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Managing the Will: Managerial Normativity from the Wage Society to the Platform Age



Massimiliano Nicoli and Luca Paltrinieri

At different times in the history of industrial capitalism, the firm has replaced the State, or anticipated it, by constructing regulatory models which were then legally sanctioned by State legislation, or generalised within public policies concerning, for example, education systems. This is what Pollman and Barry (2016) call “regulatory entrepreneurship”. Alongside this legal normativity, management practices have always entailed a *psychological* normative production aiming to shape the workforce as a subject, also according to the political instances of current forms of State governmentality. Indeed, the very birth of modern management is to be conceived in relation to these practices of production of forms of subjectivity in the workplace (du Gay, 1996; Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2015; Rose, 1990).

The question to be asked in this chapter is: *how does managerial normativity change when firms become platforms in the digital turn of neoliberal capitalism?* Starting from the paradoxes and antinomies between subordination and autonomy of the individual will, traditionally characterising wage labour, we will first show how modern managerial discourse has produced the notion of “psychological contract” to regulate such antinomies. Thus, the psychological contract will be grasped as a supplement of normativity making workers not only consent to the legal subordination of the employment relationship, but also voluntarily choose to construct their subjectivity by commitment and job performance.

In particular, we will focus on the transformations of the psychological contract in the post-Fordist age and within the neoliberal governmental rationality centred on the notion of human capital. Our aim will be to highlight how, in this context of the crisis of wage labour and its legal forms, the psychological contract redefines

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itself as a “self-contract” in which individuals can voluntarily produce themselves as neoliberal subjects by practices of self-management and self-investment. In this sense, we will propose to inscribe the self-contract in the history of the “direction of conscience” or “government of souls” (Foucault, 2016), i.e. the practices of the social construction of the individual will by relations of direction, subordination, and even obedience.

Next, we will briefly describe the transformations of the firm and management in the platform age and the spread of the gig economy, showing how digital platforms deepen the transformation of labour into self-employment and outsource a large part of traditional managerial functions to the operations of algorithms. As we will see, this brings about a new change in managerial normativity that leads us back to our initial question. Finally, the answer to that question will be sought in the social dissemination of evaluation and assessing practices implied by algorithmic management, inside and outside business. That means that management, namely Human Resource Management, is redefined as an extractive *ecosystem* of evaluation involving a new form of externalised psychological self-contract through which individuals self-govern and self-control in order to maximise their self-appreciation. In this sense, the “becoming platform” of the firm in the framework of the gig economy and human capital-focused neoliberal governmentality participates in the construction of what we will define here as “Self-Worth Political Economy”. To conclude, we will consider this new form of political economy as an extension of the logic of financial valorisation to the scene of individual subjectivation that tends to replace wage with the possibility of self-investing and constituting oneself as a *subject of value* willing to assess and to be assessed.

1 Wage Labour and Its Paradoxes

As jurists have observed, notions like “employment contract” or “wage labour” imply a conflict between two laws: business law, which postulates the autonomy of the individual will, and labour law, which organises the submission of the will, or the “subordination” to an authority. The subordination within the employment contract thus incorporates an antinomy that Roman law had clearly seen refusing to admit that a free man can remain free when he places himself in the service of others (Supiot, 2017). This antinomy has repercussions on a series of aporias, or paradoxes, specific to the wage labour.

Firstly, the commodification of labour presupposes a neutral and symmetrical relationship between two contracting parties—the worker and the principal—who remain free in their choices and actions. The employment contract merely represents the formalisation of the worker’s consent to the use of their workforce by a third party. The principle of contractual freedom thus presupposes the autonomy of the will, as the only force creating obligations and rights in so-called “democratic” societies (Ranouil, 1980). According to this principle, the individual can only be obliged to those obligations to which he or she has voluntarily subscribed. However, by

this same contract of subordination, the workers renounce their own will and agree to be reduced to the rank of an instrument, so that the principal can make use of their workforce. Inequality is thus established by the very nature of the employment contract, which is placing the worker at the disposal of the principal without giving a more precise determination of the employee's obligations.

During the performance of the contract, the employer thus acquires a continuous right of direction over the employee's activity, while the latter is bound by a duty of obedience which, while not without limits, clearly marks his position as a "subordinate". If, in the civil contract, commitment implies freedom, in the labour contract submission denies it. Therefore, the employee is apprehended in the business enterprise as both subject and object of the contract (Supiot, 1994). In other words, consent to submission must be free: the worker chooses his own servitude. This also explains why slavery and serfdom have always been negative terms throughout the history of wage labour: while the slave was conceived as an instrument extending the master's body, wage labour appears as the captive instrument of the owners of the means of production. This instrumental nature of labour justifies the hierarchical and unequal relationship between the employer and the employee, who must obey the orders of the former as stipulated in the employment contract: *Pacta sunt servanda*.

There is also a second paradox: at the same time as it is commodified by an employment contract, labour is also removed from the market by a brand-new actor, the firm. The capitalist enterprise, which only appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, is usually presented as an intermediation surface between capital and labour allowing the abolition of transaction costs, more specifically the costs generated by research, negotiation, training, and management of the labour force (Coase, 1990). The internalisation of labour previously available on the market allows significant savings to be made by imposing vertical and hierarchical cooperation instead of the unorganised "spontaneity" of the market. But this collective activity based on vertical and horizontal cooperation requires workers to be permanently integrated, so that the workforce can be continuously trained and adapted to technological changes. Through the concept of "real subsumption" of the labour process by capital, Marx had already shown this submission of the worker and the whole society to capital by means of wage labour. By transforming social relations and labour processes, capital shapes workers' bodies and minds as adapted to the task: the worker becomes an instrument of the instrument, not only subjected to the will of the employer, but also to the machine (Durand, 2004; Marx, 1990). Thus, from the moralisation of workers in the nineteenth century to Taylorism, the history of wage labour is also that of the progressive adaptation of the workforce to the technological transformations that make it possible to obtain a competitive advantage in the market. In this aim, however, management had to be instituted as an alternative to political government, where the power of the rulers over the ruled was limited by a system of checks and balances (Anderson, 2019). The institution of management as a form of government which is free of any democratic control entails that the workers give up their citizen rights at the gates of the enterprise in order to gain access to economic independence (Trentin, 2014).

This last point leads us to the third paradox, which has to do with the place of employment in our societies since the “Fordist compromise” between capital and the State. The capitalist enterprise can be seen as an intermediary institution between the State and the family, establishing the ground of modern individualism: the economic independence of the worker allows him to emancipate from family, creating the conditions of political freedom exercised in the framework of modern democracies. In addition to the wage, the employment contract gives access to social status, social rights, and forms of protection and integration (Castel, 2003). By accepting the legitimacy of the legal subordination, Trade Unions tried, during the twentieth century, to enable workers to protect themselves and to establish a power relation with their employers, thus acquiring economic rights and social protection (Fehrer, 2018). It is indeed the link between work, citizenship, and freedom that makes it possible to radically distinguish the wage condition from slavery or serfdom. Consequently, the experience of the salaried worker was divided into two spheres: the one of work, where a relationship of servitude and obedience is continually renewed, and the one of personal relations and the private life, where the subjects experience “freedom” as the satisfaction of their needs. But if we look closely, economic independence only gives access to a sphere of consumption whose existence is still motivated by the growth of capital (Arendt, 1958).

2 Management and Psychological Normativity

The fundamental antinomy between wage subordination and individual will autonomy runs more or less explicitly through the history of management, which has organised the conditions in which workers can choose their own servitude. That is to say, the history of legal normativity concerning labour is complemented by the production of a “psychological” normativity targeting the worker’s subjectivity and in particular his or her will. We believe that the notion of “psychological contract” is the name of this supplementary normativity aiming to regulate the paradoxes of the wage condition.

In the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature, the notion of psychological contract refers to the set of expectations and promises, most often implicit, that exist in an employment relationship but cannot be formalised in a legal employment contract. According to Denise M. Rousseau’s “classic” definition, the psychological contract consists of individual beliefs, shaped by the organisation, concerning the terms of an agreement about what individuals and the organisation exchange (Rousseau, 1995). In psychology and HRM textbooks as well as in job search sites, one constantly finds the idea that positive and proactive management of the psychological contract can transform employees into artisans of the company’s success. It can animate work with real passion and create an integrated organisation in which everyone will row in the same direction, according to the old metaphor of the corporate boat. The psychological contract is in fact linked to the level of commitment and to the “inner disposition” to fulfil the technical-legal obligation of the employment

contract “in a spirit of cooperation, trust and with a strong engagement” (Costa & Gianecchini, 2005: 204).

This insistence on the psychological contract as a necessary supplement to the legal contract is justified by the incompleteness and indeterminacy of the latter, which, being established prior to the job performance, can only refer to a future engagement and to an immaterial sphere of promises and expectations (Erbès-Seguin, 1994). Precisely because the employment relationship takes place in two distinct times (first the contract and then the performance), the commitment of the workers and the quality of their work are impossible to specify *ex ante* (Bargain, 2014: 93–94). The legal contract establishes the relationship of subordination between the employer and the employee but cannot specify a priori the workers’ will to fulfil the obligations foreseen by making *the best* use of their stock of skills and knowledge, which, unlike the other factors of production, remains a property of the worker (cf. Costa & Gianecchini, 2005). This “willingness” has to be continuously renewed during the employment relationship. From this point of view, the psychological contract can be seen as a contractual mechanism that compensates for the uncertainty of the job performance, thus complementing the legal agreement (Bargain, 2014: 93–94).

The HRM literature insists on the relatively recent origin of the notion of psychological contract. In fact, during the twentieth century and especially during the “The Post-war Boom”, the psychological relationship between the individual and the company was played out mainly in an exchange between subordination, loyalty, commitment, and good performance on the one hand, and job stability, certainty of wage, access to social protection and the possibility of career development within the organisation on the other (Argentero et al., 2010: 159–180). The regulatory framework established by collective bargaining and the State legislative function constituted the conditions of possibility of this form of contract—the hegemonic one when the notion emerges during the 1960s. Moreover, as Rousseau (1995) remarks, psychological contracts are distributed along a contractual *continuum* between “transactional contracts” (economic motivation prevails, personal involvement is limited, flexibility is low, no skill development) and “relational contracts” (emotional involvement, consideration of the person in all dimensions, broad commitments that can affect personal and family life, professional and personal development).

In this sense, the psychological contract can be seen as an extra-legal tool—a supplement of normativity—that participates in the real subsumption of labour power, making workers not only accept the subordination of the employment relationship but also voluntarily choose not to dissipate their workforce outside the production apparatus (Foucault, 2015; Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2015). From Taylor’s *Scientific Management* to the *Human Resources* approach (Miles, 1965) via Mayo’s *Human Relations*, managers elaborate forms of “psychological negotiation” pushing the employment relationship from the transactional to the relational side. The latter, in fact, seems more effective in terms of producing an effect of “voluntary servitude”. Indeed the relational psychological contract involves the very will of the worker, by the promise of personal development, thus making the subordination of the employment relationship something desirable in itself. Whereas the transactional contract

focuses on the dimension of exchange and rational choice without touching the individual will (the worker chooses to accept the subordination relationship but can continue to want something else), the relational contract reaches the very core of that will: individual subjectivity.

As Raymond Miles, the founder of the *Human Resources* approach, wrote in 1965, the best way to increase employees' performance is to encourage responsible, self-directed, and self-controlled behaviours. In contrast to the *Human Relations* model, the *Human Resources* approach is not about increasing participation to improve subordinate satisfaction and morale so as to get obedience in return. Rather, it is about stimulating individual, autonomous, free, and creative action to increase productivity and thus improve satisfaction and morale, thereby triggering a virtuous circle. Miles assumes that the free and autonomous action of individuals does not hinder business goals, but that presupposes indeed a managerial action on what is supposed to be the principle of freedom and autonomy: the individual will. And that is rightly the sphere where the relational psychological contract lies.

However, we believe that there is no break between Fordism and post-Fordism in the history of management discourse: rather, from Taylor to the present day, it is a continuous evolution consisting in moving from a voluntary servitude based on rational choice or ideological manipulation, to another in which the formation of the will is at stake. Or rather, the most important managerial issue is finally to fill the empty form of individual will with specific contents: management states what the worker should want. But if until the end of Fordism, this operation could remain a project or a kind of ideological lubricant, with post-Fordism it becomes an emergency to be inscribed in the reality of management practices.

3 From the Psychological Contract to the “Self-contract”

Indeed, the psychological contract centred on job security and stability began to change in the 1980s, namely with the post-Fordist transformations of work and firm. Collective and universalistic legal frameworks of labour regulation evolve too slowly and hinder the metamorphosis of organisations from the “bureaucratic” to the “adhocratic” stage (Rousseau, 1995), in which individuals are called upon to design their own careers as “managers of the self”. At the same time, the massive affirmation of neoliberal policies leads to the emergence of the model of the “entrepreneur of the self”. As a subjective embodiment of the theory of human capital developed since the 1960s by the economists of the Chicago school, such a model updates the subject of interest of the bourgeois tradition and constitutes the *pivot* of a societal project in which (self-)entrepreneurial behaviour must be multiplied among the entire population, regardless the actual creation of business (Foucault, 2010). According to this economic, political, and anthropological model, each individual is supposed to be responsible for their endowment of human capital—the stock of skills that makes a subject capable of earning a certain income. Hence, the need to continuously invest in it in order to valorise, appreciate, and adapt

it to the changing labour market demands (cf. Feher, 2009; Paltrinieri, 2013). *Self-management, self-entrepreneurship, self-investment*—these are the fundamental operations characterising neoliberal subjectivity.

The field of labour law has not been spared by this process of political and social transformation. Under the aegis of the Court of Justice of the European Union and the theoretical influence of the doctrine of *Law and Economics*, the aim of labour law is separated from the improvement of workers' conditions and linked to the promotion of the liquidity of human capital, i.e. a skilled and specialised workforce capable of managing itself. The adaptation of the latter to the new economic normativity (Supiot, 2014, XI-XIII) privileges individual economic relations under private law and aims to progressively reverse the hierarchy of bargaining levels, pursuing a labour market model populated by individuals in competition, endowed with a set of fundamental rights and freed from the weight of solidarity (*Ibid.*, XIV). Rather than deregulation, it is a different kind of market regulation pushing towards a return to the labour relationship as an exchange between equals, even within the framework of subordination relationships. Internal and external flexibility, multiplication of legal statuses of self-employment, individualisation of contracts, careers, and social protection (Le Goff, 2004: 529–530): the rigidity of the status of employee—an obstacle to economic freedoms—must be mitigated in order to facilitate the conversion of each individual into an enterprise.

In this context, management discourse announces that “the old psychological contract” based on stability and job certainty “is dead” (Rousseau, 1995). But not the psychological contract in general, of course. On the contrary, the psychological contract—individual by definition—is the best tool for individualising the employment relationship and moving, as HRM puts it, from collective labour agreements to individual contracts (Costa & Gianecchini, 2005). It also becomes the instrument for eliciting full availability, flexibility, and emotional commitment—essential in the fragile and vulnerable post-Fordist organisation—in the lack of stability and economic gratification. Thus, in post-Fordist flexible work the psychological contract as a matrix of *good performance* focuses on self-knowledge and self-production, through a work relationship increasingly enriched with personal meanings, and intrinsic motivations (Lévy-Leboyer, 2007).

The psychological aspect of the contract now concerns not only the immaterial sphere of expectations and promises, but increasingly the very psychological constitution of the individual and the relationship to himself or herself (as human capital): work becomes a practice of self-production (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2017a, 2017b). So, in the post-Fordist work organised around the individual as owner of their human capital, the issue of the psychological contract is now the possibility of investing in oneself, one's skills, and one's professional and personal development. It is at this point that we see the emergence of a new form of relational psychological contract—given the high level of subjective involvement—which we have called the “self-contract” (*Ibid.*). Investing in oneself and one's skills, especially when the organisation of work tends to overlay know-how and self-knowledge, working time and non-working time, presumes the constitution of a relationship of knowledge and transformation with oneself. The “inflation of reflexivity” caused by the

constant “incentive to produce oneself” within the work relationship (Eraly, 1994: 135–140) probably represents the organisational side of the rise of the culture of narcissism already described by Christopher Lasch (1991). It is no coincidence that a significant part of the literature on human resource assessment, from individual potential to performance, emphasises how advantageous these evaluation practices are for the individuals being assessed, insofar as they provide them with an “authentic self-image” on which they can work to transform and improve themselves (cf. Lévy-Leboyer, 2000, 2007, 2011). This image, moreover, measures the state of investment in one’s human capital and the competitiveness of the stock of skills, influencing the sense of personal efficacy—the so-called “self-efficacy” described by Bandura (1997) and other “psychologies of optimism”.

Self-image, self-evaluation, and self-efficacy are the terms of this new psychological contract and the levers of the will to work. What binds the individual to the organisation is now the possibility of constructing and reinforcing *through* work the form of subjectivity typical of the current phase of neoliberal capitalism. The exchange taking place within this type of self (production) contract—if we can still speak of an exchange—consists of commitment, performance, and acceptance of subordination (even where there is no or very little legal subordination) in exchange for psychological tools to become a competitive and performative neoliberal subject. “Performance in exchange for subjectivation”, one might say. It is difficult, however, to describe this type of contract as an exchange and a rational choice, given that subjectivation takes place *in* and *through* work performance, already beginning with job search and practices of self-reflexivity such as the writing of the curriculum vitae and cover letters. One submits to managerial power because one wants to and not because of manipulation, miscalculation, or simple opportunism, and despite the fact that this submission leading to the neoliberal subject of performance involves more and more psychological and physical suffering (Chicchi & Simone, 2017).

Now, it seems to us, as a consequence, that the self-contract can be inscribed in the history of what Foucault called in 1980 at the Collège de France “the direction of conscience” or “government of souls” (Foucault, 2016: 224). In this scene, that of direction of individuals, which differs, according to Foucault, from both political coercion and legal obligation, there is neither a transfer of sovereignty nor a cession of will:

In direction one does not renounce one’s own will. One simply wants one’s will to be subject to the will of someone else. That is to say that the person directed is the one who says: I want the other to tell me what I must will. I refer myself to the other’s will as the principle of my own will, but I must myself will this other’s will. [...] It is therefore, in the strict sense, a subordination of the will to the other, in which the two wills remain intact, but one willing always what the other wills (*Ibid.*: 230).

And the goal of this relationship of direction is not something external to the relationship itself, an external end, but rather an internal one, that is to say, a certain relationship of self to self. One does not obey in order to obtain happiness, wealth, or health; one obeys freely what the other wants it to will, in order to be able to establish a certain relationship to oneself.

And as a result, if we call subjectivation the formation of a definite relationship of self to self, then we can say that direction is a technique that consists in binding two wills in such a way that they are always free in relation to each other, in binding them in such a way that one wills what the other wills, for the purpose of subjectivation, that is to say access to a certain relationship of self to self. The other and the other's will are freely accepted by me so that I may establish a certain relationship of myself to myself (*Ibid.*: 232).

In the post-Fordist organisation of work, we can know, recognise, and transform ourselves through practices of self-exploration and self-discourse, the proliferation of which is one of the hallmarks of neo-management (Brunel, 2008). In particular, it is possible to establish a relationship with oneself which is of the order of development, appreciation, and valorisation of one's human capital according to the logic of self-management and self-investment. But the establishment of this relationship through what we have called the self-contract can only take place in a relation of subordination of one's will to that of another—real, imagined, or socially multiplied. In our societies this “other” acting as director can be both embodied in an individual (manager, coach, psychologist), imagined by the subject himself (the recruiter, the evaluator, the organisation as such), or disseminated in the social system where the injunctions to enhance human capital are spread (from education and training systems to active labour market policies, via the management of “health capital” in social protection systems). In other words, the self-contract seems to be part of the long history of practices of the social construction of the individual will by relations of direction, subordination, and even obedience: one needs to be directed to know what one wants and become the subject of this will.

4 The Platformisation of the Firm and the Spread of the Gig Economy

In the context of the crisis of salaried work, the advent of platform capitalism and the *gig economy* generates new forms of dependence and subordination, which are based on the delegation of managerial tasks to the algorithm. First of all, what does the firm become in the platform age? The emergence of the platform as a mode of coordinating work is a symptom of both the progressive financialisation of the economy and the crisis of the classical firm as a space for organising work based on private property (Baronian, 2020). It is the economic model of the platform, in fact, that questions the foundations of the capitalist firm. Firstly, the platform algorithm automates the relationships between principals and workers, which drastically reduces transaction costs. The digital platform thus organises a fluid market where labour is immediately and continuously available on demand, allowing for the gradual outsourcing of work in the form of self- and micro-entrepreneurship. Secondly, the platform profits from a commission on the transaction that applies to both users and workers, in different forms and quantities set by the platform. This means that customers and workers are all operators in a certain market organised by the platform itself (“prosumers”). It is no longer just a question of taking work out of the company boundaries, but

of integrating the market (both supply and demand) within the platform, through the promotion of competition between self-employed workers, who are supposed to become rentiers and sellers of the services of their human capital (Corsani, 2013). Finally, the platform model allows the production factors costs to be reduced through the exploitation of the property of workers, who are most often owners of the means of production, by putting them in competition with each other in order to provide the service. In the capitalist enterprise, the ownership of the means of production was concentrated in the hands of the shareholders, a property right is defined as a socially validated right to choose the uses of an economic good and thereby to control the labour process. But in the case of the platform, it is the worker-user who formally owns the means of production. Of course, the shareholder remains the owner of the intangible capital, i.e. the rights to ownership of the algorithm, namely in the form of copyright. But this means that at the very least we are in front of a bifurcated ownership of the means of production, which on the one hand are externalised to the workers, while on the other hand are concentrated in the property rights of the intangible assets. The function of exclusive ownership of the means of production is therefore no longer sufficient to define what a platform is (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2019).

In short, the platform no longer exists as a separate space from the market, characterised by hierarchical relations and the formalisation of the relationship of subordination allowing the exercise of authority. The platform is no longer, as Ronald Coase thought of the classical firm, an island of conscious organisation in the sea of unconscious market interactions, but a kind of firm-market hybrid coordinating social actors who are no longer employees but self-employed people competing for market shares (Casilli, 2019). In the case of the platform, the firm is nothing more than a legal fiction supporting a set of contractual relations between individuals: a light and flexible central structure which subcontracts, externalises, and controls from a distance without organising the work. For some economists, the economic model of the platform thus seems to realise the ideal of the *agency theory* that defines the firm as a node of contracts where there is no longer any distinction between employment and commercial relationships (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). This radical outsourcing of labour in the age of digital capitalism could evoke the domestic system preceding the institution of the labour contract. But platform workers do not coincide either with the individuals of agency theory negotiating working conditions in an open market or with the workers organising themselves into associations and cooperatives in the nineteenth century. In fact, they respond individually to a flow of injunctions that are no longer presented as orders from a hierarchy but as alerts, messages, and notifications from an algorithm. Moreover, while leaving them “free” to choose their services or their schedule, the platform continues, like the classic company, to set the costs for the user and the remuneration for the worker: in this sense, platform capitalism is reminiscent of the predatory mechanisms typical of the feudal economy, much more than pre-salaried modernity (Durand, 2020; Srnicek, 2017). In the platform economy, value is directly extracted from the social by the market, through the immaterial tool of the algorithm that allows the accumulation of information to minimise losses and accumulate profits (Vercellone, 2020). In other words, the

platform model no longer corresponds to the paradigm of the classical firm: it blurs a series of distinctions that are used to structure the firm and to characterise the instrumental nature of work: not only the distinction between inside and outside the firm, but also between professional and personal life, ownership and subordination, producer and consumer. Finally, even the distinction between the principal and the agent seems to disappear in the dream of an algorithmic management that would be finally fair as it is impersonal (Huws, 2014).

This kind of management, by eliminating any form of human intermediation, creates a relationship of direct subordination between the client and the gigger (on-demand work, micro-work, or social network work). Traditional management is replaced by competition between workers: in order not to be disabled by the platform, the gigger ends up accepting all the tasks that are proposed. By offloading its workforce, the platform establishes a paradoxical relationship with the worker: it is no longer a matter of obtaining subordination in exchange for legal and economic protection, but rather of encouraging competition with peers while trying to retain loyalty by intensifying economic dependence. While no longer enjoying legal protection, gig workers are then plunged into a double subordination: economic but also organisational, as they are linked to the employer by a whole series of diverse and varied applications, chat rooms, and social networks requiring almost total availability and reinforced attention. This has led to a transformation in the way people experience work and the relationship of subordination. A new form of subordination is emerging that guarantees neither the stability of a job, nor the social responsibility of management, nor the coverage of costs generated by certain professional risks but rather the assignment of a set of productive tasks generating a relationship of subjection (hence the prefix *sub-*) based not on a symbolic hold (religious, political, etc.), but on an authority which is expressed through a flow of instructions (Casilli, 2019).

Just as nineteenth-century industrial capitalism had to shape labour power by actually subsuming it under capital, platform capitalism participates in the neoliberal enterprise of subsuming labour power under the economic, political, and subjective category of human capital. Digital platforms intensify this process of transformation of labour into self-employment, both in terms of legal status and workers' subjectivity: the phenomena of gamification or benchmarking of performances made possible by the game of appreciation typical of the applications of the digital economy are the subject of a growing number of investigations. The operations of any digital platform would be impossible without the algorithmic performance assessment practices realised by all the actors of a platform, giving rise to the rating of each of these actors. Digital platforms thus play a fundamental role in the social dissemination of evaluation and comparative self-assessment practices, making them a *normal* form of relationship with others and with oneself.

5 The Metamorphosis of the Self-contract: Towards a Self-worth Political Economy

Now we can ask what happens to what we call “self-contract” in this kind of acceleration of the post-Fordist organisation of work which is platform capitalism. That is to say: what about the psychological contract in the firm becoming a platform (both in the case where the firm coincides with the platform and in that where it maintains a more or less traditional structure but outsources more and more functions, in particular HRM, to digital platforms)? Indeed, beyond the proliferation of digital platforms as such, the gig economy—as already shown in the 2016 McKinsey Global Institute report on “Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy”—is becoming *normal*. When we talk about the gig economy, we are in fact not just talking about “uberisation” and click-workers. Gig economy refers to the broader process of replacing traditional labour with short-term on-demand self-employment relationships, managed by algorithmic intermediation platforms connecting clients (individuals as well as companies) with gig workers. In this framework, the technical tool entailing “management effects” is obviously the algorithm, as Rosenblat and Stark have clearly shown in their 2016 study on Uber. It is well known that the algorithm fulfils the traditional managerial functions since Taylor and Fayol, from monitoring and assessing performance to rewarding and sanctioning systems, which not only ensure performance management, but also standardise, coordinate, and plan the work process (Cuppini et al., 2022; Newlands, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). But the whole issue of the psychological contract—and therefore of the commitment of workers in the absence of a traditional managerial structure and a subordinate labour relationship that would justify such a structure and its power—remains open. This obviously raises the problem already posed by post-Fordist transformations: how to make an independent or even precarious worker committed in an employment relationship that no longer has the form of legal subordination and is no longer managed by a specific managerial function, but directly by the algorithm of the intermediation platform? In other words: how to manage workers in a gig economy? Significantly, asking this question to Google today gives about 5,730,000 results.

In the last years, management science has begun to look for answers. The first element of response refers to the gamification techniques involved in the reward mechanisms—material or symbolic—connected to the evaluations obtained within the platform (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018). In the filiation of Michael Burawoy’s work, Sarah Mason, a social scientist and Lyft driver, describes the impact on self-esteem produced by systematic feedback and ranking, as well as the performance improvement challenges and efforts strictly linked to it (Mason, 2019). In the case of Uber, the platform is known to implement “psychological inducements” such as “gaming techniques, graphics and non-cash rewards of little value that can prod drivers into working longer and harder” (Ravenelle, 2019). Beyond gamification in performance appraisal, some management science scholars propose to use artificial intelligence and machine learning to implement gamified assessments as part

of human resource recruitment and talent assessment practices (Bester & Stander, 2021).

The issue of gamification, feedback, and self-esteem thus leads us to the second element of response, namely the diffusion and multiplication of HRM within performance assessment practices involving all actors in the gig economy: companies, customers, and workers. According to Meijerink and Keegan (2019), HRM needs to be rethought in terms of “ecosystem”, which means that workers, customers, and companies are simultaneously considered as active actors in HRM. This ecosystem functions and produces economic value only if all the actors interact in a coordinated way, and if the coordination of these interactions is ensured by the algorithm. The platform is the *leader* that governs the ecosystem. But what guarantees the continuity of interactions, i.e. that customers and workers continue to use the platform in question, allowing the continuity of value production and the dimensional growth of the platform itself? What ensures this continuity is the activity of mutual evaluation, the rating of everyone, and the virtuous circle that the positive evaluation generates by attracting other clients, according to a logic of valorisation that obviously reproduces that of financial assets on the stock market. Thus, the specific task of HRM in the gig economy, as Meijerink and Keenan put it, is to ensure that all actors assess each other, thus creating an ecosystem in which any of them remains involved and continues to engage in multilateral exchanges—the interactions creating value. Customers rate workers, workers rate customers, the platform manages the ratings and rankings and *extracts* profits from the interactions (normally it first extracts less value and endures economic loss in order to increase customer–worker interactions, and then, having achieved market dominance, intensifies extraction to recover the loss).

These considerations suggest the existence of an “extractivist dimension” of contemporary management and of HRM in particular. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have clearly shown the extractive turn of current capitalism, starting with the prevalence of logistical and financial operations over the sphere of material industrial production. But they have also highlighted the new forms of value extraction based on the exploitation of “practices of human cooperation and sociality that are external to the operations of capital”, right up to the extraction of rent from the bodies and forms of lives of individual subjects (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017). In this sense, and unlike Fordist and post-Fordist management which was supposed to produce the conditions of possibility of the psychological contract through specific managerial functions, algorithmic management abolishes these functions by delegating them to evaluate social practices carried out by the actors themselves within the perimeter of the platform. These social practices produce a double value that can be immediately appropriated: a value that is both economic and, so to speak, *governmental*. That is to say: the generalised evaluation organised by the algorithm establishes a working ecosystem in which the actors *self-govern* and *self-control* according to the signals they receive from outside—be they notifications or feedback. But, above all, this involves a new, externalised form of psychological contract. For not only does evaluation entail gig-workers loyalty: workers quitting the platform cannot import their reputation into another ecosystem; but it also allows for the individual integration of performance standards through feedback and individual rating, appealing to

a psychosocial need for self-esteem created precisely by the psychological contract centred on the valorisation of one's human capital.

Following Michel Feher's analyses (2018), we can say that the neoliberal transformation of societies centred on the anthropological, economic, and political figure of human capital tends to make each individual a subject who is, in fact, a "manager of his own portfolio seeking investment". In other words, the neoliberal subject is an "invested-self" whose activities construct it as a project which is worthy of investment. If the possibility of generating a certain income (material as well as immaterial) depends on the *potential* defined by the capacity of human capital to attract investments, we understand the crucial importance in our societies of social credit and reputational capital. If one's value, therefore, is defined less by what one has done in the past than by what one promises to do in the future, and if the economic and social recognition of subjects depends on the assessments of their human capital, everyone is subject to the injunction to be evaluated or to evaluate himself (Feher, 2009; Paltrinieri, 2013). And that to the extent that this operation of (self-)assessment becomes the practice of subjectivation defining neoliberal subjectivity as such. The self-contract defined above as "performance in exchange for subjectivation"—or better: "subjectivation *through* performance"—can now be reformulated in terms of "(performance) appraisal in exchange for subjectivation"—or better: "subjectivation *through* evaluation". In other words, when HRM is reconfigured as a gig economy ecosystem according to a slogan that could be "all power to the mutual evaluation", the psychological self-contract is reformulated into a proposition such as "work for me and you'll have what you need to assess yourself".

More generally, the becoming platform of the firm in the gig economy, and within the framework of human capital-focused neoliberal governmentality, draws the contours of a new political economy essentially centred on self-appreciation and self-valorisation. That is what we suggest to call a "Self-Worth Political Economy" now emerging and joining the monetary economy as such. The constitution of this political economy corresponds, in fact, to the neoliberal project, developed from the Lippmann Colloquium of 1938 (Audier, 2018; Dardot & Laval, 2017; Stiegler, 2022), of extending the market competition to all areas of social life as a response to the governmental and economic crisis of classical liberalism, and in frontal opposition to Keynesian economic policies. This project of generalising economic competition in the social sphere consequently involves the political construction of "market situations" where these are not yet present, or, as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2010) write, the creation of "quasi-markets" in non-market environments. But the construction of a quasi-market, as Dardot and Laval (2010) also note, necessarily implies defining a "quasi-money", just as any market economy must achieve the constitution of a universal equivalent in the form of money (Edwards, 1972).

If we follow André Orléan's (2014) critique of the (neo)classical paradigm and consequently consider money as that through which market value comes into existence, we can see in the proliferation of ecosystems of evaluation typical of platform capitalism the almost utopian (or dystopian) tension towards the creation of a homogeneous system of measuring self-worth. Thus, we can recognise in the transformations of managerial normativity the attempt to generalise assessment systems

and practices in order to achieve an individual rating as a universal quasi-monetary equivalent. Therefore, the emergence of the Self-Worth Political Economy implies the implementation of political techniques of constructing a “money-form” capable of expressing the value of the self in terms of quantity, i.e. of measuring what is called reputational capital or social credit. As we have already evoked, this kind of economy is less about the exchange of goods or services than about the logic of valorisation characterising financial markets. As Keynes already noted in Chap. 12 of his *General Theory* (1936) and as André Orléan (2014) and Michel Feher (2018) have more recently emphasised, the aim of financial markets is not so much the formation of a price—which would be the manifestation of a pre-existing value or of the equilibrium between supply and demand—but the formulation of rates, which in turn produce value. Thus, if a stock, a share, or a financial project is well rated by investors, its value increases, demand increases, determining a further increase in value, and so on, until a negative valuation reverses the trend—investors’ estimation being based less on firms current results than on the performance they may promise in the future (Feher, 2018). The Self-Worth Political Economy can be seen as an extension of the logic of financial valorisation at the level of subjectivation by individual performance assessment practices. This subjectivation of the financial value logic determines the constitution of a subject who is both evaluated and evaluator—a *subject of value*, as to say—who is formed at the crossroads of multiple practices of assessment of one’s human capital as a potential: the value of oneself being the appreciation of this potential. This makes it possible to understand the insistence of HRM recruitment practices on the need to detect the potential of individuals on the basis of their CVs (Nicoli, 2015); or the hypertrophy of the category of project (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018) in the fields of management, education, and Welfare systems; or the growth of self-esteem disorders in the diagnostic practices of contemporary psychological sciences (Feher, 2009). Through the political and social effectiveness of the notion of human capital, therefore, neoliberal subjectivation practices seem to result in the production of a subject of value who, in addition to constituting himself as an “entrepreneur of the self” (Foucault, 2010), redefines himself as a “self-investor” or “invested-self” (Feher, 2018; Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2017a, 2017b)—as well as a “potential subject”, always in search of social credit even more than economic.

On the edge of the collapse of legal subordination and traditional wage labour, the platform gig worker wants the servitude of work and performance, despite the suffering it engenders, because this constitutes the socially dominant manner of establishing the relationship with oneself that has become normal in neoliberal societies. Which means, still following the Foucauldian analysis about the direction of conscience, that it is also the socially dominant way of giving specific content to the empty form of the individual will through the subordination of the latter to the will of some other—given that this other, which we could now write with a capital “O” as if by a Lacanian whim, is now multiplied in an omnipresent ecosystem of evaluation. And without all this, no subjectivation is possible—the Other also seems to be telling us through his mute and yet very audible words.

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