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ARTÍCULOS

Unlivably Accelerated Work: How Neoliberal Capitalist Temporalities Produce Labour Precarity

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ENG **Abstract:** This article argues that, despite positive developments in recent decades, the global labour landscape is still notoriously marked by forms of precarity, *unlivability,* and exploitation. With a theoretical framework based on the works of Rancière, Butler and Rosa, among others, it seeks to illuminate the relationship between the accelerated temporalities of neoliberal capitalism and emerging forms of labour precarity. In this sense, I contend that temporal pressure and the control of workers' time are a nodal point from which various forms of labour precarity derive. I start by characterising contemporary time regimes and identifying the productivist rationality that underpins them. I then analyse the manner in which productivism effectively materialises in workplace surveillance, automation, and logistical technologies. Finally, I discuss the case of Amazon warehouses and the meat industry as two examples that illustrate how neoliberal capitalist time regimes, their productivist normative code, and their association with the latest technology not only perpetuate disciplinary mechanisms of old, but also enable new overlappings between various forms of labour precarity and socially assigned disposability.
Keywords: labour precarity, social acceleration, neoliberal capitalism, temporalities.

ES La invivible aceleración del trabajo: cómo las temporalidades del capitalismo neoliberal producen precariedad laboral

Resumen: Este artículo argumenta que, pese a desarrollos positivos en las últimas décadas, el escenario del trabajo a escala global permanece notablemente marcado por formas de precariedad, explotación, y de lo invivible. Con un marco teórico basado en los aportes de Rancière, Butler y Rosa, entre otros, este texto busca elucidar la relación entre las temporalidades aceleradas del capitalismo neoliberal y formas emergentes de precariedad laboral. En este sentido, sostengo que la presión temporal y el control del tiempo de los trabajadores son un nodo clave a partir del cual se derivan varias formas de precariedad laboral. Comienzo caracterizando los regímenes de tiempo contemporáneos, identificando la racionalidad productivista que los fundamenta. Después, analizo la manera en que el productivismo se materializa efectivamente en los espacios de trabajo a través de la vigilancia, la automatización y el uso de tecnologías logísticas. Finalmente, comento el caso de los almacenes de Amazon y el de la industria de la carne como dos ilustraciones de cómo las temporalidades del capitalismo neoliberal, su código normativo productivista y su asociación con la última tecnología no solo perpetúan técnicas disciplinarias tradicionales, sino también posibilitan nuevos sobrelapamientos entre varias formas de precariedad laboral y de "desechabilidad" socialmente asignada.
Palabras clave: precariedad laboral, aceleración social, capitalismo neoliberal, temporalidades.

Summary/Sumario: Theoretical foundations. Work under Neoliberal Capitalism. Consequences of stress and overwork on worker health. Conclusion. References

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The advance of the twenty-first century has meant gains in labour rights for some populations across the globe and the increased automation of manufacture, relieving human labourers from performing strenuous

tasks. It has also brought time-flexibility for some workers. Yet, in spite of these developments, the realm of labour remains largely precarious and exploitative due to several factors. One of these is the systematic exposure of workers to two kinds of temporal pressure: to work as fast as possible (imminent deadlines), and for as long as possible (overtime). This induces chronic stress, which leads to various other health problems resulting from the joint degradation of physical and mental health (Dickinson, 2023; Navinés, Martín-Santos, Olivé & Valdés, 2016). The impact of time pressure and work-related stress is manifest in the alarming rise in burnout, depression, and *karoshi* cases across countries where overwork is rife (Kobayashi & Middlemiss, 2009; Dickinson, 2023; Han, 2015). In addition, the implementation of ubiquitous electronic surveillance and logistical technologies in workplaces exacerbates labour precarity since it allows employers to keep employees on a sort of permanent probation, making their contracts always liable to termination. Behind this lies a productivist rationality, which also pushes workers to self-exploitation through the promise of a self-realisation that they never truly attain. These are some of the adverse conditions that together constitute what I more generally designate as the *precarious* and *exploitative* landscape of contemporary labour. I deliberately use these terms, understood as *thick ethical categories* (Sayer, 2011), to not only describe but also condemn this specific state of affairs.

Some theorists have addressed the above issues from discrete perspectives. Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration centres on explaining the increasing fast-pacedness of most social spheres, including work, in relation to the escalatory logics of capitalism (2013, 2017). Other scholars address the normalisation of overwork and the persistence of excessive working-hours regimes in corporate environments, but without correlating this to social acceleration or to late-capitalist dynamics (Blagoev, Muhr, Ortlieb & Schreyögg, 2018). Jonathan Crary (2014) critiques the late-capitalist colonisation of human time, attention and sleep by work, technology, and constant illumination. Yet he speaks of work in the abstract, and so does not explain how 24/7 temporalities concretely affect different aspects of work and different kinds of jobs. Like Crary, Judith Butler writes of the world becoming increasingly "unlivable" due to the neoliberal production of precarity. But her account, as I argue below, remains incomplete because it does not consider the temporal dimension of unlivability (2018). In view of the partiality of these accounts, a more rounded and thorough understanding of the constellation formed by neoliberal forms of government, contemporary time regimes and labour precarity is still needed.

Acknowledging that contemporary experiences of work are complex, diverse and temporally mediated, this paper seeks to articulate a comprehensive account of what makes them precarious, exploitative, and, sometimes, unlivable. I start by defining the two parallel theoretical dimensions from which my analysis will unfold: labour precarity and time regimes or temporalities. I then use these lenses to show, with examples, how different aspects of work such as work-pace, surveillance, production quotas, and human-machine interfaces can accommodate particular forms of what I call *temporal unlivability*. I thereby advance four central arguments: first, that although work is being transformed by multiple, intersecting phenomena, these are all ultimately correlated to *neoliberal capitalist temporalities* given that every aspect of labour is traversed and shaped by time. Secondly, that the particular forms of temporal pressure and control imposed by neoliberal capitalist temporalities are *a core component* of labour precarity today. Thirdly, that whilst the continuing acceleration of work enabled by machines extends earlier practices, it now produces *unlivability* and a *worsening* of precarious working conditions because it proves impossible for bodies to cope with the speeds imposed on them. Finally, that these temporalities, the productivist normative code that grounds them, and their association with the latest technology are not only perpetuating disciplinary mechanisms of old, but also enabling new overlappings between various forms of labour precarity and socially assigned disposability.

Theoretical Foundations

Defining time regimes

I understand time as a social phenomenon, one whose regulation is *as crucial as* the regulation of space for any form of power to consolidate itself (Foucault, 1995; Martineau, 2015). Thus, social and political formations erect temporal structures as part of their world-making endeavour. Different theorists have proposed different signifiers for this idea: Rosa (2013) and Martineau (2015) speak of *time regimes* and *temporal structures* (2013), while Crary calls them *temporalities* (2014). I use the above denominations but also propose the term *temporal cartography* as an alternative way of conceiving them. A temporal cartography is the result of a deliberate exercise to stabilise chaotic, uncharted time into a normative arrangement. I therefore compare it to what Rancière calls a *distribution of the sensible* (2010), which binds specific material, spatial and, crucially, temporal partitions with the symbolical order through which a given form of power affirms itself. The distribution of the sensible functions as a cognitive a-priori insofar as it presupposes the perceptibility of some things and the imperceptibility of others. Thus, it takes place across four axes:

i. Time
ii. Space (Rancière's "places")
iii. Kinds of action (Rancière's "modes of being and doing")
iv. Utility (Relevance to a set of preestablished values)

The distribution of time starts with the visibilisation of particular intervals or partitions. The 8-hour workday, the 6-day workweek, and the financial year are examples of temporal partitions that, having been instituted

as part of political agendas, have a privileged visibility for people living in contemporary societies. Temporal and spatial partitions are then correlated to forms of action based on their perceived utility, which, as Räber identifies, is today determined from a productivist logic –traceable back to the Protestant work ethic— that deems actions useful the more they contribute to growth and production (2023). This happens through the mechanism of *the police*, which, in Rancière, is a partitioning that also *allocates* functions. The arc of the distribution culminates, following Rancière, in the allocation of these *nexii* to specific groups of people depending on their place in the social hierarchy. I argue we can interpret the neoliberal capitalist institution and enforcement of particular distributions of the sensorium as a contemporary instance of *the police*.

Temporalities, or temporal cartographies, are thus the four-dimensional territories resulting from a distribution of the sensible that establishes the legitimate uses of time, space and action as opposed to the deviant or improper uses. Although temporalities may be circumscribed to a clearly delimited perimeter, *e.g.* a factory or a prison, they are mostly diffuse and discontinuous in their scope. Temporalities are "alive" in the sense that they undergo slow changes much like language does; they compete, intersect, and sometimes merge with others. But although there are still various temporalities in our world, I claim many of them are being increasingly excluded or subsumed by the hegemonic set of time regimes today, which I group under the label of *neoliberal capitalist temporalities* in view of their common traits[1].

Neoliberal capitalist temporalities: a brief characterisation

Although no one concept will ever be sufficient to capture the intricacy of our current paradigm, the latter must be named in order to be theoretically manipulated. I therefore refer to it with the term *neoliberal capitalism*, where capitalism is more of an *axiomatics* that has found different models of realisation throughout history than a concrete social formation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 567). Complementarily, I argue, with Callison and Manfredi, that it is neoliberalism's "multiple and mutating forms"[2] what give today's capitalism an unprecedented degree of plasticity and robustness (2020, p. 2). Contemporary capitalism thus proves to be singular and plural at the same time: singular insofar as it has common features worldwide that differentiate it from previous capitalisms, plural because it manifests in many guises and recycles its own effects as causes for further expansion.

Despite its many transformations, capitalism, now as before, is based on a paradigm of accumulation and valorisation through the exploitation of underclass groups (Fumagalli, 2011; hooks, 2015). Now, what is important is that valorisation processes rely on the stealth of workers' time. Absolute surplus value is produced by the prolongation of the working day (overtime), while relative surplus value is created through the acceleration of the worker's labour (time pressure) so that his necessary labour-time is contracted as much as possible and the surplus-labour time is extended, within a workday with fixed length (Marx, 2015a, p. 220). Acceleration thus proves a fundamental element for the capitalist production of relative surplus value, for to the extent to which capital is able to increase the efficiency of its means of production (workers and machines), it can obtain greater profits. The link between acceleration and value-production relates more generally to the structural need for *dynamic stabilisation* (constant growth and escalation) that Rosa, Dörre and Lessenich have identified in all known capitalisms (2017). Crucially, this means that any kind of capitalist time regime will be oriented towards acceleration, one of the three mechanisms through which capitalist societies dynamically stabilise.

In addition to an ever-increasing pace, late capitalist time regimes are characterised by relentless activity and a resistance to interruptions. This is underscored by Crary, who argues capitalism installs a normative model of permanent activity that "requires 24/7 temporalities for its realization" (2014, p. 15). As he argues, the concern is that it is now humans who are being engineered and subjectified to better fit into the global infrastructure for 24/7 production and consumption that, as we will see, is based on abstract time.

Summarising, neoliberal capitalist temporalities are sensorial distributions structuring the ways in which we articulate time, space, action, and utility according to the principles of acceleration and continuous functioning. Rooted in a productivist normativity, they simultaneously place work at the centre of human life and demand that this work be performed on a regime of minimal rest and maximum efficiency, disavowing the need for pause and recovery inherent to all human exertion. As I now go on to argue, these time regimes produce precarity and *temporal unlivability*.

Temporal Unlivability

Various theorists have identified the destructive impetus that characterises neoliberalism. Lazzarato points to its "techniques of the minimum" (2009), while Brown comments on its ruthless "dismantling of the social" (2019). Similarly, Butler attributes the lack of livable conditions that many people face to neoliberalism's tendency to *induce* precarity and destitution (2018). To make things worse, she tells us, we are still expected to be economically solvent:

> we are morally pushed to become precisely the kind of subjects who are structurally foreclosed from realizing that norm. Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level (2018, p. 14).

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1 I am currently preparing a monograph on neoliberal capitalist time regimes.

2 They see neoliberalism as "an intellectual and political project, a program of economic governance, a form of normative reason, and an order of material production" (*ibidem*).

Butler's subsequent arguments show that this paradoxical structure of neoliberal rationality asphyxiates not only our economic subsistence but every level of our existence. She concludes that if we are constantly demanded to achieve *x* under conditions that preclude *x*, the contradiction that haunts us is that we are living the unlivable and that we must act without the conditions to act: "The fantasy of the individual capable of entrepreneurial self-making [...] makes the uncanny assumption that people can, and must, act in autonomous ways under conditions where life has become unlivable" (2018, p. 16). Unlivability, hence, designates the presence of an incongruity between what we are pushed to do, and the absence of the adequate conditions for effectively satisfying those demands. In other words, it indexes a tension between the dismantling (by neoliberal capitalist processes) of the preconditions for livability and the escalating demands placed on us (by neoliberal capitalist discourses).

While I agree with Butler's account of unlivability, I contend it remains incomplete as long as we do not take into account the temporal dimension. I argue that the neoliberal capitalist production of unlivability also takes places at the temporal level. Its contradictory structure appears as a requirement *to be temporally self-sufficient under conditions of collective time-scarcity*. It also demands that we labour as fast as possible, while the workload keeps growing at an even faster rate. This is what I call *temporal unlivability*, but it can also be formulated inversely as the inhabiting of an *unlivable temporality.* Having defined the terms 'unlivable' and 'temporality', the definition of an *unlivable temporality* now appears as quite straightforward: it is an ordering of time which exhibits a contradictory *tension* between the demands it issues and the conditions it provides for the satisfaction of those demands, and which results in a life permanently on the brink of collapse. Neoliberal capitalist temporalities produce unlivability in different ways, but nowhere is this most evident than in the realm of work where unlivability directly translates into the production and allocation of labour precarity.

Labour Precarity

There is no labour precarity in the singular, but rather different *kinds* of it. When enough of these overlap, it is customary to speak of 'precarious work'. But because, as Lorey argues, precarity and insecurity are now "normalized at a structural level", even jobs that do not strictly qualify as precarious often bear one or more types of labour precarity (2015, p. 63). Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) propose to think of labour precarity along four dimensions:

- Temporal: low certainty over the continuity of employment
- Organisational: lack of workers' individual and collective control over working conditions, working time and shifts, work intensity, pay, health and safety
- Economic: insufficient pay and salary progression
- Social: lack of legal, collective, or customary protection against unfair dismissal, discrimination, and unacceptable working practices; and social protection (access to social security benefits covering health, accidents, unemployment insurance).[3]

The lacks listed here respond to the contradictory structure of unlivability outlined above: for instance, if workers are demanded to work long hours, under time pressure, and be highly productive but the underlying conditions are poor pay (poor nutrition), and insufficient recovery time, their entire bodies come under unsustainable levels of stress; they are trapped in an unlivable situation. It is important to think of these conditions both in terms of unlivability and of precarity. While the first term foregrounds the discrepancy between capacities and demands, the second highlights that this condition of heightened exposure to injury, violence, poverty or death is *induced* (Butler, 2018) by neoliberal forms of governmentality. The problem becomes even more insidious when multiple forms of precarity start to become normalised and to overlap, for they reinforce each other and place workers in a position of extreme vulnerability. I will return to this point with some examples.

For Rodgers and Rodgers, the temporal dimension of work precarity refers to the low certainty a worker has over how long they will retain the job. This uncertainty and the increased risk of being made redundant for no particular reason signal the predominance of the neoliberal logic according to which workers are treated as dispensable, replaceable human resources. The utilitarian approach to the making and breaking of employment contracts is also spurred by the rise of "outsourcing and new forms of flexible employment (such as part-timework, telework and on-call work)", which increasingly free employers from forms of responsibility towards their employees and from accountability towards third-party regulatory agents (Jain & Hassard, 2014).

Now, although Rodgers and Rodgers label the second dimension of precarity "organisational", this one is just as markedly determined by temporal variables as the former. The difference is that, while the first dimension relates to workers' futures, the second dimension bears on workers' *everyday* experiences of time and space according to the rules imposed by their management. It also involves the materiality of their working conditions, where the existence or nonexistence of health and safety protocols signifies a greater or lesser degree of labour precarity. In cases where the organisational dimension is a source of precarity, workers have little control over the '*hows'* of work: how it is to be performed, for how long, how intensely, etc. It is at this level that workers are often assigned unreasonable workloads, leading them to work under time pressure and /or overtime in what effectively are forms of exploitation.

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3 See also Jain & Hassard, 2014.

Different workers overwork for different, sometimes combined, reasons: sweatshop and undocumented workers, for instance, do it for their mere survival. Workers with better but still precarious contracts are often pressured to work under stress and do overtime due to insufficient legal protection, or to remain competitive and prove their commitment to their employers (Kobayashi and Middlemiss, 2009). People who have "extreme-jobs" (Hewlett and Luce, 2006), on the other hand, are forced into overwork due to the fast pace, high demands and high stakes of their jobs. As I mentioned earlier, the dimensions of precarity identified by Rodgers and Rodgers frequently come tied together: exploited workers are forced to consent to organisational and temporal kinds of precarity because economic and social kinds of precarity keep them in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis their employers. Workers' lack of collective bargaining power, of outlets through which to safely report unfair demands, and the absence of sanctions for employers prevent workers from overturning their situation and securing fairer contracts.

Work under Neoliberal Capitalism

The argument I now put forth is that neoliberal capitalist temporalities are producing unlivability, aggravating preexisting forms of work precarity and introducing new ones into the global labour market. I build the support for this argument in four phases: after introducing abstract time as the basis for the capitalist rationalisation of labour aimed at maximal productivity, I show how automation and logistics are two key infrastructural drivers of the rationalisation of work *qua* acceleration. I subsequently analyse two examples where the creation of labour precarity appears clearly associated with productivism, neoliberal time regimes, and the technological devices enforcing them. Finally, I discuss some of the consequences this has on workers' overall health.

Abstract time

Throughout his historical investigation of the rise of capitalism, Martineau argues that the introduction of clock-time produces an abstract concept of time composed of equal and interchangeable segments, as opposed to the unequal hours of varying lengths that were traditional in medieval societies (2015, p. 61). Martineau takes the distinction between *abstract* and *concrete* time from Moishe Postone who, in turn, derives it from the Marxian postulate of labour's dual character. Clock-time also brought a shift from what E.P. Thompson calls a 'task-oriented' approach to work to a time-oriented one (*ibidem*).

The spread of *abstract time* is not incidental to the development of the capitalist system. Rather, capitalism and abstract time exist in a relation of mutual constitution and dependency. The progressive implementation of clock-time as the standard time-measuring system has been crucial to the development and expansion of capitalism. This is due to the centrality of abstract time to processes of value-formation and appropriation. Abstract time, Martineau explains, is at the basis of value because the notion of abstract labour relies on abstract time as the objective frame where labour-time is measured (2015). The reduction of what Martineau calls "radically different forms of labour" to abstract labour can only be achieved through the notion of abstract time; for it is only in terms of abstract, identical time-units that concrete labour can be quantified and thereby assigned a price in the market. Abstract time, therefore, makes labour exchangeable. More generally, the capitalist instauration of rationalisation as a general scheme for social functioning (aimed at the ubiquitous extraction of surplus value) cannot be conceived without, first, rationalising time into a grid-like temporal continuum. Abstract, rationalised time is therefore a central precondition for the neoliberal capitalist configuration of the temporalities that regulate labour time today.

The acceleration of work through automation and logistics

As we have established, late capitalism is primarily geared towards the maximisation of productivity. In concrete terms, this is achieved through rationalisation, which theorists essentially understand as the application of a method to make things calculable and predictable (Weber, 2012; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Lukàcs, 1971). Rosa conceives rationalisation as that which allows one "to achieve *more in less time*" (2013, p. 50). He therefore argues rationalisation can be understood "as an acceleration process that aims at the accelerated realization of ends through the minimization of the necessary steps or an increase in the effectiveness of the means employed" (*ibid*). Drawing on Weber, we can condense rationalisation into four key principles: *efficiency* (more in less time), *calculability*, *predictability* and *mastery* (or 'control') (Habermas, 2007, p. 159). These are precisely the four principles Ritzer argues are dominating more and more sectors of the world as it becomes McDonaldized. Particularly, he critiques the increasing standardisation of labour into McJobs, which involve

> a series of simple tasks in which the emphasis is placed on performing each task as efficiently as possible. Second, the time associated with many of the tasks is carefully calculated [...] Third, the work is predictable; employees do and say essentially the same things hour after hour, day after day. Fourth, many non-human technologies are employed to control workers and reduce them to robot-like actions (Ritzer, 1998, p. 60).

McJobs require little training and usually provide minimal job security and benefits to workers. This makes them convenient for employers, which is why they have proliferated across the globe. The standardisation of human action is thus a vital requirement in the rationalised acceleration of work.

Another crucial element for the contemporary rationalisation of productive activities is the development of automation technology. Although it has several implications, two important consequences of automation are that human labour is cheapened and that the workday *does not shorten.* In *The Grundrisse*, Marx explains how even though machines drastically reduce the necessary labour-time of workers, their working hours per

day do not decrease because the saved time is immediately converted into surplus labour: "Capital employs machinery, rather, only to the extent that it enables the worker to work a larger part of his time for capital" (2015b, p. 701). Machines therefore only save time for the owners of the means of production. In this way, Marx shows how the machines' diminishing of necessary labour-time, which is a creation of free time, immediately becomes re-captured as surplus labour-time.

Many countries have reached a point where their actual productive capacities can meet their population's short and medium-term subsistence needs. This would be true for all countries if they were self-sufficient monads with equal amounts of resources and technological development. Globalisation further complicates matters; in particular, the fact that the nature and proportion of the economic flows that move between Global North and Global South is unequal. Yet despite this global interdependence and the colonial dynamics that still mark the uneven distribution of working hours across the planet, technological development in general means that what we needed years to build can now be done in months, and what took months now takes days. *And yet*, people continue to work artificially long hours all over the world. On this subject, Graeber contends:

> Keynes predicted that, by the century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a fifteen-hour workweek. [...] In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more (2018, p. 9).

Concurring with Graeber, Lewis argues: "the link between automation and freedom cannot and will not be facilitated without adequate policy intervention" (2019, p. 28). Automation therefore does not in itself guarantee a shorter working day; far from this, because it is embedded in a productivist normative code, automation is often another driver of overtime.

The other significant change brought by automation is that it modifies the speed at which humans are now expected to work. As Klaess notes, today "advanced robotics, collaborative automation, and more sophisticated software" allow "humans to work more intimately with machines on assembly lines than ever before" (2021, np). This unprecedented intimacy means that humans must be perfectly synchronised with machines. Companies ensure this through the establishment of production quotas in the form of *items processed per time-unit* for workers to attain. This metric thus serves as a standardisation device to make sure that, as Marx once wrote, one worker during an hour is equal to another one, and to all others on the factory floor.

Although automation was a big step in the acceleration of work and production, it could not have reached its current degree of efficiency without logistics. Indeed, it was through the coupling of automation and logistics that modern goods production became truly systematised into a seamlessly connected series of protocols where no component is idle but rather always contributing to the whole. Whereas automation was the golden asset from Ford to McDonald's, it was logistics which, as the "newly dominant capitalist science" (Harney and Moten, 2013) based on ICTs and satellite technology, marked a new era in the intertwined histories of work and production. By aggressively targeting delays and interruptions, this approach enabled the minimisation of transfer times between phases and allowed for simultaneous processing.

Logistics translates "real-world systems and behaviours into quantifiable variables and models" (Archer, 2020, p. 10). Objects and processes are therefore first reduced to variables that can then be entered into formulas, the formula *par excellence* being the efficiency-measurement, given as items processed per time-unit. Examples of this metric are number of parcels or chicken carcasses processed per minute, number of hamburgers or toys manufactured per hour, or cars assembled per day. The particular nature of items is irrelevant and thus effaced as they become translated into the cybernetic language through which logistics organises production. For the logistical system, it matters only how many *x* items are being produced by *y* per hour. Logistical rationality is most prominent in contemporary assembly lines, which are long, extremely complex systems designed to ensure the maximisation and uniformity of production. Here, it is crucial to acknowledge that abstract time is the primary quantitative variable in any logistical model. As the territorialised temporal continuum where different processes can be simultaneously scheduled and tracked, abstract time provides the foundation for capitalism's pivotal rationalising instruments: automation and logistics.

I have sought to shed light on how the answer to the productivist search for efficiency above all else was a thorough rationalisation of production processes, from the ways in which labouring bodies ought to operate, to the introduction of automation and logistical technologies. By imposing speeds, time frames and output ratios, the latter are the technological means through which neoliberal capitalist temporalities are effectively instituted and enforced. I will illustrate this with two examples where the time-regime imposed on the worker corresponds to the condition of temporal unlivability. Although they represent extreme cases, I argue they are not exceptional: the rationality that underpins them is to be found across all sorts of work environments, involving both manual and cognitive labour. As we will see, there is an unbridgeable gap between what the machine or the company is asking of the human worker and what the latter can effectively do with their biological capacities in terms of speed. I will then analyse how this tension yields specific forms of labour precarity.

The Amazon workplace: humans treated as robots

Amazon's hyper-complex supply chain and its reliance on advanced logistics is a clear example of how having to closely collaborate with machines pushes humans to work at inhuman tempos. In his report on the "unsafe and grueling conditions" at Amazon's warehouses for *The Guardian*, Sainato describes the unreasonable demands that the company places upon its workers as it aims for ever faster shipping. He starts with the case of Rina Cummings, an employee who

> has worked three 12-hour shifts every week at Amazon's gargantuan New York City warehouse, called JFK8 [since] 2018. As a sorter on the outbound ship dock, her job is to inspect and scan a mandated rate of 1,800 Amazon packages an hour –30 per minute– that are sent through a chute and transported on a conveyor belt... (2020, np).

The mandated rates, which are euphemistically called by Amazon managers "performance expectations", are monitored by computers, which "write employees up" when these rates are not met, regardless of accidents (*ibidem*). Sainato interviews some ex-employees who confirm having had the same experience and openly complain about Amazon's stressful and unsafe work environment. Raymond Velez, who "was required to pack at a rate of 700 items per hour", says "workers are regularly fired for missing rates" (*ibid*). Juan Espinoza, in turn, narrates, "I was a picker and we were expected to always pick 400 units within the hour in seven seconds of each item we picked. I couldn't handle it. I'm a human being, not a robot" (*ibid*). Ilya Geller's words, in turn, reveal the unforgiving nature of the surveillance Amazon uses to ensure productivity rates are met:

> "You don't get reported or written up by managers. You get written up by an algorithm," said Geller. "You're keenly aware there is an algorithm keeping track of you, making sure you keep going as fast as you can, because if there is too much time lapsed between items, the computer will know this, will write you up, and you will get fired" (Sainato, 2020).

Together, the conveyor belt (which, ideally, should always be moving) and the algorithm can be conceived as a logistical disciplinary assemblage insofar as they broadcast what Foucault calls a "collective and obligatory rhythm, imposed from the outside" (1995, p. 152). In this way, Amazon's tracking algorithm imposes a 24/7 temporality, and sets the benchmark for a correct use of time and a correct way of functioning.

Time pressure is not just a coincidental downside of having a job at Amazon, it is a central part of the contract. In another article, Sainato reports how Amazon delivery drivers are also subjected to time-pressure and surveillance, to the point that they have to renounce normal bathroom breaks for fear of being sanctioned or fired: "Fourteen-hour shifts were common [...] and the pressure to meet delivery rates meant Meyers used a plastic bottle to go to the bathroom on a daily basis" (2021). These drivers are being forced to postpone or abbreviate beyond reason and dignity what is a biologically indispensable human need: the need to empty their bladder. They need to drink water in order to stay alive and function, but the system opposes what this action entails: to discharge it, because it consumes part of the time they have already purchased from the worker. Thus, it is the 'concrete times' (Martineau, 2015) of biological needs what the tracking systems disavow and what Espinoza's statement "I'm a human, not a robot" reclaims.

This shortening and monitoring of work-breaks is one of the features of contemporary work precarisation. Whereas in previous decades, break times were *included* in workers' shifts as part of their normal activities, labour precarity today consists in externalising those pause-times as temporal costs that fall upon the worker: the lunch break and the toilet break are barely accounted for in the worker's daily schedule. Temporal unlivability here means that the worker is forced to finding ways of fitting them in a twelve or fourteen-hour workday with no respite, and the longer the breaks she takes, the more she will be penalised with a reduction in wage or a missed delivery order.

If the Amazon universe is governed by a neoliberal capitalist time regime, this is one where the *sensorium* (Rancière) has been reconfigured to revolve around the *efficient processing* of Amazon packages. This is Amazon's definition of 'utility', toward which all action in time and space must be oriented. For workers, time is measured not in hours but in 'scanned-packages-per-hour', or 'delivered-packages-per-day'. The combined operation of logistical and surveillance systems is key here, for it serves two purposes: it institutes Amazon's orthodoxy of time-use, its obligatory workpace, and, it obtains worker efficiency and compliance with this exploitative work regime *through sanctions and the production of job insecurity*. Workers are made aware of the possibility that any of them may be fired at any moment, without warning, under the pretense of a few minor shortcomings. Job insecurity, the "temporal" kind of precarity for Rodgers and Rodgers, is thus turned into a coercive tool so as to then impose a *second* sort of precarity: the organisational one, where workers have no say over the speed and intensity at which they are demanded to work. Hence, the awareness of being constantly watched and the implicit threat of being fired, manifesting as "a heightened sense of expendability or disposability" (Butler, 2015, p. 15), are what truly force workers to endure stress and strive for the mandated hourly rates. Far from being restricted to the Amazon warehouse, this phenomenon has become the norm in many workplaces today. Indeed, Lazzarato elucidates how the production of insecurity, as well as of inequality and of individualisation, are the strategies used by neoliberal forms of power to influence—here, *to accelerate*— the conduct of subjects (2009).

The lack of adequate toilet breaks and job insecurity used to be associated only with sweatshop labour, but they have now become normalised practices in places like Amazon, which are supposed to be Western, legally-compliant firms that pride themselves on fostering their employees' "self-development". This normalisation is further evidenced by Amazon's contempt for worker safety, which became apparent when the injury rates at JKF8 were "found to be three times the national average for warehouses" (Sainato, 2020). Precarious working conditions are therefore no longer the mark of the peripheral "third-world" sweatshop; they exist almost everywhere across the globe and, I reiterate, the temporal pressures that characterise them are not accessory but constitutive of them.

The meat industry: production speed placed above worker safety

Since early industrialisation, every step in the meat-production chain has been steadily accelerating: from the breeding of animals to their slaughtering, processing and packing. The US meat industry, in particular, pioneered faster breeding techniques:

> Producers discovered that animals could be kept inside, and fed grain, and could be bred to grow more quickly and get fatter in the right places. Since 1925, the average days to market for a US chicken has been reduced from 112 to 48, while its weight has ballooned from a market weight of 2.5 pounds to 6.2 (van der Zee, Levitt & McSweeney, 2020).

In this respect, the genetic modification of both animals and plants has to a great extent been guided by the goal of producing organisms of the same size[4], weight and that need less time to attain full growth. Likewise, meat factories were among the first ones to incorporate automated production lines and remain, to this day, one of the sectors most heavily reliant on them (Berger, 2021, p. 108). The use of automation in meat-processing plants "has led to significant increases in line speed for beef, pork, sheep, poultry and fish operations" (Barbut, 2013, 1). These increases follow from the tireless lobbying of meat producers to push the evisceration line speed limit higher and higher. For instance, although a few years ago the Trump Administration's approval of the 175 birds per minute (bpm) limit was controversial, this limit has now again been updated to a vertiginous 250 bpm. At least, this is the case in the various countries where the multinational Marel sells its products, for its integrated "processing solution" of 15,000 bpm remains, since 2019, one of the fastest and best-selling lines today. Genoways reports that US pork processing plants have also witnessed a dramatic acceleration of their operations:

> in 2002, Hormel's production lines were running at 900 pigs per hour; by 2007, they were running 1,350 pigs per hour. That's a 50% increase in five years, but the number of workers on the line increased by only about 15%. So, obviously, everyone is working harder, working faster, and mistakes occur (2014).

Berger explains that the rationality behind line speed legislation in Canada, whose history is similar to the US's, is primarily oriented towards ensuring "the microbial safety of consumer products" (2021, p. 101). She notes that the OECD's 1993 definition of 'food safety' as merely the absence of microbial hazards is highly deficient as it is defined negatively, and exclusively from the perspective of consumer well-being (p. 102). For Berger, this results in "a failure to account for other tangential harms, societal or environmental, associated with production methods" and in a dismissal of the risks for workers and animals as "outside of the assessment's jurisdiction" (p. 103). Most alarmingly, not even the mandate to neutralise microbial risks for consumers is being respected with the implementation of high line speeds: Genoways reports that company-employed inspectors were found to overlook copious amounts of contamination due to the speed of the chain (2014).

Most relevant for our purposes, worker safety is also impacted by line speeds in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants, in relation to which Berger affirms: "occupational risks are well-documented, including injuries related to repetitive movements, holding awkward postures for extended periods, and working in extreme temperatures (hot and cold) surrounded by fast-moving, sharp instruments" (p. 100). Indeed, it has been statistically proven that "people who work at any meat-packing plant for five years have a nearly 50-50 chance of suffering a serious injury" (Genoways, 2014). The primary reason why this risk is so elevated is because it is directly proportional to the high speeds at which the machines operate. While it is a risk that could be minimised by reducing line speeds and processing quotas, companies are clearly more interested in making profits than in protecting the limbs of their workers. The risk of suffering a serious injury is another case of organisational labour precarity. But to this kind of work precarity becomes attached to this: the social dimension of work precarity that Rodgers and Rodgers define as lack of legal protection against unacceptable working practices. This is the case of the many legal and illegal migrants that work in American and Canadian meat-processing plants:

> [A]n extensive study of packing-house workers conducted by the University of Iowa in 2008 suggested that the number of injuries may be significantly under-reported. The study found that the large numbers of undocumented workers from Mexico and other parts of Latin America are almost half as likely to report an injury or job-related illness as their white counterparts (Genoways, 2014).

Latin American workers are less likely to report an injury, to unionise, or to denounce unfair labour practices for fear of losing their jobs or of being deported. Representing a large percentage of the workforce in American slaughterhouses, they confirm the portrayal of slaughterhouses as places of marginalisation where, "[i]n the words of Chas Newkey-Burden, [...] vulnerable animals are often slaughtered by some of society's most vulnerable humans" (Berger, p. 110). Meat industry workers are not particularly well remunerated for dealing with animal carcasses all day long, do not always have job security, and regularly work under time pressure. The heightened risk of losing a finger or limb due to breakneck line speeds, or of developing neuropathy from dangerous machinery (Genoways, 2014), —compounded by inadequate healthcare, compensation, and convalescence leave—demonstrates that meat-processing plants elevate conventional labor precarity to an extreme level. Like sweatshops, meat-processing plants are able to get away with unfair wages and unsafe

[4] By homogenising their size, animal species are essentially being modified to better fit into a standardised production line.

working conditions because, for them, there is an inexhaustible supply of human resources in financially desperate situations that will settle for any job.

The fact that, by working at meat-processing plants, undocumented workers are disproportionately exposed to serious injury and that they are also unlikely to report it or demand compensation is a perfect illustration of how inequality is produced and perpetuated through what Butler calls the differential distribution of precarity. With Athanasiou, Butler distinguishes a fundamental precarity (or 'precariousness') understood as "an existential category that is presumed to be equally shared" from a second-degree precarity, which is "a condition of induced inequality and destitution" and which exploits the existential condition (2013, p. 20). Thus, while precariousness is a condition that we all face as living beings, precarity in the second sense refers to the fact that some groups of people are markedly more exposed to harm than others. Athanasiou brilliantly condenses this latter meaning as follows: "In describing the politically induced condition in which certain people and groups of people become differentially exposed to injury, violence, poverty, indebtedness, and death, 'precarity' describes exactly the lives of those whose 'proper place is non-being'" (2013, p. 19). In more recent work, Butler connects this disparity between the protection of some populations and the abandonment of others to "the differential ways that populations are valued and disvalued" by specific "forms of power that establish the unequal worth of lives by establishing their unequal grievability" (2021, p. 56). From this perspective, the repeated increases in line speeds represent increases in indifference towards workers' health and wellbeing; they are a statement of the disposability of their lives (and the replaceability of their bodies in the workplace). The correlation between high line speeds, a high serious injury rate and informally employed workers is no coincidence; rather, it follows the logic of the differential assignment of disposability upon which the neoliberal production of precarity relies:

> This is indeed related to *socially assigned disposability* (a condition which proves fundamental to the neoliberal regime) as well as to various modalities of valuelessness, such as social death, abandonment, impoverishment, [...] *workplace injuries* (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 19; my emphasis).

Through its "differential ways of assigning disposability" neoliberalism produces inequality and perpetuates it at a structural level (*ibidem*, p. 20). Here, again, meat-production plants resemble sweatshops; these are places where the lives of workers have little or no grievability. But if these places were already dangerous and precarious, with the advent of Covid-19 they became even more so. During the peak of the pandemic, several meat-packing plants across the world refused to close, resulting in hundreds of thousands of their workers contracting Covid-19 and a number of them dying (Berger, 2021; Reid, Ronda-Pérez and Schenker, 2021; Saitone, Schaefer and Scheitrum, 2021; van der Zee, Levitt & McSweeney, 2020). We could conceive of this allocation of injury or health risks as part of the prescriptive operation through which, in the Rancièrean framework presented earlier, *the police* assigns functions and places to specific groups of people as it institutes a distribution of the sensible.

The trends above described represent a new combination of various kinds of labour precarity, one that did not exist twenty years ago because integrated line technologies did not allow such processing speeds. The regulation of line speeds is thus not merely a logistical dilemma focused on balancing out the maximisation of profits with consumer safety. Rather, it also fundamentally involves ethical and political questions on the value and entitlements of the lives, human and animal, inside the processing plant. The case of meat industry workers is a compelling example of how modern technology's ability to satisfy capitalism's appetite for relentless and faster production enables the onset of new and perversely overlapping forms of labour precarity.

Consequences of stress and overwork on worker health

I have argued neoliberal capitalist temporalities, fuelling and fuelled by a productivist ethos, yield different forms of labour precarity and unlivability in the world of industrial production, to the point of threatening workers' physical integrity in cases of extreme social vulnerability. But neoliberal time regimes are pernicious for all workers today, not just for those risking their safety at warehouses or slaughterhouses. The reality is that workers from all kinds of industries—including the attention, service, and knowledge economies— are increasingly exposed to dangerous levels of stress and overwork due to the pace and demands of their jobs (Basso, 2003). Some white-collar workplaces exhibit a truly toxic and stubborn overwork culture, as has transpired from research on investment banking, where "both employees and managers reported feeling 'trapped' in a regime of working up to 120 hours per week *for years*" (Michel, 2011 in Blagoev, Muhr, Ortlieb & Schreyögg, 2018, p. 157). Surveillance, here too, plays an important role in creating time pressure. For instance, most corporate offices and call centers are endowed with monitoring devices that measure screen time, performance quality, and number of tasks completed (Hill, 2015). 24/7 ICTs have, of course, further exacerbated overwork by blurring the distinction between 'office hours' and private time. I must underscore that, while I discuss specific phenomena such as overwork or time pressure, the object of my critique is not just these but, more generally, the entire time regime and logic of which acceleration and the normalisation of overwork are but two aspects. Let us now examine how the consequences of accelerated overwork have a traceable impact on the health of workers, regardless of their occupation.

As has become more and more evident, the combination of chronic stress and overwork is what makes today's work culture so toxic and, literally, unlivable. Mexico, Singapore, China, Turkey, the US, and the UK are among the top countries where these have become a large-scale health problem (John, 2017; Kobayashi and Middlemiss, 2009). Commenting on the Mexican case, where 43 per cent of workers suffer from work-related

stress, Villavicencio-Ayub deplores the normalisation of bad working conditions over the past 20 years and affirms their impact on health is sweeping and, often, irreversible:

> An unhealthy diet; gastrointestinal disorders; increased coffee, alcohol and tobacco consumption, muscle pain, migraines; frequent illnesses; insomnia; mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and neurosis; abstenteeism; distant interpersonal relationships [...] are all consequences of those bad working conditions (2019; my translation).

Villavicencio's enumeration of ailments corresponds to what Brennan terms 'bioderegulation' (2003). Brennan proposes this term to name the erosion "of the internal constraints protecting" a human body that overworks itself, sacrificing its health, to meet "the pace and demands of production" (2003, p. 22). Brennan's work is marked by an awareness of the widening "gap between the speed at which natural resources and human beings are used up" under global capitalism and "the time they need to regenerate" (13). It is precisely in this unsupported gap, in this place of ongoing tension between capacities and demands, that the condition of neoliberally induced unlivability, as we defined it earlier, emerges. And it is in the survival-driven attempt to bridge that gap that human workers fall into bioderegulation, which takes place as a macro-process where various micro-processes aggravate each other. Particularly, the intertwining of physical and mental health causes one to degrade the other, and viceversa (O' Sullivan, 2016).

When the body stays in a state of bioderegulation for too long, what was a tired but functioning body starts to experience burnout syndrome. Although associated with the occupational context, the phenomenon of burnout must be understood as stemming from the gigantic pressures of what Byung-Chul Han calls *achievement society*, pressures that indeed go beyond the professional realm and construe achievement in a broader sense as an always-incomplete life-project. Characterised by "exhaustion and increased mental distance from one's job", burnout thus designates the frontier of human functionality (WHO, 2019). The experience of it is well captured by Cohen, who describes it as "the urge to shut down" altogether (2016). Byung-Chul Han sees burnout and depression as two interrelated and unmistakably contemporary illnesses. More particularly, he understands them as the consequence of "neuronal" or "system-immanent" violence (2015, p. 7). Han's argument is that our late-modern societies produce an excess of positivity, in the form of *too-much-of-the-same*: overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication (p. 5). We can thus group burnout syndrome, work-related stress, anxiety, and depression under the label of neuronal violence. Albeit catalogued as separate mental illnesses, they share several symptoms and are *de facto* linked with each other (Khammissa, Nemutandani, Feller, Lemmer, & Feller, 2022). They all manifest as reactions to task overload, job insecurity, and toxic work environments. Han sees depression as a state preceding burnout: "it erupts at the moment when the achievement-subject is *no longer able to be able*" (p. 10). With this sharp formulation, Han shows how depression is a kind of violence that affects one at the most fundamental level: at the level of being capable of having the capacity to act. The fact that anxiety and depression are the world's most prevalent mental health disorders, with 301 and 280 million people respectively suffering from them in 2019 (WHO, 2022), confirms Han's thesis about their epochal nature.

According to Han, the violence of achievement society, as opposed to that of disciplinary society, manifests primarily as *exhaustion* and *inclusion* (p. 48). Neoliberal subjects, he tells us, stand "under the injunction to achieve": they must (*can* and *should*) do everything and get involved everywhere, for which they must act as fast as possible. Han's recasts this injunction as the duty "to maximise performance" or "to increase productivity". As we established earlier, these are precisely the productivist imperatives that drive our capitalist societies and that normatively structure our relationship with the sensible world, time and space. Although he acknowledges the weight of internalised norms as a form of subjection, Han's qualification of self-exploitation as predominantly "voluntary" seems to obscure the triple bind of sheer necessity, exacerbated precarity and the internalisation of a productivist ethos as a strategy to remain competitive. There are thus voluntary (for instance, self-entrepreneurs) and involuntary (e.g. financially desperate people with multiple jobs) forms of self-exploitation coexisting with classical allo-exploitation.

Demographically, work-related mental health disorders have reached such alarming proportions that they have become a public health problem hindering productivity and costing a lot of money (Kobayashi and Middlemiss, 2009, p. 139). Likewise, the Health and Safety Executive in the UK estimates that 17.9 million working days were lost to stress, anxiety, or depression in 2019-2020 (2020). In other words, the pressures of neoliberal capitalism are backfiring on the system itself. The disastrous effects of burnout, which are palpable at the individual level as much as at the societal one, must therefore not be underestimated. As Rosa (2019) argues, this is symptomatic of a broader and deeper psychological crisis that perhaps originates in the realm of labour but certainly overflows it, and which seems merely kept at bay, but not truly addressed, by the endless prescription of antidepressants everywhere in the globe.

Conclusion

I have presented the various ways in which the contemporary landscape of work is still notoriously marked by forms of precarity, unlivability and exploitation for many people around the globe. In order to do this, I first argued it is necessary to acknowledge the role of time regimes in the regulation of social life at large. Building upon Rancière's theses, I proposed to think of temporalities as distributions of the sensible that configure time, space, action and utility into specific normative arrangements and that are assigned to specific groups of people. In a parallel vein, I sought to complement Butler's arguments by insisting that there are not just socio-economic but also (bio-)temporal conditions beyond which human life becomes unlivable. I then drew

a closer focus onto the nature of contemporary time regimes, which stand in a symbiotic relationship to late capitalism, and the impact they have on different aspects of labour by inquiring what the concrete manifestations of the principles of acceleration and continuous functioning are in present-day work environments. I identified the increasing rationalisation, standardisation and surveillance of labour as developments aimed at heightening productivity by accelerating work. Likewise, I recognised logistics and automation as two important mechanisms through which neoliberal capitalist temporalities and their productivist agenda are routinely enforced. I also underscored how all of these rationalising processes depend on a model of abstract time within which calculations are projected.

Analysing labour from the perspective of the temporal pressures and norms that workers regularly encounter allowed me to identify that the control of workers' time is a nodal point from which various forms of labour precarity derive. The two examples I presented not only show how labour precarity is a temporal matter, but also illustrate how excessive speed requirements can make labour precarities of different types overlap and create forms of extreme vulnerability. In these cases, the prevalence of absurdly fast processing speeds has a direct correlation with the degree to which a workplace is deliberately made safe or unsafe, and the degree to which workers' lives are valued or devalued. Finally, I endeavoured to show how temporal pressure is a form of violence whose effects extend across all areas of a worker's life. Through a brief examination of the health impact of work-related stress and burnout, I laid bare how destructive productivism and its associated time regimes really are. Because they have sedimented at a structural level, combatting the unlivable, precarious and exploitative dimensions of work I have here highlighted will require radically challenging not just workplace policies and supranational legislation, but the very logics behind neoliberal capitalist temporalities and their governance of our navigation across time.

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