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PhD specialization

Sociology

Title of the thesis

Platformization from Below: Social Practices of Migrant Food Couriers in Norway

The summary of the thesis

This dissertation examines how the rise of digital platforms affects various aspects of the human condition, including economic opportunities, work, and social interactions. It challenges traditional scholarly perspectives, which often view platformization from a top-down perspective—focusing on business models, cutting-edge technology, and regulatory matters. Instead, this research adopts a bottom-up view. It highlights the real experiences and actions of individuals who interact with digital platforms, offering an intimate perspective on how people’s everyday practices contribute to the seemingly abstract process of platformization.

Centering on migrant food couriers in Norway, the research provides a window into platform work within a unique welfare state known for strong labor protections. Employing in-depth interviews with 23 migrant food couriers, ethnographic bike-alongs with seven of the couriers interviewed, and the analysis of Norwegian newspaper coverage on the topic of food couriers, this dissertation explores migrant labor dynamics in the digital era and weighs in on the larger debates around racial platform capitalism, the future of work, workers’ rights, and societal impacts of rapid technological progress.

The research questions of the dissertation are: What kinds of social practices underpin migrants’ engagement with platform work in their everyday lives? And in what ways do these practices shape and sustain the platform economy from below? Utilizing the sociological theory of social practice, this research explores how migrants’ everyday activities integrate with digital platforms. To refine the analysis, it harnesses three concepts—strangers, infrastructure, and (in)visibility—representing different facets of migrant platform workers’

experiences on the street. These concepts correspond to key elements of social practice: the subject (strangers), the object (infrastructure), and the meaning ((in)visibility).

The dissertation outlines four essential types of social practices of migrant food couriers in Norway, each of which shapes how these workers contribute to shaping the platform economy and platformization. The first article probes the representational practices, where migrant couriers frequently go unnoticed in the media and may actively distance themselves from the local media spotlight. This points to their role as ‘strangers’ within the local society, navigating subtle discrimination while working in a Nordic setting. The second article emphasizes a type of ‘infrastructural practices’ that is essential at all stages of migration. Within this practice, migrants’ networks provide vital information and support, showing their networks’ significance in maintaining a continuous labor flow for the platform economy. The third article examines the ‘mobility practices,’ highlighting the couriers’ tactics to traverse the city with its varying digital infrastructures. Despite facing geographic obstacles, immigration-related bureaucracy, and work-related social isolation, they fulfill the platform’s promise by ensuring deliveries are completed. The final article focuses on ‘(in)visibility practices,’ which refers to the management of (in)visibility, where migrant couriers tactically choose when to be seen or unseen to different stakeholders, dealing with potential discrimination, racism, and deportation threats. This approach indicates how migrants construct and navigate the meanings of their platform work. Collectively, these social practices demonstrate how ‘platformization from below’ is deeply embedded in the everyday life of platform workers, impacting the platform economy from a ground-up perspective.

This research delivers threefold contributions. Empirically, it unveils how migrant platform workers navigate the intricacies of their trade within the Nordic context, tackling the unique challenges posed by the locality. Theoretically, it extends social practice theory into the domain of platform economy studies, providing new insights into the intersections of migrant labor, digital technology, and urban landscapes. Methodologically, the explorations of bike-alongs as a research tool underscore the effectiveness of immersive methods in capturing the fluid realities of workers’ mobile lives on the street. The research starkly highlights the struggles and precarity migrant platform workers face in an environment characterized by racial platform capitalism in the Nordic setting. Furthermore, by recognizing their proactive engagement, it portrays these individuals as vital ‘architects’ rather than mere users of digital platforms. This recognition demands a reevaluation of their functions and

advocates for a change in the approach of stakeholders such as policymakers, platform developers, and the public toward more supportive and inclusive practices.