

The Ideological Perversion of Technological Progress: A Philosophical Reflection on Informal Employment

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Abstract: This paper examines the ideological distortion brought about by technological progress, focusing on its impact on informal employment through the lens of Slavoj Žižek's theory of perversion. As digital platforms like Upwork and Fiverr grow, providing flexible jobs for millions of freelancers, the number of informal workers has increased worldwide. While such platforms claim to provide flexibility and autonomy, informal workers confront significant challenges, including low wages, lack of social security, and job instability. This study explores how technological progress, under the guise of legitimacy and rationality, reshapes society's perception of remote outsourced work, using Žižek's framework to uncover the hidden mechanisms of exploitation and control. Moreover, the analysis reveals that, although platforms promote innovation and efficiency, they strengthen workers' dependency through algorithmic surveillance, exacerbating exploitation. Furthermore, the paper calls for a critical reassessment of the societal and economic impacts of technological advancements on informal workers and advocates for improved working conditions and stronger social protections.

Keywords: Informal Employment; Ideology Perversion; Digital Platforms; Žižek's Philosophy.

1. Introduction

The rapid advance of 21st-century technology has fundamentally reshaped the labour market. Platforms like Upwork and Fiverr do not just offer flexible work; they've transformed workers into transient nodes in a vast digital network, where labour becomes precarious under the guise of opportunity. However, it cannot be denied that this has also led to an increase in informal employment. This shift challenges the traditional explanations offered by the philosophy of science and technology (dialectics of nature). Considering this, informal employment has witnessed a rapid rise in global growth. According to a report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2 billion people globally are engaged in informal employment. In Africa, the proportion of informal employment is 85.8%, in the Asia-Pacific region 68.2%, and in Arab states 68.6%. Globally, 93% of informal employment is concentrated in emerging and developing countries [1].

While informal employment presents new economic opportunities, societal attitudes are divided. On one hand, it is viewed as a marker of technological progress, embracing trends in flexible work and freelancing. Workers now have the freedom to complete tasks from home, cafés, or anywhere globally [2]. On the other hand, informal work presents numerous challenges. Workers often endure lower incomes, lack social security and stability, and experience higher levels of psychological stress [3].

This paper explores how technological progress, through ideological manipulation, reshapes society's perception of remote outsourced work. Using Slavoj Žižek's theory of perversion as an analytical tool, the paper investigates the ideological issues within the phenomenon of informal employment. Žižek's theory posits that perversion is not merely a subversion of social order but a deep mechanism that manipulates individual and group behaviours under the guise

of legitimacy and rationality [4]. This paper offers a fresh perspective for academic research and provides new avenues for policymakers and society to improve working conditions and social security for informal workers.

2. Theory Theoretical Foundations

(1) Informal Employment Driven by Technological Progress

Informal employment encompasses work that lacks protection under traditional labour laws and social security systems, including freelancing, temporary, part-time, and other non-full-time employment. According to the ILO, informal employment often lacks formal labour contracts, with working conditions and social security inferior to formal employment [1]. Also, informal workers frequently face income instability, poor working conditions, and a lack of social security and legal protection [5].

Technological progress, especially in ICT, has greatly fueled the growth of informal employment by allowing many jobs to be performed online, broadening the scope of work beyond traditional physical workplaces. Businesses can flexibly employ temporary and part-time workers to meet business needs. These technological advances also allow companies to remotely manage and monitor work processes, offering them a chance to hire and manage informal workers [6]. This flexible employment approach raises the percentage of informal work while additionally reducing labor expenditures for enterprises [2]. Furthermore, technological progress has made remote work and freelancing possible. Freelancers, specifically those in fields such as technology, design, and writing, can operate remotely from any location thanks to the internet and digital tools [7].

The platform economy offers an innovative model in which consumers and workers are directly connected online by digital platforms, giving informal workers access to a global pool of clients and jobs [8]. Through digital platforms,

companies can access labour services at lower costs without bearing the social security and legal responsibilities associated with traditional employment relationships [9].

Despite the economic opportunities created by technological progress, informal employment also faces many challenges. The pay of informal workers is frequently less than that of regular employees, and they are not entitled to fundamental social security benefits like pensions and healthcare [10]. Moreover, informal workers face higher levels of psychological stress and job insecurity, affecting their mental health [11]. Their unclear career prospects further exacerbate their anxiety [12]. According to another study, informal workers work on average 20% longer than formal employees but earn 30% less [13].

The above theoretical analysis demonstrates that technological progress not only promotes the rise of informal employment but also profoundly affects the structure of the labour market and the working conditions of workers. With this understanding of the theoretical foundations, we will investigate more thoroughly into the ideological issues within technological progress and informal employment, particularly how Žižek's perversion theory explains this phenomenon.

(2) Žižek's Philosophical Theories

Slavoj Žižek is a renowned contemporary philosopher and cultural critic, known for his unique analysis of ideology and perversion. His thought integrates the thoughts of Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx, exploring the complex mechanisms of ideology and perversion in modern society.

Subtly theory of perversion is built upon the theories of Lacan. Lacan conceptualises perversion as a specific subject position in which the pervert, by appearing to "comply" with the law and order, subtly subverts and redefines them at an unconscious level [14]. Žižek inherited and expanded this theory, arguing that perversion exists not only at the individual psychological level but is also deeply embedded in social and cultural structures. Žižek points out that the pervert does not simply break the rules but, by strictly adhering to them, reveals the absurdity and internal contradictions of these rules. The fundamental characteristic of perversion is its capacity to conceal its subversive intentions behind a façade of rationality and legality [15]. In modern society, perversion manifests as a strategy to achieve illegal or unjust goals through legitimate means. This process, disguised by an outward semblance of legality and rationality, subtly manipulates individuals and groups at an unconscious level. This represents the social manifestation of ideology. Žižek contends that ideology is not simply a collection of erroneous beliefs or misconceptions about the world but rather a "fantasy construct of social reality." This construct not only influences people's thinking but is deeply rooted in daily practices, influencing how we view the world, understand ourselves, and perceive others [16]. Žižek proposes that the power of ideology lies in its covert manipulation, causing people to unconsciously accept and internalise social structures and power relations.

3. Ideological Analysis of Informal Employment

Digital platforms often present themselves under the guise of legitimacy and rationality, showcasing technological innovation, market efficiency, and employment expansion.

Many sharing economy services claim to revolutionise employment through innovation, while championing market efficiency and consumer advantages. Additionally, these claims often obscure complex realities and potential drawbacks of their business models [17]. By emphasising their technological advantages and market benefits, these platforms effectively positioned themselves as the driving force of modern economic development [8]. However, the exploitation concealed beneath this ostensibly polished facade is frequently difficult to discern.

These platforms exert algorithmic control over gig workers, reducing individuals to data points through constant monitoring. By quantifying performance metrics, they manipulate working conditions and task distribution in real-time, prioritising profit maximisation over worker well-being [18]. This mechanism often overlooks the actual needs and workload of workers, subjecting them to enormous psychological stress and work burdens [19]. At the same time, scholars such as Lee have noted that algorithmic control increases informal workers' dependency on platforms, making it increasingly difficult for workers to challenge their working conditions [20]. This implicit control, disguised as objective and impartial algorithms, conceals the ruthless exploitation and injustice beneath.

Despite digital platforms' assertions of offering flexible work opportunities, the reality reveals that informal workers frequently earn lower incomes compared to their formally employed counterparts [21]. Notably, platforms further reduce workers' actual income by deducting various fees and commissions, leaving them unable to meet basic living needs [21]. These workers often operate without formal labour contracts and are consequently deprived of basic social security benefits such as healthcare and pensions [12]. Irregular working hours, coupled with intense workloads, further intensify their life stress and elevate health risks.

Žižek argues ideology's power stems from its subtle influence. Digital platforms obscure their control mechanisms behind veneers of legitimacy and logic. Through algorithmic systems and data analytics, these companies covertly monitor and shape worker behaviour, exerting pervasive influence.

4. The Fantasy of Ideology and Reality

(1) The Construction of a Technological Utopia

Technological progress is often portrayed as a utopian vision capable of resolving all social issues, including employment, poverty, and inequality. Capital promotes digital platforms and new technologies as offering limitless opportunities and freedom, implying that anyone can achieve their dreams through hard work. However, this electronic paradise, according to Žižek, hides the inconsistencies and exploitation that are synonymous with reality [22]. The true role of technological progress is often to reinforce existing power structures, further concentrating capital and marginalising workers. By creating the illusion of infinite possibilities, this technological utopia leads workers to overlook the contradictions and exploitation they face. It obscures the real challenges encountered by workers in the platform economy, encouraging them to pursue an illusory freedom while being further exploited [23].

(2) The Myth of Technological Neutrality

Technology itself functions as ideology, not merely a neutral tool. By portraying science and technology as

impartial, capital obscures underlying power dynamics and control mechanisms. In reality, technology serves to maintain existing social structures, leading to unconscious acceptance of inequitable systems. The myth of technological neutrality is, in fact, an extension of capitalist control over society and workers, making technology a tool for perpetuating inequality [25].

(3) The Conflict Between Fantasy and Reality

The ideological fantasy structure clashes with reality, producing significant consequences. The fantasies of technological utopia and flexible employment impose immense psychological pressure and anxiety on informal workers as they strive for freedom and opportunity.

They unwittingly put up with the demanding, high-stress job environment but are unable to achieve stability and security [21]. This psychological pressure and anxiety not only negatively impact their quality of life but also their physical health. Meanwhile, the fantasy structure of technological progress conceals the inequalities and exploitation, leading to the accumulation of social instability [12]. This inequality and instability not only threaten social harmony and stability but also pose challenges to sustainable economic development.

5. Perversion in Informal Employment

(1) The Apparent and Substantive Control of Algorithms

Modern capital exerts control over informal workers through the use of algorithms and data analysis. While this process appears to enhance efficiency and optimise resource allocation, it actually functions as a mechanism of exploitation and control. In his first main work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues that, in modern society, algorithms and data analysis are not merely tools; they are carriers of ideology, concealing their underlying ideological purposes under the guise of objective technical methods. [22]. Žižek's argument reveals the intricate relationship between technology and ideology in modern capitalist society. The true power of ideology resides in its ability to operate invisibly, leading those under its control to unconsciously accept this domination as natural [26]. Algorithms not only govern workers through technical mechanisms but also obscure the nature of this control behind a facade of "scientific" legitimacy. Even though algorithms seem impartial and objective, the way they function makes it easier to manipulate and manipulate workers.

(2) The Lack of Social Security and Increased Dependency

By classifying workers as independent contractors, many platforms circumvent traditional labour protection obligations. Although this strategy seems to be in line with the ideas of free market competition, it in fact deprives workers their rights. Capitalism, under the guise of legality, enables profound exploitation and control over workers. This position of power is legitimised through ideology, leading workers to unconsciously accept this unjust structure [24]. The absence of social security is rationalised through technological frameworks, further reinforcing workers' dependence on platforms. By defining workers as independent contractors, capital effectively avoids the duty it must provide essential social security.

(3) The Illusion of Legitimacy and Rationality

Žižek observes that the most powerful instruments of

ideology are rationality and legitimacy. Capitalism perpetuates its hegemony through them [26]. Ideology hides its fundamental logic of domination and exploitation behind a façade of legality and rationality. Capital, by presenting informal employment as legitimate and rational through the application of science and technology, creates the illusion that workers' jobs are free and autonomous. This illusion of legitimacy and rationality conceals the exploitation and control that workers endure. The true power of ideology lies in its ability to rationalise oppression and control, causing the oppressed to unconsciously accept this unjust structure [22]. The facade of legitimacy and rationality forms the basis of modern capitalist ideology. Algorithms and data have evolved beyond mere technical tools to become ideological vectors. Through these digital mechanisms, capitalism achieves pervasive control and exploitation of workers, masking its true nature behind a veneer of technological progress.

(4) The Strategy of Individualisation and Fragmentation

Capitalism employs a strategy of individualisation and fragmentation, which undermines the collective strength of workers and leads them to unconsciously accept their fragmented and isolated status [27]. Individualisation and fragmentation are essential tools for modern capitalist control over workers. By classifying workers as independent contractors, capitalism diminishes their capacity for collective action, making things challenging for them to organise effective labour unions or associations. The above strategy is made acceptable through technological means, leading workers to unconsciously accept their fragmented and isolated condition allowing platforms to control and exploit them more effectively [27].

In the current context, workers are portrayed as independent economic entities, with their success or failure attributed to personal effort rather than external factors. As individualisation and fragmentation deepen, workers increasingly perceive each other as competitors. This increased competition can turn their relationships into a zero-sum game, where resources and opportunities are seen as limited, meaning that one worker's success directly results in another's loss. Network platforms and algorithms, often employed to optimise resource allocation, frequently exacerbate competition among workers, who must compete on a broader scale. As cooperation among workers decreases and competition increases, social structures begin to change. Social relationships become more atomised, reducing mutual dependence and support, and decreasing social cohesion.

(5) The Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries

Technological advancement has eroded work-life boundaries, forcing workers to perpetually toggle between professional and personal realms. This constant adaptation normalizes an unhealthy lifestyle, perverting workers' sense of balance. Žižek contends that modern capitalism veils its underlying control mechanisms beneath a facade of freedom and flexibility, manipulating workers into accepting this distorted reality as inevitable [22]. The blurring of work-life boundaries is packaged as a symbol of progress and convenience through technological means. The supposed liberation offered by mobile devices and remote work software masks a more insidious form of capitalist control. What appears as flexibility is in fact a totalizing intrusion of work into every aspect of life. The employee is, however, now 'free' to work anywhere and at any time, and yet paradoxically, finds him and herself locked in a constant state, an invisible

cage, of availability, like Lacan's *nom du père*. This blurring is part of perversion, rationalised through technological means, causing workers to unconsciously accept a more intense and high-pressure working style.

Žižek argues that the power of perversion lies in its ability to make workers internalise control by presenting it as legitimate and rational, leading them to accept it as natural [24]. Companies highlight the benefits of flexible work, presenting this high-intensity work style as a convenience, a free choice, and a personal achievement for workers, thereby concealing the underlying exploitation and control. This pushes workers to unknowingly accept their situation [22]. Influenced by this ideology, workers are compelled to blur the lines between work and life through perversion. They may strive to demonstrate their worth through overwork or seek fleeting satisfaction through consumption, both of which are ideological expressions of perversion. The true power of ideology lies in its invisible operation, which prevent individuals under its influence from rejecting it since they start to accept it as normal [26].

(6) The Faith in Technological Supremacy

Faith in technological supremacy, underpinned by the perceived legitimacy and rationality of science and technology, reinforces people's acceptance and reverence for technological progress. Capital presents technological advancements as a cure-all for societal issues, leading people to unconsciously embrace this belief. This idea increases confidence in the power of technological advancement to solve issues like instability and inequity in the labour market. As a result, faith in technological supremacy blinds people to the real issues created by technological advancements, leading them to unwittingly accept the control and exploitation imposed by technology on the labour market. Consequently, capital achieves more efficient control and exploitation of workers.

(7) The Fantasy of Individual Freedom and Autonomy

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek asserts that "the fantasy of individual freedom and autonomy is reinforced by technological progress, causing people to believe that their work choices are free and autonomous" [24]. This fantasy is propagated by digital platforms and algorithmic control, leading workers to think their work choices are genuinely free and autonomous, while this freedom and autonomy are systematically structured and controlled. The fantasy of individual freedom and autonomy obscures the actual exploitation and control experienced by workers, causing them to unconsciously accept this new labour relationship. Furthermore, this fantasy is embedded within social ideology, which upholds the existing social order and power structure by creating an illusion of freedom and autonomy. This is a key reason why capitalist societies persistently promote the notion of individual freedom and autonomy. As Žižek illustrates in *TSOI*, such fantasies operate within the Lacanian Symbolic order, where social symptoms—such as the illusion of freedom—mask deeper contradictions. This fantasy becomes a mechanism through which workers internalise their exploitation, reinforcing the power structures that control them. In this way, what appears as freedom is in fact a reinforcement of control within the symbolic structure of capitalism.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the ideological perversion introduced by technological "progress," which distorts our collective understanding of informal employment. Using Žižek's theory of perversion as a critical framework, we analyse the underlying mechanisms of exploitation within the gig economy. This approach aims to uncover the hidden dynamics of control and manipulation inherent in the ostensibly flexible and autonomous nature of informal work. These illusions conceal the true challenges faced by workers, thereby sustaining the existing social order and power structures. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a critical examination of the impacts of technological progress and informal employment, aiming to identify strategies to enhance working conditions and social security, and to foster genuine social progress and individual well-being.

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