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Who serves who serves you?

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Abstract

In contemporary society, the service has taken up more and more space and, although part of its value is still linked to productive work, it is already possible to see that the field of non-productive and reproductive work begins to absorb a significant part of the social workforce.

This process has generated, on the one hand, a demand for professionals able to design good services and, on the other hand, the precariousness of the work of service providers. This article aims to present a reflection on the relationship between these two categories of professionals: those who design and those who execute the service, both working class specimens, but different in their interests and working conditions. Thus, this work brings provocations that can be condensed into a single question: What is the role of the Service Designer in the face of the precariousness of the work of service providers?

Keywords: Service, work relationship, precariousness of work, *uberization*.

Introduction

All around the world, it is quite common for Service Designers to treat the expression that names their profession as an element detached from the productive and economic world and, thus, avoid relating it to the production chain. This is, in fact, a common practice in other areas of human activity that, although they are linked to the economic production chain, focus their reflections and practices in elements that are positioned far from this economic way. This is what happens, for example, with the HR area, which is more dedicated to thinking about psychology and elements of human behaviour than about the economic and social impact of recruitment processes and the management of the so-called reserve army (or "industrial reserve

army", a concept by the German philosopher, Karl Marx, in '*The Capital*' and describes the importance of the unemployed in wage regulation).

In Service Design case, what is seen are reflections linked to the practice of Design as an approach – in attention to the second part of the concept – than those linked to the term "service", which if thought in economic terms, could answer (or, at least bring the doubt about) some questions: What is Service? What impact does the process of expanding the service's spheres of action have on everyday social life? And, finally, how does the service sector organize its productive force? Being the latter one more provocative and important, being, among other things, an invitation to think about the working conditions of workers in the service sector, those who, in most cases, are directly impacted by the result of a Service Designer's work, despite not always being its target.

This essay aims to bring provocative reflections about the role of the service designer - often also precarious workers - in improving the working conditions process of today's service providers[1]. Based on *comparative* analysis of important service workers resistance acts around the world, specially in Brazil, in what became know "Bréque do app" (Apps break, in literal translate), at the end of this work, it is intended that the reader reflects on the role of the service designer in an attempt to reconcile antagonistic interests (between organisations and workers) and that, in the limit, are represented by the dichotomy between work and capital.

The service worker situation

As it is not the object of interest of the present work, we will assume that the sedimentation of services in the spheres of non-productive and reproductive[2] work meant the expansion of the possibility of creating value-added[3], pushing these

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[1] Although the material conditions of working class can have some differences, the working class condition, i.e., the practice of changing the workforce for money, under Surplus-value rules, is common for workers all around the world, according to Marx.

[2] In Marx, productive work is the one that has the capacity to generate (exchange) value to the commodity throughout the production process. On the other hand, unproductive work is is separated from the production chain, in the sense that it does not impact the process of generating value-added along the productive chain.

[3] The complete cycle of the production chain consists of production, consumption, distribution and circulation. According to Karl Marx's theory of value, the final value of the product (exchange value) includes all the costs necessary to enable the complete closing of the cycle, added the profit. Thus, when paying for a product, the buyer pays proportionally for all the cost generated in the chain: machine for production, maintenance of the machine, worker's salary, etc., every cost is proportionally inserted in the product's exchange-value, which we can call here final value. This means that each activity carried out along the production chain generates value and this value generation process is what we call value-added.

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activities to the range of activities that generate value in the production cycle. This means expanding the role of capital in the economic activities.

However, this expansion process requires more attractive and appropriate service offers to the consumer. Hence, it is possible to deduce 3 premises, two pessimistic and one optimistic:

a) The optimistic one is that the need for greater adequacy of the offer to the consumer demanded the development of an ideology and a structure capable of *understanding-to-meet* the human need, which has generated more humanized services;

b) The second one, not so optimistic, is that when developing an empathetic look to create more attractive services in order to increase profit, what has been witnessed is the transformation of human emotional needs into merchandise. In other words, the commodification of the feelings. Hence, the importance of reflecting on the construction of an empathetic relationship with everyone whom is involved with an organization and its operation and not just with those who pay the bills;

c) The last premise, which most clearly carries the contradiction between work and Capital, is related to the importance of including services worker's in the Design processes, not only in co-creative sessions, but deeply, in a sense of welcoming their needs and improve their everyday life. They are the ones who are in direct contact with the user and know their needs. These workers know the processes that users of a service go through. In other words, they are the link between a demand and a supply, a pain and a pain reliever, between the organization and its users. Furthermore, it would be a contradiction to say "human-centered design" and not consider all involved humans at the service to put them at "center".

It is based on the last two premises that we will develop the reflection from here, focusing on the service worker and try to demonstrate that service designers can contribute to improve services but the working class conditions too.

It is not uncommon for workers to collaborate on Service Design projects with data (in interviews, service safaris, etc.) or with ideas (during co-creation workshops). In this process, the Service Designer tends to establish empathetic relationships and be considerate with these workers. In addition, it is common for the project to conclude with training notes and incentives for customer service workers to develop friendly communication and patient care for consumers.

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But it seems, from the point of view of the project and its implementation, that is where the interest about the worker participation finishes. Because, although the co-participation take more and more place on creative processes, at the end of the day, the organizations has looking less and less to worker welfare and their career. On the contrary, what has been witnessed throughout the world is a process of flexibilization of rights and economic insecurity, whose effects are known as "precariousness of work", pushing them to form a social group known as the "*precariat*".

This is a cruel process that affects, in particular, workers from peripheral economy countries or their natives, even – and specially - when they are providing services in central countries.

In the United Kingdom, for example, it started the adoption of the so-called *zero hour contract*, in which the employer is not obliged to provide a minimum of working hours and the worker is hired only for the hours that are necessary, which generates social and economic insecurity. The number of employees in this modality has grown: In 2008, 0.8% of workers in the United Kingdom were hired under the *zero hour contract* model. In the current year, the number has risen to 3.2% of workers, what means more than a million workers (Leaker, 2022), been the immigrants most affected.

Because the increase, governments have tried to adopt measures to try to limit damages to workers, for example: to extend the same rights as regular workers to these workers, to prohibit contract exclusivity clauses (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - United Kingdom, 2015), among others. Despite that, the *zero hour contract* continues to be described as a "non-legal term used to describe many different types of casual agreements between an employer and an individual." (DBEIS-UK, 2015).

But in this withdrawal wake of workers' rights, the UK is not alone. Italy has established the *voucher payment system*[4], according to which there is no commitment on the part of the employer to the social security of its employee and "employees receive a voucher for the hours worked, which they exchange for a monetary equivalent. (...)" (Antunes, 2018, p. 35). The same process is common in Portugal, under the name "*Recibo Verde*"[5] (*Green Receipt*, in a free translation), in which the worker is framed as a service provider, without a bond and without subordination, at least in theory.

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[4] In some cases, the worker is paid without a voucher declaration, but at an even lower price, in a system of illegal precariousness that works in conjunction with legal precariousness.
[5] The name refers to the invoice sheet color that was issued before the process was digitized.

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That is a trend on the current stage of capitalism and, in Brazil, a similar contracting model is called "*pejotização*", a word created from the acronyms PJ[6] and which designates the opening of a company (or micro-enterprise) by the worker who starts to provide services as an outsourced organization. In this work model, the worker becomes an entrepreneur with a single client, representing "a mixture of the bourgeois-in-itself and the proletarian-in-itself" (Antunes, 2018, p. 34). There is still the creation of the figure of the "fixed freelancer", a freelancer who offers his services on a permanent basis, with the same routine as those hired, however, without enjoying the same rights or rituals.

All these contracting modalities fit into the *just-in-time* philosophy, promoted by the *flexible accumulation* regime that, in the context of the oil crises of the 1970's, came after the Fordism production model and became known as *Toyotism* (Harvey, 1989).

These flexibilization examples and loss of economic and social security brought by the process of expansion of the productive model known as flexible accumulation do not exhaust the list of cruel practices necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist regime. These practices reach their apex in the activities that, under the false guise of the so-called "shared" economy (Kaplan, 2013), mediate services offered through digital platforms known as "applications". The practice reached notoriety due to the massive expansion and consequent growth of the Uber, which "workers in their cars, i.e, with their work instruments, bear their insurance expenses, with the expenses of maintenance of vehicles, food, cleaning, etc., while the 'application' – in fact, a global wage company disguised in the form of unregulated work – appropriates the *Surplus-value* generated for the service of the drivers (...)." (Antunes, 2018, p. 35). Being Uber on the avant-garde in this process and given its growth (also in the users' imagination), the process of similar hiring became known as "uberization"[7].

It is important to note that the *uberization* dialogues broadly with the *zero hour contract* and with Brazilian "*pejotização*" insofar as, on the one hand, employees only receive when they work and, on the other hand, employers do not assume any responsibility for workers social security, in a regime of *value-added* generation from the intensification of the use of the alien workforce, in a process known as *surplus-value*.

It is ironic to note that, precisely at a time when there is a concern with humanizing consumer relationships, precisely those who were responsible for the humanized care, are subjected to a dehumanized work process, transforming their lives into a

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[6] Corresponding to *Legal Entity* – so, the translate could be something like "*L.E.tization*".
[7] Also known as "*uberization* of the work".

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pain-filled journey – to use common service design terms. And all of this is happening with Designers acceptance, if not with their support.

Well, if the material world is hard, the symbolic world needs to be soft. In this way, to reduce the feeling of social insecurity and smooth out the cruelty, organizations have sought to soften working relationships, creating an intense and perennial process of the lexical renewal and, this way, "workers" or "proletarians" become "collaborators" and the long working hours can be called "resilience" or "collaboration". However, this effort is not enough to attenuate the resistance of these service workers who create mechanisms – silent or not – to promote the struggle for their interests or, at least, to express their dissatisfaction and that's what we're going to see.

The service worker struggle

To express their dissatisfaction and circumvent the needs arising from the intense exploitation of their workforce, workers in the service sector have found different ways around the world.

Some of them go through pranks, sabotage and petty crimes and that almost always have the first symptom in poor ways to attendance. But these are not the forms of resistance that will be addressed here. Instead, we will devote our attention to groups of workers who, together, seek a way to expand rights and resist the terrible working conditions in a legal form, through collective actions and leaving a trail of political impacts for brands.

In Italy (where vouchers are applied) there's a movement that, in a good mood terms, appropriates the wide religiosity of that country to create the figure of San Precario[8], a fictional saint who symbolizes the movement and occupy the status of "Patron of dumped, poor, underemployed, exploited and blackmailed. http://Co.Co.Co, undocumented and temporary hired. For a while also GigaWorkers.[9]" (San Precario movement, 2009). The character received a "prayer" in its honour, published in a satiric religious flyer available for download in a suitable file for reprints on the group's website.

Another movement in Italy and spread around the world is the *Clash City Workers[10]*, which according to Ricardo Antunes:

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[8] To know more about San Precario, please consult: Vanni, I. "Precarious objects: Activism and Design in Italy."
[9] Probably refers to "Gig Workers", which designates digital platform workers and temporary hired ones.
[10] There are evidences this name was inspired by a song by the band *The Clash*, called *Clash City Rockers*.

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> Clash City Workers is a collective of unemployed and unemployed workers, called 'precarious youth'. (...) Born in mid-2009, we are active particularly in Naples, Rome, Florence, Padua, Milan and Bergamo and we seek to continue sustaining the struggles that are ongoing in Italy. (Antunes, 2018. p. 36).

But wherever precarization arrives, the resistance starts, even (or mainly) in developing countries[11]. In Brazil, in 2020, the digital food delivery platforms witnessed a national shutdown, which included an appeal to service users not to order food on that day, forcing a massive reduction in activities (and consequent decrease in revenue) from these platforms. The Brazilian movement, called "*Breque dos apps*", was so big that "Gathered in dozens of WhatsApp groups, workers shared testimonies of delivery people who must join the movement in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay." (Soprana, 2020).

This case of resistance in Brazil was quite emblematic because one of the largest companies in the business of ordering meals through digital platforms – iFood – was involved in a scandalous counterattack against the movements: unsigned advertising, boosting false pages and posts, impersonating delivery men and spreading the causes of struggle. The movement, despite its momentary strength, was diluted amidst the various banners that were covertly raised by an advertising agency hired by iFood, to what became known as "Marketing 4.0" (Levi, 2022), being this counterattack conceived and carried out for marketing and design professionals.

These cases can illustrate that, in the process of expanding services to non-productive activities, there is a conflict. A conflict that is not as veiled as it seems and, from time to time, emerges in the news around the world. The reflection intended here is one that makes us able to answer the following question: what is the role of Service Design - and, by extension, of the service **designer** - in this process of creating experience in an environment permeated by the antagonism of interest between companies and their workers?

It seems clear conciliation between workers and organizations is not always possible and that companies, forgetting that their workers are also their users, seem not to be concerned about the importance of building the relationship with their workers in the same empathetic way they pay us to build with their users. In Brazil (and how we could see in some other countries) we designers have failed to improve workers conditions and, this way, we have being ideologically far from our social class (the working class) and at dominant classes services. Could we do differently?

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[11] According Edward Palmer Thompson, even the injustices need do seem fair. When not, workers will show resistance. For more, please consult: *Whigs and Hunters: the origin of Black Act*.

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Certainly, in our environment, there is opportunities to improve the experience of those who buy (in spite of saying: strictly while they are shopping). But does that mean that we really have the same opportunity to improve people's lives? Is it possible, with Service Design, to transform the world?

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