out and believe that research on this topic, especially among members of the younger generations, would give insight into the numerous problems faced by the labour market, in which direction the trends are moving, as well as what measures should be undertaken so that employees enjoy a fair treatment in a random place in the era of technofeudalism.

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