Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019. ISBN: 9781509535507 (cloth); ISBN: 9781509535514 (paper); ISBN: 9781509535521 (ebook)

Callum Cant's book *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* aims to analyse the working and living conditions of workers of food-delivery platforms, as well as the forms of resistance and struggle that they mobilise to improve their situation, and that Cant accompanied and supported as a courier. Thus, it is a book about food-delivery platforms that has the specificity of being written by someone who worked at one of these companies – Deliveroo, in Brighton in the UK. And it also presents as a specificity the fact that it is not limited to offering a critical analysis of the sector, but is intended to be an exercise in questioning and supporting the forms of organisation of workers on those same platforms. These two characteristics contribute to making this a book "written from the perspective of the working class" (p.6), applying the workerist method of worker's inquiry. His perspective on social classes is clearly Marxist, stating that these are defined by antagonistic economic relations, and that this conflict shapes society.

As someone who, like Cant, also worked on a food-delivery platform for a few months (for Glovo, in Lisbon), and is also researching these platforms, I would like to stress the relevance of such a perspective for the comprehension of these phenomena and the experience of those workers. Bearing in mind Cant's objectives and the analysis presented, and my own experience, this review will focus on the main ideas and analyses presented in the book, as well as offering a critique of some dimensions of it, including what is missing and the political possibilities cant sketches out.

Food-Delivery Platforms

The author designates Deliveroo as a "food-delivery platform", an example of what Nick Srnicek (2017: 76) calls lean-platforms, which "operate through a hyper-

outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained". For workers, this business model represents an intensification of their precariousness, in which a considerable part of the operation costs are externalised for the worker. For example, workers have to guarantee the means of transport and the smartphone essential for their work.

Despite the outsourcing of much of the costs and an increase in turnover, Cant points out that this was accompanied by a large increase in expenses, leading to the fact that most of these platforms have not yet shown profits – or if they did, these were only in a few years and quite marginal. This is due to the fact that the service that these platforms offer, "deliveries", corresponds to a service with few possibilities of gains in efficiency and scale, and where it becomes difficult to introduce technological or logistical innovations that could translate into great economic gains (Benanav 2019; Smith 2017). One of the limits of Cant's work is the lack of consideration of this aspect, as well as leaving practically unexplored the basis of the business model of these companies – the Big Data sector. Contrary to what Cant says, the reason these companies attract investment and stay in business is not only their strategy of disrupting the market and disseminating new forms of precarious work as a capitalist governance strategy. The main factor is related to an expectation of future gains in relation to the Big Data sector and the different ways of using and commercialising them.

These platforms have as their main attraction the enormous amount of diverse data they collect regarding the different users of the platform (workers, customers, restaurants) and dimensions such as consumption or urban mobility. Various aspects that constitute the concrete work of a courier on these platforms, referring to the diverse knowledge and practices that workers mobilise in their activity, are digitally represented and captured for the most diverse ends – such as commercialisation or for use in urban planning. The possibility of accessing and controlling these markets acquires great

commercial and strategic value, which justifies the current losses and the ability to attract investment in order to maintain the operations of these platforms (Srnicek 2017). At the same time, this situation, by transforming into data the labour and practices of various workers and customers, highlights the way contemporary capitalism is based on the production and extraction of rent (Rossi 2019; Sadowski 2020). With a theoretical perspective similar to Cant, Rossi (2019) highlights the way in which knowledge, produced and related to common dimensions and which is acquired and mobilised by workers, is appropriated as data by these platforms in the framework of cognitive capitalism, transforming urban and metropolitan space into a space for production and experimentation in all its scale.

Algorithmic Management

An important problematisation advanced by Cant concerns the emergence of "algorithmic management". It reproduces principles of coordination and disciplinarisation of the workforce similar to other forms of management but now with an algorithmic mediation. As Duggan et al. (2020: 6) put it: "App-workers are typically managed via tracking mechanisms and customer ratings, thus forming one of the fundamental principles of the gig economy in that most core HR processes (i.e. the assignment of tasks and performance evaluation) are fulfilled by one of the two groups of users, the worker or the customer, through the medium of the app-work platform (Schmidt 2017)." This algorithmic management, applied to the precarious workers of these platforms, intersects with a "per-drop piece wage" remuneration system, accentuating the deskilling and work intensification processes (p.41-50). This combination results in an intensification of work in order to increase their income,[1] as stated by Cant, and produces a subjectivity in which the worker is obliged to become a *productive subject* (Macherey 2015) in order to be able to receive a salary that may be

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[1] Following Marx, Cant argues that the "per-drop piece wage" system is the one most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production (p.52).

sufficient to guarantee his or her subsistence. The worker has to be able to carry out the largest number of requests in the shortest period of time, which, as Cant rightly points out, introduces a logic of competition between workers and the adoption of greater risks in their conduction (p.52). An aspect influenced by several factors, most of which are beyond the possibility of workers' control – the existence of specific events that could increase or decrease consumption, social and urban rhythms, among others. As Cant states, workers are completely dependent on algorithms without knowing their main operating logic – a real *black box* (Pasquale 2015). For Cant, the management practices that characterise these platforms could be transferred to other forms of work, with a tendency "to partially automate labour supervision and coordination" (p.13). This situation may be more easily extended to several independent workers, in particular those who already work on projects and/or specific and temporary tasks, suitable for the introduction of algorithmic management and "per-drop piece wage" systems, as is the case in several cultural and intellectual sectors – for example, workers in the translation industry. This is something that should be considered in view of the growing precariousness and digital transformation of work.

Class Composition

This precarious situation is associated with the social composition of the workers on these platforms. The workers' inquiry applied by Cant during his work experience allowed him to identify the profile of workers in Brighton. There is a combination of immigrant workers subject to various barriers for accessing the labour market, and a young students, mostly UK citizens – both immersed in various situations of precariousness (p.96-97).[2] In Brighton, there are more young students than immigrants. These two profiles intersect with other dimensions – immigrants tended to use mopeds and work several hours in a row, meaning they accounted for the most deliveries; young

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[2] Regarding the factors leading to precariousness, Cant highlights the high value of housing and a segmented labour market with few formal job offers, in particular for immigrants and young students.

people made up the majority of workers, but tended to use bicycles and work part-time. It was not properly explored by Cant, but the option of using mopeds and the need to work several hours also reveals the way immigrants are in a more precarious situation. For example, in the case of Lisbon, it is common to have several immigrant workers without the necessary documentation to start their activity, being obliged to sub-rent accounts opened by other people, resulting in greater precariousness. That is, there tend to be different legal and material frameworks among these workers, which is reflected in their work experience. As Cant says, this situation contributed to a division between immigrants and young people – differences that were linguistic and cultural, but also of life experience and trajectories, shaping different frameworks of precariousness. However, this situation managed to be overcome in some moments for the organisation and realisation of forms of resistance.

This social composition tends to be reproduced in the UK and other cities worldwide. However, there are some important differences. For example, in the case of Lisbon, the vast majority, certainly greater than 70% of all workers, are immigrants – mostly Brazilians but also a growing increase of immigrants of Asian origin (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan). What is similar is the fact that immigrants opt for mopeds and work more hours.

Resistance and Strikes

As Cant affirms, this book is not only about the exploitation of workers, but also about how they put into practice forms of resistance and struggle. Cant devotes an entire chapter to describing the strikes and forms of struggle that he observed and participated in as a Deliveroo worker. Most strikes were due to changes in the remuneration system (such as the transition from a system of hourly- to piece-rate wages), or due to the decrease in fee-per-delivery values. Throughout the book, we move from a description of forms of struggle that focus on major UK cities, starting in London, to a reference to strikes in other European cities and the creation of transnational networks. The

occurrence of these strikes, carried out from autonomous and relatively informal forms of organisation, were able to stop much of the production and distribution of these platforms, and translated into some achievements.

The description of these forms of mobilisation is is particularly interesting. Firstly, the criticism of the perspective that sees such workers as relatively atomised and alienated from their interests, incapable of mobilisation and collective organisation, either because they do not share a common workplace, or because of the social composition of the workforce itself. This view, initially shared by the author, disappeared as he became aware of relationships established among workers – some of them informal. There were two fundamental means for this collective organisation to take place, which functioned as a basis for the struggle processes: on the one hand, the waiting times when workers come together and speak to each other, sometimes in central areas defined by the platforms; on the other, the various chats and communication channels in social media (especially Facebook and WhatsApp).[3] In this way, the importance of social relations, including informal ones, for the organisation of forms of struggle is highlighted. As Cant says, it is something that creates a sense of community, or what he calls "invisible organisation". In addition, these are forms of struggle that occur in a socio-political context characterised by a retreat of the working class, and that took place precisely in a paradigmatic sector of precarious work (p.16-17).

However, one aspect that remains to be explored in Cant's work concerns what Scott (1989) calls "everyday forms of resistance". During my experience, I observed several such forms. For example, deliberate delays by workers in response to the notifications they received for new deliveries, some lasting several minutes – sometimes simply because they wanted to end a conversation they were having with other colleagues. In other situations I witnessed deliberate carelessness regarding the way

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[3] In Lisbon there are also several WhatsApp groups where workers share information and help each other, and where their labour situation and the relationship with the platform are also discussed.

orders were taken, with some workers sharing phrases such as "If the customer wants a better service, he/she should come and get the delivery". Constant criticism of the platform, restaurants and customers; or, and taking advantage of the fact that there is no presential relationship with a supervisor, they send false information to the workers' company support chat in order to deselect previously scheduled hours or other requests (some workers would send photos of damaged bikes that were not theirs, or would say they were sick when they weren't, among other tactics). These and other situations may be debatable as to their effectiveness, but they demonstrate that workers are not fully controlled by the platform or do not act only in response to wage issues.

Another aspect that, although present, could have been highlighted is the relationship between social class and other axes of social structuring and differentiation. Even though Cant recognises and mentions the relational difficulties between young UK citizens and immigrants, or the forms of sexism in the sector, the author not only tends to restrict his analysis to a class-centered perspective, but also criticises the political perspectives that emphasise the internal divisions to it. Cant goes so far as to claim that " … if you focus on reinforcing the division between migrant and non-migrant workers, you're doing the bosses' job for them"(p.93). Even understanding the need to think and mobilise a class perspective that allows the union of the various workers on these platforms, it is essential to properly consider the different experiences and the reproduction of various forms of internal discrimination that hinder that same unity and class politics. As Nick Clare (2020: 5) points out, referring precisely to the concept of class composition and the dangers of falling into a workerist and autonomist line of thought, "[c]lass analyses must also consider relationships *within* and not just *between* classes, as these influence the political (in)activity of the working classes … class composition analysis is particularly attuned to this internal heterogeneity … ". To be fair, this is something that Cant highlights at the end of the book when he says that the political possibilities of these workers come from the possibilities of cooperation between immigrants and non-immigrants, even though there are differences and

divisions between them: "These two groups, when they cooperate, can form a strong coalition, despite their significant cultural, racial, linguistic, political, and economic differences. Women workers, however, are often excluded due to the internal culture of the workforce" (p.176). The possibility of such cooperation and organisation is Cant's main objective with this book, and the criticism made here is precisely to highlight the need for a vision that considers the internal heterogeneity of the class so that such an objective could be realised.

Open and Disputed Possibilities

A possibility of organisation and political action for the contestation and change of labour and power relations within these platforms, lead by workers, is precisely one of the three hypotheses advanced by Cant for the future of this sector. The other two are: a situation in which bosses and companies manage to maintain and increase their dominance over the platform and the market, perhaps with the introduction of various forms of automation; or the introduction of a liberal reform that could regulate part of the sector, but without great gains for workers.

As Cant points out, the hypothesis of a cooperative platform or a platform under workers` control has several difficulties within a framework of such asymmetrical power relations and without a major reorganisation of society through class struggle (p.154). In the current framework of capitalism, cooperative platforms have difficulties for success and maintenance in the long term (p.150) – something demonstrated by Borowiak (2019) through the analysis of the fall of a cooperative taxi worker. However, even that possibility is open and there have been several cooperative platforms in these sectors under workers' control, with more or less success.

Whether these or other hypotheses, what Cant's book tells us is that they are open and subject to dispute, being dependent on the forms of resistance and political organisation that could be put in place. In short, *Riding for Deliveroo* is an important book for the way it presents, from an inside point of view, the living, working and

political conditions of workers on these platforms. But it is also, and above all, an important book for the way it analyses and debates the possibilities of class organisation and resistance in this sector. With it, it becomes possible to question and put into practice new forms of resistance and political organisation within the framework of the current transformations of capitalism.

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