Abstract

Labor market inclusion through predatory capitalism?

The ‘sharing economy’, diversity, and the crisis of social reproduction

in the Belgian coordinated market economy

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Drawing on the case of the recent Belgian law on the ‘sharing economy’, this paper develops a critique of the dominant discourse of platform-mediated work as fostering the inclusion of individuals belonging to historically underrepresented groups (e.g. women with caring roles, people living in remote areas, individuals with disabilities, etc.) into the labor market. Exempting platform-mediated employment from social contributions and substantially lowering taxation, the law facilitates platform-based crowdsourcing firms’ predatory business model of capital valorization. I argue that this business model rests precisely on the externalization of the costs of the social reproduction of this ‘diverse’ labor through its precarization. These costs are not only externalized to individual workers, as often held. They are also externalized to the Belgian welfare state, and thus ultimately both to taxpayers and firms operating through classical business models, which fund the welfare state through taxation and social security contributions. For this reason, the debate surrounding platform-based employment might paradoxically provide a historical opportunity for recovering the Belgian tradition of social dialogue between employers’ associations and trade unions. I conclude by identifying key foci for action to ensure a better protection of workers of crowdsourcing firms including classifying them as employees, revising the conditions of access to social security protection, inclusive union strategies, the leveraging of technology to enforce firm compliance, and fostering counter-narratives of firms’ accountability towards society.