



*Deskilling Beyond Labor: Platform Capitalism and Transformation of Market**

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Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution of the division of labor, focusing on the labor processes and deskilling debates across different phases of capitalism. Beginning with the classical works of Adam Smith and Émile Durkheim, it delves into both sociological and economic dimensions. The rise of Taylorism and Fordism, marked by the increased analyticity of tasks and the mechanization of labor, contributed to a significant decline in workers' skills. In the era of platform capitalism, new business models and digital platforms are transforming production, distribution, exchange, and consumption processes. This study explores how the concept of deskilling may adapt to these shifts, while also considering the impact of platform capitalism on market structures and the notion of the liberal individual.

Keywords: deskilling, division of labor, platform capitalism, mode of production, market structure, liberal individual

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Emeğin Ötesinde Vasıfsızlaştırma: Platform Kapitalizmi ve Pazarın Dönüşümü

Öz

Bu çalışmada, iş bölümünün tarihsel gelişimi ve kapitalizmin farklı aşamalarında emek süreçleri ve vasıfsızlaşma tartışması sosyolojik ve ekonomik boyutları ile birlikte Adam Smith'in ve Durkheim'ın klasik eserlerinden başlanarak ele alınmaktadır. Taylorizm ve Fordizm ile birlikte işlerin daha analitik hale getirilmesi ve emek süreçlerinin makineleşmesi, işçilerin becerilerinin azalmasına yol açmıştır. Platform kapitalizminin ortaya çıkışıyla birlikte, yeni iş modelleri ve dijital platformlar, üretim, bölüşüm, mübadele ve tüketim süreçlerini yeniden şekillendirmektedir. Bu bağlamda, platform kapitalizminin etkisiyle vasıfsızlaştırma tartışmasının nasıl dönüşebileceği ve vasıfsızlaşan piyasa fikri ile birlikte platform kapitalizminin piyasa ve liberal birey fikrine olan etkileri üzerinden tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: vasıfsızlaştırma, işbölümü, platform kapitalizmi, üretim biçimi, piyasa yapısı, liberal birey



1. INTRODUCTION

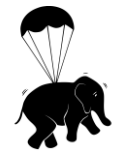
The division of labor, which refers to the delegation of specific tasks to individuals, has not only been examined from an economic perspective over the centuries but also as a sociological phenomenon. For example, as discussed by Durkheim in his 1893 book, “The Division of Labor in Society (De la Division du Travail Social)”, the division of labor is not only concerned with enhancing the productivity of a particular task or labor. According to Durkheim, the division of labor also shapes the social and moral order of society by creating a sense of solidarity among individuals who share the same work (Durkheim, 2013). Thus, the division of labor is highlighted by Durkheim as a factor that also constitutes the social.

Perhaps the most notable economical emphasis on the division of labor belongs to Adam Smith, who views it as the most significant influence on developing labor's productive forces. This emphasis is found in the very first paragraph of Smith's magnum opus, “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” (1977). Thus, the degree of division of labor in terms of which tasks are to be made more analytical or should become so, who will perform these analytical tasks, how they will be done, at what speed, and how the division of labor will affect the social structure have been topics of discussion spanning centuries. Therefore, division of labor as a concept has settled at the core of studies on labor productivity, the development of productive forces, political economy, and even the foundations and analysis of society.

In studies where the ideal form of industrial society is examined as capitalism or accepted as a natural outcome, the division of labor is addressed with technical questions about how productivity can be increased. However, in the works of the critical school and especially those discussing alternative forms of organizing industrial society, the division of labor is viewed in conjunction with a side effect: the deskilling of labor and workers.

Although the tendency of capital to push the workforce toward deskilling in pursuit of productivity became a subject of intense scrutiny following Karl Marx's political-economic critiques, it is worth noting that Adam Smith first warned about this issue. In “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”, Adam Smith forewarns of an anomaly that may arise with the advancement of the division of labor (Smith, 1977, p.1040):

“In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently to one or two. ...He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.”



Deskilling can be approached from two fundamental dimensions. *The first dimension* concerns capitalism not only as an economic ideology equated with free markets and private property but also as a form of labor organization that finds its expression par excellence in the norms of Taylorism and Fordism. Taylorism is fundamentally a management method related to the manner in which tasks are performed and how labor is controlled, with very little emphasis on technological analysis. It emerges as a concept belonging to the development chain of management methods and labor organization. According to Braverman (1998), Taylorism does not engage with irreconcilable social interests, nor does it seek to uncover or confront the reasons for this irreconcilability; instead, it accepts it as an unavoidable fact, a "natural" condition. Taylor's primary concern is the control of labor at any technological level, and he finds the fundamental method of labor control in a division of labor and specialization that is organized at the most advanced level possible. It can be argued that the degree of division of labor and specialization proposed by Taylor aligns with the advanced level quoted from Adam Smith above.

The second dimension of deskilling pertains to technological developments, specifically machines, which offer tools for direct control over the labor process. The three core principles of Taylorist management, also known as Scientific Management —(i) the removal of intellectual work from the production area, (ii) the analysis of the work process exclusively by management, and (iii) instructing workers on what, how, and at what speed to perform tasks— can be embedded into technological devices used in the workplace (Edgell and Granter, 2019, p.230). Hence, in the context of deskilling, technology is viewed as a tool that separates workers from the production process, strips them of their intellectual production capabilities, and creates a worker “subjectively expropriated” (Turchetto, 2008), devoid of skills.

Both dimensions summarized above can be understood as technological determinism, meaning that the causal forces and effects belonging to or mediated by institutions and agents are shaped through technology (Thompson and Laaser, 2021). With the transition to industrial capitalism, the labor process became easier to classify, and measure compared to earlier times. For example, the "tacit" knowledge of a steelworker, which could only be transferred through an apprenticeship in the mid-19th century (Mollona, 2022, p.21), began to be transferred to machines with examples like Fordism's assembly line during the rise of industrial capitalism.

Can deskilling today be interpreted only through the lens of assembly lines, machines, or Taylorist managerial control? This question forms the central theme of this study. Today, we are witnessing a rupture marked by the rise of “platform capitalism”, a conceptual framework that redefines how companies operate and interact with other economic actors (Srnicek, 2017). This rupture has been so profound that some argue that the term “capitalism” itself no longer applies, as there may no longer be a market. For instance, Varoufakis (2024) compares the current transformation to the shift of the 1770s and contends that defining the system with terms like “hyper-capitalism”, “platform capitalism”, or “rentier capitalism” is not merely a failure of imagination but also signifies a failure to recognize the transformation currently underway in



society. According to Varoufakis, this emerging order should be called “techno-feudalism”. Thus, the concept of deskilling becomes a term that needs to be revisited and situated within this rupture.

2. FROM INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM TO PLATFORM CAPITALISM: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DESKILLING

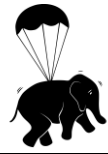
After World War II, Italy experienced rapid industrialization and economic growth, which led to significant labor migration from the south to the north of the country. This migration gave rise to a political tendency or movement aimed at interpreting and analyzing the effects of this influx on the working class. This political tendency was known as “Operaismo” (literally translated as “Workerism”), led by figures such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti. It is important to note that Operaismo was not created to contribute to the academic or historical reinterpretation of 20th-century labor struggles but rather to offer a specific methodological and political perspective that served as a foundation for the formation of revolutionary cadres in Italy. In summary, Operaismo was a political movement that sought to accelerate the path to a socialist society by analyzing production and workers and through the theories it developed. Therefore, the categories that will be outlined below can be seen as the political subjects or categories sought by Operaismo for its own purposes.

In his famous article “Factory and Society”, Tronti’s main thesis was that the capitalist mode of production occupies the entire network of social relations, becoming the master of all other areas of society (Tronti, 1962, p.51). In other words, the more and how capitalism develops, the more the organization of production will progress toward shaping the organization of society as a whole. At this fundamental point, Tronti draws on Marx’s thesis that the elements of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are different parts of a unity. According to Marx (2015, p.31), a specific mode of production determines a specific mode of consumption, distribution, and exchange, and also the relationship between these elements. Ultimately, the process always begins again with production.

2.1. The Emergence of the Mass Worker

The Operaismo movement, which analyzed the effects of a specific mode of production and examined the relations between consumption, distribution, and exchange to analyze work and workers, thus forming a political agenda, introduced the concept of the “mass worker” into the literature during this period of significant labor migration in Italy.

With the advent of Taylorism, accompanied by assembly line technology, workers became extensions of the assembly line within factories. According to the interpretation of the Operaismo movement, the political unity between engineers and workers was also attacked with the rise of Taylorism. From this point on, workers were no longer seen by engineers as direct producers but rather as “mere functionaries of the scientific organization of exploitation” (Baldi, 1972, p.8). In comparison to the master worker category, this new model of worker,



deprived of technical skills and mainly composed of individuals migrating from rural areas to factory towns, was socially rootless. Thus, the mass worker was a worker who was “subjectively expropriated” and placed under the “real domination of capital” (Turchetto, 2008, p.288).

2.2. From Mass Worker to Social Worker

The dominance of the mass worker category in the workforce and politics was shaken, especially with the 1973 oil crisis. With production shifting to Third World countries due to cost advantages and these countries growing horizontally (factory to factory) while the countries organizing production grew vertically (skyscrapers), this transformation necessitated the definition of a new worker category. This new category, which can be expanded today to include the service sector, involved workers who produced immaterial labor and worked more with intellectual and emotional labor. This class, defined by intellectual and technical labor and productive intelligence, was first referred to as the “social worker” by Alquati in the early 1970s (cited in Wright, 2002). Thus, the mass worker was left behind, and a new political subject emerged, connected to the proletarianization and massification of intellectual labor.

One of the reactions from the Operaismo movement to the emergence of this new category of social worker and its labor organization was to suggest that capital was trying to free itself from the political power gained by the mass worker (Turchetto, 2008, p.294). On the other hand, another tendency, led by Hardt and Negri, viewed the category of the social worker as a more qualified political subject that could replace the mass worker (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p.220). However, regardless of the perspective, the emergence of the social worker fundamentally altered the framework for discussing labor organization, which had previously centered on factory assembly lines and machines.

3. FROM MACHINES TO UNMANNED FACTORIES AND ECONOMIES: THE RISE OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

By the 1980s, capitalism had taken on a completely different form compared to the early years of industrial capitalism. Particularly with the spread of computers and electronics-based products, many names have been proposed for this new era, which is intertwined with techno-scientific elements and dreams. Terms such as deindustrialization, post-industrial, immaterial economy, and knowledge economy are among some of these names (Beaud, 2010, p.402). Along with the onset of this new era came futuristic dreams and sociologies that predicted that with robotics and automation, human labor would soon become obsolete and thus, the need for work would disappear, signaling the end of work (Turchetto, 2008, p.296).

Now, more than forty years later, we are faced with a more moderate literature that approaches these futuristic dreams and terminologies with caution. Srnicek (2017) refers to the current capitalist era we live in as “Platform Capitalism”. According to Srnicek, with the advancement of data science and the decreasing costs of data storage, companies required a new business



model to fully capitalize on these developments. In this context, Srnicek identifies this new business model as the “platform”, which signifies a new type of business model. The term *platform economy*, closely linked to “platform capitalism”, highlights the transformative impact of digital platforms on the economy and society. According to Steinberg (2022), this era is characterized by the dominance of American and Chinese technology giants in market valuation and the global influence of data-collecting intermediaries. Digital platforms mediate transactions that reshape not only economic activities but also social and cultural structures. In short, platforms, which are digital infrastructures that enable interactions between two or more groups, have become the driving force of today’s capitalism.

The central role of mega-platforms like Google, Amazon, and Alibaba in production, distribution, exchange, and consumption is driven by their use of algorithms, data collection, and monopolistic control to accumulate capital (Gilbert, 2024). On the other hand, platforms dictate the rules of market exchange to serve their own interests, frequently bypassing or altering foundational principles of market capitalism. Törnberg (2023) highlights that this privatized regulation establishes a power dynamic that significantly departs from traditional market structures. As a result, whether these changes signal a shift toward “techno-feudalism” rather than a continuation of capitalism has become a topic of growing academic debate.

3.1. Techno-Feudalism: Is it the End of Capitalism?

According to Rubinstein (2020), dramatic changes in the global economy represents a new mode of production. The fundamental phenomenon accompanying this mode of production is the established “planetary logistical infrastructure”. This new mode of production materialized through ideals of “endless circulation, infinite flexibility, and ruthless efficiency”, also creates its own unique individual subjects and constructs the social.

Varoufakis (2024), on the other hand, hypothesizes that the economic system we now live in cannot even be called capitalism anymore. Ironically, capitalism has been killed by capital itself, and capitalist dynamics no longer govern our economies. The market and profit concepts inherent in capitalism have been replaced by “cloud rent”, and the real power is no longer held by the owners of traditional capital, such as machines, railways, telephone networks, or industrial robots. Varoufakis claims that what now governs our economies can no longer be called capitalism, and instead, this new economic dynamic should be referred to as “techno-feudalism”.

Whether it is called platform capitalism, logistical mode of production, or techno-feudalism, the existence of a new mode of production—or at least the fact that we are at an economic and social turning point—is a subject extensively discussed in the literature. Discussing the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption elements of this new political-economic location and attempting to determine the coordinates of both the worker and work itself has become a significant social science issue.



3.2. Deskillling Between Market Capitalism and Platform Capitalism

In his article “Capital as the Integral of Power Formations”, written in the late 1970s, Guattari writes (Guattari, 2007, p.253), “Machines in the factory seem to be working all by themselves, but in fact it is the whole of society that is adjacent to them”. The new dynamics of today seem to require updating Guattari’s observation. There is still a society standing beside something, but what is it standing beside? At this moment of rupture, it has become possible to say that society stands beside “platforms”. Shoshana Zuboff defines this new economic dynamic, which she calls “surveillance capitalism”, as a “new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales” (Zuboff, 2019, p.ix) and argues that it poses a serious threat to the market order. According to Zuboff, this new order targets human nature in a way similar to how industrial capitalism threatened natural resources in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In their article “Privacy, Autonomy, and the Dissolution of Markets”, Brennan-Marquez and Susser (2022) evaluate platform capitalism and its potential evolution from the perspective of individual freedom and the market. Since the late 19th century, capitalism has been defended on two fundamental grounds. First, it has been argued that capitalism promotes a system in which individuals can benefit from their own property, labor power and their freedom of choice thus encouraging freedom. Second, it has been claimed that capitalism ensures the efficient allocation and use of resources. According to Brennan-Marquez and Susser, both dimensions begin to dissolve when capitalism enters the platform stage. In platform capitalism, the pursuit of efficiency supported by data surveillance does not typically encourage individual freedom; somewhat, it undermines it. Moreover, the idea that markets are necessary for efficiency is now under pressure. When viewed as a type of information technology, the idea of a market, which is needed for the optimal allocation of resources, is actually vulnerable to being replaced by a more advanced information technology.

At this point, the real threat to capitalism is the displacement of the market concept itself—the very promise of capitalism to foster competition and allow the most rational, efficient, and functional entities to thrive—by a new technological development or disruptive innovation. As a result, according to Brennan-Marquez and Susser, this has made the market susceptible to being replaced by “algorithmic planning”, a process where algorithms dictate available options rather than relying on traditional market mechanisms. This shift leads to significant centralization, undermining the very concept of the market and restricting the diversity of choices available to individuals or instance, platforms that utilize algorithmic planning often prioritize certain products or services, effectively controlling market dynamics. Consequently, the decision-making power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few entities, raising concerns about the autonomy of consumers and the transformation of capitalism itself.

Today, platform capitalism remains partly dependent on markets, but according to Brennan-Marquez and Susser’s argument, the structure of platform capitalism—where it says yes to



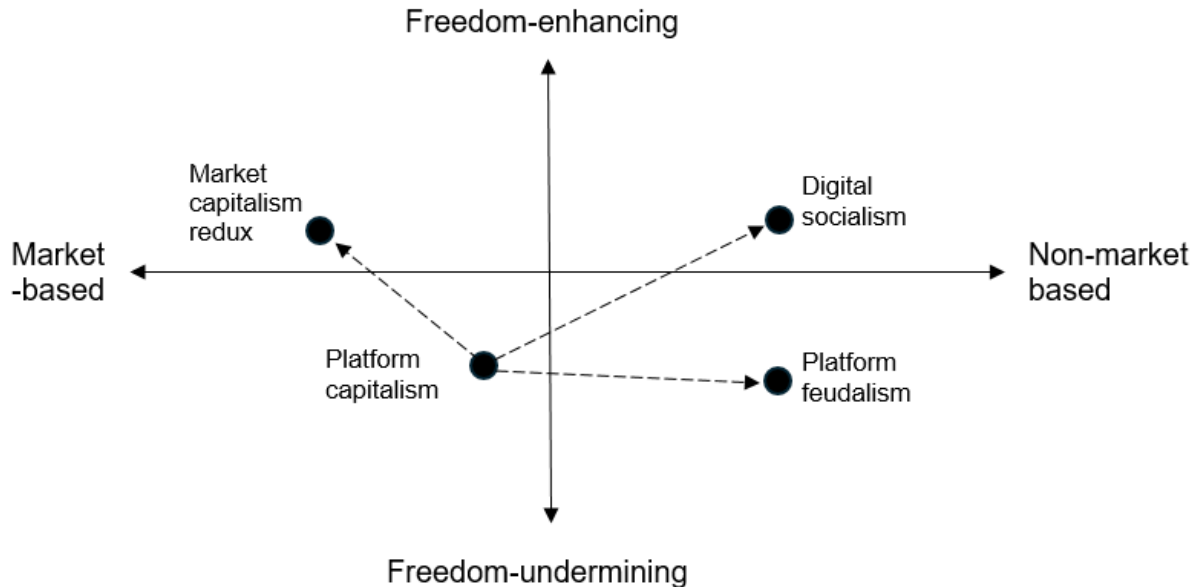
markets but no to freedom—is contradictory. Unlike markets, which function to distribute and anonymize information, platforms aim to influence human decision-making and behavior. According to Zuboff, platforms are radically indifferent to human autonomy and, what was once considered social relations and economic exchange now takes place within this roboticized, abstracted environment (Zuboff, 2019, p.464).

In today's world, where markets have become less functional in multiplying choices and thus have become less effective in facilitating freedom of choice, Brennan-Marquez and Susser (2022) define three potential evolutionary paths for platform capitalism (see Figure 1). The first is the “rescue capitalism from itself” through regulations aligned with market capitalism, which falls in the upper left quadrant. The second is a move towards “platform feudalism”, which would result from the complete weakening of the market concept and fall in the lower right quadrant. Finally, the third is a more utopian path, which is referred as “digital socialism”, located in the upper right quadrant.

Here, the evolution of economic systems in the digital age gives rise to a tension between traditional market capitalism and emerging concepts such as platform capitalism, digital socialism, and platform feudalism. While “market capitalism” relies on decentralized market forces to allocate resources efficiently, “platform capitalism” represents a significant shift wherein digital platforms centralize economic activity, leveraging data and algorithmic governance to mediate transactions. This transformation has given rise to concerns about surveillance and concentration of power, prompting critiques that liken the system to a form of “platform feudalism,” where humans are increasingly dependent on and subjugated to platforms that shape their choices and behaviors. “Digital socialism” emerges as a theoretical response, arguing that advanced technology could enable centralized planning to distribute resources fairly, challenging the necessity of markets altogether. Together, these frameworks illustrate the contested terrain of economic governance in the digital era, raising critical questions about autonomy, freedom, market and the role of technology in shaping societal and economic structures.



Figure 1. Platform capitalism in the dimensions of freedom and market (Brennan-Marquez and Susser 2022)



All paths outside the route of reviving market capitalism with enhanced privacy regulations suggest a “post-market” order. The common feature of these post-market orders is the concept of a market becoming deskilled and being replaced by an algorithmic structure. When we reconsider the debate on deskilling within this context, it becomes clear that the tendency towards deskilling, which the Operaismo scholars analyzed in parallel with Taylorist and Fordist techniques in the early 20th century and found the need to redefine by the end of that century, should be rethought alongside the concept of a deskilled market.

Taking Tronti's thesis into account—that a mode of production occupies the entire network of social relations—understanding the non-market-based structure of post-market orders that undermine individual freedom and reevaluating the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption relations within these post-market structures is crucial. Therefore, it seems necessary to shift the focus of the deskilling debate beyond simply viewing it as an effect of management techniques or mechanization within the division of labor. Instead, it should be examined through a broader causal lens that considers its societal implications, as this may offer a valuable perspective for theoretical debates about the future.

Hence, deskilling as a concept must be extended to the market, which increasingly loses its foundational characteristics. Platforms, through algorithmic planning and data-driven models, replace traditional market mechanisms with a controlled environment that narrows choices and concentrates decision-making power on themselves. This "deskilling of the market" not only undermines its role as a medium of free exchange but also transforms it into a tool of centralized structure. By situating deskilling within this comprehensive framework, it becomes possible to



address the interconnected dynamics of technological mediation in digital era, power centralization and social transformation.

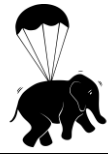
This broader perspective on deskilling necessitates exploring its manifestations across various domains, including the cultural, political, and technological dimensions of society. If considered beyond the boundaries of labor discussions, deskilling is no longer limited to the decline of worker competencies within production processes but extends to the diminishing agency of individuals as consumers and citizens in algorithmically mediated environments. Platforms not only centralize economic activity but also have potential to dictate behavioral norms and subtly shape societal values and structures. This type of influence can occur through the decisions made by algorithms, content recommendations and most importantly, the shaping of human interactions.

4. DESKILLING RECONSIDERED: NAVIGATING ALTERNATIVES AS DECENTRALIZED AUTONOMOUS ORGANIZATIONS (DAOS) WITHIN PLATFORM CAPITALISM

The direction in which this rupture will evolve remains uncertain. For instance, with platform capitalism and algorithmic management, the powers of data-processing giants like Netflix and Amazon may increase, potentially leading to the emergence of a massive “algorithmic central planning machine” that operates contrary to the fundamental tenets of capitalism, amplified by network effects. With the development of models predicting how individuals with similar data traces behave under comparable conditions, a preference economy that operates solely on correlation—showing no concern for causality—could become more powerful than it is today. Moreover, if the prevailing view is that such a dynamic may create a form of anomie, criticism of this logic of efficiency may intensify, as seen in a project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research ([Jain, 2021](#)). This could lead to developments centered around an “anti-efficiency” logic that promotes relationships, emotions, and innovation for workers.

On the other hand, the rise of decentralized decision-making technologies could further advance this debate. One prominent example is Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs), which are designed to operate independently and autonomously. In short, all transactions and decisions in DAOs are made through consensus among members and recorded on the blockchain, making them transparent and tamper-proof. DAOs have a decentralized structure, meaning there is no central authority or intermediary controlling the organization, and decision-making power is distributed among its members through consensus. The post-market path located in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1, referred to as “digital socialism” by Morozov (2019), can be reconsidered with the support of DAOs.

For example, Trevor McFedries, the founder of “Friends with Benefits”, a DAO-based organization in the UK that organizes rave events, summarized the advantage of DAOs as a way to succeed without falling into the hands of algorithmic determinism ([Ryce, 2021](#)):



"The most exciting part is that it's a way to escape the Instagram and Facebook algorithms. The algorithm dictates what you need to do to be successful, while the DAO is the opposite of that—the community decides how it's going to work and builds the tools to make it happen. Not a top-down approach but actually building culture from the ground up."

Thus, DAOs can be considered as a technology that stands out as an alternative exit from a post-market order that undermines individual freedom.

It is increasingly emphasized that there is a need for a new interpretation of the discussions on governance, organization, and thus deskilling, which have been explained and directed by relying on the relationships of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in the context of 20th-century industrial capitalism.

5. CONCLUSION

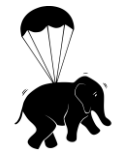
A critique or interpretation of this new rupture is not only the focus of researchers who approach capitalism with categorical skepticism but also of those who track the fate of the liberal individual. After all, the current discussion goes far beyond claiming that it is the worker or labor organization that is being deskilled today: what is increasingly being deskilled is the concept of the market and the idea of individual freedom, which is rewarded by the market and is intrinsic to capitalism. Here, we must heed Varoufakis's (2024, p.149) warning:

"The irony is that the liberal individual was snuffed out neither by fascist Brownshirts nor by Stalinist guards. It was killed off when a new form of capital began to instruct youngsters to do that most liberal of things: be yourself! (And be successful at it!) Of all the behavioural modifications that cloud capital has engineered and monetised, this one is surely its overarching and crowning achievement."

The argument of this study is not to critique a particular concept but to highlight the necessity of a renewed effort to intensify the discussion of deskilling in relation to contemporary technologies and their impact on the concepts of market, freedom and the very notion of liberal individual within this context.

Furthermore, the transformative impact of platforms on capitalism warrants serious consideration as a means to expand the discussion of deskilling beyond the boundaries of organizational labor. When capitalism is understood not only as an economic system but also as a generator of specific types of social relations, the concept of deskilling should be re-evaluated within a broader context. This includes not only labor debates but also the role of individuals' sensibilities, desires, and preferences in shaping the framework of social agreements.

This study examines the evolution of capitalism from Adam Smith's era to the present, focusing on labor. It highlights the transformative effects of platform-based business models on



production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Platform capitalism is regarded as a major turning point, introducing a new mode of production with the potential to reshape work structures and even societal organization. Consequently, significant shifts in governance are anticipated as well.

In these emerging business models, where algorithms handle the tasks of planning, organizing, executing, coordinating, and controlling, it becomes crucial to revisit core managerial topics such as job satisfaction, employee engagement, leadership, and motivation. Moreover, there is a growing need to reassess contemporary notions of managerial control, including subjugation, subjectification, and identity, prompting a broader reflection on the nature of work itself. Further research is also required to explore whether and how DAOs might counteract the dynamics of techno-feudalism, particularly by fostering democratic participation and collective decision-making.

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