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From GAFAM to RUM: Platforms and resourcefulness in the Global South

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The GAFAM [an acronym for the five largest tech companies: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft] are often considered the undisputed actors of the world digital economy. However, through three situated ethnographic studies, we focus on the RUM (Rappi, Uber, and Microworkers) to analyze the online uses of couriers in Mexico, drivers in Argentina, and click workers in Venezuela. While in high-income countries digital workers benefit from the stability and social protection of formal employment, in the Latin American context, it is by exploiting the informal system and reactivating “colonialist” relations that digital workers manage to extract value. The implementation of methods of resourcefulness and active solidarity shows that the informal sphere is a space of struggle where experiences of emancipation emerge that could also inspire social struggles in the North.

By examining the countries of the South, we aim for a twofold shift away from how digital platforms are seen as inherently Western phenomena and are viewed from a perspective dominated by academic research conducted in the North. The two objectives of this paper are therefore to build on other authors work to de-Westernize practices and continue their efforts to “de-Northernize” analytical frameworks.¹ These platforms play a dual role here: on the one hand, they reinforce forms of domination stemming from old forms of “coloniality,” and on the other, they allow access to the informal social relations shaped by digital tools.

Our analysis will take us to three Spanish-speaking Latin American countries—Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela—to show the extent to which *informality, particularly in labor, is an integral part of platform capitalism*. The daily life of express couriers in Mexico on the Rappi application, drivers in Buenos Aires using Uber, and “click workers” in Venezuela on the Microworkers platform denotes an “informal sphere” where practices of digital resourcefulness abound.

Beyond the attitudes that consider users in the South exclusively as the passive objects of decisions made in the technological hubs of Silicon Valley, striving to see the legitimacy of these practices, as well as the conceptual categories developed within the Latin American social sciences to understand them, also means acknowledging these worlds of work that help us to see our own realities in a different light.

Coloniality and disembedding

The three platforms designated by the acronym RUM—Rappi, Uber, and Microworkers—serve as tools for tackling two academic challenges that studies on platform capitalism have been structured around since the late 2010s: the debate around *digital coloniality* and the issue of *social disembedding* caused by platforms. The object that will allow us to remove these two hurdles is that of *labor*, especially in its platformed version.

When speaking of platforms in the South, it is important to highlight the difference between *colonization* and *coloniality*. The former carries extraordinarily powerful significance but is also at times misused. When references to the colonial experience become a carry-all term for all forms of dependence, they cease to designate a historically situated fact and instead become a simple metaphor, or even a cliché. Does the use of a platform automatically entail the “colonization” of its users, whatever their situation? Is the same rationale at play when we analyze the experience of an American influencer on Instagram or of a “click-farmer”² carrying out their activities from a cybercafe in Jakarta? What meaning do these individuals, who participate in economic exploitation, attribute to that misappropriation of their data and thinking time?

¹ Payal Arora, *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Mohammad Amir Anwar and Mark Graham, *The Digital Continent: Placing Africa in Planetary Networks of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² A low-paid worker recruited to click on links or share content on social media in order to fake virality.

Reflecting on the role of digital platforms has led to a preference for the notion of coloniality.³ Developed in the context of the Latin American social sciences, particularly in the work of Aníbal Quijano,⁴ this notion denotes the ways in which colonial power engenders the creation of subjectivity. Alongside economic and political dependence comes the cultural grip over the identities and life trajectories of colonial subjects. The “subjectivity of power” that forms the very identity of people is linked with how users of digital platforms regard themselves as “data subjects.”⁵

It is legitimate to ask whether GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) platforms colonize human communities as long as we establish where we are talking about (a country in the Global South or North?), as well as the goal of the speaker (a subaltern subject who wishes to shake off the shackles of their dependence, or a hegemonic subject aiming to compete with other hegemonic subjects?).

The other prevalent theme in studies on digital platforms is the social *disembedding* of technologies. Labor-based platforms especially are considered to be online services whose effects on friendship, family, and neighborhood networks are often harmful: their arrival is said to be marked by the replacement of interpersonal links with commercial ones. This is when the issue of *informality* comes to the forefront and becomes an explanatory factor for the platform economy. Focusing on Venezuelan click workers, Julian Posada puts forward the concept of “embedded reproduction.”⁶ In order to be able to provide their services, platforms outsource some of the actions necessary for their survival and reproduction to their workforce. A mixture of resources, feelings, and personal and professional attitudes are mobilized by workers in order to exist on these platforms. Their informal networks of contacts, which often rely on parallel economies and occasional exchanges, now become preconditions for formal exchanges. Informality plays an ambiguous role on these platforms as both a facilitator and a counterbalance to the economic formalization of digital businesses and the social disembedding they lead to.

The economics of resourcefulness

In the context of Latin America, informality manifests in a particular way. This region of the world has a web of labor markets that have been historically subject to high levels of exploitation, with generally a minority of people in salaried work and various different kinds of work coexisting. Nowadays, this heterogeneity is reflected in a vast informal sector that absorbs surplus labor.⁷ The precariousness, exclusion, and instability that are, in the countries

³ Antonio A. Casilli, “Digital Labor Studies Go Global: Toward a Digital Decolonial Turn,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3934–54.

⁴ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78.

⁵ Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, “Data Colonialism : Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject,” *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (2018): 336–49.

⁶ Julian Posada, “Embedded Reproduction in Platform Data Work,” *Information, Communication & Society* 25, no. 6 (2022): 816–34.

⁷ Julio César Neffa (ed.), *La informalidad, la precariedad laboral y el empleo no registrado en la provincia de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Ministry of Labor, 2008).

of the North, associated with all types of work that are removed from the industrial, Fordist, stable, and regulated ideal, give way in Latin America to a broad range of activities, which also involve a higher percentage of the economically active population. Following the health crisis that struck in 2020, according to the International Labour Organization, one in two people work in informal conditions in this region of the world.⁸

For Brazilian researcher Ludmila Abílio, this self-management of work does not escape subordination (to platforms, to one's clients, etc.) and echoes traditional forms of resourcefulness (*viração*).⁹ Without any stability or linearity in the construction of identities at work, platforms require workers to make their own daily arrangements for creating and making use of fleeting and temporary opportunities that involve various kinds of social relations and social networks. Resourcefulness is therefore an indispensable organizational talent for workers, so that their activities can be adapted to an economy marked by injustice, inequality, and uncertainty. However, for platforms, it serves above all as an opportunity for profit. As all individual efforts toward self-empowerment and self-management resemble self-employment, platforms can take advantage of this.

The generalized precarity of working-class sectors pushes Rappi deliverers, Uber drivers, and Microworkers click workers¹⁰ to mobilize economic and organizational resources that are comparable to calculated investments to be able to get by.

Projecting this same reasoning onto the national context of various labor markets in Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela allows for the detection of a formal center and an informal periphery. This informal periphery is integral to the creation of value in platform capitalism. The fact that it is so widespread in the countries of the South calls into question the categories developed in the countries of the North, as well as the hierarchies between different statuses. As we will see in the following case studies, this paper looks at three different countries with variable geographic contexts that include the megacities of the South as well as more modest hubs, such as those in Venezuela.¹¹

Rappi: Self-managed delivery work

The main activity of Rappi, whose name alludes to the word “*rápido*” (Spanish for “fast”), is the delivery of food. Operating in large cities in almost all the countries of Latin America, this Colombian platform assures couriers that they can be “their own boss” and promises

⁸ “Elevada informalidad es detonante de pobreza laboral en América Latina y el Caribe,” International Labour Organization, accessed December 6, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/americas/sala-de-prensa/WCMS_863384/lang-es/index.htm.

⁹ Ludmila Abílio, “Empreendedorismo, autogerenciamento ou *viração*? Uberização, o trabalhador just-in-time e o despotismo algorítmico na periferia,” *Contemporânea* 11, no. 3 (2021): 933–55.

¹⁰ Artificial intelligence is trained by “click workers,” who are paid per hour or per task by specialized platforms. They identify objects on photos, transcribe conversations, note down results from search engines, etc. In this way, they contribute to the production of algorithms and automatic solutions by improving databases. See: Antonio A. Casilli, *En attendant les robots. Enquête sur le travail du clic* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

¹¹ The data and the methods used in these three case studies are mainly characterized by an approach that is not so much comparative as multi-sited, with each case study examining a particular situation that offers specific insights.

consumers “deliveries with love within 35 minutes.” The Rappi logo, a white mustache on an orange background, appears on the boxes that couriers carry on their backs. The company was valued at a billion dollars in 2018.

Just like its competitors, Uber Eats and DiDi, the platform acts as a delivery partner by deducting commission fees from orders made to restaurants and paying couriers per journey. In this way, the platform can avoid engaging couriers in a formal employment relationship, which removes the obligation to pay them social security contributions or insure them. A management solution in the form of an algorithm allows demand for deliveries to be matched with offers of work. Couriers are formally free to log into the application whenever they want and to manage their time themselves, although the algorithm may penalize workers who are too “independent.” In any case, the platform retains control over the key aspects of the work, such as the rate of pay for the service and the possibility of accessing “challenges” (programs that offer the possibility of earning more), as well as the order of priority in which orders are distributed, which is also determined by a series of feedback provided by clients and restaurants.

The flexibility offered by Rappi allows workers to add delivery work to their résumé, not only as their main form of employment, but also as a “side job” to add to their main source of income, or otherwise as an intermittent job to cover periods of unemployment. According to a survey led by Laura Centeno Maya and her colleagues, 24 percent of Mexican couriers have a high school diploma, while 58 percent have an advanced level diploma or a technical diploma. These two groups earn an average weekly income of 1,202 pesos (57.5 euros) and 1,500 pesos (71.8 euros), respectively. This is well below the average salary in Mexico, which is 2,208 pesos (97.0 euros).¹²

Given the highly variable and low levels of income, Rappi workers in Mexico engage in what could be called “functional self-management” of their work time. Setting a daily goal is such common practice among couriers that in a 2021 update of its software, Rappi introduced the possibility to configure the application to include this goal. The application then displays a success rate, making the use of the platform follow a general trend toward the gamification of work.

The length of a courier’s working day and their pay are determined by a complex rewards system, as well as scores and goals suggested by the platform. Work strategies therefore vary in relation to these factors. During our participant observation in Mexico from 2019 to 2021 and our online research, the key variables upon which couriers based their calculations were: adequate pay, time spent logged in, and the range of hours and places of work to choose from. Responses to a Facebook post in February 2021 in which a user asked how much could be earned on average demonstrate a constant focus on pay. “I generally earn 200 pesos [9.6 euros] per day working roughly nine to fourteen hours, but there are some very bad days where I have to wait for an hour or two longer. There are also good days where two hours is

¹² Laura Centeno Maya et al., “Food Delivery Workers in Mexico City: A Gender Perspective on the Gig Economy,” *Gender & Development* 30, no. 3 (2022): 601–617.

enough to earn 200 pesos,” commented Rafael, with Emiliano adding: “It depends, my friend. It depends on many things. For example, on Sundays, I can earn up to 600 [28.8 euros] but sometimes it’s so bad that I can only make 50 [2.4 euros].”

The relationship between Rappi and Meta, one of the largest companies in the GAFAM group, isn’t only instrumental. Facebook and WhatsApp groups are actually spaces for socializing at work, acting as online “*bases de espera*,” public spaces where couriers gather as they wait for new orders.

In these “waiting areas,” friendships are formed, close bonds emerge, and experiences and advice are shared. The competition encouraged by the platform by measuring the economic output of different couriers can also have a stimulating effect on productivity. Some waiting areas are even set up in the physical space of the city by the couriers themselves to offer material support to other Rappi workers (for example, by providing multiple plugs for charging smartphones), and small informal businesses emerge within them selling paying services to couriers, as we observed in February 2019 in our field journal: “In Parque España [. . .], between an illuminated billboard and an electric vehicle charging point, we come across several cycle couriers. Someone has hijacked the billboard to siphon the electricity to charge phones. One man is running a stall selling chewing gum, cigarettes, and soda. There is also a makeshift workshop for small bike repairs.”

Socializing in the city’s public spaces and in online communications become intertwined. Couriers who choose to “wait at the base” together are also part of chat groups on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. It is through social media that workers share their advice on the best waiting spots, ask their peers for advice if they experience issues with the platform, seek material assistance in the event of an accident (a frequent occurrence) or of a delivery to a dangerous neighborhood. In the latter two cases, location-tracking capabilities of messaging applications allow couriers to share their location in real time. The whole online community can then intervene in the event of an accident or violence. Just as in waiting areas, in online groups there is a blurred line between personal relationships, political self-organization, and business opportunities. The bonds and interactions between individuals sometimes transform into forms of active solidarity.

Facebook groups function as flea markets where backpacks, waterproofs, and second-hand motorbikes and bicycles are sold. It is primarily Rappi accounts that are offered for sale or rent (at 200 to 400 pesos a week, equivalent to 9.6 to 19.2 euros.) There are various reasons why someone might purchase a Rappi account: some couriers get banned from the platform, while others seek out profiles with the best statistics to improve their earning prospects.

Although Rappi offers its couriers work that is in line with the reality of informal labor in Mexico, we are also seeing growing awareness of the risks and lack of social protection at work. For example, in social media groups the #NiUnRepartidorMenos hashtag (“Not One Courier Less”) has emerged, which over time has evolved from an expression of support and call for justice for express couriers in the event of accidents, or even death, into a political rallying point.

Uber: Informality as a tool of struggle

The ride-share company Uber, founded in 2009 in California, has quickly reached more than eighty countries around the world. Thanks to an application, users can book a vehicle to take a journey, generally at lower cost than with taxis and other ride-hailing services. These prices are nevertheless based on a “surge pricing” algorithm that calculates them on a just-in-time basis based on the number of customers logged into the application at a given time. Higher pricing clearly acts as an economic incentive for drivers, who are then more likely to accept a journey at any time of day and in any part of the city. Normally, drivers pay a commission fee of around 25 percent on every journey, which is deducted directly through the platform. Drivers are brought in as independent contractors: they must bear the costs for their vehicle as well as the risks associated with their work.

Ride-hailing platforms operate illegally in Buenos Aires. Since the arrival of Uber in April 2019, the City has declared the service to be in breach of the transport code. But the Californian company continues to portray itself as simply an “intermediary,” which therefore does not need to comply with regulations. This explains some of the peculiarities of the service. As our field journal explains, drivers prefer to seat customers in the front passenger seat to conceal their activity.

For the majority of its drivers, the platform represents their main source of income. Furthermore, the vehicle represents a significant investment. The fact that Uber is illegal in the city exposes the drivers to further risks: police checks as well as the provocation of taxis. During our study, which was conducted from 2019 to 2021, a driver confided that driving with Uber in the capital “is more like being a fugitive than a worker.” Drivers risk fines and even having their license or vehicle confiscated.

Given Uber’s situation in the Argentinian capital, informal channels and parallel markets to the official applications have also proliferated.¹³ The largest of them is without a doubt the trade of fake accounts (*cuentas truchas*)—namely, fake driver profiles. Workers buy them for several reasons: because their account has been blocked by Uber, to be able to sign up to the application if they are undocumented immigrants, or even simply to avoid paying commission fees to the platform. This parallel market is not only made up of small-scale forgery “artists,” but also large-scale organized crime structures.

These fake accounts are not the only services provided on social media. Illegal car rental and the forgery of identity documents and driving licenses are also very widespread. The illegality of these activities sometimes goes hand in hand with a subsistence economy. At the intersection of ride-hailing platforms and social media is a flourishing market for illegal data as well as the sharing of advice and helpful information. Some workers set up YouTube channels, such as “Escuela para Uber” (Uber School) and the very popular “Don Uberto,” which provide some real on-the-job learning. In Buenos Aires, as in Mexico, journeys in “risky” neighborhoods are also monitored through WhatsApp groups. These information channels are an indispensable resource for workers, especially due to the lack of official information through these platforms, which only offer courses on specific topics such as road safety and hygiene standards.

¹³ Jack Linchuan Qiu, Melissa Gregg, and Kate Crawford, “Circuits of Labour: A Labour Theory of the iPhone Era,” *Triple C* 12, no. 2 (2014): 564–81.

Drivers must also manage their own productivity, be familiar with the inner workings of the application, pay attention to their ratings, and so on. Being a flexible worker means above all knowing how to adapt to business needs and being one step ahead of the algorithm. Many Uber drivers engage in “multi-apping,” where they simultaneously use other platforms such as DiDi, Beat, and Cabify. Every driver develops their own tactics to maximize their income: some prefer to only work at night, “because there is less traffic and because Buenos Aires never sleeps”; others only serve airports, even though police checks are more frequent there; and most set themselves a daily income goal or a maximum number of driving hours per day, which usually ranges from eight to twelve hours.

Generally, it seems that drivers’ ability to deal with the uncertainties of their work forms the informal infrastructure that is essential for Uber in Buenos Aires. Sometimes, the tactics used respond to changes brought in by the platform. In the words of YouTuber “Gabifi,” recorded in August 2019, “you have to be resourceful [*ingenioso*]. There must be a plan B. [. . .] You must always be prepared to find another option, even if it’s buying a fake account to stay on the same app.” Uber can indeed freely dispose of this labor by arbitrarily deactivating accounts or even carrying out significant purges of its own fleet.

Consequently, those who decide to take on these risks are mainly the most marginalized groups in the labor market: the unemployed, migrants, young people, single mothers, and anyone who cannot find stability within the formal economy. Uber, in particular, has swiftly become the preferred market for migrant labor. The accessibility of the platform and the possibility to work on it while undocumented has drawn many Venezuelan nationals. They are exposed to exploitative arrangements among Uber workers themselves in the form of cases of digital “piece work”—or even “*caporalato*” (a form of forced labor, initially developed in the field of agriculture, which mainly involves undocumented foreign workers). Through an app extension called “Uber Fleets,” any driver can become a fleet owner and manage other drivers signed up to Uber, to whom they rent cars. However, some mini-fleet owners recruit workers who already have a car and offer them lower commission fees. If the owners do not in turn pay the commission billed by Uber, the Californian company ends up banning all of their drivers.

This widespread illegality also presents a repertoire of actions to undermine the platforms’ power. For example, as Uber is illegal in Buenos Aires, electronic payments are blocked, meaning that journeys must be paid for in cash. Through this, drivers have obtained powerful leverage in their negotiations with the platform: they can refuse to pay commission fees to the platforms for journeys paid for in cash if the platforms refuse to reduce the amount of commission they owe.

In a context of shared illegality, on the part of the platform as well as drivers, informality is a double-edged sword. It is not only a symptom of a labor market and state system that do not provide adequate social protection, but also a tool in the hands of workers to establish a sphere of struggle: faced with a platform that relies on their personal data, drivers counter with fake accounts; faced with exorbitant commission fees on earnings, they counter with a refusal to use electronically traceable transactions; faced with overly long working days and badly paid journeys, they counter with the use of multiple applications.

Microworkers: The feminization and re-embedding of click work

Microworkers is an international platform based in the United States, upon which workers carry out micro-tasks. These involve small online activities which can take from a few minutes to an hour: taking photos and videos for image banks, transcribing short audio extracts, or watching videos and leaving comments on YouTube. Generally, these activities help improve algorithms and artificial intelligence. Workers are paid per task via an online payment system such as PayPal.

Microworkers claims to have, as of the beginning of 2023, more than three million workers—although this kind of figure can be considered highly problematic.¹⁴ The platform is open to all countries, and especially since the health crisis related to COVID-19, it is heavily used in Latin America. Its communication with workers uses elements of language borrowed from formal employment, promising them “job opportunities.” On average, the tasks offered take less than ten minutes, although a significant portion of time spent by micro-workers on the platform (looking for adverts, training for tasks, and checking if they qualify to perform said tasks) is not paid. These users are generally aged between 18 and 34 and have higher education qualifications.¹⁵ Their profiles on the platform generally do not display their real name or details of their legal identity beyond their city and country of residence. However, their profiles do show statistics relating to the number of micro-tasks completed, as well as a rating for their completed work, ranging between one and five stars. Each micro-task is paid in US dollars, a reliable store of value for a country like Venezuela where the local currency can drop in value from one day to the next, with monthly salaries falling to as low as 100 bolivares (5.4 euros).

The platform works as a two-way marketplace putting businesses and freelancers in contact with each other. The former sign up online, create tasks (data annotation, answering surveys, moderating website content, etc.), and publish adverts containing a short description of the work offered, the payment for it, and the qualifications required (to be able to speak a certain language or use a particular kind of software, etc.). They pay commission for the advert and can recruit workers from any country.

Neither Microworkers nor the business users employ the workers. The platform’s general terms of use carefully avoid using terms that suggest employment, rights, or the subordination of workers, who are simply called “users.” The latter’s accounts can be deleted “for any or no reason, at any time in our [the platform’s] sole discretion, with or without notice.” Adding to this uncertainty is the risk of not being paid if an employer does not validate a completed task.

Unlike Rappi in Mexico or Uber in Argentina, which have been established in very localized urban contexts, Microworkers is widespread across all of Venezuela. However, just as with other platforms, Microworkers prompts workers to constantly manage their own productivity by adjusting the length and intensity of their work. Consequently, the ability to self-manage is

¹⁴ Paola Tubaro, Clément Le Ludec, and Antonio A. Casilli, “Counting ‘Micro-Workers’: Societal and Methodological Challenges around New Forms of Labour,” *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 14, no. 1 (2020): 67–82.

¹⁵ Paola Tubaro, “Learners in the Loop: Hidden Human Skills in Machine Intelligence,” *Sociologia del lavoro*, no. 163 (2022): 110–29.

often illusory. The very way the platform functions drives micro-workers to work long hours in order to make a profit in line with the cost of living in Venezuela. The supposed “freedom” clashes with the reality of a very busy schedule. These constraints on working hours are also due to the time difference between Venezuela and foreign clients.

Another characteristic of click workers in Venezuela is the strong presence of women on Microworkers (representing approximately 30 percent of users). Although this is a smaller proportion than in the United States or Europe, where women represent more than half of the labor for similar platforms, this presence is an element that simultaneously affects and is affected by their working conditions.

Given how well-equipped Venezuelan homes are, with the vast majority having computers—albeit often slow and outdated—carrying out micro-tasks means spending time at home: working on Microworkers ends up exacerbating the overlap between productive and domestic spaces for social reproduction. This brings about what could be called the “feminization” of the workforce, that is to say, the expansion of fields with characteristics traditionally associated with the precarious work of women.

Furthermore, the informality of work on these platforms has more adverse effects on women. For Paulina, for example, whom we encountered during a survey carried out between 2020 and 2021, working for Microworkers was a choice she was forced to make, because it is the only form of work that allows her to look after her child and earn money. However, the underlying problem is that workers’ rights—maternity leave, a day care space, etc.—are not guaranteed by the platform.

This domestic micro-work is also characterized by a degree of isolation. Microworkers do not have communal spaces such as the *bases de espera* used by Mexican couriers. For Venezuelan click workers, social media is just as essential, above all for training themselves to carry out tasks. Despite the competition on Microworkers for getting tasks with the best pay and the lowest refusal rate by advertisers, instant messaging applications, Facebook groups, and YouTube channels often form an infrastructure that re-embeds workers into networks of contacts and mutual assistance.

This is especially the case for the Facebook group “Microworkers Venezuela,” which was set up in 2019 and three years later has almost four thousand members. The members post self-made tutorials on how the platform works and how to carry out tasks. Micro-workers minimize their efforts this way by sharing tips, for example on what the correct answers are for filling out a form or what options to select to carry out a task more quickly. A browser extension has even been created for banned workers to sign up again. Cheating the platform is also a way of showing solidarity, which for some goes hand in hand with building deeper connections. The high level of social disembeddedness associated with micro-working is a direct consequence of domestic isolation and dependence on a remote platform that connects users with anonymous clients in foreign countries. In such conditions, it is difficult to find colleagues or peers. This is why several members of the Facebook group create further opportunities for exchanges by creating WhatsApp or Telegram groups. Thanks to this socialization via digital tools, workers create a space of re-embedding, which relies on seeking new social connections that are not guaranteed by this kind of work. This self-organization, in terms of how it equips workers to deal with the precariousness associated with their platform work, can also translate into a form of resistance.

“Incomplete disembedding” and the baroque economics of RUM platforms

We have reviewed three cases that, despite their differences, reveal striking similarities. They offer significant insights that allow us to revisit the two issues in the debate on online platforms and work: disembedding and digital colonialism.

Through the lens of the first issue, we see how platforms in the South bring about “incomplete disembedding.” Their socioeconomic structures place workers in an economy that is disembedded from their reciprocity networks (their families, their circle of friends, etc.) and their redistribution networks (their communities, national solidarity, etc.). On the other hand, in the examples we have studied, the use of work platforms (RUM platforms) is linked with that of other platforms (GAFAM platforms), which offer spaces for socializing and sharing. The emergence of this informal sphere and the social re-embedding it brings appear above all to be facilitated by Alphabet and Meta, which control YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook, all three of which were popular with the participants in our surveys. Digital platforms’ algorithm-based management and reduction of all human interaction to commercial transactions coexist with the sharing of information or the material or emotional support of online communities that are created by workers unprompted.

Within the three countries studied, we can see a division of use between RUM platforms, where participants find opportunities to earn money, and GAFAM platforms, which in this context seem to take on the simple role of socializing spaces. Although these platforms were described as having specific uses and advantages, their deep ambiguities should not be overlooked. Social media and instant messaging applications in particular set out an infrastructure that, while promoting re-embedding and informality, also end up facilitating the most harmful effects: some forms of inequality and labor exploitation are socially ingrained, and socializing networks on WhatsApp or Facebook groups perpetuate them. Examples of bargaining and piece work, exploitation of women’s reproductive activities, and the subaltern position of migrant workers in digital capitalism attest to the difficulty of distinguishing between the positive aspects of the informal economy and its dark side. The benign view that our interviewees conveyed of GAFAM platforms must therefore grapple with the hidden side of the informal economy that these platforms favor by making the necessary emotional, material, and informational resources available to pursue a form of work despite constant uncertainty and persistent vulnerability.

The second issue, that of digital coloniality, is not experienced in the same way in the countries of the North, successors of former colonial powers, as in those of the South, where there are still tangible consequences of old and new instances of colonization. In the North, the “Uberization” of the economy and the cultural influence of social media are perceived as unforeseen manifestations of the intrusiveness of foreign powers. In Latin America, however, these platforms adopt the preexisting structural conditions of informality and precariousness of work. They do not represent a complete break with the past, which seems to reactivate some ways of thinking associated with historical colonization. By linking itself to indigenous elements, platformization takes on a new dimension that is diverse and globalized and that plays on the issues relating to the North–South divide. This dimension has a name in the Latin American social sciences: baroque.

The notion of “baroque modernity” was developed in the mid-1990s by Bolívar Echeverría.¹⁶ It describes the social strategy of the historical construction of Latin America: the adaptation to the spirit of capitalism and the reconfiguration of identity to conform with the type of person required by modern capitalist life. According to the philosopher, this modernity is not a mimetic one (it does not refer to a colonized subject imitating the gestures and customs of the colonizers) but is instead influenced by theatrics, cheating (as we have seen with Venezuelan micro-workers), and fake identities (such as those on Uber in Argentina).

Hence, it is the concept of a “baroque economy” that Latin American philosophy advances.¹⁷ In the economic context of this global region, social actors attempt to bring together elements that seem to be irreconcilable: resistance without subversion and inclusion without adhering to the norms of hegemonic powers.

Saliently, the baroque economy is reflected in the entrepreneurship of users on work platforms. It involves a socioeconomic model based on the link between personal strategies of resourcefulness and the neoliberal narrative. In order to gain material advantage and be able to manage their own time, the “self-employed masses” become part of the informal economy of the working classes in Latin America as much as a part of the region’s identity, which is marked by coloniality and cultural mixing.

Finally, the main lesson to take from our case studies is an ethical and political one. The informal and blended use of platforms in the South does not indicate the surrender or abandonment of social struggles around work. On the contrary, these phenomena give rise to unprecedented modes of resistance—unprecedented, at least, for most countries in the North. While in Western societies, struggles around work are structured as organized collective mobilizations with explicit demands and tactics taken from a limited repertoire of actions—in short, like struggles around formal employment—the forms that disobedience, agency, and worker solidarity take on platforms in the South make them able to deal with the intermittent and unstable nature of their work while staying within the boundaries. Small-scale tactics emerge in the *bases de espera* for Rappi, “tricks” for not paying commission fees to Uber are used instead of any official campaign calling for them to be reduced, and tips shared in a Facebook group to reduce efforts on Microworkers replace collective bargaining to improve working conditions.

The overwhelming presence of global actors in the digital economy that citizens have to deal with highlights another phenomenon that is typical of Latin American countries, but that also threatens Western democracies: systematic reductions in the investment of the state in social welfare and protection systems, which in the age of digital platforms, emerge at the peak of neoliberalism. This context justifies the adoption of strategies of resourcefulness and “baroque” approaches to self-employment among the populations studied within the countries of the South. Yet it also indicates the generalization of this instability and the lack of safeguards in the countries of the North.

¹⁶ Bolívar Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco* (Mexico: Era, 1998).

¹⁷ Verónica Gago, *La razón neoliberal. Economías barrocas y pragmática popular* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2014).

By taking advantage of the informal economy, platforms perpetuate forms of work that are far from simple premodern vestiges, as they seem to incorporate the latest developments in platform capitalism. This is why we need to find a way to transfer modes of social struggle developed in a context where informality is prevalent and predominant (the countries of the South studied here) to a context of a long-running decline of salary-based society (in the countries of the North).