Sorry, We Missed You -Unveiling the XXI st Century Proletarian Life

Fabien Tarrit, Florent Giordano

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Florent Giordano* and Fabien Tarrit

Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne, REGARDS EA6292, 51100 Reims, France

> Please Mister Postman, look and see
> Is there a letter, a letter for me
> I've been standin' here waitin' Mister Postman
> So patiently, for just a card, or just a letter
> Sayin' he's returnin' home to me
> *The Marvelettes* (1961)

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living (Marx, 1852, p. 23).

This paper was written in mid December 2019 while a return of massive strikes and struggles were going on in the world, including France. This moment is at the crossroads of two feelings: first, a revival of hope against the violence of capitalism supported by the state, and then, the fear of losing the possibility of getting a decent pension and some rest before the age of illness at the end of life. Precisely, yesterday, the government began to understand that the strike could disrupt one of the major moments of consumption in Western countries: Christmas. To avoid the party being spoiled, political leaders and major media blamed the strikers for threatening the possibility to celebrate. A TV report[1] even gave us some advice to get our gifts delivered before 24th December or request compensation for the 'trauma' of not being delivered.

In many ways, the rationality of this TV report puts us in the position of a consumer who buys goods on the internet without paying attention to the whole hidden distribution channel and its consequences on the people we see (do we?) only during the required time to sign and get our package. These Mr Nobody, all dressed in the same way, appear in front of our door in less than one minute and get back quickly in their van. Ken Loach's movie, *Sorry, We Missed You* (2019), tells the story of Ricky Turner – a deliveryman – and his wife Abby with their children, Sebastian (Seb) and Lisa Jane, in their workplace and their home. Thus, the film depicts not only the life at work with this hellish pace and the illusion of liberty of self-entrepreneurship but also the consequences of this kind of work on the private life. This constitutes a sort of answer to Le Goff (2017, p. 180) when he 'question[s], after all, what counts the most between delivery time and the smile that comes with this delivery'.[2]

The film takes place in Newcastle, a middle-sized former industrial city in Northern England. Mines and shipbuilding disappeared and gave way to mass unemployment – the rate of unemployment (7.4%) is twice as high as in average Britain (3.8%). What we can see in this film is a clash between an old and still strong working-class culture, on the one hand, and violent pro-capitalist policies against the exploited workers who try to keep their humanity and their dignity, on the other hand. Therefore, job insecurity is at the heart of this film, which tells the story of a former laborer who accepts a new job for a predatory delivery company. This is similar to the rest of Europe, at least in France, as Guédiguian shows it in *Gloria Mundus*.

Formal freedom but real submission

As soon as the opening scene, where the main character (Ricky) has a crucial interview with the manager (Gavin Maloney), we can feel his complex personality. We immediately face what seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, Ricky indisputably comes from a working-class background, since he used to be a wage earner, in a huge amount of blue-collar occupations. On the other hand, he shows quite an individualistic spirit, since he clearly claims that he wants orders from no one and since he denies socially organized solidarity in letting us know that he would be ashamed to receive unemployment

1. M6 news report (private channel): Monday 16th December 2019, Evening.

2. 'Questionner, finalement, ce qui compte le plus entre le délai de livraison du colis et le sourire qui accompagne cette livraison' (our own translation).

***Corresponding author:** Florent Giordano Email: florent.giordano@univ-reims.fr

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benefits. This paradox, which amounts to a contradiction between the illusion of being his own boss and the reality of being a worker, will stand as the guideline of the film. Ricky, opposed to the subordination related to wage-earning, applies for a job as a deliveryman under self-employment status. His manager clearly tells him that he is his own boss: 'You don't work for us; you work with us. You don't get a wage, you get feel'. Then, there is no labor contract but a commercial contract, as a balanced relation with no subordination. Ricky is full of dreams and is convinced that he has taken a crucial step for his own emancipation.

But 'as the man is free, we say, who exists for his own sake and not for another's' (Aristotle, 2016, p. 982b10-27). The labor conditions are worse than in traditional firms, since no norms apply (no minimum wage, no labor time, no staff representation, no severance pay, and no leaves) and workers must supply their own tools. All the costs are at Ricky's expense, and he is assigned very high profitability objectives. From the outset, he must buy a van (which is cheaper than leasing it to the company) and pay the insurance. The work amounts to some piecework wage, closer to the ideal-type case of capitalism: the worker is responsible for his own exploitation, no need of a supervisor. Longer incomes and longer days under voluntary subordination: such are capitalism's dreams. The workers are not allowed to take days off, unless they pay a £100 fine and lose more dignity when the manager explains that others' lives are more difficult than his. Ricky may be his own boss, but he is not allowed to work with his daughter. Such a paradox when it appeared at that time he spent with her was probably the happiest moment in the film – it seems that family is the only humanity left (far away from all other solidarities):

> The right of man to private property is, therefore, the right to enjoy one's property and to dispose of it at one's discretion (à son gré), without regard to other men, independently of society, the right of self-interest. This individual liberty and its application form the basis of civil society. It makes every man see in other men not the realization of his own freedom, but the barrier to it. (Marx, 1843, p. 63)

The time when workers had 8-h working days and fixed jobs looks so far, and this is an unavoidable outcome of unhindered capitalism with competition between private companies. Under Thatcher, the struggles were crushed, the most iconic being the 1984's miners' strike, which memory appears when Abby visits one of her 'clients'. Under Blair, the struggles were betrayed. Now the working class is disarmed, people can be fired at days' notice. The workers take all the risks. They are dehumanized, since there is a human relation neither between the boss and the workers nor between the deliveryman and the recipient. The workers are deprived of autonomy. 'Don't think and drive', the manager shouts: a sophisticated electronic box tells the deliveryman everything he needs to do (where, who, and when), scans, localizes, and plans. The problem is that this box generates a huge amount of stress that might lead to a further disconnection of the worker. We propose the assumption that the box is an unidentifiable incarnation of capitalism. All the breaks are excluded, including pee breaks, and Ricky finally understands why his old colleague advised him to keep an empty bottle. Even if the worker wants to do a good job, he cannot do it, since such a rationalization process becomes absurd. This box is similar to a torturer whipping the slaves to be more productive. This does mean that the technology is responsible for that; it depends on who owns it and who benefits from it. In the end, the worker is oppressed, and he cannot deliver everything on time. At some point, he admits that it is much more difficult than expected, and the dreams of independence, of social security, and of buying their own house are gradually fading away:

> Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx, 1848, p. 241)

Here is the class struggle, coming through the back door. The film shows the new working poor, as a neo-proletariat, those people who work all day and are not able to afford a living. While the emerging capitalism hid exploitation behind a labor contract, this capitalism hides it behind self-employment.

The manager also has his own objectives, he keeps the deliverymen under pressure, he refuses to give in to anything, and he pretends to get desperate, as if the world depends on it, in case of delayed delivery. He looks unpleasant, but he has himself a human face, since the film denounces less the individuals than the social structures. It is not a matter of individual morality, but of transformation of the work environment. Individuals are not naturally raptors, but capitalism, and the way it works is responsible for a huge amount of violence. These proletarians are hit by a multiple violence: the violence of his invisible employer, the violence of the people who attack them, the violence of the clients, and the violence of the manager who does not allow him to take care of his family, who calls him to ask money while he is at the hospital… Ricky has to wait 3 h to receive an X-ray after being attacked by a couple of young delinquents, probably lumpenproletarians, maybe his son in a couple of years. The bad quality of the public services is related to aggressive politics against public services. In the last 3 years, 5,500 people died on a bed while waiting at the hospital (Campbell, 2019). The humanity of a man and of his family is being degraded, and this is due to the supposedly new form of employment: independent labor, giving oppression the name of freedom!

Behind the fleeting deliveryman

A central feature of this new form of capitalism is that oppression at work is now expanding in private life. In concrete terms, home is no more, as Hollywood pretends, 'a place of heaven' where the separation between work and personal life is sharp (Dale & Burrell, 2008, p. 172). The family is overwhelmed by Ricky's job and Abby's zero hour contract: they manage (or at least they try to) their children's lives by phone telling them everything they need to do (where, what, and when). They get up silently to avoid waking them up in the morning and kiss them quickly before watching TV in the evening. In addition to this, Ricky cannot use the van he owns for the delivery as he wants because of the rules of the company he has a contract with (e.g., bringing his daughter with him during his round is forbidden in the franchise contract).

This huge place taken by work in their life also restricts social relations to the family. No friends are shown in the film, because Ricky and Abby do not have time for that. The exclusion of social network, due to their work conditions, shows the huge pressure preventing the possibility of another life. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) demonstrated in *New Spirit of Capitalism*, the 'little person' who has no network cannot project himself/herself in new activities and get new experiences that could be useful to maintain his employability. This contributes to the reproduction of class destiny that is in the heart of the movie:

> It is lived experience that produces ideology, not the other way around. Ideology is rooted in and expresses the activities out of which it emerges. As Althusser writes, citing Pascal, 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'. (Burawoy, 1979, p. 18)

Additionally, the experience of work also assigns the place in the society as Burawoy (1979) explains. Ricky and Abby physically feel their proletarian conditions. Their bodies are exhausted at the end of the day, and they cannot even have sex after work. They have just enough energy to watch some diversion shows until they fall asleep on their sofa before their daughter shuts down the TV and tells them to go to sleep:

> At the time, my father had already been working – at the lowest rung on the ladder – for quite a while. He hadn't even reached the age of fourteen (school ended in June, and he began working right away, and only turned fourteen three months later) when he found himself in the surroundings that would be his for the rest of his life, chasing the only horizon that was open to him: the factory. It was waiting for him; he was waiting for it. It was also waiting for his brothers and sisters, who would all follow in his footsteps. And it waited, and still waits, for those who were born and are born into families with the same social identity as his. Social determinism had a grip on him from the day he was born. There was no escape for him from that to which he had been promised by all the laws, all the mechanisms, of what there is no other word for than 'reproduction'. (Éribon, 2013, pp. 50–51)

Even if the film is a little bit different from Éribon's life – Ricky and Abby push Seb, their elder child, to study for years – *Sorry, We Missed You* is a perfect illustration of the concept of class reproduction. Whereas the parents believe that education can help their children to escape from their class destiny, Seb, by his attitude and the model he sees in his father, cannot overcome the idea that its destiny is to become a proletarian. As a teenager, he is in revolt against his family and especially his father, and he pointed out very painfully the social position by his work and its humiliations. Seb's attitude – petty crime (larceny, brawl, and tag) – a symptom of his resignation for the (no) future, leads him ironically to reproduce his father's destiny despite his family warnings. Lisa-Jane, the youngest child (about 11), is not falling into delinquency but we saw despair in her expression and the care she tries to provide to her family is echoing her mother's job as a nurse for personal care. Thus, this family is not free from gender division of family work, which is also shown by the fact that Abby has to sacrifice her personal car she uses to do her job and to take the bus to let Ricky take a loan to buy the van for his delivery job.

New resistance?

At the end of the movie – and the final scene is incredibly tragic – it seems that hope has deserted Ricky's and Abby's family (and Ken Loach films). In spite of everything, the totalitarian dream of logistics is not yet a reality. Even if Ricky is led by a GPS at every moment of his workday, even if his manager is sending him packing with (faint?) compassion, Loach could not stop himself from filming how life prevents the dehumanizing *dispositif* that could eventually transform every deliveryman in robot (before the arrival of the drone?). When Ricky quarrels with a soccer supporter, when Abby is helped by a woman she has to take care of, when a guy is giving Ricky his hand to load packages into his van… people are deeply reluctant to accept this dehumanization process and, even subtly, manifest their micro-resistance.

Nevertheless, there is no real struggle, no union, and no disagreeing character against the methods imposed by this delivery company. Ricky goes working, while he was aggressed the day before and needs serious medical care, while his wife and son tried unsuccessfully to prevent him from doing it. Yet, the working class is collectively unfree to avoid exploitation, and there only can be individual freedom if the others do not exert it. Getting real freedom would mean deleting the obligation for laborers to work for a capitalist. This amounts to prohibiting the private ownership of the

means of production. The film assumes that the social world offers few perspectives on that issue.

Yet, there are rays of hope in the economy of Uberization: in March and May 2019 in the United States, a strike succeeded to force Uber and Lyft, two major private companies of transport, to back from their new pricing system. In France, several unions of private drivers have appeared since 2015. Why are these forms of resistance not in the movie? Ken Loach (2019) argued that 'it was stronger to maintain the point of view only on the family because a union would be interpreted as the director's idea', and he just wanted not to influence the audience. As spectators, we could say that the end is a little bit overpessimistic, as struggle still goes on around the world and leaves wide open the opportunity to have better lives.

Finally, the issue of 'unveiling' used in the title aims to challenge ourselves as (tenured) researchers: Patinaud (2020) reminded that invisibility is a matter of perspective. As members of a scientific community, we contribute to this process mainly with the choice of our research field and, therefore, with the light and shadow we decide to shed on specific social phenomena. Thus, it is probably the case that we should not derive satisfaction in this 'unveiling'. In fact, we may have to ask ourselves why this work situation was mainly unknown to Human Resources and Economics specialists as many of our students have experienced such a situation.

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