

## Precarização do trabalho docente: um mau compartilhado entre Brasil e Espanha

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### RESUMO

O presente trabalho apresenta uma discussão preliminar sobre a precarização do trabalho docente no ensino superior. O artigo busca analisar através de pesquisa bibliográfica, qual o cenário da precarização e flexibilização do trabalho docente em Instituições de Ensino Superior, com o fito de proceder a um cotejamento da realidade social de economias capitalistas que, conquanto suas particularidades, podem apresentar similitudes em termos de desenvolvimento das formas do capital: Espanha e Brasil. O trabalho tem a pretensão de demonstrar quais os impactos das novas tecnologias sobre a profissão docente, diante do impacto das inovações tecnológicas e suas implicações no campo produtivo e os desdobramentos das políticas neoliberais no campo da educação superior. Por fim, pretendemos lançar as bases teóricas para a defesa do seguinte argumento: a precarização do trabalho docente está presente nas instituições de ensino superior hoje. O estudo apoia-se nas discussões teóricas de autores nacionais e internacionais como Antunes (2009-2023); Srnicek (2017), Van Doorn (2019-2021); que pesquisam sobre o tema.<sup>4</sup>

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ensino Superior. Infoproletários. Uberização do Trabalho.

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## Precarization of teaching work: a shared problem between Brazil and Spain

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a preliminary discussion on the precarization of teaching work in higher education. The article seeks to analyze, through bibliographical research, the scenario of precarization and flexibilization of teaching work in Higher Education Institutions, with the aim of comparing the social reality of capitalist economies that, despite their particularities, may present similarities in terms of the development of forms of capital: Spain and Brazil. The aim of this work is to demonstrate the impact of new technologies on the teaching profession, given the impact of technological innovations and their implications in the field of production and the consequences of neoliberal policies in the field of higher education. Finally, we intend to lay the theoretical foundations for defending the following argument: the precarization of teaching work is present in higher education institutions today. The study is based on the theoretical discussions of national and international authors such as Antunes (2009-2023); Srnicek (2017), Van Doorn (2019-2021); who research on the subject.

**KEYWORDS:** Infoproletarians. Uberization of Work. University education.

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### RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta una discusión preliminar sobre la precarización del trabajo docente en la enseñanza superior. El artículo busca analizar, a través de la investigación bibliográfica, el escenario de precarización y flexibilización del trabajo docente en las Instituciones de Educación Superior, con el objetivo de comparar la realidad social de economías capitalistas que, a pesar de sus particularidades, pueden presentar similitudes en cuanto al desarrollo de formas de capital: España y Brasil. El objetivo de este trabajo es demostrar el impacto de las nuevas tecnologías en la profesión docente, dado el impacto de las innovaciones tecnológicas y sus implicaciones en el campo de la producción y las consecuencias de las políticas neoliberales en el ámbito de la enseñanza superior. Por último, pretendemos sentar las bases teóricas para defender el siguiente argumento: la precariedad del trabajo docente está presente hoy en las instituciones de enseñanza superior. El estudio se basa en las discusiones teóricas de autores nacionales e internacionales como Antunes (2009-2023); Srnicek (2017), Van Doorn (2019-2021); que investigan sobre el tema.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Enseñanza superior. Infoproletarios; Uberización del Trabajo.

*Uberized labor represents this bizarre combination of technological self-advancement and the revival of past and most degrading forms of labor exploitation.*

*Ricardo Antunes*

## Introduction

Our times are certainly not for amateurs. We are living through an era of intense labor precarization across all sectors, immersed in what Antunes (2021) refers to as the age of flexible accumulation, marked by the development of neoliberal modes of managing surplus-value extraction, grounded in a continuous process of productive restructuring. These modes of labor force control are characterized by deep estrangement, operated through increasingly opaque and inaccessible mechanisms for living labor. This set of social relations through which capital exerts control over labor manifests some of the most severe and contradictory features of capital itself as a social form of production. Among the many damaging aspects of this system, we may cite chronic mass unemployment, the progressive precarization of labor both in operational and societal terms, and the escalating degradation of the environment. These phenomena are far from being mere anomalies or accidental distortions; rather, they actualize the contradictory dynamics of the metabolic relationship between humans and nature, driven by a social logic oriented toward production that is now generating widespread environmental destruction on a global scale. Faced with a social reality in which vast segments of the population are nearly permanently relegated to informality, there has been an exponential increase in the number of workers who enter flexible contractual regimes often under exploitative conditions, without labor protections, and subjected to excessively long working hours. In this social context, mediated by technologies embodied in so-called service “apps,” the search for an extra job to help support one’s family has given rise to a massive wave of app-based drivers. This represents a socioeconomic phenomenon generically referred to as “uberization”<sup>5</sup>.

The precarization of labor, intensified by the flexibilization of labor laws, has manifested in various forms one of the most emblematic being app-based work, such as that performed through Uber. This model, which has rapidly spread throughout Brazil, creates the illusion of a new type of entrepreneurship, in which the worker is responsible for every aspect of their activity, from acquiring the vehicle to delivering the service. However, this autonomy is merely superficial, as workers are

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<sup>5</sup> The term *uberization* is derived from the name of the ride-hailing platform Uber and refers to a process in which labor relations become increasingly individualized and invisible, with wage labor and exploitation progressively obscured.

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subjected to strict control by the platforms, which determine the working conditions, service pricing, and even user evaluations. According to Silva (2019), this modality of work represents a new form of exploitation in which companies shift costs and risks onto the workers, stripping them of even minimal labor protections and consolidating a disguised form of subordination. The absence of fixed schedules, the freedom to choose working hours, and the denial of an employment relationship are merely some of the strategies used to conceal this dependence.

In the field of education, a similar trend can be observed though it presents certain specific traits. Within the realm of teaching, the general tendency outlined above materializes, to some extent, in forms of remote work. Frequently framed as a form of *polydocência* (multi-teaching), this type of teaching activity, according to Mill (2014), results in an improper reduction of teaching hours and, consequently, of remuneration, despite an increased demand on teachers' time for the preparation of online classes.

In her work, Silva (2019) illustrates that while in a conventional classroom the student-teacher ratio is approximately 40 to 1, on an online platform this ratio may reach 400 students per teacher. Should this model of work organization prevail, a single teacher working from home could serve 400 students online. The platform itself monitors the time the teacher spends on tasks and uses this data as the basis for determining compensation. Silva (2019) emphasizes the need to confront the reality that most teachers are not specialized in the use of technology, and that educational institutions often lack the technological infrastructure required thus further precarizing teaching labor. According to Silva (2019), the author warns of the trend toward the *uberization* of teaching, where intermittent work and continuous monitoring are combined, using reputation systems as increasingly rigid mechanisms of control, reinforcing centralized and disciplinary models. In the sharing economy, there is a direct relationship between service providers and consumers, replacing traditional consumer protection regulations with algorithms and rating systems. Just as Uber relies on driver reputation systems for control, a similar mechanism could be applied to teaching labor. One can imagine, in the near future, teachers being evaluated by such platforms, with continued employment subject to their performance ratings, as Silva concludes. Since it is no longer necessary to hire workers as employees nor to invest in most of the physical means that constitute fixed capital, the surplus value appropriated by capitalists is maximized at a level unimaginable for traditional enterprises. This reveals an imperative for other companies to adopt similar business structures (Srnicek, 2017). In the dimensions discussed here—projected as future developments but already a reality in many social contexts we witness the emergence of new actors within the landscape of labor precarization and *uberization*. The

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digital labor force, composed of “infoproletarians” such as app drivers, telemarketing operators, and software technicians, is increasingly dependent on digital platforms and algorithms. This is the worker whose performance is intrinsically tied to the use of digital technologies such as computers and mobile devices, according to Antunes (2022). Within this universe, Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICTs) and the expansion of apps exponentially develop and accelerate the growth of the *infoproletariat* or *cyberproletariat* (Antunes & Braga, 2009). What comes to the fore is what Sennett (2009) calls “flexible capitalism,” which is directly linked to the pressure placed on workers to be fast, to constantly adapt to ever more fluid rules, and to function without a stable normative framework. This can lead to opportunistic and unethical behaviors, compromising trust in professional relations and generating a perfect storm: the mass precarization of teaching labor and large-scale unemployment.

## **The Perfect Storm: The Precarization of Teaching Labor and Mass Unemployment.**

The perfect storm is forming over the horizon of teaching labor or perhaps it has already taken hold encompassing not only the growing precarization of this vital profession, but also the looming specter of mass unemployment. This bleak scenario is the result of a complex intersection of economic, social, and political factors that are undermining both the stability and the value of educators’ work around the world. The precarization of teaching labor is a phenomenon that has gained momentum in recent years, with temporary contracts increasingly replacing stable and secure employment. Educators face challenging working conditions, low wages, a lack of benefits, and workloads that often exceed what is reasonable. This precariousness not only compromises the quality of education provided but also has a devastating impact on teachers’ physical and mental health. In addition, the technological revolution is redefining the educational landscape, with automation and artificial intelligence threatening to replace certain functions traditionally performed by teachers. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote learning, introducing a new layer of uncertainty regarding the future of in-person education and, by extension, the very security of teaching jobs. At the same time, mass unemployment haunts society, with automation and globalization eliminating jobs in both traditional and emerging sectors. The economic crisis resulting from the pandemic has only exacerbated this situation, leaving thousands of individuals unemployed and left to fend for themselves. In this context, teachers find themselves at a dangerous crossroads.

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They are confronted with the possibility of job loss due to automation and cost-cutting measures in educational institutions, while also facing the increasing precarization of working conditions for those who remain employed. Antunes (2020) notes that the current hegemonic political-economic system can only expand by means of destruction that is, it accumulates more capital as it irreversibly destroys nature while simultaneously expelling massive numbers of workers from the labor market on a global scale. A spider performs operations similar to those of a weaver, and a bee puts many architects to shame with the structure of its hive. However, what from the very outset distinguishes the worst architect from the best bee is that the former has the hive in his mind before constructing it in wax. (Marx, 2013, pp. 255–256, emphasis added).

Dal Rosso (2017) highlights a strong trend in our century of embracing flexibility as a response to fixed or rigid working hours. In this scenario, the role of the state is minimal with regard to social welfare needs, while its interventions increasingly favor the market. In this way, labor in its flexible form allows adaptation to the demands of capital's business logic at the right times, at precise hours, *just-in-time*, that is, in sync with the timing of demand. It follows, therefore, that a significant portion of work organized around flexible, shorter, and irregular hours results in lower wages, precarious working conditions, minimal prospects for professional advancement, and weak guarantees of access to health care and education. In countries considered part of the global periphery such as Brazil this flexible trend further weakens workers, who have not experienced the benefits of the wage-based model in which labor rights were strongly linked to employment stability, and in which fixed working hours held particular significance (Dal Rosso, 2017).

## **The Scenario of the Precarization and Uberization of Teaching Labor in Brazil**

The scenario of teaching labor precarization in Brazil is increasingly present in the daily lives of educators, with a vast reserve of labor power at the system's disposal something inherently tied to the logic of capitalism. Under the guise of a modernizing and supposedly job-creating discourse, institutions frequently invoke this narrative to justify the chaotic state of the teaching labor market. In this context, the precarization of labor in the private sector is intensifying, while the public sector resorts to fragile justifications for the constant attacks on its budgets.

According to Antunes (2022), "Brazil is tragically heading toward the state of destitution that typifies India, and this is no coincidence. Just as in India, Brazil has an extraordinarily wealthy bourgeoisie, one that knows no limits in its expansion. It is enough to note that the five wealthiest

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Brazilian businessmen earn an income comparable to that produced by 100 million people in the same country. This level of social tragedy is something we cannot accept. ”

The labor reform enacted in 2017 by the ultraliberal government of then-president Michel Temer significantly contributed to the worsening of labor precarization and flexibilization in Brazil. This reform introduced substantial changes to the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), originally established in 1943. Chahad (2017) points out that the 2017 reform included changes in various areas: (1) employment contracts; (2) collective bargaining and union organization; (3) new forms of labor; and (4) labor justice. A synthesized overview of the reform reveals that it introduced multiple changes to employment contracts. From an ideological standpoint, it was presented as an “expansion of possibilities” for establishing labor ties for example, allowing workers to individually negotiate conditions directly with employers. However, in essence, these legal changes reduced the space for union-mediated bargaining, thereby encouraging a fragmentation of employment relations and contractual arrangements. This phenomenon is what Krein (2018) refers to as the “destandardization of working hours.” In reality, Brazil underwent a labor reform that targeted informality and effectively brought it into the realm of formal employment. In this context, the precarization and *uberization* of teaching labor have become increasingly prevalent in Brazil, as a direct result of transformations in both the economy and the world of work.

These phenomena directly impact the lives of teachers, who have been facing increasing challenges in their careers and work environments. The precarization of teaching labor is a phenomenon that has intensified over recent decades, particularly in the wake of labor reforms, coupled with a steady reduction in public investment in education and the implementation of policies that further deteriorate teaching conditions. This situation has been exacerbated by the growing *uberization* of teaching, resulting from the increasing use of digital technologies and online teaching platforms. The *uberization* of teaching is a complex phenomenon that remains understudied, yet it already presents significant challenges for educators working through online platforms. Srnicek (2017) coined the term *platform capitalism* to describe the contemporary process of financial accumulation based on new business models in which algorithms and data controlled and extracted from platformized telematic networks play a central role.

Online teaching platforms often promote work flexibility, allowing teachers to work from different locations and at various times. However, this flexibility may lead to work intensification, as teachers often end up working more hours than necessary just to maintain their contracts. As Van

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Doorn (2019) emphasizes, platform labor is essentially data production work and algorithm training. This is precisely what makes it so valuable, despite being simultaneously devalued and exploited—just like many other forms of low-wage service labor, both past and present. For this reason, platform labor is a key dimension of financialized platform capitalism: without people providing all kinds of data services that support not only other people but also machines (i.e., AI production), there would be no capacity to attract such vast amounts of venture capital and other forms of financial investment.

In light of this scenario, it is essential to develop public policies that protect teachers' rights, shielding them from the negative effects of platformization, precarization, and *uberization*. Such measures include the regulation of labor on online platforms, the guarantee of labor rights and social protections, and the promotion of policies aimed at valuing the teaching profession.

In sum, the precarization and *uberization* of teaching labor are phenomena that demand close attention and in-depth study. It is crucial that policies be implemented to ensure the protection of teachers' rights and the quality of education in the face of these profound changes in the economy and the world of work.

Within this universe of precarization, Antunes (2020) emphasizes that *uberized* labor and this, in itself, is already tragic is no longer limited to workers employed by platforms such as Uber or iFood. Today, there are platforms for various types of labor: doctors, engineers, domestic workers, journalists, and teachers. All workers in this broad service sector are increasingly at risk of becoming *uberized* workers. The approval of the labor reform by the ominous figure of former president Michel Temer particularly his endorsement of intermittent labor served as the gateway that capital needed to formalize this new modality, which Antunes calls “digital slavery.” A concrete example of resistance to the precarization of labor in the digital era, according to Antunes (2021), is the beginning of the construction of a new era, one grounded in class consciousness and awareness that articulates both objective and subjective elements. For instance, *uberization* leads to fragmentation, work intensification, exploitation, and individualization. However, at a certain point, this process its intensity, pace, and super-exploitation ends up generating forms of solidarity and sociability. These culminated in the first global Uber strike, known as “*Uber Off*”<sup>6</sup>, during which workers organized via social media especially Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp calling for unity and participation in the strike. In Brazil, drivers urged their colleagues to log off the app for 24 hours.

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<sup>6</sup> On May 8, 2019, Uber drivers in at least four countries—Australia, Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom pledged to log off the app for up to 12 hours.

In the face of this apocalyptic scenario, resistance becomes imperative. Building pathways and alternatives for the organization of the working class and especially the teaching profession is essential for confronting, on a daily basis, the dismantling of labor through the systematic erosion of rights, that is, rights won over centuries of workers' struggles, often at the cost of their own blood, and at times, their very lives. None of this is simple to understand or to critique and it becomes even more challenging in the current historical moment we are living through.

## **The Scenario of the Precarization and Uberization of Teaching Labor in Spain**

The selection system for permanent teaching positions in public schools in Spain—both at the primary and secondary levels frequently gives rise to challenging circumstances that shape the personal and professional subjectivities of teachers, as well as their pedagogical practices. In order to successfully participate in the selection process, teachers are often compelled to tailor their professional profiles to the requirements of the educational system, and frequently to revise their personal and/or professional goals (González-Calvo, 2020). The process of entering the profession places teachers under intense pressure, requiring them to study educational curricula many of which are outdated without any guarantee of employment for the following academic year. This selection system, which takes place every two years, is regulated by Organic Law 8/2013, of December 9, aimed at improving the quality of education. The selection process comprises two main component: (a) Subject area knowledge, for which candidates must complete a written exam, a practical exam, and design an educational intervention plan; and (b) Pedagogical area, for which candidates are required to present a teaching program and a lesson unit to a panel of five teachers who currently hold permanent positions in the public school system.

Together, these components account for 60% of the total possible score, while the remaining 40% is calculated based on years of teaching experience. Successful candidates must complete a one-year internship before securing a permanent teaching position (González-Calvo, 2020). Those who are not selected may obtain temporary positions in public schools, with contracts ranging from 15 days to one academic year (González-Calvo, 2020).

With regard to higher education in Spain, capitalism and neoliberalism are the structuring axes of the educational laws that have been successively enacted over the years (e.g., González-Calvo, 2020; González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018). Higher education policies, as in other countries, result in a shift from employer-driven exploitation to autonomous and voluntary self-exploitation on

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the part of the worker in this case, the university professor. Thus, the professor who seeks a place in the system and aims to build a professional career within the university ends up becoming an *animal laborans*, both executioner and victim of themself; this form of self-exploitation is more efficient than external exploitation because it is imbued with the illusion of freedom (Han, 2015, 2018). Under the influence of neoliberal discourse, individuals may be convinced that they are shaping their own lives; however, this is the result of a subtle governing technique that persuades them to give meaning to their lives as if they were the result of their own choices (Han, 2018).

The university faculty selection system, shaped by these neoliberal principles, exalts self-interest, competitiveness, and success above all else, and sometimes even promotes ethically questionable practices (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2018). Individuals are expected to submit inwardly and work incessantly toward increased productivity and constant self-improvement (Han, 2018; Laval & Dardot, 2018). Consequently, the selection system integrates the faculty into a more flexible, dynamic, and precarious group that assumes various names and contractual forms before achieving tenure as a university professor. This results in the ongoing contractualization of academic labor from research fellowships to the most precarious positions such as associate lecturer, assistant professor with a PhD, and contracted lecturer in its various forms.

The constant renewal of the employment relationship between the worker and the university (Chomsky, 2013) creates the conditions necessary to render the system more flexible, efficient, and profitable at the expense of the personal and professional well-being of academic staff. Unsurprisingly, the internal pressure to which they are subjected can lead them to develop self-destructive tendencies, lack of confidence in their own abilities, and persistent feelings of inadequacy. Compelled to continually deliver results, they often suffocate themselves fearing marginalization, mistakes, failure, or simply falling short of their own expectations (Han, 2018).

Risks are pervasive features of our own actions; they are present in all situations and may be reduced but never entirely eliminated (Bauman, 2013). Beck (1992) first described the "risk society" as an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization, involving hidden politics, ethics, and morality. However, current uncertainties are "manufactured" that is, they are created by the advancement of human development, particularly by the progress of science and technology (Giddens, 1999). In this sense, uncertainty is understood as a way of life perhaps the only form of life available today; it is not something to be "fixed," but rather something we "create" (Bauman, 2013). "Insecurity breeds more insecurity; insecurity perpetuates itself" (Bauman, 2013, p. 180). This constant state of insecurity may lead us to live under precarious conditions.

Standing (2011) defines the *precariat* as a new working class whose labor is dictated by increasing labor market flexibility and insecurity, leading to “a precarious existence, living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work or lifestyle” (p. 16). This precariousness is politically, socially, and economically threatening, as it generates anger, anxiety, and alienation (Han, 2018; Standing, 2011). This is clearly applicable to the field of education, where teachers must wait many years before being able to carry out their professional activities with any degree of stability.

Neoliberalism fosters an unrestrained belief in market values, radical individualism, and ruthless competition, thereby discouraging notions of the public good, solidarity, and care for others (Giroux, 2014). In the neoliberal world, the agile and marketable self is valued and esteemed, as it can embody corporate desires and be captured by neoliberal discourse (Gillies, 2011). The necessary condition of "agility" as a precursor to success in the neoliberal world echoes what Bauman (2000) referred to as "liquidity" a way of characterizing the relationship individuals have with society today. Our subjectivities are in constant flux, and like fluids, we do not remain in any fixed form for long; we must always be ready (and willing) to change (Bauman, 2000). Liquids in this case, substitute teachers in Spain occupy spaces (such as schools), but only momentarily. Unlike solids, liquids are not easily obstructed; they travel freely, circumventing some obstacles while dissolving others (Bauman, 2000), adapting to different contexts and situations. No emerging form, such as that of a permanent teacher, is likely to solidify and endure for long (Bauman, 2013). It is important to remember at this point that the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities for the well-being and welfare of its population particularly those living in precarious conditions (e.g., substitute teachers) is one of the shameful effects of neoliberal practices in governance(Judt, 2010).

## Final considerations

Our bibliographic study reinforces that job insecurity is present in higher education institutions in both Brazil and Spain, becoming a source of instability, vulnerability, and dependence, while taking on different characteristics in each country. The precarization of academic labor entails the increasingly rapid deployment of both old and new forms of extracting absolute and relative surplus value, such as the extension of working hours, contract flexibilization, outsourcing, among others. In this context, we can better understand what underlies the precarization of labor, which confronts professors with a new era and new challenges, including the growing devaluation

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or even real discrediting of teachers in all respects, and the advance of education toward privatization or, beyond that, the construction of a sociopolitical ideal in which the notions of “public” and “education as a right” undergo a process of erosion, being replaced by a new conception of education as a driving force for economic development (Estevão, 2019). It is time to face these challenges and fight for a higher education system in which teaching work is valued and working conditions are dignified. Strengthening collective action by fostering dialogue among colleagues and building strategies to resist the suppression of workers' agency is the way forward. Nothing is entirely predictable, and without a strong, coordinated support network, the worker is left vulnerable, and the processual nature of work becomes invisible and unrecognized (Schwartz, 2004). Antunes (2021) argues that one of the starting points for constructing a new era lies in class consciousness, which involves the articulation of both objective and subjective elements. University professors must oppose all forms of colonialism especially those that loom over our minds aiming to strip us of the brilliance of hard-won achievements earned over time.

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