The gig economy on one hand and on the other the new professional elites able to buy time at the expense of everyone else: a look at the near serf labour of digital exploitation.

I would like to focus on an insight I outlined briefly in my book *Entreprecariat*¹ and that I discussed in the chapter on Fiverr.com, the largest online marketplace for freelance work. On that occasion, I sketched an image of the delegation society:

“When you need to delegate, you should”, wrote Adam Dachis on LifeHacker about Fiverr. Delegate when possible, or when it is worth spending a modest sum rather than wasting your own precious time. Delegate tedious, stressful, and thankless tasks. But how far can one go, when this is so easy? […] If we were to summarise the effects of the popularisation of digital technologies, we could identify three ‘revolutions’. The first concerns the advent of personal computers, which made tools easily accessible. The second, the internet, provided access to distribution channels. Finally, the third, the gig economy (still ongoing), provided access to labour. Similar to many other online service brokers, Fiverr incorporates all three of these revolutions in what could be called a democratisation of delegation. Even Fiverr itself jokes about it, posting a meme on Instagram showing a young man in pyjamas forced to outsource all his employees because he still lives at home. […] If everyone delegates, who does the doing? In an episode of the *Silicon Valley* series (a masterpiece by Mike Judge, author of *Beavis and Butt-Head*) some of the characters go to a supermarket where no one does their own shopping anymore, and the

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only ones left are the employees of various start-ups who do the shopping and home delivery for others. This scene reminds me of the gendered lineage of delegation, now partially displaced, as grocery shopping is traditionally a female task. In this respect, Melissa Gregg understands both contemporary productivity and delegation as the veiling of “the ongoing trauma arising from the death of the secretary”, and that of the housewife, we might add. Silicon Valley’s comic piece might not be so amusing after all. It is not out of laziness that the delegation society offloads its burdens elsewhere, but rather because it is too busy. A recent Amazon service seems to confirm this. Amazon Key electronically controls the door lock so that various tradespeople can gain access when the owner is away. The introductory ad shows a young woman getting a parcel delivered and the house cleaned just in time for a visit from her parents – all while she is stuck in the office. From there she can use a camera – or rather micro surveillance software – to check that the workers are doing a good job.
In *Metamorphosis of Work, Critique of Economic Reason*, the Franco-Austrian philosopher André Gorz, a companion of Sartre and Illich, and an advocate of Marxian-style existentialism, not only anticipated such development, but even described its dynamics. I would like to comment on an enlightening passage from the book’s introduction that focuses on the free time created by the progress in automation. The parallels with the current situation, and in particular with the advent of the gig economy, are, in my opinion, evident. The italics are the author’s while the bold font is mine.

“Society, according to [most authors], will inevitably continue to divide. The reason for this division will be (as it is already) the unequal distribution of the savings made in working hours: an increasingly large section of the population will continue to be expelled, or else marginalized, from the sphere of economic activities, whilst another section will continue to **work as much as, or even more** than, it does at present, commanding, as a result of its performances or aptitudes, ever-increasing incomes and economic powers. Unwilling to give up part of their work and the prerogatives and powers that go with their jobs, the members of this **professional elite** will only be able to increase their leisure time by getting third parties to procure their free time for them. Therefore, they will ask these third parties to **do in their place all the things everyone is capable of doing**, particularly all labour referred to as ‘reproduction’. And they will purchase services and appliances which will allow them to save time **even when producing these services and appliances takes more time than the average person will save by using them**. They will thus foster the development, across the whole of society, of activities which have no economic rationality and which only serve the private interests of the members of this professional elite, who are able to **purchase time** more cheaply than they can sell it personally. These are activities performed by **servants**, whatever the status of the people who do them or method of payment used.”

Gorz describes an increasingly polarised, dual society: on the one hand a small professional elite, on the other a multitude of servants. How does
the former behave? If we ignore the author’s claims for a moment, it may seem surprising that the professional elite does not want to reduce their working time but increase it; while being able to afford to work less, the elite decide to work more instead. Nowadays this intensification of time spent working is there for all to see, as are its effects: burn out, work addiction, breakdowns, presenteeism, etc. Why are professionals imposing this scourge on themselves?

In the first place because they are moved by *internal competition*: to remain a member of the professional elite one has to show oneself to be better than others, thereby raising the bar of performance and the time spent. Secondly, the elite has to face *external competition* from the reserve army of well-educated short-term workers. What we are witnessing is a process of entrenchment: in order to maintain their power, which is also precarious given the infighting, the professional elite is forced to extend this power, colonising an ever-increasing number of job opportunities.

As a tangible example I can quote my personal experience in teaching. Having only temporary assignments and in the fear that they will run out in the future, both my colleagues and I are forced to accumulate as many 'little jobs' as possible, effectively preventing access to those who are not already a part of the system. In this winner-takes-all dynamic, where there is no doubt that the losers are losers, the winners are only marginally so, being constantly on the alert and suffering from opportunity FOMO.

Reserved for those who are not part of the elite are outsourceable activities, reproduction work, “which can be done by anyone”: washing dishes, shopping, cleaning the house, etc. But are we sure the work that can be done by anyone – and that has traditionally been done by women – remains mere reproduction work even today?

The current reality of the gig economy denotes a broader and more varied outsourcing structure: even transferring by hand from paper to digital can be carried out by more or less anyone, as can, for example, data entry into an Excel page. Indeed, Gorz speaks of “trivialization of skills”. Similar
to reproduction work, these tasks are delegated to avoid their intrinsic tediousness and gain time, because beyond a certain limit free time is no longer enough and one has to strive to ‘free up’ some more. It could be said that for professionals, another temporal category creeps in alongside working time, that of *professional reproduction time*, that is, the time invested in preserving their role in the overall organisation.

“The unequal distribution of work in the economic sphere, coupled with the unequal distribution of the free time created by technical innovations thus leads to a situation in which one section of the population is able to buy extra spare time from the other and the latter is reduced to serving the former. Social stratification of this type is different from stratification in terms of class. By contrast with the latter, it does not reflect the laws immanent in the functioning of an economic system whose impersonal demands are made as much on managers of capital and company administrators as on paid workers. For a section at least of those who provide personal services, this type of social stratification amounts to *subordination to and personal dependence upon* the people they serve. A ‘servile’ class, which had been abolished by the industrialization of the post-war period, is again emerging.”

Here one comes up against a crucial point. Gorz tells us that getting a pizza through Deliveroo or hiring a cleaner through Helpling does not mean buying a service but buying – generally at little cost – another individual’s time in order to free up one’s own. The fact that the platform-mediated work is structured (albeit precarious and on-demand) does not change its nature. According to Gorz, this is servile work. The philosopher uses an expression that risks offending those who carry out such work, but, as we will see later, the masking of the servile quality of this work is part of the ideology of the real power centre, the technological micro-elite in the driver’s seat of the platforms. Italian philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2019) calls them the creators of abstraction.  

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Platform-mediated servile work is economically rational on an individual level (particularly that of the buyer) but not on a social level. Socially speaking it would cost less to walk to the nearest pizzeria or clean the house yourself. The infrastructure set up by the platforms is expensive from various points of view. First of all, the temporal one: as Gorz points out, servile work costs more in time for those who do it than those who delegate it. Let’s take the case of the cleaner who, in addition to the actual time spent working, also invests the time needed to get to the workplace, i.e. an additional amount of time that the home occupant would not need to spend. Alongside this, the costs of transport and management of the digital apparatus also need to be taken into account.

The servile class, Gorz recalls, is not a real class because it does not result from the impersonal dynamics of the economic system. What is it then? Let’s take the gig economy as a reference with which we will try to frame it in greater detail. The Sindacato Networkers (2019) reports that the previous occupations of gig workers are among the most diverse: “They range from bricklayers to company consultants working remotely, from pizza chefs to former employees of a multinational company abroad, and from pastry chefs to graphic designers.” In 2019, the group was joined by “sociologists, call centre workers, advertisers, babysitters, stock traders, warehouse workers, waiters, social health workers, marketing managers and copywriters.” It is not hard to imagine that a number of gig workers have been or aspire to be a part of the professional elite. The two social poles are porous. A while ago, the newspaper La Repubblica interviewed an architecture graduate who, after not being paid by the engineering firm she worked for, had taken up delivering for Foodora, a company later sold to Glovo.

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However, one should keep in mind that a part of the army of delivery riders is made up of migrants who do not interface directly with the platform, but with intermediaries who subcontract the accounts of the likes of Deliveroo, UberEats, Glovo, or Just Eat. In some cases, this labour force receives only half the figure shown on the app (Pirovano, 2019). In this case, the servile class comes up against the near slavery of digital exploitation.

At this point we can reformulate Gorz’s categories: above, the micro-elite of technology-abstraction; below, in conflict with each other, an unstable professional group and a highly fragmented servile class, amid stifled aspirations and submerged near slavery. In fact, Gorz himself refers to the

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instability of the professional group, as he considers its members “limitlessly interchangeable workers”.

“Conservative governments and even trade unions justify and promote this powerful social regression on the pretext that it permits ‘job creation’, or even that servants increase the amount of time their masters can devote to activities which are highly productive in economic terms. As if the people who do ‘odd jobs’ were not also capable of productive or creative work; as if those who have services done for them were creative and competent every minute of their working day and were thus irreplaceable; as if it were not the very conception the latter have of their function and rights which is depriving the young people who deliver their hot croissants, newspapers and pizzas of chances of economic and social integration; as if, in a word, the differentiation of economic tasks required such a degree of specialization that the stratification of society – into a mass of operatives, on the one hand, and a class of irreplaceable and overworked decision-makers and technicians who need a host of helpers to serve them personally in order to do their jobs, on the other – was inevitable.”

Gorz rails against the assertion that what he calls ‘odd jobs’ are socially useful, as he does against the rhetoric that it is about creating jobs. The philosopher’s reference to young people makes one think of the promotional set up of the gig economy: we are told that these jobs are dynamic, fun, somehow suited to a young workforce, while we know that, in reality, this is not the case. According to the Sindacato Networkers, “Italian gig workers are mainly men (73.6%) and mostly young (18-34 years, 53%) but with an increasing share of over 50s (16%), according to 2017 data. The 35-50 age group is rising, albeit slightly, representing 31% of respondents.” Gorz also explains how, in order to perpetuate themselves, the professional elite strives to produce and promote their own essentialness and irreplaceability. In short, it acts in the same hegemonic way as any dominant group aspires to do.

Returning to the three-part categorisation, it can be said that the micro-elite of techno-abstraction produces both the narrative that legitimates it
(digital “makes the world a better place”) and the one transmitted by the gig economy platforms, which do nothing other than merge Gorz’s two original categories, disguising the servile class as professionals. The platforms turn the gig worker into an entrepreneur: autonomous, a master of their time (only in appearance) and of their body, on which the carnal risk of enterprise weighs, measured not so much in loss of capital as in accidents at work and mental and physical disorders. This camouflage goes beyond rhetoric. As Lorenzo De Lellis (2019) explains on Jacobin,7 “the workers who operate on these platforms are always classified as independents, to eliminate the contractual and social security burdens borne by companies.” Not only that: as online markets for freelancers (such as Fiverr8) reveal, even those who buy the work, these sort of temporary micro-managers, are portrayed as free, super-busy entrepreneurs who are ultra-focused on their mission.

In her book Counterproductive9 Melissa Gregg (2019) describes the trauma that derives from the “death of the secretary”, or rather the semi-extinction of that legendary film trope of the manager chased by a crowd of female assistants who, agenda in hand, deal with everything he considers secondary, everything that can be done by anyone other than him. Fiverr reminds us that the work of the secretary, in the sense here accepted, has not disappeared but has become democratised, fragmented and specialised, while its cost has dropped significantly.

Meanwhile, the unstable professional group does what it can to stay where it is, that is, it tries to convince itself and others that the shaky place in the world it temporarily occupies is legitimate. Unlike the micro-elite, who recite their self-fulfilling prophecy from a hegemonic standpoint, the professional group does so from the cliff edge. The former is conservative, the latter reactionary.

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9 Gregg, M, 2018, Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy, Duke University Press.
Gorz condemns the division between a caste of irreplaceable creators and a mass of perennial servants. Looking at the impoverished middle class, we see that this is not quite the case: part-time creators inhabit the ranks of the subservient class on and off, with journalists doing bar jobs at weekends, students making ends meet by translating online, artists doing babysitting, and so on. Moreover, as soon as they can, they themselves draw on personal services (for example a home-delivered dinner) to gain more professional reproduction time.

So, if social time invested in personal services does not add anything to society, what about the work of part-time creators? Rather than dragging up the age-old question of productive and unproductive labour, I will, at this point, limit myself to quoting Raffaele Alberto Ventura who, in reviewing Luca Ricolfi’s *La società signorile di massa*, describes the tragic dimension of these master-creators by saying: “our middle class is unproductive even when it is working.”

“Certainly, the existence of a servile class is less obvious today than it was during the periods when the affluent classes employed a large number of domestic servants (according to British censuses – in which they were categorized as ‘domestic and personal servants’ – the latter represented 14 per cent of the working population between 1851 and 1911). The difference is that nowadays, these personal services are to a large extent socialized or industrialized: the majority of servants are employed by service enterprises which hire out labour (insecure, part-time employment; piecework, and so on) which is then exploited by private individuals. But this does not alter the basic fact that these people are doing servants’ work, that is, work which those who earn a decent living transfer, for their personal advantage and without gains in social productivity, on to the people for whom there is no work in the economy.”

The enterprises Gorz mentions have been in part replaced by platforms, making the atomised worker an enterprise-unit, favouring rapid career...

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prototyping, and singularising customer relationships through an interface. The unstable professional group has somehow merged with the servile class, which tries to professionalise itself by internally outsourcing part of what it has been delegated to do. Only rarely do both “make good money”. What form does this process take? The pyramid shape suggested by Gorz is all too reassuring. The vertical, horizontal and diagonal trajectories of *ad personam* outsourcing deplete social time, leaving an indecipherable imprint of servitude.
Silvio Lorusso
THE SERVILE MASS SOCIETY*

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