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A Time Out of Joint. Reflections on Labor Precarization and Social Impoverishment in the Context of Argentina's Crisis

Un tiempo fuera de quicio. Reflexiones sobre la precarización laboral y el empobrecimiento social en el contexto de la crisis argentina

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the moral attitudes and emotional dispositions of social actors in relation to economic reality within capitalist societies marked by a colonial past, through an in-depth case study of contemporary Argentine social reality. Building on the recent interest in Critical Theory in the emerging social forms of suffering, I aim to reconstruct how contexts of crisis shape and transform the subjectivity of workers. To this end, I explore the meanings that individuals attribute to the temporal dimension of two of the most emblematic expressions of the current capitalist crisis: labor precarization and social impoverishment in inflationary contexts.

Key Words: labor precarization, social impoverishment, inflation, platform capitalism, crisis.

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Resumen

En este artículo examino las actitudes morales y las disposiciones emocionales de los actores sociales en relación con la realidad económica de las sociedades capitalistas con un pasado colonial, mediante el estudio de caso de la realidad social argentina. Partiendo del reciente interés de la teoría crítica en las formas emergentes de sufrimiento social, mi objetivo es reconstruir cómo los contextos de crisis moldean y transforman la subjetividad de los trabajadores. Con este fin, exploro los significados que los agentes atribuyen a la dimensión temporal de dos de las expresiones más emblemáticas de la actual crisis capitalista: la precarización laboral y el empobrecimiento social en contextos inflacionarios.

Palabras clave: precarización laboral, empobrecimiento social, inflación, capitalismo de plataformas, crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine the moral attitudes and emotional dispositions of social actors in relation to economic reality within capitalist societies marked by a colonial past. Building on the recent interest in Critical Theory in the emerging social forms of suffering, I aim to reconstruct how contexts of crisis shape and transform subjectivity (Fassin & Honneth, 2022). To this end, I explore the meanings that individuals vulnerable to domination in labor market attribute to the temporal dimension of two of the most emblematic expressions of the current capitalist crisis: labor precarization and social impoverishment in inflationary contexts.

Yet the way I draw on the conceptual repertoire of these theoretical traditions involves a twofold decentering. By incorporating concepts from contemporary Critical Theory into a context that lies outside their original frameworks of reference—transposing them from Europe and the United States to Latin America—it becomes necessary to estrange their normative presuppositions. The disruption of their normalized uses, far from suspending their explanatory or critical potential, opens them up to new layers of meaning (Torres & Gros, 2022).

On one level, the perspective adopted in this article shifts attention away from the exclusive focus on issues experienced by social actors in the affluent economies of the Global North, highlighting the ways in which classical categories of the Marxist tradition—such as alienation [*Entfremdung*] and reification [*Verdinglichung*]—require a process of "translation"

when applied to political, cultural, and social realities for which they were not originally conceived (Prestifilippo, 2023: 227). On another level, the approach developed here also displaces the exclusive primacy of social theory and political philosophy, fostering a productive dialogue between these domains of thought and the methodological protocols of the social sciences, particularly empirical research in sociology.

As has been underscored in debates concerning the role and significance of colonialism and slavery in the historical development of capitalism,[2] a constitutive feature of this mode of production lies in its articulation of multiple temporalities, geographically disembedded locations, and contradictory social dynamics. Such heterogeneity complicates any attempt to identify a singular or linear trajectory of historical unfolding. Consequently, the most recent systemic crisis cannot be analyzed in general or abstract terms, as though it followed a uniform pattern (Crouch & Streeck, 1997). A critical analysis of the contemporary capitalist crisis must take into account not only the institutional traditions, political identities, and cultural values that have historically "embedded" it (Polanyi, 2001), but also the structural conditions of the world-system—conditions in which costs and benefits are distributed in an unequal and combined manner across the intersecting axes of the North-South and center-periphery divides (Balibar & Wallerstein, 2011).

This article proceeds from these political-economic determinations in formulating its central research questions, situating the inquiry within the specific historical configuration through which the neoliberal crisis has unfolded in Latin America and, more concretely, within the contours of recent Argentine society (Prestifilippo, 2024a). My analysis is based on empirical material collected over several years as part of a broader project funded by public scientific research agencies in Argentina. The project focused on examining how precarious workers in Argentina make sense of economic crises (Prestifilippo, 2024b; Cuesta and Prestifilippo, 2022; Prestifilippo and Wegelin, 2019). The excerpts from the empirical material in Section 2 of this article come from a corpus of 40 interviews and 2 focus groups that we conducted with workers from the Rappi and Pedidos Ya platforms in Buenos Aires between 2020 and 2023. The excerpts from the

[2] This sensitivity to disparity and difference, to the heterogeneity and plurality of the spatial and temporal dimensions of capitalist development, has been emphasized by a wide range of authors—from Vladimir I. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg to Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, and, more recently, in the works of scholars such as Orlando Patterson and François Hartog. See, in this regard, Grüner, 2010.

empirical material in Section 3 are drawn from a second corpus consisting of 9 focus groups with precarized workers from the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA), Argentina, that we conducted in 2023, organized into 3 distinct subgroups according to age range and ideological-political profile.

Both in the sale of labor power and in the purchase of essential goods and services for subsistence, one can discern a conjunction of two opposed subjective attitudes toward the contradictory temporal dynamics of contemporary capitalism. On the one hand, what I term *alienation through acceleration/deacceleration* is characterized by alternating sensations of anxiety provoked by the intensification of the workday's pace and by feelings of tedium during moments of leisure. On the other hand, what I describe as *reification through acceleration/deacceleration* is marked by the simultaneous experience of fear before the growing volatility of prices for essential goods and services, and by expressions of depression accompanying the perception of an *eternal present*.

As will become apparent throughout this analysis, interpretations of the meaning of time within both practices cannot be grasped independently of the dialectical mediation between these affective and moral dispositions and the objective constraints that structure individual experience. The hypothesis I advance in this paper is that, through the production of specific temporal schemes of interpretation, the labor process generates incentives for agents to intentionally bring about structures whose effects are unintended yet socially dominating. However, these forms of symbolic reproduction of the conditions for structural domination cannot be understood in abstraction from the fact that agents' intentions are themselves socially conditioned by their positions within the structure of social relations.

To this end, the article proceeds in four steps. First, I review how interpretive sociology [*Verstehende Soziologie*] has addressed workers' subjective appropriation of the objective economic world, drawing on the Weberian concept of professional ethos. Second, I analyze how recent technological transformations in the pattern of capitalist accumulation have reshaped the meaning of work in the contemporary world. In sections 2.1 and 2.2, I then examine how these transformations are eroding the temporal interpretive schemes of labor experience inherited from the twentieth century, advancing the conceptual notion of alienation through labor acceleration/deceleration. Third, I explore how inflationary

contexts in crisis-ridden economies disrupt the experience of time among those most affected by the rapid increase in the prices of essential goods, through the concept of reification by inflationary acceleration/deceleration. Finally, in the fourth section, I offer concluding remarks that recapitulate the paper's central argument.

1. DEATH OR TRANSFIGURATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL ETHOS?

One hundred and twenty years after the publication of the essays that completed Weber's (2016) investigation into *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, many of the fundamental questions posed by the German sociologist continue to resonate in our present. On what value-based foundations does the motivational support for socially significant actions—those that contribute to the reproduction of the capitalist social order—rest? Despite the major transformations in the economy and politics since the 1970s, many of Weber's claims may now seem outdated. Yet, his approach to the social relationships among key actors in the economic order continues to inspire contemporary research aimed at understanding and explaining our societies.

As is well known, Weber identified in the value-laden ideas stemming from the professional ethics of religious Puritanism a key source for understanding what we might today call capitalist subjectivity. He drew elective affinities between the Protestant concept of vocation and the way of life demanded by the capitalist economic system for its ongoing reproduction. The ending of his essay is also well known—bitter and somber in tone—where Weber offered a rather bleak outlook for the future of capitalism. Let us recall Weber's words:

> The Puritan wanted to be a professional; we have become specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart. And this void imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved. Today, the ascetic spirit has fled from this shell—just as the ascetic once fled from his cell. But the hard shell, like a structure of steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*], remains. And it may well determine, with irresistible force, the way of life of every individual born into it—at least until a new prophet arises, or a powerful resurgence of old ideas and ideals occurs, to once again reshuffle the cards of destiny (Weber, 2016: 182).

To the extent that the capitalist economy had operated as a driving force for new types of social action, the motivational sources it relied on—namely, value ideas drawn from salvation religions—had been neutralized in their symbolic effectiveness. This created a self-producing system whose conditions for maintenance and growth no longer depended on any connection with the lifeworld of its members. For Weber, the consequence of this separation between the economic system and the social actions on which it depended was crucial to understanding why little could be expected from this order in terms of fostering flourishing ways of life, social well-being, and the fulfillment of individuals.

While this bleak prognosis proved highly useful for future generations of critical theorists—whose aim was to diagnose the irrational tendencies and sources of dissatisfaction that the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* would continue to produce throughout its history (consider, for example, Weber's immediate followers such as Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno)—, it is true that his predictions did not foresee the enormous strength of the economic system to replace the motivational sources needed for members of society, both on the side of labor and capital, to continue wanting to participate in an order sustained by domination.

This is perhaps the intuition that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) developed in their now classic study on the new spirit of capitalism. In this work, the disciples of Bourdieu reconstruct Weber's concept of the spirit of capitalism in direct dialogue with the Marxian concept of ideology, aiming to understand and explain the relationship between economy and society in late twentieth-century French neoliberalism. As part of their interpretive strategy, their only methodological criticism of Weber's research stands out: namely, that the German sociologist failed to recognize the plasticity and porosity of the capitalist spirit to reconfigure and reinvent itself in response to the multiple crises that are constitutive of it. If Weber's somber tone implied distrust toward an economic order that, having separated from its value foundations, seemed to be heading toward a final crisis—thus inaugurating a future time of uncertainty and radical unpredictability—, Boltanski and Chiapello's study emphasizes the need to adopt a historical perspective when studying the relations between capital and labor. This approach opens the possibility of drawing comparisons and distinctions among the different ways capitalism has assimilated new value ideas, thereby reshaping the framework of meaning that sustains the social actions and relations crucial to its reproduction over time. The conse-

quence of adopting this historical perspective is the capacity to develop an epistemic sensitivity to recognize the internal transformations deployed by the economic order to maintain the circuits of capital valuation.

The social actions and relationships relevant to economic reproduction that concern us here are, of course, those of the world of work. One hundred and twenty years after the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, we can once again ask—as the interpretive sociologist did in his time—about the meaning behind social actions taking place in the world of work within a capitalism that, following the series of crises after 2008, still does not appear to have shifted toward the formation of a new order. Instead, as has already been noted (Streeck, 2014), it seems to persist in a strategy of postponing its end, without this delay leading to the emergence of a new institutional order. What I intend to focus on here, then, is the way in which the meaning of those actions occurring in the world of work is produced and reproduced in our present, paying special attention to the professional ethic that may be developing within the new labor activities enabled by what is called platform capitalism.

I am particularly interested in these forms of employment in the specific case of *lean platforms*. Nick Srnicek (2018) defines lean platforms as a specific type of digital company that minimizes ownership of physical assets and outsources most of its operations. These platforms focus on providing a digital infrastructure that connects different groups, such as users and service providers, without owning the physical resources involved in delivering the service. The forms of employment generated by lean platforms embody some of the most prominent features of our present time, involving activities in which new technologies play a central role. Artificial intelligence and technological devices perform key functions in the organization of work, and there is also a clear reconfiguration of the social relations between capital and labor that must be understood in their specificity to discern what is new and what remains from the past in our current situation. Furthermore, I am interested in these forms of platform-based delivery work because they are mostly performed by young people, making them one of the first work experiences for those entering the labor market for the first time.

In this sense, I understand my inquiry as a continuation of Weber's study, although focused particularly on one dimension of his work: the representations and meanings that individuals give to their occupations. I recognize that these processes of meaning-making involve normative ex-

pectations, value ideas, and moral evaluations that not only relate to the activities performed but also to relationships with others and to how one's work is positioned within the overall structure of the society in which one lives.

Next, I will propose the hypothesis that, considering the mentioned case study, a *radical crisis* of the imaginary associated with the world of work can be detected in our present time. This crisis is noticeable in the interpretive and value orientations of society's members toward their tasks, which initially calls for a reconsideration of the role of work in the reproduction of the system. This crisis could support the idea that we are living in a period of interregnum, in which work as we have known it is dying, but a new and different idea to replace it has not yet fully emerged.

2. ANXIETY AND BOREDOM: ALIENATION THROUGH LABOR ACCELERATION/DECELERATION

Since the 1970s, academic debates have increasingly emphasized how scientific and technological advances—especially in information and telematics technology—are impacting global economic structures. In 1971, James Martin addressed this new world order in his book *The Wired Society*, describing a society massively connected through telecommunications networks (Martin, 1978). In 1996, sociologist Manuel Castells argued that the 1970s marked the transition from industrial society to informational society, the latter being structured around networks rather than individuals (Castells, 2000). This new interconnected form of social organization emerged as a result of the interaction of three main phenomena: (a) the capital's need to flexibilize and globalize the production and circulation of goods; (b) society's demands oriented toward individual freedom and open communication; and (c) advances in telecommunications and computing, driven by radical changes in microelectronics. According to Castells, these three processes enabled the emergence of what he calls a "network society" (Castells, 2000). By the twenty-first century, discussions about the impacts of new technologies became dominated by the rapid advancement of digital technologies. Jan van Dijk's seminal work *The Network Society*, originally published in 1991, received a new edition in 2020 incorporating topics such as artificial intelligence, big data, platform economy, and blockchain (Van Dijk, 2020). Currently, digital technologies have substantially

transformed how we communicate, study, work, socialize, treat diseases, feed ourselves, relate sexually and emotionally, entertain ourselves, and more—a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, studies on the extent and depth of these changes in social life remain insufficient compared to the speed of these transformations (Susskind, 2020). In this context, recent years have also seen a multiplication of academic debates on transformations in work during the early decades of the twenty-first century. Economist Ursula Huws (2019), for example, draws attention to the emergence of a new and extensive lexicon including expressions such as "digital labour", "workforce on demand", "click work", and "immaterial labour". Vallas and Schor (2020) assert that by the end of the 2010s, academic literature presents a complex and empirically grounded panorama of what is called "platform labour".

What representations of time can we recognize in the subjectivity of those who, for various reasons, are motivated to dedicate their working hours to food delivery on platforms? As I mentioned at the beginning, it is worth highlighting at least two main ways of experiencing time during the workday of these young workers. Regardless of the terms we use to classify these two experiences, what is relevant to our discussion is that they represent contrasting orientations, resulting, on the one hand, in a processual perception of time, and on the other, in a suspension or arrest of temporal perception. What interests me to analyze is why both produce feelings of discomfort or suffering among those engaged in this type of work. The inquiry into time perceptions among these workers is justified precisely by their own viewpoint: it is important to note that most of the delivery workers interviewed reported having chosen their job for two main reasons. First, they believe they could earn more income than in other occupations available to them given their precarious conditions (many are recently arrived immigrants, young, and without formal qualifications). Second, they associate this type of work with a feeling of freedom. Allow me to quote at length an excerpt from an interview:

> J.: Work is… well, you've got to be disciplined on your own, you know, because there's no one telling you "go work" or "do this" or "do that". You choose what you want to do, and that's it. It's just that here you're your own boss… basically, you can do whatever you want, and depending on how much time you put in, how much effort you give, and how you do it, that's how much you earn. No one's gonna call you to come work—it's up to you if you want to work or just do nothing and waste the whole year doing absolutely nothing.

> M.: I like working here because, even though there's no boss breathing down my neck, the motivation to go out and work is mine, not anyone else's. And that shows the interest—the interest in everything, in general: the hunger, literally everything. And I'm the one putting in the effort. It's everyone's own motivation. At first, it was hard, but now, even though I have health problems, I still go out to work every day.

Considering that, during the interview, both workers stated that they felt freedom in their work and identified this as the most positive aspect ("there's no one telling you to go work or do this or do that"), a notable feature of the quoted excerpts is their representation of having the freedom to choose when to go out to work and how much time to dedicate to their workday. Phrases such as "you choose what you want to do, and that's it" and "the willingness to go out and work is mine"—which embody the highly valued feeling of freedom—need to be examined not only in relation to the actual practices of these workers (i.e., whether their freedom is truly such), but also in terms of the effects this type of work has on their subjectivity. This involves analyzing whether they maintain a relationship of appropriation or of derealization toward their tasks. This approach follows the criterion suggested by Rahel Jaeggi (2016: 1) for using the Marxian concept of alienation in a contemporary way: "a relation of relationlessness [...] a failure to apprehend, and a halting of, the movement of appropriation". Let us examine in more detail the first of these forms of temporal experience.

2.1 Fast and Restless

The question of time plays a central role in the way agents organize their experience of the social world (Schütz, 1967). The ability to make sense of the experiences of others, as a social actor, involves deploying a series of cognitive skills to retain past perceptions in consciousness and link them to future ones, whose presentation to consciousness occurs anticipatorily, according to an action project that for the agent arises from their orientation toward specific goals.

If we accept this concise and modest characterization of how goal-oriented social action requires, for its execution, an internal linking work of the experiences presented to consciousness in a temporal flow, then we can acknowledge the relevance, for research on the transformations in the meaning of work, of the way representations of time are articulated in the

lifeworld of workers. As mentioned above, here we focus only on how young precarious platform delivery workers experience time.

Our way of addressing this issue is through the empirical material we have gathered in Buenos Aires over recent years, within a broader research project on labor precarization and its relation to contemporary forms of justification of social inequality. As Hartmut Rosa (2016) has emphasized, acceleration is a predominant phenomenon in modern societies. Rosa says about this:

> Modern life is accelerating continuously. Strangely enough, while the art of saving time reaches unprecedented heights thanks to the introduction of ever newer communication and production technologies, we nevertheless feel that we are running out of time. In all Western societies alike, the scarcity of time is increasing, and individuals report the impression that they have to run faster and faster each year—not to get somewhere, but simply to stay in place! (Rosa, 2012: 43).

Although, according to this diagnosis, acceleration in the experience of time could be expected in any form of employment, it is observed with greater intensity among precarious platform delivery workers. In the various occasions, both in individual interviews and group discussions, the informants expressed a strong tendency toward an accelerated perception of time.

This is evident from the outset in the official message that companies offering this service aim to convey to their customers, competing to provide the fastest service on the market. Speed and quickness are the watchwords these companies offer to clients, which is why their relationship with workers is primarily determined by the rationalization of working time, where productivity is measured by the number of deliveries completed within a specific work period.

Consequently, companies deploy various motivational strategies to push their workers to fulfill the promise of making the fastest delivery on the market. These strategies include rewards and punishments, bonuses and extra payments, as well as suspensions and psychological manipulation, among others. Since the payment received per delivery is not high enough to rely on a single order for income, workers are compelled to complete their deliveries as quickly as possible.

This often results in harmful consequences: either accidents on the road or interpersonal conflicts with restaurant employees or customers to whom the delivery must be made. When calculating time and money, the

mandate to be fast becomes an obsession for the riders, who devote much of their discourse to recounting their experiences in being quick and efficient. They also express moral evaluations about what is good and bad when performing their job, and, as such, formulate ways to rank things and people, institutions and practices, social groups, and public figures.

One of the main sources of tension during the workday arises with customers, whom the workers blame for causing delays in completing the order. It is important to highlight the feeling of lack of recognition expressed by the employees in these situations, when the other party—in this case, the consumer—does not take the reasonable time required to place the order but instead makes the workers lose time, thereby disregarding and offending them. As an example, I quote the testimony of a rider who explained the internal effort he had to make each time he waited longer than expected at the door of a customer's home to deliver an order:

> F.: That's what I tell customers who take too long, you know? At first, waiting really stressed me out. And then I started working on it internally so I wouldn't go home in a bad mood. I started telling myself: I'll wait, and when they show up I'll say, "Hi, good morning, how are you?", or whatever, buuuut: "please try to stay attentive to your phone, because we're paid per delivery, not per time. Thanks".
>
> M.: I've told them that too. Actually—sorry—last night I had a customer who didn't take that long, but for me, 10 minutes is already… too much. So the lady finally comes downstairs and I was just about to say: "Hey, I've been waiting a while!". But when I saw her face, I realized she didn't understand a thing… I don't know, she was speaking Russian or something, so I just said "okay, okay"—I couldn't say anything. I was like, oh my god!

Since the pay is low, the only way for workers to make their working time worthwhile is by overexerting themselves, completing as many orders as possible per hour. Through the accumulation of deliveries, the worker can effectively earn a reasonable amount of money to meet their expectations. The main source of dissatisfaction, then, lies in the anxiety caused by the perception of losing money with every fraction of time wasted during idle moments in the work activity. In this time-interpretation paradigm, activity is valued while inactivity is despised. Inactivity, or the moments when the individual is not moving through space to complete a delivery, is evaluated by the workers from the same perspective as the company: as a

loss of money. Responsibility for this loss is individualized and assumed by the worker, who experiences it as an affront to their moral integrity—despite it often resulting from normal circumstances of social life, such as delays in preparing an order at a restaurant or a customer taking time to come down and open the door at their home.

Although the workers are fully aware that this sequence of delays and conflicts is strictly a result of the low pay offered by the company—as the informants confirmed in some of the conversations we had with them—this does not seem to be a sufficient reason for them to adopt a critical perspective on the employment relations they are involved in. They do not use it as an argument to demand higher wages or to call for changes in company policies that penalize them when orders are delivered later than the agreed time. As one worker put it, time is money, but for a very simple reason.

> A.: Time is money because you're not being paid a fixed rate like in other jobs, where you know that after five or six hours you're going to make 3500 pesos. Time is money for this reason: because you earn per delivery, so the time you're waiting with one customer keeps you from taking other orders.

Despite the fact that this reasoning is clear and compelling—that time becomes the most valuable resource where a *lean platform* precarizes and impoverishes its workers with very low pay—this does not prevent workers from developing moral evaluations of others and themselves. Alongside the rational calculations of time and money, they add judgments about what is right and wrong regarding the connection between individual actions and the law, which here is understood as a moral law. This means that those who do not obey the mandate deserve to be punished, while those who accept it deserve to be seen as virtuous. This applies both to others—who can be clients, as mentioned before—and to other workers, who appear as part of a competitive world where everyone fights for their own survival and only the strongest win. While clients are slow, workers are lazy, unwilling to work, or incapable of understanding how the system works. However, this does not mean that workers do not blame themselves as well, recognizing themselves as transgressors of the norm whenever they take breaks—that is, when they are not working.

M.: That's when it's love or hate with the customers—because, literally, it's the fault of one customer who took too long to come down or who had to give you a code, and that made you miss the promo. That happened to me. I did everything, but the last order was in the final three minutes. I got to the place, rang the bell, and the client said "I'm coming down", and I was like "okay". But it was one of those customers who take forever, and just because of that, I didn't get the promo.

N.: Right, well that's what happens to me [that I feel guilty]. I can take two days off because I'm really tired, or maybe I'm just being lazy, not even that tired, I just don't want to go out. And by the third day I'm like: "Why didn't I go to work?". On the third day I'm thinking, "I've rested enough, why didn't I go?". So check this out—we have a meme in a WhatsApp group of friends that says: "I didn't go to work yesterday, and my buddy who did: 'I made 15,000'".

R.: On that side it's good because it's extra money, which is useful. But why is it bad? Because I have so much discipline, this happens to me: if I didn't do it, I tell myself that I could've done it.

2.2 Repressive Leisure

Now let us consider the second form of temporal experience. While the first mode was characterized by how acceleration—a phenomenon diagnosed as structural for the advance of capitalism—results in subjective discomfort and anxiety, where the subject projects obsessively into the future, making the present unbearable, the second form appears as a way to inhibit the experience of the transitory nature of the present. In this form, the present becomes loose, eternal, and unchangeable. This relates to a kind of total presentism, in which the individual experiences the present as an eternity that cannot be changed, blocking any possibility of critically reflecting on what is happening. We can recognize this in the testimonies offered by workers about the time when they are not working—i.e., when they rest or spend time with their families. In earlier times, this period was experienced as a moment of freedom, where the worker could effectively live a life that work had taken away. However, platform delivery workers have expressed on more than one occasion feelings of boredom, meaninglessness, and restlessness during these non-working hours. Rather than spreading out and enjoying this time, workers find sufficient reasons to stop resting and return to work.

If the economic output of work depends on "how much time you invest and how much effort you put in", then the issue of income becomes a matter of individual will ("the effort is mine. It's each person's motivation").

> E.: I try not to rest too much, because I might have my TV, my PlayStation, my computer, but if I'm just in my room, I get bored. I could have a thousand movies, but I still get bored. I don't do anything. Being stuck inside drives me crazy.
>
> P.: The thing is, I get bored at home. I'm so used to being out on the street, I know everyone there, I'm there all day and I feel useful. And now, these days when I can't go out, they just feel like repetitive days… I play PlayStation, listen to Spotify, and I don't know what to do, I get superbored. One reason is that I just don't like being at home, like I just told you. So, if I can go out all day, that's a win for me. There's a system where you have to look for shifts a day before or a few hours before—you don't just open the app and go. You have to find shifts and grab them. They're usually three-hour shifts, then you find one-hour shifts, then two-hour shifts, and you put your day together. The more I work, the better, because I'm farther away—like, I'm out of my house—and on top of that, I'm making money. I'm not ambitious, but I also don't want to… I have a weekly amount I want to keep, it's nothing big, but I want to stay there.

The statement by the first worker, "being stuck inside drives me crazy", reveals a feeling of anxiety, which is also evident in the second worker's account when he says that working all day is an "achievement" for him because he is out of his house earning the money he needs for his expenses.

Alongside this experience of anxiety, we want to highlight the workers' feeling of boredom and tedium during their leisure time. It is precisely this negative affect that overwhelmingly emerged during the interviews. Many delivery workers reported feeling bored during the moments when they are not working:

> S.: Work really keeps your mind busy, you know? Because you're out on the street, you gotta keep pedaling, dealing with traffic lights, dealing with this guy, that guy, and if I stay at home, it's like the bike and the backpack are saying, "Take me out of here".
>
> I.: Why's that?

S.: I don't know, maybe it's because you get used to working, or maybe just used to being out on the street—even if you're not getting orders, you're still out there with the bike, the bag, and the app. And somehow, in that distraction, you keep going, like we all do, hoping to make more money today.

I.: Is that hope something you really have?

S.: Yeah, inside that boredom… 'cause I'm at home and I'm like, "It rained today" and me, without a raincoat—man! Do you know how much I can make in the rain? Like three thousand, four thousand pesos. And you end up feeling bad.

I.: How do you mean, feeling bad?

S.: First, you get bored, 'cause you know there's money out there… and at least for me, making money is fun. I like working, I try to see the positive side.

To the extent that economic income depends *solely* on each individual's willingness to exert effort, idleness is identified with a negative meaning, understood as a "loss of time" during which the worker, self-perceived as their "own boss", could be earning additional money.

3. BECOMING POOR. REIFICATION THROUGH INFLATIONARY ACCELERATION/DEACCELERATION

As part of the devastating aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic (Tooze, 2021: 25), a discernible trend had emerged in countries across both the Global South and the Global North. This trend, which could be seen as constituent parts of the *nervous crisis* (Davies, 2019: 12) of current political-democratic regimes, is the return of the inflation phenomenon in a context of stagnant economic activity (Mattick, 2023: 121; Blavier et al., 2023: 5), reflected in the increase of international gas prices, increasing urban housing rents, and the upward trajectory of food price (OECD, 2023; Parasecoli & Varga, 2023). Inflation is defined as the general and sustained increase in the prices of goods and services in an economy over time. The inflation rate is one of the main macroeconomic indicators of a country, as it directly affects citizens' purchasing power as well as the investment and saving decisions of both individuals and capitalists. Inflation is usually measured through the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which calculates the price varia-

tion of a representative basket of goods and services consumed by households over a period of time (food, clothing, rent, electricity, medications, school fees, and household appliances, among others). If inflation decreases (for example, from 10 % to 5 % annually), it does not mean that prices are falling, but rather that their rate of change in the current period is lower than in the previous period. Thus, the acceleration (or deceleration) of prices is equivalent to an increase (or decrease) in inflation.

This trend can be observed in the social reality of Argentina. Far-right political parties exploit the issue of inflation discursively to fuel electoral growth, mostly through agitators who intervene in digital arenas. In Argentina, this has been seen in the electoral rise of the right-wing libertarian and ultraconservative political coalition La Libertad Avanza (LLA). Importantly, however, the relationship between inflation and the deterioration of democracy takes a specific shape in this country, in accordance with its particular socioeconomic, sociostructural, and sociocultural features.

A brief historical review of the twentieth century allows us to recognize milestones in the interaction between inflationary economy, authoritarian attitudes, and anti-democratic values, where uncontrolled trends of rising food prices have been followed by processes of restricting citizens' rights (Hirsch & Goldthorpe, 1978: 263; Aglietta & Orléan, 1982: 289; Streeck, 2014: 136; Cooper, 2017: 25). Inflation has been one of Argentina's most persistent macroeconomic problems in recent decades. Until the 1940s, inflation was not a chronic issue in Argentina's economy. Since then, except for the Convertibility period (1991–2001), the country has not experienced prolonged price stability. Over the years, Argentina has gone through different inflationary regimes: from the *chronic* inflation of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, to high inflation and hyperinflation in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by price stability in the 1990s, and a return to chronic inflation starting in the 2000s. During 2023, the annual inflation rate climbed to 211,14 %. For much of the past eighty years, the sustained rise in prices has been a recurring issue, even though this problem has been resolved in most countries around the world and in the region. This helps explain why, over the past fifteen years, Argentina has had one of the highest inflation rates in the world. How does chronic inflation in Argentina relate to recent signs of democratic backsliding among citizens?

When we spoke with various precarious workers about these issues, different interpretations of the phenomenon of inflation emerged, both regarding its underlying causes and the effects it produces on social coex-

istence. It is worth noting that, even though inflation appears in public discourse as a structural problem related to a country's monetary policies, unlike other economic issues—such as external debt, the unequal distribution of wealth and assets, or the fiscal deficit—inflation is subjectively experienced by social actors repeatedly in their everyday lives (Wilkis, 2017: 157). This, in turn, incentivizes the social production of meanings and the formation of popular narratives that seek to make sense of, and thereby dominate, that which seems resistant to technical control by experts. Part of the political dilemmas of the present is the disconnection between the economic theories that explain the return of inflation within the national boundaries and the lived experiences of individuals in their daily practices (Mattick, 2023: 12), which in the long run may threaten what Lisa Herzog (2024: 133) has called the «epistemic life of democracies».

As noted above, our interest here lies in analyzing the way individuals incorporate the temporal dimension when interpreting how an inflationary economy affects their lives. Before differentially examining the moral attitudes and affective responses displayed by social actors in relation to the phenomenon of inflation, it is worth highlighting that, above all, inflation is interpreted from the first-person perspective of the working subject.

> Work these days is frustrating, 'cause you make an effort, you work hard, and still your money's not enough—everything just keeps getting more expensive... And there's not much real, decent work out there. A lot of under-the-table jobs, a lot of precarious work, a lot of exploitation. So yeah, there's a lot that needs to be fixed and changed.

In the voice of one who identifies as a worker, inflation is associated with an eroding process, like a time thrown off its hinge, in which the individual becomes poor. The recognition that, regardless of any effort the subject exerts, they will not be able to "outpace inflation", as the rising costs of basic goods and services advance at a pace unattainable for those, like this worker, who must contend with precarious jobs, low wages, and long working hours. The perception articulated by the worker's voice is that of a becoming-poor.

Within this process of becoming-poor, two attitudes are particularly relevant for our research. On the one hand, one mode of response to the acceleration of excessive price variation is a perspective expressing feelings of fear in the face of the uncertainty produced by uncontrolled price fluc-

tuations. This fear is associated with the image of a structural disorder that undermines individuals' capacity to plan courses of action, both in the short and medium term.

> […] I feel like, in some way, I'm not really safe... and suddenly a bad streak could hit, and that would be a real problem now... 'cause there's not much of a safety net... and it's the same for most people around me too […] without a stable economy, you just can't feel emotionally.

The identification of inflation with an accelerating rise in prices imprints on individuals' subjectivity a sense of anguish at the visualization of entropic chaos. Entropy in a system can be described as the state of equiprobability toward which its elements tend in forming possible combinations. The absence of a discernible pattern, or the lack of knowledge of a logic regulating the relationship between the value of goods, services, and the prices representing them, causes inflationary entropy to lead individuals to process their discontent in various ways.

One mode of response to the acceleration of excessive price variation is to imitate, in practice, what is represented in the market. If the prices of goods and services are offered in the market without rational criteria, multiplying their variations without limit, then the social practice of consumption must mimic its object, thereby deploying a nervous hyperactivity oriented toward the multiplication of survival strategies.

> People are buying because they want to buy today—they don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, so they're buying way too much at once. That's what's going on. Out of fear. Yeah, the economic instability—I have to buy now. Today sugar costs 800, tomorrow it might be 1,200. That's it. So today I buy in bulk, 'cause I know tomorrow money... you know.

> I'm fed up with all the discounts, it's driving me crazy. I go to the supermarket with 15 %, then there's 30 % off with the other thing. I'm all over the place, I don't even know if I should get sugar, yerba, bread—I just don't know. Luckily, I manage to put food on the table, I eat well, thank God. But I can't take it, all that stuff just overwhelms me.

As can be observed in these excerpts from a focus group, the mimicking of inflationary disorder, far from guaranteeing individuals a sense of achievement or practical success, can only lead to an internal disorder that overwhelms the subject. Ultimately, it exhausts them: completely drained

("exhausted"), fatigued by the intensity with which the pace of price fluctuations forces them to deploy unprecedented survival strategies. The subject, perceiving that they have already lost everything, ends up assuming the position of one who desires the radical transformation of the existing order:

> P: No, for me it's like the exhaustion of being unwell. Like, we just can't take it anymore.
>
> H: It's fear of change, but also like... whatever, let it come already, let the wave crash.
>
> MOD: Alright. What about the rest of you? Do you feel like people are living with anxiety?
>
> J.: Like it's all too much, like there's a sense of burnout?
>
> M: Tiredness.
>
> R.: Everything's gonna go to hell in the next few months; [...] only when we hit rock bottom will we be able to say better things are coming—it won't stop until we're all the way down.

Another mode of response to the acceleration of excessive price variation is that which counteracts the speed at which commodity prices rise through quietism. Unlike the hyperactive response mode, the subject paralyzed by inflation remains still because they do not know how to act in the face of an objectively ungovernable scenario. It is important to emphasize here that, in expressing their hopes regarding the problematic situation embodied by the phenomenon of inflation, those who expressed fear in response to the constant price fluctuations shared a desire for a stable social order, in which the temporal dimension is associated with a continuous image of historical progression: "M: That it lasts forever. V.: Continuity. M.: That it lasts forever, forever".

On the other hand, there is the perspective that associates this perception of temporal disorder with the belief that beneath this appearance of constant change lies a line of continuity in which nothing truly changes and everything remains the same. This second belief is expressed through a subdued language, marked by discouragement and sadness in response to the experience of inhabiting a time without time, or a present that extends

indefinitely, dominating all and binding individuals to a fate over which they have no control.

> It's not like there's gonna be a radical change from one day to the next. So people... I see them more caught up in the day-to-day, with spending, inflation. It's like... it's always been something that just worked like that, and it'll keep going—the wheel keeps turning.

> It feels like a century, like the end is never gonna come, you know? I don't know, six years... but you just don't know, it's like time is gonna catch up with us.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to reconstruct the different ways in which time is experienced by a key labor category of contemporary capitalism, namely, precarious workers. It is evident that many of the issues analyzed reflect how neoliberal platform capitalism manifests itself in the economies of the Global South, such as Argentina. In this regard, both the importance of the notion of freedom when offering reasons for choosing this type of work, as well as the specific migratory profile revealed by this labor category, cannot be understood apart from the political and economic history of Latin America, and Argentina in particular. The elements analyzed here could likely be further nuanced by adopting a comparative perspective on how time is experienced by workers in other contexts of global capitalism, such as those found in countries of the Global North. However, risking a somewhat premature extraction of conclusions from the analysis, I would like to emphasize one issue that connects to our initial question.

This issue refers to the provisional, fragmented, and instrumental nature that work assumes for these young people. Far from embodying, through their occupations, what Weber attributed to modern workers of the early twentieth century—namely, the socialization into a professional ethic in which work tasks were imbued with vocational meaning—those who deliver orders for digital platforms perceive their work as something temporary, performed intermittently, and conceived merely as a means to achieve goals that truly attract and motivate them, such as university studies or personal projects.

Yet although one of the first conclusions we can draw is that these workers appear to be establishing new meanings in relation to their labor activities—meanings that can no longer be interpreted through the vocational lens employed by Weber—, this does not mean that social actors fail to develop attachments to their work that, due to epistemic blocks preventing reflective appropriation, generate new forms of suffering and social distress. The experience of alienation and reification, mediated by a problematic interplay of acceleration and deceleration within a context of crisis, reflects the ways in which contemporary capitalism produces psychic mechanisms that oppress workers, inhibit the possibility of meaningful appropriation of their activities, and open the door to experiences of contradiction between their aspirations and their actual practices. Both alienation through the acceleration/deceleration of the labor process and reification through inflationary acceleration/deceleration disclose how internalized perceptions of time operate as a key mediating factor in the reproduction of the mechanisms of domination that structure the contemporary labor market. In this sense, the somber conclusions reached in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* remain relevant, at least regarding Weber's diagnosis of the tension between the systemic imperatives of the economic order and the attitudes, dispositions, and values that shape the life-world of individuals.

One of the central claims advanced in this article is that these interpretive schemes of working time and market price variation are not the outcome of isolated individual intentions, but instead emerge from the specific structural positions that workers come to occupy within the precarized and flexibilized labor market characteristic of *lean platforms* in countries marked by a colonial past. However, as has become evident in the widespread expressions of discontent triggered by the accelerating rise in the prices of goods and services essential to life, these new forms of suffering—produced by the objective coercions of the capitalist economy—may also bring to light social longings for a radical transformation of the existing order.

While the perception of the pace of price increases can reproduce social mechanisms of control through the naturalization of history, at the same time, the frustration, fatigue, and depletion of psychosocial energies generated by such conditions seem to emerge as forces and impulses for new collective configurations oriented toward transforming the present state of affairs. Whether these energies and fermentations of radical social

change might also become the means of a genuinely emancipatory collective process is something that can only be determined in political practice.

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