

WhatsApp groups emerge and are abandoned at each mobilization, workers gather and disperse with the same volatility with which a conversation on the sidewalk is interrupted when the notification of a new order arrives: like molecules of gas that condense in a storm, it is only at the moment of confrontation that this cloud-proletariat takes form.



WORK & REVOLT AT BRAZIL'S DEAD END

uprisings.” Interestingly, one of the examples mentioned by the sociologist are the “thousands of motorcyclists who survive by working illegally on the streets of Tehran, carrying mail, money, documents, goods, and people, in constant conflict with the police.” (*Revolution without revolutionaries*, 97).

190 Bayat, *Revolution without revolutionaries*, 106-108.

191 Temps Critiques, “Labor Value and Labor as Value,” *Ill Will*, December 28, 2021.

192 In the last months of 2021, quitting also became a meme in the United States. In a TikTok selfie, a young fast food worker jumps out the drive-thru window while laughing and announcing her resignation to the manager. With the hashtag #antiwork, the video in which a worker uses the speakers of a supermarket to curse the bosses and declare her departure circulates alongside photos of stores without attendants, where a handwritten sign explains that all staff have asked for the bills. The memes report a much larger wave of quitting (4 million layoffs per month), described by a former Labor Secretary as an “unofficial general strike”—which is also a sign of labor’s loss of form. Between reports, jokes, and complaints against companies and employers, postings on online forums like Antiwork: Unemployment for all, not just the rich! ([reddit.com/r/antiwork](https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork)) oscillate between anarchism and “self-entrepreneurship”—with some frequency, “being your own boss” appears as an alternative to shit jobs. Ver Robert Reich, “Is America experiencing an unofficial general strike?” *The Guardian*, 13 October 2021, and Passa Palavra, “Greves e recusa ao trabalho nos EUA e no mundo: novo ciclo de lutas?,” *Passa Palavra*, October 2021.

193 “In these recent reactions against labor, we hear cries of suffering, frustration, and revolt mixed together, in an expression that at first is not collective, but particular, individual, and subjective. To see a collective consciousness there would be a fiction, because, today, it is the notion and the experience of a collective consciousness that tend to change, dissolve, decompose, since, from work, only “negative experiences” emerge—and negative in the original sense of the term, not in the Hegelian and Marxist sense (...). Just as the proletariat can no longer assert a workers’ identity, it can no longer refer to a ‘proletarian experience’ - and only exists politically, in this sense, in “its immediate actions”: fragile and unstable parentheses that close as soon as the conflict ceases. See Temps Critiques, “Labor Value and Labor as Value.” Paulo Arantes had already located “this negative recentralization of work at the origin of the current explosion of new suffering in companies and societies” in a commentary on the findings of Christophe Dejours (“Sale Boulot”).

194 Endnotes, “Onward Barbarians.”

WORK AND REVOLT AT BRAZIL’S DEAD END

MILITANTS IN THE FOG

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engine belts, broke windows or damaged the keys. The mysterious wave of sabotage was attributed to “former employees who had left the bus companies.” Adamo Bazani, “Polícia faz diligências para identificar autores de vandalismo contra ônibus em São Paulo e classifica participantes como criminosos”, *Diário do Transporte*, July 12, 2021. In 2019, a collective of young workers fired from precarious jobs in small establishments in Italy organized to haunt their former “shitty bosses” by going to protest in front of stores with their faces covered by white masks—“make them pay” could refer to both severance pay and *vendetta*. Francesco Bedani e outros, “È l’ora della vendetta?,” *Commonware*, September 12, 2019.

188 The occupation of the ruins of a fast food store in Atlanta, burned down in the midst of the June 2020 rebellion in the United States after another young black man was killed there by police, and from which teenagers came out every night “to block the roads with flamethrowers, guns, swords, and vehicles,” illustrates this dynamic well. The account of a group of activists “intoxicated by a mixture of adrenaline from 17 straight days of rioting, a large stockpile of looted alcohol, MDMA” and more, tells how the “distinctly ‘anti-political’ airs” of that space quickly evolved into a mixture of “paranoia and fatalism”: “I’m ready to die for this shit!” was what was heard from the “young black men armed to the teeth” who took turns standing watch to “defend a parking lot that contained little more than a destroyed building” from a supposed imminent attack by white supremacists or the police. The occupation would end up “privatized” by armed identity groups, with a toll of seven shootings and the death of an eight-year-old child. See Anonymous, “At The Wendy’s,” *Ill Will*, 9 November 2020. In the midst of struggles fought in a context of deep social disintegration, these militants encountered problems that sound familiar to anyone trying to organize in the Brazilian urban outskirts. In a balance of more than a decade of “attempts to create urban occupations, settlements near cities, grassroots groups in peripheral neighborhoods,” a Pernambuco militant reported how “some good fruits seemed not to compensate for the failures and frustrations, which were mounting. The evaluations were recurrent: extreme poverty hindering discipline, [...] the youth distant from the political objectives, the fast pace of renovation making political formation always having to start over from scratch. It is a dialogue among the deaf, said one leader. We cannot admit that our mobilizations become recovery clinics, said another. The general perception is that we are dealing with a degenerated people - almost incapable of social organization [...] We don’t have words in our vocabulary, concepts in our theories, pages in our primers, and space in our meetings to assimilate the lacerating reality of the ghettos.” Carolina Malé, “Criférios de periferia,” *Passa Palavra*, September 2010.

189 The idea of “social non-movements” seems to have been coined by the Iranian-American sociologist Asef Bayat, in studies on the transformations in the cities of the Middle East, and employed more recently by the author to reflect on the origin of the “revolutions without revolutionaries” that swept the region at the beginning of the last decade. See A. Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of Arab Spring*, Stanford University Press, 2017, 104-108, and N. Ghandour-Demiri and A. Bayat, “The urban Subalterns and the Non-movements of the Arab Uprisings: an Interview with Asef Bayat,” *Jadaliyya*, March 26, 2013. According to Bayat, “there are constant tensions between the authorities and these subaltern groups, whose subsistence and sociocultural reproduction often depend on the illegal use of external public spaces. The tension is often mediated by bribery, fines, physical confrontation, punishment and imprisonment, when it does not remain marked by constant insecurity, by guerrilla tactics such as ‘operate and flee.’ [...] The link between non-movements and the episode of riots lies in the fact that ‘non-movements’ keep their actors in a constant state of mobilization, even if the actors remain dispersed, or their ties to other actors remain often (but not always) passive. This means that when they sense that there is an opportunity, they are likely to forge coordinated collective protests, or merge into a larger political and social mobilization.” See “The urban subalterns and the non-movements of the Arab

179 The expression, used by Chris King-Chi Chan to describe the factory conflicts in China, interestingly matches the synthesis of Brazilian Marxist Luiz Carlos Scapi about the protests of June 2013: “mass movement without mass organization.” See C. K. Chan, *The challenge of labour in China: strikes and the changing labour regime in global factories*, PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2008.

180 Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes Without End,” *Ill Will*, May 16, 2021. Also see Paul Torino and Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes With Force — Lessons from the Yellow Vests,” *Mute*, February 26, 2019.

181 Just remember how that anonymous and diffuse popular violence that shocked the Brazilian news during the riots of June 2013 - at the time, simply called “vandalism” or “disorder” - was gradually replaced, already in the hangover of large demonstrations, by the crystallized media figure of the black bloc. The backlash of the conflicts becomes visible when what once went viral and became a meme is reduced to a static brand or a symbolic staging of the revolt. There is something of this in the insistence to “not return to normality” of the relentless protesters who continued to gather regularly in the inhospitable central Santiago traffic circle months after the peak of the Chilean social estallido; as well as in the French groups who, past the peak of the mobilization, tried to turn the “yellow vests” into a fixed identity.

182 Friedman, *Insurgency Trap*, 19.

183 We’ve discussed such continuity in depth in “Brazil: How Things Have (And Haven’t) Changed.”

184 In this sense, Ana Elisa Corrêa and Rodrigo Lima observe that “such explosions end up aggravating the generalized fragmentation and make the revolt itself even more abstract”, which ends up contributing “to widen the risk framework that makes up the arsenal” of capital accumulation in our days. “Revolta popular e a crise sistêmica: a necessária crítica categorial da práxis,” *Anais do XIV Encontro Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Geografia*, Editora Realize, 2021.

185 Sharpening their gaze amidst the geopolitical mirages surrounding the 2019 Hong Kong protests, a group of activists encountered an apparent paradox: “How is it possible that the least overtly political grouping—the one that seems to want nothing more than for the city to burn—is, in fact, the only one with an accurate intuition of the real political terrain? This is because, on the one hand, their very lack of political coordinates is itself an accurate reflection of the state of the movement’s collective consciousness. Their literal act of tearing apart the city is also a figurative unmaking of the city’s political and ideological foundation.” “The Divided God,” *Chuang*, January 2020.

186 “We are back to the time of class hatred...in the absence of classes in the historical and Marxist sense of the term,” concludes another group’s analysis of the protests against the health passport in France. “Here, anger certainly builds up, but it does not have the character of the ‘proletarian experience’ that aimed the class struggle and inscribed in it cycles of struggle and thus continuities and discontinuities with periods of greater and lesser intensity that succeeded each other in time. [...] Here, the sense that nothing really began creates the impression that temporality itself has disappeared.” *Temps Critiques*, “Demonstrations Against the Health Pass... a Non-Movement?,” *Ill Will*, 5 October 2021.

187 With no prospect of conquests, the workers’ demands make room for revenge. In July 2021, a trail of destruction would attract the attention of the newspapers of São Paulo: in different parts of the city, dozens of buses were being approached by small and unidentified groups that withered tires, cut the

“Brazil is not an open ground where we can build things straight away for our people. There is a lot that we must first dismantle, many things we must undo, before we can start building something. I hope that I can at least serve as a tipping point in this direction.” It was with these words that Jair Bolsonaro addressed the banquet gathered at the Brazilian embassy during his first visit to Washington in March 2019.¹

Exactly one year later, the first Covid-19 death was confirmed in Brazil. The apocalyptic panorama of news flooding in from abroad about the pandemic’s spread contrasted with the unbroken continuity of daily routine here. A blurry scenario, which created an apprehensive atmosphere that grew day by day. Unavoidable crowding in closed workplaces such as factories, shopping malls, and offices, as well as in invariably packed buses and wagons, provided the harrowing conditions for the spread of a still unknown disease. It was in a telemarketing company in Bahia that the tensions first overflowed: workers abandoned their workstations and took to the streets demanding quarantine measures. Within a few hours, the scene replicated itself in call centers in Teresina, Curitiba, Goiânia, and other cities. Footage from the walkouts went viral in WhatsApp and Facebook groups, revealing a concrete solution to a desperate situation: literally, just leave!²

The coronavirus lent a prescient tone to an anonymous letter—or more exactly, a “final cry for help”—penned by workers at a chain bookstore in February 2020 following an incident of brazen harassment. It is symptomatic that, a month prior to the pandemic, they had already described their experience at the company as that of witnessing the “end of the world *masterclass*.” The “trouble with the end of the world,” they concluded, “is that someone still has to clean up afterwards.”³ In fact, when we found ourselves confronting a biological calamity a few weeks later, “bullshit jobs” continued to take hostages in order to keep business running.⁴

The comparison between call centers and slave quarters and prisons, so common in workers’ jokes, suddenly found brutal confirmation. For many, escape from work emerged as a last resort so as not to die at the workplace.⁵ Despite a presidential decree shortly after lockdowns began declaring them to be “essential services,” in the weeks that followed many call centers were found empty. Many workers began to present medical certificates (real or forged), skip work without justification, or simply quit. Companies responded with inadequate solutions such as remote work, collective vacations, and layoffs.⁶ The pressure of the protests was absorbed into the disintegration of industry here that had been ongoing, and which was merely accelerated by the virus.⁷

As quickly as the pandemic eroded working conditions in the most different areas, life adjusted itself to the “new normal.” We watched workers return from lay-offs only to face infection, all the while grateful that they still had jobs amidst a context of factory closures. We saw teachers who initially objected to distance learning proactively engaging in the new routine. After the avalanche of layoffs, many who remained in the service sector were forced to submit to wage and working hour reductions designed by the federal government (although in truth, the working hours in the companies did not really change). And if strikes by bus drivers and fare collectors became more recurrent around the country throughout 2020, it was because the strikes were the only way left to guarantee wages in a context of reduced passenger numbers and crisis in the transportation sector.⁸

The destructive power of the coronavirus was combined, here, with the wave of devastation that was already underway. This “movement of destruction of productive forces,” an emergency exit triggered by capital in response to the social revolt unleashed in 2013, found an embodiment in the incendiary figure of a retired army captain in the 2018 elections.⁹ When a crisis proves impossible to manage, it is the crisis itself that becomes a model of

pecados de uma obra amazônica.” Caio Cavechini (2015) the research of Cauê Vieira Campos (*Conflitos trabalhistas nas obras do PAC: o caso das Usinas Hidrelétricas de Jirau, Santo Antônio e Belo Monte* (Master’s thesis, UNICAMP, 2016) and Rodrigo Campos Vieira Lima (*Desenvolvimento e Contradições Sociais no Brasil contemporâneo. Um estudo do Complexo Petroquímico do Rio de Janeiro — Comperj*, master’s thesis, UNESP, 2015).

172 For then-mayor Fernando Haddad, the stoppage of bus drivers and bus fare collectors in São Paulo in default of the union was not exactly a strike, but “an inadmissible guerrilla war. How do you get on a bus and tell the passenger to get off? You get on the bus and throw away the key?” (“Greve de ônibus trava SP, e Haddad fala em ‘guerrilha,’” *ANTP*, 21 May 2014). In the aftermath of the conflicts over transportation that shook the country, that wave of wildcat stoppages between May and June 2014 added to protests and *catrações* [turnstile-jumping actions] of passengers at bus terminals and subway stations. For records of these struggles in different cities, see “Sem choro nem vela: paralisações no transporte em Goiânia,” *Passa Palavra*, May 18, 2014; “De baixo para cima: a greve dos rodoviários em Salvador,” *Passa Palavra*, 27 May 2014 and “São Paulo: greve dos metroviários e catração dos usuários,” *Passa Palavra*, 5 June 2014.

173 Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China*, Londres, ILR Press, 2014, 13. In the early 2010s, activists and intellectuals following the strikes in China still “expected a generalization of the shift from ‘defensive’ to ‘offensive’ actions, in which workers would seek wage increases beyond existing laws and norms, rather than ‘reacting’ when employers pushed them too far and did not comply with legal norms. In the years that followed, however, these ‘reactive’ demands (for unpaid wages, social insurance, etc.) remained dominant in labor struggles.” Chuang, “Picking Quarrels,” *Chuang 2: Frontiers*, 2019.

174 The wave of strikes in the 2010s was not indicative of “the emergence of a traditional ‘labor movement,’ or anything like that. There is no such movement in China, and it is not simply because of repression, because there is also no such movement in Europe, the United States, or other places without the ‘hard’ oppression characteristic of Chinese state policy.” Lorenzo Fe, “Overcoming mythologies: An interview on the Chuang project,” *Chuang*, 15 February 2016.

175 G., “Scaling the Firewall, 1: #LiftTheBucket,” *Chuang*, September 24, 2020.

176 Francesc & El Quico, “The Centrality of Conflict,” cit.

177 The diffusion of the agenda is yet another symptom of the loss of form of the struggles. In June 2013, the existence of an organized interlocutor, Movimento Passe Livre (MPL), still gave some contour to the street disturbances, especially in São Paulo. “The explosion of revolt is (...) also the explosion of meaning, and as long as this explosion has to be contained, the maintenance of the agenda (in which the MPL is engaged) will fulfill a fundamental limiting role.” (Caio Martins e Leonardo Cordeiro, “Brazil: Popular Revolt And Its Limits,” *Passa Palavra*, May 27, 2014, available in English). Years later, in France, the yellow vests insurgency seemed to become more radicalized as the initial fuel tax agenda lost importance; moreover, among the protesters, there were even those who openly claimed that nothing should be demanded, so as not to give the state the key to demobilization. (see “On se bat pour tout le monde,” *Jaune - Le journal pour gagner*, January 6, 2019).

178 “Onward Barbarians,” *Endnotes*, December 2020.

163 Paula Salati, “MST inicia captação de R\$ 17,5 milhões no mercado financeiro para produção da agricultura familiar,” *GI*, July 27, 2021 and Maura Silva and Luciana Console, “Fundo de investimento permite financiar cooperativas de pequenos agricultores,” *MST*, May 22, 2020.

164 “Despite the difficulties faced with the lack of aid [in the pandemic], development policies, and access to credit, peasants continue to foster solutions,” states a short account of the financial operation published on the MST website. For the thousands of interested people who were not able to acquire their quotas, the movement promises to repeat the dose soon. Lays Furtado, “Finapop consolida horizontes de investimentos para a agricultura familiar camponesa,” *MST*, October 28, 2021. On the financialized management of the social conflict that is outlined from this and other initiatives, structured to capture “income flows generated by social actions”, see Isadora Guerreiro, “Impacto Social, Apps e financeirização das lutas,” *Passa Palavra*, August 2021 and “O futuro dos trabalhadores é a rua?,” *Passa Palavra*, February 14, 2022.

165 “The scoring system was originated by the urban popular movements from the Popular Democratic camp, and serves as a queue not only for access to construction processes, but for any other relationship between the family and the organization.” From an internal control tool, notes Isadora Guerreiro, the MTST would also make the registry an instrument of negotiation with public power. In mid-2010, a collective already warned about the use of attendance control in “assemblies, political meetings, or public acts considered important by the leadership,” and even in “electoral campaign” actions, to determine who had access “to the movement’s promises: houses, scholarships in colleges, training courses, allotments.” That when the registry was not “also a means of control and monitoring for (...) the movement’s accountability to the State, due to agreements and related partnerships established with it.” Isadora Guerreiro, *Habitação a contrapelo: as estratégias de produção do urbano dos movimentos populares durante o Estado Democrático Popular*, PhD thesis, FAU-USP, 2018 and Passa Palavra, “Entre o fogo e a panela: movimentos sociais e burocratização,” *Passa Palavra*, August 22, 2010.

166 “Núcleo de tecnologia - Setor de formação política - MTST”

167 Francisc & El Quico, “The centrality of conflict”, cit.

168 The comparison of the historical series of strikes can be found in DIEESE, “Balanço das greves de 2018,” *Estudos e Pesquisas*, n. 89, April 2019.

169 Militants in the Fog, “How things have (and haven’t) changed”, *Passa Palavra*, June 5, 2019

170 According to the “Balance of strikes of 2017” by DIEESE, “(...) the defensive emphasis of the strikes’ agenda continues, but some ruptures, some discontinuities are observed. We can say, briefly, that the civilizing aspect of the defensive strikes is now being relativized. In other words, without ceasing to address those rights that have been historically unfulfilled, strikes are increasingly taking place in the field of immediate, urgent reactions: against layoffs and against late payment of wages.” DIEESE, *Estudos e Pesquisas*, n. 87, September. 2018.

171 Between 2009 and 2014, explosive strikes would occur in the works of the hydroelectric plants of Jirau, Santo Antônio and Belo Monte, the Suape Port Complex, the Abreu e Lima Refinery and the Petrochemical Complex of Rio de Janeiro - “not strike, terrorism,” explained a Jirau worker when filming through his cell phone the fire in the construction site’s lodgings. See, in addition to the documentary “Jaci: sete

management. Where some might see an inefficient government, our self-proclaimed agent of deconstruction reveals the efficiency of negation: just as chaos is a method, “not governing is a form of government.”¹⁰ By systematically throwing up roadblocks to scientists’ recommendations for the control of the pandemic, Bolsonaro was never properly a “denialist”; on the contrary, “he is himself a vector of the virus, he is fully identified with the virus.”¹¹ As he stated in 2017, “I’m an army captain, my specialty is killing, not saving anyone.”¹²

In August 2020, when Brazil was still approaching the figure of one hundred thousand recorded COVID deaths, surveys warned of another worrying index revealing that less than half of the working-age population was actually working.¹³ If the decrease of the employment-to-population ratio to the lowest levels in recent history could be seen as an acceleration of the elimination of disposable workers, under a different perspective, however, the same devastating picture was producing something new: “we were already observing in Brazil a *promising scenario* for this new way of working and the pandemic has made more people look for other ways to carry out their activities and generate income,” explained the vice president of international expansion of an application used by companies to hire freelancers in 160 countries, now arriving in Brazil.¹⁴ After the apocalypse, Uber?

Brazil Is Online¹⁵

“We want to work!” shouted dozens of mobile vendors in February 2020 as they invaded the tracks of Estação da Luz train station in downtown São Paulo, in a protest against the use of a recently-outsourced security company to suppress trade in train wagons—an activity that, according to the rules of the suburban railway, is informal.¹⁶ A few weeks later, with the arrival of the new virus, the same slogan would echo again amid the horns of car caravans called by Bolsonaro to demand the reopening of businesses. By opposing the isolation policies implemented by mayors and governors, Bolsonaro not only satisfied the wishes of small bosses, he also gambled with the situation of “workers who depend on small gigs to survive and who look forward to nothing but misery under the pandemic.”¹⁷

If the perspective of struggle that we saw in call centers failed to become widespread, this is because the demand for quarantine measures would not easily assume the features of a strike. This is particularly true in those sectors where work long ago transcended the physical limitations of the company.

Among the most qualified professions, it would not take long for the rapid transition to remote work to transform “shelter in place” into a cue to work twice as hard. On the other hand, as the streets emptied, this slogan threatened a loss of wages and hunger to those whose livelihood depends on the daily movements of the city, e.g. street vendors, manicurists, waiters, *flanelinhas* [irregular parking attendants], drivers, etc.

Coronavirus containment measures pushed the condition of work without defined form, i.e. *informal* work, to the center of debate. Such work forms a recurrent and fundamental political dilemma in the composition of the capitalist economy in Brazil. Throughout our history *Bicos* [gigs], *gambiarras* [kludges, DIY, MacGyver], *mutirões* [communal work] and all forms of *trambiques* [con jobs] have compensated for the precariousness of urban services and the infrastructure of capitalist accumulation. The “*jeitinho brasileiro*” [Brazilian way] improvised by those at the bottom to handle life at the city’s margins, mixing formality and legality, provided the fuel for the country’s industrialization and urbanization “miracle.” Deciphered by Brazilian sociology in the 1970s, such magical formulas fed hopes of a national development towards a stable wage society—a model that was already showing signs of exhaustion at the heart of the system.¹⁸ Since that time, it was the rest of the world that approached the Brazilian regime of work flexibility, which no longer points toward any future.¹⁹ In the center of capitalism, we see the dissolution of “socially stable, contractual, recognizable” forms of work, which defined what is and “what is not work time, workplace, remuneration, or labor costs.”²⁰

Even at its peak during the Workers’ Party (PT) governments, formal work would never reach much more than half of the employed population in Brazil, in an expansion based on low-paying jobs that—despite the recurrent neo-developmental litany—did not express a tendency towards universalization of formal employment so much as its reduction to one among other strategies of *viração* [getting by].²¹ By stating that labor legislation “has to come closer to informality,”²² Bolsonaro finally adjusted the parameter and recognized the unregulated as a rule.

It would be only due to the economic calamity caused by the coronavirus that informal work would receive, for the first time in the country’s history, a legal definition—and it was as broad as possible, negatively delimited: informal is any worker without a formal employment contract, “whether employed, self-employed or unemployed.”²³ During the brief period of discus-

157 The expansion of the delivery service by apps has been producing, around the world, the proliferation of “ghost” kitchens and stores—facilities without face-to-face customer service, which sometimes bring together several virtual establishments, reducing costs with personnel, furniture, inventory and rent. Nabil Bonduki, “Dark kitchens, que vieram para ficar, são boas para as cidades?,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 16 February 2022. A new front for real estate investments, they also become meeting points for delivery people, where conflicts often erupt. See, for example, Treta no Trampo, “A greve na loja da Vila Madalena entra no 2º dia,” *Twitter*, November 6, 2021.

158 Francesc & El Quico, “The centrality of conflict,” *Ill Will*, January 18, 2022.

159 The expression is used by Rodrigo Nunes to shed light on the financial dimension of the Bolsonaro militancy—a true “entrepreneurial phenomenon” that can help understand a dynamic present in other mobilizations. “Whether by creating movements able to raise funds of nebulous destination, whether by conquering (or regaining) spaces in traditional media, whether by monetizing YouTube channels and Instagram profiles, they constituted a circuit in which the accumulation of political capital was easily converted into the accumulation of economic capital, and vice versa. This convertibility is, moreover, simultaneously the means by which the trajectory of political entrepreneur is built and an end. By consolidating himself as an influencer, the individual becomes a candidate for public office, either by election or nomination; the public office, in turn, brings notoriety and a loyal audience, feeding back the performance in the social networks. Even when it does not lead to a career in politics, this type of entrepreneurship always involves pecuniary advantages, both direct (invitations to lectures, advertising and publishing contracts, sale of products such as T-shirts and stickers, public funds) and indirect (forgiveness of tax debts, loans, access to authorities).” Rodrigo Nunes, “Pequenos fascismos, grandes negócios” *Piauí*, October 2021.

160 It is not uncommon that, during a picket in a shopping mall, someone shows up with a portable speaker playing Racionais MC’s, SNJ, 509-E, DMN, and other national rap groups that emerged in the 1990s singing about the undeclared civil war underway in the Brazilian peripheries. Throughout the following decade, the social contradiction expressed in the lyrics would gain increasingly ambiguous contours, between resistance and adherence to widespread competition. In the verses that enunciate that “today is the reality that you can interfere” and that “the future will be a consequence of the present” (Racionais MC’s), or that “if you fight you conquer” (SNJ), the convocation may represent the call for a combat in which the conquest is only possible through collective interference in the present — the social struggle. But it can also be the expression of an objective condition that imposes itself on all those for whom daily life is a succession of battles for survival, like the “unemployed, with hungry children and a large family” (SNJ). It is necessary to “not measure efforts” (SNJ) or, as the lyrics composed by the deliverers themselves explain, to be “ninja” and “risk your life” both in the rush of daily life and to break the system—“every day in this [ambivalent] fight.” Racionais MCs, “A Vida é Desafio” in *Nada como um dia após o outro dia*, 2002; SNJ, “Se tu lutas tu conquistas” in *Se tu lutas tu conquistas*, 2001; Sang, “Diz pro iFood” Rzl Prod, 2020 and Família019 CPS, “22 de junho de 2020”)

161 Leandro Machado, “Eleições municipais 2020: os entregadores e motoristas do Uber que viraram candidatos,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, November 13, 2021.

162 For a critical reflection on the trajectory of the MST, see “MST S.A.” *Passa Palavra*, 8 April 2013 and Ana Elisa Cruz Corrêa, *Crise da modernização e gestão da barbárie: a trajetória do MST e os limites da questão agrária*, doctoral thesis, UFRJ, 2018.

see Treta no Trampo, “Almoço brechado,” *Instagram*, September 11, 2021 and “Teve jantar brechado em SP,” *Instagram*, September 11, 2021.

148 Treta no Trampo, “Entregadores de aplicativo bloqueiam Zé Delivery Jabaquara,” *Instagram*, September 9, 2021.

149 Amigos do Cachorro Louco, “Entregadores de app de São José dos Campos completam 6 dias em greve,” *Passa Palavra*, April 16, 2021 and Ingrid Fernandes and Victor Silva, “Como uma greve de entregadores no interior de SP enquadrado o iFood,” *Ponte Jornalismo*, September 20, 2021.

150 Treta no Trampo, “Manual de como brechar um shopping,” *Instagram*, August 29, 2021.

151 See Amigos do Cachorro Louco, “Greves de entregadores no interior de São Paulo já completam 7 dias,” *Passa Palavra*, October 14, 2021 and Gabriela Moncau, “Greves de entregadores contra apps de delivery se espalham e já duram dias,” *Brasil de Fato*, October 11, 2021.

152 During the mobilization in São José dos Campos, in addition to “terminating their partnership with restaurants without any warning” and pressuring establishments to resume deliveries, iFood threatened to use alleged “recordings of delivery workers complaining about the strike” and made it known to the strikers “that the police might start showing up at the picketed locations.” Renato Assad, “Entregadores de São José dos Campos recuperam métodos históricos de luta e emparedam iFood,” *Esquerda Web*, September 24, 2021.

153 “When we look at lower class territories, community leaders become intermediaries of a huge amount of relations, regulating everything from commercial, domestic, community, political issues, etc. and being, above all, centralizers of demands and mediators of the community with external agents.” As Isadora Guerreiro notes, such middlemen are necessarily ambivalent figures: at the same time that “they are part of the community, lean on its existence and its networks, having to maintain and promote them,” their economic interests “place clear limits to this partnership.” “It is not surprising that in the reports on the delivery strike in São José dos Campos, small businesses / shop-owners appeared initially as supporters and then as potential deflagrators of violence if there was no negotiation by the workers.” Isadora Guerreiro, “Lições do Breque entre a cidade e o trabalho,” *Passa Palavra*, September 27, 2021.

154 Dois funcionários do Metrô, Metrô SP: Terceirizados da bilheteria denunciam descontos abusivos,” *Passa Palavra*, March 3, 2019.

155 “Bilheteiros do Metrô param os atendimentos contra descontos abusivos do salário,” *Passa Palavra*, March 7, 2019. It is noteworthy that, at the beginning of the mobilization, a group of ticket workers appealed to the union that legally represents them against the company and received the reply that “the strike is only beneficial to public employees,” because for the outsourced workers the strike “is not legally accepted, but rather the paralyzation.”

156 Two years and one pandemic later, in a strategy accelerated by the loss of revenue during the period of social isolation, the São Paulo government would announce the extinction of the contract with the service providers and the closing of all subway ticket offices, transferring the work of employees to users through an app and self-service machines. Fernando Nakagawa, “Metrô de SP triplica prejuízo em 2020 e quer fechar bilheterias para economizar,” *CNN*, April 1, 2021.

sions around the law instituting “Emergency Financial Aid,” it was difficult to accurately anticipate the true scope of that criteria. Sanctioned at the beginning of April 2020, the assistance program would reach almost 68 million people—about 32% of the Brazilian population—of whom 38 million were until this point outside the reach of income transfer programs. The devastation suddenly opened up a historic opportunity for “inclusion”:

The president of Caixa Econômica Federal called these people “invisible,” most of whom did not have one or more means of access to the social visibility as determined by the state: an active social security number, a cell phone (with access to the internet), or a bank account. Those people are not registered in Bolsa Família [...], which reached the farthest corners of the country, making roughly 30 million people visible to the government. These were already known. Invisible, oddly enough, was a significant portion of the population whose social metabolism was structurally linked to urban metabolism. It is the portion of the population that survives through “*viração*,” not from public benefits (...). They are presupposed in their consequences, but invisible in their existence. When the city stops, this portion claims state visibility through registration in the Federal Government Unified Register. The pandemic reveals them but also submits them, setting the rules for their visibility.²⁴

Of course, this invisible contingent was already included up to their necks, since the consequences of their shapeless work were always presupposed by the functioning of the economy as a whole; the difference was simply that they would now be subjected to mechanisms that ensure a more complete control over their existence. A bank account, a smartphone with access to the internet, and a profile in an app: the means required to collect Emergency Aid are the same to create an account for Uber, a sign that we are facing fundamental parts of this “new way of working.” Years ago, it was already possible to identify in the Bolsa Família program, whose dimensions were small in face of the 2020 financial aid program, the objective of forming a unified workforce more deeply subjected to capitalist relations.²⁵ The “bankification” promoted by the program contributed to expanding the reach of microcredit systems, in a process of financialization of informality—which was deepened in recent years with the dissemination of increasingly agile and easy payment terminals and electronic payment systems, such as Pix [a quicker and tax-free

money transfer method].²⁶ The phenomenon reached unprecedented intensity due to the Emergency Aid: the state-owned bank Caixa Econômica Federal absorbed 30 million customers in ten days, in what was possibly the fastest bankification process in world history, thus reaching a record profit in 2020.²⁷

Access to credit is essential for the emergence of a precarious workforce to which capital costs and risks are transferred, while interest rates induce a new level of productivity to the old *viração* [getting by], now directly connected to the global financial market. Thus, the focus of these income policies would be less on expanding the consumption capacity of the beneficiaries (as in the Keynesian distributive model) and more on expanding their investment capacity, financing the acquisition of work instruments and “self-valuing” their “human capital.”²⁸ Enthusiasts of such programs openly claim that “the financial cushion provided by basic income can represent enough stability for people to be able to spend their own savings or other capital on starting a business.”²⁹ A report that interviewed residents of some capitals in the Northeast region points out that “in many cases, the money [from the Emergency Aid] served as working capital for informal businesses”: finishing building a small apartment for rent, acquiring goods for street trade, opening a small store or buying “a used bike from the neighbor to make deliveries through apps.”³⁰ However, in large urban centers, the payments do not cover the cost of living for many families, which have to look for other sources of income. “The money would go away only to pay rent. They would have other bills and the food,” explains an unemployed man forced to sleep on the street.³¹ Even before considering renting a room again, when receiving the first installments of the financial assistance, another interviewee says that he bought a mobile phone. When it was not invested in means of production, the money became means of reproduction: it paid for home renovations and household appliances. In the middle between these two fields lies the mobile phone.³²

Gathering leisure, work, socialization, and control functions within a single apparatus, smartphones materialize the contemporary lack of distinction between free time and work. Through algorithms that process vast quantities of data in real-time, apps that connect a multitude of people to the same server have made it possible for capital to incorporate and organize directly that shapeless work that is a constitutive part of the Brazilian economy. The notorious “uberization” of work means, in *tupiniquim* lands, a kind of “real subsumption of *viração*.”³³

141 Luis Felipe Miguel, “Favorito em 2022, Lula pode normalizar dismante do país se ceder demais”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, 14 August 2021. When it took over the federal government in the early 2000s, the Worker’s Party (PT) played an analogous role, completing and deepening, with the help of its social capillarity, the “state of economic emergency” implemented in the administrations of its predecessors and criticized by PT at the time when it was the opposition. See, for example, Leda Paulani, *Brasil delivery*, Boitempo, 2008.

142 Throughout the first semester of 2021, we witnessed a profusion of corporate struggles for priority in the queue for vaccination. However, only clearly identifiable “work sectors” where “frontline” work retains some form, can claim a special place in line. Naturally, the priority was limited to public workers, permanent employees and people with diplomas: teachers, policemen, subway workers, bus drivers, biologists, etc. For many of them, the achievement would revert itself into an early return to work—usually before the complete immunization was finished. In the words of a subway worker, “the vaccine became the new ‘early treatment’. It doesn’t matter if they give vaccines or chloroquine. What matters is to keep working, regardless of whether a thousand or four thousand die every day. In the hand of capitalists, the vaccine is one more weapon to impose the return to work.” Um funcionário do Metrô, “Prioridade para os trabalhadores do transporte?”, *Passa Palavra*, April 14, 2021.

143 “In fact, the withering ended up being an important element, a charm” Eduardo Moura, “‘Piroca verde e amarela’ do 7 de Setembro é gigante pela própria natureza, diz autor”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, September 15, 2021.

144 Among the reasons for such a difference between the unsuccessful attempts by independent truckers to paralyze fuel prices and the mobilization in support of Bolsonaro, there is the suspicion of support from agribusiness and transportation companies, raised by entities opposed to the blockades initiated on September 7. The audio of the president circulating through WhatsApp groups of the category the next morning departed from the explosive rhetoric of the previous days and asked them to release the roads to “follow normality.” While some of the protest leaders, for whom it was too late to back down, were left to their fate, Bolsonaro was accused of betrayal on social networks, where some spoke of “game over.” “O que se sabe sobre paralisação de caminhoneiros que atingiu 15 Estados”, *BBC*, September 8, 2021 and “‘Game over’: a decepção e revolta de bolsonaristas com recuo de Bolsonaro”, *BBC*, September 9, 2021.

145 The expression is Bolsonaro’s. As cited in Gabriel Feltran, “Elementary Forms of Political Life.”

146 As one astute observer noted, “the sight of gatecrashers angrily storming the Senate demanding Mike Pence reveal himself, a man in proletarian dress with his feet up on a desk in the office of the multi-millionaire powerbroker Nancy Pelosi, and the perverse fun most of them seemed to be having doing it, furnish powerful political images, (...) no matter how ephemeral.” “In a country where the majority of eligible citizens do not vote,” where “rampant interpersonal violence, addiction, routines mass shootings, and suicide epidemics testify to a profound hopelessness that anything can be done to improve daily life,” they “register in the minds of millions of people the idea that drastic measures can be taken by ordinary people.” Jarrod Shanahan, “The Big Takeover”, *Hardcrackers*, January 7, 2021.

147 The blockades that brought Brazil to a halt three years ago are often referenced by delivery workers: some even took food to the strikers in 2018 and now dream of a similar unity capable of disrupting the flows in the cities and highways throughout the country. For more on the September 11th strike, in 2021,

- 131 See Felipe Catalani, “A decisão fascista e o mito da regressão: o Brasil à luz do mundo e vice-versa”, *Blog da Boitempo*, 23 July 2019.
- 132 “It was the last shot, let’s see where this will end”, explained a resident from the far south of the city of São Paulo the day after Bolsonaro got elected in October 2018. Six months later, another resident would tell these same interviewers: “I see the country as a cesspool, a hole. Every president came in, there was a hole, covered with concrete. Four years went by, and ‘oh, the hole is there: if you want to solve the problem, solve it, or cover it up too’. Then our president came, plugged it, fought to be able to put Dilma in power, to plug the hole. When Dilma left, Temer came in, tried to plug the hole, but by screwing Dilma. When Temer left, Bolsonaro came in, and do you know what he did? He broke the lid of the cesspool. Is he wrong? He is right. This cesspool comes before Fernando Henrique, it is a very big hole. So, man, he only broke the hole in the cesspool. No more shit can fit in the cesspool, everything is already burst. That’s the way I see it.” Carolina Catini and Renan Santos, “Depois do fim”, *Passa Palavra*, November 1, 2018 and “Apesar do fim”, *Passa Palavra*, June 10, 2019.
- 133 This is the synthetic formula used by João Bernardo to define the foundation of fascism in his “Labirintos do Fascismo” (2018).
- 134 Leo Vinícius, “Que horas Lula volta?”, *Passa Palavra*, September 29, 2015.
- 135 Fabrício Bloisi (president of iFood), “Novas regras para novas relações de trabalho”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, 21 July 2021.
- 136 “Therefore, it is not a matter of repealing the labor reform, but of undertaking something that a campaign coordinator suggestively called a “post-reform,” to be settled, of course, through “negotiation between workers and employers’ representatives.” Fábio Zanini, “Regras fiscais precisam ser revistas, diz coordenador econômico de plano do PT”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, July 11, 2021 and C. Seabra and C. Linhares, “Petistas procuram Alckmin para desfazer ruído com fala de Lula sobre lei laborista”, *Folha de S. Paulo*, January 10, 2022.
- 137 “Lula today gestured towards a re-nationalization of the aspects of Petrobras that are currently being privatized and to releasing fuel prices from international parity. At this moment many truckers and app drivers are literally stopping work because the activity has become unviable with the price of fuel. [...] A new Lula government will be one in which the horizon of expectation should be no greater than the perspective of making a living driving for apps.” Leo Vinícius, March 10, 2021.
- 138 “iFood terá 50% de mulheres”, *iFood News*, May 29, 2021 and Pablo Polese, “A política identitária do iFood” *Passa Palavra*, 2 November 2021
- 139 It is telling that one of iFood’s main spokesman to delivery workers displays in his résumé having worked for public policies in which the “social inclusion” via “art education” is part of an effort to “pacify” the youth and precarious territories”, such as with the “Culture Factories in São Paulo. See Dany and others, “Rebelião do público-alvo? Lutas na fábrica de cultura,” *Passa Palavra*, July 18, 2016.
- 140 Gabriela Moncau, “iFood assina compromisso com entregadores escolhidos pela própria empresa e não aumenta repasse,” *Brasil de Fato*, December 16, 2021.

Throughout the pandemic, the number of Brazilians who resorted to apps as a way to work grew, reaching one in five workers.³⁴ It is important to remember that the first step to obtaining Emergency Aid was also to download an application and answer a questionnaire. The program accelerated the process of digitizing this invisible crowd: “those who did not have a mobile phone had to get, borrow or ask for one” and “those who did not know how to use had to learn,” or seek help.³⁵ Even so, the flood of problems in the online registration during the first week ended up in Caixa’s physical branches, resulting in queues that stretched for blocks. In addition to overloading employees, the crowding in front of the banks at the beginning of the pandemic gave concrete features to the dire dilemma of choosing to be infected by the virus or to go hungry. For a few days, that desperate delay turned into revolt: in cities across the country, the population protested, vandalized bank branches, and obstructed avenues.³⁶

While Caixa managers reorganized the in-person attendance schedule to avoid chaos, WhatsApp and Facebook groups were formed due to the financial assistance. With hundreds of thousands of members, these self-organized forums occupied the place left vacant by the precariousness of banking services: participants reported their problems, exchanged experiences, solved questions, etc. The only political actor to try to surf on this immense invisible engagement was an incognito parliamentarian from the same avalanche as Bolsonaro, elected because of his videos in selfie format recorded at roadblocks during the 2018 truck drivers’ strike. At the moment when he began to follow the procedures of the Emergency Aid daily on his Facebook profile, Andre Janones, a federal congressman from Minas Gerais rose from the lower ranks of the lower house, transmitting the most-watched live streams in Western Hemisphere internet history.³⁷

On the other hand, the start of the 600 reais [~\$112 USD] per month payments during the first wave of the pandemic seems to have contributed to delaying the convergence between informal workers and entrepreneurs sought by the Bolsonaro and other critics of social distancing. At that time, the anti-lockdown demonstrations were limited to the militant core of the far-right and the blackmail of small and medium bosses, who tried to coerce their employees to protest under the threat of dismissal in the event of bankruptcy.³⁸ At the same time, the flow of money provided by the Emergency Aid to families and popular neighborhoods provided some backup to those who, amid the chaos of the pandemic and despite the increase in unemployment,

refused to work under such conditions. After manifesting itself in the dungeons of call centers, insubordination would not take long to appear outside on the streets, increasingly crowded with app delivery workers and drivers.

Storming The Cloud

Fortaleza, January 6th 2020. In the city's financial center, morning traffic is interrupted by an unusual colorful barricade. Piled-up bags emblazoned with iFood, Rappi or UberEats logos blocked various points along the boulevard: it was a protest set in motion by app couriers angry about a colleague who was run-over the night before. In the months that followed, this scene would become increasingly frequent around the country. In March, a group of militants already believed that "a specter haunts the Brazilian cities, and this specter rides on two wheels."³⁹

However, it wasn't just yesterday that a key part of the Brazilian urban metabolism started moving on two wheels. During the chaotic expansion of cities, wherever transportation stepped in to link the fragments together the price of precariousness was always paid by the haste of those who had to arrive on time. While lack of mobility punishes the workforce with overtime hours in packed collective transports, the other commodities don't get around on their own and demand an increasingly fast circulation.⁴⁰ Hence the appearance, in the late 1980's—long before any online platforms—of an army of *motoboys* [motorcycle couriers] progressively growing in number, capable of lane-splitting their way through traffic jams, and thus guaranteeing, at risk of death, the acceleration of capitalist flows in our collapsed metropolises. The "informal and mortal motorcycle lanes" enable the circulation of what cannot stop amidst blocked traffic and serve, at the same time, to increase productivity through the mobility of workers held hostage by urban immobility, and who found in motorcycles an emergency exit that "equates low cost with high speed."⁴¹

As the expansion of microcredit during the Workers Party governments facilitated the financing of low cylinder power motorcycles, leading to rampant fleet growth, small outsourced delivery enterprises multiplied. These so-called "express companies" tended to push the costs of the primary instrument of work back onto the workers. The popularization of mobile phones throughout the 2000s would allow a continuous and direct communication between the dispatch office and the couriers on the streets, diminishing "zones

taking place on highways, the infraction for "using the vehicle to interrupt, restrict or disturb the highway flow," punished with an exorbitant fine and suspension of the driver's license, was created by the government of President Dilma Rousseff to curb the truckers protesting for her impeachment in 2015 and is also frequently employed to repress the movement of delivery workers.

- 120 Target of criticism and boycotts by app drivers throughout the year, the Uber Promo and 99 Pop modalities were terminated at the end of 2021. For an account of the wave of protests around fuel prices in the first half of that year, see Comrades in Brazil, "Petrol in the Pandemic: short report of motorised workers' protests in Brazil," *Angry Workers of the World*, May 29, 2021.
- 121 See Akemi Duarte, "Combustível caro faz motoristas abandonarem apps de corrida", *R7*, Jul. 14, 2021, "30% dos motoristas por aplicativos abandonam a função em Campinas e região", *Digital*, Mar. 18, 2021, Jael Lucena, "Motoristas de aplicativo devolvem carros às locadoras após decreto no AM", *D24am*, 22 January 2022.
- 122 Wang Qianni and Ge Shifan, "How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China's Unhappiness", *Sixth Tone: Fresh voices from today's China*, 4 November 2020.
- 123 "In a [...] prosaic way, the agricultural or urban 'involution' can be described as the relentless increase in the self-exploitation of labor (while holding other factors fixed), which continues, despite reduced income, as long as it produces some return or increment," writes Mike Davis, taking up a concept of anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his study of "urban involution and the informal proletariat." Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums," in *New Left Review* n. 26, April/March 2006. "Such societies must run faster and faster—just to stay in the same place and not slip." See also Anonymous, "China: Neijuan 内卷", *Wildcat*, n. 107, 1 April 2021.
- 124 "'Neijuan' has now become the term that the metropolitan Chinese use to describe the ills of their modern lives, their sense of frantically treading water in a hyper-competitive society. Intense competition with low chances of success, be it in high school exams, on the job (or marriage!) market, or when working mad overtime. *Everyone is afraid of missing the last bus - and yet knows that it has already left.*" ("China: Neijuan 内卷," *Wildcat*, cit., our highlight)
- 125 Like the episodes described in the following paragraph, the excerpt is from "Bombing the Headquarters," *Chuang*, May 2021.
- 126 "Cadeirante ameaça explodir agência do INSS com bomba falsa em SP", *UOL*, 16 March 2021.
- 127 Carolina Fernandes, "Homem demitido invade casa de ex-chefe e faz família refém no Sul de SC, diz polícia", *GI*, 5 July 2021.
- 128 "Em Parnamirim (RN), homem joga carro contra UPA após ter atendimento negado", *Diário de Pernambuco*, 22 March 2021.
- 129 João Pedro Pitombo, "Morre policial baleado após dar tiros para o alto e contra colegas no Farol da Barra, em Salvador", *Folha de S. Paulo*, 28 March 2021.
- 130 Gil Santos, "Grupo faz protesto no Farol da Barra após morte de PM", *Correio*, 30 March 2021.

112 Between May and November 2020, the average number of people working remotely or away due to social distance corresponded to 17.6% of the employed population in Brazil (about 14.5 million people). The workers who were able to perform their work activities remotely “were mostly composed of people with complete college education. Less intensely, but still responsible for the largest demographics in remote work are women, the racially white, the age bracket from 30 to 39 years old, and people employed in the private sector.” Also “it is observed, both for the private and the public sector, a strong participation of teaching professionals” (Geraldo Sandoval Goés and others, “Trabalho remoto no Brasil em 2020 sob a pandemia do Covid-19: quem, quantos e onde estão?,” *Carta de Conjuntura*, n. 52, IPEA, 2021).

113 The emergency implementation of remote teaching ran into serious material and social obstacles, such as the lack of infrastructure and equipment in students’ homes (“Ensino remoto na pandemia: os alunos ainda sem internet ou celular após um ano de aulas à distância,” *BBC Brasil*, 3 May 2020). At the same time, it accelerated a process of restructuring the teaching work that was already underway, exacerbating tensions, as recorded in the testimonies of private and public school teachers gathered by the newsletter *A Voz Rouca* during the first months of the pandemic (“Diários de Quarentena,” *Passa Palavra*, 25 May 2020, and Professores Autoconvocados, “Pequeno manual de resistência no EaD,” *Passa Palavra*, 28 April 2020, on productive restructuring in basic education and higher education see, for example, Carolina Catini, “O trabalho de educar numa sociedade sem futuro,” *Blog da Boitempo*, 6 June 2020). On the other side of the video call, students who managed to connect also tested their scope for action in a transformed environment, creating “New Types of School Sabotage in Distance Education” (available in English at *Fever—Class Struggle Under Pandemic*, 6 June 2020). It was also through online tools that public school teachers organized strikes, as early as 2021, to boycott the in-person return to classrooms before vaccination. During the second wave, teachers on strike and motorcycle couriers protests even came together in São Paulo—despite the abyss of realities and language, banners from both sides converged in the demand for the vaccine (João de Mari, “Professores e entregadores de app se unem em greve contra retorno presencial e pedem vacina contra a Covid,” *Yahoo! Notícias*, 16 April 2021).

114 In August 2021, streamers and viewers of the Twitch platform, acquired in 2014 by Amazon and widely used for live streaming of games and championships, united for a day of “blackout” of the service, against the 66% reduction in the cost of subscriptions (i.e., payment) of Brazilian channels. As in the delivery workers struggles, the demands of these uberized content producers eschewed leftist labor grammar, criticizing regulation projects and the tax burden (see Alexandre Orrico and Victor Silva, “Por dentro da greve de streamers da Twitch no Brasil,” *Núcleo*, 23 August 2021).

115 Vladimir Safatle, “Não falar,” *El País*, 10 August 2020.

116 Isadora Guerreiro, “Lockdown: o problema e o falso problema,” *Passa Palavra*, 15 March 2021.

117 The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2015.

118 The documentary film *Bloqueio* (dir. Victória Álvares and Quentin Delaroche, 2018) depicts the atmosphere of those days of interrupted flows, which perhaps announced what was yet to come. See also the article written in the heat of the moment by Gabriel Silva, “A greve dos caminhoneiros e a constante pasmaceira da extrema esquerda,” *Passa Palavra*, May 28, 2018.

119 Raquel Lopes, “Greve dos caminhoneiros tem baixa adesão e poucas problemas nas rodovias até o início da tarde,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, February 1, 2021. One of the instruments used to disarticulate mobilizations

of non-work throughout the journey” and cheapening the service for the contractors. Later, with the arrival of smartphones with internet and GPS access, the mediation performed by such companies was discarded and replaced by an app that promised to connect the crowd of deliverers “directly” to the demands of the client, liberating them from the exploitation of third-party companies. By transferring labor contracts to a virtual register and workers to a just-in-time workforce, platforms are capable of recruiting couriers who’ve been in the streets for thirty years, the worker with a steady job who makes after-hours deliveries, or the unemployed youth who either owns or rents a bike as a side hustle. It is this heterogeneous multitude that in a dispersed, inconsistent way, and with different intensities, ensures the distribution of a significant part of the goods in the cities.

When app couriers went on strike for the first time in the country, opposing the payment reduction of Loggi rides in late 2016, the sector’s union—while watching its ranks evaporate into the “cloud”—intervened along with the Labor Court in order to defend the recognition of formal employment by the platform. It ended up, for this very reason, being rejected by the strikers themselves, who would carry to the following protests a banner with a clear message: “no to the CLT [Brazilian Labor Law] contract”! It might seem paradoxical for workers struggling for better work conditions to openly reject the formalization of their activity. However, it is precisely in this refusal that we find the driving force of the specter that haunts Brazilian cities.⁴²

For most of the left, the answer to the enigma comes down to the biased consciousness of workers seduced by the entrepreneurial song of the neoliberal siren. However, how does one explain that the rejection of regulation is often associated with a declaration of “war against the apps”? You don’t have to talk long with a motorcycle courier to realize that the aversion to employment relationships carries with it a refusal of the infernal universe of “shitty jobs”: hours to be worked, low pay, and a boss to make your life harder.⁴³ Beyond the added costs of paperwork and bureaucracies, the future promised by the discourse of regulation just actually sounds fake.⁴⁴

In the world of formless work, the reformist agenda acquires a new meaning: by defending and maintaining Labor Law it seeks to recover the lost form, it is *re-formist*. In other words, “progressivism” becomes restorative. Contrary to the mirage of reconstructing a wage society within a Keynesian-Fordist framework (which in Brazil, as we know, only ever enjoyed a partial existence), the entrepreneurial chant finds its echo in the lived experience

of the Uberized worker. After creating a profile with the app, it is the “worker, on his own account, who assumes the risks and costs of his work, who defines his own journey, who decides on his own dedication to work.”⁴⁵ It is precisely because it describes a reality, and is not mere rhetoric, that autonomy can operate as a central cog in the gears of subordination: while transferring to workers the task of managing their own work, capital also transfers the necessity to extend and intensify their journey while expecting them to shoulder all fluctuations in demand and uncertainties along the way.

Each courier self-manages his working process, but he or she does so within the conditions imposed by these companies in a unilateral and often unpredictable way, beginning with payment itself, which is determined by an algorithm. Ranking systems limit the number of rides that can be rejected; promotions encourage couriers to cater to regions and periods of high demand such as rainy days, or even to accept all rides during a certain period; automated lockouts, both temporary and permanent, punish supposed irregularities detected by the software; and, more recently, scheduling mechanisms encourage previous definition of working hours. As the marginal independence afforded by their occupation encounters ceaseless resistance, couriers are forced to engage in a permanent conflict, creating strategies to resist and fool the control mechanisms of the applications, as well as the traffic authorities and shop managers who police their workspace.

To earn a living as courier, it isn’t unusual to need to use (or even rent) someone else’s profile, bypassing an account block; to run red lights or exceed the speed limit in order to increase productivity; to cover your plate when passing a speed camera; to dodge police roadblocks which can lead to the seizure of a motorcycle with payments in arrears; or even to embezzle a client’s meal as a means of guaranteeing a special snack between one ride and the other. But as constantly breaking the rules is not only part of the game but ensures the functioning of the app—and the city as a whole—the insubordination of the *mad dogs* [as Brazilian couriers refer to themselves] proves to be ambiguous.⁴⁶

WhatsApp groups, as well as YouTube channels and Facebook forums assume a key role in this dynamic. They spread successful strategies for combat, while also establishing cooperative networks indispensable for work and for the functioning of the service:

- 101 Arthur Rodrigues, “Direção da Prevent cobrava ‘altas celestiais’ para liberar leitos a pacientes VIP, diz advogada em CPI,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, October 21, 2021.
- 102 “The ‘evil’ would be represented today as a management system, as an organizational principle: of companies, of governments, of all institutions and activities, in short, that, organized according to this same principle, have been converted into diffusing centers of a new violence and incubators of its agents, the so-called collaborators of our time.” Arantes, “Sale Boulot,” 102.
- 103 Brazilian Army, “Mensagem do Comandante do Exército - COVID-19,” *YouTube*, March 24, 2020.
- 104 Lisandra Paraguassu, “Em ofício, Exército defendeu sobrepreço de 167% em insumos da cloroquina por necessidade de ‘produzir esperança,’” *Reuters*, December 22, 2020.
- 105 Alessandro Visacro, *Guerra Irregular*, São Paulo, Contexto, 2009. With field experience in Haiti and Brazilian favelas, the officer updated his reflection in *A guerra na era da informação*, Contexto, 2019.
- 106 Before hitting the headlines again with the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, the term “hybrid war” became widespread amid the wave of protests in Arab countries, starting in 2011, and came to be widely used by rulers and analysts to reduce the increasingly frequent social upheavals around the globe to obscure geopolitical plots (see Jonas Medeiros, “‘Guerras Híbridas’, um panfleto pró-Putin e demofóbico,” *Passa Palavra*, 28 January 2020). If the discourse on a “hybrid war” conducted by agencies of yankee imperialism has supported the left’s official fantasy about the post-2013 Brazilian political process, anthropologist Piero Leirner has observed how the same notion runs with an inverted sign inside the Armed Forces - concerned with an alleged hidden project of cultural hegemony conducted by the “gramscist” left since the 1980s in the country. The researcher maintains that in recent years the Brazilian Army itself has come to be guided by the principles of hybrid conflict to run a domestic campaign, in which the 2018 election would represent a key episode. *O Brasil no espectro de uma guerra híbrida*, Alameda, 2019.
- 107 Brazilian police murdered 6,416 people in 2020. Among the victims, 78.9% were black. The year 2021 began with the second largest massacre in Rio de Janeiro’s history, carried out by the civil police in the Jacarezinho slum. See *Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 15º Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública*, 2021.
- 108 As that same president of a research institute describes the “entrepreneurial drive” of the *favela* (Henrique Santiago, “Favela S/A,” cit.)
- 109 Leonardo Vieceli, “Pandemia empurra 4,3 milhões para renda muito baixa nas metrópoles brasileiras,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 6 July 2021.
- 110 Wellton Máximo, “Beneficiários do Auxílio Brasil terão acesso a crédito especial,” *Agência Brasil EBC*, 12 August 2021.
- 111 “It’s no use telling the *favela* resident to separate what is [money] from business and what is from home. If you’re going to save money for entrepreneurship, you’ll never save money,” explains Celso Athayde, CEO of Favela Holding (Henrique Santiago, “Favela S/A,” cit.)

- 90 “Decreto N.º43.234, de 23 de dezembro de 2020,” *Diário Oficial do Estado do Amazonas*, 23 December 2020.
- 91 Victor Hugo Viegas Silva, “A revolta popular de Manaus e os dilemas do lockdown (3),” *Crônicas do Titanic*, 6 January 2021.
- 92 Serafim Oliveira, “Movimento Todos pelo Amazonas e a Covid-19 - O risco da suspensão das atividades causar perdas econômicas e a ascensão dos movimentos populares,” *O Conservador*, 4 January 2021.
- 93 According to a survey by the Brazilian Doctor’s Association, 34.7% of the doctors still believed in some efficacy of chloroquine in June 2021, and 41.4% trusted the use of ivermectin for the treatment or prevention of covid-19 (Paula Felix, “Pesquisa diz que 1/3 dos médicos ainda acredita na cloroquina, comprovadamente ineficaz contra covid,” *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 2 February 2021).
- 94 Victor Hugo Viegas Silva, “A culpa não é nossa’ e ‘precisamos fazer alguma coisa agora’: Entre a luta do lockdown e o tratamento precoce há um fio tênue,” *Crônicas do Titanic*, 12 April 2021.
- 95 Victor Silva, “O que dizem no WhatsApp médicos a favor da cloroquina,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 19 June 2021.
- 96 “Automedicação é um hábito comum a 77% dos brasileiros,” *GI*, 13 May 2019.
- 97 In the pandemic, buses are, more than ever, vehicles of death: in São Paulo, those who die more often are “those who went to work and traveled long distances by public transport” as shown by Raquel Rolnik et al, “Circulação para trabalho explica concentração de casos de Covid-19,” *LabCidade*, 30 June 2020.
- 98 See Christophe Dejours, *Souffrance en France: la banalisation de l’injustice sociale*, Paris, Seuil, 1998.
- 99 The so-called “denialist” discourse and its panaceas are in tune with a world in which “inequality makes quarantine an unsustainable luxury for the poorest,” as Rodrigo Nunes observed. “If in other times sacrifice was presented as a way to improve one’s life, it is now an end in itself. (...) there is a sense in which it is possible to affirm that the fantasies of the extreme right offer, albeit irrationally, a reasonable response to the insanity we are currently building. To reduce the power that these fantasies have to speak to people to the mere effect of fake news is an attempt to deny this fundamental fact.” (“O presente de uma ilusão: estamos em negação sobre o negacionismo?,” *Piauí*, March 2021).
- 100 Paulo Arantes, “Sale boulot,” cit. In the second half of 2021, workers from Prevent Senior came to the public to denounce a series of irregular practices that they were forced to adopt in the treatment of patients with covid-19. The company occupies a niche market formed by the elderly who cannot afford the exorbitant prices of health plans for their age group, but reserve their resources as best they can to guarantee private medical assistance. With reduced tariffs and a target audience that demands hospital services more frequently, the company has always resorted to tricks to avoid or delay costly procedures to maintain profitability. During the pandemic, which hit the elderly the hardest, these practices would gain even more macabre contours. Other operators, such as HapVida and some units of UniMed, were also denounced. In addition to the reports from the time, see the podcast “Prevent Senior não deveria ter sido aberta, diz especialista,” with interview with Ligia Bahia by Maurício Meireles and Magê Flores, *Café da manhã*, 11 October 2021.

There are infinite courier WhatsApp groups that are used to share information about the streets, police operations, assaults, accidents; selling and exchanging motorcycles, bags, or jackets, drivers licenses, work, any kind of stuff. These groups end up being an informal structure for work organization by workers themselves, which operate parallel to those imposed by the app. At the same time as they contribute to the better functioning of the app (couriers tell one another in which parts of the city they can get more rides, whether there are glitches in the system, help each other navigate problems with support, or with account blocking, etc.) WhatsApp groups are also spaces for circulating anti-work memes, venting frustrations, and even organizing protests.⁴⁷

Since the beginning of 2020, it has primarily been through these informal networks that courier protests have been organized. As coronavirus spread throughout Brasil, these same networks mushroomed up alongside it. Quarantine measures revealed the centrality of the delivery worker to urban logistics—it was, after all, the permanent mobilization of this motorized army that produced part of the conditions necessary to the home office of the more “qualified” contingents. However, counterbalanced by the vertiginous expansion of “partners” registered on the platforms, the demand for delivery services didn’t translate into increased earnings.⁴⁸ Amidst the avalanche of layoffs in other sectors, apps started operating as a type of perverse “unemployment insurance” and, as the total number of riders increased, the value of fees and the frequency of orders declined. Combined with the influx of new workers for whom this was only an extra or temporary source of income, the falling earnings of those who already depended on these apps would spur the eruption of wild movements all over the country.

On a night of high demand, a group of couriers blocked the drive-thru entrance to a fast food restaurant, forcing it to prioritize the release of the meals meant for delivery.⁴⁹ Huddled in a supermarket parking lot while waiting for their orders, couriers get angry and start a honking demonstration to press for the faster arrival of packages.⁵⁰ After an episode of humiliation or a scam attempt spreads through WhatsApp, provoking an outburst, the scoundrel client is surprised by the noise of a motorcycle convoy at his doorstep. While couriers in one city gather to reclaim more safety from the authorities after a hit-and-run accident or a robbery, in another place episodes of police violence and arbitrary traffic control trigger protests.⁵¹ From major state capitals

to small towns, last-minute demonstrations organized through social media demanding raises in delivery payment and other improvements begin to boil over. On the verge of the first wave of the coronavirus, riders from Acre froze their rides to demand the supply of masks and hand sanitizer from Rio Branco's City Hall.⁵² A strike of motorcycle and car couriers from Loggi against the abrupt reduction in the value of the freight extends throughout the state of Rio de Janeiro, reaching Baixada Santista the next day.⁵³ In São Paulo, bikers gather repeatedly on Avenida Paulista against Rappi's rating system, which restricts access to zones of higher demand.⁵⁴

With volatile and scattered demonstrations that formed and dissolved in the interval between one order and the other, the “specter on two wheels” that prowls the country would soon make its first public appearance. The call for a strike—dubbed the “National App Brake”—channeled this latent movement into a single date, July 1st, 2020, marking the debut of these underground struggles on the stage of major political events. As the idea of a nationwide strike began to take shape in WhatsApp groups, video selfies recorded by couriers nationwide announced the participation of crews from across the country. As the mobilization began to gain visibility, with supporters publicizing a campaign to boycott the platforms on the day of the strike, leftist parties and organizations released messages of solidarity, and major media outlets reported on the call. By gaining a public face, the spontaneous and diffuse agitation of previous months was translated into a more legible form by institutions: “In many cities, the usual unions tried to take the front of the movement, and self-proclaimed leaders were embraced by parties and institutions, as well as by the press.”⁵⁵ Coming at the tail end of a timid wave of demonstrations against the federal government, the mainstream media produced the image of the “anti-fascist courier,” while left and Labor Law operators framed the movement in the grammar of labor rights.⁵⁶

Although big and noisy, many of the car caravans that took over avenues around the country on July 1st—well before the convoys strategically led by Bolsonaro the following year—wound up tamed by representative entities. In São Paulo, the union's loudspeaker truck overrode the horns of the motorized crowd that drove from the Regional Labor Court to the Estaiada Bridge. By remaining within the boundaries of a specific sector of workers and its demand for better working conditions, the App Strike never managed to twist free of the script handed down by the surviving husks of trade unionism. In Brazil, this was the most visible and organized—and therefore, in a certain

83 See Alfredo Lima, “Barreira sanitária é vida, flexibilização é morte!,” *Passa Palavra*, 21 Jun. 2020, and Renato Santana and Tiago Miotto, “Povos indígenas reforçam barreiras sanitárias e cobram poder público enquanto covid-19 avança para aldeias,” Indigenous Missionary Council, 29 May 2020. For an interview with residents who participated in one of these blockades in the Trindade region, see Invisíveis, “Paraty: barreira sanitária e retomada territorial,” *Passa Palavra*, 27 September 2020.

84 Even before the coronavirus landed in Brazil, the image of a “bricolage quarantine” was already used to analyze how the “poor connections between levels of the government” resulted in conflicting efforts to deal with the initial outbreak of the virus in China, from “repression of ‘whistleblower’ doctors by local officials” to health measures applied in a seemingly random way by each locality, outside the control of the central power. (Chuang, “Social Contagion,” *Chuang Blog*, March, 2020). The lack of confidence “that the state would be able to effectively contain the virus” resulted in a “mass mobilization in response to the pandemic, with groups of volunteers providing all kind of services, both in containing the spread and in helping people survive the pandemic,” as well as blockades by residents at the entrance to villages in the countryside of the mainland (see the interview with Chuang by Aminda Smith and Fabio Lanza, “The State of the Plague,” *Brooklyn Rail*, September 2021).

85 See Paulo Arantes, “Sale boulot,” in *O novo tempo do mundo*, cit. Within the ill-defined contours of the “gray zone” of the private management of suffering, there is also the infectious disease specialist who ratifies—in the service of the “consulting” signed in large contracts with this or that renowned hospital—the cynical “cheating” of private schools that, even at the peak of the pandemic, “found a way” to fill their poorly ventilated classrooms with students; there's the teacher, resigned to having to return in the classroom and forced to turn a blind eye to the inevitable breaking of sanitary protocols among the students in order to precariously guarantee the continuity of the classes; there's the autonomous school van driver who, with no children to take and no money, found a source of temporary income in the transportation of the dead in the midst of the high number of deaths in the capital of São Paulo. (See Roberto Acé Machado, “Esse ano não tem bandeirinha,” *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*, 10 February 2021; Aline Mazzo, “Vans escolares vão transportar mortos por Covid até cemitérios de SP,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 29 March 2021; and also Carolina Catini, “O brutalismo vai à escola,” *Blog da Boitempo*, 13 September 2020).

86 The role of *viração* [getting by] in reproducing this endless collapse is evident to the president of a research institute, a scholar of the so-called “new Brazilian middle class,” according to whom, “the *favela* is what kept Brazil from crashing in the pandemic. ‘The person who collects garbage, the nursing assistant, the collector and the bus driver are favela residents. Classes A and B were only able to enter quarantine because the favela residents continue working.’” (Henrique Santiago, “Favela S/A,” *UOL*, 13 December 2020).

87 Victor Hugo Viegas Silva, “O Auxílio Emergencial não acabou em janeiro. Foi acabando aos poucos - e sem chance de defesa,” *Crônicas do Titanic*, 28 January 2021.

88 For an observation on the role of new technologies, from Airbnb to internet banking, in the *viração* at beaches during this “period of temporary land ultra-valuation,” see Três trabalhadores de férias, “Uma tarde na praia,” *Passa Palavra*, 28 January 2019.

89 Victor Hugo Viegas Silva, “A revolta de Búzios contra o lockdown e a conexão evangélica x #Agglomera-Brasil (2),” *Crônicas do Titanic*, 4 January 2021.

place,” points out Isadora Guerreiro, “the State can act in the regulation of an informal economy or that escapes labor legislation” intervening in the “price of the workforce [...] in its urban aspect.” See “Elementos urbanos de um ‘governo miliciano,’” *Passa Palavra*, June 8, 2020.

- 72 Amazônia Real, “População de Macapá se revolta com apagão,” *YouTube*, 8 November 2020. For a record of the mobilizations during the blackout, see Transe, “SOS Amapá - O apagão e as lutas,” *YouTube*, 19 November 2020.
- 73 “Decreto Nº 3915 de 17/11/2020,” *Diário Oficial do Estado do Amapá*, 17 November 2020.
- 74 The catastrophe that struck Amapá may anticipate, to a lesser extent, the scenario of energy collapses to come—see the false alarm for new blackouts in five Brazilian states in the second half of 2021, due to drought (Alexa Salomão, “Governo em alerta de emergência hídrica em 5 estados e vai criar comitê para acompanhar setor elétrico,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 27 May 2021). In a climate emergency scenario, of which the water crisis is only one of the components, it is not surprising that the costs and risks are borne by the population—both environmental disease and the remedies prescribed by governments and international organizations, such as the “carbon tax: a specific additional tax for polluting products (...), (...) highly regressive” (Antonio Celso, “Dirigindo pelo retrovisor,” *Passa Palavra*, 15 August 2021). It is worth remembering that the creation of a levy along these lines was the trigger for the yellow vests movement in France in 2019.
- 75 Agência France Press, “A busca desesperada por oxigênio em Manaus para salvar pacientes em casa,” *Estado de Minas*, January 18, 2021.
- 76 Ludmila C. Abilio, “Breque no despotismo algorítmico: uberização, trabalho sob demanda e insubordinação,” *Blog da Boitempo*, July 30, 2020.
- 77 On the political force of not governing as a mode of governing, a kind of “government of suspension” inaugurated by Bolsonaro in his “revolutionary endeavor,” see Miguel Lago, “Batalhadores do Brasil...,” *Piauí*, May 2021.
- 78 Tom Slee, *What’s Yours Is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy*, OR Books, 2017.
- 79 Raquel Azevedo, “Qual a origem de uma renda sem contrapartida?,” *Passa Palavra*, 14 September 2020, and Nelson Barbosa, “Renda básica universal,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 27 August 2022.
- 80 It makes sense that, during the blackout in Amapá in November, the aid payment—reduced at that time to 300 reais—was extraordinarily maintained at 600 reais by decision of the Supreme Court. See José Antonio Abrahão Castillero, “Amapá: protestos garantem auxílio emergencial de 600 reais,” *A Comuna*, 15 November 2020.
- 81 Organized in “networks of neighbors in housing complexes, movements of slums, solidarity networks between urban squats” and so on (Victor Hugo Viegas Silva, “Quem fez e faz a quarentena no Brasil? Os trabalhadores!,” *Crônicas do Titanic*, 21 August 2020).
- 82 The term is, again, by Ludmila Abilio (“Uberização: Do empreendedorismo para o autogerenciamento subordinado,” *Psicoperspectivas*, v. 18, n. 3, November 2019).

sense, most well-behaved—episode in a movement that traversed the whole period of the pandemic and is still going on, both here and in other corners of the planet.⁵⁷

Something did, however, escape the script. At seven o’clock in the morning, in front of one of Loggi’s many warehouses in São Paulo from which thousands of products bought over the internet depart for the homes of consumers aboard cars and motorcycles, a video recording had begun circulating on WhatsApp. Gathered around a speaker playing 1990s *pagode* music, a dozen couriers were getting ready to spend the day there, promising to have a barbecue and block the delivery of any packages. Blockades in other warehouses, shopping malls and restaurants around the city extended throughout the day, continuing until dinner in fast food stores in ABC Paulista Region and other points throughout the metropolis. It is curious that, precisely in cases where it is difficult to define a “workplace” because the latter is spread all over the city, real pickets of a sort we haven’t seen for some time suddenly proliferated. They were, in a certain sense, inverted pickets: the aim was less to prevent the workers from entering the production space than to stop the exit of goods for circulation.⁵⁸

The organization of many of these blockades spread through local networks of motorcycle couriers who, during the moments before a new delivery arrives on the app, or while waiting for the completion of an order at the restaurant, find themselves waiting in the same parking lot. At the same time that they provide a precise image of the permanent availability required of the just-in-time worker—who, when not racing against time, must remain on standby,⁵⁹ waiting for the app to ring—these “waiting zones”⁶⁰ scattered throughout the urban space become places of confraternization, and eventually of organization. It was like this on July 1st, when many parking lots were converted into blockades. Several fast food store attendants and even managers expressed support for the strikers, with whom they live every day, allowing the use of the restrooms, offering coffee, and even donating meals that were piling up on the counter with no one to deliver them. At the doors of shopping malls and restaurants, the tacit or even explicit support among security guards of outsourced security companies proved to be fundamental, blocking or delaying the approval of entry to even the most frantic scabs.

In the parking lot of a liquor distributor that, respecting the strike day, had announced the suspension of the delivery service through apps, one could hear in the distance, around eleven o’clock in the morning, the arrival of a

large convoy of delivery drivers, joining their colleagues who had concentrated there since early morning. A short time later, the swarm of motorcycles was again zipping through city streets, without a defined route. Continuously honking their horns and revving their engines, this squadron produced a deafening noise and assaulted the docks of the malls they found along the way in lightning raids aimed at expelling drivers who were taking orders and forcing the shopkeepers, frightened, to lower their doors for a while. Flexible and replicable, the mobile blockades carried with them a threat of ungovernability that contrasted with the predictability and stiffness of the motorcades led by union sound trucks. *When the city itself is the workplace, the strike can take on the features of social revolt.*

The explosion, however, did not happen. The mobile pickets encountered a twofold limit: first, there was the flexibility of the apps, which, in addition to launching promotions for deliveries in the regions most affected by the strike, relied on the size of its gigantic network of “partner restaurants” in order not to lose the customers of the day; second, the agility of the strike-breakers themselves, who were equally capable of moving through the urban fabric in search of open establishments. It is significant that many of those who insisted on working were couriers linked to iFood’s outsourced “Logistics Operators” (OLs). In addition to the “cloud” modality—the much-celebrated “new way of working” in which the courier turns on the application on whenever he wants and organizes his journey, accepting the deliveries that appear on the screen or not—iFood relies on another less known and (at least apparently) less innovative system to manage its workforce. A “logistics operator is a smaller company subcontracted by iFood to organize and manage a fleet of fixed delivery drivers,” sometimes in a limited area.⁶¹ According to the platform, these contractors account for at least 25% of the contingent of “partners”—a proportion that many couriers believes to be growing— and “contribute in various scenarios, such as serving specific locations” and malls, the “opening of new regions” and the “complementing of the fleet on certain days and times.”⁶² Some of these companies have fleets of “up to 400 people running around São Paulo” and charge a weekly fee for the rental of scooters and bicycles by their delivery drivers.⁶³

With the promise of receiving more orders than the “cloud couriers” and without having to face the waiting line to sign up for the most popular mode, the “OL courier” has predetermined work schedules, gets paid through a third-party company, to which the app passes on the value of the orders, and

shorter periods, or less frequently, logistics operators can be actually responsible for a much larger share of the available fleet. Wildcat strikes against the expansion of the operation areas of OL companies and the decreasing number of orders directed to other delivery workers have become increasingly common in São Paulo Metropolitan Region (see Treta no Trampo, “iFood, libera os nuvens em Arujá!,” *Instagram*, 12 May 2021), Goiânia and Cuiabá (see Revolucionários dos Apps, “Ontem rolou a maior reunião dos entregadores em Goiânia,” *Instagram*, 3 February 2022 and FML Foguetes do Asfalto, “Cuiabá vai pra cima do iFood, tmj,” *Instagram*, 16 February 2022).

- 63 Leandro Machado, “A rotina de ameaças e expulsões de entregadores terceirizados do iFood,” cit.
- 64 Strikes by food delivery workers have increased more than four-fold between 2017 and 2019. In 2020, a series of protests and strikes would break out in China as the pandemic accelerated the expansion of the sector and widened social inequality, putting downward pressure on wages and leading the authorities to highlight the informal sector as the solution to China’s rising unemployment. The information is gathered in a “long-form inquiry into the horrors of food delivery work, based on six months of research” produced by one of the most famous magazines in the country, Renwu. See “Delivery workers, trapped in the system,” *Chuang*, November 2020. In early 2021, five Beijing couriers who kept mutual aid channels and campaigns against delivery platforms on social media were detained in their homes by the police. The persecution of the “Delivery Workers Alliance” was denounced by an international campaign, which included acts of solidarity from app workers around the world, including in front of the Chinese consulate in São Paulo. See Treta no Trampo, “Liberdade para Mengzhu - motoca preso na china,” *Instagram*, April 29, 2021. Victim of an obscure process, the courier Chen Guojiang was finally released in January 2022. For more information, check [deliveryworkers.github.io](https://github.com/deliveryworkers).
- 65 Leo Vinicius, “Os OL como resposta à luta dos entregadores de aplicativos,” *Passa Palavra*, 23 June 2020.
- 66 As Antonio Prata noticed in “#minhaarmaminhasregras,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, 10 November 2019, taken up by Gabriel Feltran, “Formas elementares da vida política: sobre o movimento totalitário no Brasil (2013-),” *Blog Novos Estudos CEBRAP* (also available in English at “The revolution we are living,” *HU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 10, n. 1, 2020) and by Paulo Arantes and Miguel Lago, “A revolução que estamos vivendo,” *Congresso Virtual UFBA 2021*, 26 February 2021.
- 67 Isadora Guerreiro e Leonardo Cordeiro, “Do passe ao breque: disputas sobre os fluxos do espaço urbano,” *Passa Palavra*, July 6, 2020.
- 68 Marcio Pochmann, “O movimento sindical e a precarização do trabalho no Brasil,” *YouTube*, April 12, 2021. And, by the same author, “A guerra no mundo do trabalho,” *Terapia Política*, April 11, 2021.
- 69 See, for example, Brasil Econômico, “Empresa que contrata entregadores para o iFood ameaça quem aderir à greve,” *iG*, July 1, 2020; Victor Silva, “Operadoras da iFood ameaçam greve de entregadores,” *Passa Palavra*, September 17, 2021. For a collection of complaints about this iFood work regime, check videos gathered in Ralf MT, “(Série) iFood, a casa caiu, fim da função OL, das fraudes e das barbáries...,” *YouTube*.
- 70 Leo Vinicius, “A inovadora parceria do iFood e as milícias,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 23, 2021.
- 71 From the privatized and monopolized control of the territory, where the reproduction of life takes

- Instagram*, 17 April 2020). Commenting on a mobilization against a mega-operation of traffic police targeting delivery workers in Florianópolis, Leo Vinicius reflects on the problem of delivery work safety in “Entregadores de apps e o modelo policial de prevenção de acidentes,” *Passa Palavra*, February 25 2021.
- 52 Amigos do Cachorro Louco, “Sob pandemia, motoboys de app paralisam entregas no Acre,” *Passa Palavra*, March 27 2020.
- 53 The strike at Loggi warehouses started on June 9 2020. It went on for a few days in several parts of Rio de Janeiro State and in Santos (Treta no Trampo, “Greve nos galpões da Loggi no RJ,” *Instagram*, June 9 2020, and “Greve da Loggi em Santos,” *Instagram*, June 10 2020. Check also Invisíveis Rio de Janeiro, “Entre as dificuldades do breque e a experiência dos entregadores,” *Passa Palavra*, August 2020).
- 54 Treta no Trampo, “Diário de um Motoca - Protesto dos Entregadores no Masp (5/6/2020),” *YouTube*, 20 June 2020.
- 55 Isadora Guerreiro e Leonardo Cordeiro, “Do passe ao breque: disputas sobre os fluxos no espaço urbano,” *Passa Palavra*, July 6, 2020.
- 56 Even without significant support among delivery workers, the appearance of the group “Entregadores Antifascistas” [Antifascist Delivery Workers], at the time of the protests against Bolsonaro and the rise of the delivery workers movement, contributed to leveraging the visibility of the struggle against the apps, providing an interlocutor for the left and the press. And it is still another symptom of the constitutive mismatch of the App Strike, this time between the projection of the “progressive” public — whose support on social media proved to be fundamental —, and what was really at stake for couriers. Not by chance, that audience would be the target of a barrage from iFood’s advertising batteries in the following months.
- 57 For a video overview of the delivery workers’ movements throughout the first year of the pandemic in Brazil, see Treta no Trampo, “Um ponto de vista sobre o #BrequeDosAPPs 2020,” *YouTube*, March 14 2020.
- 58 Treta no Trampo, “Breque dos Apps/App Strike in Brazil (Sub EN/ES/PT/FR), July 2020,” *YouTube*, July 8, 2020.
- 59 The idea was developed by Leo Vinicius in “Modo de espera e salário por peça nas entregas por apps,” *Passa Palavra*, November 8, 2020. The image of an immense stock of just-in-time workers, on standby waiting for the next job, is still an adequate description of large Brazilian cities.
- 60 The expression was coined by Paulo Arantes and serves as the title of his essay on “o tempo morto da onda punitiva contemporânea” in *O Novo Tempo do Mundo*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2014.
- 61 Leandro Machado, “A rotina de ameaças e expulsões de entregadores terceirizados do iFood,” *BBC Brasil*, 24 July 2020.
- 62 Data comes from an iFood director in an article responding to complaints about the OL regime (João Sabino, “Cuidar do outro é mandamento do iFood,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2 August 2021), but it is not possible to confirm it. Since part of the “cloud” delivery workers access the application sporadically, for

is supervised by a station leader who acts as a middleman for the platform. The impersonal and automatic control of the algorithm thus combines with the management of a boss in the flesh who, filling in the gaps left by the former, closely controls the productivity of the workers, with powers to interfere in the distribution of orders, apply sanctions and dismiss: the worst of the job with a formal contract, without any of its traditionally afforded guarantees.

Does the latest word in labor management, the ultra-modern “algorithmic management” of platforms like iFood, synchronize with the archaic methods of the foreman? On the one hand, it is the pre-existing market in Brazil that explains the phenomenon: many of the logistics operators are the old *express* companies, motorcycle delivery firms that lost space to the apps, now incorporated by iFood in a subordinate position. On the other hand, the combination does not exist only here. China’s two largest app delivery companies divide their workforce in a similar way: while “gig workers” are usually part-time drivers who can choose which orders to accept, “direct hired” couriers work full-time and are tied to a “station” controlled by a manager—yet none of them have formal employment ties to the platform.⁶⁴

By combining the data processing capacity and impersonal surveillance of artificial intelligence with the direct and personal coercion of the good old foreman, now duly outsourced, this bastard form of Uberization might signal a new trend in labor management, much more efficient than robots left to their own devices. “The algorithm whistles a lot, but it’s dumb.”⁶⁵ In the contemporary hellscape of labor, foremen, middlemen, and gunmen have a guaranteed place. As certain cogs in the apparent truce of the past decades are left to rust, these neo-archaic mediators are proving more topical than ever—and, despite the efforts of CEOs who, in their cultivated detachment, prefer to keep them in the shade, it is no wonder they are seeking the light of day.⁶⁶ In this renewed *viração* economy, there is no longer any plausible way to prevent open violence from becoming the central social nexus, as is clear in the warlike vocabulary of the motorcycle couriers—“soldiers” in the daily battle of traffic whose productivity “is measured by speed, that is, by the risk of imminent death.”⁶⁷ The “civil war...increasingly coordinated by what we call the henchmen system in Brazil” becomes even clearer when its social ties are made explicit, as is the case of the growing evidence of relations between iFood OLs and illegal businesses in the outskirts of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.⁶⁸

On July 4th, 2021, after a new wave of dispersed protests and stoppages

across the country, couriers in Curitiba, Goiânia, Campo Grande, and Itajaí mobilized for improvements, including abolishing the requirement to schedule work hours in advance imposed by iFood in certain cities where it operates. On the same day, the expansion of the work area for OL drivers, which drastically reduced the supply of orders for others, would lead couriers from a popular neighborhood in the west of Rio de Janeiro to link arms and prevent the exit of orders in a mall. Reports of the strike, which quickly spread to other regions of the city and lasted four days make mention not only of recurrent threats from OL leaders to the strikers⁶⁹ but the presence of gun thugs in front of restaurants to prevent picketing.⁷⁰ The obscure and notorious relations between the presidential family and armed groups that exercise this type of “privatized and monopolized control of the territory” are no mere coincidence: in tune with the most advanced management of the flexible labor force spread throughout the urban space, the captain’s “militia government” is both a symptom and an agent of the Brazilian Uberization.⁷¹

Surviving Purgatory

Heavy rain fell in Macapá on November 3rd, 2020. Between ripples of thunder, the lights went out and cellphones lost service. The substation that provides energy to the entire state of Amapá, which had been operating with part of its structure damaged for over a year, finally collapsed. It was the beginning of the longest blackout in the country’s history, which would last three weeks. The lack of electric energy affected water distribution to a large part of the city, leading many to wash their clothes and do their dishes in rivers. The instability in telecommunication networks left residents unable to communicate. At ATMs, it was impossible to withdraw cash; lines formed at gas stations, and the shelves soon ran empty at the markets and grocery shops. Meanwhile, covid deaths grew exponentially. After four days in the dark, the connection was re-established, along with an utterly unstable rationing system unevenly distributed across elite condominiums and lower class neighborhoods. The oscillation of the current led to overloads: appliances went out, street lights exploded, houses caught fire.

As the crisis stretched on and despair became more widespread, “barricades appeared in the streets, demonstrations all over the city, many with burning tires.”⁷² Besides mitigating the darkness of the night, going out onto the avenue and lighting a trash fire barricade was a last resort of crowds wait-

- 42 Leo Vinicius, “A greve dos apps e a composição de classe,” *Passa Palavra*, August 18, 2021.
- 43 Such perception is not restricted to Brazilian delivery workers. “There was no one breathing down my neck, telling me to go faster, do this, do that. [...] Given how grim other jobs can be, a lot of workers liked Deliveroo by comparison. The stress of riding on the road is about the same as, or less than, the stress of working 8 hour shifts in a pub or supermarket. [...] You get to be outside all day, constantly moving about, and never have a manager calling you in to cover a closing shift on a few hours’ notice. There was a sense of autonomy and independence to the job that wasn’t entirely illusory.” (Callum Cant. *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.) Mocking the image of delivery workers as “poor slaves of the system,” an Italian cyclist ponders that delivery is “preferable to other jobs, for example in a company. I think this is one of the problems with the current platform of demands. [...] Most delivery workers are against this demonstration [called by unions], to turn into a subordinate, because flexibility is an advantage” (“EP. 4 - Riders,” *Podcast Commonware*, April 20, 2021).
- 44 Seeking at all costs to mirror, in the real movement, its image, the left “defends neither something utopian, since it is the maintenance of the same situation and a containment system, nor something realistic since there is no material ballast for its projects.” (Felipe Catalani, “O ‘enigma’ dos motoboys em greve contra a CLT,” *Passa Palavra*, July 2, 2020).
- 45 Ludmila Abílio, “Uberização do trabalho,” cit.
- 46 This mad dog dialectic is not something new to the periphery of capitalism. “Being a *cachorro loko* [mad dog] means having a motorcycle without a [vehicle] license and knowing how to escape a police blitz. It means knowing the ways around town. It means knowing how to do the procedures in a court of law, register office, or bank. It means ensuring the company(s) that the service will be performed literally without setbacks. (...) The zeal of this profession translates into an ongoing balancing act over how much to risk one’s life, how to carry out bureaucratic procedures given one’s knowledge about the city, and the daily social tensions that materialize in traffic.” See Abílio, “Segurando com as dez,” 23-24.
- 47 Francisco Miguez and Victor Guimarães, “App Workers Memes and Struggles in Brazil,” *Notes From Below*, March 30 2021.
- 48 Jacilio Saraiva, “Total de entregadores na Grande São Paulo tem aumento de 20%,” *Valor Econômico*, June 9 2020.
- 49 Scenes of protests like these were recorded by Treta no Trampo in “Diário de um motoca na pandemia,” *Instagram*, April 25 2020 and “Pedidos demorando demais pra sair no BK Demarchi (SBC),” *Instagram*, October 13 2020.
- 50 For an example of this type of situation recorded in São Gonçalo, Rio de Janeiro, see Invisíveis, “Protesto de entregadores no Supermarket,” *Instagram*, June 11 2020.
- 51 In January 2020, the video in which a police officer attacks a delivery worker would spark protests against police arbitrary behavior during a blitz to inspect vehicles in the Distrito Federal (“Motoboys fazem protesto em Taguatinga,” *Globoplay*, 21 January 2020); three months later, delivery workers from Piauí would protest in the streets demanding more security from the Teresina City Hall after a colleague was robbed during a delivery (Entregadores Teresina PI, “Cadê os valentões da Rua Goiás agora???”

contemporary capitalism (*Sem maquiagem: o trabalho de um milhão de revendedoras de cosméticos*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2014).

- 33 The thesis is taken from Ludmila Abilio (“Uberização do trabalho: subsunção real da viração,” cit.). According to Marx, real subsumption of labor to capital marks the moment when, in industry, machinery forms an integrated system that is no longer controlled by workers, but dictates the pace of their work and gives unity to the tasks that they perform separately. Dead labor begins to fully organize the process of production and to submit living labor, in a process of dispossession that consolidates the separation between the workers and the means of production and constitutes labor as such. If years ago, Chico de Oliveira pointed out something that could be called the “formal subsumption” of *viração* (*getting by*), the technologies that allow to carry out the control of such work in its own dispersion represent a new step. Through gains in economies of scale, rationalization, and centralization, the “algorithmic management” of *viração* (*getting by*) takes productivity to unknown heights. From this point of view, the recognition of this shapeless work at the center of our truncated modernization imposes a limit on the categorization of “uberization” as a strict process of flexibilization of work relations. In a sense, what the app companies did here was accelerate the creation of increasingly direct and streamlined connections between that shapeless activity and accumulation circuits.
- 34 Luciana Cavalcante, “Do WhatsApp ao Uber: 1 em cada 5 trabalhadores usa apps para ter renda,” *UOL*, May 12, 2021.
- 35 Victor Hugo Viegas, “O movimento do auxílio emergencial,” *A Comuna*, October 14, 2020.
- 36 Treta no Trampo, “Tretas na pandemia: Filas do banco,” *Instagram*, May 6, 2020.
- 37 Victor Hugo Viegas, “O que o auxílio emergencial tem a ver com a luta de classes?,” *Jacobin Brasil*, October 27, 2020.
- 38 Aliny Gama, “MPT investiga se funcionários ajoelhados em ato foram coagidos por patrões,” *UOL*, April 30, 2020.
- 39 Amigos do Cachorro Louco, “Dá para fazer greve no aplicativo? Discussão das lutas dos motoboys,” *Passa Palavra*, March 17, 2020.
- 40 “I’ll learn how to swim,” sang Gordurinha, condensing in a single verse, in 1960, the journey of “working in Madureira, traveling by Cantareira and living in Niterói.” It was no surprise that the lyrics appeared a year after the Ferryboat Revolt [“Revolta das Barcas”] set fire to the fleet and plundered the mansion of the owners of the Cantareira company. “Mambo Da Cantareira,” *Gordurinha tá na praia*, 1960. Nor is it surprising that buses and trains have always had an incendiary vocation; after all, the collective humiliation in boarding lines and crowded transport is an endemic feature of surplus labor due to the fact that the burden of displacement is itself laid on the shoulders of the worker. “*It takes more work to go to work than to work*,” explained one placard in June 2013, when the time bomb finally exploded.
- 41 In the quotations in this and the next paragraph, the terms come from Ludmila Costhek Abílio, *Segurança com as dez: o proletário tupiniquim e o desenvolvimento brasileiro*, final postdoctoral report presented to FAPESP, FEA-USP, 2015.

ing for the normalization of the power supply or the repair of a damaged transformer to pressure the authorities. Military Police who followed the movement closely, repressing and persecuting residents, counted more than 120 protests throughout Amapá when, suddenly, the pandemic once again became an object of concern. “With the purpose of reducing the risks of transmission of the new Coronavirus,” the state government decreed a night time curfew and banned “any kind of political activity in streets or squares... even if outdoors...including meetings, walks, motorcade, rallies, etc.”⁷³ The overlapping forms of collapse in Amapá completes our portrait of the Brazilian dystopia, wherein the state at once sabotages social isolation measures in the name of labor discipline then sets off a lockdown to contain social revolt.

“What happened with electricity in Amapá has nothing to do with the federal government,” the President would affirm in the following days. It was clear from the beginning that the government would not assume any responsibility for the blackout. It was, after all, a result of the negligence of a private company: with the announcement that any damage to personal property would not be compensated, the population itself started to organize crowdfunding to help rebuild the homes of those who lost everything. Around the hashtag #SOSAmapá, initiatives to donate groceries to the poorest neighborhoods spread during the shortage.⁷⁴

The self-organized survival of hell thus operates in an ambiguous zone, suspended somewhere between solidarity and an effort to offload the costs of the disaster onto the population. When the health system collapsed in Amazonas a few months later, the commotion on the Internet raised donations all over the country. In an effort to circumvent overcrowding and lack of supplies in the ICUs, families improvised treatment beds at home to take care of their sick relatives. Networks of friends and volunteers mobilized to obtain oxygen tanks directly from industry in the Manaus Free Trade Zone, then redistributed them to outpatient homes all over the city. If the daily count of the pandemic’s dead in the news highlights the disposability to which a great part of the population is condemned, this same nightmare reveals its productivity to the precise extent that it consigns the living to a regime of total availability to any work: “We are becoming doctors. That’s what we have left to do,” reported a young woman, who had just learned to administer oxygen at home to family members who weren’t admitted to the hospital due to lack of available beds.⁷⁵ Shock after shock, the permanent catastrophe in which we have been suspended for two years, empowers and normalizes the old strategies of

survival in the daily war, which were always informal, improvised, unsafe, and illegal. But this formless overtime once considered by Brazilian sociologists to be the hidden engine of our capitalist modernization has long since failed to foster any hopes for development: in the midst of collapse, it only constantly recalibrates the negative horizon of confinement in our desperate, exhausting, and never-ending period of waiting.

At the same time that it radicalizes the “run-for-your-lives peripheral way of life,”⁷⁶ Bolsonaro’s “deconstructive” form of government⁷⁷ prepares the ground for movements of capital that tighten the mesh of control and attempt to give “measure to this nebulous zone” of informality.⁷⁸ From this point of view, emergency aid is a far cry from the so-called “universal basic income” celebrated by economic analysts.⁷⁹ The experimental money transfers of 2020 were closely linked to another transfer: the transfer of costs and risks from the state and companies to a population that is properly registered and remunerated in limited doses.⁸⁰ When the authorities’ actions in the pandemic boil down to “greater or lesser leniency or (small) reinforcement to a self-organized quarantine by workers,”⁸¹ this is because the very management of the health emergency has been outsourced to the crowd. That “subordinate self-management”⁸² characteristic of platform work is here revealed to be a tendency toward generalized survival through the catastrophe. From cloth masks sewn at home and sold on the street—a source of income for those who always find a way to get by—to the sanitary barriers where volunteer residents took turns at the entrances of small towns and tourist areas,⁸³ the quarantine could only exist as a bricolage,⁸⁴ a sum of uncoordinated (and often conflicting) efforts that resulted, in the end, in a gigantic amount of dirty work.⁸⁵ While the dead were being buried, we all collaborated—whether in isolation or in the hustle—to keep the urban machine running.⁸⁶

In the final months of 2020, the emergency aid was gradually interrupted through the progressive exclusion of millions of beneficiaries and a reduction of the value of the last installments, until it finally expired in December. Along with it went a state of public calamity and a “war budget” that made possible the largest direct income transfer trial ever carried out in Brazil.⁸⁷ With a second spike in infections at the beginning of 2021, states and municipalities would again implement measures to restrict commerce and services to contain the virus, only this time with none of the economic support. Informal workers would be pushed to the edge. The situation became even more alarming in tourist regions, where summer presents the chance to build

and informal work (...), in the combination of gigs, social programs, illicit activities and jobs.” Ludmila Abilio, “Uberização do trabalho: subsunção real da viração,” *Passa Palavra*, February 19 2017.

- 22 “Lei trabalhista tem que se aproximar da informalidade, diz Bolsonaro,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, December 12 2018.
- 23 Pedro Fernando Nery, “Desigualdade em V,” *Estado da Arte*, November 11 2020.
- 24 Isadora Andrade Guerreiro, “O vírus, a invisibilidade e a submissão dos vivos ao não-vivo,” *Passa Palavra*, May 11, 2020.
- 25 João Bernardo, “Programa Bolsa Família: resultados e objectivos,” *Passa Palavra*, 10 April 2010.
- 26 Vectors of the same process, the new Rural and Urban Land Regularization Law and the Green and Yellow House Program show the transformation of self-built housing into a financial asset, a kind of financialization of the *viração*, which constitutes the real ballast of these securities—either as dead labor crystallized in the houses that are regularized and used as collateral for mortgages and other transactions or as living labor that pays these debts. Isadora Guerreiro, “Casa Verde e Amarela, securitização e saídas da crise: no milagre da multiplicação, o direito ao endividamento,” *Passa Palavra*, August 31, 2020.
- 27 “We have no news of any country that in ten days provided bank accounts for free for up to 30 million people” said Paulo Guedes in early April 2020. Mariana Ribeiro et al., “Auxílio emergencial colocará 30 milhões de pessoas em contas bancárias digitais,” *Valor Investe*, April 7, 2020.
- 28 “The aim is to liquidate the archaic forms of credit and insurance, replacing them with their capitalist equivalents. It is curious to consider that, if this objective is met, we will be in a situation opposite to that of the Keynesian model of income distribution, because here we rely not on the consumption capacity of the beneficiaries, but on their capacity to save for investment. This way, those who do not find employment as wage earners will survive as microentrepreneurs, thus contributing, on the one hand, and the other, to the modernization of Brazilian capitalism”(João Bernardo, “Programa Bolsa Família: resultados e objectivos,” cit.). The process of organizing this economy at the same time informal and absolutely modern is precisely what has been called “uberization”, with the proviso that it is not a question of retrogression or modernization, but certainly an increase in the temperature of the boilers of hell that is the world of contemporary work.
- 29 Michael Grothaus, “How Universal Basic Income Could Rescue The Freelance Economy,” *Fast Company*, December 1, 2017.
- 30 João Pedro Pitombo e João Valadares, “Auxílio emergencial irriga negócio informal e banca puxadinho em casas no Nordeste,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, August 7, 2020.
- 31 Toni Pires and Heloísa Mendonça, “Mesmo com auxílio emergencial, crise empurra desempregados para viver na rua,” *El País*, September 1, 2020; Beatriz Jucá and Heloísa Mendonça, “O auxílio que revoluciona a vida no Ceará não salva da rua em São Paulo,” *El País*, August 31, 2020.
- 32 Perhaps it is a good example of “productive consumption”, in the way Ludmila Abilio gives a new meaning to Marx’s term, associating it with the blurring of boundaries between work and consumption in

18 In his writings in the 1970s, Chico de Oliveira saw the modernization process in the country as a “Columbus egg”: like the old trick of breaking the eggshell to put it on its feet, what put and kept Brazilian capitalism on its feet was this “strange subsistence economy,” apparently archaic, of the urban peripheries and the countryside. The consumer goods industry, the sociologist showed, had its counterpart in the street trade, while the growth of automobile production was accompanied by the proliferation of manual car washes and mechanical shops on every corner. As it compensated for the lack of sufficient prior capitalist accumulation, such symbiosis gave an absolutely central place to “informal work” in the process of industrialization and urbanization in the country. Likewise, formal employment has itself been linked to informality since its genesis: during days off from the factory, the formally-employed worker continued to work—on his own and without pay—to build his own house in irregular neighborhoods, a practice that gave rise to a considerable number of the slums and peripheral neighborhoods in large Brazilian cities and ended up lowering wages, since the latter did not have to take rent into account. In the self-production of workers through exhausting and improvised solutions, a colossal amount of shapeless surplus labor was made invisible in the shadow of the official worklife. Chico de Oliveira related this invisible dimension of exploitation to the workers’ distrust of populist governments before the 1964 coup, which were overthrown overnight without great popular resistance. Not by chance, it was precisely from the urban outskirts, which concentrated this informal work, that new characters came into the stage in the years before the end of the military dictatorship. From land invasion to the demand for collective infrastructure in neighborhoods (sanitation, electricity and paved streets, buses, nursery, health centers, schools, etc.), the struggles on the margins of the metropolis had a central place in the political recomposition of the Brazilian proletariat of the late 1970s. At the same time as it represented a functional surplus labor to capitalist accumulation, the self-construction of the city proved to be an explosive conflict zone. In this ambivalent process, in which proletarian self-activity was simultaneously unpaid work and class struggle, what the Brazilianist James Holston called an “insurgent citizenship” becomes visible, in which confrontation becomes a means of integration into the order. See Francisco de Oliveira, “The Duckbilled Platypus,” *New Left Review*, n. 24, November/December 2003; and, from the same author, “Acumulação monopolista, Estado e urbanização: a nova qualidade do conflito de classes,” in José Álvaro Moisés and others, *Contradições urbanas e movimentos sociais*, São Paulo, CEDEC / Paz e Terra, 1977; James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

19 Paulo Arantes, “A fratura brasileira do mundo,” *Zero à esquerda*, São Paulo, Conrad, 2004. For a recent resumption of this discussion, in the context of the failure of the struggle against the pandemic in the western heart of capitalism, see Alex Hochuli, “The Brazilianization of the World,” *American Affairs*, v. 5, n. 2, 2021.

20 Ludmila Costhek Abílio, “O futuro do trabalho é aqui,” *Revista Rosa*, v. 4, n. 1, August 2021.

21 This popular expression, borrowed by some sociologists in recent years, nicely defines the movement “between a series of contingent activities, marked by instability and inconstancy, as well as between legal and illegal expedients” that marks the trajectory of a significant part of the Brazilian workforce: “always discontinuous, always unstable paths in the labor market” that “render inoperative the differences between the formal and the informal” See Carlos Freire da Silva, “Viração: o comércio informal dos vendedores ambulantes” in V. Telles e outros, *Saídas de emergência*, Boitempo, 2011 and Vera da Silva Telles, “Mutações do trabalho e experiência urbana,” *Tempo Social*, v. 18, n. 1, 2006. This “‘living on the edge’ of the Brazilian peripheries means a constant clinging to opportunities, which in technical terms translates into the high turnover of the Brazilian labor market, the permanent transit between formal

up savings for the rest of the year.⁸⁸ The numerous anti-lockdown demonstrations that began in December 2020 had a different social composition than the Bolsonaroist rallies at the beginning of the pandemic. Although a court order had closed beaches, restricted commerce, and banned tourists, a few days before New Year’s Eve the city of Búzios was overrun with protests: hundreds of people surrounded the courthouse, until the measure fell. In Angra dos Reis, workers blocked the Rio-Santos highway and shopkeepers occupied the city hall building against the tightening of restrictions.⁸⁹ Around the country, small employers mingled in the streets with their employees alongside hawkers, artists, market vendors, motorcycle taxi drivers, musicians, app drivers, and so on. In a certain way, this movement expressed a reaction to the end of the emergency aid, although by targeting the health measures of local governments, it had reverted into the orbit of Bolsonaroism. In Amazonas, where 52% of the labor force is informal, the lockdown decree of December 23rd expressly forbid the “sale of products by itinerant vendors” and “handicraft fairs and exhibitions.”⁹⁰ It would be revoked three days later, after a demonstration escalated out of organizers’ control and triggered a night of barricades in Manaus.⁹¹

It was precisely during the weeks that followed that the whole world watched in distress as news of deaths due to lack of oxygen in Amazonian hospitals, plagued by a new and more contagious variant of the virus, broke out. How can we support a demand whose obvious consequence is the death of more people? In the words of an app driver who organized the protests, the movement “is not led by denialists, everyone knows that the disease exists and unfortunately many people have died,” but “we need to coexist and develop means or strategies that can guarantee the continuity of all economic activities.”⁹² Seeking a “stability between economy and health,” the demonstrations called for at the height of the hospital catastrophe also began to demand the distribution of “free covid kits.” In a new rightward tightening of the screw, the fight against the lockdown engaged in a defense of so-called “early treatment,” a generic reference to the prescription of drugs with no proven efficacy against the new coronavirus (and with possible harmful side effects to health), but widely adopted during the pandemic in the country.

Encouraged by the president in his speeches, administered in public hospitals and indicated by health insurers and private doctors, “prophylaxis” by means of over-the-counter drugs designed for malaria, lice, and worms was still, in mid-2021, recognized by almost half of the Brazilian doctors as useful

in combating the coronavirus.⁹³ The amazing capillarity of this miraculous cure, sold by opportunists of all kinds more than a year after the pandemic began, was a sign that its appeal found echoes in the frontlines of hospitals. Now, if the “alternative methods” were never efficient for the recovery of the sick, they would certainly provide some relief to desperate patients and to soothe the impotence of health workers themselves, many on the verge of burnout in the face of an unfamiliar and deadly disease. From improvised alternatives in the crisis, such procedures became popularized precisely as a “Collapse Protocol”—title of one of the livestreams in which doctors from Pará shared their dramatic experience during the first half of 2020. When “Belém’s health system collapsed and drugstores ran out of medicine stock,

doctors had to improvise to save the lives of patients. Case reports are abundant on live streams, experiences of healthcare plans and public clinics, which would confirm that early treatment saves lives, and which suggest that those who did not have access to treatment responded the worst. [...] At the same time, the cases of patients that end up dying are seen as natural: after all, “no treatment is infallible.”⁹⁴

In closed groups on Facebook and Telegram, doctors shared the results of experimental and homemade therapies, such as nebulization of hydroxychloroquine tablets in sick relatives; discussed how to legally protect themselves when performing this type of clandestine procedure; organized campaigns for the recognition of their methods; and, most importantly, formed a huge network of professionals and patients. More than a simple prescription—and a free pack as a gift in the hopes of building loyalty—the Ivermectin prescription was often accompanied by an invitation to a WhatsApp group.⁹⁵

In a country where self-medication is widespread,⁹⁶ it is not surprising that a big part of the population has not hesitated to add one more pill pack to the medicine cabinet. Also for the other workers tormented every day by the fear of contagion—surrounded by the deaths of acquaintances, friends, and family members, and forced to risk themselves every day in crowded buses, closed offices, and cafeterias—the “early treatment” movement provided a “community” of care and security, a macabre network of mutual aid offering some semblance of support and sanity amidst the chaos.⁹⁷ In the same way, belief in the “covid kit” among health care workers served as a subjective defense mechanism to “tolerate the intolerable,” namely, the hardship of working in

see as temporary. In any case, automation and the dispersion of the workforce seem to be complementary trends in the restructuring of the area, which assesses keeping part of the workforce working from home after the pandemic—and already develops new surveillance mechanisms in order to do this, as several other sectors. Angelo Verotti, “Ao novo normal,” *IstoÉ Dinheiro*, July 14 2020; Douglas Gavras, “*Telemarketing* reabre vagas com mudança de comportamento do consumidor pós-Covid,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, May 8 2021; “Funcionários de call center em home office serão vigiados,” *Poder 360*, March 28 2021.

- 8 Some of these stoppages are recorded in a video in the Treta no Trampo channel, “2020 - Greve dos rodoviários!” (*Instagram*, Feb. 1 2021), and are mentioned in Thiago Amancio, “Crise no transporte público na pandemia provoca greves em série por todo o país” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, May 21 2021).
- 9 “As politics and open war become more and more alike,” we suggested on another occasion, “the technologies of social mediation developed in recent years seemingly become obsolete. [...] The wave of destruction that fell not only upon the main operators of the political arrangement constituted since the re-democratization period and their government machinery but also upon some of the biggest Brazilian companies must be comprehended within the frame of a ‘forced annihilation of an entire mass of productive forces’, typical movement of capitalist crises, which always comes accompanied by an increase of exploration. The destruction of productive forces, often through war, has always been an efficient emergency exit for capital.” A group of militants, “Brazil: ‘How things have (and haven’t) changed.’”
- 10 Marcos Nobre, “O caos como método,” *Piauí*, April 2019; Gabriela Lotta, “O que acontece quando a falta de decisão é o método de governo,” *Nexo*, January 27 2020.
- 11 “Bolsonaro’s speech is not a denial of the lethality of the virus, or it is only on a superficial level,” noted a spectator of the first official pronouncements during the pandemic: “transubstantiated in a human-virus complex, (...) Jair Bolsonaro approaches his final form, an angel of death, an emissary of mass death—what better expression would there be for suicide capital?” (Felipe Kouznets, “aninhos,” *helétricuzinho*, March 25 2020).
- 12 “Bolsonaro diz que, no Exército, sua ‘especialidade é matar,’” *Folha de S. Paulo*, June 30 2017.
- 13 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua—Mercado de Trabalho Conjuntural*, August 2020.
- 14 Among the new users of the platform, 35% related the search for work to social distancing. Beatriz Montesanti, “Startup israelense de trabalho freelancer chega ao Brasil,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, November 10 2020.
- 15 The expression “the father is *on*,” made popular by soccer striker Neymar Jr., became a meme on the internet. Being online also means, in this case, being “connected,” available, ready for everything, in contexts ranging from flirting to work, passing through the entire ambiguous field of social networks.
- 16 Clara Assunção, “No país da informalidade, ambulantes na CPTM protestam pela sobrevivência: ‘Queremos trabalhar,’” *Rede Brasil Atual*, 6 February 2020.
- 17 Available in English: Some militants, “Caught between Rush and Isolation: Workers Under Dispute during the Pandemic,” *Passa Palavra*, 12 April 2020.

“normality,” becomes even more hellish. With each new emergency—health, environmental, economic, social—the screw of work intensification tightens, everyone is fully mobilized in an endless effort in which nothing but “negative experiences” are formed.¹⁹³ If the “non-movements” bring good news, however, it is precisely this: they “signal that the proletariat no longer has any romantic task”: nothing to hope for, but also nothing to lose.¹⁹⁴

Notes

- 1 Eduardo Bolsonaro, “Fala de JB abrindo o jantar na embaixada do Brasil nos EUA (17/MAR/2019),” *YouTube*, March 18 2019.
- 2 “Para não morrer, operadores paralisam call centers em todo Brasil exigindo quarentena,” *Passa Palavra*, March 19 2020. The protests are an unusual epilogue to the reflections of some militants who, a few years earlier, faced the difficulties of organization in a sector with such a high turnover. Alguns Militantes, “Disk Revolta: questões sobre uma tentativa recente de organização em call centers,” *Passa Palavra*, May 30 2019. At the time when call centers were affected by an unprecedented wave of stoppages, it is significant that the mobilizing perspective was simply to escape from that hell.
- 3 Trabalhadores da Livraria Cultura, “Nosso último grito de socorro: trabalhadores voltam a denunciar a Livraria Cultura,” *Passa Palavra*, 19 February 2020.
- 4 “We are hostages,” was the message written on a sign posted by workers in the window of a call center in downtown São Paulo on the day of the “general strike” called by the unions against Labor and Social Security reforms in 2017. Disk Revolta, “Pedido de socorro e apoio à greve na Uranet,” *Facebook*, 28 April 2017.
- 5 Here, the clandestine battle in the bookstore also revealed a trend. “For any trade unionist, the ultimate goal set by the workers of Livraria Cultura will sound very strange: they want to be fired without any justified reason. Although this demand only makes sense in the framework of CLT [Brazilian Labour Law] (after all, the goal is to win the dismissal), from a historical perspective, this type of struggle already indicates a farewell to the promises made by CLT labor contracts, since there is no longer the legal, political, economic and social horizon that they once presented (career, stability, rights, etc.). ‘Being fired was seen as a victory,’ wrote a former employee in a comment.” “Por que as denúncias contra a Livraria Cultura viralizaram?,” *Passa Palavra*, 27 April 2019.
- 6 A case of collective pressure for remote work was recorded by Invisíveis de Goiânia, “Atento: resistindo à chamada da morte,” *Passa Palavra*, April 17 2020.
- 7 “Known for being the gateway for thousands of young people to the labor market,” the job of call center operator had been facing “in recent years, (...) a reformulation of the [telemarketing] market, with job cuts and an investment in self-service,” explains the director of the sector’s employers’ union. The social distancing measures seem to have contributed, however, to more operators being hired than fired in the twelve months ended in February 2021, “for the first time in five years,” a movement that some experts

the new normal.⁹⁸ This mechanism helped to appease despair and cope with fear in a context of the dramatic deepening of the negative experience of a job it felt impossible to desert. In this sense, the widespread resort to drugs with no proven efficacy seems to have had less to do with an ideological refusal of the known measures to combat the pandemic than with the suffering generated by their unviability. The engagement of the patients themselves—actual or potential—in the cause of “life-saving drugs” not only added to the psychic defense strategies of thousands of people forced to disregard the most basic sanitary protocols in order to survive, but also lent a political meaning to the indifference to which necessity compelled them.⁹⁹

While many doctors voluntarily joined the cause of “early treatment,” others were coerced into prescribing it and taking part in this sinister “field of experimentation and dissemination of social cruelty.”¹⁰⁰ Subjecting patients to experimental research without their consent, prescribing the “covid kit” to postpone hospitalizations, or advancing the release of beds by prescribing “celestial discharges” (i.e., turning off equipment and administering a “palliative treatment”) was dirty work needed to balance the books of a handful of health care providers, in a grim demonstration of how perversity can become a management system.^{101, 102}

It should be clear that the green and yellow calamity served, on multiple fronts, as an advanced laboratory of crisis management. For what could be, according to General Edson Pujol, the most important mission of his generation, the Brazilian Army increased the production of chloroquine in its facilities a hundredfold, after making a huge purchase of supplies.¹⁰³ In the battle against the virus, the subjective defense mechanisms represented national defense weapons in an operation that the Armed Forces admitted was essentially psychological: more than a cure for the disease, says an Army statement, it was about “producing hope to millions of hearts afflicted by the advanced impacts of the disease in Brazil and in the world.”¹⁰⁴

The fact that the war effort required by the pandemic would escape the patterns of conventional combat has always been evident in the global chain of command’s response to the new virus: “more than a war, it is guerrilla warfare,” announced the director of the World Health Organization back in March 2020. This sentiment echoes the paradigm of irregular conflict that has long guided military manuals, attentive to the multiplication of asymmetrical and fragmentary conflict in which it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish the forces in confrontation, as it was in the classic model of “two

national armies, one against the other.” And the loss of form of contemporary warfare—which increasingly takes on an “informal, dynamic, flexible character,” as a Brazilian colonel explains—is perhaps not unrelated to labor’s loss of form, but an indication that the very boundary between war and labor has blurred.¹⁰⁵

A new trend in military academies around the world, the jargon of “hybrid warfare” describes the co-mingling of military combat operations—overt or covert, conducted by outsourced forces—with civilian crowd engagement on social networks and in the streets, as witnessed over the past decade in Syria or Ukraine.¹⁰⁶ However, for another example combining algorithmic crowd management and direct coercion by outsourced operators, we might also consider the work regime of certain app couriers. Have we not discovered a “hybrid” labor management, between software and foremen?

No less “hybrid” is the administration of the increasingly ungovernable territories and populations around here. Once governing is confused with dismantling, it is difficult to even distinguish the insurgents from the forces of order. In its successful operation to ensure law and order in a collapsed country, the federal government relied on a huge network to spread “early treatment,” with social movements supporting the reopening of businesses, churches and schools, and with the community and corporate donations for the most vulnerable, without ever dismissing, however, the firepower of the official and unofficial squads: Brazilian police set a new record for lethality in the first year of the pandemic.¹⁰⁷

All in all, the fear that had led Congress to defend an emergency aid higher in value and broader in scale than any other program of its kind in the country was no longer justified: the population’s ability “to get by in crisis situations”¹⁰⁸ transformed the devastated scenario into a “new normal,” even alongside free-falling labor income, soaring inflation, and skyrocketing hunger.¹⁰⁹ In the face of this, the payment of the aid would be resumed after months of indefiniteness at more “realistic” levels—with reduced scope and lower amounts—before finally being replaced by a redesigned Bolsa Família and special credit lines.¹¹⁰ Recalibrated, the money transfer policy continues to function as the “working capital” of the *viração* (in which, by default, it is impossible to “separate what is business and what is household money”) in the arsenal of this total mobilization for work.¹¹¹

Even for those who remained at a distance from dangers of the battlefield, the experience of being confined at home—telecommuting, attending

changes in working conditions, it is not uncommon to hear motorcycle delivery drivers defending the strikes as a way to at least take revenge on the apps—but the collective hatred can quickly turn against a driver in a traffic fight or a motorcycle thief caught in the act and about to be lynched.¹⁸⁷ With the same vengeful and suicidal features as these individual outbursts of despair, the confrontations often boil down to an escalation of senseless violence.¹⁸⁸ And someone needs to stick around to clean it up—as occurred the morning after the largest demonstration in Chile’s history, when Venezuelan migrants organized to voluntarily clean the streets of downtown Santiago; or in Quito, in that same October 2019, where the clearing of the barricades was left to a task force organized by Ecuador’s own National Indigenous Coordination (CONAIE) after an agreement ended the uprising. Seen from this perspective, riots and rebellions of the most varied dimensions become another routine fact of our catastrophic daily life.

Interestingly, the term “non-movements” first appeared in sociological literature to describe the “constant state of insecurity and mobilization” of subaltern urban layers “whose livelihoods and sociocultural reproduction often depend on the illegal use of the public spaces of the street” in a “long war of attrition” with the authorities in contemporary Middle Eastern metropolises.¹⁸⁹ Not very distant from the rush of hustlers or delivery drivers in the Brazilian streets, always ready to evade a police roadblock, avoid paying bus fares, or cross a red light to get by: “dispersed efforts,” individual, daily and continuous, that may involve “collective actions when gains are threatened.”¹⁹⁰ With just one spark, this desperate routine of work, which transitions at every moment between resistance and engagement, can break down in a desperate explosion—it is well worth remembering that it was the self-immolation of a street vendor whose fruit cart had just been confiscated that served as the trigger for the 2011 protests in Tunisia.

On the street corners where we hustle between “bullshit jobs” and temporary gigs—where there is nothing promising in sight except to escape—insubordination erupts with the same urgency, the same immediacy as just-in-time production. Conflicts explode as a desperate gesture, a cry of “fuck this shit” in which “suffering, frustration, and revolt” are mixed together, often in the form of an act of individual—or at best, collective—revenge.¹⁹¹ Like the recent wave of desertions from work in the United States¹⁹² and other parts of the world, the stampede from call centers in the first days of the pandemic in Brazil was a sign of refusal of a routine that, in order to cope with a collapsing

replicate themselves in a dispersed manner. Non-movements expand through gestures that can be “copied and imitated, accumulating instances of repetition”¹⁸⁰ and branching out like memes on the internet—but on the streets, in a dynamic that feeds back into the networks. This was certainly the case with the App Strike, which was neither an organization nor a planned campaign but a replicable gesture spread through videos that followed the same script. The same is true of the shutdowns in the telemarketing industry right after the arrival of the new coronavirus; the blockades of dozens of traffic circles by pedestrians wearing reflective vests in France; the student evasions and the *primera línea* [frontliners] during the Chilean protests. By multiplying these decentralized acts, conflicts acquire scale without acquiring a stable form (when the form is fixed, the meme loses its momentum and is in danger of becoming a brand, an image that is empty of content, an aestheticization of revolt).¹⁸¹

Pushed by diffuse turmoil and with no interlocutors to negotiate with, governments and businesses around the world are challenged to “respond unilaterally and rationally to an ‘irrational’ insurgency.”¹⁸² The formalization of non-movements—that is, their translation into a grammar legible to institutions—stands as a precondition for their neutralization and incorporation. However, even when revolts are victorious in their immediate demands, the return to normality usually carries the perception that nothing has improved, or even that the situation has worsened. The inability of the state to fully absorb the energy of confrontation leaves a latent dissatisfaction, which can reverse itself into the opposite of the original impulse—wasn’t this, after all, the continuity between the June 2013 uprising and the Bolsonarist insurgency?¹⁸³ From the election of politicians who openly assume social violence to the degradation into actual civil wars, non-movements often end up accelerating the destructive tendency of the crisis itself.¹⁸⁴ Intense and exhausting mobilizations that never really leave their seat: are the conflicts of our time trapped in the infernal cycle of *nèijuǎn*?

On the charred walls of the subway stations of an uprisen Hong Kong, phrases like “I’d rather become ashes than dirt” or “If we burn, you burn with us” condensed a precise image not only of the dead end faced by the rioters of that city, but of the suffocating atmosphere that weighs on the uprisings of our time.¹⁸⁵ If it makes little sense to talk about the accumulation of forces, “the anger certainly accumulates,”¹⁸⁶ and is always a short step away from descending into violence among the flayed themselves. Without significant

remote classes, not having a job, or even monetizing their performance on videogames—did not escape the war effort.¹¹² On the one hand, social isolation deepened the historical divide between the qualified contingent and the rest of the workforce, since the security of the home office was not an option for more than 80% of the employed population. On the other hand, the improvised office or classroom within people’s homes, bearing costs that once would have been borne by employers, indicates that the characteristics of informality have begun to extend to all strata of the labor force. From silent resistance to the surveillance and overwork regime of remote learning¹¹³ to unprecedented streamers’ strikes,¹¹⁴ the tensions of this formless telework between four walls have also produced conflicts throughout the pandemic. With the boundary between work and rest space blurred, life in quarantine is pressured by a relentless demand to stay productive—between online courses to improve the résumé and physical exercises to stay in shape—“in a mix of a slaughterhouse pace with online lectures on the challenges of parenthood and teachings on ‘how to live alone and remain happy.’”¹¹⁵

On the streets or at home, anyone who goes through life as a war, “working at the pace of death”—succumbing a little each day—is already half dead. And “there is no lockdown of the undead: they cross barriers, they don’t care about dying again.”¹¹⁶ But the zombie apocalypse, in Hollywood cosmology, is also the image of insurrection.¹¹⁷

Abandon All Hope

In the leadup to a national truck drivers strike on February 1st, 2021, a video circulated through WhatsApp groups of a driver who had hung himself in a tree by the side of the highway, next to his truck. The scene was shared with mournful messages and warnings about the desperate situation of self-employed truckers, who were trapped between low freight rates and spikes in driving costs, especially fuel. Even so, the movement got nowhere close to achieving the strength of the May 2018 strike, during which the supply chains of the whole country were choked in a matter of days and the government, terrified, offered some immediate relief, through measures that would lose effect in the following years.¹¹⁸ Lacking the broad—and ambiguous—coalition of the preceding mobilization, which involved owner-operator truckers, small fleet owners, and even several large transportation companies, the irruption in the beginning of 2021 amounted to the scattered initiative of

independent truckers who assembled highway blockades in several states, but which were quickly dismantled by highway police.¹¹⁹

Although the strike did not take off, the unrest contaminated other workers who also rely directly on fuel to make a living in the cities. Between February and April, demonstrations by couriers, app drivers, and self-employed school bus drivers took place almost daily throughout Brazil. Alongside new protests by truckers, all of this gave an insurrectionary contour to streets whose daily circulation had been reduced by the peaking second wave of coronavirus. This movement of motorized workers blocked highways and Petrobrás distribution centers; it crammed itself into gas stations, with the tactic of refueling only 1 real to produce queues and cause losses to the retailers; it reignited the organization of the courier strikes, and powered the largest motorcade of Uber drivers in the history of São Paulo, which blocked access to the Guarulhos International Airport for an entire night, demanding the end of low paid promotional rides.¹²⁰ Whereas inflation traditionally translates into demands around the cost of living, in the era of Uberization it leads chiefly to protests over the costs of work, i.e. to struggles over the ability to work. The reproduction of the workforce turns into the management of the microenterprise of oneself—hence the frequent rapprochement between protests against hikes in fuel prices and anti-lockdown campaigns of shop owners during the first months of the year. For many, these strikes were the last resource before abandoning the fight and surrendering all weapons, that is, before returning the car to the rental companies (in some cities, app driver associations estimate that more than half of the drivers registered in the platforms gave up working during the year of 2021).¹²¹

Between the growing financial inviability of self-employment, on one hand, and the crumbling of formal employment, on the other, there is nowhere to run. The only alternative is the endless rat race, *viração* under more and more adverse conditions. This sensation of being confined to exhausting work with no future found its echo on the other side of the globe in the buzzword *nèijuǎn* (内卷), used by Chinese social network users “to describe the evils of their modern lives.”¹²² Before trending in the most populous country in the world, in mid-2020 the term was used by scholars to translate the concept of “involution,” a dynamic of stagnation in agrarian societies—but also of big cities in the peripheries of global capitalism—in which the intensification of work does not amount to modernization.¹²³ Composed by the characters “in” [内] and “to roll” [卷] the expression can be “intuitively understood

offs, among other “defensive” claims. Carried out in default of the unions and often hostile to their representatives, such movements sometimes took on insurrectionary features, such as the rebellions at the construction sites of the late Growth Acceleration Program (PAC)¹⁷¹ or the wildcats of bus drivers outside the garages on the eve of the World Cup.¹⁷²

Despite its unprecedented scale, the 2010 strike wave left no room for any “accumulation of forces”—neither here, nor in China. Contrary to what one might imagine, the situation was similar in the industrial heartland of the planet, which went through a wave of worker unrest in the same period. Without official channels of representation, the scattered and violent strikes that multiplied in Chinese factories ended up “unable to build a durable organization or articulate political demands.”¹⁷³ With airs of “looting,” the strike appeared as a moment to “take-whatever-you-can-get” in exchange for the unbearable day-to-day life in the industrial districts: “obtain back wages, holiday bonuses, unpaid benefits, or simply to get back at managers who had sexually harassed workers, owners who had hired thugs to beat up workers who stand up for themselves, etc.”¹⁷⁴ Other times, workers would “just take the money and leave”—or rather, “lifting the bucket” and abandoning their lodgings, to use the typical Chinese migrant worker expression that has recently gone viral alongside videos critical of factory life.¹⁷⁵

Without the old “horizon of ‘conquests’ to be accumulated, in a broader perspective of progressive integration,” what is left to the struggles of our time is to recede little by little or escalate immediately, “assuming insurrectionary forms without any mediation (without before and after).”¹⁷⁶ Therefore, protests against an increase in transportation fares become, in a few days, earthquakes in the streets of Brazil or Chile; police violence burns cities in Greece, the United States, or Nigeria; an increase in fuel shuts down Ecuador, France, Iran or Kazakhstan. Even if the initial demands provide minimal outlines to these uprisings, their explosion tends to stretch and dilute them into a generalized revolt against the order—which ends up translated in many cases, inaccurately, into a revolt “against the government.”¹⁷⁷

As intense as they are discontinuous, without ever assuming stable forms, the conflicts that proliferate from one end of the globe to the other can be described as “social non-movements.”¹⁷⁸ Brought up in debates in certain militant circles, the expression comes in handy in a context of an increasingly atomized “class struggle without class organization,”¹⁷⁹ whose propagation passes not so much through centralized structures as through actions that

directly to the market, in an operation that raised more than 17 million reais without any mediation by government programs, a move entirely in sync with the growing valuation (and quantification) of the “social impact” investments worldwide.¹⁶⁴

After all, it’s been quite some time since certain social movements migrated to the cloud. Throughout the 2000s, the challenges of managing land squats with hundreds of families in the metropolitan outskirts, replete with disputes among competing territorial powers and always under threat of eviction, led more and more housing movements (notably the Homeless Workers’ Movement [MTST]) to recognize their squats as a necessarily provisional moment and to adopt, as a permanent structure, a large registry of families. While other organizations built a base by collecting rent in squatted buildings, the MTST expanded its ranks by demanding engagement rather than money: participation in assemblies and protests yields points that determine access to the rental subsidy program negotiated with the government, and each family’s score determines the ranking in the waiting line for the promised house.¹⁶⁵ In short, the “rank and file work” gave way to the work of the rank and file. With pioneering technology, the movement has digitalized part of this internal logistics of squats and demonstrations into an app, and more recently launched a campaign called “Hire those who struggle,” which relies on a WhatsApp bot capable of connecting registered homeless people to clients seeking a range of services.¹⁶⁶

If “the boundary between forms of association aimed at collective struggle and those intended to further engage the worker in exploitation has blurred,”¹⁶⁷ it is by no means strange that the conflicts of our time occur outside consolidated organizations, or even against them, but without building any structure in their place. The largest wave of strikes in the country’s history, from 2011 to 2018—and not the 1980s, as one might assume—has so little to do with the cycle of struggles that marked the end of the dictatorship that the comparison becomes almost misplaced.¹⁶⁸ When resurging in relatively stable fordist niches forty years ago, the unionism still nurtured a horizon of expansion of conquests, in which new and important mass organizations were forged, integrated in the general effort of “building democracy”—a mantra that, from then on, would dissipate “in a perpetual present of redoubled work.”¹⁶⁹ Over the last decade, the strikes “increasingly took place in the field of immediate, urgent reactions”¹⁷⁰: for the payment of delayed salaries and compliance with legislation, against plant closings and mass lay-

as “turning inward.”¹²⁴ While “development,” in English, carries the image of an outward unfolding towards something, *nèijuǎn* suggests a stripped screw revolving around itself: a ceaseless movement in place. Isn’t this, after all, the endless everydayness of *viração*? Echoing the despair of the daily experience of students and workers in the chinese metropolises, the term condenses

the feeling of being trapped in a miserable cycle of exhausting work that is never sufficient to achieve happiness or lasting improvements, but from which no one may opt out without falling into disgrace. They feel it when they complain that life feels like an endless competition with no victors, and they feel it when they dream of the day that’s coming when they will finally win. But that day never comes. Debts pile up, petitions for help go ignored, remaining options start to dwindle. In a time of involution, when even the smallest reforms seem impossible, all that remains are desperate measures.¹²⁵

If part of the same despair runs through the struggles of freelance drivers in Brazil, it assumes even more dramatic outlines in the Chinese streets and roads. In January 2021, a delivery worker who had his payment refused by the app self-immolated in front of his delivery station in Taizhou. In April, a trucker in Tangshan who had his vehicle seized by the police for being overweight drank a bottle of pesticide and sent a farewell message to his fellow drivers via social media. Over the course of that same month, a man from São Caetano do Sul confined to a wheelchair strapped fake explosives to his body and threatened to blow up a Social Security Institute building if he wasn’t granted access to his disability pension, while the resident of a village in the Southern Chinese district of Panyu—where the state had expropriated the collective lands to sell them to tourism companies—entered a local government building with real bombs and blew himself up, killing five employees.¹²⁶ Fired in the beginning of June, a bricklayer invaded his former employer’s house on the coast of Santa Catarina, held his family hostage for ten hours before being killed by the police after releasing them.¹²⁷ The pandemic brought with it even more pressure and desperation, as is evident in the case of the man who crashed his car into the reception desk of an overcrowded public hospital in the metropolitan region of Natal after his wife, infected with Covid, was denied care.¹²⁸

When a Military Police soldier in Bahia abandoned his post and drove

alone for more than 250 kilometers to Farol da Barra (a tourist spot in El Salvador) and opened fired with his rifle into the air while screaming denunciations of the violation of “dignity” and the “honor of the worker,” his outburst was celebrated in anti-lockdown networks as an heroic gesture against the “illegal orders” of the governors.¹²⁹ The tragic end met by the soldier, who was killed in a shootout with his own colleagues, was instrumentalized by far right congressmen to incite a mutiny among the troops. However, the police motorcade that left the scene the next day ran straight into a traffic jam caused by another demonstration: couriers were denouncing the death of a fellow delivery worker who had been run over by a drunk driver speeding down the wrong way of the road the night before. Accidentally united by their mourning for fallen comrades in a social war with no defined form, the protest routes converged toward the state government’s headquarters.¹³⁰

At the same time the it aggravates the crisis, or rather, widens the cesspool in which we’ve been struggling for decades without moving an inch, Bolsonaro’s scorched earth policing enables him to mobilize despair into suicidal bursts under the promise of a *decision*¹³¹—the idea of taking “one final shot.”¹³² As much as discontent with the rise in fuel prices has cut into the president’s support among one of his key “bases” (truckers), Bolsonarism was still the chief political force that had any capacity to dispute the social turbulence of these apocalyptic times, by molding diverse dissatisfactions into a “revolt within the order,”¹³³ diverting them either toward targets aligned with the institutional agenda—whether they be mayors, governors, judiciary, the media, the vaccine, or the electronic ballot box—or else simply mimicking concrete struggles through aesthetic rituals, as with his Sunday motorcycle trips.

At the peak of the turmoil, the Supreme Court placed a decisive piece back on the board, which its judges had removed from the game a few years earlier. By overturning Lula’s convictions and enabling him to run for elections again, the decision signaled that perhaps it isn’t possible to contain the onslaught of the Bolsonarist insurgency without turning to the commander of the great pacification operation that went practically unchallenged until the blow of June 2013—presumably with the expectation that everything will go back to its normal functioning once again. However, amidst the current escalation of social warfare, it is worth asking “what tools he will have on hand to pacify” an urban mass in an accelerated trajectory of “downward proletarianization”?¹³⁴ As much as the judiciary’s maneuver may revive the Left’s vain hope of restor-

process of co-optation of leaders, the centrifugal dynamic of the struggles also presents a challenge for any efforts to organize the movement. WhatsApp groups emerge and are abandoned at each mobilization, workers gather and disperse with the same volatility with which a conversation on the sidewalk is interrupted when the notification of a new order arrives: like molecules of gas that condense in a storm, it is only at the moment of confrontation that this cloud-proletariat takes form.

“A ‘base’ that only exists in confrontation,” that “dissolves as soon as the action declines...is not capable of being managed.”¹⁵⁸ As for the leaders that do emerge publicly, far from leading a cohesive contingent of motorcycle couriers, they count, at best, upon a diffuse network of followers in the cloud. For YouTubers and influencers linked to the movement, who are less leaders than “political entrepreneurs,” the commitment to the cause is often confused with a personal career.¹⁵⁹ Winning the fight is not dissociated from profiting from the fight, which can mean anything from monetizing videos, to collaborating on marketing efforts, or being invited to become the owner or manager of a Logistic Operator. This ambiguity, which describes a zone of indistinction between political action and work, is already to some extent contained in the current vocabulary of delivery drivers: being a “warrior” or “facing the struggle” are expressions that can refer both to the conflict against the platforms and to the low-intensity war experienced in the day-to-day rush on two wheels.¹⁶⁰ The profusion of app drivers’ candidacies in the 2020 municipal elections, mostly by political machines and right-wing parties, represent much more a path of individual ascension than the deliberate tactics of an articulated movement of the sector, which does not exist.¹⁶¹

Today, organizational structures only endure outside the conflict to the extent that they operate as gears of labor itself, such as the countless professional associations, unions and cooperatives that function, for the deliverers, as channels for insertion into the labor market—as well as the large social movements of decades ago, which now subsist as mediators of access to government programs and the market. It’s enough to recall the latest success of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in the financial sector, a partnership with large business groups to raise funds for seven rural workers’ cooperatives—among which are some of the largest organic food producers on the continent¹⁶²—by issuing bonds within the reach of “small and medium investors” on an online platform.¹⁶³ Faced with the insufficiency and dismantling of policies to promote the so-called “family agriculture,” MST turned

Formless Class Struggle

In the first days of March 2019, passengers encountered closed ticket offices at several subway stations in São Paulo. This was not at all strange, since headaches from the card reloading system are a routine part of using public transportation in the city. What looked more like a technical problem from outside the booths was, however, an invisible movement taken by outsourced ticket vendors against illegal cuts in their salaries, among other illicit schemes often used by the service provider to reduce its personnel expenses.¹⁵⁴ “Exploiting the ambiguous boundary between the precariousness of the already usually dysfunctional system, the winding up [...] and an effective ‘partial stoppage,’” the outsourced ticket takers conducted an intermittent strike in which interruptions and returns to work succeeded each other “at various ticket offices, according to opportunities, the force of the moment,” and with no apparent coordination.¹⁵⁵ One turnstile away, the conflict passed almost unnoticed in the eyes of most of the subway’s permanent employees, known for their intense union activity. Besides exposing the abyss opened by outsourcing within the same workspace, the difficulty in recognizing that strike, completely outside the official rites—without a delimited beginning or end, without a clear announcement, without assemblies or formal negotiations—is a sign of the disappearance of form from social conflicts in a world of formless labor.¹⁵⁶

Like the subterranean mobilization in the ticket offices, countless stoppages of delivery workers explode and fall apart without precise contours, in the shadowy spaces geared towards the diffuse work that moves urban logistics: shopping mall docks, motorcycle parking lots, distribution centers, dark kitchens and dark stores,¹⁵⁷ as well as virtual environments. If among the subway outsourced workers the insubordination oscillated from one station to another according to the gaps and the pressure of the moment, among the motorcycle couriers it is usual for the conflict to move from store to store, from one neighborhood to another, or from city to city in a discontinuous and unpredictable manner: while the first strikers reach their limit of strength and resources, a new group announces a strike in another place, propelled by videos and reports that spread in real time.

When high labor turnover is the rule, struggles also tend to revolve: within a city, it is common for those on the frontline of an app strike to have never participated in previous struggles. And if this fact hinders a consistent

ing the dismantled rights, the policymakers of the Workers’ Party economic program for 2022 not only acknowledge labor’s loss of form but also echoes iFood executives in “taking the digital platform workers out of regulatory limbo,”¹³⁵ which “doesn’t mean framing them under the old Labor Law but neither leaving as they are today.”¹³⁶

“A new Lula government will mean, at best, that people can continue to work as Uber drivers,”¹³⁷ with a regulated “partnership” between platform and drivers and more “legal security” for the companies. Even though Bolsonaro’s incendiary government provides fertile grounds for the expansion of business, Brazilian food tech does not dismiss the expertise in dialogue and conflict mediation accumulated in the country during “popular democratic” governments. In order to minimize the negative impact of protests on its brand, iFood—which, by the way, celebrates “the goal of diversity and racial and gender inclusion” within its offices¹³⁸—has been recruiting cadres forged in NGO’s and social projects in favelas in order to placate the rebellion of its motorized “partners.”¹³⁹ Throughout 2021, couriers involved in strikes throughout the country were sought out by a “community manager” hired by the company, yet it was not so as to meet their demands but to engage in *dialogue*, announcing the organization of a “Delivery Worker’s Forum”¹⁴⁰ with digital influencers and alleged strike leaders in the finest style of participatory conferences from yesterday’s Brazil.

A return of the former metalworker to the presidential palace would not signify a moment of national reconstruction, but a chance to bury the wreckage and consolidate new terrains for accumulation in the country; in other words, to normalize the disaster by giving it the taste of victory—and, for that reason, making it “more perfect than would ever be possible under a conservative politician.”¹⁴¹ The expectations for the 2022 elections thus deepen the state of waiting of the big left wing parties and small collectives, which during the pandemic found in the imperative of social isolation the excuse for its political quarantine. In embodying the defense of the public health recommendations, the left conformed itself to the reality of the remote work, in a paralyzing wait with diminished expectations: the wait for the daily count of the dead, hoping for the fall of the contamination numbers; the wait for the arrival of the vaccines to Brazil, followed by the wait—and the dispute¹⁴²—for a place in the line; the wait for the end of the “Bozo government,” animated by each new deadlock with the Supreme Court or testimony in the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry about the pandemic management; in

short, the wait for the worst to pass and for everything to go back to being slightly less bad, *like before*. By mid 2021, with the slackening of the pandemic this inert hope left the nest and became an aerial photograph. However, if the left wing parades demonstrated the scale of the president's disapproval in the main cities of the country, they also made the impotence of this opposition flagrant. After gathering hundreds of thousands of people, the rallies gradually dwindled as they entered into the holding pattern of the organizing entities.

The lethargy of the left contrasts with the insurgency of the far-right, which feeds on the mobilization of those who no longer harbor any hopes. And if it is not possible to rule out an unexpected victory of Bolsonaro in the ballots, neither one can dismiss the threats of a rupture of the institutional order, always postponed in order to keep its militancy in an almost paranoid readiness while keeping the opposition on a defensive stance, hypnotized by the imminence of a decisive coup that never comes. Politics remains in a trance, in an eternal preparation for a conflict that never erupts, which is, in itself, already a war tactic in the arsenal of "hybrid" management of territories and populations.

Even though relying only on the same ever faithful crowd, the Bolsonarist demonstrations of September 7th, Brazil's Independence Day, represented less a sign of impotence¹⁴³ than a testing ground for military mobilization exercises. In the dawn of the following day, when the highways of fifteen states of the country were blocked by truckers—which, until this point had proven incapable of sustaining a movement around the freight and fuel prices, attesting to the considerable support for the President's strategic offensive against electronic ballots and the Supreme Court¹⁴⁴—the government was forced to recognize that the call was nothing but a dress rehearsal, provoking the rage of many protesters and displaying a glimpse of a Bolsonarism that already goes beyond Bolsonaro himself. Whether inside or outside of the State, whether commanded by the captain or not, "the revolution through which we are living"¹⁴⁵—which "positions violence, and the use of armed strength, as an essential political resource"—will make itself felt well beyond 2022, as in the almost surrealist scenes of the assault on the United States Capitol and other state legislative houses after Donald Trump's defeat.¹⁴⁶

Scheduled for September 11, a new national strike of app delivery has come to be confused with the news of the truckers' strike—less because of the support for the president than because of the significance that the last

major strike of that other central category of the logistics sector acquired in the imaginary of the motorcycle couriers.¹⁴⁷ Without the same repercussions as the previous year's App Strike, the 2021 strike lingered, here and there, beyond the scheduled date. In a beverage distribution company of the app Zé Delivery, in the south zone of São Paulo, riders decided to start the strike two days earlier to demand late payments.¹⁴⁸ And in São José dos Campos, in the countryside of São Paulo, the delivery drivers remained on strike for the next five days, in the longest app strike the country had yet seen.¹⁴⁹

Inspired by a video in which motorcycle couriers from the capital city enacted step by step "how to pickett a shopping mall,"¹⁵⁰ the deliverers in the state's fifth largest municipality split into small groups to blockade the city's major establishments, while others circulated on the streets to intercept scabs, as well as distribute water and food to the strikers. Each night, everyone gathered in a square to discuss the directions of the movement and vote on whether to continue the strike. While a smaller app, new to the city, gave in to the pressure by announcing an increase in fees, iFood organized a counter-offensive and promised a meeting to the local leaders, through one of its "community mediators." The news that the largest food delivery platform in Latin America had opened a negotiation—however limited—in the face of the heroic persistence of the "three hundred from São José dos Campos," as memes on the motorcycle couriers' networks portrayed it, gave that defeat the taste of victory and turned it into an example for onlookers. In the following weeks, the hinterlands of São Paulo were swept by an uncoordinated sequence of strikes, which would continue for several days in Jundiaí, Paulínia, Bauru, Rio Claro, São Carlos and Atibaia.¹⁵¹

In the tense moments that marked the end of the mobilization in São José dos Campos, however, the promises of dialogue were combined with another iFood negotiation with local restaurant owners and logistics operators that, in a threatening tone, sent a message to the couriers that the continuity of the movement could lead to "acts of violence" in the city.¹⁵² By resorting at once to participationist and militia-like demobilization strategies, Brazil's largest delivery app hints at the future of the country between Lula and Bolsonaro—or simply reminds us that *pelegos* [sheepskins, union bureaucrats] and *jagunços* [henchmen, roughnecks] have always crossed paths in the greyzone of popular intermediators.¹⁵³