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# THE REPRODUCTION AND RESTRUCTURING OF INEQUALITY THROUGH PLATFORMS

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## ABSTRACT

Platforms are the avant-garde of digitized work. Based on digital techniques, they develop innovative business models and new organisational forms. With this process, new inequalities arise and old ones are reproduced or transformed. The paper focuses on this transformation of inequalities via platforms. Specifically, with food courier work and private cleaning services, two major types of locally-linked, platform-mediated services in Germany are analyzed comparatively. These affect both vertical and horizontal inequalities.

## KEYWORDS

Platform Work; Intersectionality; Gender; Inequality; Digitalization

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Platforms are the avant-garde of digitized work. Based on digital techniques, they develop innovative business models and new organizational forms. With this process new inequalities arise and old ones are reproduced or transformed. The paper focuses on this transformation of inequalities via platforms. Specifically, with food courier work and private cleaning services, two major types of locally-linked, platform-mediated services in Germany are analyzed comparatively. These affect both vertical and horizontal inequalities.

# 2 PLATFORM WORK

Digitization leads to a "radical structural change" of the economy (Roland Berger & BDI, 2015, S. 44). Signum of this development are online platforms, so that there is already talk of a platform capitalism (Lobo, 2014; Srnicek, 2017). Platforms are not a new development (Brinkmann & Seifert, 2001), but by now they can also be used to organize complex industrial relations, which are being extensively reorganized in this way. While this field of platform work evidently exists and shows marked growth, there are currently no reliable figures on actual size and, hence economic relevance. Nonetheless, platforms are an avant-garde as they explore and establish new ways of organizing work. In the course of this, the question arises to what extent well-known inequalities in the context of platform work are reproduced or whether they are transformed or even new inequalities arise. The paper is dedicated to this question, focusing on the two most relevant fields of platform work in Germany: food couriers and private cleaning staff.

# 3 METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on a research project on platform-based courier work, in which 35 interviews in seven German cities, an online survey (n= 261) and ethnographic surveys (>700h)

were conducted. For contrasting, ten interviews with platform mediated cleaners were conducted. All interviews were semi-structured, took over an hour, were recorded and afterwards transcribed and then digitally coded and analyzed.

# 4 THREE TRANSFORMATIONS

As the following comparison shows, the different types of platform work have ambivalent consequences. They transform inequalities (4.1), exacerbate and reduce them at the same time (4.2) and draw boundaries that make previously latent inequalities manifest (4.3).

## 4.1 MARKET INSTEAD OF LOVE

(Locally bounded) platform work is not the result of solely new technological possibilities, which now allow work to be organized inexpensively, flexibly and remotely. Likewise, they go back to a specific social change. Even though the primary and in particular the secondary sector has by no means become irrelevant, an increase in services can be observed in all Western societies. This "collective hunger for the tertiary" (Fourastié) is partly the result of increasing female employment and increased demands for work due to flexibility and longer working hours.

Next to technological innovations, the emergence of platform-based services is the result of large quantities of finance capital in search for profitable investments in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. As a consequence, these new platforms give higher classes the possibility to outsource reproductive labour to workers instead of taking over themselves. Unequal gender orders in individual households are externalized and applied to lower classes.

Reproduction work, which was previously a "love service" performed mostly by women (Klinger, 2012), is now being traded on the market. This can be understood as a shift in horizontal inequalities between the different genders towards vertical inequalities between

the classes. The result is the creation of a new service caste that handles care work for upper and middle classes when needed (Andall, 2003).

## 4.2 HETERONOMY AND AUTONOMY

Depending on how strongly and restrictively work is controlled, employees have different scope for action. The simple service work considered here is commonly characterized by limited rationalization and mostly personal control. However, the platformization also affects the control of the work and thus the autonomy of the employees.

Platform-based couriers experience an increasing heteronomy. Their location is communicated to the platforms at all times, every step of the process must be confirmed within the app, and the platforms establish comprehensive information asymmetries. By no means are the couriers without any agency, but their autonomy is noticeably limited (Heiland & Brinkmann, 2019).

In contrast, the platform-based organization of cleaners is also subject to the platforms' control efforts, but these are far less effective as a result of the specific work process. In addition, the platform is a mediating third party in the service relationship between workers and customers, and thus a valuable resource for the cleaners, giving new autonomy. The classic form of private cleaning work is usually unreported and directly depends on the employer. If, on the other hand, the work is organized by platforms, the cleaning staff can use it in cases of conflict and also benefit from a formalized settlement of the payment. In accordance with the "autonomy-control paradox" (Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013), the platform workers are able to use the organizations for new kinds of self-organization.

However, this is not a zero-sum game. The preceding horizontal as well as vertical gender segregation of the various works leads to diverging developments. Male-dominated courier

work is more heteronomous as a result of the platform organization. Used to a low organizational level, primarily female, private cleaners experience new freedoms.

## 4.3 PLATFORMS AS GATEKEEPERS

With the platforms another actor has entered the market, which acts as a gatekeeper. While the platforms are solely interested in workers' labor, regardless of ascriptive attributes, they often formalize informal working relationships and subsequently exclude some workers in those sectors.

Namely non-German people without legal residence status and work permit have no way of getting jobs from platforms. For this already vulnerable group the job opportunities are reduced, which makes them even more fragile for exploitation.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The new Platforms are shifting the prioritization of the "axes of inequality". In domestic work, the class comes to the fore as a result of the externalization of gendered work. In platform work itself, the degrees of freedom differ, but the primarily female workers gain new forms of agency. At the same time, the exclusion of non-German workers from these organizations has created a new division along nationality.

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