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# Revisiting conflict: Neoliberalism at work in the gig economy

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## Abstract

What is the role of conflict in bringing about radical change? Taking the case of the gig economy, we study the conditions of possibility for fairer alternative ways of organising to emerge. Currently, some commentators underscore the sense of freedom of working as a self-employed contractor; others focus on its negative and exploitative dimensions. Less attention has been given to the potential emergence of (radical) conflicts around the nature of gig work. Thus, we contribute to the study of conflict in organisation theory by appreciating two different yet interrelated phenomena. First, how neoliberal gig work mobilises positive fantasies of individualised economic prosperity and independence, leading to *reformist* responses to contractual disputes. Second, how the dark side of gig work can trigger *radical* conflicts, which reject the assumptions underpinning the “self-employed contractors” business model. We argue that the potential for radical labour revolts is buffered by neoliberal individualisation and hegemonic ideology – articulated in the phenomenon that we term “econormativity”. Yet, as the latter offers no resolution to structural grievances, conflict continues to simmer in the background. The paper aims to advance, principally from an organisation studies perspective, our understanding of conflict and its role in unleashing radical alternatives.

## Keywords

Conflict, neoliberalism, precarious employment, individualisation, poststructuralism, gig economy

## Introduction

In autumn 2016 a group of riders using the platform<sup>i</sup> “Foodora” began a strike in the Italian city of Turin *contesting* their designation as independent, self-employed contactors (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017; 2020). Similar actions subsequently took place in Paris, San Francisco, Barcelona, London, and beyond (Euronews, 2019; Glover, 2021)<sup>ii</sup>. Key to understanding these riders’ grievances is a legal distinction between providers of labour as “contractors” and those designated as “workers” or “employees”. Qua contractors, sellers of labour are denied rights that previous generations struggled to establish and protect, such as payment ‘not only for the days [or hours] they work, but also for times when they are not working or are investing in their capacity for work’ (Bosch, 2004: 619). The attraction of hiring labour as self-employed, ‘on demand’ contactors lies not only in the elimination of down time cost but also in the avoidance of the expenses of holiday pay and payment of a living wage (Gandini, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). This stratagem is not untypical of how employers increase or protect margins and profits by exerting downward pressure on labour and organisational costs (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

In the gig economy, sellers of labour are ‘market subjects’ (Foucault, 1982), often managed by online platforms that dis-intermediate relations (Srnicsek, 2017). This position has not been substantially changed by recent court rulings, nor it is solved by attempts to advance new legislations (Butler, 2021; De Stefano, 2015; Financial Times, 2021). Gig labour markets are also characterised by minimal barriers to entry and exit, as well as individualised and atomised social connections (Täuscher & Laudien, 2018). Where it has minimal regulatory protection, gig work returns the capital-labour relation to what Marx aptly characterised as the whip of the market – a development that is ‘seen by many neoliberal policymakers as an ideal form of work’ (Crouch, 2019: 2). Its critics underscore the regressive, corrosive, and damaging aspects of this development (Crouch, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020;

Roger, 2015 that are apparent, for example, in its physical dangers and violence (e.g., delivery riders' exposure to traffic accidents, physical morbidities, and risk of assault – see Bajwa et al, 2018).

It is not surprising therefore that this way of organising work generates discontent. Congruent with Contu's (2019) call to regenerate radical analysis of conflict in management and organisation studies, we here commend a dynamic understanding of conflict's presence or notable absence in which the neglected role of fantasies is incorporated. Focusing on the gig economy, we interpret the actions of the riders in Turin, London and elsewhere in the West as an expression of conflict provoked, but also moderated, by a form of work organisation in which neoliberal 'market-based principles and techniques' are elevated to 'state-endorsed norms' (Davies, 2017: xiv).

Management scholars have mostly studied conflict at work from a functionalist perspective, framing it as a problem of *organisational performance* (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; De Dreu, 2011; Rahim, 2010; Shah, Peterson, Jones & Ferguson, 2021). Critical authors, on the other hand, reframe conflict within an overarching understanding of its importance for *emancipatory struggle* (Gandini, 2019; Kelly, 1998). However, the latter approach generally pays insufficient attention to the appeal and grip of fantasies, such as the self-entrepreneurial conception of gig labour that manifests the neoliberal, spirit of a freewheeling, self-employed contractor. The fantasy is one of being unconstrained by the bondage of an employer in which imagined, or occasionally experienced, episodes of "ecstasy" are mask or compensate everyday instances of "agony" (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019).

Such fantasies have been unequivocally dismissed as 'fictitious freedom' (Shibata, 2020) as it is argued that, for many gig workers, 'the sober reality is [often] very different' (Fleming, 2017b: 32-3). That difference results, arguably, from the asymmetries of power and opportunity that are structured into (capitalist) labour contracts granting firms a significant

measure of coercive control, underpinned by penalties for any refusal to make one's labour available (Springer, 2016). We recognise gig work may be chosen in order to avoid such penalties, and not because gig workers self-identify as freewheeling individuals (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017). We also acknowledge there is often a tension between lived experiences (Ravenelle, 2019) and the fantasies associated with being a contractor (rather than a worker or employee). Nonetheless, and in line with recent studies (Peticca-Harris, DeGama & Ravishankar, 2020; Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018), we resist easy dismissal of self-entrepreneurial freedom as 'false consciousness'. Rather, we underscore the significance of allure in impeding and mediating (radical) conflict – something that has been largely glossed over by critical as well as mainstream organisational scholars (Contu, 2019).

Attentive to actors' lived experiences, in addition to their structural positioning, we engage Glynos & Howarth's (2007) *Logics of critical explanation* (hereafter *Logics*), whose analytic focus is upon 'the relationship between social structure, human subjectivity, and power' (Howarth, 2013: 6-7). We define radical conflict as collective demands for structural transformation rather than adjustments, and we engage *Logics* to better appreciate how the potential for radical expressions of conflict is impeded by fantasies, including those of self-empowerment and self-entrepreneurship (see also Bloom & Cederström, 2009). To this end, our analysis is focused upon the operation of what we term "econormativity"<sup>iii</sup> – a phenomenon comprising elements of "responsibilisation", "quantification", "universalism" and "disembeddedness" – that illuminates how 'social structure, human subjectivity, and power' (Howarth, 2013: 6-7) combine to ferment and impede the expression of radical conflict in gig work.

To be clear, econormativity is not to be confused with 'economization', a term invoked by Çalışkan and Callon 'to denote the processes that constitute the behaviours, organizations, institutions and, more generally, the objects in a particular society which are tentatively and

often controversially qualified, by scholars and/or lay people, as “economic” (Caliskan & Callon, 2009: 370). We take precarious, ‘gig’ work to qualify as “economic” in this sense, but we attend to it as a *social relation*, rather than to its constitution of the ‘economic’<sup>iv</sup>. Without denying the possibility of conceiving of econormativity as contributing to the reproduction of the economic, we deploy it to shed light on the distinctive dynamics of conflict (e.g., within the sphere of gig work).

The elements and dynamics of econormativity, we conjecture, may also be relevant for the analysis of conflict in other social and organisational settings. We conjecture that, in combination, its four elements have widespread relevance for analysing how and why social actors are attracted to framings that accommodate, rather than challenge, the market rationality of neoliberalism. That accommodation is, nonetheless, precarious, not least because it is insidiously antidemocratic (Brown, 2019), socially divisive, and open to diverse interpretations (Gago, 2017). So, despite the allure of econormativity for providers of labour who invest in its imaginaries, a latent potential remains for denaturalising, problematising, and rejecting reformist responses to grievances and disputes.

In the next section, we revisit the framings of conflict within management and organisation studies, where we distinguish two broad conceptions of it: reformist and radical. To move beyond the confines of structuralist analyses, we then introduce the *Logics* framework. We set out its five key concepts (regime, dislocation, social logics, political logics and fantasmatic logics) before outlining how it is applied. We then look at the case of neoliberal gig work, introducing “econormativity” and its four dimensions. There we show how the potential for radical conflict is checked by neoliberal individualisation and hegemonic ideology.

## **Revisiting Conflict**

### *Reformist framings*

Conflicts are widely considered to be endemic to organisations (De Dreu, 2011). But there are divergent views on how to interpret them. Rahim (2010) conceives of conflict as ‘an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities’ (2010: 37), framing it as a problem of management and optimisation; a “dysfunctionality”. In this tradition, conflict is interpreted as something either to be reconciled or eliminated (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Currie et al., 2017), including within teams (Shah, Peterson, Jones & Ferguson, 2021).

We characterise this way of understanding conflict as *reformist*, where differences are valorised only for their potential to regenerate the prevailing order in the face of contestation (see Table 1). Subscribers to this framing translate or reengineer disagreements and even incompatibilities into means of reaffirming and regenerating the status quo (Jehn, 2014; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Rahim, 2010; Zhao et al., 2009). As such, ‘questions of values, exploitation and responsibility’ are largely backgrounded or absented: it is assumed that ‘subjects and their interests, [like] unions, workers, managers, investors and regulators [...] all still benefit from the system itself’ (Contu, 2019: 1452). Reformists exemplify the ‘decisive neoliberal turn in the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature [which] assumes that the interests and behaviour of employees are identical to corporate interests’ (Currie et al, 2017: 505) or, at least, can be reconciled through enlightened HRM policies.

In the context of the gig economy (and elsewhere), an assumption of consensus, ostensibly based upon common interests, has been supplemented by localised and individualised negotiations, where managers ‘address problems and disputes [...] within privatized systems of conflict resolution’ (Currie et al., 2017: 505; see also see Box 1). Reformist framings deny or gloss over structural sources of conflict or attribute them to other causes, such as ill-disciplined employees. They do not recognise the significance of the systemic asymmetry

between social actors, resulting for example in conflict precipitated by the experience of violence, both symbolic and material (Costas & Grey, 2019; Muntaner, 2018).

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Insert Table 1 and Box 1 about here  
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*Radical framings*

When reformist ‘background assumptions’ (Gouldner, 1971) are de-naturalised or suspended, a *radical* framing of conflict can gain traction. Such framing is evident in Fox’s (1974) classical industrial relations text, *Beyond Contract*, where he contends that in capitalist enterprises,

people do not come together freely and spontaneously. The property-less many are *forced* [to] access to resources owned or controlled by the few. The few can use this power to [...] promote *acceptance* of the social institutions, principles and assumptions which embody and generate inequality. (Fox, 1974: 284, emphases added)

This asymmetry speaks to the ‘systemic violence’ (Zizek, 2008) of the contractual relation, that can also become physical when employers and/or the state are determined to “lock out” workers or “break” strike action (Costas & Grey, 2019). Within this radical framing, labour’s “acceptance” of the contract of employment is understood to express a forced and structurally conditioned, rather than spontaneous, consensus. In the context of post-war Western European economies, a fragile consensus or ‘settlement’ was achieved by governments adopting (Keynesian) policies and espousing full employment, social mobility and (some) wealth redistribution. Broadly effective in coordinating the capital-labour relationship for almost three decades, this settlement became increasingly fragile, with the ensuing disorder and disillusionment creating the conditions of possibility for neoliberalism to gain “acceptance” (Harvey, 2007)<sup>v</sup>. Inspired by the ideas of Hayek (1960/2013), Friedman (1962) and Rand (1967), this alternative commended a return to market discipline enabled by a more



entrepreneurially-oriented state, and the promotion of individual initiative and responsibility that, allegedly, had been suffocated by a nanny state (as in the UK under Thatcher, 1993). Privatisations, financialisation, and anti-unionisation (Gamble, 1994; Standing, 2011) prepared the way for contemporary “acceptance” of labour market deregulation, exemplified by British “zero-hours contracts”, German “mini-jobs”, or Italian “vouchers system” (Bosch, 2004), and the growth of the gig economy (Srnicsek, 2007).

In this context, it is relevant to take account of Heery’s (2016) differentiation of radical scholarship on employment relations into critical labour studies (CLS) and critical management studies (CMS). In contrast to reformist perspectives, each openly frames ‘the employment relationship as exploitative and conflicted’, and each attends to the political ‘mobilization of workers and other oppressed social groups’ (Heery, 2016: 108-109). CLS, exemplified by Kelly (1998), privileges labour’s (economistic) positioning within the structure of capitalism in which other (non-economic) sources of identity and self-esteem play a marginal role. Placed ‘firmly within this economistic framework’ (Ackers, 1992: 4), subscribers to CLS are inclined to presume that ‘systemic exploitation’ will translate into mobilisation of radical, oppositional actions capable of ‘shift[ing] the balance of power decisively and finally against capital’ (Kelly, 1998: 304). Much CMS scholarship, in contrast, is ‘intersectional’ (Alakavuklar, 2020; Contu, 2019), acknowledging the significance of other sources of identity and collective motivation, including gender, ethnicity or age.

The most significant difference between CLS and CMS, for our purposes, resides in how their respective critical orientations to work are governed, in CLS, by structuralist proclivities; and how, in CMS, elements of poststructuralism are incorporated. While CMS shares a view of the employment relationship as exploitative and fully acknowledges its ‘negative consequences’ (Heery, 2016: 108), there is a stronger appreciation of how capital-labour relations are mediated and reproduced by actors’ subjectivities and multiple

identifications. These may include, for example, the valorisation of hegemonic discourses of flexibility and self-determination that subscribers to CLS tend to portray, or dismiss, as simply bogus self-employment. Exponents of CMS acknowledge that work ‘can be degrading, oppressive, and precarious’, but are more inclined to take *critical* account of how work ‘can also be a source of satisfaction’ (Heery, 2016: 108-109). Any employment that is considered “objectively” degrading and characterised as precarious can, from this perspective, *simultaneously* be a coveted source of pride and self-worth that is keenly defended (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Ravenelle, 2019).

### *Beyond structural explanations of conflict*

Our intention is to counterbalance (overly) structuralist framings of work organisation by paying closer attention to ‘acceptance of the social institutions, principles and assumptions which embody and generate inequality’ (Fox, 1974: 284). We seek to incorporate consideration of the social construction and significance of “acceptance” that is largely omitted from, or dismissed in, structuralist forms of critical explanation. In structuralist analysis, insufficient attention is given to how positions and interests ascribed to labour (or to capital) are *in practice* organised, rather than given or simply read off from structurally assigned positions. A presumption of structuralist analysis is that, *ceteris paribus*, providers of labour are amenable to being ‘transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organisation and engage in collective action against their employers’ (Kelly, 1998: 38) – assertions that findings of studies undertaken in the gig economy and elsewhere have served to problematise (Gandini, 2019; Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

As we shall see, Glynos and Howarth’s *Logics* presumes the contingency of any amenability to become mobilised as a collective actor. Its analytical value becomes evident when it shows how CLS, for example, provides a limited basis for appreciating how contemporary subjects,

including academics, are liable to become ‘captives’ of the neoliberal project of ‘enhancing [their] portfolio value in all domains [whether] through social media[,] rankings and ratings for every activity’ (Brown, 2015: 33-4). It would, indeed, be sociologically surprising if, as subjects, we were not susceptible to internalising a dominant, contemporary ‘form of power [that] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth’ (Foucault, 1982: 781)<sup>vi</sup>. It is a theoretical stance that, we contend, is incompatible both with the structuralist conjecture that ‘workers in capitalist societies find themselves in relations of exploitation and domination’ (Kelly, 1998: 126); and with the related claim that these relations may induce working class mobilisation and socialist transformation (Kelly, 1998, Ch.7; see also Mouffe, 2018). However, we reject the idea that the interests of sellers of labour are objectively given, or inescapably defined, by their relation to capital; and we also reject the associated idea that the “givenness” of “real” interests is temporarily obscured (e.g., by ‘disorganization’, Kelly, 1998: 25) prior to being confirmed by evidence of their pursuit and realisation.

*Logics* is consistent with Foucault’s insistence on incorporating subjection, in addition to exploitation and domination, into analysis of oppression and struggle: ‘[m]echanisms of subjection [cannot] be studied outside their relation to mechanisms of exploitation and domination’ as they ‘entertain complex and circular relation with other forms’ (Foucault, 1982: 782). When “reading” an action, practice or event we [...] navigate between the particular meanings interpreted and the whole way of life within which it is embedded’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 57). Summarising, the relevance of engaging *Logics* lies in its capacity to yield insights into how and why, in practice, the structuring of labour-capital relations is widely reproduced through a framing of reformism, rather than being radically challenged and changed. We illuminate these processes, and expose their limits, in what follows.

## The ‘Logics’ Framework

Building on the ideas of Gramsci (1971) and Laclau & Mouffe (2014), *Logics* has been applied to examine diverse organisational phenomena such as contested public choices (Fougère, Segercrantz & Seeck, 2017; Glynos, Klimecki & Willmott, 2012; Griggs & Howarth, 2004), social enterprises (Kenny, Haugh & Fotaki, 2020), and the “neoliberalisation” of work and passions (Hoedemaekers, 2018; Van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). *Logics*, it is worth emphasising, is post-structuralist, not anti-structuralist (Howarth, 2013). And since within it conflict is understood to be endemic to processes of social reproduction and transformation (see also Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), its conceptual framework is highly relevant for our analysis. More specifically, *Logics* enables the construction of a critical explanation of how structural sources of conflict are articulated, such as those between gig firms and providers of labour. It deviates from the (structuralist) assignment of positions and associated interests to actors, as it refuses

either to completely reject or totally endorse structuralism; instead, it signifies a “both/and” strategy whereby the resources of the structuralist paradigm are liberated from the essentialist strictures of its metaphysical impulses (Howarth, 2013: 6-10).

*Logics* opposes – or, better, deconstructs – the structuralist conception of actors’ interests as *readily* or *objectively* discerned from their positioning in the social structures (e.g., class, patriarchy), without denying the complex and ambivalent conditioning effects of this positioning. As a conceptual framework, it appreciates how exploitative relations can foster grievance and conflict; but it also attends to how these relations may also impede expressions of dissent.

*Logics* facilitates a grasp of how, for example, structural conditions characterised as exploitative may also be identified as “free-spirited” or “entrepreneurial” (Cederström & Spicer, 2014). In challenging explanations which reduce expressions of conflict in work

organisation(s) to the structuration of class (without adequate regard to other, potentially more gripping sources of identification, such as gender and ethnicity<sup>vii</sup>), it provides insights into how grievances may be symptomatic, or indicative, of multiple, intersectional differences (see also Contu, 2019). By (re)connecting the meaning and significance of conflict to broader questions and issues of justice, *Logics* provides a radical alternative to its reformist framing.

More precisely, and resonant with our radical framing of conflict, *Logics* conceives of social order as the (historical) product of physical and/or symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979), where consensus and harmony are rarely spontaneous, or unforced. Crucially, in *Logics*, fantasies are central for analysing processes of social reproduction and transformation where both compliance and resistance are induced ‘by influencing desires and beliefs, *without being intelligent or intentional*’ (Lukes, 2005: 136, emphasis added). *Logics* assumes social relations, identities and structures to be ‘constitutively incomplete’ (Cederström & Spicer, 2014: 110), and tensions and contradictions to be hegemonically sutured. They may *appear* to be complete and relatively free of conflict but any persuasive sense of completeness is conceived in *Logics* to be contingent and ultimately impossible. Seemingly stable social objectivities are conceived to be inescapably vulnerable to disruption and transformation.

We now move to presenting the framework in greater detail. Conceptually, *Logics* comprises the interlinked ideas of *Regime*, *dislocation*, *social logics*, *political logics* and *fantasmatic logics*. Although analytically separable, each of the three logics is fused-in-tension in specific practice(s), and so they are holistically relevant for analysing the same organised practice(s). *Social logics* ‘assist in the process of characterising what a practice is’; *political logics* ‘show how it is challenged and defended’; and *fantasmatic logics* ‘generate reasons for why practices are maintained and transformed’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 108). We now briefly outline the five key concepts of the *Logics* framework.

*Five key concepts: regime, dislocation, social logics, political logics, fantasmatic logics*

*Regime* refers to practices and discourses that have become sedimented in a particular era (e.g., during the 80s in the UK; Thatcher, 1993) or in a specific sphere (e.g., the gig economy). Regime ‘denotes the particular context as well as the new social structure that emerges out of hegemonic political practices’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 125). Such ‘practices’ are political in the sense that they are developed and maintained through exercises of power in which each regime is defined in opposition to a contested one (Burawoy, 1985). Today, arguably, the neoliberal regime, established in the 1970s and consolidated since then, structures the gig economy and its labour relations but, as *Logics* would anticipate, the regime is not without its dislocations and critics (Crouch, 2011, 2019; Gago, 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

*Dislocation* makes evident the incompleteness of social practices or institutions that becomes apparent when their reproduction is problematical. Dislocation may prompt denial or renewed glossing (suturing), but it can also potentially ignite radical transformation. To illustrate (see also Box 2): a rider hired by *Deliveroo* as an independent contractor may identify with, and take for granted, the flexibility and freedom of self-employment. Nonetheless, lacking social protections, s/he is inherently vulnerable to the shock of dislocation. If unfortunate to have a serious accident, s/he may become aware of a liability to which s/he had previously been indifferent or inattentive. And, of course, this awareness may become heightened for other riders and concerned parties (e.g., investigative journalists) whose attention is drawn to this hazard of working as a self-employed contractor. We expand on this below.

*Social logics* provide the norms and conventions that define and reproduce each regime, ensuring the maintenance of its practices in the face of dislocation. These logics enable discourses and practices to be maintained with minimal contestation through their entrenchment of naturalised ‘contextualized self-interpretations’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007:

140). For instance, couriers' self-interpretation as "independent contractors" facilitates their identification with entrepreneurs or even self-employed businesspersons, rather than with employees or workers. In turn, this bestows a substantial measure of legitimacy upon the "on demand" capital-labour relation that sustains the gig economy regime.

*Political logics* are activated when a defence (*suturing* mode) or replacement (*supplanting* mode) is enacted in response to dislocations entailing conflict that cannot be immediately re-naturalised. Political logics either (re)establish and defend practices, institutions, and regimes; or they aspire to challenge and change them. Following a dislocation, *supplanting* (political) logics are expressed, in the case of gig couriers, when a change in the legal designation of couriers as employees, as opposed to self-employed contractors, is advocated. Conversely, an example of *suturing* forms of political logics is found in Deliveroo's claim to offer 'flexible work, competitive fees' to its contractors, adding that 'you'll be self-employed and free to work to your own availability. The Deliveroo rider app makes it easy to plan ahead' (Deliveroo.co.uk, 2021). To the extent that riders identify with this narrative, the potential for an eruption of radical conflict is contained, but nonetheless remains latent.

*Fantasmatic logics* are conceived to provide the motivating impetus for either maintaining or challenging established regimes of practices, and are perhaps the most distinctive and novel element of the *Logics* framework. Fantasmatic logics either affirm or weaken participants' acceptance of, or at least compliance with, the rules and conventions of the prevailing regime. When social actors host *beatific* fantasies, they moderate demands and press for reforms; conversely, *horrific* fantasies fuel a radicalisation of demands that inspires and energises emancipatory change. The neoliberal regime is adept at recuperating forms of conflict by means of seduction and/or compulsion which suggest, for example, that the benefits of the regime are self-evident, or that individualism is endemic to "human nature". Horrific fantasmatic logics may contribute to debunking conformist mantras, such as "There Is No

(rational) Alternative” (TINA; Fisher, 2009), and thereby initiate, or lend momentum, to a more radical framing of conflict.

*Logics and framings of conflict*

The *Logics* framework ‘contribut[es] to our understanding of the conflict associated with resistance to change of social practices (their “inertia”) but also the speed [...] of change when it does happen’ (Glynos, Klimecki & Willmott, 2012: 145). We begin by identifying a cycle to help visualising how conflict is understood within the *Logics* framework.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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Figure 1 shows a regime emerging out of practices and discourses that establishes and sediments *social logics* (step 1). Actors routinely experience *dislocation* (step 2), where the small circle indicates that dislocations continuously occur, yet they are routinely absorbed as a consequence of the radical contingency of social objectivities. In most cases, fantasies impede and contain expressions of grievance and conflict, so dislocation does not lead to any significant questioning, let alone overhauling, of the regime. On occasion, however, dislocations provoke some de-naturalisation of practices and discourses. Actors may then to question the *status quo* and potentially to bring about radical change by engaging in *supplanting political logics* (step 3).

Pressures for radical change may be disarmed by established political logics whose suturing effect is to reassert the grip of hegemonic ideology. When *suturing logics* prevail, conflict is framed as reformist, and social order is maintained (step 4b); when *supplanting logics* triumph, conflict is framed as radical (step 4a), potentially leading to a change of regime. Imaginaries (*fantasmatic logics*) may therefore promote radical change, or they may instead foster a re-naturalisation of established social logics (dotted lines in both figures 1 and 2).



Acknowledging that both reformist and radical forms of conflict occur in a dynamic process (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), we take the example of work organisation in the gig economy to illustrate how social, political and fantasmatic logics combine to impede the eruption of radical conflict.

### **Econormativity: Individualisation and Hegemonic Ideology Dissected**

The conditions of possibility for radical conflict to emerge and, eventually, to alter the prevailing regime are historically contingent: they depend on particular assumptions, norms, discourses, and practices that, being hegemonic in that moment, take on a universal or ostensibly natural authority (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Gramsci, 1971). Accordingly, we frame our study of conflict in the context of the gig economy within the regime of neoliberalism. In this particular form of capitalism, responsibilities associated with the modern state (e.g., labour legislation or welfare provisions) are redirected *from* a preoccupation with regulating exchange *to* the optimisation of competition (Harvey, 2007; Moisander et al., 2018; Read, 2009; Springer, 2016).

When addressing this shift, a plethora of analytical angles have been privileged, such as the expulsion of vulnerable and ‘non-conforming’ subjects from job markets or even the society (Sassen, 2014) and the significance of violence (Costas & Grey, 2019), including studies that make specific reference to its presence in the gig economy (Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro & Whelan, 2021).

Our focus is on less extreme cases of exclusion or exploitation (e.g., involving physical violence, Muntaner, 2018) in which fantasies and political logics for explaining the expression and suppression of mundane manifestations of radical conflict. The conditions of possibility for radical demands are, we contend, not considered as emerging from unbearable violence, but rather from a collective process of dealing with grievances and disputes in

settings that are comparably pacified. Our particular interest is in how the ethos of neoliberalism undermines democratic ways of dealing with conflict (Brown, 2019). We understand it as a regime that shrinks the political spectrum and discredits collective action by framing it as something which impedes competitiveness in labour markets. Neoliberal regimes thereby forestall and even outlaw manifestations of radical conflict.

It is in this context that we introduce the concept of econormativity. With this term, we aim to convey how the conditions of possibility for the insurgence of radical conflict are impeded, but not extinguished, by specific facets of neoliberalism. In the case of gig work, it harbours positive narratives of freedom through self-entrepreneurship (Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018; Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019) but it is also at the forefront of the use of exploitative algorithmic practices (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). Econormativity refers to a process that frames criticisms of, and challenges to, market-centric work organisation as “irrational” because they transgress the ideology of unfettered competitiveness. As a form of biopolitical governmentality (Foucault, 2008), econormativity attends to how the ethos of neoliberalism applies particular economic principles in ways that exert pervasive, structural effects. It also attends to this ethos as a medium of self-formation that invites and incentivises actors to embrace and enjoy the self-entrepreneurial status ascribed to them – a fantasy that significantly impedes, without ruling out, engagement in radical conflict. Declining the invitation of economic reductionism to frame neoliberal subjects as the personification of economic categories, econormativity gives insights into why, for example, contractors’ grievances so rarely escalate in radical demands for a change of regime.

The *Logics* framework does not discount the presence of coercion and symbolic violence (Gamble, 1994; Springer, 2016), nor does it deny the dire toll that most precarious forms of employment exert on social actors in a position of powerlessness or exploitation (Bajwa et

al., 2018; Muntaner, 2018). But it does facilitate awareness of the explanatory power of elements of econormativity for accounting for the reproduction of work organisation (e.g., gig work) in the face of violence and degradation. In sum, *Logics* provides a framework of concepts for characterising and explicating the complexities of neoliberal governmentality that goes beyond essentialist or structuralist explanations (as in the case of CLS – see Gandini, 2019).

We now argue that social, political and fantasmatic logics can be projected in two different dimensions: *individualisation* and *hegemonic ideology*. In this way, econormativity elucidates the theorisation of conflict through the *Logics*' lens (see Figure 1). Individualisation is disaggregated into “responsibilisation” and “quantification” (as forms of *social* as well as *political* logics); and hegemonic ideology is split into the elements of “universalism” and “disembeddedness” (embodying *political* and *fantasmatic* logics), whose analytic purchase, we contend, is increased by their combination and interaction (see Figure 2). Several different critiques of neoliberalism are brought into dialogue within the context of gig work in order to theorise conflict. And, in combination, the four elements of econormativity provide a critical explanation of how conflict is disarmed and de-escalated through reformist framings, even when radical demands are made. Latent discontent and conflict are not eliminated, but radical challenges to the prevailing regime are thereby forestalled.

#### *Individualisation: responsibilisation and quantification*

Social and political logics in the context of neoliberal (gig) work can be subsumed and theorised as the naturalisation of the discourses and practices of self-entrepreneurship and (algorithmic) quantification. Hence, with individualisation we aim to convey a specific facet of neoliberalism: its role in reproducing social dynamics “sanitised” from collective solidarity, and its ability to provide technical tools that can maximise the marketisation of every aspect of human life (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). Nonetheless,

individualisation can become a political logic, hence contesting the social order – as when self-responsibilisation is questioned, or when technology is used to organise collectively (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro & Whelan, 2021).

*Responsibilisation* refers to the legal, social, and managerial adoption of discourses and practices that ascribe responsibility to individuals for their success, wellbeing, and welfare. For Shamir (2008: 8), ‘as a technique of governance, [it is] premised on the construction of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring [individuals’] entrepreneurial disposition’. Responsibilisation has two dimensions: practical, as it shifts labour conflict from the collective to the individual; and ethical, as it assumes that each provider of labour is ontologically responsible for its formation and delivery, both present and future.

Responsibilisation is a central tenet of the ‘homo economicus [as] an entrepreneur of itself’ (Foucault, 2008: 226), of which the gig economy is an exemplary case. In it, each life is a project devoted to accumulating human capital to be traded on the labour market (Bloom & Cederström, 2009). Responsibilisation is most penetrating when it substitutes any form of collective solidarity with a (forced) individualised striving for wellbeing, welfare, and work (Fleming, 2017a). Each person is, in principle, then responsible for him/herself and is “entitled to nothing” from any other quarter. As a *social logic* of neoliberal regimes, responsibilisation hinders collective forms of conflict because grievances are (re)framed as a personal, not collective, problem. Responsibility to accumulate human capital, and thereby acquire value, is placed squarely upon individuals who are cast as atomised suppliers of labour (Standing, 2011).

In this context, gig work may be valued as a way of addressing the “personal problem” of falling real wages by supplementing income, and/or as a way of avoiding the subservience and indignity ascribed to being tied to a single employer with fixed hours (Moisander et al.,

2018; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019). It is in this sense that, by privileging and empowering *suturing* logics, responsabilisation displaces and weakens *supplanting* political logics that require concerted political mobilisation (Kelly, 1998).

*Quantification.* The social logic of responsabilisation is advanced through quantification – that is, the extensive use of technologies-of-self to record, measure and quantify all aspects of life (Moore, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). By deploying a self-referential system of feedback, these technologies displace broader, more structural understandings of grievances (see also Burawoy, 1979a,b). Technologies-of-self (Foucault, 2008) provide seemingly objective information – measures, rankings, and assessments – to track and (self)monitor performance. While not new (Marx, 1867/1976), platform corporations develop and apply tools, namely mobile apps, that escalate data granularity and complexity to a magnitude capable of subverting most forms of collective action (Gandini, 2019; Han, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

In the case of the gig economy, these technologies (of self) are evident in the use of ratings and prompts, and in the scope for the pleasures of gamification associated with the short-termism of tasks (Moore, 2017). *Social logics* are (re)affirmed when potential dislocation is contained by cues that suggest possibilities for recovering from negative feedback or a drop in performance (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). Apps are designed to capture the attention and compulsive engagement of users (Williams, 2018), shutting out or devaluing thinking devoted to processing complex issues, underlying causes, or long-term solutions. However, an unintended consequence of their use is that unilateral changes may be experienced as a kind of cyber despotism that dislocates users: they can activate *political logics* when gig workers become sceptical about the design and purpose of platforms. In turn,

this scepticism can stimulate forms of subversion and collective resistance that disrupt their operations (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

*Hegemonic ideology: universalism and disembeddedness*

Whereas individualisation is amplified and legitimised by the social and political logics of neoliberalism, hegemonic ideology incorporates fantasies, including those of universalism and disembeddedness. Attentiveness to fantasies does not deny, or seek to detract from, the material conditions structured by neoliberalism (e.g., the lack of alternative forms of employment for gig workers, Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020), but it does acknowledge their role in enabling the routine reproduction and potential transformation of those conditions.

*Universalism.* Neoliberalism has a universalist dimension as it draws from assumptions of rationality and boundaryless individual freedom (Hayek, 1960/2013). It differs from ways of organising social relations within *social* market economies because the latter are constructed in opposition to an acknowledged and legitimate “other” that they intended to restrain or regulate (Gill, 2002; Wallerstein, 2011). Neoliberalism is, in contrast, a comparatively totalising fantasy: ‘society’s life could be summarised [in] economic categories [...] making up the whole community’ (Wolin, 2016: 269), and therefore ‘the primacy of economy and its representation [are] the “real” constitution of society’ (Wolin, 2016: 564). In this view, what does not respond to economic criteria is simply “unreal” or redundant, including fantasies of social or workplace justice that can motivate and underpin radical conflict.

As a social order governed by universals, neoliberalism more closely resembles the Church and Empires (Hardt & Negri, 2001), where it is assumed that nothing else is legitimate. What these regimes also share is the adoption of an ideology which divides the world in two spheres, beatific and horrific – of progress, prosperity, and civilisation, and its abject ‘other’

(also known as ‘asymmetric counter concepts’, Koselleck, 1979/2004). Collective action is demonised for placing illegitimate restrictions upon the unfettered operation of markets and the sovereignty and freedom of its participants (Hayek, 1960/2013; Friedman, 1962). Hence, forms of radical confrontation questioning these ontological assumptions are illegitimate as they hinder fantasmatic logics of endless growth, as well as of individual freedom and its responsibilities.

*Disembeddedness* points to how, within neoliberalism, the political basis for economy is ostensibly removed from all social relations (Callon, 1998; Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005; Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1957; Rand, 1967). In the words of Hayek, ‘the ultimate basis of the market as a disembedded institution itself is the commodification of human labour’ (1960/2013: 345). Since Adam Smith (Cochoy, Giraudeau & McFall, 2010), the price system has been sanctified as the silver bullet, or guarantor, of an impartial distribution of symbolic and material goods. Integral to the performative fantasies of neoliberalism, it ‘disembed[s] capital from the [...] web of social and political constraints’ (Harvey, 2007: 11). As neoliberal policies have gained traction, they have tended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005): neoliberal thinking has increasingly framed and shaped self-understandings and the enactment of social relations around the dogma of market-rationality (Fourcade, Ollion & Algan, 2015). As such, disembeddedness constitutes a fantasmatic logic that “prevents” dislocations that arise from social justice concerns escalating into political logics that challenge economic thinking.

#### *Econormativity at work*

Combined, the four elements of “econormativity” convey ways in which neoliberal practices and institutions frame conflicts in a *reformist* way, thereby animating suturing political logics that obstruct the ability to imagine or create radical alternatives. In the gig economy, self-employed contractors are vulnerable to the grip of the fantasmatic logics of human capital

and self-entrepreneurship; and *suturing political logics* either celebrate or obscure how markets ‘control when and where [contractors] work, penalise them for declining jobs, and set non-negotiable prices and quality standards’ (Silberman, 2017: 17). The despotic platform replaces the despotic boss but in a way that passes largely unnoticed, given its depersonalised form (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020).

In (critical) structuralist analysis, typified by CLS, ‘ignorance’ of how markets, perfected by platforms, institutionalise inequality and mask domination is framed as a manifestation of ‘false-consciousness’ with regard to the real exploitative position of sellers of labour in relation to its purchasers (e.g., Kelly, 1998). In poststructuralist analysis (e.g., variants of CMS), in contrast, there is no assumption of a positive structure from which workers’ objective or “real” interests can be inferred. Accordingly, the concept of “econormativity” accounts for how resistance (e.g., to neoliberal gig work organisation) is impeded by a hegemonic ideology that frames opposition as logically absurd, emotive and tout court ‘barbaric’ (Luhmann, 2008).

*Logics* advances a form of analysis that takes seriously how the established conception of “everyone is equal before the impersonal operation of the market” is framed alluringly as freeing labour from pre-rational, feudal regimes (Fourcade, Ollion & Algan, 2015); and how, in the contemporary context, this understanding is extended to the release of sellers of labour from the yoke and degradation of being an employee (Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020). Such ideas, it is conjectured, operate to forestall, or discredit, expressions of grievance and conflict, anticipating the “end of history” in a society where dissent is pathologised as symptomatic of individual deficiency and failure (Crouch, 2011), rather than ascribed to a deficit of social justice. Grievances are then routinely situated within a reformist framework and are thereby neutralised in response to the exercise of coercive means (Springer, 2016), or ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1979), resulting in a



reinforcement of the normalisation of established relations. However, the appeal and grip of such forms of accountability are contingent. They are therefore vulnerable to radical critique, rather than reformist accommodation, when fantasies are frustrated: grievances can then erupt. So, while the potential threat of conflict being resolved through radical transformation is averted or contained by suturing political logics, the possibility of it becoming radicalised is never eliminated.

## **Dynamics of Neoliberalism and the Case of Gig Work Organisation**

We have situated gig work organisation within the regime of neoliberalism, where a model of corporate governance harnessed to shareholder value maximisation promotes a precarity (Standing, 2011) that reflects and reinforces growing inequalities (Amis, Munir, Lawrence, Hirsch & McGahan, 2018; Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020; Cobb, 2016). Gig work transfers the risks associated with unproductive down time and accidents from the purchaser to the provider, so that employer costs (e.g., national minimum wage, sick leave, etc.) are minimised (Ravenelle, 2019). And dislocations attributed to the restrictive practices of *organised* labour are expunged. Low paid and/or precarious jobs are created, and profitable growth generated, by minimising labour market regulations (Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Harvey, 2007). These inequities invite questions of fairness and justice. To date, however, the transfer of risk and increased precarity has been largely masked or normalised. Indeed, the inequities of self-employment are routinely recuperated as a benefit when gig work is conceived to offer an escape from the subordination and degradation of “standard” forms of employment where labour is seen to be enslaved to managerial prerogative and rigid working hours (see Figure 2).

As one self-employed delivery rider who had suffered broken bones while working explained, ‘Deliveroo don’t care [...] because you’re an independent contractor’. Yet this rider

also volunteers that ‘the work itself is really good because the algorithm is the boss, [giving a] sense of freedom’. For another rider, gig work is ‘actually like a reasonable shit job because that illusion of freedom is really strong[.] You’re not selling yourself so there is no emotional labour in it’ (Woodcock & Graham, 2020: 72-4). The implication here is that many, if not all, jobs are ‘shit’ (at least when compared to leisure), but the sense of freedom of gig work is palpable *even if* it is also recognised to be largely illusory.

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Insert Figure 2 and Table 2 about here  
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We now move to the analysis of the interrelations between critical logics, conflict and elements of econormativity (see also table 2). Beginning with step 1 in figure 2, the *regime* of neoliberalism structures *social logics*: it makes gig work, based on quantification and technologies-of-the-self possible. Step 2, represented as a small circle, suggests how *dislocations* are endemic: for example, covert or latent grievances erupt in demands that include reform of the relationship between gig workers and purchasers of their labour. Contractors may express discontent about their precarious status by, for example, switching to a competitor, or by voicing their grievances privately to friends and relatives. Such grievances have the potential to escalate into radical conflict, but they do so only when their resolution is believed to require *radical*, transformative change, and so activates *political logics*. Routinely, grievances are disarmed rather than escalated. Entrenched social logics (e.g., ‘radical responsibility’, Fleming, 2017a) are recuperated and reproduced with minimal or no reforms (keeping subjects in the loop of step 2). Material concerns, legal impediments, and technologies-of-self intertwine to fragment and narrow attention in respect of, for example, the short-term and casual nature of the contracts between providers and purchasers of labour. They buffer dislocations (“I can quit when I want”, “I can always work for another firm”, “I need this money now”). Conflict is then minimal, silent, or latent: the grip of the

*fantasmatic logics* of disembodiedness and universality covers over dislocation (dotted lines).

Nonetheless (step 3), there are instances when dislocation cannot be contained, and social relations are not re-naturalised. Changes in an algorithm might unilaterally disconnect contractors from the platform if they fail to meet efficiency goals for reasons beyond their control (Kellogg et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017, 2020). Grudging compliance, routinely compensated by a sense of entrepreneurship and autonomy, may then boil over into confrontation and potential radicalisation as the appeal and grip of previous objects of identification weakens. There is then increased vulnerability and receptiveness to the allure of ‘new objects and discourses [like alternative designations] that [potentially] fill the lack made visible by the dislocatory event’ (Howarth, 2013: 162). A comparatively radical demand for legal recognition and treatment as a worker or employee, rather than as a self-employed contractor, may then become more widely and loudly voiced.

In response to such mounting conflict, political logics are activated (rectangle *Political Logics 1*). Deliveroo riders, for example, may no longer resign themselves to the inevitability of changes imposed upon them by the company (activating *supplanting* political logics), whereas other riders, and the gig organisations themselves, may attempt to preserve the *status quo* (activating *suturing* political logics): “it is their problem!”, “do not take away my job”, “I am happy this way”, “they are just moaning”. Other stakeholders, like restaurants or customers, may reinforce this *suturing* logic – as when a petition not to ban Uber in London received half million signatures (Guardian, 2017). Those who are affected or concerned may challenge the programming of algorithms, but not necessarily the use of algorithms *per se*, or the absence of riders’ input into their design. Grievances are aired but “econormative” elements may ensure that they are sutured. When successful, this *reformist* framing of conflict leads to a re-naturalisation of social logics (step 4a).

Nonetheless, when grievances are not sutured, then *radical* conflict can erupt in “impossible” political demands (step 4b). In this case, a second wave of *supplanting* political logics challenges assumptions upon which the relationship between the providers and purchasers of gig labour are based (rectangle *Political Logics 2*). Illustratively, providers of labour can unrepentantly reject the designation of being self-employed contractors by engaging in collective actions of withdrawing their labour. As “responsibilisation” loses its grip, contractors may unionise (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), activating radical, contesting political logics. In turn, this may provoke the intervention of a stronger *suturing* political logic taking the form, for example, of institutional violence, expulsions from the app, and blacklisting: ‘two days after the first protest, two organisers were found guilty of participation in a workers’ assembly prior to the strike and lost their jobs’ (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017). Box 2 provides a further illustrative example of this.

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Insert Box 2 about here  
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It is in this moment, when supplanting political logics have the potential of overhauling the regime, that *econormativity* operates to reframe conflict as reformist: step 5 refers to the combined effect of all four elements of econormativity in impeding radical conflict to achieve radical organisational and social change. Insofar as elements of universalism and disembeddedness remain, fantasmatic logics (dotted line) continue to be activated, bonding subjects to the prevailing regime. Hence, most self-employed contractors do not join unions, let alone participate in strike action, even though there is no legal barrier to doing so; managers do not change the gig business model; and regulators cling to market rationality as the guiding principle of policy making. Residual faith in the superiority of the market, as a mechanism for allocating all kinds of resources, results in the continued framing of issues

primarily in terms of their economic meaning and value (Harvey, 2007), and thereby reduces the risk of economic issues becoming mixed up, or conflicted, with social ones.

Of critical importance, the ethos of neoliberalism engenders a difficulty in imagining and devising viable alternatives: the grip of econormativity makes it difficult to think, let alone act, beyond the established social logics of neoliberalism (TINA; see Crouch, 2011; Fisher, 2009). Radical demands can thereby become evacuated from the realm of the possible. Strikes have, to date, achieved mainly reformist outcomes (see Box 1). The most recent ruling in the UK and in the EU (Financial Times, 2021) may precipitate pressures to change the status of gig labour from contractors into workers or even employees. However, as we write, Uber in the UK is insisting that it will pay only for the actual time worked and will not compensate drivers for any waiting time (Butler, 2021).

Any change of status must therefore be viewed cautiously as it may amount to little more than a comparatively small, first step in challenging and replacing the established ‘structure of employment, ownership and control’ which, of course, ‘implies so much more than fighting to be reorganized as an employee’ (Fleming, 2017b: 38-9). Since the change of status from independent contractor to “worker” or even “employee” mitigates but does not radically alter ‘the social institutions, principles and assumptions which embody and generate social inequality (Fox, 1974: 284), self-employed contractors may establish or join alternative, cooperative forms of work organisation<sup>viii</sup>. Indeed, in a context where there are recurrent legal as well as moral challenges to substitution of contractors for workers and employees, it has been suggested that a cooperative basis of ownership (and control) ‘may prove to be more sustainable’ (Healy, Nicholson & Pekarek, 2017: 241). Table 3 summarises these debates.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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## Discussion

In this paper we have attended to the dynamics of conflict which we have illustrated by reference to work within the gig economy. We have discussed how neoliberal fantasies depicting gig labour as an opportunity for freedom and self-entrepreneurship are rooted in the equation of justice with the unimpeded operation of (ostensibly) disembedded, impersonal markets. We now discuss three main implications of our work. First, the sense that we have made of conflict by distinguishing between its *reformist* and *radical* framings. Second, our engagement of *Logics*, so to explicate the possible escalation of grievances into radical conflict within the complex dynamics of social reproduction and transformation. And third, we identify continuities and differences between platform-mediated gig work and other forms of precarious work (Standing, 2011).

### *Making sense of conflict in work organisation(s): Reformist and radical framings*

From a (radical) structuralist perspective, any flexibility and autonomy ascribed to work, especially if it is ‘unskilled’ (e.g., delivery riders), tends to be viewed as little more than a deceptive façade invoked to establish, and defend, on-demand business models. Without denying the exploitative nature of such work, we have complemented this perspective with an appreciation of how the flexibility and sovereignty experienced by suppliers of labour may be welcomed and internalised – so that they are then more inclined to preserve, rather than dismiss, the benefits ascribed to their self-employed contractor status.

We have related the expansion of gig labour to elements of econormativity. On one hand, established modes of management are replaced by “responsibilisation”, enabled by platforms and algorithms (Fleming, 2017a; Kellogg et al., 2020; Srnicek, 2017). On the other hand, “disembeddedness” indicates that labour relations are defined as purely market transactions, so conflict between employers and workers is (formally) defined out of existence (Bloom &

Cederström, 2009). The hegemony of neoliberal human capital theory means, at least in principle, that ‘each person is already their own means of production’ such that ‘the intractable conflict [between labour and its purchaser] at the heart of the capitalist labour process must logically dissolve’ (Fleming, 2017a: 696). Of course, what is logical is not necessarily enacted.

In principle, neoliberal actors are expected to embody ‘market-based values in all of their judgments and practices’ (Hamann, 2009: 38). However, to presume that the totalising ambition of the ethos of neoliberalism is enacted in its practical application is to overlook possible areas of contestation, including disputation over the designation of gig workers as self-employed contractors – a flashpoint where firms are potentially vulnerable to *radical* challenge that imperils the viability of their business models. Sensed injustice prefigures an eruption of conflict that is prototypically *radical*, rather than *reformist* (rectangle *Political Logics 2* in Figure 2). In this framing, grievances cannot be solved by improving the terms and conditions of contracting. Rather, resolution of the grievances requires recognition of contractors as workers, with all the benefits to users of publicly funded services as well as to the labour providers.

When positioned within a *reformist* framing, grievances expressed by gig workers are readily appeased (e.g., by marginally improving pay and/or conditions), ignored (e.g., by refusing transparency about how algorithms work), or sanctioned (e.g., by disconnecting contractors from the app). Alternatively, when grievances are directly associated with wider issues of inequality and injustice, *reformist* measures are insufficient, with the resulting conflict posing a more *radical* challenge to the status quo and its return to business-as-usual. Accounts of conflict that presume the necessity and/or legitimacy of the established order are then regarded as problematical: self-employed contractors, for example, may see no necessity, and have no longer sufficient desire, to be ‘governed like that and at that cost’ (Foucault, 1997:

113). A search then begins, or is renewed, for more radical remedies in the pursuit of liberty; yet alternatives are hard to envision due to hegemony and disembeddedness, and are frequently reduced to marginal, pragmatic, and placating solutions, like small cooperatives (Scholz, 2017).

*The value of logics and the question of interests*

*Logics* assumes the incompleteness of every social order. That, in turn, renders regimes inherently vulnerable to forms of contestation and political transformation. Any ontic *closure* – like the designation of suppliers of labour as employed vs self-employed – is susceptible to dis-closure of its impossibility, and its potential replacement. We have sought to demonstrate how adoption of the *Logics* framework has productive consequences for the *critical* study of organisations, including (workplace) conflict, and for what is commonly described as “conflicts of interest” (e.g., between purchasers and providers of labour).

*Logics* offers an alternative, postfoundational approach to the study of work organisation and employment relations. Many critical studies – generally framed within the assumptions of radical structuralism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), including versions of critical realism – assume a ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Derrida, 1976) that minimises contingency by identifying a privileged point, or positive ontology, from which critique can be authoritatively produced. Notably, they assume the possibility of attributing essential or objective interests to particular groups or classes, and then they readily ascribe ignorance or false consciousness to those who are seen not to pursue the interests ascribed to them. We have argued instead that establishing this privileged and seemingly “objective” point of reference is a political exercise – and that poststructuralism can help deconstructing it. Indeed, the negative, post-foundationalist ontology of *Logics*, positions its claims in a different, less secure space.



By rejecting all forms of essentialist analysis, through *Logics* we illuminate how “interests” are ascribed and organised in ways that precipitate or mitigate conflicts. For example, grievances about gig work organisation are seen to be animated by positive or negative identifications with notions of flexibility and autonomy. We also elucidate how the conditions of actions are ones of possibility – such as creating or entering contracts in which labour is designated as a worker, or as an employer, or as a self-employed contractor; and where grievances may be articulated within *reformist* or *radical* framings of conflict.

*Beyond agency work: context and contestation*

When considering the rise of gig work organisation, it is instructive to put it in perspective by, for example, recognising continuities with the rapid growth of “temping” (temporary agency work) from the 1970s (see Peck & Theodore, 2002), when neoliberal conditions that favoured self-regulating market rationality and individualisation began to gain traction (Harvey, 2007). Temping engaged a ‘reserve army [...] always ready for exploitation’ (Marx, 1867/1976: 784), comprising mainly females, drawn into the labour market by a combination of earning opportunities and available technologies (like the telephone) for conducting flexible, disintermediated work. The parallels between the rise of temping in the 1970s/80s and the contemporary expansion of gig work are, in some respects, quite striking: the platform replaces the telephone; the automobile becomes the delivery rider’s bike. In each case, the provider of labour relates to its purchaser as a (responsibilised) individual; and technology operates as an ‘instrument of atomization’ (Burawoy, 1985: 265). And, of course, the temp, like many gig workers, had ‘no security of contract [and] receives no fringe benefits’ (Burawoy, 1985: 265). Insufficiently acknowledged and integrated into (radical) structuralist analyses of precarious work, however, is an adequate appreciation of how, in the eyes of many temps and gig workers, this casualised, on-demand form of working compared

favourably to alternative – unpaid or unfulfilling – forms of work (Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020).

Indeed, temping appealed to workers symbolically, in the guise of increased autonomy and self-determination, as well as materially, in the form of greater financial independence. Illustratively, for female temporary workers in the 1970s and 1980s the experience was, as Burawoy notes, one of ‘greater freedom to balance domestic work and low-paid wage labour’ (Burawoy, 1985: 264-5). He also comments that the female temp ‘relates to her employer as an individual[.] Unions are barred and fellow employees unknown’ (1985: 264). However, when characterising temp work as an experience of ‘oppressive isolation... in the name of enhanced autonomy’ (1985: 264), Burawoy marginalises the valorisation of the increased sense autonomy by women suffering ‘oppressive isolation’ in their ‘material circumstances’ (1985: 264) as mothers and housewives confined to undertaking domestic labour in the private sphere. Radical structuralist analysis gives insufficient weight to how temping appealed to, and promoted, liberal feminist aspirations of self-entrepreneurialism and self-determination in which the struggle for women’s rights was equated to embracing the (reformist) opportunities presented to them as casualised participants in this flexible labour market.

Incorporated into poststructuralist *Logics* is an appreciation of the attraction and grip of notions such as “greater freedom” and “self-empowerment” as well as critique of it. Central to the *Logics* framework is an attentiveness to how, for example, the mediation of purchaser-provider relationships in platform capitalism can induce and reinforce a sense of sovereignty (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Ravenelle, 2019) – not least because, in principle, working hours are flexible, and jobs can be rejected. It takes more adequate account of the complexities of what Burawoy characterises as new forms of ‘despotism’ (Burawoy, 1985: 148-152) driven by the neoliberal restructuring of capitalist relations of production. This includes, but it cannot be

reduced to, ‘the “rational” tyranny of capital mobility over the collective worker’ (Burawoy, 1985: 150). In the case of gig work organisation, as with temping, the business model is seen to be based upon a “rational” *circumvention*, or manipulation, of legislation, resulting from decades of often violent struggle, whose purpose was to establish and normalise the standard, permanent contract of employment (Peck & Theodore, 2002). Conversely, the employer stratagem of supplanting and displacing that contract increases precarity and instability (Standing, 2011). By hiring on demand, self-employed labour, the power of the “collective worker” is dismantled. But this stratagem also invites horrific fantasmatic logics with regard to the justice and sustainability of business models based upon hiring independent contractors (e.g., gig workers and other kinds of temps), rather than workers or employees. These logics contest reformist framings of conflict and potentially radicalise grievances by translating them into demands for transformative organisational and social change.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, our purpose has been to revive the analysis of conflict in management and organisation studies. We have sought to move beyond the scholarly framing of conflict as something that can be recuperated for reformist purposes (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; De Dreu, 2011; Rahim, 2010; Shah, Peterson, Jones & Ferguson, 2021; Zhao et al., 2019), thereby maintaining the *status quo* (Contu, 2019). We have shown how, when radical demands arise, they are met with discourse and practices that are unreceptive to inequality or redistributive concerns. Within the normative framing of neoliberalism, such alternatives are construed as irrational or politically distorted. Subjected to responsabilisation and disembeddedness, precarious social actors within neoliberal regimes are systemically denied access to what ‘one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 82).

With specific reference to gig work, we coined the term *econormativity* to convey how criticisms of the market-centrism of ‘on demand’ labour are considered implausible, if not “irrational”, as they fly in the face of neoliberal ideology of unfettered competitiveness. As a form of biopolitical governmentality (Foucault, 2008), neoliberalism is not just a distinctive set of economic principles that privileges markets and competitiveness. It is also performative in processes of self-formation, resulting in actors embrace and “enjoyment” of the fantasies of self-entrepreneurialism that are visited upon them by neoliberal thinking. However, when the endemic presence of contingency is assumed, as it is within the *Logics* framework, such econormativity is not conceived as totalising as the suturing of dislocations by political and fantasmatic logics is always fragile and temporary. There are therefore potentials for progressive reforms to be supported as a productive step in the direction of more radical, transformative change.

From a poststructuralist perspective, it can be argued that 'the emptiness of the entrepreneurship discourse is precisely what makes it attractive [: it is] vague and ambivalent' (Musílek, Jamie, & McKie, 2020: 518). It is those performative effects that are here understood to impede (without ruling out) the translation of grievances into radical conflict. By better comprehending the dynamics of its generation and containment, our interest lies in appreciating the potential of conflict to precipitate radical transformation – an approach to the analysis of conflict at work that resonates with a growing interest in inequality and precarity, and questions of how new regimes of work organisation may exacerbate and transform, rather than alleviate and reproduce, entrenched social divisions (Amis et al., 2018; Bapuji et al., 2020; Cobb, 2016; Kellogg et al., 2020; Suddaby et al. 2018). In this context, probing questions are raised about the fairness or justice of expanding forms of work organisation. To understand where and how the status quo, as illustrated by the prevailing regime of gig work,

is vulnerable to challenge, is a first and crucial step in stirring up radical transformation (Conger & Scheiber, 2019; Butler, 2021).

Studying conflict as a source of transformative change can, we suggest, be further advanced in two associated directions. First, studies can shift away from *reformist* framings of conflict, in which grievances are recuperated (e.g., by reaffirming the virtue of gig work as a liberating innovation that fosters opportunity and enables self-determination). And second, studies can contribute to *radical* framings of conflict that reject the necessity and sustainability of business models in which returns on capital are earned primarily by undercutting competitors through the curbing of labour costs (e.g., employers' contributions to benefits). Accordingly, we have sought to explicate and illustrate how, in the contemporary context, elements of “econormativity” – responsabilisation, quantification, universality and disembeddedness – limit but do not entirely deplete the capacity to imagine and enact radical, transformative change.

Our illustrative examples have been drawn from the gig economy, but it is probable that the four dimensions of econormativity are present in other domains. In academia, for instance, the Covid pandemic has forcefully highlighted discontent towards the neoliberal treatment of academic staff (as human capital) and of students (as income streams) through measures that incorporate elements of responsabilisation, quantification, universality and disembeddedness. Health concerns have been addressed by reformist measures such as “wellness virtual seminars”. Radical demands for rethinking universities as dedicated to public services have been devalued and marginalised by an entrenched valorisation of the status quo where performance metrics and associated efforts to climb league tables are prioritised. Yet, even here latent discontent remains and, indeed, it may be further stimulated by the effects of such competitive, neoliberal aims.

The neoliberal impulse is to let ‘markets decide our present and future’ by ‘abandoning the project of individual or collective mastery of existence’ (Brown, 2015: 221). Or, more precisely perhaps, markets are identified as the exclusive means of attaining such mastery. Yet, what we have termed *econormativity* is an imperfect means of securing market mastery. Each iteration activates political logics such that established practices tend to become less stable; market solutions are unsettled and lose credibility; and, as market mastery becomes more despotic (e.g., in the name of populist demands – Butler, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), resignation and resistance are induced. With discontent mounting, a quest for alternative forms of work organisation is stimulated, potentially involving ‘more deliberate constructions of existence through democratic discussion, law, policy’ (Brown, 2015: 221-222). Whether the emergence of new modalities of work will form part of a post-zombie neoliberal regime (Banerjee, 2008; Cederström & Fleming, 2012; Crouch, 2011) capable of supplanting destructive market rationality is, as Fleming (2017a) suggests, an open question; and it is one that the exercise of political logics will answer.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Our examples are drawn from location-based gig work carried out by delivery contractors, as contrasted to online platforms that typically involve other services delivered remotely from home (International Labour Office, 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> In some jurisdictions, the law prohibits self-employed workers from engaging in collective bargaining (International Labour Office, 2021).

<sup>iii</sup> Inspired by the notion of heteronormativity, econormativity combines “economic” with “normativity”. Presuming all actors to be heterosexual, heteronormativity structures social norms and expectations so that actions and social behaviours follow and reinforce heterosexual principles. Econormativity is a form of normalisation whose grip limits the extent to which alternative social and economic models can be imagined, let alone enacted.



<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, we do not see much novel “economization” going on in the sphere of employment, as it is already strongly constituted and institutionalised as “economic”.

<sup>v</sup> The evisceration of organised labour is exemplified by the (neoliberal) advice provided by Norman Tebbit, member of the British Thatcher administration in the 80s. Addressing the unemployed casualties of his government’s policies, Tebbit recalled that, in the 30s, his ‘unemployed father [...] didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work’ (Guardian, 2000). Thatcher herself famously stated: ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual[s] and [...] families[.] People must look to themselves first’ (Thatcher, 1993: 626). While these pieces of advice exemplify a *reformist* orientation to conflict, whose prescriptions are readily accommodated within the status quo, a *radical* orientation was expressed in (the collective action of) strikes or riots demanding transformative change – as exemplified in the UK during the Thatcher era by opposition to the Poll Tax, an individualised policy *par excellence*.

<sup>vi</sup> Foucault’s assessment of neoliberalism is complex and contested. Some claim that, for him, neoliberalism does not tie individuals to the truth of their identity (Dean, 2018). However, it is one thing to acknowledge that neoliberalism may increase the space for minorities and expressions of individual differences; it is quite another to claim that this expansion offers a way out of subjectification.

<sup>vii</sup> When advocating mobilization theory, Kelly (1998) acknowledges, but does not explore, the issue of identity and interest formation. While he recognises that identities may be multiple, as workers may be lesbian or gay (Kelly, 1998: 122), he consistently privileges or essentialises the worker, discounting how identities may be existentially as potent. Kelly also argues that it is unsatisfactory to regard multiple identities as ‘fragmented’ (Hall, 1992) when they may become fused and mutually reinforcing. Arguably, it is equally implausible to presume that the identity of “worker”, rather than “woman” or “environmentalist” is necessarily, rather than contingently, the most salient basis for collective action.

<sup>viii</sup> Prime examples (Scholz, 2017) in Europe are the ‘European confederation of industrial and service cooperatives’ (*cecop.coop*) and ‘CoopCycle’ (*coopcycle.org/en*).

# Figures

Figure 1 – The Logics framework of Glynos and Howarth (2007), revisited as cycle.

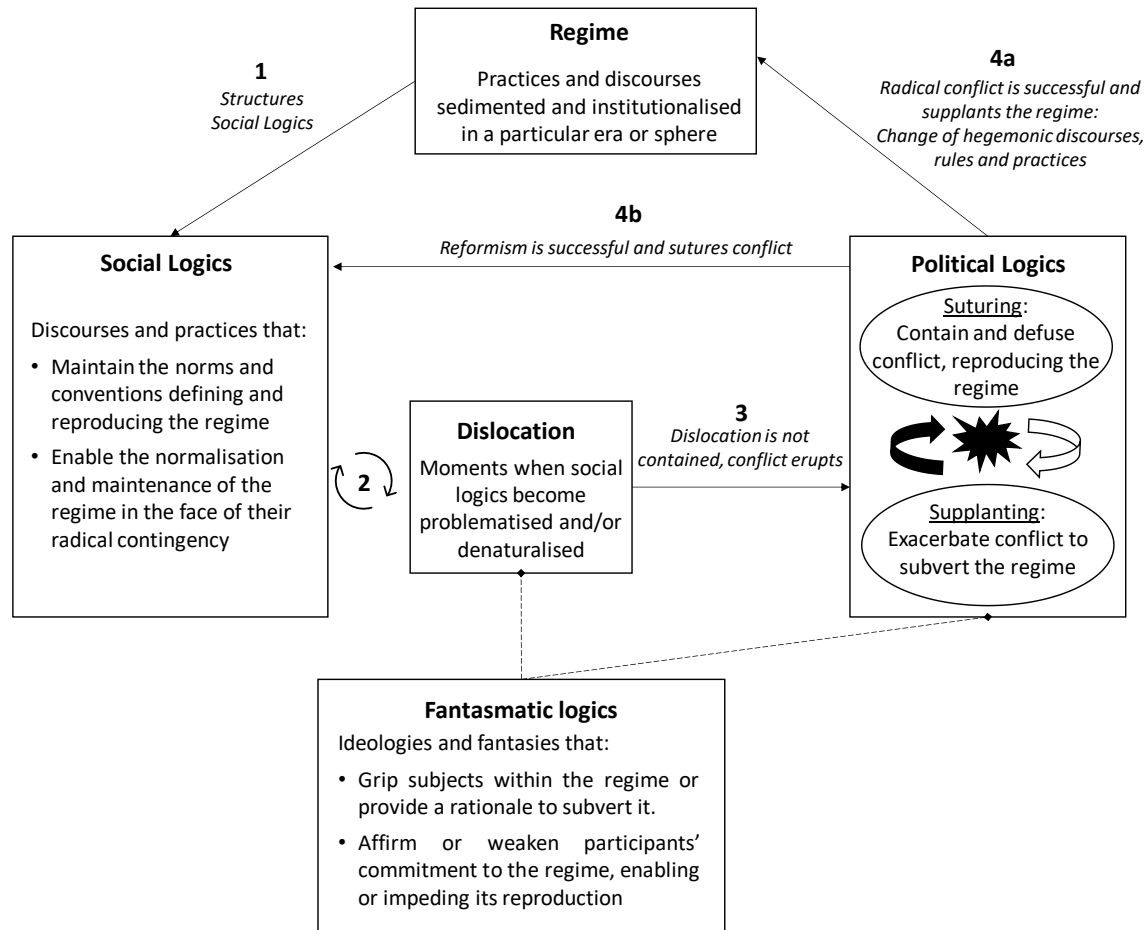
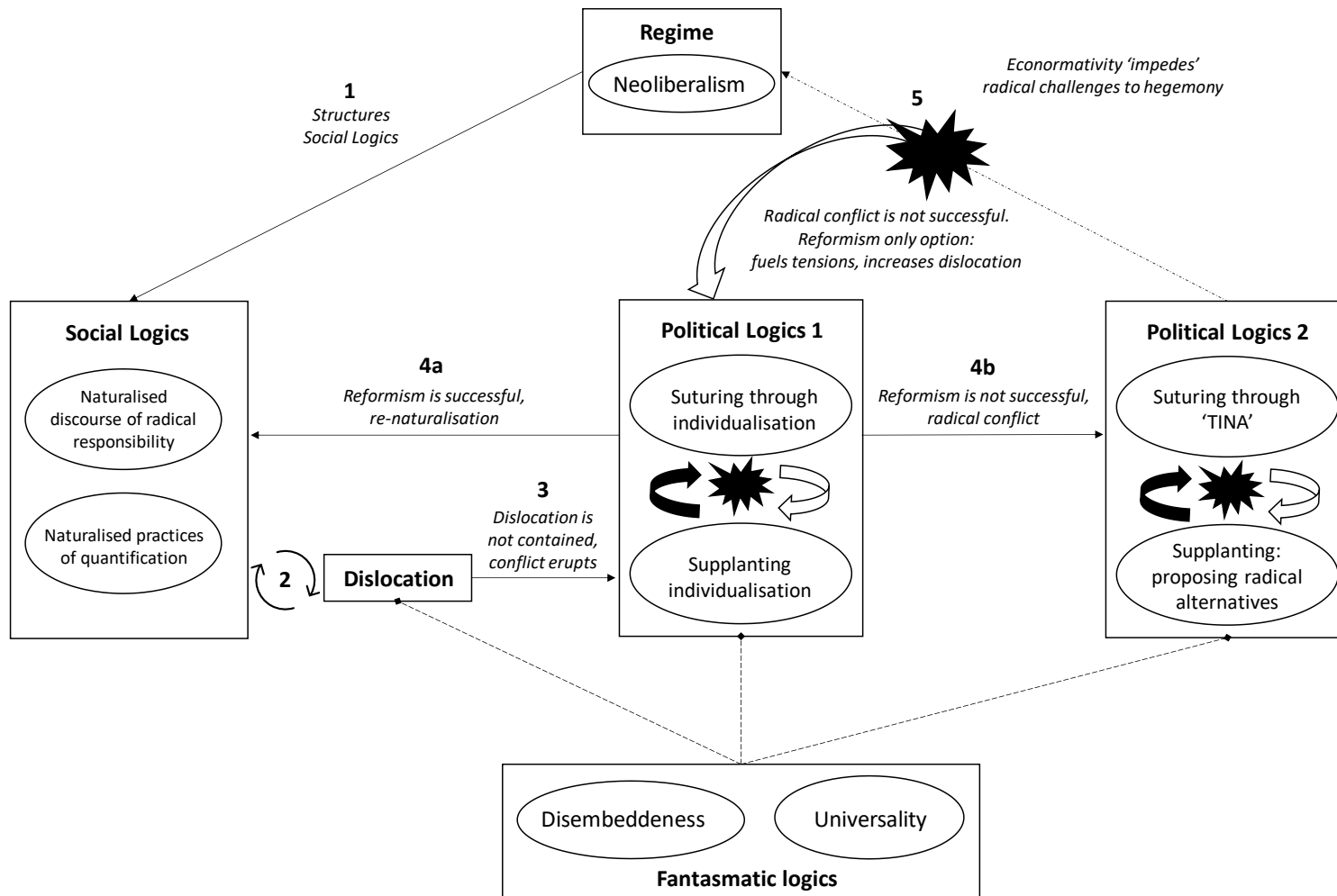


Figure 2 – The Logics framework where neoliberalism is the Regime (TINA: There Is No Alternative)



## Tables

*Table 1 - Framings of conflict in different ontologies*

Framing of conflict	Description	Analysis of, and solutions to, conflict		
		Functionalism	Structuralism	Poststructuralism
Reformist	Solutions to grievances that are accommodated within the social order (regime)	Attends to performance problem and to needs for optimisation	Tends to attribute 'false consciousness' to reformist preferences	Acknowledges appeal and 'truth' of self-dis/identifications, grip of ideology and fantasies
Radical	Solutions to grievances that challenge the social order (regime)	Disregards or pathologises radical, emancipatory demands	Attends to emancipation principally through (revolutionary) class struggle	Attends to emancipation as a continuous multidimensional (e.g., intersectional) process, radically contingent

Table 2 - Logics, conflict, and elements of econormativity (see also Figure 2)

Elements of Econormativity	Naturalised Social Logics	Political Logics disrupt Social Logics, phase 1: Neoliberal hegemonic ideology is not contested		Political Logics disrupt Social Logics, phase 2: Neoliberal hegemonic ideology is contested	
	Vulnerability to dislocation	Suturing (re-naturalise social logics)	Supplanting (revise social logics)	Suturing (reproduce regime)	Supplanting (overhaul regime)
Responsabilisation	Disarm and de-escalate dislocation	Externalises responsibility, discourages unionisation. 'I can be my own boss!'	Grievances towards firms increase; actors switch to competitors or request fairer algorithms	Attraction of new riders; responsabilisation of customers by allowing tips and compliments	Reject individualisation through unionisation and support from courts; demand for ban or total reform of gig businesses
Quantification		Fragmentation of attention; competition between peers; use of 'objective' measures	Actors contest measurements and request qualitative ones; disconnection from app	Repression: unionising and striking users are disconnected	Collective actions to confuse the algorithm; development of alternative apps
Universality	Render actors receptive to individualisation and market rationality	Negative aspects are temporary; benefits lie in long-term growth	Mass self-employment is detrimental; demand for limited market regulation	Rebuttal of non-market-based solution or State intervention; TINA	Proposal of radically alternative, fair, emancipatory social-business models; formation of courier coops; contesting TINA
Disembeddedness		Footloose firms focus on being efficient and competitive; Social issues relegated to legal compliance	Calls for social protections; attempts by courts to revive and impose other contracts of employment (e.g., as 'workers' or 'employees')	Appeal to rationality; use of mathematical language; rejection of social demands as not objective	Calls for re-embedding and solidarity; demands to subject economic rationality to social demands
<b>Conflict</b>	Minimal	Reformist		Radical	

Table 3 – Reformist vs Radical conflict in the case of gig work organisation

Framing of conflict	Description	Analysis of, and responses to, conflict		
		Functionalism	Structuralism	Poststructuralism
Reformist	Solutions to grievances affirm individualism and hegemonic ideology	Individualisation through self-care, wellbeing and increase of human capital. Extensive use of technologies-of-self to mitigate conflict by accommodating grievances (better algorithms, fairer labour conditions)	Marginal improvements dismissed as co-optation, disengagement with reformist attempts. Underappreciation of contextualised lived experiences, and over-reliance on 'questions of interest'	Appreciates how reformism is congruent with self-identifications and enjoyment of individualisation. Micro-emancipatory practices bring benefits but do not overcome endemic conflict or significantly change the regime
Radical	Solutions to grievances challenge individualism and hegemonic ideology	Emancipation ignored or reframed; only individual self-empowerment is considered. Demands incompatible with market rationality are disregarded or pathologised	Emancipation through struggle, with goal of ending class conflict. Gig work framed as inherently exploitative, as 'interests' are determined by structural positionings	Individualisation and hegemonic ideology impede radical change. Yet they do not eliminate, and may even intensify, pressures for it

*Box 1 – Deliveroo: An Illustrative Example*

*Deliveroo* transports meals to customers of outlets (e.g., restaurants) that do not have their own delivery staff. Revenues are generated from charging outlets around 30% of the cost of the food, an undeclared percentage of which is passed on to customers. Pressures to expand and reduce unit costs have resulted in changes to the (self-employed) terms and conditions of couriers' work.

In the UK, couriers have questioned these changes and pressed for improvements (e.g., raising payment from around £3 to £5 per drop, payment of £10 per hour waiting time, and £1 per mile travelled) but they have rarely challenged their self-employed status or campaigned for recognition as 'workers' or 'employees'. To manage this issue, *Deliveroo* incorporated a clause in their contracts that required them not to challenge their self-employed status in court. The clause was subsequently removed by the company, while affirming their self-employed status (see Wood, 2017).

The legality of designating *Deliveroo* couriers as self-employed was confirmed in November 2017 when the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), which oversees collective bargaining law, reached the conclusion that riders are contractors because they are no longer required to wear branded kits and could ask a substitute to perform a job for them. The changes made to *Deliveroo* couriers' contracts were introduced eleven days before the CAC ruling, enabling the company to defeat the case brought by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). The CAC ruling stated that couriers "have a right to substitute themselves both before and after they have accepted a particular job – something that would not be permissible if they were 'employees' or 'workers'" (Ainsworth, 2018: p. 11). Subsequently, fifty *Deliveroo* riders made an employment rights claim relating to the period prior to the change of contract. This challenge was parried by *Deliveroo* settling out of court for a six-figure sum - a settlement that the solicitor acting for the couriers interpreted as indicating the anticipation of a horrific scenario, for *Deliveroo*, of losing the case (Butler, 2017) which would have undermined the basis of its business model. By settling out of court, which involved no admission of liability on the part of *Deliveroo*, the potential to mobilise other self-employed contractors to contest their status was lost. As a spokesperson from the company candidly announced, presumably with its major shareholders as well as its couriers as the invisible audience: "this settlement has no impact on *Deliveroo* riders or our model" and elaborated: "[it] allows us to continue to focus on creating the well-paid, flexible work that our riders value" (Butler, 2017).

Writing as a *Deliveroo* courier, Shanks (2019; see also Cant, 2020) notes that, as self-employed contractor, he had received no protections or benefits during the year he had worked (no paternity leave, pension, cover if a bike is stolen, no rights to collective bargaining, no health and safety, and no minimum wage). He had gradually become disillusioned with the established *social logic* of the gig economy *regime* and its (ab)use of employment law which he interpreted as one in which “the business costs, risks and responsibilities *Deliveroo* would normally bear are entirely transferred on to us” (a prime example of *radical responsabilization*). Unsatisfied with *reformist* remedies to his grievances, this courier took the more *radical* step of organising collective action in response to what we have termed *dislocation* that took the form of *Deliveroo* changing the basis of payment (‘fees’). Instead of obtaining a flat rate per order, couriers received variable pay per distance. This resulted in “working longer hours for less money”.

On October 4<sup>th</sup> 2018, joint action by *Deliveroo* and *UberEATS* couriers in at least 10 UK cities was organized either by couriers or by grass-root unions, thereby mobilising the *fantasmatic* logic of debunking, discrediting and removing the self-employed designation. One advantage of being designated self-employed is the absence of any legal restriction on enacting the *political logic* of taking industrial action without a postal ballot; and couriers’ familiarity with social media has provided a cheap and effective way of informing and mobilizing otherwise atomized contractors (e.g. by using *WhatsApp*) (see also Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019).

That said, the strike fell short of enacting radical alternatives. The *Deliveroo* business model remained substantially unchallenged and radically different solutions haven’t seen the light. So, even though the social logics of the gig economy were dislocated and denaturalised, the disruption was temporary, and, at the time of writing, the hegemony remains unchallenged, potentially incubating further grievances and outbreaks of conflict.