

Will Luckman

Gramsci and His Legacy

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**Independent Contractors vs. Deliveristas: Shaping and Mobilizing Worker Consciousness in the Digital Factory**

Throughout the history of mankind, our sense of self and our place in the world has been shaped in a large part by the work we do. Karl Marx in *Capital* was incredibly attentive to the new forms of subjectivity, the *consciousness*, that the process of industrial labor stimulated in the workforce. From the late 1910s–early 1930s Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, enmeshed in the more mature industrial-factory milieu of Turin, built on and reconfigured Marx’s work theorizing the nature of ideology and worker consciousness. Gramsci aimed to flesh out the connections between Marx’s structure and superstructure—or the economic foundations of our society and the accompanying cultural, civic, and political sphere—in order to better understand all the factors at play in the movement of historical progress.

Gramsci sought revolution, and believed it could and must be led by factory workers, the industrial proletariat. But he also lived through a failed worker’s revolt in Italy which showed him firsthand that the workers’ revolution was anything but inevitable, and that economic conditions alone would not guarantee a certain course of events. He came to understand there was a connection between forms of work, consciousness, ideology, and political power, and sought to map this connection thoroughly so that an effective political intervention could be made. Through this work Gramsci produced many insights into how the specific form of factory

work both created and required a new self-conception of the factory worker, and he also showed how the formation of that subject was in many ways mutable, and was the result of a complex web of dynamic economic and social forces.

A century later we are living in what some theorists have described as the “fourth machine age.” The capitalist mode of production has developed into a truly global system, aided in a large part by advances in networked digital computing technologies. With these changes in technology have come attendant changes in forms of work, life, and consciousness, notwithstanding a lack of revolutionary change in the fundamental economic relationship wherein workers sell their labor to profit-seeking firms who own the means of production. One “new” form of work enabled by advances in technology is a type of spatially dispersed, algorithmically managed, piecework—aka “gig” labor—most visible in app-based food delivery and taxi services run by firms such as Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, and Seamless, among others. Gramsci’s focus was on factory work and factory workers, but we can think with Gramsci, borrowing both his insights and his forms of inquiry to examine how work in the “digital factory” is shaping worker consciousness in the here and now. In particular, we need to draw from the revelation that consciousness is neither mechanistically determined nor static; rather it is subject to influence from an array of social and economic factors, within the workplace and without, constantly in the process of being actively and ambiently shaped, and mobilized by various social forces towards opposing ends.

To illustrate the relationship between economy, ideology, consciousness, and political action drawn by Gramsci, I present two brief case studies. Both are active attempts to formulate a version of digital factory worker consciousness in order to marshal workers towards specific political ends. The first example focuses on the formation of the worker as “independent

contractor” and how that was deployed to support the passage of the California ballot measure Proposition 22 in 2020, with the goal of creating a new legal category of worker exempt from the protections and guarantees provided to “employees” by the state. The second case reviews ongoing efforts by a group of delivery workers in New York City calling themselves “Los Deliveristas Unidos” to use a collective identity to protect themselves on the job and make demands of the City of New York. We can use Gramsci the theorist and Gramsci the organizer to shed light on both these efforts, and to demonstrate that while new forms of worker consciousness are up for grabs, those who are able to effectively shape that consciousness may be able to wield the the digital factory worker as a key social force in the constellation of political power.

## **Work and Consciousness**

The first step to applying Gramsci’s insights is to parse how he formulates the relationship between work and individual consciousness. In his earliest writings he uses the term “culture” as something as a stand in for either consciousness or ideology, in that it contains both an internal sense of self, and yet is not something that is come to independently:

“It is the organization, the disciplining of one's inner self; the mastery of one's personality; the attainment of a higher awareness, through which we can come to understand our value and place within history, our proper function in life, our rights and duties. But all this cannot happen through spontaneous evolution, through actions and reactions beyond the control of our will, as occurs in the

vegetable and animal worlds, in which each individual entity adapts itself and develops its organs unconsciously, obeying ineluctable laws. Man is primarily a creature of spirit—that is, a creation of history, rather than nature.”<sup>1</sup>

For Gramsci here, “culture” is an individual awareness of one’s self, and one’s place within *history*, a larger social system, stretching through time both backwards and forwards. At the same time “history” is acting on the individual and stimulating this situational awareness, interacting with their individual agency. He later uses the term *consciousness* to describe this form of historical self-knowledge translated into both thought and action. “One ‘is’ only when one ‘knows oneself to be’, when one is ‘conscious’ of one’s own being. A worker is only a proletarian when he knows himself to be one, and acts and thinks in accordance with this ‘knowledge.’”<sup>2</sup>

We begin to get a sense of the collective construction of thought systems, or *ideologies*, in his analysis. If consciousness is experienced on an individual level, it is actually historically developed, and reified through social activity. Individuals’ positions within society—their class, their job, their own personal background, race, gender, etc.—all affect which ideologies have influence over them. Ideologies guide how people act, so they are a material and a political force; and because of individual agency and historical movement, ideologies are inconstant, shaped by context. Following from that Gramsci instructs that ideological formation is a field of political struggle.

Thus, as a political strategist, he devotes much of his writing to identifying the social forces that work to mold consciousness. On the one hand, *intellectuals*, thought leaders from

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<sup>1</sup> Gramsci, 1916: “Socialism and Culture,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Gramsci, 1918: “Cultural and Poetic Mysteries,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, p.78.

varying class backgrounds, including teachers, politicians, religious leaders, academics, and organizers function within the superstructural social layer as theorists and interpreters of history. And on the other hand, the specific organizational structures of work—mechanical, managerial, and economic—have their own effects. “New methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and thinking and feeling life.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his work, Gramsci is clear that the relationship of work and ideology goes both ways. The idea that man develops a new subjectivity through his relationship to the means of production is a fundamental tenet of classical Marxism. In Gramsci’s framing, orthodox Marxism suggests first men must be organized “externally” then gradually they must be organized “internally.” In the “normal course of events” physical organization (within industrial formations) would precede and stimulate ideological formation (revolutionary consciousness) and only then would follow action and revolution.<sup>4</sup> Gramsci accepts the basic theoretical premise that external organization and internal organization are both deeply important in shaping consciousness, but he rejects a simple mechanistic and directional framework that suggests the one leads directly to the other. The act of working—being organized physically and mentally into certain productive roles, in specific relationships—generates a new set of experiences that then inform and create new ways of thinking. But forms of ideological formation must also precede work. For instance, education prepares us to play a role within the ongoing social and historical act of human reproduction facilitated through work.

“[The modern school] taught that there exist objective, intractable natural laws to which man must adapt himself if he is to master them in his turn—and that there

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<sup>3</sup> Gramsci, “Americanism and Fordism,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.302.

<sup>4</sup> Gramsci, 1917: “The Revolution Against Capital,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, p.40.

exist social and state laws which are the product of human activity, which are established by men and can be altered by men in the interests of their collective development. These laws of the State and of society create that human order which historically best enables men to dominate the laws of nature, that is to say which most facilitates their *work*. For work is the specific mode by which man actively participates in natural life in order to transform and socialise it more and more deeply and extensively.”<sup>5</sup>

As we delve deeper into Gramsci’s own extensive work mapping the forms of work present in his time and the role it played in shaping ideology, and as we try to think with Gramsci’s ideas through new forms of work and subjectivity being created in our time, we must always keep in mind that the act of work itself—how we are organized in relation to production—is but one of many forces shaping our conception of self, and by no means necessarily the most determinate.

### **Factory Work + Factory Worker Consciousness**

Gramsci’s exposure to capitalist production came from his time as a student and organizer in Turin, the heart of early-20th century Italian industry. Turin at the time was characterized by a predominance of high-tech machine engineering factories, producing automobiles, steel, rubber, and the like. Gramsci was a keen observer of the factory system, and saw immense potential in scientifically managed factory production, both in technological terms

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<sup>5</sup> Gramsci, “On Education,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.34.

as a way of providing a higher standard of living to the largest number of people, and as a form of cooperative work that had potential to change human consciousness for the better.

In his collected prison notebook writing on “Americanism and Fordism,” Gramsci advocates for Europe to adopt the highly-rationalized American production techniques of the time. These techniques included a wide range of technologies, broadly construed, including specific forms of hardware, management styles, corporate organizational structures, and socio-economic arrangements between state, employer, and worker. In these writings he also begins to talk about the historical socio-political differences between America and Europe—the inherent contradictions within each society—that may have led to different manifestations of the same basic capitalist imperatives in the new and old world. He structures his inquiry around nine central topics of inquiry, which include the role of different factions within the capitalist class and other “parasitic” elements of the ruling class, the historical “revolutionary” potential of the new forms of work, demographic composition of the workforce, the tools of coercion and consent deployed upon the workforce, and the role of the state in economic planning, among others.<sup>6</sup>

As part of his exploration, Gramsci makes a number of direct observations about the factory system. Chief among them: The factory condenses workers in a single site, in a cooperative, technically-enabled, specialized, productive process. This production process applies rational science to both machines and management techniques and includes the mechanization of physical labor. “Transport and trade” have been absorbed as productive elements of Fordist manufacturing. The success of the American system relies in part on high-wages which wins consent from the workforce, and allows the workforce the means to reproduce

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, “Americanism and Fordism,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 279–80.

itself through consumption. Unlike Europe, America doesn't have an "unproductive" landed aristocracy creating inefficiencies in its economy and fighting politically against industrial progress; thus America is in a better position to stand up a State-backed planned economy.

Crucially Gramsci was attuned to how these features of the factory system were related to various forms of consciousness within and without the workplace. In particular he was concerned with a market-influenced and legally enshrined ideology that produced the worker as liberal individuated subject, and how the factory system itself might help to produce a competing subjectivity, that of the proletarian "producer."

Gramsci wrote that through the legal apparatus of the bourgeois republic, structured as it is on private property rights, "Competition becomes enshrined as the practical foundation of human interaction: citizen-individuals are the atoms which make up the social nebula—unstable, inorganic elements which cannot adhere in any organism."<sup>7</sup> Building on this, the sociologist and Gramsci scholar, Stuart Hall, describes how the lived experience of a certain set of relations comes to shape our patterns of thought, our basic forms of expression. Thus our tools for understanding our place within that system are limited by the forms of the system itself. The constant exposure to market relations fosters—often imperceptibly and without overt guidance—individualism as the dominant consciousness under capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

Gramsci was excited about the potential of the factory system to act as a crucible for a new type of consciousness, that of the "producer,"<sup>9</sup> tied to the formation of the "collective worker."<sup>10</sup> The experience of factory work, despite being housed as it is within the market relation, could function in a contradictory fashion. He theorized a number of ways that external

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<sup>7</sup> Gramsci, 1918: "The Sovereignty of Law," *Pre-Prison Writings*, p.88.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, 1983: "The Problem of Ideology," *Selected Writings on Marxism*, p.148.

<sup>9</sup> Gramsci, 1920: "The Program of L'Ordine Nuovo," *Pre-Prison Writings*, p.183.

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, "The Modern Prince," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 202.



factory organization might foster new internal organization of thought: In its original form, the factory concentrated the exploited laborers in the same physical space as their exploiter, the factory owner, thus heightening awareness of their exploitation. (At the same time Gramsci acknowledged that the growth of investor capital, worker specialization/differentiation, and bureaucracy served to obscure and buffer that direct relationship.) The process of coordinated industrial manufacture could foster a sense of cooperation. Worker organizations within the factory, specifically factory councils that drew representatives from every specialized group within the production process, could further this sense of unity of purpose. When workers revolted in Turin and took over production, he felt workers could see themselves anew as producers of necessary goods, not just producers of profits. In his most hopeful moments he speculated that even the mindless repetitive action of Taylorism could potentially allow the workers the mental capacity to reflect on their conditions and imagine a different future. Gramsci acknowledged that none of these factors would “spontaneously” result in a new consciousness taking hold and that technological change itself was no guarantee of historical change.<sup>11</sup> But he believed that the factory system provided the basis for new conceptions of the self in relation to production, and thus the entryway to further political action.

Through his exploration of the factory system, Gramsci accomplishes three different, but related, tasks: first, he describes the nature of the factory system itself, second, he shows how various social forces are arrayed in the constellation of capitalist state planning, and third, he describes how the the organization of work, organization of men, and organization of capital both require *and* produce new ideologies, new organizations of thought. This method of inquiry

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 163

could prove very useful to understanding forms of work in our present day and the ideologies formed prior to and through these forms.

## **The Digital Factory**

In the present day we are living in what theorist Martín Arboleda, describes as the “fourth machine age,” a “quantum leap in the robotization and computerization of the labor process.”<sup>12</sup> In his book, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*, Arboleda concludes, like Gramsci before him, that technological advances have not represented a change to the underlying mode of capitalist production that organizes human labor in order to extract surplus value for those who control of the technology. However these technologies have introduced specific changes to the forms work takes, and thus play a role in reshaping attendant forms of life and thought, and, following Gramsci, the terrain of political and ideological struggle. In order to parse the latter, we must analyze the forms of work present in the fourth machine age.

One feature of contemporary capitalist production is that digital communication and tracking technologies have helped to enable faster forms of financial exchange and logistics, which have collapsed time and space, flipped the directional force of supply and demand, and helped to establish a fully united global system. This system, in particular through the supply chain, is at once incredibly dispersed in physical space, while being deeply interconnected through the flows of commodities, information, and capital. Arboleda describes this planetary production process as the “global social factory.”<sup>13</sup> Geographer Moritz Altenreid devoted his

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<sup>12</sup> Arboleda, 2020: p. 210

<sup>13</sup> Arboleda, 2020: p.26

book, *The Digital Factory: The Human Labor of Automation*, to describing this phenomenon. For Altenreid, “the factory is understood as both a real site of labor as well as—more abstractly—an apparatus and logic for the ordering of labor, machinery, and infrastructure across space and time.”<sup>14</sup> Altenreid devotes particular attention to the role that software, in the form of algorithms, increasingly plays in managing workers. This is an advanced version of Gramsci’s mechanization of physical labor that Altenreid describes as “digital Taylorism.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to Gramsci’s Fordism, the social contract that was brokered between capital and labor in many advanced industrial nations no longer exists. Not only have we seen a stagnation in wages in comparison to both productivity and inflation, we have also seen continued attacks on organized labor, and a rise in “contractual flexibility and forms of contingent labor.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas Gramsci described an American order free of a parasitic faction of the ruling class, we have seen, in America and globally, an increase in the role of “fictive” financial capital in backing new technologies, and a proliferation of business models that rely on firms inserting themselves into existing exchange processes—be they communications, retail, or transport—to extract “digital rents.”<sup>17</sup> Although discrete factory manufacturing still largely exists in forms reminiscent of Gramsci’s era, the entire production process, and larger circuits of commodity production, exchange, and consumption, are far less bounded by physical proximity. Tracking and communications technologies also allow for a spatially diffuse workforce, whether those workers are concentrated in locations far from corporate headquarters, or untethered from a discrete workplace entirely.

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<sup>14</sup> Altenreid, 2022: p.6

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Altenreid, 2022: p.163

<sup>17</sup> Sadowski, 2020.

It should be noted that the changes I highlight here are specifically tied to work: labor regimes, technology, the workplace, and production and exchange. But Gramsci would be quick to remind us that is an abstract theoretical distinction, and *work* as defined here is not separate from other momentous changes in state and civil society like the advent of supranational financial and governing bodies, or the rise (of particular concern for ideological struggle) of new forms of mass media such as television or internet-hosted outlets and platforms.

Despite these many differences, certain features remain mostly intact if not somewhat amplified or deformed within the digital factory. New digital technologies require a new stratum of technicians, software engineers, coders, and analysts, so there is still a great deal of specialization and differentiation within the workforce. The state is still backstopping industry through subsidies and bailouts. Altenried's descriptions of digital Taylorism are an eerie echo of Marx's worker as "automaton,"<sup>18</sup> wherein algorithmically managed workers "serve as the executing body of the software."<sup>19</sup> Despite the spatial diffusion, the digital factory has in many ways increased the socialization of production. This is a more fully integrated system, incorporating more people, more sites, more extraction, more moments, and more social reproduction into an increasingly interdependent circulation of global capital. Arboleda describes "the production of relative surplus value at the world scale and the reproduction of the working class as a fragmented, polarizing, yet unitary whole or industrial organism."<sup>20</sup>

And what then can we glean about worker consciousness in the digital factory? What new self conceptions and forms of organization have been introduced that could lead to alternative political arrangements? Gramsci identified the potential of the factory system to stimulate new

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, 1976: p.546

<sup>19</sup> Altenreid, 2022: p.40

<sup>20</sup> Arboleda, 2020: p.20

forms of proletarian subjectivity, which might allow the working class to become conscious of itself to such a degree that it could lead those outside the factory system. That moment of global revolution never appeared. In many ways we are still within the long unresolved crisis of capitalism where the dominant ideology is one of individual alienated market actors, and where the potential for a different conception of self as part of a global unified working class is present if largely dormant.

### **Digital Factory Worker Consciousness**

Gramsci instructs us that ideology only becomes material when it is translated into action. Just as Gramsci's "theory of praxis" was informed by the specific struggles of his time, by briefly examining a couple of recent efforts to organize digital factory workers it will be easier to illustrate how lived experience combines with the rhetoric and influence of various social forces to concretize ideology. Both of the examples I look at here effectively leveraged different versions of worker subjectivity to make demands of the state. First, the passage of Proposition 22 in California, a ballot measure which imagined the digital factory worker as an "independent contractor," and then enshrined this new category of worker into law. Second, app-based delivery workers in New York City who, as Los Deliveristas Unidos, organized around a collective-worker identity to address challenges they faced as a direct result of their shared working conditions.

### Prop 22

In September 2019, the state of California passed Assembly Bill 5 (AB5), the goal of which was to address the legal standing of digital factory workers by fighting “misclassification.” It aimed to use a three-part test to determine whether any given worker was entitled to the legal protections and guarantees afforded under state law to “employees.” Under these newly adopted standards, most app-based gig workers would qualify as employees and be eligible for minimum wage standards, unemployment benefits, overtime pay, sick leave and more.<sup>21</sup> Soon after the passage of AB5, the Protect App-Based Drivers and Services Act aka California ballot initiative Proposition 22 (Prop 22) was introduced, and was subsequently passed by voters in November 2020. Prop 22 was designed as a direct response to AB5, in order to create a new classification for “app-based drivers” that would reclassify them as a specific category of “independent contractor” via contracts that would be signed between app-based drivers and the “network companies,” exempting these workers from the legal rights they were set to receive under AB5, and establishing a separate suite of reduced benefits and wage guarantees.<sup>22</sup> The major delivery and ride hailing apps Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, Instacart, and Postmates, and other backers spent approximately \$224 million in support of the legislation, making it the largest expenditure on a single ballot measure in California’s history.<sup>23</sup> In August 2021 a California superior court judge ruled Prop 22 unconstitutional, but that ruling was overturned in a court of appeals in March 2023. Latest reporting states that this case will likely be headed to the California Supreme Court.<sup>24</sup>

How did Prop 22 win consent from the public in the first place? The legislation’s backers put their large war chest to wide and varied use. The business coalition behind the measure hired

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<sup>21</sup> McNicholas and Poydck, 2019

<sup>22</sup> CA.gov, “Text of Proposed Laws”

<sup>23</sup> Ballotpedia

<sup>24</sup> Browning, 2023

at least 18 different PR firms to develop various outreach and influence strategies.<sup>25</sup>

Expenditures included huge sums to target the public with radio and TV ads, mailers, and digital advertising on Facebook and Google.<sup>26</sup> A reported \$85,000 went to a consulting firm run by the head of California’s NAACP who later endorsed the measure,<sup>27</sup> and Uber rolled out a multi-million “anti-racism” advertising campaign, amidst the large-scale national Black Lives Matter uprising that summer. Passengers using Uber were served pop-up ads claiming that passage of Prop 22 would result in fare hikes or discontinued service altogether.<sup>28</sup> In summation, the coalition spent hundreds of millions of dollars in order to create a narrative. The content of this messaging was diverse and targeted at different sectors of the public. As mentioned, these companies utilized racial identity and financial scare tactics, but the main thrust of their story—evidenced by the full name of the act—was that this legislation was pro-worker. And it was effective, in part, because a significant portion of app-based workers did support Prop 22. The campaign prominently featured driver testimonials on their website and in their ads.<sup>29</sup>

Why did some portion of drivers support legislation that many legal and labor experts agreed would have a negative impact on their livelihood? There are a number of factors here as well. Just as they did with passengers, Uber added a pop-up advertisement to their application that drivers had to view before they could accept a ride. It urged them to “Vote Yes on 22” and if they clicked through, it would take them to a website with messaging specifically aimed at workers, claiming failure to pass Prop 22 would affect their ability to make money on the app. The website also claimed that driver “flexibility” could only be preserved by maintaining their

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<sup>25</sup> Canales, 2020

<sup>26</sup> Kerr, Sept. 2020

<sup>27</sup> Kerr, Nov. 2020

<sup>28</sup> Gurley, 2020

<sup>29</sup> Protect Drivers and Services, “Driver Stories”

legal status as “independent contractors.”<sup>30</sup> In this way, the apps were able to capitalize on existing individualized entrepreneurial ideology among a section of the workforce.

“Flexibility”—understood as having the ability to work as much or as little as you like—has long been a promise of app-based recruitment materials, even as researchers have shown the majority of the app-based workforce works over 30 hours a week and that the pool of app-based workers seeking work consistently exceeds the amount of jobs available.<sup>31</sup> In short the apps benefit from the fiction that workers are in control of their working conditions via their independence because a certain number of the workers believe this about themselves as well. The campaign was able to speak directly to drivers’ concerns: it combined coercion (playing on fears of diminished opportunity to work) and persuasion (playing up a flattering image of workers as agents of their own financial destiny).

There are some interesting takeaways from this campaign. A key feature was the business interests’ use of the democratic process within the constitutional framework of the state of California. By using a ballot measure, they were able to appeal to the public directly, sidestepping state-level representatives, and successfully contravening regulations put in place by professional legislators. Once they were able to address the public directly, they were able to use both their vast sums of money, and their control over marketplace infrastructure (in the form of the apps) to promote their message. Their message was that Prop 22 was pro-worker. They were able to convince the public of this, in part, because they were able to appeal to the workers’ positive self-conception as “independent contractors,” and then mobilize them as public advocates in defense of this identity.

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<sup>30</sup> Gureley, 2020

<sup>31</sup> Chan, 2020



## Deliveristas Unidos

In September 2021 the New York City Council passed a slate of bills aimed at protecting delivery workers. These measures set a minimum base pay per ride, guarantee bathroom access to delivery workers, set geographic limits on the length of deliveries, and more.<sup>32</sup> The package of legislation was introduced and passed largely as a result of advocacy by a group of delivery-app workers calling itself “Los Deliveristas Unidos” founded in April 2021. Since the bills’ passage, Uber, Lyft, and Grubhub have successfully delayed implementation of the rules surrounding worker pay by directly lobbying the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, the City agency tasked under the legislation with studying and implementing the wage increases.<sup>33</sup>

Los Deliveristas, an informal, worker-led organization, developed in the absence of the infrastructural organization traditionally provided by an employer. The delivery riders have no set workplace, or even set territory where they work. They are managed not by human overseers, but by algorithms—which some refer to as the “patrón fantasma” (ghost boss)—that sets their wages, determines their pace, and assigns them work, but with no opportunity for direct recourse. Because of the pace of work required by the delivery apps, most delivery workers in New York have been incentivized to ride high speed e-bikes or risk being demoted in the algorithmic ranking and be deprioritized for new jobs. The workers must provide their own form of transportation in order to work, and pay out of pocket for their bikes, as well as their maintenance, repair, and storage. Because they have no formal workplace, groups of these riders have begun sharing the cost of spaces in garages and convening at bike shops where they can rest and repair their bikes between rides.

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<sup>32</sup> Velasquez and Aponte, 2021

<sup>33</sup> New York City Comptroller, 2023

The e-bikes mostly cost anywhere from \$2,000–\$3,000 and have become a target for theft. After a rider was attacked and his bikes stolen in October 2020, following a string of incidents that were being ignored by the NYPD, some of his garage-mates had enough. They decided to ride to the local police precinct and demand action. One announced it on his Facebook page and about 30 delivery riders total showed up for an impromptu rally. Videos from the rally posted online spread through the delivery community and attracted the attention of a local community organizing non-profit, Worker’s Justice Project (WJP). Another rally at City Hall, this time planned in advance, was hosted soon after, attracting hundreds of riders. Workers involved in that rally, with assistance and training from WJP, soon formed Los Deliveristas Unidos, and began actively organizing other riders into the group, building alliances with local labor unions, and lobbying local politicians for legal protections and other reforms. Legislation based on their demands was introduced in April 2021.<sup>34</sup>

The case of the Deliveristas illustrates a tendency that Gramsci described in his writing: the organic development of worker consciousness through forms of work, stimulated and aided by a group of trained organizers. Directly as a result of not being concentrated in a single location, workers began physically organizing themselves around shops and garages and creating communication networks. The nature of their extremely alienated work, and the costs of physical labor and machine maintenance, encouraged them to pool their economic resources. Their vulnerability to theft and violence and lack of protections from the police brought them into confrontation with the state. They shared their stories and built their network using available digital communication technologies like messaging apps and social media. Spontaneous action drew attention from outside groups willing to share their expertise. And together this culminated

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<sup>34</sup> Dzieza, 2021

in a sense of self-consciousness as a collective worker, and a willingness to organize explicitly as such and make further demands of the state and their employers.

## **Conclusion**

Gramsci was a complex thinker. His ideation and language is dense, multilayered, at times contradictory, and his work was constantly evolving and building upon itself. But how could it be otherwise when he set himself the task of thinking through the immense complexity of the capitalist totality growing like a cancer on the modern world? In trying to think with Gramsci within the limited bounds of the interaction of work and consciousness, one is almost immediately forced to open their aperture to encompass an array of other influential institutions, relationships, feelings, and forces and attempt to account for their impact. A narrow focus is not really in the spirit of Gramsci. To consider the relationship between work and self is immediately to think about the role of the state, the role of the media, the function of democracy, the economy, technology, and a host of other spheres of an intricately interwoven social structure. Looking at two case studies with a large number of similarities is one method for reducing noise and keeping us attuned to certain specific circumstances. By identifying similarities we can identify certain trends, certain common features in the modes of historical development at play. And through a close examination of their differences, we can attempt to locate the internal and external forces unique to each situation that relate to their divergence.

With both Prop 22 and Los Deliveristas Unidos, we are dealing with a similar form of work: geographically diffuse app-based transportation gig-work in the U.S. happening primarily in urban centers. Both cases illustrate how this form of work produces a new type of worker,

often precarious, underemployed, and otherwise lacking the means of social reproduction sometimes provided by employers, while also lacking basic legal protections from the state. These conditions combine with efforts by organizers to produce new forms of worker consciousness. That consciousness is used to mobilize workers to win concessions from the state at a relatively local level, formalized as legal recognition of specific ideological versions of the app-based worker. It is also worth noting that both efforts began in 2020, and the increased visibility of this specific workforce as “essential” in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak likely contributed to their political salience.

Beyond those similarities, the tactics and ends pursued were quite different. In the case of Prop 22 the organizing body was a collective of financial interests, with an explicit goal at the outset of pursuing political action, and then working to mobilize a base of support. This group strategically used a technical exploit within the state legal apparatus—in the form of a ballot measure—to undermine its ability to regulate them. It used the structural advantages of massive wealth and infrastructural capture to increase its influence. The worker consciousness it produced and enshrined in law, was that of the individual market actor. In the case of Los Diliveristas Unidos, organization initially happened spontaneously as a worker response to a deficiency of top-down organization from employers and a lack of visibility to the state. It was only through spontaneous action and cooperative struggle that the workers’ consciousness developed to the point where they became aware of their power and a desire to ask for more. The movement built strength and influence by working in coalition with non-profits, labor groups, and other non-enterprise civil society groups. The worker consciousness it enshrined in law was that of the collective worker laboring under shared conditions.

So, despite these new forms of work, to borrow a phrase, the economic relationship does still seem to be determining in the last instance, in as much as the crucial distinction between individual and collective consciousness remains unresolved under capitalism. And if the internal contradictions within the capitalist system tend towards crisis, it is also true that capital has proven to be quite adept at self-preservation through technological fix. As an organizer and theorist, Gramsci was chiefly concerned with the power of ideology to consolidate power behind a particular class's vision of the world and its systems, and in the process reproduce itself. In our time, it may be less that a particular segment of the capitalist class, or a particular nationalist version of capitalism has ideological dominance, but that the disembodied logic of capitalism itself, enshrined within our legal systems, our algorithms, and our own visions of ourselves is increasingly the leading hegemonic force in society. But as always there is a question of how long the legitimacy of this system can last.

Gramsci decried socialist utopianism as lacking a concrete picture of the present, but that didn't stop him from engaging in the positive imaginary from time to time. In his unfinished work of revolutionary political science and strategy, "The Modern Prince," he sketched a three stage development of consciousness through which the working class could take power, and eventually overthrow the state. First the workers in a particular trade needed to become aware of their shared economic interests. Second, they needed to recognize their place within a broader economic class and begin fighting for recognition and power within the state. Finally, once they become aware that all oppressed peoples are united, they will embrace political goals not related to narrow economic issues, unite all the subaltern classes to take state power, and lead them to a new world—creating a whole new revolutionary consciousness along the way.<sup>35</sup> It is a beautiful

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<sup>35</sup> Gramsci, "The Modern Prince," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 181.

vision, and as the examples of the Deliveristas show, there is still potential for a collective anti-individualist conception of the world to take root. But a critical examination of the array of social forces in the current moment suggests the hegemony of the proletariat is further from realization now than it was in Gramsci's time.

If there is any hope of moving closer to that world, Gramsci emphasized that it would require direct intervention. But what avenues are open to us? Gramsci pointed to the "party" as an institution that could furnish intellectual leaders who could provide expertise and instruction, and simultaneously function to develop new leaders and new consciousness through the experience of shared struggle. Altenried calls for the creation of new digital tools and a push to take public ownership over technologies, to turn them to use for the common good. Arboleda advocates for embracing indigenous forms of knowledge and collectivity in the few areas of the world that continue to exist and survive outside the circuits of capital. From the examples of Prop 22 and Los Deliveristas Unidos, it seems there is a role for all of these methods to play. The movement against capital needs strategic leadership and experience, it needs to participate in active struggle, it needs to use the technologies available to it, and crucially, it needs to continue to work to "render 'subjective' that which is given 'objectively,'"<sup>36</sup> i.e. fight the ideology of capitalist isolation and foment the collective consciousness of cooperation and collaboration. And this all begins with a clear view of the complicated ways in which ideology functions materially in our world. Gramsci the intellectual helps lead us there.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.202

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