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## Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age

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*Published in:*  
Critical sociology

*Publication date:*  
2023

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Christiaens, T. (2023). Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age: A Comparative Perspective" (Donatella Della Porta, Riccardo Emilio Chesta & Lorenzo Cini). *Critical sociology*, 49(7-8), 1352-1355.

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Much of Marx's theoretical corpus consists of critical commentary and a large part of it is written in a polemical context. For instance, the 1842 debates on press censorship and the wood theft law were built on the legal-political language of the time which served for Marx to reveal the internal contradictions of social power relations of the time. Marx found the stylistically appropriate tool in parodies in that regard.

Silva is particularly taken by Marx's favorite literary figure, namely chiasmus: 'Weapons of critique and critique of weapons', 'the century that belonged to the principle and not the principle that belonged to the century', and finally 'the alienation of activity and the activity of alienation'. Silva contends that this colorful language exemplifies characteristic features of Marx's preoccupation with social antagonisms and contradictory flux of things.

Silva also pays considerable attention to the famous metaphors of basis and superstructure in the *German Ideology*. Unconvinced by the orthodox Marxist (mis)interpretation of the terms as scientific concepts, Silva asserts that one should take them as metaphors seriously. For only as metaphors, they have heuristic value in grasping the interrelations between political power structures, ideological struggles, and economic classes. The reason that basis and superstructure are no scientific concepts is that upon further scrutiny, they reveal themselves to be inconsistent when applied back to architecture. Common assumption suggests that superstructure refers to the upper part of a building while the basis signifies the rest of it. Silva, by contrast, points out that the whole corpus is one single structure. This point is more than obvious, one could say. Yet, Silva is alerted by the theoretical misconception according to which superstructure represents an atomized ministry in charge of ideological affairs, while the basis supposedly refers to an economic department isolated from its corresponding politics. What is more plausible to Silva is that economic 'basis' is at best the skeleton, while ideological 'superstructure' is the cement of a society.

This brings Silva to another problematic metaphor: reflection. What stands and falls with this figure is an inserted passivity, forced upon human subjectivity. The debates on reflection are as old as Lenin's famous plea for a Marxist theory of reflection in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Yet Silva warns that one should beware the overt generalizations of the term, as it threatens to do violence to much of the theoretical core of Marxism: human subjectivity, productive activity, and the self-agency of the working class. People can be plausibly said to be products of their time. Similarly, dominant ideas can be viewed, to some extent, as 'reflections' of inter-class relations of a society. But lived experience is obviously more than a passive reflection of the material infrastructure of that society.

The book is a useful guide for beginner and advanced students of Marx and Marxism. Despite its thin size, it provides a refreshing insight into Marx's poetic blood, flowing through the practical heart and theoretical brain of the great master.

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*Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age: A Comparative Perspective* by Donatella Della Porta, Riccardo Emilio Chesta and Lorenzo Cini. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023, 166 pp, £80.00, ISBN: 9781529228243.

As long as there has been a political Left, there have been analyses of the so-called 'crisis of the Left'. For a movement aimed at forging human liberation in the future, it is paradoxical how often left-wing thinkers fetishize opportunities for emancipation in unrealised possibilities from the past.

Today's recurrent nostalgia for Fordist society and the *trentes glorieuses*, for example, voices a longing for the days when the industrial working class still existed as a powerful and well-defined political agent and people could still count on a job-for-life. While the firm securities of Fordism are tempting in an era of liquid modernity and the corrosion of character, nostalgia is rarely a recipe for political success. As Wendy Brown observes, 'Left melancholy is Benjamin's unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present' (Brown, 1999: 20). On the other hand, the champions of post-Fordism have sometimes too quickly announced the death of traditional labour activism and established unions in favour of ephemeral transnational social movements. While André Gorz said farewell to the working class and Ulrich Beck welcomed the subpolitics of global risk society, worker uprisings at companies like Amazon and Foxconn have shown the persistence of traditional working-class concerns in digital capitalism. Replacing the working class and union activism with postmodern identities and social movements might broaden the political imagination of the Left, but if taken to its extremes, this choice underestimates the continued importance of working-class concerns and the persistence of old-school labour exploitation in today's seemingly futuristic settings. Rather than lamenting the fact that things are no longer as they used to be or rejoicing at opaque visions of utopian futures, the Left should focus on decoding the conjuncture of the present.

The digitalisation of work and the gig economy provide a new arena for the oscillation between left melancholy and utopian enthusiasm. Some researchers push for traditional government regulation, union activism, and collective bargaining; others put their hopes in innovative projects like platform cooperativism or fully automated luxury communism (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2020; Bastani, 2020; Christiaens, 2022; Pasquale, 2020; Scholz, 2017). *Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age* by Della Porta, Chesta, and Cini intervenes in this debate by arguing that a combination of both attitudes fits best with the current conjuncture of the digital economy. Rather than longing for the Fordist past or jumping towards a nebulous future, they develop a theory of labour unrest that combines insights from industrial relations theory and social movement studies to explore the political challenges and opportunities of the present *sine ira et studio*. In their view, industrial relations theory has been too accepting of the aforementioned nostalgia, whereas social movement studies has too quickly dismissed labour conflicts as a relic of the past. The digital gig economy manifests simultaneously continuous and discontinuous features compared to the traditional workplace: while techniques of algorithmic management are often mere updates of traditional Taylorism, digitalisation also provides new grounds for labour organising.

The book bases its findings on a comparative study of workplace organisation among food-delivery couriers and crowdworkers, as well as a wealth of literature on collective action in the digital gig economy from different disciplines. It elaborates a theory of labour unrest in the digital gig economy that perfects the multiple strands of research Della Porta, Chesta, and Cini have individually developed in previous research articles. On the level of challenges, a highlight of the book is its concise presentation of workforce fragmentation in the gig economy. On the legal front, platform companies are notorious for classifying their workers as independent contractors rather than employees. Second, meticulous techniques of algorithmic management hide managerial interventions behind a technological veil. Workers rarely encounter a human boss at whom they could direct their anger. The labour process is, rather, managed through opaque and anonymous algorithmic decisions. Third, from an organisational perspective, platforms maintain digital reputation systems that incentivise gig workers to continuously try to please the algorithm. The only way to make their gig career sustainable is to maximise their ratings, whereas those who 'underperform' risk deactivation. Fourth, some gig workers suffer spatial work delocalisation. Especially crowdworkers on platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk are dispersed across the globe. They rarely

meet their co-workers in offline contexts, making it difficult to organise collectively. There is, fifthly, major heterogeneity within the workforce that hinders political action. Whereas the industrial working class used to be homogeneous in terms of social backgrounds and lifestyles, the gig economy mostly absorbs workers who do not fit in the traditional labour market: migrants who do not speak the local language, students looking for a hobby, the unemployed in search of some temporary income, and so on.

While the drivers of workforce fragmentation are considerable, collective action is not impossible in the gig economy. Workers have been able to secure political victories by organising online, in indie unions, or with more established trade unions. *Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age* turns to social movement studies to enhance the industrial relations research on worker mobilisation. Della Porta, Chesta, and Cini thereby expand the range of explanatory factors relevant to collective action in the gig economy. Just like the Fordist factory produced certain social and political conditions conducive to a particular form of struggle (the mass strike) and a particular organisational form (the trade-union), the digital gig economy produces new conditions leading to new struggles. The shift from the homogeneous working class of the factory to the fragmented workforce of the gig economy is hence not a mere history of decline but a change in the political conjuncture shifting the range of potential strategies and tactics. The book brilliantly highlights how a dynamic interplay between online and offline spaces of communication serves as the organisation infrastructure of workers' activism. Gig workers often first meet online through WhatsApp-groups or Reddit-pages to make sense of platforms' algorithmic decision-making or provide information to each other, but these online communities often evolve into practical networks of political solidarity. When such processes link up with external activist networks and tap into pre-existing national cultures of labour protests, these online communities nurture for offline activist movements.

An important theoretical contribution the book makes, in this regard, is that struggle itself can be an immediate educational step towards further collective action. As Alessandro Pizzorno noted in 1970s Italy, collective interests do not exist objectively beyond intersubjective group identities. One must first form a collective with a common identity and shared aspirations and sufferings, before representative institutions, like trade-unions, can claim to defend the common interests of that group. In Pizzorno's social theory, worker struggles are hence, in the first place, struggles for recognition of a shared fate before they are pursuits of a pre-existing objective interest. This explains a curious phenomenon we see today in the gig economy: the more gig workers organise for better working conditions, the more they develop a common identity as a distinct social group entitled to particular rights and protections. Through workplace conflict gig workers become a class for itself able to articulate what its common goals and interests are.

However, the book still leaves us with a central organisational enigma. While it describes the emergence of worker uprisings in the gig economy and urges readers to 'go beyond the study of the union form' (p. 122), the authors remain silent on the strategic question of which organisational form would suit the age of platform capitalism. Spontaneist upsurges of gig worker struggles can achieve momentary victories, but these sometimes devolve into mere symbolism when, months later, platform companies dismantle these victories with a single update of the app's terms and conditions. Established union activism, on the other hand, can enforce stable improvements, but they sometimes drain the combative energy out of workers in favour of pacified procedures of collective bargaining. In an interview, Maurizio Lazzarato asks,

why have we not found an organisational form that can stabilise all these political energies? There are numerous movements, organisations for women, precarious workers, civil servants, etc., but sooner or later they all have to find an answer to the question of the war machine. (Lazzarato et al., 2017: 142)

The question of the war machine still remains: we need to imagine institutional forms that can both fuel and maintain the political energies of today's anti-capitalist forces. Experiments like platform cooperatives or innovative indie unions are helpful attempts in this venture, but most of the work for a political theory of strategy on the Left is still unfinished.

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