

## **Proposal Summary**

# **Digital Labour Platforms: Mechanisms of Neoliberal Governmentality? The Case of Household Service Workers in Turkey**

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### **Problem and Research Questions**

The purpose of my research is to explore the effects of recently emerged digital labour platforms on workers' experience of and meaning attributed to work. Digital labour platforms are digital applications undertaking the online matching activity of the supply and demand of services such as household, transport or delivery. The research is based on qualitative study of household service platform workers case in Turkey, with a focus on Armut, the single largest household service platform in Turkey.

In the study of digital labour platforms, I explore their role digital labour platforms in the prevalence of neoliberal governmentality observed in the subjectivities of platform workers. The questions I looked to discuss are: What are the effects of digital labour platforms in promoting entrepreneurial discourse attached to labour? Do workers in the platform economy have a more entrepreneurial meaning attached to work? Do the technologies deployed in platform economy change the nature of control exerted by the management on the workers? Are these platforms constitute a new phase in the prevalence of entrepreneurial culture and managerial control? What is the experience of platform workers in terms of self-commercialization, self-rationalization and self-control?

My hypothesis is labour undertaken in digital labour platforms is encouraging entrepreneurial outlook on labour as described by Foucault in his analysis of neoliberal governmentality. My objective in the research is to demonstrate the techniques of managerial control employed by platforms and to discuss if these techniques are effective in the introduction of three dimensions of entrepreneurial outlook to labour, namely; self-commercialization, self-rationalization and self-control

### **Originality**

As evident in the study of Moisander et al. (2018), Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality presents a valuable opportunity to study platform labour from the perspective of managerial control and entrepreneurship

discourse. Apart from the above mentioned study on a direct sales organization, literature on digital platform economy lacks studies adopting the neoliberal governmentality point of view.

## **Research Approach**

In Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality, in contrary to classical liberalism, labour is approached as a rationalized, strategic activity undertaken by an individual enterprise. Labour in this analysis, is the capital of the worker, which makes the worker both the enterprise and the entrepreneur. Wage is the income acquired through worker's own capital, its labour (ibid, 234). With the market expanding to non-market areas of social processes, the society will be formed of enterprise-units, which will make the subject of neoliberal governmentality governable.

As Moisander et al. (2018, 379) suggests, this is undertaken by mobilising the subject as an autonomous free market actor through the active management of freedom through biopower. When taking this analysis to the work relationships, biopower points out to the techniques of managerial control that does not directly target workers but rather targets the environment that workers live, which free the entrepreneurial capacities of workers within the framework defined by the management (ibid.).

To apply this theoretical framework, household service workers case is selected with specific focus on Armut platform in Turkey. Armut is a digital platform uniting service requesters and providers in a number of household work such as cleaning, repairs, moving, assemblage, private lessons, health and so on. According to company data, platform grew by 63% in incomes in 2018 with the number of service request created at the website reaching to 1.8 million in the year. A total of 291.744 service providers are currently providing service within the platform (Webrazzi, 2019).

In analyzing digital labour platforms from the framework of neoliberal governmentality, I based my analysis on qualitative evidence. In collecting data, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with platform workers to gain insight on the employment of entrepreneurship discourse and role of workers within the production process to understand subjective meanings attributed to work, whether the individualizing effect of independent contract work is revealed, or whether the understanding of market relations and entrepreneurship discourse is emphasized in the labour processes. The data was coded and analysed using Nvivo software. Participants to the interviews are recruited in a two-way strategy, first through placing ads on the platform and with snowball sampling technique to reach more workers. A total of 16 workers were interviewed in different branches of services such as dyeing, cleaning, window repairs and care.

In designing questionnaires for in-depth interviews, I employed concepts introduced by Pongratz and Voß (2003). In analysing what they define as 'entreployee', Pongratz and Voß define three dimensions of the new character of labour (ibid., 7). First is self-commercialization, both in terms of the generation of an expected performance and in terms of marketing the labour capacity. Second dimension is self-control, marked by the increased role of the worker in the planning, organization, control and monitoring processes of the production. Third dimension is self-rationalization, defined by the approach of the worker to its own labour as a commodity and worker's new strategic position to decide on how to develop and exploit its own labour, which becomes its capital, in a process very similar to what was described by Foucault (2008) in his analysis of neoliberal governmentality.

## **Main Results**

The initial analysis of the interviews reveal the defining effect of the platform structure over differentiating approaches of workers to their work. The platform is designed differently for different branches of services. As the cleaning work is based more on trust rather than competing prices compared to dyeing or repairs, the platform works basically as an employment agency between the service providers and requesters, without allowing the cleaning workers to bid for different service requests, instead matching totally the supply and demand through the algorithm. On dyeing or repair works however, platform selects the 5 workers to bid for the service requests and allows the competition to define the rest of the work process. The competition is not only created among the five selected workers but enlarged to the totality of them through the creation of a ranking of workers, which results in the first placed worker to receive more work. This different design of the platform is reflected in the increased entrepreneurial outlook of dyeing and repair workers compared to cleaning workers.