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Platform (im)mobilities: migration and the gig economy in times of COVID-19

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Abstract

Testimonies of gig economy workers during the pandemic in Germany show that lockdowns have altered labour options, creating and consolidating new patterns of mobility and immobility.

Keywords

Gig economy, platforms, virtual migration, COVID-19, Germany, food couriers, crowdwork, seasonal workers

Theme

Mobility business

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'How do you manage to do contact-free delivery if the soup has spilt into the backpack?' one Berlin rider for the food delivery platform *Lieferando* asked his colleagues in April 2020. 'I throw a drinking straw to the customer,' another replied.

Although a joke, the remark inadvertentely expresses the seriousness of the situation. In times of COVID-19, these two riders are not only exposed to health-related risks, but also fear for their daily income. In the current crisis, their livelihood as food couriers relies on new constellations of (im)mobility: their own ability to stay on the move and navigate a city in lockdown, while also catering for those whose mobility is constrained by COVID-19 restrictions. The gig economy is a prime example of both the constitutive importance of mobility for labour and its reconfiguration in times of COVID-19.

While workers fear for their safety, the crisis surrounding the global spread of COVID-19 has become a monumental moment for digital platforms. Already in its first months in China, the crisis led to a boom for platforms delivering meals and other shopping items to the doors of their isolated clients.[2] At the heights of the first lockdown in some European cities such as Paris and Milan, food delivery riders were often the only people still seen on otherwise empty streets. Coined as 'corona shares' by the financial world, the rise in value for certain stocks of the 'stay-at-home'/'work-from-home' industries such as video-conferencing services or home deliveries was remarkable. The web conference provider Zoom, for example, had a year of explosive growth, and in September 2020, its market value exceeded the combined value of the two famous automakers General Motors and Ford,[3] while delivery platforms, from Takeaway.com to Amazon, also grew exponentially. These developments hint at how amply the current crisis is reshaping the spatiality and (im)mobility of labour.

Even before the crisis, in Berlin and many other cities across the globe, the majority of platform workers were migrants.[4] For them, the current situation is particularly precarious. This is the case for Cristina, a recent newcomer to Berlin from Buenos Aires.[5] Shortly after arriving in Berlin with a one-year visa, she started working for *Helpling*, a German gig-economy platform for cleaning services. She had heard about the option to enrol with them in Argentina and had registered even before her arrival in Berlin. Amongst migrants from Argentina and other Latin American countries, it is common knowledge that working for *Helpling* is an option to make a living. Such platforms ask for very few papers, accept people with short residence status, do not ask for language skills, and take in just about everyone who applies.

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[2] Lin, Chengi. 2020. Delivery technology is keeping Chinese cities afloat through coronavirus. *Harvard Business Review*. 17 March 2020. Available online at: https://hbr.org/2020/03/delivery-technology-is-keeping-chinese-cities-afloat-through-coronavirus. Last accessed 27 January 2021.

[3] AP. 2020. Zoom stock surges, market value tops Boeing, Starbucks. *The Washington Post*. 1 September 2020. Available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/zoom-stock-surges-market-value-tops-boeing-starbucks/2020/09/01/a447c3a0-ec59-11ea-bd08-1b10132b458f_story.html. Last accessed 27 January 2021.

[4] See our research project on migration and the gig economy: Digitalisation of labour and migration, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Available online at: http://www.platform-mobilities.net/en.

[5] Name changed. We interviewed her in April 2020 in the context of our ongoing research on Platform Labour in Urban Spaces (PLUS), a project researching different platforms in seven European cities (https://project-plus.eu/). This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822638. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission/Research Executive Agency.

Bastián, a food courier from Chile, tells a similar story.[6] Platforms like *Helpling*, or the food delivery platform *Deliveroo* for which he works, are in his opinion 'easy jobs to apply for when you come with a visa, because you only have one year and you don't need many papers, and you don't need to speak German'. Like him and Cristina, many of these young migrants have university degrees, but struggle to find other jobs. Bastián argues:

> 'This is the only option that the immigrants, or people from Chile, or people from India have. So, even though the work conditions are shit, (…), I was really happy with it. And as long as I didn't get hit by a car, everything was going to be okay.'

His last sentence underlines the extreme precarity of platform labour. Gig workers are self-employed; there is no sick pay, insurance, or income guarantee in times of low demand.

Under the current difficult conditions, such precarious jobs demand flexibility and the readiness to move on. During the first lockdown in Berlin, cleaning jobs became rarer. Cristina and her boyfriend, who is also registered with *Helpling*, relocated to the western part of Germany. Here, they worked for 12 hours a day as harvest helpers in agriculture. In this job, they fill in for a different group of migrants. Seasonal workers, mainly from southern and eastern Europe, usually populate Germany's fields during spring and summer.[7] This year, their labour mobility was curtailed due to the closure of European borders. Facing prolonged pressure from the agriculture economy, the German government finally issued special permits for tens of thousands of seasonal workers who were flown into the country with charter flights.[8] The death from COVID-19 of one of these workers, a man from Romania, as well as the rising number of infected workers in the meatpacking industry – another hotspot for temporary and posted workers from neighbouring European countries[9] – now shines a spotlight on sectors of the labour market that are maintained by migrant labour, and that otherwise remain invisible to the broad public.

Upon her return to Berlin, Cristina hopes that customers will begin to hire platform workers to clean their flats again. Another option to raise income could be one of the many online labour platforms, the so-called 'crowdwork' platforms. These, too, could become winners of the COVID-19 crisis. Just like *Deliveroo* and *Helpling*, they function according to a logic of work-on-demand, and they outsource computer work to internet users around the globe. Compared to mobile food couriers or taxi drivers, it is often their very immobility that brings workers to these platforms. Many of them are tied to their homes due to care responsibilities or physical limitations.

This is the situation for Eliana[10] – a 60-year-old woman from Romania who used to work as an electrical engineer until her company went bankrupt in 2017. She was already struggling to find a new job when she developed serious health problems that did not permit much moving around. She earns her unstable income by working from home on the platform *Microworkers*. Day in, day out she

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[6] Named changed. The interview took place in August 2019, in the context of the project Digitalisation of labour and migration.

[7] Becker, Jörg. 2010. *Erdbeerpflücker, Spargelstecher, Erntehelfer: Polnische Saisonarbeiter in Deutschland – temporäre Arbeitsmigration im neuen Europa.* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

[8] Tagesschau. 2020. *Erntehelfer kommen im Sonderflieger*. 4 April 2020. Available online at: https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/erntehelfer-einreise-101.html. Last accessed 27 January 2021.

[9] Birke, Peter and Felix Bluhm. 2020. Migrant labour and workers' struggles: The German meatpacking industry as contested terrain. *Global Labour Journal* 11(1): 34-51.

[10] Named changed. The interview took place in April 2020, in the context of the project Digitalisation of labour and migration.

logs on to the platform and competes for a variety of tasks, such as data labelling or content evaluation for tech giants like Facebook, against 1.7 million other workers worldwide who are registered on the platform. In contrast to delivery workers or harvest helpers, the livelihoods of these homeworkers do not rely on physical mobility. Yet their labour power still moves – mostly invisibly – across digital space, something which we may think of as 'virtual migration'.[11]

Even before the pandemic, platform labour had a special relationship to (im)mobility, from migrant food couriers to crowdworkers working remotely for customers on the other side of the globe. While these workers and their precarious mobilities have been unsettled by the COVID-19 crisis, it has become clearer than ever that mobility is constitutive for labour – paradoxically, even when people are stuck in their homes.

[11] Aneesh, A. 2006. *Virtual migration. The programming of globalization.* Durham, USA: Duke University Press.