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Abstract
Recent years have witnessed the rise of digital platforms that allow economic agents to arrange ever more fine-grained contracts. This article zooms in on *labour-based platforms* that permit the hire of labour in a just-in-time fashion (and are part of the broader trend towards on-demand work). Its principal contributions correspond to its three sections. First, the article exposes the frequently overlooked diversity of labour-based platforms. While the debate typically focuses on powerful platform companies, which arguably constitute distinct economic entities, other platforms resemble mere marketplaces or ordinary employers. Second, it argues that staying alert to this diversity is vital because violations of labour justice take different forms across the three types of platforms. The underlying cause, however, is identical: their relative powerlessness renders workers vulnerable to domination and exploitation. Finally, the article examines three strategies for addressing this threat: turning platforms into worker-run co-ops, introducing stricter regulation, and improving outside job opportunities. While each strategy is most suitable in certain contexts, and all three are complementary, the article argues that the last strategy is most significant. This feeds into its overall conclusion: we should always discuss labour-based platforms with an eye towards the broader labour market.

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1. Introduction

One of the major economic shifts over the past two decades has been the evolution and increasing reach of digital platforms, which has prompted some to proclaim the "rise of the platform economy" (see e.g. Kenney and Zysman 2016). Platforms have grown in relevance not only in the economic, but also in the social realm, where firms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have grown to connect hundreds of millions of people. Platforms can be characterised as technological frameworks that allow agents to interact – for the purpose of communicating in the case of social platforms and for the purpose of entering fine-grained contracts in the case of economic platforms. By providing a suitable, digitally organised infrastructure, these latter platforms enable economic agents – including customers, workers, and firms – to advertise and search for products and services in ways that would hitherto not have been feasible.

While the platform economy is often treated as a uniform phenomenon, it is important to be attentive to the diversity of platforms. We can distinguish at least *three types of economic* *platforms*. First, there are *trade-based platforms* like Ebay, Etsy and Amazon, which allow individuals and firms to buy and sell a large variety of physical goods.[1] These platforms effectively operate as digital marketplaces: they enable their users to advertise and to search for specific products, thereby facilitating trade. Second, there are *capital-based platforms* like Airbnb and Tulo, which allow individuals to lease and to rent out capital assets like apartments and cars. These capital-based platforms form the core of the so-called 'sharing economy', which reflects the idealistic roots of the initial heyday of platforms: the idea that by sharing rather than owning capital assets, we can exploit economic inefficiencies that result from their idleness, thereby reducing our environmental footprint (see Heinrichs 2013). Finally, there are *labour-based platforms*, such as TaskRabbit, Upshift and Uber, which enable individuals to sell, and other agents to buy, labour for specific tasks. These labour-based platforms are symptomatic of the shift towards on-demand work, but they are not alone in driving it; other policies in the labour market, like employment on zero-hour contracts and the reliance on last-minute scheduling, equally increase the short-term availability of labour. While the distinction between these three categories is not always clear-cut, as some platforms combine several aspects,[2] it yields a helpful framework for structuring, and narrowing down, the debate of the platform economy. This article focuses on labour-based platforms, i.e., digital matchmakers whose primary aim is to connect those who want to buy labour for a specific task (rather than purchase a physical product or lease a capital asset) with those willing to provide this labour against payment.

This preliminary clarification allows us to turn to the questions that stand at the centre of this paper: *in what ways do labour-based platforms pose a threat to labour justice, and in what ways can this threat be addressed?* Both questions are important and pressing. In recent years, platforms have increasingly been portrayed as drivers of precarity in the media and the popular press (see e.g. Scholz 2017; Kessler 2018; Semuels 2018; Aron 2021); meanwhile, they are projected to grow substantially more powerful in the near-term future (Mastercard and Kaiser Associates 2019). While sociologists and ethnographers (see e.g. Rosenblat 2018; Ravenelle

[1] The qualifier that trade-based platforms are be limited to the trade of physical goods is critical here. Because the other platforms identified below serve as matchmakers, too, they could be said to be oriented towards a form of trade as well, namely a trade in capital-based or labour-based services.

[2] This is true even of some of the platforms invoked as examples here. While Airbnb is geared towards the short-term lease of capital assets (rooms, apartments, houses), this lease also requires the input of labour: someone must welcome the guests and tidy the apartment after their visit. And while TaskRabbit is used to contract the labour required to complete specific tasks, some tasks require workers to bring along specialised equipment (think of a lawn mower or a snow shovel), which is a capital asset. Strictly speaking, it would thus perhaps be more accurate locate economic platforms on a three-dimensional spectrum, with trade in physical goods, capital, and labour as the dimensions. In practice, however, one of these aspects will typically be dominant, and it will be evident which.

2019; Schor 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020), alongside managerial economists (see e.g. McDonnell et al. 2021; van Doorn and Chen 2021) have devoted significant attention to labour platforms, political philosophers have by-and-large not done so. For example, platforms barely feature in recent edited volume on the future of work and the proposal of a basic income (Cholbi and Weber 2020); instead, the potential for automation, and the projected loss of jobs resulting from it, takes centre stage. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Anderson's (2017) influential proposal to conceive of companies as private governments focuses squarely on regular modes of employment: in detailing the ways in which companies exercise far-reaching, and largely unchecked, power over their workforces, Anderson restricts her view to traditional firms. While there are a few notable exceptions (see e.g. Halliday 2021; Muldoon and Raekstad 2022),[3] the philosophical literature on platform-based work remains fairly slim.

In attempting to answer the two questions specified above, the paper proceeds in three steps. Section 2 begins by examining the range of labour-based platforms. While the discussion typically focuses on platforms like Uber that hire on-demand labour to provide services they independently sell, platforms come in a variety of forms. The section distinguishes three types: *bare-bones platforms* that function as mere marketplaces, *platform companies* that directly sell on-demand services and rely on independent contractors to provide them, and *platforms-turned-employers* that offer similar services but employ their workers. Remaining alert to this full range is critical, if one hopes to attain a comprehensive view of the way in which labour-based platforms pose a threat to justice. Section 3 moves on to examine this threat. It starts by critically discussing Daniel Halliday's (2021) claim that justice is violated whenever platforms manage to simultaneously withhold from workers the freedoms associated with self-employment and the guarantees associated with regular employment. It argues that an injustice occurs when platforms withhold freedoms and guarantees *while also not providing monetary compensation*. Where platforms achieve this, their ability to do so points to an underlying concern: the relative powerlessness of workers. Drawing in part on empirical evidence, which reveals that the satisfaction of platform workers depends greatly on whether they rely on this work for their living, the section argues that the core threat to justice is a lack of power, which renders workers vulnerable to domination and exploitation. Importantly, this holds across all three types of platforms: while domination and exploitation take different forms, a relative lack of power enables them in each case. Section 4 then examines three strategies aimed at countering the threat of injustice: turning platforms into worker-run co-ops, regulating them more tightly, and

[3] For an attempt to map the ethical questions surrounding the gig economy, also see Zhi Ming Tan et al. (2021).

improving the outside options of their workers. It argues that while each strategy will be most suitable in some contexts, and the three approaches are best conceived of as complements, the improvement of the outside options of platform workers is ultimately most significant. This feeds into a two-fold conclusion. It indicates that even where labour-based platforms manage to attain a dominating position vis-à-vis their workforce, it would be inappropriate to place blame only on them: for those who rely on these platforms still do so voluntarily, and for a lack of better alternative for which no single firm is to blame. This in turn highlights the limits of thinking about labour-based platforms in isolation – instead, it is advisable to always evaluate them with an eye towards the broader structure of the labour market.

2. The Range of Labour-Based Platforms

Where labour-based platforms have received theoretical attention, a central question has been how to classify them. Platforms themselves have traditionally claimed to be mere intermediaries, while many workers and labour activists instead insist that they are employers in disguise.[4] Some academic have meanwhile proposed a third alternative. In an influential paper, Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor (2020) argue that platforms embody a "distinct type of governance mechanism" (2020, 273).[5] According to Vallas and Schor, platforms are unlike markets, but also unlike hierarchically organised firms: they "govern economic transactions not by expanding their control over participants, but by relinquishing important dimensions of control and delegating them to the other two parties of the exchange" (2020, 281). Because platforms simultaneously delegate control and retain power, Vallas and Schor call them "permissive potentates" (2020, 281).[6] Their characterisation is, I believe, spot-on and apt – but it applies *only to some* labour-based platforms. In making this case, I start by scrutinising the respective arguments of those who insist that platforms are just intermediaries and those who insist that they are employers in disguise. Neither argument, I contend, is plausible for the likes of Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash, which have come to dominate the discussions surrounding labour-based platforms. But there are other platforms, I show, for which each of the arguments has bite.

Most platforms insist that they merely serve as intermediaries in the mould of market makers: they provide a space for sellers and buyers of labour (or labour-based services) to meet

[4] Several court battles have been fought over this question, with varying outcomes (see Halliday 2021, 230).
[5] In developing this proposal, Vallas and Schor draw on existing studies that examine the organisational structure of labour-based platforms (see Aneesh 2009; Kornberger, Pflueger, and Mouritsen 2017).
[6] Vallas and Schor contrast this understanding with four existing "images of platform work", namely as "incubators of entrepreneurialism" (activating idle resources through sharing), "digital cages" (algorithms taking over the management), "accelerants of precarity" (dramatic negative shift of the position of the workforce) and "institutional chameleons" (platforms taking a variety of forms responding to their environment) (2020, 277–81).

and transact. According to this narrative, those who find work through a platform are no more its employees than the owner of a fruit stand is the employee of a farmer's market. Instead, those who sell their labour, just like those who buy it, are *users* of the platform. In this understanding, a platform is nothing more than a marketplace. This description has come under intense scrutiny, and it is indeed implausible for platforms like Uber and DoorDash. These platforms offer a specific, labour-based service – ride-hailing and delivery – and while those who purchase and those who provide these services interact through this platform, they never directly enter into a contract with each other. Instead, they each contract with the platform, which takes on the role of an active intermediary: it acts as the provider of the service on the one hand and as the buyer of the labour required to provide it on the other.

Yet, there are labour-based platforms for which the characterisation as mere market makers is more fitting. Consider, for instance, TaskRabbit, a platform that allows individuals to advertise to take on a range of tasks, such as running errands, doing repairs, cleaning, and setting up furniture. Those who wish to buy these services can contact the so-called 'taskers' through the platform. Unlike Uber or DoorDash, TaskRabbit does not act as the provider of these services. Instead, it provides the infrastructure that permits sellers and buyers of labour (or labour-based services) to connect and securely transact. In addition to serving as an advertisement forum, TaskRabbit takes measures aimed at building the trust required for these transactions: it performs background checks on taskers, operates a rating system, and serves as an intermediary, and thus as the guarantor, of payments (of which it takes a cut). This gives TaskRabbit some control over those who sell their labour through the platform: for example, its algorithms determine how prominently their profiles are displayed, and a breach of its terms of service can result in suspension. But this form of control is not atypical for a marketplace: on a farmers' market, vendors need to accredit themselves, are allotted locations, and they may be suspended for failing to follow the rules. The same holds for trade fairs and stock exchanges. While more established vendors and traders typically have at least some say in the rules of the marketplace, which may run by a trade collective (or operated in other ways that give stakeholders a voice), new entrants are subjected to existing rules in much the same way as a new tasker is. TaskRabbit thus really resembles an ordinary marketplace.

Many workers and labour advocates meanwhile insist that (most) platforms are employers in disguise: they exercise control over the conditions of work in ways that are compatible only with regular employment. As the above analysis brought out, this claim is not plausible in the case of a platform like TaskRabbit, which grant considerable autonomy to individual workers, allowing them to negotiate pay, to set their schedule, and to perform their work independently.

And it is implausible even for firms like Uber and DoorDash (at least given how they operate in the United States).[7] These platforms directly sell services and only then hire labour on an to provide them. And in order to be able to do so reliably, they impose rules on their workforce, ranging from requirements of punctuality to directives concerning attire. But those who work through these platforms still differ from regular employees. Instead of being bound to a schedule, they are at liberty to decide, at any moment, whether to accept a ride (while suffering from the risk that there will be no rides, or at least none that are attractively priced). And while many platforms rely on tools like surge pricing and bonus payments to ensure that enough workers are always readily available, they cannot command them to work or to take on specific tasks. This feature distinguishes them from regular employers.[8]

Yet, there are labour-based platforms that have arguably morphed into regular employers. In several European jurisdictions, which have stricter laws against fictitious self-employment, delivery platforms have adopted a more conventional model of employment. Lieferando, for example, a German food delivery platform, gives part-time or full-time contracts to all of its drivers, guaranteeing them the state-mandated minimum wage, along with other benefits and social insurance; additional bonuses are paid for deliveries (Schreyer 2021).[9] In return, drivers lose some liberty: they have to sign-up for shifts in advance, and the firm effectively dispatches them, assigning them deliveries through the app rather than allowing them to choose whether to accept them. Lieferando has turned into an employer with a regular workforce. Analogous work arrangements exist at grocery delivery platforms like Flink and Gorillas.[10]

Based on this analysis, I propose to distinguish three types of platforms, which demarcate a spectrum from least institutionalised to most institutionalised. *Bare-bones platforms* are at the lower end of institutionalisation: they do not sell services themselves, but really serve only as a forum that allows buyers and sellers of labour, or of labour-based services, to connect and to enter into agreements. TaskRabbit arguably qualifies as such a bare-bones platform; in any case, a suitably scaled-down version of TaskRabbit, which exercises even less control, would. Bare-bones platforms neither qualify as permissive potentates, nor as a distinct, new form of governance; instead, they are akin to mere marketplaces. In the intermediate place are *platform*

[7] In some jurisdictions, Uber drivers have been granted additional rights, such as recognition as workers and a guaranteed minimum wage from the moment they have accepted a ride (see e.g. Stein 2020). Even then, however, they are not bound to shifts, and are not guaranteed any rides, so I would not classify them as employees.
[8] The claim here is not that these platforms should not bear greater responsibilities for those who work for them; it is merely that, given current arrangements, these platforms do not qualify as regular employers.
[9] Note that restaurants can also choose to take care of deliveries themselves (and many apparently do), in which case work arrangements may differ (Schreyer 2021, 74).
[10] Admittedly, one might ask whether they still qualify as labour-based platform; I address this concern below.

companies: they sell labour-based services directly to customers and then purchase, and direct, the labour needed to provide them in an on-demand mode. Firms like Uber and DoorDash fall into this category. These firms, which are the focal point of the public and academic debate surrounding labour-based platforms, fit Vallas and Schor's description as permissive potentates and arguably constitute a new form of governance. Finally, at the top end of institutionalisation, there are *platforms-turned-employers*: Lieferando and other platforms that offer labour-based, on-demand services, but directly employ their workers, fall into this category. These platforms-turned-employers do not qualify as permissive potentates because they do not disperse control. And instead of embodying a new form of governance, they resemble ordinary, hierarchically structured companies.

While I will rely on this taxonomy of labour-based platforms throughout the text, one potential objection should be addressed. One might question whether platforms-turned-employers are really platforms at all. In important ways, Lieferando resembles a taxi company that dispatches its drivers as bookings arrive. In my view, three observations speak in favour for counting Lieferando as a platform. First, its business model relies on the digital infrastructure characteristic of platforms, which allows customers to access a labour-based, on-demand service and connects them to those who provide this service. Second, if one were to insist that, once a platform company hires its workers, it can no longer be a platform, then the common demand to employ platform workers would be misguided: platform workers could then never, as a matter of principle, become employees whilst remaining platform workers. Finally, if one insists that platforms-turned-employers do not qualify, one confronts the question why platform companies do. For according to the characterisation given above, labour-based platforms are digital matchmakers that connect those willing to buy labour for a specific task (or a labour-based service) with those who seek to perform it. But platform companies like Uber and DoorDash, which are the epitomes of the platform economy, are direct sellers of such services and their role extends beyond that of mere matchmakers. So, I believe that platforms-turned-employers should be counted as platforms. But note that even if one were to dispute this claim, my argument would not be fundamentally undermined. On the one hand, even in this case, platforms would clearly come in a variety of types, ranging from mere marketplaces to powerful platform companies. Moreover, if one is concerned about threats of injustice in the platform economy, then one cannot be indifferent to the question whether such threats persist for platforms-turned-employers (whether they are platforms or not) – for its answer determines whether a mere shift towards the employment of workers would amount to a genuine solution.

3. Labour-Based Platforms and the Threat of Injustice

The platform economy has, over the past years and especially in the wake of the Covid pandemic, faced increasingly vocal criticisms over its working conditions. Labour-based platforms have drawn fire not only from some of their own workers (Sainato 2019) as well as unions and labour activists (Trade Union Congress 2021). Platform work has also been subject of scathing accounts in the media (see e.g. Tolentino 2017; Thompson 2019; Conger, Satariano, and Isaac 2020) and in popular books (see e.g. Kessler 2018). A mostly critical stance is also evident in the work of academics. Sociologists have detailed the manifold hardships of platform work (see e.g. Rosenblat 2018; Ravenelle 2019) and have framed platforms as free-riders, whose business is parasitic on that of ordinary employers (Schor 2020, 71–72). This section aims to add to the theoretical debate by providing a more nuanced answer to the question: in what ways do labour-based platforms pose a threat to labour justice?

The conditions of platform work have been subject to numerous criticisms, but chief among them are the lack of social insurance and income stability, the relatively low pay, the far-reaching control exercised by platforms, and the difficulty of bonding and organising with fellow platform workers. Consider, for instance, the ride-hailing behemoth Uber. Because Uber drivers are independent contractors (at least outside of the UK), they are not covered by insurance, and are vulnerable to unexpected shifts in demand, as the dramatic decrease in ridership during the pandemic illustrated (see Spurk and Straub 2020). Second, while the pay fluctuates, drivers frequently struggle to earn the minimum wage once the expense of operating their vehicles is factored in (see e.g. Stanford 2018 who estimates net incomes in Australia). Third, Uber constantly monitors drivers and uses models to predict their behaviour, has the power to unilaterally set prices (in the form of take-it-or-leave-it-offers), and can modify its access requirements at will (for instance by no longer permitted certain vehicles) (Möhlmann and Henfridsson 2019; Halliday 2021, 238–39). Fourth, the individualised nature of the work, which turns drivers into competitors, makes it hard to organise – there are few opportunities for drivers to meet or bond (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Note that all these criticisms concern the way platform work is structured, not the occupation itself. There may be additional occupation-related concerns, such as the health effects of spending all day in a driver's seat; but these would apply equally to employees of ordinary firms, such as taxi drivers, chauffeurs, and truckers.

Underpinning these four criticisms is the contention that the way platform work is organised is unjust, and more specifically that workers are treated unjustly. According to Halliday (2021), this injustice consists in platforms simultaneously denying workers the benefits of employment and the benefits of self-employment. Halliday presents the choice between self-employment and employment as one between accepting risk in return for freedom and ceding freedom in return for security (2021, 231). The self-employed enjoy numerous freedoms, such as the freedom to directly negotiate over the price of their services, the freedom to self-brand, the freedom to make independent capital investments, and the freedom to decide whether to stay in business (2021, 235–39). By becoming an employee, one gives up these freedoms, but obtains security in return: employees are guaranteed a certain pay for their hours spent at work, are entitled to benefits like paid holidays and sick leave, and cannot be fired without notice (2021, 234). In Halliday's view, this is not merely a descriptive statement: instead, he contends, that "employees cede at least some freedoms […] in return for certain guarantees [is] what employment law and policy, on these matters, *should* say" (2021, 231). But platforms, Halliday argues (primarily by reference to the case of Uber) do not respect this trade-off: they neither offer their workers the guarantees that comes with employment, nor the freedoms that come with self-employment.[11] While Halliday holds that we should conceive of the employer/freelancer distinction as a spectrum (2021, 243), and that platforms should be free to choose how to balance freedoms and guarantees (2021, 245), he insists that they "cannot have it *both* ways" (2021, 243, italics in the original): "[i]f a worker is denied the freedoms of a freelancer, then they must (proportionately) received the guarantees of an employee" (2021, 243). Platforms are a threat to labour justice, according to Halliday, because they tend to ignore this trade-off, denying their workers a just combination of freedoms and guarantees.

While Halliday provides an illuminating account of the ways in which platforms undercut the distinction between employment and self-employment, I believe that he fails to fully identify the injustice. The problem is not simply that platforms "have it both ways", but that they manage to have it both ways *without offering adequate compensation*. To see why Halliday's account falls short, consider a person who voluntarily gives up the guarantees characteristic of employment as well as the freedoms characteristic of self-employment, but does so in return for a *very* high expected wage: would this worker really be subjected to an injustice, as Halliday is committed to claim? Halliday addresses this concern (2021, 241–42), providing a two-fold response.[12] He first notes that few platform workers can in fact expect very high wages. This is correct but does not show that compensation could not make a difference. Halliday's second

[11] In Halliday's view, "[t]hey get to behave like employers when it comes to directing workers […] and get to behave like mere brokers when it comes to not providing workers with relevant guarantees" (2021, 241).
[12] Halliday also admits that "[i]t is hard, however, to entirely dismiss the claim that higher earnings in the face of low freedom and low security still matter", but ultimately insists that "the dimensions of security and freedom may remain the sole variable so far as justice is concerned" (2021, 242).

point is that while compensation concerns individual transactions, the injustice concerns a relationship. To make this point, he draws on the occasional Uber driver. Due to the more sporadic nature of their work, Halliday claims, this driver is not entitled to the same sort of security. So, despite being subject to exactly the same conditions, the occasional driver would not be treated unjustly (whereas the regular driver would). But, Halliday claims, the "trouble […] with treating expected compensation as decisive is that it is harder to avoid disqualifying these workers as victims of injustice [because] expected compensation is specific to individual transactions" (2021, 242). Halliday makes two plausible observations: drivers are paid per transaction and the standards for just treatment arguably differ for occasional drivers. But both observations are perfectly compatible with insisting that expected overall compensation is a relevant factor. Given some relationship between a platform and a worker (be it an occasional or a full-time worker), whether an injustice exists depends not only on which benefits and freedoms the worker retains, but also on what their expected renumeration is – not for a specific transaction, but over the course of the relationship. Put differently, holding everything else equal, we may at least sometimes be able to remove an existing injustice (or create one) by, perhaps dramatically, increasing (or by decreasing) the worker's expected income.

But the above discussion not only yields a more nuanced account of the injustice to which platform workers may be exposed. It also suggests a way of characterising the underlying threat to labour justice in broader terms. For, yes, there is an injustice when platforms manage to *have it both ways* without offering compensation. But that they manage to do so is indicative of a more fundamental problem: it reveals an imbalance of power that allows platforms to get away with it. And it is this imbalance of power that enables platforms to, more broadly, dominate, and potentially exploit, their workers: if the bargaining position of workers is sufficiently weak, then platforms can impose their will on them in a variety of domains. Domination and exploitation can thus take a variety of forms: denying workers the benefits of employment and self-employment without compensation is one; using hidden surveillance tools and nudging strategies to trick workers into accepting unattractive rides is another. But domination can arguably also take more exotic forms. In a recent paper, James Muldoon and Paul Raekstad (2022) for instance explore the possibility of algorithmic domination. Algorithmic domination, on their account, consists in being "subjected to a dominating power, the operations of which are (either in part of in whole) determined directly by an algorithm" (2022, 7).

Putting the power imbalance in the relationship between platforms and workers at the core of the analysis allows us to provide a more nuanced account of when platform work poses a threat to labour justice. Specifically, it allows us to differentiate among workers. For what often fades into the background in the more theoretical debates of platform work is the heterogeneity of platform workers and the corresponding diversity of the experiences. As Juliet Schor and her co-authors (2020) show in a recent study focusing on the United States,[13] platform workers come from all walks of life and find themselves in very different circumstances. What Schor and her co-authors find is that those who rely on platform work for their living (the *dependent earners*) tend to report exhaustion, powerlessness and a sense of vulnerability, or even a feeling of being exploited (2020, 847–51), virtually all saying that theirs is a "less-than-ideal working arrangement" (2020, 849). By contrast, those who engage in platform work to earn some extra money, but do not depend on the income to cover basic needs (the *supplemental earners*), tend to be quite satisfied with their conditions of work. They allow themselves to be selective when it comes to the choice of jobs, feel free to occasionally violate platform policies despite the risk of suspension, and state that the opportunity to earn additional money through platform work overall *in*creases their sense of economic security (2020, 845–47).[14] Of course, high reported levels of satisfaction do not prove that there is no problem – supplemental earners could simply be ignorant of being subjected to an injustice. But there is a principled explanation for why the threat of injustice is greatly reduced in their case: supplemental earners are in a more independent position vis-à-vis the platforms, which renders them less vulnerable to domination and exploitation.[15] If, hypothetically, all platform workers were to become merely supplemental earners, platforms would lose much of their potency, and would it find it much more difficult to (in Halliday's terms) 'have it both ways' without offering premium pay.[16]

In addition, the lens of power allows us to appreciate how labour-based platforms of all three types can pose a threat to labour justice. Those who work for bare-bones platforms enjoy all the freedoms characteristic of self-employment and those who work for platforms-turned-

[13] At just 112, their sample size is relatively small. Yet despite the relative abundance of first-hand accounts of platform work and portrayals of platform workers, there do not appear to exist bigger, cross-sectional studies on the experiences of workers for a variety of platforms (on this, see also Schor et al. 2020, 834).
[14] Schor et al. also include an intermediate, third category, the "partly dependent group" (2020, 841), which consists of those who have income from multiple sources (which could be multiple platforms). I set this category aside here as the experience of partly dependent earners, unexpectedly, falls somewhere in-between.
[15] Of the four concerns raised at the outset of this section, only that of being unable to organise applies equally to supplemental earners.
[16] In the case of supplemental earners, we might however be concerned with a threat of free-riding at the social level. For in the absence of a universal basic income, the existence of supplemental earners presupposes that other firms offer more stable employment (setting aside the special cases of pensioners and the independently wealthy). But in this case, platforms get the benefits of a readily available workforce without paying the costs of regular employment – they are thus free-riding on the other firms who offer regular employment (on this thought, see also Schor et al. 2020, 835). While I believe that there is a basis to this concern in the case of platforms companies that qualify as 'permissive potentates', I believe that it should not be overstated. If all those working for platforms were merely supplemental earners, then they would insist on attractive conditions, making platforms pay dearly for the flexible services of their workforce. (There might still be a worry about platforms reaping supernormal profits because they are natural monopolies, but this is a different type of concern.)

employers enjoy all the guarantees characteristic of ordinary employment. So, on Halliday's account, it is difficult to see how they could be subject to an injustice akin to that experienced by workers of platform companies. Yet, empirical studies suggest that overall job satisfaction does *not* depend significantly on the type of platform one works for. Schor et al. (2020) report similar levels of overall satisfaction, and similar experiences of job insecurity and powerlessness, for dependent workers on Uber and for dependent workers on TaskRabbit (and also for supplemental earners on the two platforms).[17] This suggests that the problem does not lie primarily in the way a platform is organised (and thus not in the specific set of freedoms and benefits it provides). Instead, what matters is that dependent earners on TaskRabbit, just like dependent earners on Uber, are in a weak bargaining position. Because they need to make ends meet, they cannot be selective about when to work and which jobs to accept. This puts them under pressure, regardless of whether they perform all their jobs for a single platform company (Uber) or for a crowd of private customers (TaskRabbit). Their dependency on the income from this work renders them vulnerable to domination, and possibly exploitation – by a for-profit company in the first case, and by individual customers in the second. While Schor et al. do not look at platforms-turned-employers, there is good reason to expect that the findings would be similar, with supplemental earners more satisfied and dependent earners more vulnerable. For while work contracts provide some security (at a cost of freedom), at least for the poorly qualified, conditions will still tend to be harsh and pay modest – at Lieferando, for instance, workers continue to stage protests over the conditions of work (Schreyer 2021).[18]

4. Three Strategies for Addressing the Threat of Injustice

The preceding analysis naturally prompts the question: how can the threat of injustice in the context of platform work be countered? This section discusses three approaches: (i) the transformation of the ownership and the government structure of labour-based platforms by turning them into cooperatives, (ii) the implementation of tighter work regulations (without changes to the ownership structure of platforms), and (iii) the improvement of the bargaining position of workers through modifications of the social background conditions. Each approach, the paper argues, has promise in specific contexts and for certain platforms, and the three strategies are best thought of as complementary. But ultimately, it is the most generic strategy of modifying

[17] This is not to deny that there are differences in the composition of each workforce. As Schor et al. observe, workers on TaskRabbit tend to be more highly skilled than Uber drivers (2020, 853) and the highly skilled are more frequently supplemental earners (2020, 835). Unsurprisingly then, a greater proportion of workers on TaskRabbit are supplemental earners. But among those who fall into each category, findings are similar.

[18] The same is true of grocery delivery start-ups like Gorillas, which similarly employ their workers, but have come under heavy criticism for their working conditions (see e.g. Meaker 2021a).

the social background conditions that holds the greatest promise. This in turn reveals the limitations of thinking about the conditions of platform work in isolation.

One straightforward way of addressing the power imbalance in the context of platform work is to reform the ownership and governance structure of platforms. The ideal arrangement, some have suggested (see e.g. Solel 2019), would be for platforms to be run as cooperatives, where workers (and potentially other stakeholders) collectively own and run the platform. This, or so the idea goes, would ensure that platforms operate in ways that reflect the interests of those selling their labour through it. Cooperatively run economic platforms exist but have typically evolved on the margins of the platform economy. For example, after Uber and Lyft simultaneously withdrew from Austin over regulation disputes, a taxi driver collective and the non-profit platform RideAustin stepped into their place (see Solel 2019, 240). Meanwhile, Up & Go has established itself as a cooperatively run platform that sells cleaning service to private and commercial customers in New York City (Haas 2020). Running platforms as cooperatives promises to remove power imbalance that exists between platform companies and their workforce: turning workers into the owners and managers of a platform ensures that their interests align (and realises the ideal of workplace-democracy along the way). Yet, it will not plausibly be a solution in all circumstances.

On the one hand, there are practical challenges to establishing platform cooperatives. One barrier is the market power enjoyed by entrenched platforms, which are due to network effects: the more drivers a ride-hailing or food-delivery platform has in some location, for instance, the faster the service it will be able to offer its customers. Such network effects render it difficult for cooperatives to compete against incumbent, privately run platforms. But even in a yet unclaimed market, cooperatives find themselves at a disadvantage. Network effects incentivise rapid expansion, and many platforms burn through substantial amounts of capital in their early days, prioritising expansion over profitability in a quest to capture the market; but venture capital firms generally decline to invest in cooperatives and conventional banks are also reluctant (Schor 2020, 171). While access to large amounts of capital is less critical in fragmented markets, where the benefits from size are smaller, even Up & Go heavily relied on starting grants from charities (Haas 2020).[19] Another limiting factor is the collective governance structure of platforms cooperatives. As Eleonor Ostrom's (1990) work on the governance of the commons shows, running a collective enterprise becomes more difficult as the number of participants

[19] The (at least in part) cooperatively run photographer platform Stocksy United, which is often heralded as another success story, also critically benefitted from capital reserves of its founders (Schor 2020, 149, 171).

grows and as the group of participants becomes less stable. But the workforces of today's biggest labour-based platforms number in the millions, with many workers doing the job only for a short time (Kerr 2018). All this suggests that it is no coincidence that no economic platform that has turned into a household name is run as a co-op. Successful platform cooperatives exist, demonstrating the viability of a model others seek to emulate (see Conger 2021). But they tend to succeed at a local level, in niche markets, and where capital requirements are modest.

On the other hand, there are theoretical limitations. Where a labour-based platform takes the form of a co-op, being owned, and run, by its workforce, the structural power imbalance between platform and workers dissolves (though there diverging interests of a majority of workers may remain a concern). But this does not, on its own, guarantee that workers enjoy great working conditions. That this does not follow is easily illustrated by reference to a platform that serves primarily as a marketplace: even if TaskRabbit were owned and run by the taskers, they might confront a shortage of demand and thus struggle to make a living. In addition, there is the concern about the position of outsiders: for if entry to the platform co-op is restricted, then the members of the cooperative enjoy power at the expense of outsiders who would wish to join. This would become a problem especially when a platform commands market power, making it difficult for others to set up a competing platform. All of this indicates that while the strategy of transforming the ownership and government structure of economic platforms by turning them into cooperatives holds some promise, it will not serve as an all-purpose solution.

An alternative strategy for addressing the threat of injustice consists in more tightly regulating labour-based platforms to help protect workers (while allowing them to remain privately run). Changes in regulation could take many forms. For example, the state could limit the range of permissible surveillance techniques or require platforms to be more transparent about their pricing algorithms, thereby making it more difficult for them to blindsight and control their workforce. The introduction of a law that requires worker representatives to be allotted a fraction of the seats on each platform's governing board would be another way of ensuring that workers retain some control. While more radical, this step would be in line with existing codetermination rules for larger, ordinary companies in countries like Austria and Germany (Jäger, Noy, and Schoefer 2021). A third possibility is to harden laws against fictitious self-employment, thereby forcing at least platforms that have an active role as direct sellers of labour-based services to treat their workers as employees. These are just a few examples, and many alternative regulations are conceivable. What unites them is that they aim to shift power away from platforms and towards their workforce, be it by directly protecting workers from certain forms of treatment or by securing them additional rights. Regulations aiming to shift the balance of power would not amount to anything unusual: to varying degrees, states regulate employment relations in all countries, and to the extent to which labour-based platforms are a new phenomenon, it seems only sensible to extend regulations to catch up with them.

In fact, the regulatory strategy is already being pursued in numerous jurisdictions. The European Commission, for instance, has proposed sweeping new guidelines that aim at securing fair working conditions for platform workers in part by increasing transparency (Bednarowicz 2019). But often, courts have weighed in first, either by applying existing legislation to platform companies or by instructing lawmakers to create new rules. For instance, the UK Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that Uber's drivers are entitled to worker rights, including the right to paid holidays and to being guaranteed the minimum wage (Butler 2021). Meanwhile, Spain's government codified a ruling by its supreme court that routine drivers for ride-hailing or delivery platforms are to be assigned the status of employees (Meaker 2021b). But while there is considerable potential for the regulatory strategy, it is applicable primarily to commercially run platforms that exercise considerable control over their workforce (whether as platform companies or as platforms-turned-employers). For bare-bone platforms, regulation can at most be of limited benefit. It is not sensible, for instance, to require a platform like TaskRabbit to treat its workers as employees, given that TaskRabbit's role is mostly restricted to providing a platform that allows buyers and sellers to meet and to enter into contracts with each other.

A third strategy for addressing the threat of injustice consists in improving the bargaining position of platform workers through modifications of the social background conditions against which platforms operate. This is an altogether different approach: it tackles the power imbalances and the resulting risks of domination and exploitation not by targeting the platforms, but by targeting everything else, essentially aiming to lower the costs that workers face when walking away. This approach is simultaneously most fundamental and most generic. It is most fundamental because, rather than targeting the specifics of the organisation of labour-based platforms, it aims to shift the overall balance of power in the economy in the favour of workers. It is most generic, meanwhile, because it could similarly be applied in other labour market contexts where threats of injustice result from a relative lack of power of workers. In practice, this strategy could take a variety of forms, ranging from the moderate to the radical. For example, the state could enhance the outside options of workers by investing in job training programmes; or it could increase the attractiveness of other jobs, for instance by introducing (higher) minimum wages or by improving the benefits of regular employment. More radically, a state could issue a job guarantee and become the employer of last resort, or it could introduce an unconditional income that covers basic expenses, thereby in effect turning all platform workers into supplemental earners.

This third strategy picks up on a point that frequently gets lost in the debate over the downsides of platform work: those who perform this work voluntarily choose to do so, and if they are dissatisfied with it yet endure, then they usually do so for lack of better options. This indicates that if platform workers feel desperate, exhausted, and overburdened, as a significant fraction of dependent earners reports (Schor et al. 2020), then even if platforms bear blame for the particular working conditions,[20] they cannot be blamed for the concomitant lack of outside options.[21] The portrayal of platforms as villains – whether justified or not – occasionally masks a deeper problem: for are least some people, the labour market fails to provide any attractive options at all. Because of its broader target, this third strategy can also address threats of injustice that exist in the context of bare-bone platforms that serve as marketplaces: here, platform workers are independent contractors, but only the availability of decent outside options enables them to insist on adequate conditions when selling their labour to individual customers.[22]

All three strategies – turning platforms into cooperatives, introducing more stringent regulation, and improving the outside options platform workers have – hold the potential of tackling the identified threat to labour justice by shifting the balance of power in the favour of workers. They are mutually compatible, and each approach can be pursued in a variety of ways. Which set of measures is most promising will ultimately depend on the type of platform and the specific context. But as the above discussion suggests, the third strategy of rendering workers less dependent on the work obtained through the platform is arguably most significant. On the one hand, it alone can effectively tackle the threat of injustice that exists for workers on bare-bone platforms that serve as mere marketplaces: for in this case, it is the power imbalance between workers and customers, rather than between workers and platforms, that gives rise to concerns about domination and exploitation. On the other hand, it takes aim at the root of the problem most broadly, targeting the threat of injustice in the context of platform work not as an isolated phenomenon, but as one that reflects a broader deficiency of the labour market. And it emanates a particular elegance, too: for instead of directly interfering with the market, it aims to resolve

[20] They bear blame if they in fact treat their workers unjustly; the mere fact that workers feel desperate or overburdened does not on imply that this is the case.

[21] It is possible that they bear some blame, namely where the existence of the platform negatively affects more ordinary employers, thereby diminishing the availability or attractiveness of regular jobs. But while it is plausible that the creation of ride-hailing firms had a negative effect on existing taxi companies, their impact on working conditions in the overall job market (including the job market for the lower skilled) has been rather limited.

[22] Evidently, it can also address the threats of injustice in contexts of platforms-turned-employers: improved outside options will also empower workers at firms like Lieferando or Flink to demand better conditions.

objectionable market outcomes by altering the starting positions of economic agents; this way, it leaves platforms with greater freedom of choosing how to set up their business and workers with greater freedom concerning how to go about their work.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out by noting the diversity of labour-based platforms. While the likes of Uber and Lyft, which directly sell services and then hire labour on an on-demand basis to provide them, are often evoked as the epitomes of the platform economy, these *platform companies* are only the most flamboyant exemplars. Platforms come in a variety of forms. They exist as *bare-bones platforms* that serve primarily as marketplaces (as in the case of TaskRabbit) and they arguably exist as *platforms-turned-employers* (as in the case of Lieferando).

Admittedly, there is some rationale to the conventional focus on platforms companies that directly sell services and draw on on-demand workers to provide them. They have the potential to violate the demands of labour justice in a particular way, namely by withholding from their workers the freedoms characteristic of self-employment and the guarantees typical of regular employment while not providing monetary compensation. Yet, remaining alert to the variety of forms that platforms can take is nonetheless vital, if one aims to comprehensively assess, and the address, the threats that they pose to labour justice – both, because it prevents one from overlooking part of the phenomenon and because it helps one see the deficiencies of specific platforms more sharply. The paper drew on empirical evidence to show that the primary determinant of job satisfaction is not the type of platform someone works for, but whether they are dependent on this work in making their living. This, the paper argued, highlights that the root of the threat to labour justice in the context of platform work is really an imbalance of power. Labour justice is threatened where the lack of bargaining power renders workers vulnerable to domination and exploitation. While the specific forms of domination and exploitation come in various forms (and could be explored in much greater detail than was possible here), this paper has focused on the structural point: in each case, it is the relative powerless of platform workers that creates the threat.

In the final section, the article examined three strategies that aim to counter this threat to labour justice: establishing platform co-ops, introducing stricter regulation, and improving the outside options of platform workers. Each strategy, it argued, can potentially shift the balance of power, though their respective efficacy will depend on the circumstances. Yet, the third strategy is most significant: it alone can effectively tackle the threat of injustice in the context of bare-bone platforms, and it addresses the power imbalance most generally. This also highlights the need to assess platforms with an eye towards the wider labour market. When platform companies are blamed, what occasionally gets overlooked is that those who do platform work choose it voluntarily. So, if platform workers are continuously subjected to domination, or even exploitation, then this also indicates a lack of adequate employment options for which no single employer could be blamed. Once we adopt this perspective, platform work, despite its special characteristics, no longer appears so unique. For whenever working conditions are desperate for some, be it on platforms or anywhere else, the principal problem is the absence of attractive outside options.

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