

## Article

# Hyperconnectivity and (Im)mobility: Uber and Surveillance Capitalism by the Global South

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## Abstract

Apart from governments' increased opportunities to monitor citizens, businesses, civil servants, and services, companies are mobilizing personal data to build profitable, algorithmically based business models with profound ramifications. With companies that have rapidly become giants in this sector, such as Uber, the phenomenon is spreading to various services at the same overwhelming speed as many companies bet on what is known as Uberization. In this paper, we aim to use one example of such a phenomenon from the Global South to show how a potential hyperconnected society is, in fact, creating the possibility for expanded patterns of immobilization for certain groups. We aim to show how highly indirect corporate surveillance involved in businesses such as Uber can run in parallel with a specific direct form of worker surveillance that, without any legal or social safeguards, increases the vulnerability of the weakest link in this chain.

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## Introduction

At the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, economic inequalities and power asymmetries continue to grow alongside apprehension over the augmented way in which personal data is shared, exchanged, sold, and classified for social sorting purposes. Informational capitalism relies on surveillance more than ever as it uses technology to control and extract value from labor and platforms to create new ways of evading labor regulations. When data extracted from platforms are used to perform processes of predicting and modifying behaviour, this is part of what Shoshana Zuboff (2015a) calls surveillance capitalism.

The algorithm is, in many ways, as powerful a determinant in shaping and changing present and future societies as the car was (and still is) to industrial modernist cities. The algorithm is the essence of what seems to be the next urban form in terms of connection, communication, and (im)mobility. Apart from governments' increased opportunities to monitor citizens, businesses, civil servants, and services, companies are mobilizing personal data to build profitable, algorithmically based business models with profound ramifications. Among them is a specific model that uses geolocational personal data to connect potential customers, who then establish different levels of business relationships among themselves. Trying

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to conceptualize this emergent economic form that relies on information technology, data, and the internet for their business models, Nick Srnicek (2016) uses the expression “platform capitalism.” Companies that have rapidly become giants in this sector, such as *Airbnb* and *Uber*, are classified as “lean platforms,” a term that comprises firms that deliver services using an outsourced labor force. The phenomenon is spreading to various types of services at an overwhelming speed, and many new businesses take *Uber* as an example of how to structure their operations, thus leading to a process sometimes called *Uberization*. This phenomenon is characterized by, among other things, the precarization of labor relations as companies present themselves merely as suppliers of technology for brokering services and do not accept any responsibility for their users-partners as employees. Zuboff (2015b: 3) argues that companies like *Uber* represent a second wave of digital disruption within the scope of surveillance capitalism. Or, in her own words, “it bypasses old institutional structures not only to distribute information but also to distribute valued human and physical assets directly to individuals.”

In this paper, we aim to use one example from the Global South of such a phenomenon to show how a potential hyperconnected society is, in fact, creating the possibility for expanded patterns of immobilization for certain individuals and groups. We also show how complex and idiosyncratic these manifestations of platform and surveillance capitalism can be, depending on the context.

Surveillance in this case produces the commodity used in the exploitation chain of personal data by corporations and, as we shall see, by hidden employers who are created by the so-called sharing economy (Zuboff 2015b). In a disturbing and fascinating case of *Uberization*, we aim to show how the highly indirect corporate surveillance involved in businesses such as *Uber* can run in parallel with a specific direct form of worker surveillance that, without any legal or social safeguards, increases the vulnerability of—and immobilizes—the weakest link in this chain.

### Sharing Precarization

Since the 1980s, a crisis that has been devastating the world of work and the wage society has been documented and investigated in academic studies and extensively debated in political circles in many different countries. This crisis has shaken the foundations of a model that had prevailed for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—at least in modern Western (or Westernized) cities in industrialized countries—and which is characterized by the predominance of formal employment, by the strength of trade union representation and by sectoral bargaining, as well as by the association between citizens’ identities, their professional occupation, and a predominantly male gender profile.

Many of these transformations became firmly established or even more radical with the growing popularity of always-connected digital communications devices and the internet, a phenomenon that has been exhaustively discussed by sociologists (see, for example, the work of Manuel Castells [1996] and his trilogy on *The Information Age*), as well as researchers in other fields.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of these transformations include the slow disappearance of formal employment and, at the same time, the blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work—a distinction that has been rendered meaningless by the computer, the internet, and the smartphone. In addition, technological devices and the internet have favored the emergence of new work and service-provision models,<sup>2</sup> an example being the sharing economy, which we consider here.

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<sup>1</sup> In geography, for decades now, a relevant inquiry into the spatial dimensions of ICTs has been the object of analysis in studies by Steve Graham (1998), Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge (2011), Aharon Kellerman (2002) and many others. These works recognize the programmatic importance of understanding digital interactions as part of contemporary urban life and that the advance of ICTs would not mean the end of geography (Graham 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Lima and Oliveira (2017) and Ong (2005).

There are a host of very different, alarming examples, such as the case of a municipality in the state of São Paulo, Brazil (Ribeirão Preto), which developed a plan, popularly known as *Uber-teacher*, to conduct one-off classes for the municipal school network using an app to select candidates interested in working without any formal employment contract (Basilio 2017). The same is happening in the UK and many other countries where hundreds of schools use *Uber*-style apps to hire supply teachers (Candem 2017).

If the most immediate consequence of *Uber* would appear to be the precarization of labor relations and the elimination of formal employment, in the case of *AirBnB* the impact is even greater and is felt beyond the hospitality sector, as neighborhoods become gentrified, and traditional tenants with long-term contracts and much lower monthly rather than daily rents are driven out. Both *Uber* and *AirBnB* are driving forces behind the production of a contemporary city that is very different from the cities of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The speed with which the sharing economy is spreading and the impact it is having cannot be explained by the shrinking of the formal labor market or the precarization of labor relations alone, nor can it be explained by the development and increasing popularity of technological devices connected by the internet. The *Uber-AirBnB* model achieved success in the midst of various attempts by startups in the thriving app economy because of, among other reasons, its “elective affinity” (as Max Weber would put it) with what is known, according to Nikolas Rose (1998), as the “enterprising self,” a characteristic of contemporary neoliberal rationality (Dardot and Laval 2016) and the modes of subjectivization that produce it and are produced by it. In other words, it is a question of the seduction of entrepreneurialism, of individuals’ perceptions of themselves as “enterprises” that consist essentially of human capital and compete with countless other one-person enterprises to provide services or identify market opportunities. Again, as Zuboff (2015b: 2) put it, one of the driving forces of this model is based on the “fundamental changes in consumption that represent a shift from the mass to the individual.”

### Uberization and Surveillance Capitalism by the Global South

Surprising aspects of *Uberization* come to light every day. Surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2015), a term coined to stress the collection, extraction, and analysis of users’ data to perform behaviour prediction and modification used for economic profit, manifests itself in nuanced and diverse ways around the world, stretching its implications to unpredicted possibilities. Specifically in the Global South, any comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon needs to take into account its manifestation in three dimensions: the reach and impact in the region; and role played by peripheral economies in this new mode of accumulation (surveillance capitalism *on* the Global South); the role and involvement of local actors and institutions with global companies and in international partnerships (surveillance capitalism *by* the Global South); and the culturally informed local perspectives, interpretations, and alternatives that are developed in specific settings and that can challenge or deepen asymmetries in power and inequalities (surveillance capitalism *from* the Global South).<sup>3</sup> For this particular article, we want to address aspects of one of these three dimensions, surveillance capitalism *by* the Global South. We want to describe a very particular way in which a local actor uses the platform to mitigate its labor costs, adding another level of exploitation to a formal employment relationship. Indirect and direct surveillance are being combined to increase productivity in a poorly regulated market, further deteriorating an already precarious relation in the sharing economy.

In this example, surveillance capitalism is marked by a contractual relationship between global and local actors in the adaptation of technologies and practices in terms of the contexts and (consumer) needs of countries in the Global South. In Brazil, we would say this is a move toward the tropicalization of global technologies, producing very specific ways in which these technologies are appropriated by local actors and resulting in unexpected situations. The formation of the country, marked by the experiences and inheritances of colonization and slavery, in addition to the persistence of high levels of social inequality, makes the overexploitation of labor in situations of workers’ precariousness a very recurrent phenomenon. Sadly, there

<sup>3</sup> A proposal for an analysis of surveillance capitalism in the Global South was presented by Rafael Evangelista at the 8th Surveillance and Society Conference, in June, in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2018.

are still common cases of work under conditions analogous to slavery (Esterci 2008; Figueira 2004), just as it was common in the nineteenth century for urban slaves to develop various economic activities that allowed them to earn some income (Karasch 1987). Even today, in many cities in Brazil, most taxi drivers do not have the necessary license to own a taxi. So, in order to drive they have to pay a “rent” on a daily basis and are registered as “assistants” in the official files. This daily rent sometimes exceeds the amount earned on a bad day of work (Machado Junior 2018). The recurrence of similar cases, today and in the past, means a significant portion of Brazil’s population is in a situation of “precariat” (the most precarious fraction of the proletariat) (Standing 2011; Braga 2018),<sup>4</sup> which favors more violent or radical forms of exploitation to develop and to be culturally accepted.

The case presented here appears to be an attempt to take as much advantage as possible of this type of precarization in terms of the exploitation of labor. The scheme we describe here is striking because of the ingenious relationships proposed to maximize the use of the hours a worker was contracted to work for by obliging the employee to perform additional duties during their working hours to indirectly pay for her own wage. In addition, apart from the standard ways in which *Uber* uses customers’ and partners’ geolocational data in a kind of indirect surveilling relationship, this story shows a near real-time monitoring of the *Uber* driver and their performance—a worker surveillance situation—but by an unexpected third party.

We will narrate this story as the passengers of the *Uber* driver...

To get to the airport in São Paulo after a LAVITS<sup>5</sup> meeting, we requested an *UberX* car. We were collected by an enormous SUV driven by a young driver called Daniele.<sup>6</sup> Excited by the discussions about the possibilities for new surveillance projects that had come up at the LAVITS meeting, we talked about various cases involving the use of Big Data in our daily lives and the possibility of governments, companies, and citizens collecting, using, and manipulating personal data. We discussed, for example, modifying insurance policy pricing based on real-time analysis of individualized client data to personalize risk calculation in ever more accurate ways.

Daniele was using her phone while she drove, receiving and replying to messages from someone called “the chief,” but she appeared to be paying attention to our conversation. Out of politeness and discretion, we tried not to read the messages she was receiving and that appeared on the screen of her cell phone, which was mounted on the dashboard so that it could be used as a GPS and for *Uber* calls.

It was at that point that it occurred to us that we should involve her in the discussion and ask her about her car insurance as she was using the vehicle for informal work. She said that the insurance policy did not contain any information about using *Uber*, but that the vehicle actually belonged to another person, her “boss.” The conversation continued, but this piece of information did not go unnoticed. We wanted to find out more about what appeared to be a case of the outsourcing of the *Uber* fleet—something that had happened before, with other examples already discussed in the press<sup>7</sup>—and yet another novel business development within *Uber* in the context of the sharing economy. With our next questions, we tried to find out more about this type of outsourcing. But we were wrong, as the story turned out to be even more complex.

Daniele was a professional driver and had been hired by Michael to work for his family (his wife and children). She was formally employed by Michael, and her job complied with all of the labor legislation, such as an eight-hour working day, employment contract, job description, and paid vacations. However, when nobody in Michael’s family needed her to give them a ride, Daniele was obliged by her boss to work

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the precariousness of workers in the digital sector, see Antunes and Braga (2009).

<sup>5</sup> LAVITS: Latin American Network of Surveillance, Technology and Society Studies ([www.lavits.org](http://www.lavits.org)), of which all authors are members.

<sup>6</sup> Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Diógenes and Thomé (2016). For a similar example in English, see Battersby (2016).

as an Uber driver under the following conditions: all the money she received should go directly to her boss's account; the email registered with Uber belonged to Michael, who monitored the fares and rides as they happened; in the event of an accident, Daniele would be responsible; the cell phone and vehicle belonged to Michael; and Daniele did not have the choice of working without accepting these conditions and doing extra tasks as an Uber driver.

Feeling very uncomfortable and concerned, we started asking more and more questions and suggesting that she take precautions and record the whole process in case there were future problems with the labor courts. Daniele then revealed another frightening detail. The "chief" with whom she had exchanged messages while she had been listening to our conversation was none other than Michael, who had been complaining about the small number of rides and low fares. After all, he received email reports about all the rides in near real time (just after the rides were finished). At that point, we started to worry that the "chief" might be monitoring our conversations, something that surveillance researchers are frequently paranoid about. When we mentioned this possibility, the young driver said, "No! At least, I don't think so." From then on, she may not have been so certain that this was not happening.

Daniele felt under pressure to meet all of the demands in order to "keep her own job." As she herself said while she was driving carefully along the highway toward the airport, "This way I'm the one who pays my own wage." The clarity of her analysis highlighted the fact that the money she was paid partly consisted of what she earned from Uber, during her working day, while performing a function that was unrelated to her core activity—driving Michael's family to the shopping mall, school, club, etc.—but at the same time was part of her professional job.

In fact, a worker with "semi-precarious" employment was being exploited in a complex, clever, and ethically questionable scheme built on liminalities and ambiguities that involved maximizing the exploitation of her labor by a boss who identified himself as "the chief" on the cell phone, which the driver told us was also his. It was curious and surprising that in an activity so characteristic of the sharing economy and the enterprising self, the old concept of surplus value and ownership of the "means of production" could make so much sense. Obviously, we did not have access to Daniele's employment contract and job description, but it is reasonable to suppose that the Uberization conditions were not recorded in her Employment and Social Security Booklet. And according to what she herself told us, she had been hired as the family's private driver.

The story appeared to involve moral harassment—to an even greater extent than we could have imagined—when Daniele told us that she had asked to be blocked by Uber itself. The blocking of Uber users/partners is common in cases of failure to comply with the terms of use of the service but never or very rarely at the request of the users/partners themselves. Clearly, therefore, this was an attempt by Daniele to free herself of the additional activity without losing her job. She told her boss that the company had blocked her and imagined that with that excuse she could solve the problem of her "dual function." This worked for several days, despite repeated requests from the "chief" that she sort out the situation with Uber. The pressure came in the form of constant comments that he would not be able to continue to afford her wage as a private driver and that he would be "obliged to fire her" as she was no longer working to pay her own wage. Not wanting to wait, he created a new account for Daniele, who had to start doing Uber rides again as she needed the money to support herself. She said that when the pressure came to a head, she went to the Uber office and explained what was happening. She was informed that the situation was irregular and that her account could not be reactivated. Daniele told us that, in an attempt to escape from this "Uberization of Uber," she was taking a course for bus drivers and that she had already worked as a school minibus driver, a job she would not mind doing again.

Shortly before she left us at our destination, we learnt about an even more bizarre aspect of the case. Daniele mentioned that there was another driver working for the family in the same circumstances. What particularly caught our attention was the fact that both drivers were women, which Daniele put down to the "chief" being jealous of the drivers at his wife's disposal. In addition to Michael's jealousy of his wife, it seems that

gender (and power) relations were being exploited in other ways as the driver appeared to be afraid of the “chief,” who used his position as her boss to constantly threaten her, undoubtedly taking advantage of the fact that his employee was a woman.

The fact that he only employed women may have meant that he exercised other forms of domination and power over them, some more subtle, others less subtle, but all extensively discussed and identified as characteristics of gender relations in the labor world. All of these questions were buzzing in our heads when we arrived at the airport, sooner than we would have wished, to catch our flights. And alerts with requests from new passengers were already coming in on the “chief’s” cell phone. Passengers who, like us, would have their digital tracks shared with Uber, the “chief” himself, and goodness knows what other companies or institutions that collect, classify, and monitor us, transforming us into profiles.

Before we left Daniele and she departed with another passenger, we asked her if she would like us to rate her with the maximum score (five stars) or if she would prefer a low rating so that she would be blocked again by the app. “A good rating, of course, because we have a sense of pride,” was her answer. The rating we gave her, five stars, was in no way unrealistic. Quite the opposite, as the journey ended up being disturbingly pleasant despite the story about the disguised labor precarization, mainly because of Daniele’s friendly attitude and openness, as well as the empathy she immediately inspired in us. Leaving with her new passenger and our advice on how to protect herself, Daniele was visibly frustrated, feeling imprisoned in her own job, doubly “Uberized” and under the surveillance of her “chief,” who tracked her digitally at least eight hours a day.

## Conclusion

Daniele’s case sheds light on some of the murkier aspects of what is called, somewhat romantically, the sharing economy and represents the symbiotic relationship between Uber and “the chief” performing a specific relationship of labor exploitation enhanced by the availability of new platforms in the Global South. Instead of the greater freedom and autonomy promised by forms of creative entrepreneurialism and the hyperconnectivity of these digital technologies, what we could see was even more intense, controlled work in an even more hierarchical structure resulting in an immobilizing condition for Daniele.

Reflecting on the relation between Marxian categories and theories of surveillance, Christian Fuchs argues that “surveillance is not only an economic concept for [Karl] Marx” (Fuchs, 2012: 675), pointing out that the dimensions of political surveillance in Marx’s work are chiefly related to the administration of the state. But Fuchs’ important contribution is in the categorization of the use of surveillance in a cycle of capital accumulation. The relationship between Daniele and “the chief” seems to illustrate three of these uses: the surveillance of Daniele’s productivity; the surveillance of “the chief’s” property: the assemblage formed by the car, the mobile phone (and its apps), and the bank account, in that case transformed in a special means of production; and the surveillance of Daniele’s mobile workplace. All of these categories of surveillance have enabled a complex relationship within Uber’s platform. The case in point can only happen at the margin of the law in a typical Global South situation in which either the state institutes weak labor regulations or legislation is poorly enforced.

The supposedly rational and universalist logic that permeates the technological infrastructure of the Uber app and the supposed neutrality of its algorithmic functioning are in fact produced according to a normative model of the Global North that starts from free and autonomous economic actors that launch themselves into the market as if they were enterprises. As the present case shows, the assumption of the transculturality of this normative model or the capacity of the technological infrastructure to force the operation of the economic actors according to these supposedly universal rules of the market are, at least, questionable. Similar work arrangements were found, for example, in Bangladesh (Kumar, Jafarainimi, and Bin Morshed 2018), indicating the importance of a research agenda on the appropriations of the sharing economy and surveillance capitalism in sociocultural contexts of the Global South. Rosenblat (2018) points out how Uber taps on the US cultural heritage of entrepreneurship for recruiting its drivers. She also shows that many

Uber drivers in countries in the Global North are originally immigrants from countries in the Global South—although the company uses gentrified images of white millennials in their promotional material (77)—which raises questions about how Silicon Valley companies play with economic asymmetries between countries and populations.

While the work model that underpins Fordist industrial capitalism has been progressively weakening since the 1980s, it has not given way to a world in which work itself is losing its centrality and becoming less important to sociology as a whole (Offe 1985). In fact, almost the exact opposite has happened: work has become omnipresent, distributed by technological devices that follow us all the time, alerting us, connecting us, tracking us and, to a certain extent, imprisoning us in the most complete mobility. Instead of the promised benefits, what we are witnessing is ever greater precarization of jobs, earnings, and plans for the future.

Of course, in the case we described here, the supposedly positive aspects of the sharing economy can also be observed. The “chief” was undoubtedly being entrepreneurial when he had the idea of putting both of his employees to work as potential drivers for any Uber user in São Paulo during their “idle hours” in their jobs as his family’s drivers. The use of technological devices and the internet gave him considerable freedom to organize the work in terms of time and space. It is also undeniable that the economic activity is shared and creative: Daniele and her co-worker have to do the work while the “chief” gets the profits. When he had the idea of transforming his private vehicle into a means of production and appropriating the surplus value produced by his two workers by means of an ambiguous employment contract, the “chief” was not doing anything very different from what Marx observed at the dawn of industrial capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is not our intention to suggest that the sharing economy and its variations of creative surveillance capitalism can be reduced to the case we have described here. Nor would we suggest that this case is the only example of the economic and social relations that emerge from and sustain the sharing economy and surveillance, let alone that the Marxist perspective proposed 150 years before the emergence of organizations such as *Uber* and *AirBnB* and the economic model they have given rise to are the main keys to explaining contemporary transformations in the world of work. However, considering the political context in Brazil after the 2016 “coup,”<sup>8</sup> the rise of a far-right government in 2019,<sup>9</sup> and the spread of neoliberal labor deregulation policies, the specific details of this case make it impossible not to think of the burgeoning possibilities for more radical capitalist exploitation and the precarization of social and labor relations through the use of digital technologies and surveillance practices. Gradually, and to a certain extent without noticing this process or reacting to it, we are getting used to ever more creative, entrepreneurial, and independent ways of exploiting the poorest, weakest, and most insecure members of society.

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<sup>8</sup> We refer here to the impeachment of the 36<sup>th</sup> president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, approved by the Senate on August 31, 2016. Many commentators, with whom we agree, consider the process to be the result of the illegitimate use of the impeachment proceedings and therefore to constitute an institutional coup, justified by minor charges of irregular fiscal maneuvers, but not criminal offenses, and motivated by more obscure, complex political interests. See, for example, Taub (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Since the impeachment in 2016, Brazilian national governments have considered the flexibilization of labor legislation as one of their main political platforms, in a radicalization of neoliberal policies in Brazil.

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