

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>**Special section: Emotions and relational approaches: Simmel's legacy and contemporary challenges (II)****The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms****Juan Bautista Ballestrin**
University of Buenos Aires**Date of submission:** December 2021**Accepted in:** June 2023**Published in:** October 2023**Recommended citation:**

BALLESTRIN, Juan Bautista (2023). "The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms". In: Olga Sabido and Esteban Vernik (eds.). "Special Section: Emotions and Relational Approaches: Simmel's Legacy and Contemporary Challenges (II)" [online]. *Digithum*, no. 29, pp. 1-9. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i29.394504>. [Accessed: dd-mm-yyyy].



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

Based on historical materialistic perspectives that account for certain characteristics of the work at delivery platforms, this article presents a qualitative analysis of such work, taking workers currently operating in the City of Buenos Aires as empirical reference. A Simmelian theoretical interweaving of the categories of money, freedom, vocation, acceleration and boredom is carried out to reveal some of the subjective foundations on which this type of employment is based, as well as certain adverse personal effects and affections it can cause to those who carry it out.

Keywords

delivery platforms; vocation; boredom; acceleration; negative freedom

Los efectos del trabajo. Una visión simmeliana de las plataformas de reparto**Resumen**

Basándose en perspectivas materialistas históricas que tienen en cuenta ciertas características del trabajo en las plataformas de reparto, este artículo presenta un análisis cualitativo de dicho trabajo, tomando a los repartidores que actualmente trabajan en Ciudad de Buenos Aires como referencia empírica. Se lleva a cabo un entrelazado teórico simmeliano de las categorías de dinero, libertad, vocación, aceleración y aburrimiento para revelar algunos de los fundamentos subjetivos en los que se basa este tipo de empleo, así como ciertos efectos personales adversos y afecciones que puede causar a aquellos que lo llevan a cabo.

Palabras clave*plataformas de reparto; vocación; aburrimiento; aceleración; libertad negativa*
.....

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

Introduction¹

Georg Simmel's work has a strong relevance for various critical perspectives on contemporary capitalism (Harrington & Kemple, 2013; Rosa, 2016; Lewkow, 2019; Vernik, 2019). In general, and beyond specific nuances, each of these authors postulates that the work of the sociology classic can serve as a basis from which to account for processes of working-class alienation, currently mobilized by the mentioned mode of production. Particularly, those studies argue that the Simmelian proposal can even illuminate the way in which certain relatively recent productive reconfigurations corrode the personality through affections which general sense points towards a loss of meaning with respect to the work activity.

The productive reconfigurations herein referred to are usually identified by a worsening of employment precariousness, which began in the 1970s at a global scale. Today, huge numbers of workers are forced, within a context of rising levels of job insecurity, to carry out increasingly partial and, according to them, insignificant, risky and relatively poorly paid activities (Streeck, 2016; Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Furthermore, it is noted that the current capitalist production is oriented towards both automating labour control through digital technologies (Antunes, 2020), as well as ideologically subjecting the workforce through ideals such as freedom and autonomy in relation to work-life (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Bröckling, 2015).

In this sense, not only can the concept of freedom be deemed one of the guiding threads of Simmel's work (Vernik, 2017), but also, for this reason, recovering it becomes key when analyzing the contemporary labour sphere (Vernik, 2019). In this line, Austin Harrington and Thomas Kemple (2013, p. 17) point out one of the major difficulties faced by this endeavor: while the multifaceted Simmelian idea of freedom can be read in dialogue with proposals "of expressive protest against the deadening hand of the capitalist market and techno-industrial civilization", today, this same idea is "deployed to reinvigorate the 'creative' capitalist economy", while it is "entrenched at the frontier of the contemporary entrepreneurial culture". However, these authors postulate that some of Simmel's conceptualizations of freedom can clarify that current capitalist subjection, specifically if we "cross-check" them with Karl Marx's problematization of the mode of operation and reproduction of cap-

ital (p. 17). On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that in Latin America, Simmel's work has gained new vigour in contemporary sociological research concerned with addressing both urban social issues (Márquez, 2012), as well as the emotional and affective facet of metropolitan life (Sabido Ramos, 2020).

In continuity with these proposals, this paper focuses on the case of delivery platform workers that currently operate in the City of Buenos Aires. These companies try to lure workers by appealing both to ideals of freedom regarding work, as well as to the possibility of earning quick money. The overall objective of the article is to analyze the subjectivity of delivery platform workers by drawing on *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2004). My hypothesis argues that this work by Simmel allows us to approach some of the foundations of the modern-capitalist subjectivity on which this work is based, i.e., monetary profit as the main purpose of the labour activity itself and the experience of various feelings of freedom at work, as well as the sufferings that these experiences provoke in their agents. Strictly speaking, my hypothesis is that delivery platform workers positively value both the absence of a supervisor physically controlling their work, as well as the possibility of having a certain degree of autonomy to choose which days and shifts they want to work, but also that these freedom leads to a feeling of acceleration during the work process and the affection of boredom when they are not working. Indeed, this analysis will be developed by establishing a dialogue with proposals that, inspired by historical materialism, reveal the structural operation of work at delivery platforms, and at the same time point out some negative effects caused to such workers at personal level.²

The following section portrays some structural and subjective aspects of the work at this type of platforms (1), while the subsequent section describes their insertion in Argentina and some quantitative data on their workforce (2). After that, I take up the Simmelian approach to the social relations of capitalist production, highlighting both the importance of money and freedom in shaping them, as well as some of the effects they can have on the subjectivity of the worker (3). It is this subjective configuration that will allow me to make, in the following section, a reading of certain representations of the interviewed workers (4). I close these pages with a brief discussion.

1. Translations from Spanish to English have been produced by the author.

2. The analyzed empirical corpus is part of the UBACyT Project "Money and Personality: The Case of Platform Workers" (2020-2022) directed by Dr. Esteban Vernik, based at the Gino Germani Research Institute of the University of Buenos Aires. The article presents excerpts from 30 in-depth interviews with workers from the companies Rappi and Pedidos Ya. As the fieldwork was done in 2020 (the year of the COVID-19 pandemic), the interviews were conducted after the mandatory lockdown decreed by the National Government, i.e., in October, November and December of that year. Being qualitative research, we selected the in-depth interview because it allows a detailed approach to the way in which the subjects represent certain aspects of their lives and activities. The semi-structured guide included four scales: the first, entitled "vocation/employment", delves into workers' representations of work, money, and vocation; the second, "intended freedom / realized freedom", demonstrates the type and degree of freedom they experience in relation to their work; the third, "rhythmic temporality / arrhythmic temporality", investigates the problem of the pace of work, and the fourth, "idle enjoyment / idle suffering", explores workers' experiences when they are not working. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in squares of Palermo and Recoleta, central locations in the City of Buenos Aires, where there is a high presence of riders. The interpretation of the corpus was carried out by means of discursive content analysis, within the general framework of the theory herein selected. The research consisted of an "intensity sampling": according to Patton (1990), this sampling allows us to detect patterns of common aspects observed in the members of a heterogeneous group. In constructing the data, we verified that the significant experiences (freedom, lack of vocation, boredom and acceleration) were shared by workers of different ages, nationalities, educational levels and using different means of transport to work. Regarding freedom, only 5 participants said they did not experience it. In the case of vocation, 27 respondents indicated that they disliked their work, that they did it for the income they received, and that they would change it if they earned less. Acceleration is not so unanimous: 10 workers said they did not work in a hurry, and 20 did, while on boredom we found that 13 said they were bored in their free time, 10 did not, and 7 didn't know what to answer. During August and September 2021, 10 further interviews were conducted with new workers with the aim of controlling whether workers' representations were highly determined by the experience of the mandatory lockdowns enacted between March and September 2020. These interviews confirmed the trends observed earlier, with an increase in terms of acceleration (8 out of 10 said they worked in a fast pace) and a slight decrease in terms of boredom (5 out of 10 said they were bored in their free time). Therefore, the research findings indicate that compulsory lockdowns aggravated a wider social, subjective and occupational configuration.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

1. Structural and subjective aspects of the work at delivery platforms

The outsourcing and casualization of labour, the growing relevance of technology in productive terms and a context of widespread capitalist crisis since 2008 are the fundamental trends that explain the advent of the so-called “platform capitalism” (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). A platform is a digital infrastructure that connects users who exchange services, either virtual or physical, and aims to control the terms on which this exchange takes place, according to its own convenience. While there are many types of platforms, this paper is specifically concerned with delivery platforms. Through a smartphone app, these capitalist enterprises connect a worker providing a physical service, such as the delivery of some good (commonly performed by bicycle or motorbike), to a restaurant or shop offering that product and a customer willing to pay for it. The platform provides the virtual space in which the exchange takes place, charging the customer for the goods and giving the restaurant and rider an uneven share of that amount, earning a profit from the mediation. At this point, Jaime Woodcock (2021) reminds us of Marx’s³ assertion that “capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus value” (quoted in Woodcock, 2021, p. 32). On this basis, the British researcher argues that

“The platform is selling commodified food delivery, realizing value from the restaurant’s food [...] and extracting value from the production of the food delivery. [...] In the simplest terms, the platform extracts value from the delivery labour process by charging the customers more than they pay the workers” (Woodcock, 2021, p. 32).

Returning to the previous point, these companies use a “hyper-outsourced” contracting model, not recognizing any contractual link with the rider who, being legally framed as an “independent contractor” of the platform, does not enjoy any basic labour rights (paid holidays, medical and redundancy insurance, pension contributions, etc.). Moreover, these companies only pay per piece of work, being workers obliged to provide their own work tools (means of transport, mobile phone, internet connection, etc.) (Srnicek, 2017). In this vein, workers are coerced to try to earn as much money as possible during a working day, as the maintenance of the materials needed to work depends on them (Cant, 2020). With respect to its labour management model, this is automated using algorithms, that determine the tasks and the times in which they must be carried out, closely controlling the work process and eliminating the figure of the supervisor. However, because they do not hire their workers, who are allowed to choose certain days and times to provide their services, these companies promote the value of freedom, that is, the freedom to work “when you want to” and “without bosses” (Woodcock, 2021).

According to Callum Cant (2020), from the point of view of the workers, this conjunction of elements can result in a feeling of freedom “that is not entirely illusory”, precisely because of the absence of human supervision (p. 84). Moreover, this author highlights the fact that the barriers to enter these platforms are certainly low, since by having a means of transport and a mobile phone with an internet connection, it may be possible to earn a relatively “decent” profit in a fast manner (p. 135). Additionally, Cant stresses that rates per piece “force workers to either go faster or earn less”, and hence the labour process becomes, on a delivery platform, “increasingly sped up” (pp. 51-52). In this sense, the author points out that the feeling of acceleration results in a “combination of adrenaline, speed [and] skill”, which is “sometimes intoxicating” for riders; however, “once you start to get cold, tired and bored, that intoxicating element of the job dies away” (p. 86). While from this approach we can see a link between freedom, fast money, acceleration and boredom, it should be noted that these elements are not central to Cant’s problematization and are only briefly mentioned. Instead, the author is deeply concerned with the problem of the automation of control through algorithms, as well as with the embryonic and promising trade union struggle initiated by British riders in 2016, a concern that Woodcock (2021) visibly shares. For my part, seeing the problem of freedom, affects and feelings as salient subjective qualities of this novel and widespread type of labour, I argue that there is space for a critical intervention that examines them in depth, and my hypothesis is that Simmel’s work can be useful in filling this gap.⁴

2. Delivery platforms in the City of Buenos Aires

Several delivery platforms (the most important ones being the Colombian Rappi and the Uruguayan-German Pedidos Ya) disembarked in Argentina in 2018, in the context of an administration with clear neoliberal economic orientation. In particular, the “flexibilization of foreign payment systems” provided by the national government that same year allowed for an agile functioning of financial operations, which resulted in the establishment of those platforms at relatively low costs (Madariaga *et al.*, 2019, p. 21). In more general terms, it should be noted that Argentina currently has high unemployment rates (reaching almost 10% of the total population), and it is young people who suffer from this situation the most – and who will most look to the platforms as a way out in the labour market (Del Bono, 2019). Moreover, also since 2018, the country has received many Venezuelan immigrants who, in need of rapidly finding a job, have formed the initial base of delivery platform workers, particularly in the city of Buenos Aires (Madariaga *et al.*, 2019).

3. This quote belongs to *Capital: A critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1.

4. The connection between time and money, the loss of vocational ideals in the capitalist labour sphere and the alienation to which it leads also occupy an important place in certain works of Karl Marx and Max Weber. However, for reasons of space, I will not be able to reconstruct them here. In addition, my choice to show how they appear in Simmel’s work is because the author presents them in an interrelated way with the other central categories recovered in this paper, giving us certain theoretical systematicity that could be lost when incorporating the proposal of those classical sociologists.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

A first demographic approximation claims that, in 2018, more than ten thousand people worked for delivery platforms operating in that city (Madariaga *et al.*, 2019). However, an even more recent quantitative study, signed by Julieta Haidar (2020), maintains that this number may have considerably grown during 2020. This research describes the general characteristics of the population that is currently working on those platforms: more than 85% are male; half of the workers are Venezuelan, 40% are Argentinean, and the rest come from other countries. Out of the Venezuelan workers, 72% have attained a higher education level, while among Argentinians this number drops to 34%. In general, and without distinction by nationality, age representation accounts for more than 65% of young people (under 30), while 35% are over 30 yet under 40 years old.

At this point, I would like to recover another finding presented in Haidar's study, which goes beyond these demographics. In the survey to 401 workers, an open-ended question required them to freely indicate what the positive elements of the job were: 74% of them mentioned certain "autonomy and flexibility in the organization of the workday" (p. 62), while 44% highlighted the "autonomy of the job in general (mentions refer to 'being your own boss')" (p. 64). In addition, one third of the riders responded that "the positive thing is to be able to access this job immediately, with almost no requirements", while 30% valued "the amount of income earned and/or the income/job ratio" (p. 64). According to the study, there are no significant differences in these responses as per cut-off variables (nationality, age, gender and educational level). Furthermore, the research asserts that the income obtained by the workers is between 10% and 30% higher than what can be obtained in other easily accessible jobs as in the case of waiters, telephone operators in call centers, supermarket cashiers, etc.

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that there is a strong valuation of freedom schemes among the workers of the City of Buenos Aires, while at the same time, there is a strong inclination to positively assess the possibility of rapidly earning an income and to consider that income as convenient. Indeed, some of the tendencies highlighted in the previous section crystallize consistently in the present one: it will then be our task to illuminate them qualitatively and, in a certain sense, to show their adverse subjective effects.

3. Simmel: the configuration of modern working-class subjectivity

According to Olli Pyyhtinen (2016, p. 115), the Simmelian sociological approach aims to "dissolve all things into reciprocal effects and processes". Any social entity it deals with will be dissolved into the minimal contents that, in mutual exchange, make it up: "empirically, any unit is [for Simmel] nothing but the reciprocal effects of its elements" (p. 115). This proposal is found in *On Social Differentiation*, where Simmel (2017, p. 46) argues that sociology can deal with certain objects, such as "individuals or groups acting as units" but noting that their unitary character is apparent. Rather, they are composed of smaller parts that maintain countless, multiple and changing relations with each other: in Simmel's words, any entity is the product of the "exchanges of effects" (*Wechselwirkung*) (p. 43)

that take place between its components, and sociology's task is to dissolve these units to observe them. Strictly speaking, although the Simmelian view has "the individual" as its "smallest unit of analysis", it does not observe the individual as the "elementary basis of (social) reality", but as a synthesis of historical and contextual "qualities, fates, forces and consequences" that shape such person (Pyyhtinen, 2016, p. 113). Therefore, this approach turns to individuals, their activities, relationships and representations, to observe the social contents that determine the mode of their existence. This is what this article is about: approaching delivery platform workers and, together with them, giving an account of their work experience, dissolving its fundamental contents and observing the way they are affected by them. As previously mentioned, the theory that guides my empirical analysis consists of fragments of Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*, which will be reconstructed in what follows.

In principle, Lionel Lewkow (2019) finds a parallel between the concept of "exchange of effects", and the Berliner's use of the category of "exchange" (*Tausch*) in the treatise on monetary economy. On this basis, Simmel (2004, p. 81) considers that "it is of great importance to reduce the economic process to what really happens in the mind of each economic subject". In my opinion, the sociology classic proposes here to dissolve economic relations by searching for the simplest elements which, in mutual exchange, make them up. The author invites us to make this attempt by understanding the whole "economic life as an exchange of effects [*Wechselwirkung*] in the specific sense of an exchange of sacrifices" (p. 80. Translation modified).

In Simmel's eyes, exchange can involve both goods and labour: on the one hand, when we give one good in exchange for another, we sacrifice the possibilities of using it from then on; on the other hand, working implies sacrificing energies that could be used for different activities. In this framework, the Berliner intends to observe certain specific subjective contents that make up the capitalist economy, where most exchanges are carried out for money.

In general terms, Simmel argues that money represents a "functional progress" (p. 290) of culture since it is the object that provides the most objective parameter possible for an exchange of sacrifices. However, in terms of labour, the wage form promotes individual bonds also determined by certain "objectivity": the worker is only interested in the means of labour and the wage provided by the capitalist, and the capitalist is only interested in the worker performing the productive tasks necessary to obtain a profit; "what kind of people they are in other respects plays no role here" (p. 296). In this framework, Simmel argues that the advanced monetary economy represents "the most favourable situation for bringing about inner independence, the feeling of individual being-for-itself" (*Fürsichsein*) of both subjects of the economic relation (p. 299. Translation modified). According to Esteban Vernik (2017), it is money that enables certain individual freedom for workers: the freedom to sell their own labour power in exchange for monetary gain, no matter to whom and for what purpose they sell it, and no matter who they are selling it to, since not only do they need money all the time, but also it can be "anyone" who provides it in exchange for labour. At this point, a question arises: in the context of novel platforms, where workers are "hired" not by an individual but by a mobile application, and where they are monitored by a digital algorithm, will they experience more freedom than working under human supervision?

<https://digthum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

The Simmelian view of this liberation of the worker is paradoxical. On the one hand, monetary compensations result in a “benefit” for the worker, since he or she “gains liberty and dignity” as an individual personality (Simmel, 2004, p. 397). On the other hand, contractual relations depersonalize the duties of that worker, since any individual is also capable of performing them, so that the worker’s personality does not influence the employment relationship, i.e., does not imply any “personal importance” in it (p. 398). Briefly, the worker gains freedom but loses personal relevance with respect to the other party in the labour relation. On this point, Hans-Peter Müller, Alessandro Cavalli and Alessandro Ferrara (2018, p. 22) argue that, although money entails a “growth in ‘freedom chances’”, it “exemplifies only a *negative* freedom”, a “*freedom from*” personal impositions in the labour sphere. “But what about *positive* freedom, i.e., a *freedom to* a sovereign conduct of life?” (p. 22). According to Simmel (2004, p. 406), this possibility tends to be blocked because money is marked by indeterminacy and “internal lack of orientation”: it contains no unilateral directives as to what to do with it, what to spend it on, whether to save it, invest it, lend it and so on. In line with the above, this situation allows the author to argue that the freedom of the modern worker is a “potential, formal and negative freedom” (p. 406), lacking stable vital meanings that can result in a sovereign conduct of life.

Simmel draws a significant consequence from this proposal. In his theory, we read that the person who is liberated by money, who is now “truly ‘free’”, “often experiences that typical boredom, lack of purpose in life and inner restlessness” regarding themselves and the surrounding world (p. 477). In other words, monetary liberation tends to leave people bored: they no longer know what to do now that they are “free”, and are inclined to see themselves, their activities and their surroundings as meaningless. This negative personal effect of the capitalist economy is also pointed out by Kevin Aho (2007, p. 451), who postulates that it can derive “in a life that is based not on personal and emotional connections to the social world but on instrumental logical operations”. According to this author, “the consequence of this type of calculative individualization is, for Simmel, boredom, a disengaged indifference to our everyday choices and commitments” (p. 451). To understand how this modern tendency also illuminates some affective sufferings to which certain platform workers are subjected, I consider it necessary to pay attention to another essential trend of the capitalist labour sphere, as theorized by Simmel, and which is being recovered contemporarily.

The underlying problem is the lack of vocation. In a recent article, Vernik (2019, p. 3) derives from *Philosophy of Money* a striking contemporary subjective type: “Those who work only for money”, i.e., subjects who work with the sole aim of making a financial profit, without having positive affective ties to the activity they carry out. Analyzing the modern economic sphere, Simmel (2004, p. 236) observes that money – the means *par excellence* – tends to take on the character of “ultimate end” for a multiplicity of individuals. According to the Berliner, the fact that money serves to achieve the different and numerous practical ends that people set for themselves in their everyday life prompts consciousness to elevate it to the status of an ultimate end. That is to say, the fact that money is used for (almost) everything has the effect that it is desired above all else. The manifestation of this misrepresentation of means and ends is again expressed in the capitalist professional sphere. Simmel argues

that in modern societies this is the rationale behind the proliferation of “professions [*Berufen*] [...] which do not have any objective form and decisiveness of activity” (p. 437. Translation modified). Thus, in these professions,

“Economic life, the web of their teleological series, has no definite content for them except making money. [...] These [are] ‘professions’ [...] that lack the ‘professional existence’, that is the fixed ideal line between the person and a vital content [*Lebensinhalt*]” (p. 437. Translation modified).

It is a question, then, of a growing commodification of work motives that cancels out the emergence of vocational contents in relation to work itself. This lack of vocation is accentuated in the representations of the platform workers interviewed here: since they are individuals with ample material needs and whose career path sees them inserted in networks of precarious work (Haidar, 2020), it is understandable that they tend to prioritize better-paid occupations, to the detriment of the type of activity they must carry out. Now that we postulate that monetary gain is the main motive of riders, and bearing in mind that platforms pay by piece and not by working hours, let us return to the question of boredom: how will workers relate with themselves during their free time? Will they see it as a time to enjoy the freedom they get from the labour market, or as a time in which they could be working and earning money? Is there a link between boredom and a fast pace of work?

According to Aho (2007) and Hartmut Rosa (2016), Simmel attempted to characterize how monetary circulation affects the modern worker’s pace of life: working in the context of a culture that has “outgrown time”, in which natural constraints on production tend to be replaced by social constraints, leaving the worker in a situation promoting greater freedom to choose when to work, given that modern companies, factories and markets have an irregular functioning, free from that typical “forced [productive] scheme” of the traditional economy (Simmel, 2004, p. 493). In this framework, the modern worker has a “spontaneous individualistic” (p. 498) rhythm of work: a greater tendency to work to only “depend upon [...] the relation between the will and our ability and upon the purely objective conditions” of doing so (p. 493). It is under this scheme that we will identify the freedom of working hours that riders enjoy since they tend to be able to choose their work shifts. Moreover, in Simmel’s diagnosis of modernity, we find that there is a tendency for the time-money-freedom conjunction to lead to a pattern of “acceleration in the pace of life” of the modern individual (p. 506).

This approach has recently been recovered by Rosa (2016). This author, precisely based on *Philosophy of Money*, argues that the labour tempo of contemporary societies is increasingly accelerated. According to the author, the late-modern individual is under “the desire or the need to do more things in less time”, with monetary gain being a fundamental driver of this vital acceleration (p. 30). Interestingly, Rosa draws a subjective consequence from this scheme: when subjects are in constant and accelerated activity, they tend to represent the passing of time as very fast; but when they stop being active, the passing of hours “seems to miraculously stretch”, prompting subjects to experience certain “boredom” (p. 167). In this framework, when we analyze the temporality of work on a delivery platform, we will compare the relationship between moments of speed (delivering orders continuously) and standing

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

still (waiting for notifications of new orders), and we will observe that workers, in Rosa's terms, "experience a dramatic change in their perception of time: they fall from a dynamic, or frenetic, time to a quagmire in which time seems not to pass, but to stand still" (p. 122). It is within this framework that we will observe the relationship between two manifestations of boredom: during the work day and during leisure time.

4. Empirical analysis

As I have already mentioned, the Simmelian sociological approach takes the individual as its unit of analysis, but in the knowledge that the individual is only a consequence of a series of social qualities, causes and consequences that, in exchange of effects, shape him or her. Let us begin by observing that the social relations between riders are an instance of subjective configuration for them. From my fieldwork, I argue that delivery platform workers tend to relate to each other in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, physically, when they gather in squares or outside restaurants, they are easily identifiable by their colorful backpacks. On the other hand, workers interact with each other virtually: they form chat groups on WhatsApp where they exchange multiple types of messages. The most remarkable thing about these groups is that they share information about how the platform works, where to find an open mechanic in a certain place, and they pass on warnings about precautions to take during work, among others. Riders tend to build companionship relationships, even forming friendly groups of a few (3 or 4) or many people (up to 20), of which the majority of those interviewed in this paper are part.

For the analysis of their representations of work-related life experiences, let us return to some questions that emerged from our reading of *Philosophy of Money*. There, we asked about the feelings of freedom that derive from a profoundly "objective" labour relationship, where workers no longer provide services to a person, but to a platform that digitally supervises them and allows them to plan their working hours with a certain autonomy. These feelings can be observed through some extracts from interviews with Venezuelan workers from Rappi.

Javier, 29 years old, has been working delivering by motorbike for the platform for over a year. He says he experiences certain freedom at work, and explains that feeling in this way:

"What happens is that at Rappi, as I told you, you are not obliged to work a certain shift. You work whatever hours you want, and whether you make money is your problem. If you want to work for an hour, well, you're going to make what you generate in an hour of work. But here you don't have a boss, your boss is the application, one could say, but not a boss who continuously messes up your life".

Octavio, 20 years old, has been working for the same platform for 6 months at the time of the interview, making deliveries by bicycle. Regarding the topic of freedom at work, he said the following:

"It's a free job because, well, in this application you decide at what time you want to log in so that they start calling you for orders. And well, that would represent some freedom. If you

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

decide at what time you want to work and at what time you don't, that's freedom enough".

According to Javier, the platform provides a feeling of freedom as it lacks a supervisor who "messes up your life". Moreover, this freedom is connected to the possibility of choosing when to work and earn income. Since workers do not have a fixed schedule or a fixed salary, the choice for them is between working and earning money, or not working and not earning money; as Octavio states: "You decide whether you do it or not". Thus, we see how freedom appears in this work: the "objective" freedom to work for a platform is also a temporal freedom, in which the worker can (only) decide when to work to earn money.

Kevin is Dominican, he is 29 years old and has been living in Buenos Aires since he was 5. He has been working for Pedidos Ya by motorbike for a year and 3 months. His case is interesting because he makes a comparison between his work as a rider and his previous job as a waiter:

"Delivering pizza is something that anyone can do. This one is not a job that is fruitful, that lets you acquire knowledge, so that you say 'wow! that's one hell of a knowledge base!'. I mean, if you are working as a waiter in a place where Portuguese people attend, you will be learning a language, in that case 'wow! it leaves you something'; even if you are a waiter, you get something good, something productive. Here you don't learn anything, you learn the street, you don't learn anything".

However, as "the pay is good, it's quick and easy money", Kevin keeps his job as a rider; disregarding, in my opinion, the intrinsic characteristics of his jobs when it comes to choosing one of them. In this sense, he lacks a vocation for his work, and it is financial gain that prevails in his choice. At this point, where we see that workers enjoy the freedom to choose when to earn money, and monetary gain being the main motivation for their work activities, I consider it appropriate to return to another question posed in the previous section. Indeed, here we want to know how workers experience their free time: do they manage to enjoy it, or does their "freedom" lead to a certain boredom, marked by the feeling of losing money if they are not working?

To begin to respond, let us take an excerpt from an interview with Sebastian (Venezuelan, 23 years old, who has been working for Rappi by bicycle for 7 months): "If I don't go out at midday, I am at home feeling I want to work. When I don't have orders, I feel I am wasting my time, that I could be doing or producing something, and this is a burden for me". Secondly, let us look at the answer by Federico (Argentinean, 33 years old, who works by motorbike at Pedidos Ya) when asked if he gets bored when he stays at home and does not go out to work:

"Yes, of course! It's just that being locked up in there doesn't make sense to me, because I'd rather go out and make money than be locked up doing nothing at my house: you get home, you lie down to watch TV, you've wasted 5 hours watching a series, when in 5 hours you could've earned 2 thousand pesos. I'd rather go out and work than do nothing at home".

Samuel is Argentinian, he is 26 years old, and makes deliveries by motorbike for Rappi. He is on the same wavelength:

"I work every day because I get bored at home, and I prefer to go out to deliver because otherwise, time doesn't go by. For

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

example, today is the day I should have taken a break and I went out in the morning, and I went out now, and that's it. Having money and working every day is good, the day goes by faster. Imagine, being at home the day doesn't go by, and now that I go out it goes by faster".

As for Sebastian and Federico, the possibilities of earning an income and not being bored at home seem to be, however, the only contents that Samuel values. What's more, he refers to his work in this way: "This is at least a salary. This is like getting up one day and having nothing to do but still having a salary, that's what it is". In these brief but forceful sentences, it is also possible to observe a relation of lack of vocation towards the type of work activity carried out, totally overshadowed by the possibility of obtaining financial gain, which, nonetheless, becomes an increasingly pressing duty that cancels out the ability to enjoy free time or, more precisely, to see it as a waste of time and meaning. As a result, I argue that the lack of vocation and boredom shape, in exchange for effects, the subjectivity of these workers. In what follows, I will show how acceleration is part of this configuration.

While interviewing Kevin, I asked him if the work was "fast-paced". This is what he said:

"You know what? It is. For example, there are people who work at their own pace. But here, for example, time is gold for us, time is money, because wasting time in a shop, or waiting for a customer to come down, or wasting time waiting for a barrier, are things that will reduce one's gain. And time is gold, let me say again. And we feel the need, for example, of not wasting time, of doing things quickly. You can see that there are many riders who cross at red lights, they cross where they don't have to cross, and this highlights the risk of the job".

Marcelo is Argentinian, he is 33 years old, and has been working by bicycle for Rappi for 8 months. I asked him the same question, "is there any acceleration in this job?", and he said:

"Yes, given it is piecework, obviously, if you want to earn more money and so on, you have to work faster, let's say, that is, in principle, because you don't get paid by the hour, you get paid per order, so you hurry up".

Maxi is also Argentinian, he is 27 years old, and has been delivering for Pedidos Ya by bicycle for a year. This worker also notes that there is a connection between payment-per-piece and acceleration: "I work in a hurry, to get more orders. In this job, the more orders you deliver the more you get paid".

In moments of haste, of speed, these workers experience time as very brief. Maxi says: "When there are a lot of orders, the day goes by very quickly. Three hours, one order after the other, is very fast". More succinctly, Marcelo affirms: "Yes, my friend, when you have work, the day goes by quickly". However, the situation of waiting is experienced as very slow, and boring: "Waiting is a drag. One hour seems like two hours. You're sitting there waiting for the order to come up, ah... yes, it's totally slow", Maxi says. "Suppose that you go to a bar, and maybe there are a lot of people, and you have to wait for half an hour, and if you don't know anyone, you die of boredom", says Marcelo. As previously analyzed, the feeling of acceleration derives into a subjective state in which one period of time

is experienced with the sign of speed, while another, with that of slowness, and this seems to be the feeling experienced by the workers we interviewed. In this sense, it was also noticed that boredom is an intrinsic affection of the work process in delivery platforms, which is closely linked with a more general boredom, which corrodes the personality even in leisure moments.

In brief, through the riders' representations, our Simmelian approach was able to observe how certain job characteristics shape, at least partially, its workers' subjectivity: the importance of money in granting a certain "objective" and temporary freedom was observed in exchange of effects not only with the lack of vocation, but also with the feeling of acceleration and the affection of boredom.

Concluding remarks

This article began by considering the importance of Simmel's work for a critical analysis of contemporary capitalism, especially to observe the subjective facet of certain novel labour processes that, while increasing the precariousness of employment, use the idea of freedom to attract its workforce. I then looked at the main structural and subjective characteristics of labour, as well as the trends that explain the surge of delivery platforms, the demographic composition of their workforce in the City of Buenos Aires and at some of these workers' representations of freedom and money. In this sense, Haidar's (2020) research shows how workers value these last two aspects positively, and through Cant's (2020) proposal we were able to see that they are in close contact with certain harmful effects for a rider's personality: acceleration and boredom. These were the elements that this article sought to explore in depth through an empirical analysis guided theoretically by some directives put forward by Simmel (2004). In conclusion, my paper aimed to contribute to sociological approaches to delivery platforms, highlighting that their workers, at least in Buenos Aires, experience a "negative freedom", increasingly limited by the possibility of earning money, which leads them to speed up when they work and to get bored when they do not. In more general terms, the paper sought to show how important Simmel's work can be for the analysis of today's labour sphere, threatened by no less than precariousness, algorithmic automation, deceptive promises of freedom and by jobs that promote no personal fulfillment.

Acknowledgments

The author extends his gratitude to Lionel Lewkow for his generous help in making this writing possible.

References

- AHO, K. (2007). "Simmel on Acceleration, Boredom, and Extreme Aesthetics". *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 447-462. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.2007.00345.x>
- ANTUNES, R. (2020). "¿Cuál es el futuro del trabajo en la era digital?". *Revista Observatorio Latinoamericano y Caribeño*, vol. 4, no. 1.

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

- BRÖCKLING, U. (2015). *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921283>
- CANT, C. (2020). *Riding for deliveroo. Resistance in the New Economy*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- DARDOT, P.; LAVAL, C. (2014). *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. New York, United States: Verso Books.
- DEL BONO, A. (2019). "Trabajadores de plataformas digitales: Condiciones laborales en plataformas de reparto a domicilio en Argentina". *Cuestiones de Sociología*, no. 21, e083. <https://doi.org/10.24215/23468904e083>
- HAIDAR, J. (2020). "La configuración del proceso de trabajo en las plataformas de reparto en la ciudad de Buenos Aires. Un abordaje multidimensional y multi-método". *Informes de Coyuntura*, no. 11. Gino Germani Research Institute.
- HARRINGTON, A.; KEMPLE, T. (2013). "Introduction: Georg Simmel's 'Sociological Metaphysics': Money, Sociality and Precarious Life." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 29, no. 7-8, pp. 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412459087>
- LEWKOW, L. (2019). "Efectos kantianos: interpretaciones del idealismo trascendental en la teoría económica de Georg Simmel". *Diferencias Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 16-28.
- MÁRQUEZ, F. (2012). "La ciudad. De fronteras, movimiento y extranjeros". In: Francisca Márquez (ed.). *Ciudades de Georg Simmel*. Santiago Chile, Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado.
- MADARIAGA, J.; BUENADICHA, C.; MOLINA, E.; ERNST C. (2019). "Economía de plataformas y empleo ¿Cómo es trabajar para una app en Argentina?". Buenos Aires, Argentina: CIPPEC-BID - OIT. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0001712>
- MÜLLER, H.-P.; CAVALLI, A.; FERRARA, A. (2018). "How Is Individuality Possible? Georg Simmel's Philosophy and Sociology of Individualism". *Simmel Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 15-43. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051006ar>
- PATTON, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluations and research methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- PYYHTINEN, O. (2016). "The Real as Relation: Simmel as a Pioneer of Relational Sociology". In: Thomas Kemple and Olli Pyyhtinen (eds.). *The Anthem Companion to Georg Simmel*. New York, United States: Anthem Press.
- ROSA, H. (2016). *Alienación y aceleración. Hacia una teoría crítica de la temporalidad en la modernidad tardía*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Katz Editores. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvndv5zf>
- SABIDO RAMOS, O. (2020). "The Metropolis and the Nose Life. Sensory Memories, Odors and Emotions". *Simmel Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 63-89. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075567ar>
- SIMMEL, G. (2004). *Philosophy of Money*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203481134>
- SIMMEL, G. (2017). *Sobre la diferenciación social. Investigaciones sociológicas y psicológicas*. Barcelona, Spain: Gedisa.
- SRNICEK, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. London, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- STRECK, W. (2016). *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*. New York, United States: Verso Books.
- VERNIK, E. (2017). "Visiones de la libertad. Acerca de la cuestión central en Simmel". In: Esteban Vernik; Hernán Borisonik (eds.). *Georg Simmel, un siglo después: actualidad y perspectiva*. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina: University of Buenos Aires, Gino Germani Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.24201/es.2018v36n106.1486>
- VERNIK, E. (2019). "Los que trabajan sólo por dinero: Escenas del neoliberalismo" *Dissonancia: Critical Theory Magazine*, AOP (Advance Online Publication), pp. 1-23.
- WOODCOCK, J.; GRAHAM, M. (2019). *The Gig Economy. A Critical Introduction*. London, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- WOODCOCK, J. (2021). *The Fight Against Platform Capitalism: An Inquiry into the Global Struggles of the Gig Economy*. Westminster, United Kingdom: University of Westminster Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ktbdrm>

<https://digithum.uoc.edu>

The effects of work. A Simmelian view of delivery platforms

Juan Bautista Ballestrin

University of Buenos Aires

juanballestrin@outlook.com

Degree in Sociology (University of Buenos Aires - UBA), PhD candidate in Social Sciences (UBA), doctoral fellow of the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) of Argentina, based at the Gino Germani Research Institute, belonging to the School of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires. Assistant professor of *Georg Simmel: the Reification of Modern Society* and *The Idea of Nation*, seminars belonging to the Sociology course at the University of Buenos Aires. Member of research groups at the University of Buenos Aires in projects on Critical Theory of Society, Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory and Sociology of Work. His studies focus on labour issues in current societies, favoring qualitative enquiries that seek to reveal processes of working-class alienation, based on ethnographic research methodologies.

