



**Digital Labor, Migratory Regimes, and Social
Reproduction: The Case of Platform Delivery
Workers in Berlin and Barcelona**

Aju John & Nicolás Palacios
ETH Zürich

13/12/2014 - Laboris conference - Zürich

© Nicolás Palacios

How do migration regimes constitute platform work?

What are some of the politically constituted dependencies faced by migrant delivery workers in their lives beyond labour?

The **expropriation** of racialized and colonized “others” constitutes a necessary background condition for the exploitation of “workers”.

Expropriation, distinct from mere exploitation (e.g. wage labour), involves the confiscation of capacities and resources and their conscription them into capital’s circuits of self-expansion.

What makes some person or thing **expropriatable** is its inability to set limits to what others can do to them, the lack of recourse to political protection.

The lines that mark free exploitable citizen-workers from dependent expropriatable subjects are **politically constituted**.

(Fraser 2016)



“The logic of economic production overrides that of social reproduction, destabilizing the very social process on which capital depends [...] capital’s accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail” (Fraser, 2017)

“By the time a typical worker arrives in the receiving country they have already passed a life of training, education, health care, and other costs of social reproduction at their home country [...] Capitalist economies in the Global North ‘free ride’ on the care work put into the production of labor power primarily in the Global South” (Taha, 2023)

The conditions in and beyond the point of production (logistic chain) cannot and should not be separated if we aim to understand them.

Urban gig work is primarily carried out by migrant workers (van Doorn et al. 2023)

Orth (2024) shows how platforms in Berlin drew heavily from **particular migrant populations on specific visa and residency statuses**, such as the student visa and the working holiday visa, both more accommodative of lower incomes, unstable employment relationships, and diverse German language abilities than the official work visa.

The **temporal horizons of particular visa categories** and the transient nature of platform work co-constitute the migrant platform workforce. (Stingl and Orth 2024)

Platform work as “quick fix”

By lowering the barriers to entry, by providing **opportunities to earn an income soon after they arrive**, and by appearing as a reliable source of income to people who are about to migrate, these labour platforms are an integral part of “migration infrastructures”. (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, Altenried 2021)

Animento (2024) explains how platforms, which need labour that is prepared to perform “low-skill” tasks in return for **a quick fix for their need for income**, rely on the racialization processes, including the permanent fear of deportation, generated outside of platforms.



Why so urgent?

Focusing on practices and relations of reproduction reveals **dependencies and obligations** beyond the app-governed point of production (van Doorn & Shapiro, 2023).

These dependencies and obligations are expressed in multiple scales (Katta et al. 2024) and linked to different **infrastructures of social reproduction** from education, to formal and informal support networks, healthcare and housing.

We have to as well consider temporal and spatial horizons which are uncertain and shifting, locally expressed but entangled in global networks of production and reproduction. Hence, comparative approaches can help us to get a sense of the totality.

A lawyer from India able to speak in Hindi, Malayalam, and German in addition to English, Aju has extraordinary access to the field.

In 2022-23, he interviewed 10 worker activists to narrate the story of the delivery worker movement in **Berlin between 2021 and 2023**, on the Delivery Charge podcast

As an activist, he was able to curate occasions (such as cricket tournaments and match screenings) for the quite separate worlds of South Asian student migrants and that of German unions and workers' collectives to meet.

In 2024, he conducted research among Indian students to prepare a PhD research proposal. He has interviewed 15 Indian students in various categories of low wage work.

Nico's fieldwork: Initially informed by his own experience as a migrant platform worker (delivery & tourism) in Sweden and Denmark in 2019/20. These experiences, plus having Spanish as native language allowed me to access certain communities that otherwise would have not been possible during my fieldwork.

November 2022 – pre-data collection stage

- Barcelona: meetings with CGT, UGT and CCOO.
- Berlin: meetings with LWC (Lieferando Workers Collective) and Academics.

September to December 2023 (Berlin) - 25 interviews to migrant platform delivery workers from different platforms.

- Participated in 20 organizing instances related to the work of the Lieferando Workers collective.

January to April 2024 (Barcelona) - 20 Interviews to migrant platform delivery workers from different platforms.

- Fewer encounter with organized labor aside from a couple of meetings with CGT and RidersxDerechos



12 000 Euro nur für die Privat-Uni

Ihre Eltern zahlen rund 12 000 Euro Studiengebühren im Jahr für deutsche Pri
dieses Geld muss jährlich auf einem gesperrten Konto nachgewiesen werden,
kein Visum. So will man eine Einwanderung ins Sozialsystem verhindern.

Dazu kommt die Miete in Mehrbettzimmern und Lebensmittel. Die Lösung, um Ki
zu bezahlen: Viele jobben für Lieferfirmen wie „Wolt“, „Lieferando“ und „Uber E



Preliminary research suggests that the majority of workers delivering food and groceries in Berlin through the apps Lieferando, Wolt, Uber Eats, and Flink, are Indians studying at private universities.



Indian students are now the largest group of foreign students in German universities. (Bundestag 2024)

Their numbers doubled in five years and grew over 26 percent from the previous year alone to reach almost 43,000 by the 2022–23 winter semester. (DAAD 2023)

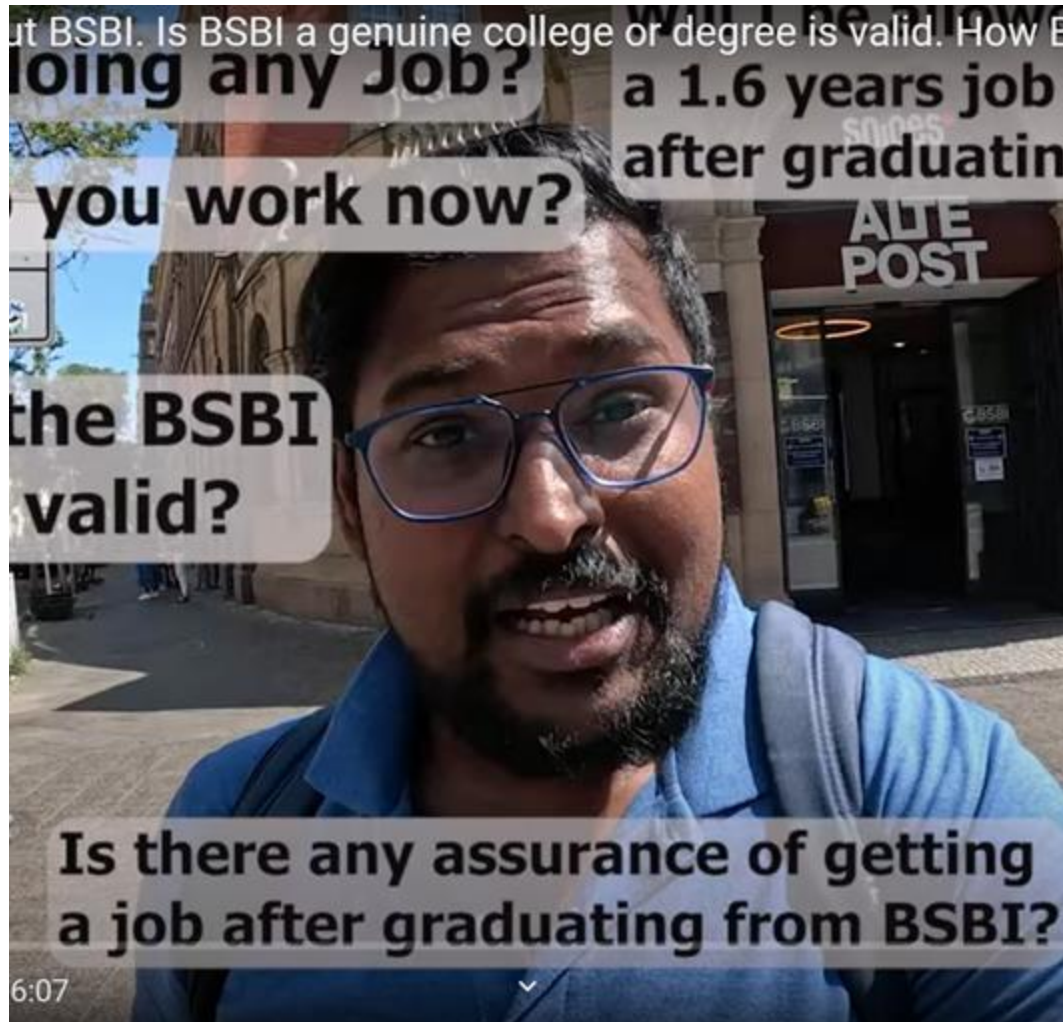


Berlin private university student experience#germany

An increase in the number of international students has been among other things, a strategic objective that western universities have pursued to survive austerity and expand profits. (Thomas 2017)

International education and migration are increasingly entangled (Baas 2019, Findlay et al 2012, 127)

“Two-steps migration” policies seek to first attract international students and then retain them as skilled workers. (Hercog et. al 2017)



The education migration industry caters on the one hand to students' aspirations for migration and permanent residency and profits on the other from migration regulation and policy. (Baas 2019, 223-224)

Apart from educational institutions, it comprises education agents, recruiters, money lenders and others who facilitate all aspects of students' migration abroad for studies. Increasingly, this can be said to include labour platforms as well.

India is one of the most significant countries of origin for internationally mobile students and has been prioritized in the higher education policies of destination countries.

Debt as a constituting instrument of international student worker life

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR ABROAD EDU LOAN

You must be a citizen of India

Have been accepted into a recognized university or college abroad

In most cases, a co-borrower is required

The co-borrower can be a parent, spouse or any other family member with a good credit score and stable income



While debts enable them to pursue an overseas education, they also become an essential feature of the expectations they have for their lives as migrant students, for instance, by accepting the conditions of low-wage work as a necessary cost to eventually achieve economic success. (Thomas 2017, 1881)

Latin American migrants and delivery in Barcelona

The total population of Catalonia is around 8 million people from which 359.888 have nationalities from the Americas (INE, 2022).

The 20 interviews conducted in 2024 in Barcelona were to Latin American migrants (9 Colombian, 8 Venezuelan, 2 Brazil, 1 Panama).

From them, only one had an EU citizenship before arrival.

All the interviewees came originally as tourist. Being the most common year of arrival 2019 (7) followed by 2022, 2021 and 2020.

Just a handful of them have managed to get a permanent residence, while most are under temporary documentation (Tarjeta roja, residencia por razones humanitarias).



Account subleasing as a way to make it through

Account subleasing has been a prevalent phenomenon since at least the pandemic (Vieira, 2020). According to several interviews price for renting an account is normal 30 to 35% of the total earned in a fortnight (15 days).

“Nico: Why do you think so many [migrants] persons start with this as their first job?”

Int: It is easier, just a bike and you are ready to go. You are ready, you don't have to do any procedure. Once you have a rented account, you only have to pay a percentage, which is very normal here.“

(Inter3_Bar, 2024)

“Well, in the beginning I borrowed an account from a friend, he would go to sleep, and I would go out [to work] around 2 or 3 in the morning, until he would wake up and start riding” (Inter8_Bar, 2024)



If they actually pay you...



“He stole from me, he took my *quincena*... 896 Euros. He stole it [...] He said that they closed his account because I stole a delivery. But it was a lie. He had the account, and he was not paying his taxes, while he was charging me 30%”
(Inter11_Bar, 2024)

“Joao moved from Brazil in 2022 when he was 19. After renting accounts for several years, at the beginning of 2024, the person from whom he was renting an account for two months already, stopped paying him. He couldn't afford his rent in Sant Boi anymore and ended up in a homeless shelter in the centre of Barcelona, commuting every day from there to Viladecans where he worked another rented account” (Inter10_Bar, 2024)

Glovo anuncia que abandona su modelo de falsos autónomos un día antes de que su fundador declare en un proceso penal

La empresa debe 267 millones de euros en cotizaciones impagadas a la Seguridad Social. Pasa a un modelo laboral, con repartidores contratados. La compañía asegura que opera con unos 15.000 'riders' en España

Despite of these challenges people keep searching for accounts to rent which are not easy to come by anymore. Even with a regularized migratory status, becoming a “freelancer” has high associated costs and bureaucratic navigation.

The risks of account subleasing constrain the possibility of access to infrastructures of social reproduction such as healthcare or housing (fear of policing / no periodic income)

Last week Glovo announced the end of the freelancer model. This will have benefits for those who can already access a contractual relation, but what could this mean for migrant workers with an irregular status?

Berlin	Barcelona
Work	
Subcontracting relationships	Account subleasing, depends on trust on the account owner
Debt	
Education loans	Account subleasing as a form of debt
Unemployment insurance	
New students, non-German speakers have limited access	Limited access depending on contributions and legal status.
Healthcare	
Insurance contributions entirely made by subcontracted worker	Formal access to registered workers, but fear to access it
Housing	
Overcrowded and temporary homes at high rent	
Access to solidarity networks, interest representation	
No democratic participation, limited interactions with trade unions, worker solidarity networks	

- Altenried, M. (2021). “Mobile workers, contingent labour: Migration, the gig economy and the multiplication of labour”, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, November 2021.
- Animento, S. (2024). Platform Capitalism: Infrastructuring Migration, Mobility, and Racism. In: Mezzadra, S., Cuppini, N., Frapporti, M., Pirone, M. (eds) *Capitalism in the Platform Age*. Springer Studies in Alternative Economics. Springer, Cham.
- Fraser, N. (2017) ‘Crisis of Care’, in T. Bhattacharya (ed.) *Social Reproduction Theory*. Pluto Press, pp. 21–26.
- Fraser, N. (2016) ‘Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson’, *Critical Historical Studies*, 163-178.
- Hercog, M., van de Laar, M. Motivations and Constraints of Moving Abroad for Indian Students. *Int. Migration & Integration* 18, 749–770 (2017).
- Orth, B. (2024). Stratified pathways into platform work: Migration trajectories and skills in Berlin’s gig economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 56(2), 476-490.
- Stingl, I., & Orth, B. (2024). Becoming “Platform Workers”: A Biographical Exploration of Temporary Visa and Worker Subjectivities in the Gig Economy. *International Migration Review*, 0(0).
- Taha, M. (2023) ‘Thinking through the Home: Work, Rent, and the Reproduction of Society’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 90(4), pp. 837–858.
- Thomas, Susan. 2017. “The Precarious Path of Student Migrants: Education, Debt, and Transnational Migration among Indian Youth.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43 (11): 1873–89.
- van Doorn, N. (2023) ‘Liminal precarity and compromised agency. Migrant experiences of gig work in Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York City’, in I. Ness (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of the Gig Economy*. 1st edn. London and New York: Routledge, p. 23.
- Xiang, B., & Lindquist, J. (2014). Migration Infrastructure. *International Migration Review*, 48(1_suppl)

Aju John

| Lawyer, researcher, Host and
Producer of the Delivery Charge
podcast |

| john.aju@gmail.com |

Nicolás Palacios

| ETH Zürich | Doctoral Candidate |
end Institute for Spatial and Landscape
Development | Spatial Development
and Urban Policy |

HIL H 28.3 | Stefano-Franscini-Platz 5 |
| CH-8093 Zürich | Tel. +41 07 65 02
69 68 | npalacios@ethz.ch |
www.irl.ethz.ch |