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VOICES FOR THE NETWORKED SOCIETY

Labor-atories of Digital Economies

Latin America as a Site of Struggles and Experimentation

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that digital labor developments and struggles are labor-atories of digital economies, with a special focus on Latin America. This means that, on the one hand, capital is experimenting with and updating forms of control and exploitation through the long trajectory of informality and dependency and, on the other hand, workers are trying and experimenting with forms of organizing and collectivities, also updating Latin America's rich histories of organizing, solidarity economies, and community technologies. The emphasis on "labor" implies that these laboratories are products of class struggles and capital – labor relationships. The paper unpacks the argument with four short insights from ongoing research, addressing 1) Latin America as more than a research site, 2) the updating of informality in the Latin American artificial intelligence context, 3) the global implications of data work, artificial intelligence value chains, and the cultural sector, and 4) digital solidarity economies as a Latin American response to the current digital labor scenario, including digital sovereignty and autonomy.

1 Introduction

Since the late 2010s, academic research on platform labor has expanded significantly and rapidly worldwide. Although the field has produced extensive overviews and identified major trends, there remains a pressing need for greater nuance and complexity, particularly given that the phenomena under study are neither static nor settled. This instability is a defining and inherent characteristic of these empirical realities. This does not mean that structures like power relations lack permanence, but given these ongoing transformations, how can researchers develop an agenda that adequately captures complexity, nuance, and instability? Beyond engaging with diverse empirical objects, it is essential to establish broad and multifaceted research agendas that can guide our scholarly communities in the study of digital and platform labor.

Between permanence and transformations, I argue that digital labor functions as a laboratory of class struggles and, consequently, a privileged microcosm for understanding broader societal transformations (Grohmann, 2021). The concept of laboratory here reflects a dialectical perspective that emphasizes experimentation, testing, and contestation and is firmly anchored in capital–labor relations. On the one hand, capital continuously experiments with and refines new forms of control and exploitation, notably leveraging artificial intelligence (AI), data, and platforms. It is in this context that the "tech bros" made their – class, gender, and race – relationships with the far right even more explicit at the beginning of 2025 (Marwick, 2017; Little & Winch, 2021). On the other hand, workers engage in their own forms of experimentation and contestation, testing new modes of organization and collective action, including efforts to build digital technologies from below, through grassroots initiatives. These prototypes are living labs for worker organizing and struggles, and they also work as ways of imagining – or trying to imagine – alternative digital futures. However, these capital-labor relationships are neither balanced; on the contrary, they manifest as expressions of class struggles in both digital and non-digital contexts (Grohmann et al., 2022; Karhawi & Grohmann, 2024).

In the domestic labor context, Cavallero et al. (2024) argue that the home operates as an experimental site where financial capital, labor exploitation, and social control intersect. It is no coincidence, then, that remote platform labor such as data work further intensifies the home's function as a laboratory by multiplying work demands and reinforcing the role of social reproduction (Posada, 2022). Yet, the concept of the laboratory is not confined to domestic labor. Latin America itself has long functioned as a vast laboratory for transformations in labor and capital. Gago (2017) demonstrates that Latin American economies – particularly their popular, informal, and feminized circuits – have historically served as testing grounds for neoliberal techniques, novel forms of labor exploitation, and financialization. The region has frequently been used as an experimental site for capital and empire, as seen in the imple-

mentation of neoliberal policies in Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s, which later expanded globally (Biglaiser, 2002). Similarly, Paulo Arantes (2023) examined Brazil as a laboratory of neoliberal globalization, proposing the concept of the Brazilianization of the world, a process in which measures first adopted in Latin America have increasingly been applied worldwide. For instance, the long and deeply rooted histories of labor informality in Latin America have become a trend in the Global North, where they are rebranded as "gig work," a phenomenon that has long existed in the region (Grohmann & Qiu, 2020). Similarly, the structural and politico-economic dependencies of Latin American countries to the Global North did not emerge with digital labor; rather, they reflect historical patterns of uneven and combined development that are now being reconfigured within the framework of platform-dependent capitalism (Valente & Grohmann, 2024).

Laboratories of digital labor do not emerge in a uniform or singular manner across regions. Instead, their internal and external dimensions are shaped by distinct geographic and socio-economic contexts. Recognizing Latin America as a laboratory for labor and technology issues highlights the importance of historicity in understanding the region's enduring structural dynamics. This includes not only capital's ongoing experiments with new forms of control and exploitation but also workers' strategies for circumventing and breaking away from dominant structures and fostering the creation of alternative technological possibilities. For instance, Latin America has a rich tradition of technological innovation driven by collective, locally rooted approaches that diverge from hegemonic global technological frameworks (Medina, 2014; Medina et al., 2014; Beltrán, 2020; Ochigame, 2021; Ricaurte, 2021; Shokoo-Valle, 2023; Rosa, 2022; Palmarola et al., 2023; Murillo, 2025). These include Chile's Cybersin, Cuban information science, feminist tech projects in Costa Rica, and free software movements in Brazil. Similar logics have long informed alternative economic models in the region, including solidarity economies (Singer, 2006) and worker-recovered enterprises (Vieta & Heras, 2022), both of which are now being reimagined within the framework of digital solidarity economies (Grohmann, 2023; Rubim & Milanez, 2024).

Thus, I propose the term *labor-atories* to capture the dialectical nature of these movements, emphasizing both their function as experiments shaped by capital–labor relations and their entanglement with labor and class struggles. This concept also suggests the possibility that these experiments could increasingly be driven by the working class rather than dominated by capital's relentless pursuit of control and optimization. The labor-atories of digital economies are unfolding in diverse ways across the globe, with particularly revealing dynamics in Latin America. With the modest objective of advancing a theoretical framework for research on digital labor *with* and *from* Latin America, I draw on four key and short insights from ongoing research. First, Latin America should not be seen merely as a research site but as a producer of critical knowledge. Second, the region's long history of labor informality is now be-

ing reconfigured within the context of AI. Third, we must understand the global implications of data work, including AI value chains, and the importance of the Marxist theory of dependency to understand the role of Latin America in these AI/data scenarios. Additionally, the cultural sector is key to the global implications of AI and labor. Finally, digital solidarity economies represent a Latin American response that goes beyond regulatory approaches to challenge dominant models of digital labor, including the role of digital sovereignty and autonomy as a way to imagine more equitable digital futures.

2 Latin America Is Not Merely a Site for Research

In fact, no place in the world is merely a *site for research*. Territories have histories, theories, epistemologies, and their own knowledge production. Yet, for a long time, Western academia treated the research and theories developed in small towns across the United States and Western Europe as if they were universally applicable. The so-called *rest of the world* has often been expected to merely apply these supposedly universal theories to local contexts, as a "tropicalization" of concepts (Gomez-Cruz et al., 2023), or, in some cases, simply collect data for *principal investigators* based in the Global North. As a result, theories and phenomena emerging from regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America are often categorized as merely *local*, as if a scholar conducting research in New York or London were not also working within a specific local context. While this issue has been widely analyzed through decolonial lenses, I prefer to frame it within the broader perspective of imperialism (Albuquerque, 2021, 2024), although both frameworks remain complementary. In particular, this framework relates to "cultural imperialism," whereby concepts and research agendas must originate from specific geopolitical centers before being replicated and translated elsewhere as a means of consolidating scholars' status as "global" researchers.

I want to critically examine what it truly means to be a *global* researcher. Does it entail traveling the world while engaging in *parachute relationships*b – as we critiqued in a report on technology and democracy (Ong et al., 2024) – and pressuring local partners to conform to a single research agenda? Barbosa et al. (2024) highlight the risks and costs of imposing research agendas globally while simultaneously erasing and rendering invisible the contributions of workers and scholars from outside the Global North, particularly those who are gendered and racialized.

The response to academic imperialism and colonialism does not lie in merely asserting the specificities of regions like Latin America. Instead, it requires demonstrating that research agendas emerging from Latin America, Africa, and Asia are not *marginal or peripheral* but rather concern the majority of the world. As a Brazilian researcher, when I first began studying the platform economy in the country, I believed that certain dynamics did not fit with the notion of the gig *economy given* that Brazil's economic history has long normalized *gig work* as the standard for the working class. However, as I engaged with researchers from China, India, and South Africa, I realized that it was not *our* economies that were *specific* or *exceptional*; rather, the concept of the *gig economy* itself was coined based on the experiences of a handful of countries that had previously benefited from a welfare state and were only recently witnessing the rise of short-term work. In this sense, *they* are the exception, not us. The same applies to the notions of precarity and precarization, which must also be analyzed in relation to the specific contexts of different regions and labor sectors, as Caminhas (2024) demonstrates in the case of digital platforms in the sex work industry in Brazil. These scholarly dynamics are often mediated through *English as a lingua franca* (Suzina, 2021), which implies that research must be framed within particular linguistic, theoretical, and discursive conventions, requiring scholars to translate *praxis* into standardized forms of academic writing and theoretical exposition.

After completing my academic training in Brazil while being based in Canada since 2023, I have been struck by how little – if anything – scholars in the Global North know about Latin American social thought. Recently, Jonas Valente and I highlighted that Latin American intellectual traditions extend far beyond the *decolonial framework*, emphasizing the relevance of Marxist *dependency theory* and the works of Lélia Gonzalez and Enrique Dussel for understanding technology, data, and platforms (Valente & Grohmann, 2024). In the 1970s, Brazilian philosopher Álvaro Vieira Pinto (2005), a professor of Paulo Freire, one of the most cited Brazilian thinkers known in particular for his pedagogy of the oppressed, published a seminal work of over 700 pages on the concept of technology. Engaging critically with cybernetics and Marshall McLuhan, Vieira Pinto offered a materialist perspective on technology grounded in the Brazilian context and its structural inequalities (Grohmann, 2016). Yet, because his work has never been translated into English, it remains largely unknown outside Brazil.

Even when books are translated, there is no guarantee that they will effectively circulate within academic communities. A striking example is Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993), who in the 1980s developed an original media and communication theory centered on the concept of *mediations*, which shifted the focus away from media effects to how people engage with media in their everyday lives. Although his work has gained some recognition in the Global North, the fact that the English translation reversed the title and subtitle – originally *From Media to Mediations* but rendered in English as *Communication,*

Culture, and Hegemony – has contributed to its limited visibility. This concept of mediation, for instance, may be particularly powerful for understanding how platforms mediate labor, with all their contradictions and power dynamics, as well as for broader applications in critical data studies (Morales, 2024).

Just as Álvaro Vieira Pinto and Jesús Martín-Barbero have offered foundational insights that remain highly relevant for theorizing platform labor, numerous other Latin American scholars provide critical perspectives that could significantly enrich the field. Among them, Milton Santos (2021) stands out for his concepts of *territory* and *technology*, which offer valuable tools for analyzing digital labor and platform economies. Additionally, scholars in the region have been theorizing the intersections of labor, communication, and technology since at least the 1990s. For instance, Roseli Figaro (2001) explored the articulations between communication and labor, while César Bolaño (2015) and the broader tradition of the Latin American political economy of communication developed the notion of *labor subsumption* within cultural industries.

A growing number of Latin American researchers are currently working to expand the circulation of theoretical frameworks emerging *from* and *with* the region, contributing to debates on technology's political, economic, and social implications. Scholars such as Paola Ricaurte (2019, 2022), Ignacio Siles (2023), Firuzeh Shokooh-Valle (2023), Julian Posada (2022), Kruskaya Hidalgo-Cordero (2022), Arturo Arriagada (2023), Ludmila Abílio (2011), Rosana Pinheiro-Machado et al. (2024), Bianca Kremer (2021), Sebastián Lehuédé (2021), Ulises Mejías (2023), Esteban Morales (2024), Thiane Barros (2023), Andrea Medrado and Isabella Rega (2022), Tarcízio Silva (2023), Kenzo Soares Seto (2024), Sebastián Fernández Franco, Juan M. Graña, and Cecilia Rikap (2024), and Rodrigo Ochigame (2021), among many others, are actively contributing to the critical study of technologies through perspectives grounded in Latin American experiences. Their work challenges the dominance of Global North frameworks and highlights the importance of theorizing technology and labor not only in Latin America but also from and with Latin America (Grohmann, 2025).

Rather than treating Latin American frameworks as peripheral or supplementary, researchers must recognize them as valuable and rigorous theoretical foundations applicable to scholarship anywhere in the world. This requires viewing Latin America not only as an *object* of study but as a politically, culturally, economically, and technologically significant – and often experimental – territory for academic inquiry. As Pereira et al. (2022, p. 1) assert, "we have always been antagonists," underscoring that the region's history of struggle and resistance, including alternative approaches to labor and technology, cannot be dismissed or rendered invisible.

3 Informality and the Labor-atories of Digital Labor

As I previously argued, *gig work* is not a glitch or an anomaly in the Majority World's labor landscape – it is a *core feature* of economies such as those of Brazil (Abílio, 2020), China (Zhen, 2023), and India (Athique, 2019). In fact, research on Brazil and China suggests that many of these work arrangements are family-based and often led by women. The rise of digital economies does not eliminate these labor structures; rather, it integrates and reconfigures them. In Brazil, for example, approximately 40% of workers remain in the informal sector (IBGE, 2023). Although informality has long been acknowledged in platform labor research, particularly in discussions of the *bad gig–good* gig spectrum (Wood et al., 2019), informality has only recently been recognized as inherently embedded in the platform economy (Bertolini et al., 2024; Ray, 2024). Indeed, dominant platform companies do not merely operate within existing economic structures, they actively appropriate and exploit long-standing production modes embedded in regions such as Latin America, leveraging historical patterns of informality to maximize profit extraction. At the same time, the platformization of labor, through its labor-atorial dynamics, generates new activities that do not necessarily align with the established global circuits of digital labor but instead update and deepen the role of informality in the contemporary world of work.

One of the conceptual challenges in analyzing these dynamics is to move beyond rigid binaries such as *formalxy/informal* labor. Rather than treating informality as an exception or deviation, it must be understood as an integral part of the working-class experience in Latin America. The concept of *viração* (in rough translation, "hustling") offers a productive theoretical avenue for overcoming these dichotomies and a framework for analyzing how workers navigate shifting work arrangements throughout their labor trajectories and interact with technologies in fluid, adaptive, and often contradictory ways. *Viração* is a vernacular concept theorized in Brazil in the 2000s as a way to transcend rigid dichotomies between formal and informal labor. Rooted in the work of Brazilian sociologist Francisco de Oliveira (2003) and later developed by Rizek (2006) based on workers' lived experiences, *viração* captures a form of labor mobility shaped by instability, contingency, and constant shifts between legal and illegal activities. As Silva (2011) explains, it refers to "a series of contingent activities shaped by instability and inconstancy, as well as between legal and illegal activities. It is a work activity fully dependent on 'doing by yourself' on an everyday basis" (p. 59). These dynamics translate into an ongoing movement across "different forms of work, including formal and informal employment, family-based enterprises, and labor that is poorly recognized or entirely unacknowledged as such" (Abílio, 2021, p. 22).

Far from a Brazil idiosyncrasy, *viração* is a valuable analytical framework for understanding how workers navigate digital economies on a global scale. This context aligns with how Veronica Gago (2017) conceptualizes popular economies in Argentina: "the velocity of the trajectories involved, the routes of vendors and visitors, situate the market at a spatiotemporal cross point: a laboratory of expanding popular economies that challenge (or explode) certain categories of analysis and force concepts to cross their own disciplinary borders" (p. 22).

One of the defining features of *viração* in Brazil is the resale of a wide variety of products (e.g., cosmetics, electronics, and toys), many of which originate from Paraguay (Pinheiro-Machado, 2017). The resale of beauty products, in particular, illustrates the central role of women's labor in structuring capital accumulation in Brazil (Abílio, 2011). Even before the platform era, this sector was already organized around crowd work, with millions of women working as resellers in the 1990s. The work culture associated with resale, especially in feminized labor markets, has not disappeared but has instead been reshaped and intensified by digital economy landscapes. According to Rosana Pinheiro-Machado (2024), social media platforms, particularly Instagram, function as digital labor platforms in Brazil, transforming and expanding informal work. She highlights women's leading role in selling and reselling products and services via social media, engaging in activities that range from home-based cake businesses to online courses and multi-level marketing schemes. Thus, platformization does not replace pre-existing informal labor structures nor substitute formal with informal work but rather updates them and reinforces long-standing gendered divisions of labor while integrating them into new digital circuits of accumulation.

In my research on data workers who work for click farm platforms in Brazil (Grohmann et al., 2022a), I demonstrated that the entire circuit surrounding click farms – which are distinctly Brazilian – is structured across multiple layers of informality and predominantly driven by women workers. The gendered nature of this labor is significant, with women forming the majority of workers and often balancing platform tasks with domestic and care responsibilities, in line with research on data work and social reproduction in Latin America (Posada, 2022). Unlike other data work platforms, these click farms operate entirely in Portuguese and target workers in small and medium-sized cities. WhatsApp and Facebook groups serve as extensions of the platforms, acting as both spaces of mutual support and hubs for entrepreneurial discourse. Click farm workers engage in a mix of mutual aid and competition, navigating the work through community networks while reinforcing entrepreneurial narratives. The language on WhatsApp groups intersects with religious ethics and popular economic logics and creates a unique mix of economic survival strategies and aspirational narratives. Workers' discourse frequently blends informal market language with entrepreneurial rhetoric.

Click farm platforms update and integrate informal reselling practices into the platform economy, where workers engage in the sale and resale of social media accounts, follower packages, and bots. WhatsApp groups act as key infrastructures where resellers advertise services with messages like "Come profit, come resell" or "Make money posting ads and earn up to R$10,000 per month selling followers." Many sellers employ emotional marketing, promising financial independence and credibility, while simultaneously reinforcing informal work structures. Some workers specialize in reselling themed Instagram accounts, meme pages, or photo packs, which often feature images of non-celebrities to avoid detection. Platforms further push workers into resale by offering tiered participation models, in which users must recruit others or engage in bulk transactions to maximize earnings. This creates a self-replicating labor structure that encourages all workers to become resellers. The informal nature of this economy also fosters fraudulent practices, such as the sale of fake engagement services, bootleg streaming accounts, and even forged financial transactions, including scams (Grohmann et al., 2022b).

Click farms function as intermediaries or semi-intermediaries in the *creator economy* (Cunningham & Craig, 2021) and often maintain close ties to *disinformation-for-hire* as a form of digital labor (Grohmann & Ong, 2024). For instance, a report by the think tank *Democracia em Xeque* (2024) revealed that a Brazilian politician orchestrated a scheme known as the "video editing industry," in which workers were recruited to edit political videos in exchange for financial rewards and promises of earnings, particularly during election periods. Numerous other cases illustrate how the *disinformation industry* exploits informal labor in the Majority World. Studies by Weltevrede and Lindquist (2024), Ayeb and Bonini (2024), and Udupa (2024) have documented similar dynamics in Indonesia, India, Tunisia, Egypt, and Iraq. Instead of adopting a moralistic lens or dehumanizing these workers by treating them as mere "ghosts" of the digital economy (Raval, 2021), it is essential to analyze their labor trajectories and the structural conditions that shape their participation in this industry. Informality is not incidental but foundational to the operations of the disinformation industry in the Majority World.

4 The Global Implications of Data Work, Artificial Intelligence Value Chains, and the Cultural Sector

Research on data work—or the labor performed by workers who annotate data for AI through various tasks—has made significant progress in understanding working conditions, different typologies, and the specific forms of data work in Latin America (e.g., Tubaro et al., 2025; Grohmann & Araujo, 2021; Braz, 2021; Posada, 2022; Miceli, 2023), including gender inequalities in the sector (Grohmann et al., 2022a). In terms of typologies (Muldoon et al., 2024),

we know that data work in countries like Brazil is predominantly conducted through digital labor platforms, whereas business process outsourcing firms play a more central role in countries like Argentina. However, we still lack a clear view of how these data workers are integrated into global AI production networks (Ferrari, 2023), AI value chains (Anwar, 2024), or AI supply chains (Valdivia, 2024). Understanding these connections requires more than a dualist perspective connecting Latin American data workers—as downstream nodes—to the companies that request their services or manage their labor in the Global North (e.g. the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom)—as upstream nodes. Instead, a multidimensional approach is needed to fully map global AI production networks and value chains.

First, there is no singular "AI industry" (Steinhoff, 2023); instead, AI services are deployed across various sectors, including automotive and healthcare, while also reshaping media and social media industries (Poell et al., 2021). Second, these networks involve multiple intermediaries, such as subcontracted firms and workers operating between lead firms (Coe & Young, 2019), as well as skill makers (Soriano & Panaligan, 2019). Furthermore, AI infrastructures (e.g. data centers, cloud computing, and submarine cables) are controlled by specific firms that play a pivotal role in shaping data work ecosystems (Anwar, 2024; Valdivia, 2024). If mapping global production networks in traditional sectors like manufacturing was already a huge challenge, tracing AI global production networks is even more complex given the intricate relationships between commercial, industrial, and subcontracting entities in AI ecosystems.

At present, what we have are (digital and non-digital) traces that serve as critical entry points for research. Following these traces is essential for mapping and understanding the global production networks of AI. Additionally, collaborations between research networks and interdisciplinary partnerships—notably between scholars and investigative journalists—are crucial for shedding light on these complex dynamics. For example, reporting by journalist Paulo Victor Ribeiro (Intercept, 2021) revealed that ByteDance outsourced transcription work to a Pakistani company, which, in turn, subcontracted Brazilian workers to transcribe TikTok videos at a rate of $0.70 per hour. Similarly, investigative work by Isabel Harari (Repórter Brasil, 2024) and Paulo Victor Ribeiro and Pedro Nakamura (Núcleo, 2025) uncovered how the Chinese company Kwai has been recruiting outsourced video editors in both Zambia and Brazil, including cases where children and teenagers were involved in digital labor. However, despite these revelations, there is still very little research on the specific relationships between Brazil and China in the context of data work, particularly concerning Brazilian subcontracted workers in the global AI production networks of Chinese companies. Understanding these transnational labor dynamics remains a pressing challenge for both academic and journalistic inquiry on the labor-atories of digital labor.

The cultural sector also plays a significant role in both data work and global AI production networks, an area I am currently researching with colleagues in the Creative Labor and Critical Futures (CLCF) project. In other words, the cultural sector is an important labor-atory for the role of AI in the world of work today. In 2023, Hollywood writers and actors, represented by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), staged a historic strike that led to an unprecedented agreement on the use of AI in the workplace. This followed a long history of struggles by Hollywood unions and guilds over technological changes (Fortmueller & Marzola, 2024).

However, cultural workers worldwide do not have the same bargaining power as those in Hollywood and will be affected differently by AI's integration into the media, arts, and culture sectors. For instance, while actors in the United States negotiate what they consider fair compensation for their voices to be dubbed by AI into up to 12 languages, the impact on voice actors in countries like Brazil, which has a long tradition of dubbing and voice acting as a key form of cultural mediation, could be far more precarious. In response, significant protests and labor movements have emerged, such as Dublagem Viva in Brazil and Arte es Ética in the broader Ibero-American context, demanding stronger protections for voice actors and other cultural workers. This situation underscores the fact that AI regulation at the national level is unlikely to fully address the challenges posed by global AI production networks. The uneven impact of AI across regions highlights the need for transnational labor solidarity and coordinated policy efforts to ensure that protections for cultural workers extend beyond the industries of the Global North.

Unfolding the global production networks of AI requires a deeper theoretical understanding of development dynamics and dependency in different regions of the world. I argue that Marxist dependency theory (Marini, 2022; dos Santos, 2020; Bambirra, 2013) remains a crucial framework for analyzing the unequal and combined developments shaping Latin America's role in AI value chains. This perspective is essential in examining mechanisms of super-exploitation, unequal exchange, and developmental asymmetries between countries (Valente & Grohmann, 2024), all of which are key to understanding Latin America's position in the global AI economy.

This approach is also necessary to clarify what we mean by "dependency" in digital labor studies. The term is frequently used to describe workers as "dependent" on platforms, yet often without engaging with dependency theory as a conceptual framework. A more rigorous application of dependency theory allows for a more nuanced analysis of Latin America's role in the global AI landscape, not only in terms of human labor but also considering environmental costs, infrastructure, and the struggles that emerge from these conditions (Figaro & Paulino, 2024; Valdivia, 2024). This broader perspective is essential for positioning Latin America not merely as a site of extraction but as a key

terrain of resistance and political contestation within global AI production networks. Moreover, as Seto (2024) points out, local bourgeoisies can reproduce sub-imperialist dynamics in the contexts of platforms, data, and artificial intelligence. These processes are not entirely new but are rather updated in dependent capitalism, now taking on new forms in what can be understood as platform-dependent capitalism.

5 Digital Solidarity Economies, Sovereignty, and Autonomy

The labor-atories of digital economies require a dialectical understanding of both how capital continuously experiments with new layers of dependency, exploitation, and control and how workers, in turn, experiment with ways to govern technology. By "govern," I refer to the debates on platform governance (Gorwa, 2019; Schneider, 2024) but highlight the possibility for communities, including workers, to play an active role in struggles over governance, notably AI governance (Attard-Frost & Lyons, 2024), from below. The way workers are struggling to govern these platforms does not mean control over them but a struggle over their governance. These struggles manifest through various strategies, such as bargaining, policy advocacy, and the formation of collectivities (e.g., cooperatives). This perspective underlines the need to move beyond regulation alone and propose alternatives to dominant digital labor economies.

One emerging path is the platform cooperativism movement (Scholz, 2024). In recent years, discussions in Quito, Porto Alegre, Buenos Aires, and Brasília have brought together policymakers, workers, and researchers to critically reflect on the term itself. Many have noted that, when understood in a normative sense, the concept of platform cooperativism does not fully align with existing practices or the needs and aspirations of communities in Latin America. This is because many of these initiatives do not fit neatly into either platform-building efforts or institutionalized cooperative models (Grohmann, 2023). Rather than a limitation, this misalignment is a reflection of workers' active experimentation with bottom-up governance of technology and building collectivities around digital labor. These experiences underscore the importance of recognizing the varieties of cooperativism (Hossein, 2024) and the diverse ways in which platform cooperativism is taking shape (Barbosa et al., 2024). Such initiatives develop their own organizing models, moving beyond simplistic horizontal/vertical binaries and instead operating within an ecology of collective strategies, as conceptualized by Rodrigo Nunes (2021). In other words, the trial-and-error process is intrinsic to the experimental nature of these initiatives, which is precisely why they do not conform to rigid, normative models.

These Latin American reflections have contributed to consolidating discussions around the concept of digital solidarity economies, with both a forthcoming collective book and a special issue dedicated to the topic. This notion emerged from long-standing collective discussions among policymakers, workers, and researchers. The shift toward digital solidarity economies represents a dual and complementary movement combining (1) the digitalization of solidarity economies and (2) the struggle for digital economies that place solidarity at their core. This approach acknowledges the plural and diverse possibilities of both technological and institutional forms. Therefore, digital solidarity economies encompass data, platforms, AI, and even long-standing concepts such as social technology, as proposed decades ago by Renato Dagnino (2019). They also incorporate various initiatives based on cooperation and democratic governance. In fact, the very foundations of the term "solidarity economy" are diverse across Latin America (Coraggio, 2021) and often intersect with experiences of popular economies (Gago, 2017) and worker-recovered factories (Vieta & Heras, 2022). This diversity reflects not only the region's historical struggles for economic alternatives but also ongoing experimentation with new models that challenge dominant digital labor economies. With this, the term emphasizes the plurality inherent in "economies," recognizing that there is no single possible economy and highlighting the connections between inclusive and community-based economies and the potential of diverse technologies.

Digital solidarity economies are not only reshaping the present of digital labor in Latin America – with both possibilities and limitations, as with any figurative politics (Sandoval, 2016) – but also maintaining deep connections to the region's past. Latin America has a long and rich history of movements and policies related to both solidarity economies and free technologies. These movements are rooted in the values and needs of local communities, drawing from historical experiences of collective resistance and alternative economic models. The labor-atories of digital economies, as shaped by workers, build on this legacy of proposing alternative visions for technology and labor in the region. However, my research has shown that these pathways have been anything but straightforward. For instance, Brazil had successful policies on solidarity economy and free software during the 2000s, yet these initiatives were dismantled with the rise of the far right in the country. The national policy on solidarity economy was recently reinstated, but the free software agenda has not yet recovered. Even at their most active, movements for solidarity economy and free software struggled to establish strong connections with one another. This lack of coordination and collective organizing between these two agendas remains a significant challenge, particularly when considering the development of policies for digital solidarity economies in Brazil.

I consider that Brazilian policymakers have so far misunderstood what digital solidarity economies are, often reducing it to the mere development of a municipal app, typically by hiring or subcontracting local software companies, without any real guarantees of digital sovereignty or autonomy (Grohmann, 2022). Digital solidarity economies are not simply about each city building its own platform, nor are they limited to sectors like ride-hailing and delivery. Instead, the focus should be on fostering inter-cooperation, federated local arrangements with shared digital infrastructures, and solutions tailored to the specific needs of territories (Kasparian, 2024). This lack of understanding has led to failed policies (Estima & Lemos, 2025), but rather than dismissing them outright, I see them as part of a learning process – or *learning through failure* – that is shaping renewed approaches, such as the updated policies in the city of Araraquara, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. These learning processes are central to the labor-atories of digital economies, which I explore in a forthcoming book. After all, no one is born with full knowledge of solidarity economies and their implications in the context of platforms and artificial intelligence. In 2023, I organized a workshop with the Brazilian federal government on this topic, bringing together workers, policymakers, and scholars. In 2024, we published a book together – now an official government publication aimed at training millions of workers – titled *Economia Solidária Digital* (Digital Solidarity Economy; Rubim & Milanez, 2024). I see these as initial steps toward establishing a national policy for digital solidarity economies in Brazil, which will require ongoing dialogue and stronger connections between technological infrastructures and solidarity-based economic practices.

I am currently leading the Worker-Owned Intersectional Platforms (WOIP) project in collaboration with six collectives from Brazil and Argentina in the tech and delivery sectors: Alternativa Laboral Trans, Central Salta, Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento (FACTTIC), MariaLab, Señoritas Courier, and the Tech Sector of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) in Brazil. This is a collective learning journey, in which we explore how to understand, design, and imagine worker-governed technologies through the lenses of gender, class, race, sexuality, and the Latin American territories we inhabit. The project highlights the possibilities for cooperation between Brazil and Argentina while also shedding light on the unique ways grassroots organizations and cooperative systems are built in each country. We are also learning about the importance of institutional diversity among organizations. One of the project's outputs so far has been the Hire a Co-op campaign, which encourages universities – including in the Global North – to hire Latin American tech cooperatives for research projects. This initiative is both an experiment in cross-border cooperation and a way to foster stronger connections between academia and workers. A report on the findings from this research will soon be published, further contributing to the discussion of how intersectionality can be a helpful lens for understanding digital solidarity economies.

Throughout the development of this project, I was struck by the limited literature addressing the intersections of digital labor with queer and trans issues. A few notable exceptions are Hicks (2019), Persaud and Perks (2022), Elwood (2021), Chartrand and Duguay (2024), Cowan and Rault (2024), and Haimson (2025). One of the fundamental aspects of digital solidarity economies in and beyond Latin America lies in bringing queer and trans perspectives to these economies. This involves breaking away from binaries, queering the future of work (Richardson & Cockayne, 2025), and queering computation (Gaboury, 2018). What this means for digital solidarity economies is still taking shape, but it reactivates the potential of prefigurative politics, which opens up the necessary imagination of desirable futures while also helping define which futures must be actively rejected (Costanza-Chock, 2020). As José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues when discussing queer futurities, "we must always be future bound in our desires and designs" (p. 185). In this sense, queering digital labor and digital solidarity economies offers new possibilities and imaginations for labor-atories of digital economies, both in Latin America and beyond.

Other key concepts for this research agenda are sovereignty and autonomy. Digital solidarity economies cannot exist in isolation; they must also connect with broader agendas of digital sovereignty and autonomy, framed within an ecological perspective (Nunes, 2021) as one of the possibilities for reclaiming digital sovereignty (see Rikap et al., 2024). However, digital sovereignty has multiple meanings, spanning the perspectives of the state, individuals, social movements, and civil society, as shown by Couture and Toupin (2019) and Couture et al. (2025). Moreover, Big Tech companies have also tried to co-opt the meanings of digital sovereignty. As Grohmann and Barbosa (2025) argue, Microsoft, Alphabet, and Amazon are selling "sovereignty as a service" by offering local cloud infrastructures to governments and corporations while maintaining ownership of and control over these infrastructures, an issue that disproportionately impacts countries in the Majority World. The multiplicity of meanings surrounding digital sovereignty highlights that what a country like the United States claims as sovereign does not align with what a country like Brazil claims as/experiences as sovereign. This discrepancy underscores the need for anti-imperialist and anti-colonial perspectives on sovereignty.

Digital solidarity economies can be linked to perspectives of digital sovereignty "from below," as argued by Lehuédé (2024). Here, "from below" refers to an approach that centers inquiry, mobilization, and organization on the perspectives of militants and organizers themselves, incorporating insights from the working class and the circulation of struggles (Mularoni & Dyer-Witheford, 2025). This means recognizing the role of communities and workers in reclaiming control and developing and achieving self-determination regarding infrastructures and technologies. In Brazil, the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST, 2023) has theorized the importance of "popular digital sovereignty" through this lens, linking digital solidarity economies to digital sovereignty (Salvagni et al., 2024). They are also actively engaged in the experimentations and struggles shaping the labor-atories of digital economies.

One crucial task for future research is to develop a clearer agenda on the roles of sovereignty and autonomy in digital solidarity economies given that they are not the same. Although related, these concepts have distinct theoretical and epistemological roots. Autonomy can be analyzed through autonomist Marxism (Wright, 2017), the intersections of feminism and anarchism (Stoljar, 2013), autonomous feminist infrastructures (Toupin & Hache, 2015), and Latin American traditions, including Zapatista perspectives on collective autonomy (Lopes de Souza, 2016; Lehuédé, 2021). Sovereignty, though it sometimes overlaps with autonomy, has historically been linked to territoriality and the role of the state as a dominant force in defining control over infrastructures and governance. Understanding how these two concepts interact and diverge is fundamental to shaping alternative frameworks for digital labor economies.

6 Conclusion

The notion of labor-atories of digital economies underscores the dialectical tensions between capital's ongoing experiments with control, exploitation, and dependency and workers' experimentations in organizing, tech governance, and sovereignty. Latin America has long been a territory where these struggles unfold in particular ways, offering critical insights into global digital labor dynamics. From the embeddedness of informality in AI value chains to the emergence of digital solidarity economies, the region exemplifies how workers are not passive subjects of platformization but active agents shaping alternative futures.

At the same time, digital labor research must expand its analytical scope by integrating insights from frameworks such as dependency theory, intersectionality, and grassroots technological experimentation. Understanding how digital labor economies operate within global production networks while also being shaped by gendered, racialized, and class-based inequalities remains a key challenge for future research. Additionally, questions of digital sovereignty and autonomy must be examined urgently to actively contribute to the ongoing labor-atories of digital futures.

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