

EDITORIAL

LABOR, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, AND LIVING CONDITIONS: Who/ what is technology for? “New” enterprises and the “old” labor exploitation

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Recently, business rhetoric about new technologies has emphasized the emergence of the so-called Industry 4.0 (or Fourth Industrial Revolution). In general, Industry 4.0 is thought to pose great challenges but offers unprecedented opportunities to the world of work. With the advancement of robotics, artificial intelligence, and information and communication tools, jobs are at risk, even those not repetitive. However, according to this narrative, permanent qualification and job flexibility can enable new and better jobs and business opportunities, ensuring a positive balance for technological changes. As promised with the 3rd Industrial Revolution in the 1980s-1990s, we now have advertisements for jobs that are less cumbersome and more creative, emerging less repetitive, more complex activities, and more power over production for workers.

According to the World Bank, the great changes brought about by digital technologies impose shorter contract terms and more flexible relationships on all workers, making work opportunities more accessible to any individual and enabling a boom in services on demand¹. The World Economic Forum supports the idea that new technologies must transform virtually every aspect of labor relations. The workforce must be even more flexible and adaptable concerning their qualifications, which can only happen with a new culture of lifelong skills enhancement².

Notwithstanding, the narrative of capital has gone even further, advocating the emergence of “new” enterprises. Allied to the discourse of technologies, corporations and their representatives announce that production changes cause an expansion of new forms of work to replace salaried work. The expansion of “new” forms of work and the anachronism of the protective labor regulation have been strongly claimed: “The world of work has changed, the system of labor relations has not kept up,” because “Brazil’s labor legislation was designed to meet to employment and not to work.”³ The impact of this narrative on legislation has been great in recent decades. For example, in Spain and the United Kingdom, forms of employment with fewer rights than typical jobs, respectively “dependent self-employed” and “worker,” were adopted. In Brazil, “integrated” work, working under a “rent-a-chair”

1 BANCO MUNDIAL, *The Changing Nature of Work: World Development Report 2019* (Washington, Banco Mundial, 2019).

2 FEM, *Towards a Reskilling Revolution: Industry-Led Action for the Future of Work* (Genebra, FEM, 2019).

3 Confederação Nacional da Indústria (CNI), *A indústria e o Brasil: uma agenda para o crescimento* (Brasília, CNI, 2002).



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agreement, "autonomous" truck drivers have all been the object of laws stating that the relationship between these workers and their contractors does not form an employment bond. In 2017, the labor reform introduced an article expanding the concept of self-employment (which can now work for a single company with exclusivity), seeking to reduce the scope of workers covered by the Brazilian labor law (CLT).

Although the "new" forms of working have been announced for a few decades and do not require new technologies as a pre-condition, they are gaining strength with so-called applications and platforms. Recently, terms have been disseminated to define transformations in business arrangements and the world of work associated with the use of new information and communication technology (ICT): gig economy, platform economy, sharing economy, crowdsourcing, on-demand economy, uberization, crowdwork, digital work, among others. Despite the different definitions, these terminologies seek to identify phenomena with the following similarities: 1) online contacts between producers/providers and consumers, workers, and companies; 2) use of platforms to access computers or mobile communication instruments; 3) intensive use of digital data for the organization and management of these activities; 4) volatile and unpredictable relationships for workers⁴.

Corporations claim that: 1) they are digital technology companies; 2) mediate activities in which workers offer services autonomously; 3) eliminate subordination, guaranteeing workers the freedom to work whenever, wherever, and however they wish. In the most extreme case, companies claim that workers would be their customers, who pay a "fee" for using the "application" or "platform."

Thus, "platforms" and "applications" identify themselves as mere intermediaries in a given market and define workers as their partners or customers. In other words, these "new" enterprises entirely deny their participation in production. Corporations are "shrinking" and "distancing themselves" from workers. Thus, not only legislation but also labor law itself becomes increasingly anachronistic.

In this scenario, entrepreneurship is strongly presented as a solution to the problem of unemployment and subordination. It is a discourse of expansion of small business opportunities for everyone, developed thanks to the development of ICT, engendering a kind of neo-entrepreneurship, or a radicalization of entrepreneurship since technology (particularly the internet and platforms) suggests apparent democratization of the means of production: all you have to do is have a computer, a car, or even a bicycle for the "autonomous" production of income, either as a creator or as a partner in a start-up. Now, more than ever, your success "depends on you." This is reinforced when companies claim to make the platforms available to people who want to offer and improve "their business," supporting the assumption that workers are the companies' customers.

The idea of freedom and flexibility ("work when and where you want") spread by these enterprises means a deliberate transfer of risks to increase control over workers, who become more vulnerable by paying fixed costs without a guaranteed salary. Furthermore, contradicting this discourse, the "platforms" use several explicit measures to control workers, as shown in the "terms of use," suspension notices, lawsuits, interviews, messages.

With the individualization of services and remuneration, exploitation becomes more explicit – it is known how much each worker produces and what percentage is appropriated by the company. Furthermore, the "platforms" control the entire process, determine the exact formats of employment contracts, pay, mobilize, threaten, and dismiss. Workers are induced to adopt the behaviors directed by companies – they have to comply if they want to work. Because they have to submit to these conditions, workers are not really autonomous, are not in charge of the initiative, and cannot really control the labor activities.

Workers are less free and more subject to capital than wage earners recognized as such. This is because they suffer double coercion to subjugate themselves. In addition to the traditional (external) coercion of the labor market on any employee (the threat of dismissal), they also suffer internal coercion because, even with a contract, they are under permanent threat of having no income (and, finally, even when they get work, they have little or no rights). Technology enters this scenario to improve this control, as it can precisely and in real-time, know who is doing what, how, for how long, at what speed, etc. Thus, the great novelty in the

⁴ Relationships are frequently established based on the company's demand (the arrangements are based on product, without guaranteed continuity).

organization of work introduced by the new ICTs is to allow companies to use these tools as a sophisticated instrument for controlling the workforce.

In addition to hampering individual resistance and collective action, these arrangements have undermined the state's protective labor regulation. The narrative that disseminates these "new" forms of work represents, in practice, a new farewell to the working class. Salaried employment is being replaced by new ways of organizing work and production, with the growth of self-employment and even the transformation of workers into clients. In any case, they would be inadequate relations to the regulation of labor legislation⁵.

Since the First Industrial Revolution, the debate on replacing people with the products of their own work in production processes has gained prominence (this concern traditionally refers to machinery). This phenomenon could cause job extinction and, consequently, the end of the livelihood of the majority of the population. Despite the many pessimistic projections over the centuries, there was no definitive collapse of employment in capitalist economies. This did not happen with the so-called Third Revolution either, despite the great concern with automation. With Industry 4.0, will the impact on the labor market be different?

Meanwhile, in recent decades, public policies have "flexed" the legal framework and prioritized the qualification of workers in line with business demands. Did the freer and more creative jobs that were promised in return appear?

The simple fact that the advancement of technical capacity in a society is a problem betrays a central contradiction of capitalism. A society with less work needed to produce more wealth should be a blessing. People have more resources to meet their needs and more free time to enjoy life outside work. In addition to generating more wealth with less work, technology has emancipatory potential because it can make work less painful and more creative, freeing people from estrangement toward labor. Work can be a source of pleasure and fulfillment.

However, under capitalism, technical advances can make more people poorer and make work more painful and alienating. Such society allows automation to be used to exclude people from the production and appropriation of wealth and as a tool to increase control, exploitation, and illness. By definition, the problem is not technology but its privatization. The development and use of the means of production are imposed by the owners to make more profits, so that, even increasing labor productivity and total wealth, one does not have to share this increase or improve the work and living conditions.

In business rhetoric, the high labor cost pushes companies to purchase technologies that have become more advantageous than hiring workers. However, the problem is not presented in these terms in the real world. Capital tends to deepen the use of new technologies to increase labor productivity and profits and gain competitive advantages; it is natural to innovate unless it is discouraged by situations like spurious competition. It is not about exchanging the worker for the machine, as if they were competitors, but about making work more productive. The machine is an instrument of work. It so happens that the employment balance after innovation can be negative, as it depends on the total growth of production.

The idea that production operates through competition between workers and machines is fundamental to the rhetoric based on neoclassical economic theory. It engenders a complete inversion of the nature of the relationship among capital, labor, and the means of production.

- 1) The rhetoric states that there is no rivalry between worker and company, but mutual gains, even if not deliberate. Companies pay wages according to productivity, and workers get paid for what they are worth. Each part seeks its individual interest, but they harmonize. Labor competes with capital, understood as a means of production.
- 2) In this logic, there is competition between capital (as a means of production) and labor because the price of one excludes the purchase of the other – they are rivals subject to the company's choice. However, what rhetoric presents as "capital" is, in reality, the instrument of work. This does not exclude work but enhances it.

5 For more on the "new farewell" of the working class, see "Vitor Araújo Filgueiras and Sávio Machado Cavalcante, "What Has Changed: a New Farewell to the Working Class?" In: *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, v. 35, n. 102, 2020. Previous predictions emphasized the industrial work. Now, they address the salary work as a whole.

What excludes the worker is the social relationship in which the instrument is owned by those who do not work – here, yes, the capital. So, there is no competition between instrument and worker, but between the instrument owner and the worker.

According to the business narrative, the workers compete with the technology (the machine) and not with the entrepreneur. However, technology does not have a will of its own, it does not relate socially with people, so it does not compete with anyone. Struggles in production are established between human beings, who can build social relationships in which technologies serve as tools for some people to subordinate others. Technologies can also be used to emancipate. Corporate rhetoric reverses (and fetishizes) the fact that the dispute is not with technology but with the employer, who commands, exploits, and fires.

Unlike the more creative work and greater freedom promised by microelectronics and more recently by “platforms”, companies widely use new technologies to control and pressure employees. Furthermore, unlike what traditionally occurred in the Fordist/Taylorist model, in many sectors, companies have appropriated the cognitive capacity of employees without this implying greater power or autonomy for them.

The use of new technologies as more sophisticated tools for disciplining and control has increased mental illness in the world of work. Contrary to corporate rhetoric about sustainable practices and social responsibility, the last few decades have shown themselves to be prodigal in the forms of pressure, intensification, demands, and organized moral harassment, which use ICT to enhance the efficiency of these measures.

As if this were not enough, while new technologies aiming to increase productivity commonly raise or create new accident risks, other technologies created to reduce risks are usually refuted, keeping workers exposed to previous risks. The adoption of technology by companies is selective and tends not to include those dealing with workplace safety. On the contrary, the predominant initiatives are to resist the incorporation of safer technologies⁶.

If microelectronics and the advance of mechanization in the 1990s and 2000s did not improve working conditions, it does not seem that companies will use the Fourth Industrial Revolution to achieve this goal. The case of the platforms is the most emblematic, using new technologies to improve operations computers already had facilitated, such as telemarketing activities. Data processing and control are so great that companies do not need to formalize workers as employees to dominate them. Another world-famous case is Amazon, which uses tools like the Internet of Things to monitor workers’ every step, making real what seems to be a dystopia of capital control over labor.

Technology is conceived and used to watch over, control, distance (i.e., keep the subjugated person out of control of what is being done), and further exploit those who make a living from work, despite having the potential to improve working conditions and offer more freedom. Therefore, the illness continues to be a key feature in work processes.

In short, contrary to what was promised, new technologies have not, in general, been associated with better jobs. Similar or worse working conditions with increased physical and mental suffering commonly emerge with the use of more advanced techniques. This phenomenon is common to the history of capitalism itself, as technology, despite its liberating potential, remains subsumed under accumulation and is therefore used for the private benefit to subordinate and exploit those who make a living from work.

This issue of Revista Katálysis offers the reader a comprehensive series of articles that focus on the relationship between ICT and working and living conditions.

We wish you a pleasant read.

Salvador, October 13, 2021.

6 See Vitor Araújo Filgueiras, *NR 12: Máquinas, equipamentos, dedos, braços e vidas* (NR 12: Machines, equipment, fingers, arms, and lives), cit. Vitor Araújo Filgueiras, and Alfredo Scienza, *Tecnologia para quê(m)? Resistência empresarial e reprodução das mortes na construção civil* (Who/what is technology for? Business resistance and death reproduction in civil construction). In: Vitor Araújo Filgueiras (org.). *Saúde e segurança do trabalho na construção civil brasileira* (Aracaju, J. Andrade, 2015). In Brazil, there are many examples of the businesses struggle to keep using machinery considered obsolete from the point of view of work safety, such as specific types of construction presses and construction hoists.

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