Why and How Precarious Workers Support Neo-Illiberalism

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Introduction

Dani Silva, 30, is an Uber driver who drives his car 12 hours a day and lives in one of the poor peripheral zones of a large Brazilian city. Like many other male platform drivers, Silva strikes up a conversation with his passengers as soon as they sit in his car, on topics ranging from poor road conditions and traffic to the political affairs of the country and rampant corruption. At times he also expresses his displeasure at the poor receiving social welfare benefits from the government and 'becoming lazy.' He voted for Bolsonaro in 2018 to 'change everything that is wrong', from moral values to urban violence. In 2022, as these 'wrong things' had not changed significantly enough to improve his life, he stuck with Bolsonaro, with the justification that 'at least he is better than the communists.' Silva is an actual research subject from a previous project of mine, but he is also the embodiment of ordinary people in Brazil – a platform-based gig worker who votes for the far right. Not an isolated case, his story is symptomatic of a wider process, particularly strong in the Global South, where a huge percentage of precarious workers – or low-income people just above the poverty line – support authoritarian politicians.

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The worker who rejects a working-class identity or identifies with the upper classes is not a novel political phenomenon[1]. Yet, we need fresh lenses to understand how such a long-standing issue is being transformed in times of growing platformization. In this paper, I use statistical data and ethnographic evidence from three different research projects conducted over the last twenty-three years in Brazil. I focus on the reactionary political manifestation amidst labour precarity and, more specifically, on platform economy labour. I will discuss the Brazilian field site, but similar cases can be observed in other countries, especially in emerging economies from the Global South, like India and the Philippines. Recent scholarship on these countries has demonstrated that certain economic strata – that have been raised from poverty but remain in precarity – tend to vote for authoritarian leaders (Caspile, 2016; Heydarian, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2013; 2015; 2016; Kaur, 2014; Lero, 2023; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020; Richmond, 2020). Building upon this finding, I have two aims in this paper. First, I examine how precarious workers in Brazil have developed political alignments with neo-illiberal worldviews. Second, and more important, I analyze how populist co-optation, combined with the algorithmic digital economy, has accelerated such an alignment with the far right.

To explore the nexus between labour precariousness and authoritarianism, this paper examines a specific segment of voters: low-income people above the poverty line, with unstable employment, in the informal economy, in debt, working in gig employment, in an increasingly platform-based economy. Representing a large part of the population pyramid in emerging economies, they are the product of 21st-century economic growth. Unlike developed countries' deteriorating working classes – the Brexiter or Trumpist 'left behind', 'declining middle,' or 'globalization loser' (Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, and Krouwel, 2017; Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann, 2012; Kriesi, 2018; Goodwin and Heath, 2016) – these people have experienced some sort of upward mobility or material comfort, and have been labelled as the new/neo

1 This has been a foundational and well-documented debate in social sciences at least since the publishing of Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* (1965 [1846]) and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1963 [1852]).

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middle class or the New Class C. These sectors are consumer-driven and characterized by entrepreneurial and material aspirations. But they remain vulnerable to economic shocks. They experience a contradiction between an aspirational identity that despises any label that associates them with poverty, and a deep resentment of the fact that they do not get social benefits. They distrust the state and are frustrated by financial insecurity, everyday violence, and corruption.

In line with this volume's purpose, this paper seeks to raise awareness about the fact that to achieve a more nuanced diagnosis of the rise of global authoritarianism, debates about economic policy and performance for sustainable democracy should necessarily address these emerging sectors that represent an aspirational precariat in the Global South. These groups not only represent a large part of the global population, but also constitute that section of the demography where the far right has been gaining a major foothold. In order to advance our knowledge of neo-illiberalism in the 21st century, it is imperative to take precarity seriously.

Methodological note

The arguments raised here stem from three ethnographic research projects conducted over the last two decades (from 1999 onwards). These projects have all analyzed the political manifestations of economic activities in contexts of labour precarity in several countries from the Global South, especially Brazil. In my first research project (1999–2008, 2014)[2], I investigated aspirations, competition, and 'self-exploitation' in an informal street market in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil (see Pinheiro-Machado, 2017). Afterwards, my research partner, Lucia Mury Scalco, and I conducted an investigation (2009–2018) into the political consequences of inclusion through consumption policies, and how this process impacted growing support for former president Jair Bolsonaro (president from 2019 to 2022) among low-income groups in Brazil (see Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020). Building upon the findings of

2 This research project was funded by The Wenner-Gren Foundation. Research for this project was also conducted in Paraguay and China.

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these two long-term projects, my current project (2023–2027)[3] relies on ethnographic research and computational approaches to follow low-income people who are engaged in the digital economy and observe how they are impacted by social media influencers who have large numbers of followers on Instagram (more than 500,000) and post content about work, investments, and politics. This aims to investigate the nexus between labour precarity and authoritarian politics in Brazil, India, and the Philippines.

My research trajectory amidst highly individualistic and unregulated market settings led me to focus on the ambiguous and even reactionary dimension of neoliberal economic precarity – or what Verónica Gago (2017) calls 'neoliberalism from below'. The following sections argue that neoliberalism from below can easily turn into neo-illiberalism.

Precarious workers and neo-illiberalism in Brazil: An overview

This section examines various pieces of evidence that suggest a strong link between precarious workers and support of illiberal politics in Brazil. Before the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, the progressive Workers' Party (PT), which ruled from 2003 to 2014, had secured its popularity among the poor through the provision of welfare social benefits and poverty reduction policies. However, in the last two presidential elections, in 2018 and 2022, populist Bolsonaro received more votes in all strata above the poverty line, including impoverished segments with household incomes between two and five times the income earned from minimum wages. This is called Class C, which is composed mostly (approximately 60%) of workers with unstable income who live with financial precarity.[4] A 2022 DataFolha survey showed that Bolsonaro had 51% of the votes in this segment (against Lula's 42%)[5]. Class C is the largest economic stratum, representing 95.6 million people out of a total population of 203 million

3 Funded by the European Research Grant, Consolidator Grant. Grant Number 101045738

4 Official data from Pesquisa de Orcamento Familiares, from The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE (2022).

5 Available at https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2022/11/encolhendo-e-em-crise-classe-c-vira-motor-do-bolsonarismo.shtml

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Brazilians. From an electoral point of view, Bolsonaro won in all states where Class C is larger than any other single segment.[6]

In 2019, a dataset from the Mapeo Institute, a privately owned database[7], monitored and tracked data from 2,513 public WhatsApp political groups in Brazil and mapped the most popular clusters of Bolsonaro's support. Beyond the expected clusters of Christian evangelicals and Catholics, and nationalists ('the patriots'), the third biggest cluster was less evident. This was composed of informal traders and sellers who used WhatsApp to sell merchandise and services, but also to spread political content. Following this lead, in 2021 we monitored[8] the social media performance of the hashtags #StayHome and #BrazilCannotStop on Twitter during the pandemic. The first hashtag was promoted by activists, public health advocates, and lockdown supporters. The second one was fostered by the Bolsonaro administration. In April 2020, the message that Brazil could not stop had higher traction on Twitter than lockdown support during the period of our observation. Our analysis of the accounts' bios revealed that Bolsonaro's hashtags were promoted by well-known wealthy businessmen as well as by micro-entrepreneurs. This is an example of how Bolsonaro had populist appeal and could drive home simple and direct messages to masses of informal workers and gig workers who could not conduct their businesses during the pandemic. In addition, Bolsonaro offered an unconditional cash transfer (*Auxilio Emergencial*) to informal workers, micro-entrepreneurs, and low-income people during the pandemic, which further ensured his popularity within this sector of the population.[9]

6 Data from the Consultancy Plano CDE (2022), which classified Class C as having an annual household income of R$ 2,030 to R$ 6,125. Available at https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2022/11/encolhendo-e-em-crise-classe-c-vira-motor-do-bolsonarismo.shtml

7 The Mapeo Institute is a business owned by the computer scientist Diego Dorgam.

8 WorkPoliticsBIP Project (UCD/ERC) in partnership with LABIC, a data center at the Federal University of Espirito Santo (UFES), which is directed by Fabio Malini.

9 The Auxilio Emergencial disbursed during the pandemic was an initiative from civil society, in particular from a group that advocates for Universal Basic Income in Brazil. Bolsonaro initially rejected the idea, but ultimately accepted it, gaining popularity as a result.

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Finally, on January 8, 2023, after Bolsonaro's defeat and Lula's victory in the tightest presidential election in Brazil's democratic history, Bolsonaro supporters invaded the headquarters of the Executive and Justice branches, as well as the National Congress in Brasilia, in a coup attempt that called for military intervention. Data from the Federal Prosecution Ministry[10] showed that 50% of the 1,149 people who were detained by the police on that day were people who received *Auxilio Emergencial*. In terms of demographics, 60% of protestors were men in the age range between 36 and 55 years. All in all, this paper draws attention to the fact that although Bolsonaro gets more votes as the indicators of education and income increase, diversified sociological data suggest that Class C – composed of informal workers and evangelicals – constitutes the ideological hardcore base of Bolsonarism (see also Barlach and Mendes, 2022).

The politics of Uberization

Lavinas (2017) points out that the first term of the Workers' Party (PT) administration (2003–2014) did not reduce the heavy tax burden on Brazilians nor did it break away from a neoliberal macroeconomic regime. Despite this, the PT era adopted redistribution policies that profoundly transformed Brazil. One of the main legacies of the PT's first term was raising 40 million people out of poverty and lifting them into the so-called new middle class or the New Class C, a phenomenon that promised a bright national future (Neri, 2013). Some analysts and scholars suggest that the amount of poverty reduction was overestimated by official data, but it is irrefutable that the lives of the poor significantly improved in the 2000s as a vast segment of the population gained access to the financial system and to mass consumption. In 2010, Brazil reached its peak economic growth rate at 7.5% GDP growth. The government's focus on 'inclusion through consumption' transformed millions of people into new consumers. One of the negative consequences of this market-oriented form of inclusion was to nullify the party's previous collective and participatory mobilization mechanisms. There is still an ongoing debate about the political impact

10 https://www.poder360.com.br/justica/metade-dos-presos-pelo-8-de-janeiro-receberam-auxilio-diz-mpf/

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of such a national push on the poor. Yet, there seems to be a consensus that financialization and mass consumption inevitably bring about individualization and depoliticization.[11]

Brazil's economy resisted the global recession that began in 2007, but by 2014 the country entered a phase marked by deep economic decline. This process coincided with the beginning of a political crisis that was animated by far-right demonstrations and a massive media campaign against corruption within the PT. President Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 when Brazil was facing a period distinguished by a political vacuum. We resumed our fieldwork in a low-income community in Porto Alegre at the end of that year. If our research interlocutors were developing new aspirations and enjoying a more comfortable life because of finance and consumption opportunities gained between 2009 and 2014, they were now heavily indebted and frustrated, particularly the males in the community. Teenage boys who represented the future of the country – the children of the new consumers – became young adults amidst a multidimensional crisis marked by financial insecurity, hardship, and unemployment. A few years before this, these young men were enjoying partying at funk balls and worried about buying Nike caps, but as they reached their 20s, they became conservative fathers, concerned with their obligations as breadwinners. It is worth mentioning that these groups did not experience significant upward mobility during the economic boom nor downward mobility during the crisis. Yet, the perception of loss within a short period of time was huge. It is also revealing that male voters attributed their previously attained new, better lives to their own efforts and merits, and not to PT's fiscal policies. Paradoxically, they attributed their subsequent failures to Lula, as leader of PT (see Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020).

Uber started its operations in Brazil in 2014, precisely during the beginning of the economic and political crisis. The corporation was the first ride-hailing platform to operate on a large scale in the country. For many of our male interlocutors, Uber became not only their main source

11 Although I do not disagree with that premise, depoliticization is a nuanced process, which occurs alongside new forms of politicization, and is more focused on female empowerment and de-subalternation (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2023).

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of income, but also an opportunity to have a more decent job, which was perceived by them as a form of self-employment and entrepreneurship. Having had a life trajectory marked by racism, exclusion, and humiliation, entrepreneurship was a dignifying label for many of our interlocutors who had never had good jobs. For these men, the incentives for using the ride-hailing platforms were to buy a car, own their first property, and work in an air-conditioned environment. The negative side was having to work in isolation during long journeys and for 12–15-hour days. Platform workers have a labour-intensive routine marked by isolation, physical exhaustion, hunger, pressure, and mental suffering (Crouch, 2019; Grohmann et al., 2022; Ramos, 2023). Yet instead of complaining about being exploited by platform corporations, our interlocutors glorified their labour-intensive regimes through their individual mystification of hard work. This new perceived identity was built in stark contrast to that of their neighbours and old friends who qualified for and received social welfare benefits from the government or were supposedly linked to the local drug trafficking faction. This process quickly evolved to villainization of certain groups, considered *vagabudos*[12], meaning people who supposedly have easy income for being lazy or criminals (see Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020).

This far-right populism conquered the minds of low-income, adult, male workers. From 2016 onwards, with Brazil still in the middle of an economic and political crisis, it offered an extremist and discriminatory narrative that could be used against the poor and minorities who were taking government 'handouts', but could be encouraging at the individual level. Bolsonarism was a movement that self-identified as neoliberal at the economic level and conservative in cultural aspects. From an economic point of view, the movement that orbited around the candidate valued entrepreneurship and hyper-individualism as a route to success, and relied on a simplistic logic that the workers who work hard win, and that the state should not intervene at any level of economic life. So, when low-income, far-right supporters failed to make money, as they had been

12 The meaning of the word *vabagundo* is different from the English word vagabond, as explained in the text.

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promised they would as by working hard, they turned to villainization of the poor to explain this failure.

One of the most perverse results of far-right radicalization was an increase in the stigmatization of poverty and the destruction of collective identities of low-income people who live in impoverished zones. Our research shows that precarious male workers bolstered their own identities by demonizing the poor. This process occurred alongside a strong conservative and even fundamentalist religious campaign, promoted especially by Christian evangelicals – the main base of Bolsonaro's support (Almeida, 2017). In this narrative, the hardworking family's breadwinner was threatened by a corrupt government, the lazy poor, and a perverted 'gender ideology'. Bolsonaro's campaign promise to ease access to firearms in Brazil made concrete all these economic and cultural dimensions: a gun would protect the breadwinner from bandits who might steal their few possessions: a cell phone or the car that could be used for work. At the symbolic level, a gun also represents masculinity and power, especially significant in times when there is perceived to be a feminist and LGBTQI+ 'insurgence'. A strongman in power could address this anxiety. All these factors together resemble a process of neo-illiberalism experienced from below, which is a combination of a demand for strong governing authority and weak state intervention.

After he was elected president, Bolsonaro maintained his support among low-income precarious workers through a continuous massive disinformation/misinformation campaign that reinforced the villainization of multiple enemies. As previously mentioned, precarious workers responded positively to Bolsonaro's anti-lockdown position. After the pandemic, in pro-Bolsonaro Instagram accounts I followed for research purposes, I witnessed investor influencers saying (obviously falsely) that the Brazilian economy had been growing steadily during the pandemic, even better than China's economy. For our research subjects, the reality of their lives – which were still in precarity and marked by hardship – was not enough to change their political views. Supporting the far right meant keeping the illusion that working hard in the gig economy would be enough to change their financial lives.

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In the 2022 presidential campaign, we were monitoring platform workers' groups on social media. The qualitative research conducted by Ianaira Neves[13] on platform drivers and delivery workers revealed that their WhatsApp groups, which were supposed to provide support and avoid political content, were fed misinformation by workers who participated in the groups and supported the candidate. The messages suggested, for example, that Uber and other gig-work platforms would leave the country if Lula won. This activated fear and panic in these people, who had reinvented their professional identities after Brazil's boom in the platform economy.

In another data collection exercise, I followed key platform driver influencers on Instagram. These people do not particularly show their political views on their profiles. During the 2022 election, two influencers, with 11,100 and 71,200 followers respectively, asked their followers about their views on Lula's declaration that platforms should be regulated and that workers should get some sort of social protection. I mined the 831 replies to this post. The majority, composing 74% of the replies, rejected the idea of regulation, fiercely opposing labour rights. Lula had suggested that platform workers needed some type of protection against accidents. Yet the followers on Instagram were against the idea, saying that they did not need social protection or pensions since these benefits would increase the fares charged to riders. In an individualistic mode of thinking, the vast majority stated that 'good workers' would save money for accidents and retirement, implying that it is the individual's responsibility to save money for the future. More than the quantitative result, the qualitative analyses showed the most paradigmatic dimension of workers' neo-illiberalism, revealing passionate favourable answers supporting a crude form of free market ideology[14]. The fear of platforms abandoning Brazil was combined

13 This information was conveyed through personal communication and is part of an ongoing PhD thesis at Fundacao Getulio Vargas. Neves is a researcher affiliated with my project WorkPoliticsBIP.

14 Of course this is not homogenous and there is nuance reading between the lines; many comments posted on these Instagram accounts reveal support for revolt against large corporations and poor working conditions.

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with an aspirational ideal – the permanent illusion that they would make money solely on the basis of working hard. In a country where 78.3% of families are in debt[15], these workers believed they would succeed financially by investing their money in cryptocurrency and other forms of investment.

How the digital economy is transforming the politics of informality

In this section, I move away from platform drivers to analyze the political implications of the digital economy. More specifically, I focus on retail sales on Instagram, a social network that had about 1.6 billion users worldwide in 2023. It is estimated that Brazil has 136 million users (equivalent to 70% of the population).[16] A report concluded that 93% of Instagram users[17] access the social media app at least once a day.[18] Selling goods and services on Instagram became a post-pandemic trend in Brazil, and this process is drastically changing the nature of the informal economy, and also having political impacts. In my current research project, I follow both low-income traders whose enterprises are online and the popular accounts these traders follow. These accounts are run by so-called social media influencers who share tips on how to run a business, invest, or keep motivated. Most of these influencers describe themselves as apolitical – but politics and the economic content is usually blurred (Riedl and Woolley, 2023) and support for populists appears indirectly.

It would not be accurate to argue that digital platforms are creating the phenomenon of neoliberalism from below. Verónica Gago's ethnographic

15 Confederação Nacional do Comércio de Bens, Serviços e Turismo (CNC): https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2023-05/endividamento-atinge-783-das-familias-brasileiras-diz-cnc

16 See Datareportal, 2023: https://datareportal.com/essential-instagram-stats

17 See https://blog.opinionbox.com/pesquisa-instagram/#:~:text=O%20Brasil%20%C3%A9%20o%202%C2%BA,menos%20uma%20vez%20por%20dia

18 All of these numbers come from reports conducted by a private consultancy and are included to provide an overview of the important presence of Instagram in Brazil.

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study (2017) of one of the biggest street markets in Latin America, Salada Market in Buenos Aires in the 2000s, is a good example of the fact that this predated the arrival of digital platforms. Likewise, when I started fieldwork in an urban and informal street market in Porto Alegre in 1999, the neoliberal subjectivity was already there in a raw form of entrepreneurship: harsh competition among peers, rejection of unionism, and weak collective solidarity in favor of small groups for mutual help. My former interlocutors were street vendors who worked 15 hours a day, usually 7 days a week. Many of those workers rejected the identity of street vendors (*camelos*) and self-designed themselves as entrepreneurs or even bosses. The first sentence I heard in the field was 'welcome to the jungle'. In my five years following the street routine, I found that my key interlocutor's personal slogan 'If I need to be a slave, I prefer to be a slave of myself' was a largely shared worldview within the group.[19] The street vendors did not believe that they had rights as citizens because social protection had never covered them; their contact with the state was limited to violence inflicted by the police.

During the pandemic, masses of street vendors and micro-entrepreneurs perceived their businesses as being at risk. Migrating their operations to digital platforms like WhatsApp or Instagram was the alternative both in Brazil and worldwide. For my current research project, I started following my former interlocutors, the traders who were working on the streets in 1999. At the moment, I monitor 87 accounts of micro entrepreneurs who work in the same marketplace in the city of Porto Alegre. Many traders maintain their stands[20] but have majorly shifted their enterprises to Instagram. If the digital economy did not create neoliberalism from below, the longitudinal perspective allows me to argue that it is fostering and accelerating it, along with a political process that connects workers to a far-right network. The reasons that explain this process are various.

19 It is important to stress that the desire for autonomy and freedom was potentially positive in a country with a slavery past.

20 These are no longer in the streets, but are now in a low-income mall, still largely marked by informality.

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First, as already mentioned, there was an ideological predisposition among these workers who gravitated towards a highly individualistic and competitive market logic. The competition that occurred on the streets is being replicated online, where these workers seek the attention of followers and clients. Traditionally, face-to-face competition implies rules around bargaining, honour, and reputation (Rabossi, 2004). Yet competition on social media platforms imposes new invisible rules, which are boosted by likes and followers in an algorithmic pyramidal infrastructure that puts permanent pressure on users.

Second, as is the case with platform drivers, working through apps became a more isolated activity executed on mobile devices. The traders are selling clothes or cell phone accessories not only during market hours but also late at night or at dawn, while their competitors sleep. A consequence of such a process is the romanticization of brutal and exhausting working routines (see Ramos, 2023). In addition, before things shifted to apps, despite several disputes that occurred on the streets, mutual help and local politics were part of everyday life. Traders had to face local police and authorities and fight for their right to stay on the street, which forged some dimensions of working-class identity. On social media, the processes of isolation and deterritorialization are detached from the local politics, which obliterates the last vestiges of street solidarity.

Third, and most important, my claim is that this context of online competition, inhumane labour experiences, and isolation led to far-right adhesion. The digital economy, therefore, potentially poses a threat to democracy, triggered by push and pull factors. The pull factors are everything I have already mentioned, such as the predisposition to a strong individualistic ideology that makes people seek influencers who are sympathetic to their goals and worldviews. The push factor is the algorithmic logic, the technological infrastructure that makes traders encounter the far right. In the context of Instagram retail selling, I hypothesize that the more traders there are online, the more inclined they are to support authoritarian populists. This assumption, however, must be put in context. It can be applied to certain platforms designed to foster alienation and competition as well as to labour contexts that have an ideological

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predisposition to support illiberalism. Feminist cooperatives of workers who use Instagram to sell food, for example, will likely be less impacted by the far-right ecosystem.

The network of traders I study falls into a digital trap. To grow online, unskilled digital traders need to follow skilled influencers. Such influencers push the idea of a wealthy and successful lifestyle that can be achieved with discipline and hard work. As one of the main influencers, who has 8 million followers, posted, 'There is no poverty that resists a work journey of 14 hours a day'. The traders follow a network of coaches who teach them how to use digital marketing tools to make money and get new followers. Investing coaches purport to teach workers how to save money, retire with Bitcoins, and make their first million. Religious leaders keep traders motivated to cultivate family love and not give up, as compensation will come. All these influencers are interconnected around the phenomenon of online business in Brazil, which attracts a large part of precarious sectors. By following the online accounts of 87 traders in Porto Alegre, I reached a network of 212 key influencers.[21] Researching their online political engagement, I found that at least 182 of them are pro-Bolsonaro, explicitly or implicitly campaigning for him. These people dominate the digital tools of online entrepreneurship. Therefore, low-income traders get trapped in a political network of influencers who support the far right. Amidst precarity and low earnings, many former street vendors now call themselves CEOs. They also join fraudulent drop shipping and pyramid multi-level marketing schemes in the hope of making their first million. Additionally, they also start following far-right politicians, which might indicate a process of political radicalization.[22]

Conclusion

Precarious low-income workers above the poverty line are vital to understanding the vitality of the new far right in the 21st century. Representing a large portion of the Global South's population, these groups face economic

21 Brazil is the country with the highest number of influencers in the world.

22 Since December 2021, when I started following the traders, I observed that they started following more far-right politicians in their business accounts. However, only the qualitative research will be able to assess the radicalization of such a process.

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insecurity, indebtedness, and urban violence. Still, they are motivated to climb the social rungs through their individual efforts – rarely supported by state initiatives but instead by conservative religious groups. Economic precarity has ambiguous political implications. Many scholars (Hardt and Virno, 2009; Standing, 2011) have argued that anti-establishment dissatisfaction could potentially turn into revolt on both sides of the ideological spectrum. In Brazil, people's legitimate grievances and aspirations have been channelled by authoritarian populists who inflate their rage, fear and egos while systematically impinging upon their rights. Considering this context, this paper has drawn two major conclusions. First, economic precarity provides fertile ground for the germination of far-right ideas. Second, the platform economy further bolsters this trend in certain labour contexts.

Labour precarity fosters several reactive emotions that stem from economic vulnerability. At the same time, aspirations are built upon national propaganda that stimulates individual ventures with the illusion of the possibility of achieving high incomes. These complementary emotions are directly related to the ambiguous economic condition of those who are not poor but have not completed their ascent to the middle class. What I have observed in the field over these years is that one of the consequences of such a condition is a growing contempt for the poor and an identification with the upper strata. Furthermore, working in gig labour in the informal economy is usually a task carried out on an individual basis, aimed at making immediate earnings. This context is ideologically aligned with neoliberal principles of weak working-class identity and unionism, and a focus on strong competition, self-enterprising efforts, and individualism. However, I also found that in spite of such inhospitable conditions, the social nature of face-to-face labour encourages people to act and to voice their grievances collectively.

In this context, the digital economy can amplify the effects of such a trend. When international organizations analyze the impacts of platformization, they tend to stress two things. One is exploitation; another is the potential for connectivity, business expansion, and even formalization. In this paper, I draw attention to a largely ignored side of digital labour: its political consequences. My work shows that within labour contexts that are predisposed to neoliberal principles, working through platforms

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can boost adhesion to far-right politics. This occurs for a combination of reasons: online ventures are isolated in their nature, platforms produce a techno-politics based on an algorithmic rationality whose infrastructure is non-transparent and pyramidal (Bruno et al., 2019; Grohmann, 2020), and, finally, enterprising online has been a wild individual venture that demands long journeys of connectivity and exposure in an environment dominated by authoritarian populists. In addition, in the post-pandemic world, masses of new and unskilled entrepreneurs need to rely solely on digital coaches to learn how to grow online. These influencers sell not only their digital expertise but also their political views.

Finally, many analysts infer that this situation of deep economic precarity amidst a growing illusion of making money on the internet is unsustainable. However, I would draw attention to the fact that authoritarian populists have historically benefited from economic austerity and social crises. Therefore, the path to restrain the authoritarian turn and pursue democratic sustainability demands a robust and diversified set of policies focused on universal welfare benefits, employment promotion, reducing inequality, and providing public support for those who aim to access the world of the digital economy.

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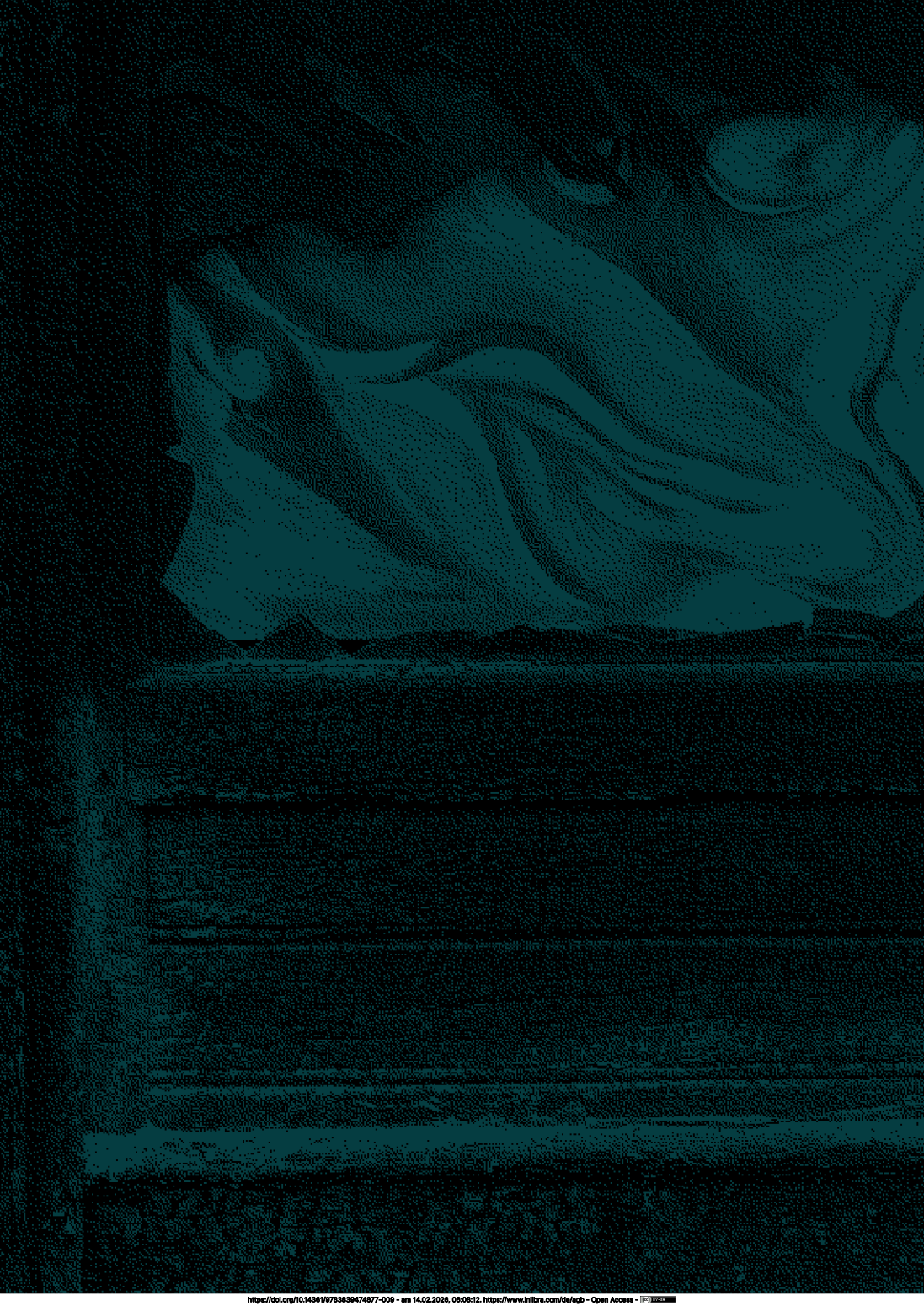

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