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# What is a delivery cyclist?

Precarious workers' identity negotiations in the gig- and platform economy

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## Abstract

The last decades have seen the rise of a new kind of industry. Companies like Foodora and Wolt utilize the internet, organizational techniques, and technological advances in new ways, creating new forms of work. Delivery cyclists are taking over our streets fast, coloring Oslo blue and pink. Behind these cyclists, there are algorithms isolating them from their employers and all other parts of production. Everything they do is translated to numbers by the algorithm, making them measurable and auditable. They are treated like commodities, reduced to the time and energy they can save for consumers. All the while delivery cyclists are presented with the idea that delivery cycling gives them freedom, autonomy, and flexibility. They are not completely convinced by this, but so is the nature of reality, always negotiated. Looking forward, into their futures, they imagine a better version of reality, figuring that things should probably change. The reality of their situation is precarious, at least for the self-employed cyclists. They endure an asymmetrical relationship with their employers, lacking predictability, security, and a proper safety net. They are unable to organize, making them at odds with the Norwegian societal model. It is from this vantage that they imagine taking a step into a new reality. To do this they have to resist their current mode of being. Through tactics performed without drawing the attention of employers, as well as openly performed, they push the limits set by bosses and algorithms. The algorithm expects them to behave a certain way, behaving like good employees. The promises of flexibility, freedom, and also entrepreneurship, are nudging them along that same path. When delivery cyclists fight for a tariff, manipulate the algorithm for breaks, or resist in other ways they are in negotiations with the algorithm and their bosses. They are negotiating what the reality of delivery cycling should entail. Employers are resisting such resistance as best they can. Since losing ground would be accepting that the very reality they are creating could change.

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## Introduction

A new type of industry has appeared on the streets of Oslo. All over the city, cyclists wearing pink or blue jumpers have begun to appear. Whichever way you turn you see them. Delivery cyclists working for the platform companies Foodora and Wolt have taken over the cityscape in record time, coloring Oslo both with their bright jumpers and bags. People no longer make the trip down to their local restaurants to get food. Instead, they use an app on their phones that automatically arranges it for them. When the customer is ready to order, they just push a button, and their requests are transformed into tasks automatically forwarded to a currier who is waiting at the ready. Ordering food has never been easier, bringing a new level of convenience and flexibility to the consumer. I have made use of this service on several occasions. Ordered pizzas, burgers, or kebabs to our flat on lazy Sundays. It is undeniably convenient, but does it also hide an ethically challenging reality behind its façade?

Delivery cyclists are one of the latest additions to the rising gig- and platform-based economies. They bring with them new ways to understand and organize work (Oppegaard 2020:169-170). Companies like Foodora, Uber, and Wolt, utilize the internet and technological advances in new ways, creating new forms of work. Growing up in the 90s, smartphones were not yet a part of our lives. Today we see that phones manage to guide a whole fleet of cyclists working the streets of Oslo. They function as intermediaries facilitating the cooperation between several isolated actors. Employers, cyclists, restaurants, and customers cooperate almost flawlessly, without ever really interacting.

Unfortunately, these advances seem to have brought with them a darker side as well. The technology contributes to isolating the delivery cyclists, creating distance between employers and employees. Platform-based companies use the app as a buffer, effectively hiding from their employees. This is what made Uber able to argue that they did not exist in Argentina, although you could see Uber cars everywhere. They claimed that the cars were just using their technology, while the company only existed in the USA. Their IP address was proof of this (Del Nido 2022:168). Part of the structure is hiring workers through independent contracts, as self-employed partners. Being hired as self-employed means that most risks involved in the job reseed

back to the employee. They are hired precisely because they do not qualify as workers with the rights that entail. Delivery cyclists are understood as their own bosses, left to manage their own risks. They are barred from several safety nets reserved for formal employees. This is what we might call a precarious situation. Their situation can either be understood as a new way to exploit employees, or a reversion to a time when safety nets and rights were scarcer. Either way, it is a worrying situation well worth watching closely.

When Foodora cyclists announced that they were going on strike in the summer of 2019, it was a big deal. I must admit that I was one of the people who found it difficult to believe that they would actually win. But they did. The Pink Strike became famous, and to many, this marked a definitive change of fortune for those within the food delivery platform industry. The former leader of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), Hans-Christian Gabrielsen, emphasized the importance of their victory. He said that the strike disproved those who believed that traditional forms of formal work had no place in the new economy (Bing 2020). Visiting Oslo, the former leader of International Labour Organization (ILO), Guy Ryder, said he believed that what Foodora cyclists had achieved in Norway would have international importance (Hagås 2019). LO advisor Jonas Bals called it a historically important event. Working for platforms such as Foodora has historically led to precariousness. They are not even acknowledged as workers. He argues that the victory in Oslo shows that another future is possible for them (Bals 2019). In their eyes, this was a turning point and the start of formalizing the work of delivery cyclists. Unfortunately, there were still some hurdles left to traverse. Foodora still hired a lot of self-employed informal workers, and the establishment of Wolt made things especially difficult. Wolt hires self-employed delivery cyclists exclusively making them able to operate cheaper, since they have no one formally employed in the company (Bals 2021:526-527). As a result, Foodora also ramped up its use of self-employment, making a large part of its workforce exempt from the agreement.

I do not think that the 2019 strike marked a definite change in how cyclists are understood, but it might have changed how they understand themselves. That same year, over 60% of Foodora's employees were self-employed (Knutsen 2021). These informally hired workers have little to no safety net they can fall back on, almost regardless of what the tariff agreement might say. They are under the violence of an app and have little choice but to follow its directions. If they do not

submit to what the algorithm tells them to do, their employers could just turn off the app. They are theoretically not employed in the company, and therefore not protected against unjust firings. This means that firing them is as easy as turning off their app. As long as cyclists working for Foodora continue to be mostly self-employed, it is hard to argue the situation for most of them has changed particularly much. The strike was an important victory, but there still is a long way to go.

Exploitation through organizational tactics in the labor market is nothing new. There are several tactics used to circumvent responsibilities in employee/employer relations. Employees are contracted for limited periods although the need for full-time employment is there, staffing agencies are used rather than formal employment, involuntary part-time contracts, exploiting international labor, or hiring dependent self-employed workers. Laws and regulations are circumvented regularly. LO visits thousands of young employees every summer. In 2022 they found that 50,7% of the places they visited broke the law in some form. This was 11,5% higher than in 2021. Although many of these instances amount to sloppiness rather than ill intent, it is still concerning (Hornnes 2023). This is not to say that everything is wrong with the Norwegian labor market. In fact, Norway is among the best in the world, sporting strong unions, laws, and a comprehensive welfare system. Nevertheless, some things seem to be moving in the wrong direction. I believe that the treatment of gig- and platform employees are among those things. Although the tariff could be understood as a turning point, I do not think it was as impactful as one might think. This thesis will argue that delivery cyclists continue to be treated as something less than workers. However, a real turning point might be arriving. Recently a new law was decided. The law states that people operating under a subordinate relation of management and control should be understood as formal workers. This description fits delivery cyclists. This law could put an end to how the industry currently operates (Stortinget 2023). However, Foodora will have to be tried against this new law to confirm that their employees should be treated as formal workers. Then, resources must be used to follow up on what happens out there in the labor market.

This thesis derives from my own interests in labor market politics and my involvement in trade unions in Norway. The thesis will take a closer look at delivery cyclists working for the app- and platform-based company Foodora in Oslo. Which is the capital of Norway. Initially, I wanted to

find out whether the strike had brought on a change in how delivery cyclists were understood, and how they understood themselves. I figured that the tariff would bring their livelihood closer to the formal labor market and that they might start seeing themselves differently as a result. What is a delivery cyclist? How do they understand themselves? Do they understand themselves as workers? To get some answers to these questions, I set out on a fieldwork spanning six months. It was carried out somewhat on and off since Oslo is also the city where I currently live. Initially, I wanted to focus on delivery cyclists' understanding of themselves. Talking to them, I found that they were more interested in talking about their bikes, the app, customers, employers, and restaurants. Broadening my view, the thesis evolved into an interest in the ways they are understood by others. As well as, how others want delivery cyclists to understand themselves. How did entities such as the Foodora algorithm, customers, and their employers define them? It also put me on the trail of all the small ways they resisted the app. Leading me to the question: What are they resisting in those acts?

This thesis will take a closer look at Foodora cyclists working in Oslo, Norway. It will explore themes such as identity, expectation, resistance, and reality. It will attempt to answer the following questions: What are the realities of being employed as a delivery cyclist? What kind of impact do such companies have on the Norwegian model? What is a delivery cyclist? How do others form their identities? How do they resist these attempts? And how are the borders of different understandings negotiated?

When the delivery cyclists connected to Foodora reached a tariff agreement in 2019, people seemed to think that they finally would be formally acknowledged as workers. Is this the case in 2022-2023, if not, how are they understood, and how do they understand themselves?

**Methodology**

I ended up conducting my fieldwork quite close to home, talking to the Foodora cyclists I see zooming past me every day along the streets of Oslo. The first obstacle I encountered going into the field was the practical challenge of how to get in touch with delivery cyclists. Foodora operates in several Norwegian cities such as Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Tromsø. Since I live and study in Oslo it seemed most practical to conduct my fieldwork here. Of course, this brings about some difficulties in separating home and field which I will be getting back to. The field becomes naturally limited geographically by Foodora's area of operation in the city.

Nevertheless, it would be more precise to say that it is limited by the movement of bikes rather than geography. People are not as bounded as they used to be, and anthropology has had to find new ways to limit their research. Instead of geographically bounded areas, fieldwork is bound by the movement of people, objects, ideas, conflicts, and more. This allows the researcher to traverse what classically constituted a geographical field (Marcus 1995:105-111). The geographical area cyclists are bound to, is dictated by the algorithm. It can change, and therefore it makes more sense to tie my field up to the object of study, namely cyclists. Instead of limiting my fieldwork to a certain area, I will be limiting it to the movement of bikes. Although I had no intention of conducting global fieldwork, this approach let me adapt to their movement rather than being bound to what suddenly could be a dated field. The important thing is the cyclists. Wherever they are, so is my field. Fields should be understood as anthropological constructs, and it is the questions we set out with that bound them. As the questions evolve, so does the field (Madden 2017:52).

Limiting my fieldwork in such a way did not fix my initial problem. How do I get in touch? Foodora cyclists are highly mobile, seldom spending much time stationary. This makes approaching them difficult, and I had to find a way to conduct my fieldwork that gave me sufficient time to talk to them. Initially, I considered several approaches such as getting on a bike myself or joining them in their brake areas. I also considered Foodora Market, which is a Foodora-owned food depot for deliveries. Another option was meeting cyclists at the union offices or events, or beyond their working lives. My first impulse was to get a job at the company, meeting delivery cyclists as a colleague out there in the streets. I shelved this idea due to ethical considerations. My thesis is focused on the cyclists themselves, and I felt like it would be hard to keep my roles straight going into the field this way. Foodora cyclists do not have much time to talk to each other while working, constantly on the move. Therefore, I would not have much time to explain my project or write contracts either. I felt like approaching them without a uniform would yield the same results, without going into a double role as both student and colleague. I am uncertain whether I would have made the same decision again. I got a chance to do a ride-along later in my fieldwork, which did bring new perspectives. I followed a student working as a delivery cyclist throughout a whole shift, using a rented bike. This allowed me to add some real participation to the project, awarding me stronger reference points to understand the field. I also ended up writing a lot about the app, and it would have been great to have more

firsthand experience navigating it. Either way, I made a choice that meant I had to adopt another strategy.

Foodora Market seemed like a good option since I imagine cyclists would have some time to talk while waiting for their orders at the depot. This approach required approval from the company, so I approached Foodora. I asked them if I could spend time talking to their employees at Foodora Market or other similar locations the company operates. Although I tried several times, I never managed to penetrate the bureaucracy of Foodora and was left without an answer. Therefore, I had to discard this approach. Having said that, I did spend some time observing from a park adjacent to one of these locations. During my time sitting there, I hardly saw anybody and did not get a chance to talk to any cyclists. Although I used some contacts in the union network to get in touch with delivery cyclists, I never spent any time at their offices. I did go to some events like panel discussions and the like. This gave me useful input and gave me a chance to meet potential informants. When I lived in Bergen, I often saw big groups of delivery cyclists gathering at certain places in the city. I could often see several Foodora cyclists taking a break together at Torgallmenningen in Bergen sentrum. I hoped I would find something equivalent in Oslo so that I could use this area to approach them. I was never able to do so. This might be because the order frequency is lower in Bergen, affording them more time to sit around. It could also simply be because I missed it. Either way, I was not able to utilize this approach either.

Since I could not find a specific geographical point to approach them, I ended up utilizing my mobility instead. Starting in April, I started walking the city of Oslo observing delivery cyclists and occasionally talking to them. At first, I usually just observed them from a distance, watching them work. After a while, I moved on to talking to them. Since I seldom was afforded much time to talk to them – seeing as they often were between orders – time was of the essence. Usually, I would introduce myself shortly and ask the delivery cyclist for contact information, so that we could meet at a later date. I got my first breakthrough approaching a cyclist outside of a restaurant in the Nydalen area, in northern Oslo. I waited while they went in to get their order and managed to get the information I needed while they packed. After a while, I used the contact information to introduce myself and set up a meeting. I repeated this process several times. The starting stages of this project were challenging and I often experienced being turned down or straight-up ghosted (ignored). Nevertheless, I stayed at it, and after a while, I managed to plan

several interviews. I had the most success after adjusting my approach and started using my own personal networks more actively. I started asking people in my social circle whether they knew any delivery cyclists. Even posting about it on social media. This got the ball rolling and led to even more appointments. Still, some people did not show up even when we had a meeting planned. I especially remember one instance where I got stood up, waiting for a cyclist in a park. I mistook another delivery cyclist for the one I was supposed to meet and ended up in an awkward situation. They believed I was flirting with them, leaving me trying to explain the situation before finally being able to walk off. I was never able to get in contact with the cyclist I was supposed to meet that day.

My main methodological approach was conducting ethnographic interviews. These are organic, informal interactions without an explicit structure to them. These conversations are meant to feel like everyday interactions. At the same time, the ethnographer attempts to steer the conversation into narrower trajectories and approach specific topics of interest. Ethnographic interviews can be understood as:

"a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants" (Spradley 1979:58).

I talked to five different informants, meeting all of them physically at least once. Meeting some of them twice, at different locations. I also used text messages and digital platforms to gather information. All conversations were structured as ethnographic interviews, although my time with them was limited. I spent at least an hour with them every time and had to fit everything into that time slot. Although I had the time to introduce some elements – especially to those I met twice – I had to be ready to adapt more to what they wanted to tell me. The conversations would go like this: I would present myself, my work, and thank them for coming. Thereafter I would present them with the consent form. After they had signed, I would explain what I had in mind and the conversations would start. In the beginning, I was afraid that these conversations would go slowly. This was not the case, and all my informants seemed to warm up to the format fairly quickly. This allowed the conversations to proceed somewhat organically and made them relax more, granting me more useful data. Although I would have liked to get more conversations done, I feel like I gathered good data from those that I had. Gathering data would probably have been easier if I had used my phone and digital platforms more frequently. My informants had

lives of their own, with families, babies, other jobs, and so on. Finding the time to meet up was not always easy, and implementing more technology would probably have helped. Still, there is something more organic and real about meeting face-to-face. I firmly believe that it was worth taking the time to meet these people, being able to see their body language, and talking to them in a common space.

I went into this project with a desire to talk about identity, and how delivery cyclists understood themselves as workers. Although I got some data about this topic, they were not that interested in talking directly about it. They seemed most interested in talking about other things. They especially talked a lot about topics like their bikes, customers, algorithms, and the app. These last topics especially inspired me to adjust my thesis. These ideas were what inspired the fourth chapter especially. My thesis consists of a blend of all the gathered field data, and field data derived from other authors. One of the most central sources of empirical examples is*: Riding with Deliveroo* by Callum Cant (2019). *Hired* by James Bloodworth (2019) and Juan Manuel del Nido's *Taxi Vs. Uber* (2022) are also central works for this purpose. These authors amongst others are used in building up my arguments. The next part will move into ethical considerations.

**Ethical considerations**

Before going into the field, I had to make some ethical considerations. Delivery cyclists are subordinate in a relation of power and could therefore potentially face serious consequences in case of a misstep on my part. This comes on top of the fact that delivery cyclists are in an especially precarious occupation, being hired as self-employed workers. They are doing a job, trying to make a living. I made sure not to get in their way while they were out delivering food since I knew time was of the essence. Failing is part of doing fieldwork, but when something does go wrong, it is important to contain the impact of it. To be able to do this I made sure to continuously assess what I was doing, considering my actions and how they could end up impacting the field, and those I studied. I knew full well that I did not possess any prior experience in this, and therefore I was ready to turn to my support apparatus should I become uncertain about ethical issues.

As mentioned in the methods section, I considered the double role of both colleague and student as problematic from an ethical standpoint. I did not find that the yield would outweigh the risks, although I might have concluded differently today. I overlooked a few benefits to such an approach – For instance, firsthand experience with the app – and just would have had to play it a bit more carefully to make it possible. Nevertheless, I gathered a lot of data by talking to different people working as delivery cyclists. I always made sure that informants signed the consent form before the conversation could begin properly. I brought two versions so that they could bring their own home to read. All information about contacting the university and withdrawing data is in those papers, so they needed to get them. I was aware that I invited them to talk representing a university, and that I had some power over them based on that position. This made it even more important that I thought about what I said and did. I made sure to be transparent as to my intentions, not take anything in the form of gifts or services, and kept it professional. Professional but friendly.

It is important not to label people or otherwise insult them based on my preconceived notions or studies I have read. I did my best to respect their knowledge and sought their input on my own reflections about the study as often as I could during conversations. I have done my best not to insult, delegitimize, or bring any consequences upon my informants. All data gathered from these conversations are kept under password protection, and identity keys are kept separate. All data is anonymized, and I have given all informants anonymized names to protect their identities. I also sought to follow the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association. Doing my best to harm no one, be transparent, get consent, consider other parties, and so on (AAA 2012). All participants got my contact information as well as my supervisors and were offered the chance to read the thesis when it is done.

**Thesis outline**

The first chapter builds up a basis for those that come after. The first chapter introduces the gig- and platform-based economy. In the gig economy, jobs are split into several smaller tasks that are being served as stand-alone gigs to groups such as delivery cyclists. These gigs are often distributed on innovative platforms utilizing technological advances. This is the platform economy (Oppegaard 2020:169-170). The first chapter also introduces Foodora, Wolt, and

several other companies and brands operating internationally using this model. It goes into how they function and introduces some of the effects such an industry might have on society and delivery cyclists themselves. Foodora is the focus of my thesis and gets covered the most. The company started in Munich, Germany 2014, moved to Berlin in 2015, and sold all of its German assets in 2018 (Mangi 2022). Today they are operating in Scandinavia exclusively under Delivery Hero. They are present in Norway, Sweden, Finland, as well as Denmark (Foodora 2022).

The second part of Chapter 1 introduces the Norwegian model. The model is a matter of pride for the region and has shown itself to be very successful. It disproves common assumptions that strong unions and comprehensive welfare would weaken productivity and investment. It proves quite the opposite. It is a system that combines central agreements that secure international competition with compressed wages, small differences, and a broad welfare system (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:17-18,20). The Norwegian model is a system with small differences and comprehensive welfare. It is built upon cooperation between employees, employers, and the state. Companies like Foodroa and Wolt pose a real danger to the model, circumventing central agreements and weakening the standing of workers. They are in danger of eroding the model by upsetting the balance it is built on. This has forced Norwegian unions out into national media channels to condemn the way these companies operate (Solstad 2023).

The last part of Chapter 1 moves from the model to the daily lives of the cyclists themselves. It starts by presenting the concept of precariousness. Precariousness has been understood in several different ways. Some see it as the consequences brought on by globalization exclusively. Others understand it as a universal status present in everyone but at different degrees of severity. The former view is represented by Guy Standing (2011) and the latter by Judith Butler (2009). Whichever way this concept is understood – at its roots – precariousness refers to those that are less fortunate than others. And this is also how I will be utilizing the concept. The most important function is as a tool to properly display the “precarious” situation of delivery cyclists. To do this, I will be using Guy Standing’s seven forms of labor-related security. The seven forms are: (1) inadequate opportunities for wage-paying work, (2) protection against unjust hiring and resignation, (3) A lack of mobility, (4) insufficient health and safety, (5) Lack of growth opportunities, (6) unpredictable payment of wages, and (7) a stifled voice that is not heard (2011:10). Delivery cyclists lack all of them to some degree. Their lack of sufficient health and

safety is one of the things I find the worst. They have limited or no access to a range of central welfare goods like pensions, unemployment benefits, and sick pay (Alsos, Nergaard, and Thorbjørnsen 2022).

The second chapter starts by introducing the concept of phantasmagoria and phantasms. This is the name of a kind of ghost show common during early modernity. Phantasms are the ghostly apparitions it projects. The technology that was used is an ancestor of modern cinematography (Gunning 2004:4). The concept would later be used by thinkers such as Karl Marx (1932) and Walter Benjamin represented by Margaret Cohen (2004) to show how commodities are given characteristics they do not have. The commodity is described as taking on a ghostly quality, projecting new forms of superstition and myths upon them (Cohen 2004:201-202). It becomes a useful tool to talk about society, showing how reality can be obscured by projected images. The first part of Chapter 2 uses the concept to show how flexibility, autonomy, and freedom are projected onto delivery cyclists, gaslighting them. These images create a positive picture of life in Foodora, hiding the sides of this industry that are less than perfect. Phantasms of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy hide their precariousness in plain sight.

Phantasmagoria is used to obscure the precarious realities of delivery cycling, and Foodora workers are living in a dualism. They are affected by the images projected at them, but they also know that they are being used. All of this affects how they are able to imagine their futures. Arjun Appadurai established that imagination can be used to negotiate possibilities between actors. Diaspora applies their understanding of an imagined past to understand their present. They use impressions from various channels and media to imagine something new. Constructing a new identity through imagination (Appadurai 1996:31). This is an example of using the past to negotiate the present. Ooman, Hoffman, and Hajer argue that the future can be used the same way. People use their future to influence their understanding of the present (2022:255). Foodora cyclists use imagined futures to understand their present situation and vice versa. They imagine futures both inside and outside of this line of work. They use their imagined futures to understand their current situation. Foodora either becomes an opportunity dependent on hard work, a broken system that can be fixed, or simply a step toward something else.

Many delivery cyclists see their work as less than legitime and want to leave. Chapter 3 starts off by documenting the realities of the app, and how they are controlled. They know they are treated

badly, and this seems to be part of the design. Their subjectivity is hidden behind the algorithms, and they are also controlled by them. Cant describes this as an authoritarian system (2019:58). The app controls all aspects of their work. It tells them where to go, what to do, and how it is to be done. Although cyclists are presented with opportunities to make their own choices, doing this is often met with sanctions. Delivery cyclists have no other choice than to interact with the app when something is wrong, seeing as management is hidden behind technology, outside of their reach. Delivery cyclists themselves are isolated. Hidden behind algorithms and gaslighted by phantasmagoria.

The second part of Chapter 3 moves into a discussion about algorithms and how they filter the subjectivity of cyclists and present them as data and numbers on the other end. Marilyn Strathern amongst others, shows us how morality and finances have become intertwined (2000:1-2). Using algorithms and auditing techniques there is an attempt to transform delivery cyclists into auditable numbers. They are being reduced to data, removed from the delivery cyclists existing on the other end of the algorithm. They become commodities in the eyes of the company and customers. Appadurai points out that nothing is beyond commodity status (2006:19). This is also the case for delivery cyclists. While cyclists themselves might understand themselves as workers, colleagues, or individuals in relationships of necessity or opportunism, they appear to others as data, numbers, or commodities. Their identities are negotiated continually.

Chapter four attempts to tie it all together before the concluding remarks. It consists of two parts, the first about resistance, and the second about how resistance can be a negotiation of reality. It starts off by showing how delivery cyclists relate to the algorithm on a daily basis. Navigating the rigid rules of the app. Then the thesis goes on to talk about their resistance. Delivery cyclists find room to launch resistance from the unofficial hidden transcript. Using the agency allowed them within the algorithm. While the public transcript is the official version everybody can see, the hidden transcript is acted out backstage (Scott 1990:2-4). In this sphere, cyclists can resist without drawing attention to themselves, for instance, by tricking the algorithm into giving them longer breaks than they are allowed. This is the only option for the most precarious portion of the workforce, seeing as the consequences of open rebellion is too big. Delivery cyclists are precarious, lacking the necessary safety nets to make confrontation a viable option. Algorithms, auditors, isolation, and phantasms are working to produce reality for Foodora cyclists. They are

gaslighted by ideas of flexibility, autonomy, and freedom. Made into numbers and commodities, isolated by an algorithm. Imagining a better future allows them to challenge their current mode, although, in small ways. Bruno Latour shows us how Brazilian scientists bring plants into their laboratories, give them names, and a number, and transform them into a referent for the real world. These referents are used to translate nature into understandable, available, and discussable terms. Everything a referent says about reality is not necessarily true, and it becomes fabricated and real at the same time (Latour 1999:34,53,132). Delivery cyclists are transformed into something more manageable to their employers, customers, and shareholders. When cyclists resist the algorithm, they are also negotiating their own reality. Fighting the process of transformation into numbers, commodities, and so on. Latour believes that science is like an event, where a proposed truth must pass through several obstacles. Some of these obstacles might be other scientists proposing opposing truths (Latour 1999:125,161). Algorithms, auditors, phantasms, and management seek to resist the resistance of cyclists as best they can. Since losing ground would be accepting that the reality they construct could be changed.

# Chapter 1: The Consequences of technological advancements

## The gig- and platform economy

The last decade has seen the rise of new forms of work which are based on gigs and digital platforms. First, the gig economy refers to the process of splitting jobs into smaller parts. Handed out as short-term, temporary gigs to groups such as delivery cyclists. Complex tasks which historically have been done by specialists in the field are split into smaller separate assignments. These tasks can be separated into place-bound tasks such as those given by Foodora or Uber, and those that are not bound geographically. Examples of the second are platforms such as Fiverr, that connect people. Fiverr facilitates exchange between artists and customers across the world. Customers are able to log into Fiverr wherever they are, using their algorithms to get directly in touch with artists about commissions, orders and delivery online. Companies such as Foodora are more bound geographically. Since they facilitate the trade and delivery of physical items. Their range is limited to the areas in which they operate. Gig work might be easier understood in terms of a musical performance (also called a gig). It is a one-time temporary thing. A task that a group such as delivery cyclists is hired to do. These tasks are often situated on platforms. There is an increasing use of digital platforms. The platform economy provides platforms where gigs can be distributed. The organization of work is transferred to digital platforms and algorithms. The gig economy refers to strategies in the application of employees, while platform economies refer to the infrastructure used to connect the parts (Oppegaard 2020:169-170). Algorithms transform orders into gigs which it distributes to delivery cyclists through its platform. It is not continuous work, but rather an endless stream of gigs. Self-employed cyclists officially have no job. What they do is continually pick up small tasks, doing one gig and then another.

New forms of employee/employer relations, as well as new forms of employee/workplace relations, are on the rise. Working nine to five as Dolly Parton put it, is no longer the standard for many modern occupations. New technologies and organizational forms have changed the realities of millions of different workers worldwide. Regular work hours are exchanged for infrequently distributed gigs provided by an app. Employers become almost absent, at least physically, hidden behind screens and algorithms. Traditional physical workspaces are transferred online, making the place of work, people’s homes, cafes, or the street. While this change has brought

convenience and flexibility to customers and employees alike, this is not the whole truth. Most gig and platform-based companies utilize self-employment, effectively transferring most risks to the employees. Self-employed workers are not formally hired. Employers create distance between themselves and their employees, avoiding responsibilities for their employees. This is what made it possible for the communications officer of Uber in Argentina, Lago Rodriguez, to go out and brag about how many drivers they had. He did this while the company claimed to the national courts that there existed no "Uber Argentina" since their IP address was situated in the United States of America (Del Nido 2022:90,168). The people driving their cars, using their algorithms, they claimed, were not working for them. In their eyes, Uber had no presence in Argentina and therefore could not be held responsible for anything pertaining to Uber drivers in the country. As far as they were concerned Uber drivers were businesses in and for themselves, merely using their systems for a fee. The lives of workers become uncertain and precarious. Resisting such a state can cost people a lot since their employment security is weak. There is no clearly defined workspace to go to, and they cannot rely on regular hours to sustain them. Employers are hidden behind technology, making it hard to know where grievances should be directed. On top of this, their status as self-employed makes them responsible for their own success. All their employers need to do to get rid of them is turn off their apps and systems. Without it, they effectively have no jobs.

For this thesis, I will be taking a look at delivery cyclists working for a company called Foodora. This is one of the two major suppliers of food delivery services in Norway. The other actor is the Helsinki, Finland-based company Wolt. Both companies use digital platforms provided via an app to communicate with their riders and facilitate transactions. Customers log into their services from home to order, looking to get something delivered to their location. Traditionally this used to be food deliveries from restaurants, but lately, the options have widened to all sorts of articles. When I log into the Foodora app, I encounter the option to order everything from flowers, and electronics, to a Rubik's cube. When the order is placed, it is transferred to the restaurant or store in question. When the order is close to being prepared a person hired to do the delivery is notified. The item in question is then delivered to the address specified by the customer. These companies are far from unique internationally. Business of Apps, which is a site dedicated to app industry news, estimates that the food delivery app industry will be worth 320 billion dollars by 2029. Right now, China represents the biggest market. This makes sense considering their

economic growth and huge population. This market alone generated a total value of 27,3 billion dollars in 2021. 90% of this market is divided between the food delivery companies Ele.me and Meituan. Following closely with a value of 22.4 billion dollars is the American market. The biggest actor among the food delivery apps in America is DoorDash. This is also the company that acquired Wolt in 2021. Europe on the other hand only generates 9,2 billion dollars, making it a relatively small market compared to the other two. In addition to the companies that are already mentioned there are plenty of big actors in the food delivery app industry. Some examples are Uber Eats, Just Eat, Grubhub, Deliveroo, Postmates, Takeaway.com, Delivery Hero, Rappi, iFood, and Zomato (Christensen 2021; Curry 2023). There are several ways in which these companies make money on such endeavors. For instance, platforms can take a percentage of every order made on their platform. This could also give them some flexibility to negotiate special agreements with certain restaurants or chains. For instance, giving them free access to the platform for exclusivity rights where this is possible. Another way is payment for promotional work on their platforms. Foodora often highlights certain restaurants in the app. It is highly probable that these are paid promotions. They could also take payment for deliveries, make users pay some kind of convenience fee, subscriptions, advertisement, technology, and equipment, or extra services provided to restaurants that feel the need to outsource tasks to someone else (Joshi 2022; Mangi 2022).

Foodora was founded in Munich, Germany in 2014. At least that is what most sources say. One of the founders of the company, Konstantin Mehl, cast some doubt on the exact date in an interview on the website Munich Startup. Either way, he started what was initially called Volo GmbH together with Manuel Thurner around that time (Duran 2017). After being acquired by Rocket Internet they moved to Berlin in 2015, while also expanding to other countries like Canada, Austria, and Australia. Later that same year they got taken over by yet another company called Delivery Hero, merging with their daughter company Urban Taste. Delivery Hero bought 100% of the company, intending to make use of the scale and presence that Rocket Internet had built up. At this point, the company had a presence in Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, The Netherlands, Austria, and Norway. At the time, Delivery Hero firmly believed that Foodora was one of the fastest-growing companies in the sector, predicting a 20% growth in orders weekly (Delivery Hero 2015; Mangi 2022). Foodora was fully run by Delivery Hero until 2018 when the Dutch company Takeaway acquired all their German interests. This included ventures such as

Lieferheld, Pizza.de, and Foodora. Takeaway paid somewhere around 508 million euros for the company, as well as giving them a huge amount of Takaway shares. Delivery Hero kept using the Foodora brand in the countries where they still operated (Ecommerce News 2018; Lunden 2018).

The same year as the German assets were acquired by Takeaway, several countries experienced that Foodora started withdrawing from their markets. Already that same year Foodora started pulling out of France. Foodora stated that they could not keep up with the competition, believing their best option was to leave. They also left the Netherlands, Italy, and Australia giving the same kinds of reasons (Bitoun 2018; Dutch News 2018; Powell 2018; The Medi Telegraph 2018). The following year Foodora left Austria. This is not to say that Delivery Hero pulled out of the country completely. They shut down Foodora in the country to invest more wholeheartedly in a competing brand called Mjam which they also owned in Austria (Eatzy.net 2019). In 2020 they left Canada, stating that they could not make their operations profitable amidst the competition (Deschamps 2020). Foodora has not left these countries entirely without controversy. After Foodora left Australia, it was speculated that their reluctance to cooperate with unions could be seen as a reason. Uber and DoorDash had a good relationship with the Transport Workers Union and met the demands to some degree. Foodora on the other hand faced multiple legal cases about workers' rights in the country (Thomsen 2022). Just months before the company left Canada the Ontario Labour Relation Board (OLRB) had decided that Foodora workers could unionize. They reasoned that Foodora cyclists were dependent contractors regardless of their status as self-employed. Unions found it suspicious that the company would file for bankruptcy at the same time that Delivery Hero reported a doubling in their turnover. They went to trial and ended up with a settlement worth 3,46 million dollars in August 2020 (CBC News 2020; Fremont and Sterling 2020). The Norwegian government adopted a law, theoretically strengthening the position of delivery cyclists in Norway as well. It states that anybody subjected to governance, management, and control should be defined as a formal worker in the classical sense, rather than an independent gig worker. They also made it the responsibility of the company to prove that they were not indeed workers. Transferring the need to defend themselves away from the shoulders of employees (Stortinget 2023). This has not yet led to any consequences for the delivery services operating in the country. But should they be forced to treat all their employees as formally hired rather than self-employed, we might see some actors leaving Norway as well.

The reasons why Foodora left several countries are not so important. In any case, it ended up with the brand being reduced to a Nordic phenomenon entirely. Leaving Foodora operational in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Last year Foodora expanded to Denmark, amongst other things through the acquisition of Hungry.DK strengthening its position as a Nordic actor (Foodora 2022). Foodora as a brand is relatively small compared to some of the other brands out there. Wolt for instance has been established in twenty-three countries since it was started in 2014, arriving in Norway as late as 2018. Traveling to Japan in March 2023, I actually spotted a Wolt cyclist delivering food in Kyoto. Although their brand name Wolt is still in use, the company itself is now part of DoorDash. The American giant bought the Finnish company around 2021 (Christensen 2021). Although Foodora might be limited to a couple of countries, Delivery Hero continues to have a big presence around the world. In addition to Foodora, they own brands such as Efood.gr, Mjam, Foody, Glovo, Talabat, Foodpanda, PedidosYa, InstaShop, DámeJídlo.cz, Hungerstation, Yemeksepeti, and Baedal Minjok. This means that Delivery Hero has a presence in well over half a hundred countries (Delivery Hero n.d.). Business of apps points to Delivery Hero as the company with the most users and downloads in the world (Curry 2023).

It is important to note that the information presented in this section relies heavily on online articles, blogs, and information released by the companies themselves. As such there might be some interests coloring the information. Either way, food delivery is clearly a huge industry, and the scale of actors such as Delivery Hero is undeniable. Operating on such a scale, the individual delivery cyclist becomes atomic in the view of stockholders and international CEOs. Yet, their interests propagate down the system and have a real impact on those working at the floor level. Youngrong Lee presents a good example of this. When Foodora left Canada in 2020 they did so because they wanted to maximize their profit by releasing ties to this specific market. If this decision was made due to the OLRBs decision or fierce competition is up for debate. Either way, the company pulled out to invest elsewhere. In the same way as Uber, Foodora understood themselves as facilitators rather than employers. They believed that delivery cyclists ought to be understood as independent entrepreneurs. In this way, they established distance between themselves and the cyclists. This also made it possible to distance Foodora from any real legal or social responsibilities. Cyclists became flexible pieces to be used or thrown aside without consequence. The realities for those who suddenly lost their jobs were different. Some might have had it as a side income, but many depended wholly on Foodora to make a living (Lee

2021:3,5,7-10). Moving on, I want to show how the specific techniques and technologies applied by this industry contribute to the precarity of its employees. Delivery cyclists are caught in an asymmetrical relationship. They are often much more dependent on the company than the company is on them. If we couple this with the often loose and flexible connection, they have to their employer. It becomes apparent that this becomes a recipe for uncertainty for many people.

**The Norwegian Model**

My fieldwork is situated in Oslo, which is the capital of Norway. Norway is part of the Scandinavian countries, which in turn is part of a group of countries often referred to as the Nordic countries. In addition to Norway, the Nordic countries are comprised of Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Island. These countries are particularly well known for their social economic systems, named the Nordic model. The model is characterized by high taxes, huge public sectors, rigid labor markets, central bargaining, and regulations (Dølvik 2013:5). I will mainly be referring to the Norwegian model throughout this section of the thesis. This is because my fieldwork is situated in Norway. When I talk about the general characteristics of the model, I will be using authors like Dølvik (2013) who writes about the Nordic model. I will also be using Barth, Moene, and Willumsen (2015) who refer to the model from a Scandinavian viewpoint. Texts like these are good to highlight common traits. However, when it comes to details, I will be talking about the Norwegian version of the phenomenon especially. Therefore, I will be referring to the Norwegian model from here on out to avoid confusion. This section will be dedicated to explaining the basics of the system, seeing as it is important for understanding the impact of new technologies and ways to organize work in the Norwegian labor market. These innovations can be understood to be at odds with the model. They contribute directly to the erosion of some of its main pillars.

Although pre-industrial conditions in the Nordic countries helped the model along, the trajectory towards the system as we know it today gained momentum during the end of the nineteenth century. Changes brought by industrialization transformed the lives of ordinary workers across the region. Class differences became increasingly apparent and class antagonism grew stronger. During this period, factories were introduced, drawing people together in geographically limited areas. The period also saw the growth of a significant labor movement (Dølvik 2013:29,33,35). Workers in the region found allies in small-scale farmers. Feudal traditions never really got a

hold on the region, and farmers were relatively independent. This meant that they were less dependent on landowners and had greater autonomy than was common for the time. These two groups found that they had a lot of common interests, often fighting together to better the conditions of both groups. During the interwar period, the model took another step toward its present form. The workers' movement, employers, and rural movements came together to bring the emerging social democratic parties to power. Cooperation between these groups was strengthened during and after the second world war. This helped to further solidify the system (Dølvik 2013:35,38,41). The national unity created during the war led the country into what is known as the golden era of the model. This era was characterized by industrial and economic growth, generous and comprehensive safety- and welfare programs, and further development of social cooperation (Dølvik 2013:41-42; Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017:224). Norway cemented collaboration between parties of the labor market, and the state during this time. The tripartite collaboration was institutionalized, creating a stable compromise-based system where central nationwide agreements could be made (Dølvik 2013:13-14). Such a system of cooperation demands equilibrium between the parts involved. Employers as well as employees are important forces in the Norwegian system. When they remain equals, governments are forced to cooperate with both, unable to favor one part above the other. A balance between the parties also means a balance between the various interests in society. Employees gain the power to negotiate, while employers get predictability and moderation. Unions are dependent on moderating their demands to keep employers at the table. Stretching the pain thresholds of employers too much could result in them simply leaving the model (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:20). Since the power dynamics between the two parts have been so equal, cooperation has been made possible regardless of political alignment. Most political parties know that they need both parties to be able to go forward with their goals. Regardless of whether they are on the right or left side of politics (Dølvik 2013:73).

Economists have often taken for granted that strong unions and strong safety nets would mean a weakening of productivity and less investment. Barth, Moene, and Willumsen argue that this is wrong. Regional investments and productivity are high, despite a compressed wage distribution, strong unions, and a comprehensive welfare state. They argue that there are three characteristics that can be said to outline the model today. The model implements central as well as local negotiations, compresses differences in wages, and promotes efficiency (2015:17,21). Wages are

decided centrally through regulated cooperative structures called collective agreements. Central to this negotiation is the “Frontfagsmodell” which is a system upholding the competitiveness of Norwegian industry. It ensures that unions in sectors exposed to international competition negotiate first. Everyone else is then obliged to follow their results. In this way, the system makes sure that different groups uphold a balanced development of salaries. Wage development is distributed through flat percentage-based additions to the different sectors and is tied to Norwegian industrial competitiveness (Dølvik 2013:47). Locally negotiations are limited by the central agreement and strikes are not allowed during local negotiations. Nevertheless, it serves an important function in adjusting results to local situations. The second characteristic is high investments in productive operations due to predictability and compressed salaries. The model is characterized by “creative destruction” which leaves old systems behind in favor of more productive ones. Unproductive enterprises are brutally crushed by higher salaries in the lower part of the spectrum, while innovators can benefit from cheap and highly educated employees on the other end (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:21,24-25). In theory, the chance of inflation is dampened and room for investment and new jobs are created. The distance to groups usually at the bottom of the salary scale is shortened drastically. Revenue maximization through wage dumping becomes less accessible, and companies are forced to turn to innovation and productivity-inducing measures instead (Dølvik 2013:47). Lastly, the state invests in a welfare system built up with the goal of ensuring the health of citizens, income, and stronger social cohesion. It builds on universalism systems, investments in knowledge, and ensuring participation for its citizens (2013:50). It might seem excessive to redistribute through compressed salaries as well as a comprehensive welfare state. However, it is not as if the state simply takes from the rich to redistribute to the poor. Rather, the state provides targeted services that have proved popular amongst all classes of people. Universal social security, healthcare, and education are broadly useful, especially to the huge middle class created by compressed salaries. Welfare has become so popular amongst the population that even right-wing parties see the benefits (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:18,25). Several factors contribute to ensuring the availability of competent and educated workers. Publicly financed interventions intended to improve the labor market’s functioning, free and easily available opportunities for knowledge development, and a comprehensive welfare state. The state invests in its workforce, creating workers fit for adaptability and mobility (Dølvik 2013:65-67). They are dependent on high taxes

to make such a system viable. Pedersen and Kuhnle argue that this is one of the reasons why the system facilitated the participation of women at an early stage (Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017:229).

The tripartite agreement between employers, employees, and the state is one of the most important pillars of the Norwegian system. Upholding the balance between them is crucial to the success of the model. Somewhere around 2010, several platform-based companies showed up in the Nordic countries. Part of their strategy is precisely to circumvent local regulations, systems, and collective bargaining. This was the case with Uber in Norway (Oppegaard 2020:79). It was also the case with Just Eat in Denmark, Foodora in Sweden, as well as Uber in both countries. Uber came with the initial attitude that they could ignore local regulations and rewrite rules to their own liking. Eventually, enforcement and clarification of existing taxi laws forced them to leave, although Uber still operates at a limited capacity in the region. Just as was the case in Norway, food delivery platforms in Sweden and Denmark eventually accepted unions. However, also like Norway, their tariffs only cover a small portion of employees in these companies. Most are still self-employed, existing to the side of societal safety nets (Ilsøe and Söderqvist 2022:13-15). The system is dependent on formally employed organized workers who are able to participate in collective agreements. Food delivery platform companies such as Foodora introduce workers who are placed to the side of the system. This is unfortunate both for the system and the workers put in such a situation.

The balance achieved through years of development would be upset if the relationship between employers and employees become too asymmetrical. This is the danger brought on by companies such as Foodora and Wolt. Using new organizational strategies and utilizing technology to their own benefit, delivery cyclists are prevented from participating fully in the model. Weakening their standing in relation to employers. This is why LO leader Peggy Hessen Følsvik recently spoke out against Wolt in Norwegian media. She described their model as what can loosely be translated as “hogwash”, or nonsense. Stating that their use of self-employed workers directly undermines the Norwegian model (Solstad 2023). The article was aimed at Wolt especially. This is because although Foodora also employs a big self-employed workforce, they already established a tariff agreement with their formally hired employees. Director of Foodora Norway, Elisabeth Myhre says that hiring self-employed workers has been a necessity for them (Solstad 2023). The unions are holding back their criticisms since they seem to believe that the tariff

makes Foodora ethically better than Wolt for the moment. They also acknowledge the necessity of employing self-employed workers to compete with Wolt in the market. As long as Wolt keeps using self-employed workers exclusively, Foodora cannot afford to do the opposite. Using self-employed workers is cheaper than hiring them as ordinary employees since they have no rights. Nevertheless, Foodora is eroding the model as well. Hopefully, it will be their turn to feel the pressure from unions as soon as the fight against Wolt starts yielding results.

The Norwegian model is part of a unique Nordic phenomenon that brought different societal groups together in cooperation. Together they created a system with a strong and comprehensive welfare state, broad cooperation, high participation, small differences, development, and innovation. It is a successful model. The Scandinavian countries did so well in the 1930-2010 period, these countries had a higher growth rate than the US (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:17). Companies like Foodora and Wolt utilize technology and organizational techniques to circumvent rules and regulations developed under the model. The consequence of this could be that the position of workers is weakened and that socioeconomic differences between people rise. Over time. This could bring negative consequences for other groups as well, as central bargaining power is weakened by a growing sector outside their reach. When wage differences are growing and inequality is on the rise, there is a good chance that foundations for solidarity and trust are severely lessened. When some people become too rich, they might not see the use for welfare programs, paying high taxes, and so on. Incentives for further innovation, development, and investment in workers would also take a hit. Rather than seeing companies like Foodora and Wolt find innovative new ways to increase productivity. They seem to be racing to the bottom, seeing who can squeeze the most out of their employees while also paying the least for it. It is important to note that delivery platforms are far from the only challenge to the Norwegian model. Neither has it been ruined just yet. New laws have been introduced this year that might strengthen the position of delivery cyclists in Norway considerably. The law says that anybody subjected to governance, management, and control shall be defined as an employee (Stortinget 2023). When this is tried in courts, we will know whether or not it applies to self-employed cyclists such as those in Foodora and Wolt. If it does, they will have no other choice but to hire all of their delivery cyclists as regular formal employees. But this is still a way off. The way food delivery platforms conduct business at the moment must be seen as symptoms of a sickness that could become a real problem. The model is dependent on an equal playing field that ensures

compromise-based solutions and societal solidarity. New platform-based companies erode this system, circumventing collective bargaining, regulations, and laws. In the next part, I will move on from the impact this development has on the societal model as a whole to its impact on the individual. Workers benefit greatly from the Norwegian model and working as delivery cyclists means being barred from many of those benefits. They are put in an asymmetrical relationship where they contribute more than they get, making their situation precarious.

**Precariousness**

In the closing part of this first chapter, I will be taking a look at the cyclists themselves. How are these companies affecting them for better or worse? I will argue that it is mostly for the worse, as they are plunged into asymmetrical relationships with less of a safety net than the rest of the population. Companies like Wolt and Foodora not only pose a challenge for the system as a whole but also to the individuals they employ. Especially those that are hired as self-employed workers become more exposed than what is usual for formally and permanently employed workers, such as the standard is in Norwegian work life. Gig- and platform-based work such as that undertaken in Foodora creates or intensifies precariousness for those involved. Before I start arguing that delivery cyclists are precarious, I will talk a bit about what precariousness means as a concept, and how I aim to use it.

In Clara Han's overview text about the study of precariousness, she states that there are two ways in which precarity has been understood. Firstly, as the transformation of work and welfare under globalization. Secondly as an ontological condition of vulnerability and interdependence that can affect anybody, regardless of what kind of life they are living (Han 2018:332). The difference lies in determining the degree to which the concept of precariousness should be tied to a single, specific area. Should it be used to talk about the transformation of work specifically or encompass a broad range of different situations? Guy Standing seems to belong to the first group, stating that the precarious grew as a result of the globalization era. Precariousness is the result of neo-liberal ideology that has been spread throughout the world, and that can be traced back to the 1970s (Standing 2011:26,5). He writes that these ideas have led to multiple developments that have been particularly bad for the stability of working lives. Firms are being bought and sold as if they were commodities, run on the logic of shareholders rather than the people involved in the actual day-to-day operation. More emphasis is put on flexibility making alternatives to full-time

contracts more common, making employee turnovers higher and collective agreements harder to obtain. Professions are dismantled into smaller parts, making employees more interchangeable. Public sectors are being dismantled, steadily pulling the state out of different sectors. Social mobility has become less obtainable since the increasingly large pool of jobs at the bottom is further away from jobs at the top. People are generally left to fight for themselves to a much higher degree. They are made responsible for their own employability and tasked with bettering themselves to be eligible for work. All the responsibility is moved to the individual rather than the circumstances. Unfortunate souls are no longer believed to be the victims of economic and structural factors, they only have themselves to blame for their situation (Standing 2011:29-30,36-37,45,51,56-57). The idea seems to be that globalization brought along changes that created precarious situations. The concept is tied closely to neoliberal ideas and development. Precariousness is understood in relation to the idea of the precariat as an emerging class or socio-economic movement. They are not the same as the working poor or those with insecure employment that came before. What is new is the lack of secure work-based identity and control over one's labor (Standing 2011:7,9). In such an understanding precariousness is used as a tool to understand the specific changes that happened to work in this period of time.

"The informal economy" is a term that is used to help tie precariousness to a specific area. It is often depicted in an oppositional relation to the formal economy (Han 2018:334-335). The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the informal economy as an economic activity that is not covered by the formal arrangements of the country in question. Those that are merely insufficiently covered are also included in the term. Illicit activities, however, are not included (ILO 2015:11). An example of such informal work is the lives of "catadores" gathering recyclable objects to sell from the dumps of Rio de Janeiro. These informal workers were situated at the very bottom of a global billion-dollar recycling industry. Working through all kinds of weather to gather items from giant heaps of trash. This is dangerous work, working outside, scorched by the sun, breathing methane, and dodging dangerous items as well as machines working to compress the very trash they are sorting through (Millar 2014:32,36-38). Certain rights are tied to formal work, and catadores cannot participate in these rights, seeing as they are outside formal structures (2014:40). These informal workers exist outside of formal structures of the state. They do not qualify for the rights that formal workers get, since they are unable to live up to the expectations of what a worker is supposed to be. Although their condition is not as

extreme, Foodora cyclists are also outside of what constitutes a formal worker in the state of Norway. At least this is the case for those hired as self-employed. They do not have access to the same security and safety nets as regular formal workers are entitled to. Some might find the conceptualization of precariousness so far, a bit narrow. Arguing that precariousness encompasses far more than this. Millar partly accommodates this and brings the concept a step further by arguing that precarious work often is coupled with precarious lives. One of the workers from the dumps of Rio de Janeiro, called Rose, got a regular job at one point. Initially, she was happy about this, obtaining a worker's ID, status as a regular worker, and acceptance from the larger society. Still, it did not take long before she went back to the dump. Catadores often point out that their lives are adapted to living alongside the dump. They cannot work regular hours since their lives do not work that way. Their lives are riddled with sickness, violence, and death. Rose would have lost control over her precarious life working a regular job. Precarious work grants them the autonomy to live their precarious lives. When buses break down, houses get flooded, favelas get stormed, debt is to be paid, and healthcare must be provided. Precarious jobs grant them the time and flexibility necessary to deal with it (Millar 2014:42,44-46,48). Precariousness as a concept is not only applicable when it comes to work-related issues. Millar brings it out from the sphere of work and makes it applicable to lives outside of work as well. Precarious workers might not fit the framework of what constitutes a safe, healthy, and normal life in their everyday lives either. They are precarious at work as well as at home.

Judith Butlers takes the concept of precariousness and broadens its application just as far, or further. She understands precariousness as a universal concept, encompassing far more than the effects of a specific time frame in history. She sees precarity as a condition that befalls all living beings. Seeing it as a spectrum rather than something you are or not. Some people are merely more exposed. Precariousness is either something that is politically induced or something that befalls people since they are not sufficiently protected against it. People are interdependent, making precarity an asymmetrical relationship that leads to a higher degree of vulnerability, exposure, injury, violence, and death for some people (Han 2018:337-338; Butler 2009:2). People are dependent on each other. When someone receives less than they are entitled to for what they give, they are plunged into an asymmetrical relationship. These relationships can be with your neighbor or bigger entities such as society or the state. When somebody gets less than others through their relationships that person is also more precarious, lacking things others might take

for granted. This is on the broader side of the spectrum and leaves room for the inclusion of all humans. In this understanding everybody is precarious in some capacity, existing along a specter of precarity. Everybody lives with the uncertainty of reliance on others. Butler states that:

"Everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions" (Puar et al 2012:170).

In this view, precarity is closely tied to economic and social relations between people. Precariousness hinges on the absence or presence of safety structures provided by the part sitting opposite in such a relation, often represented by an employer or the state. The precarious amongst the precarious become those with the weakest ties in the interdependent world we live in. Those who often find themselves in asymmetrical relations, where they receive less than is necessary to maintain their safety and health sufficiently.

Butler ties precarity to her work on gender and societal performances. Society has certain expectations as to what constitutes the roles of different genders. Gender is not simply something one is, but something one does. It is socially constructed through ongoing negotiation. When such identities are reproduced both parties bring something to the table, influencing each other's stance. Either way, the expectations of society are powerful, and people strive to perform their identities correctly. Those who fit into society's expectations are deemed to belong inside of society, and therefore also subjects worth sheltering and mourning. They belong; therefore, they are worth something. The rights and treatment of people are tied to who has the status of a legitimate subject in society. When certain groups are unable to adhere to these norms, they are treated as less. Seeing as they are mutually dependent this leads to asymmetrical relationships and less security for the individual. Not adhering to such societal expectations is what links performativity to precarity (Butler 2009:4). For instance, catadores do not perform in a way that makes them recognizable as workers. Therefore, they are not treated as such. Benefits tied to workers are withheld from them since they are deemed unfit to receive them. Precarious lives consist of performances that cannot be recognized, read, or grieved. Since they do not fit into categories that society can recognize as their own. It often contains groups such as women, queers, transgender people, and the stateless. They are precarious precisely because they cannot

adhere to the performance expected by society (Butler 2009:10-13). In relationships between different actors, a certain form of etiquette is expected. Adhering to the expectations of the other party will increase the possibility of getting more out of the relationship.

As I have shown, precariousness can be understood as pertaining to one specific period, or as a result of the changes brought by globalization. It could also be understood as tied to work outside, or partly outside of formal societal structures. It is also argued that precarity cannot be limited to the spheres of work and should be extended to encompass the precarious lives people live as well. It can even be taken as far as saying that all people are precarious to some degree. Precariousness becomes a question of degree on a specter, rather than something you are or not. The concept of precariousness is drawn between those that want to open it up and make it more applicable and those who want to reduce it to a more specific comparable phenomenon. Reducing it too much might make us exclude and become blind to groups and areas that should have been included. Things that might have shed light on the area of study might be completely missed. On the other hand, opening it up too much might make the concept meaningless. It could end up encompassing too much to be a good foundation for comparability. Some anthropologists say that we should move away from seeing precariousness as a super concept the way Butler does and be more open to ethnography. Utilizing a static definition might make the ethnographer miss local variations and understandings (Han 2018:339-340). The understanding of concepts such as precariousness varies locally. In Argentina, people understand themselves as modern and tied modernity to formal work. Many rights and safety nets are tied to the status of formal work. There is a strong drive to formalize work in the country, and some unions even refuse informal workers (Lazar 2012:20-22). In Bolivia the case is different. Many people embrace their status as informal workers. There are both tax reasons and ideological reasons for this. The state is unable to reach them, and unions regulate the local market in its stead, protecting these economies against overregulation (Lazar 2012:19-20). There is no fixed dichotomy between formal and informal, and the boundaries between them are negotiated between actors. While Argentinians clearly understand the informal sector as precarious, Bolivians do not do that to the same degree. Rather, they see benefits in their current mode of being (2012:16,20). Even though both groups deal with comparable situations, the local setting and understanding of it make it different. People understand their situations differently, and precariousness is not the same everywhere. However, we should remind ourselves of the importance of not rushing into a decision that just ends up

changing the concept of "precariousness" with something else. For instance, a focus on the good in societies. Maybe the answer is having several thoughts in one's head simultaneously, contextualizing precarity in the real world (Han 2018:341).

Whichever way one chooses to understand the concept, precariousness refers to those that are less fortunate than others. And this is also the core of how I want to be utilizing the concept for my thesis. Whether it should be reduced to a certain timeframe, or sphere, or understood in a broader perspective does not matter much. I aim to substantiate that delivery cyclists get a raw deal. Self-employed Foodora cyclists, as will become apparent, can be understood as precarious regardless of which of the above is utilized. However, I will mainly be focusing on those parts of their lives that pertain to the working sphere. Since these are the parts that are most relevant to my fieldwork. This is why I want to use Guy Standing's seven forms of labor-related security, which he finds is characteristically lacking for precarious workers. This is a convenient way to show the uncertain situation of delivery cyclists. The seven characteristics are as follows: (1) Labor market security in the form of adequate opportunities for income, (2) Security against unjust dismissal and hiring, (3) Job security through a clearly defined job with visible paths of mobility, (4) Adequate measures that ensure safety and health, (5) a chance to reproduce skills, (6) grow stable secure income, and (7) possess a voice through representational security (Standing 2011:10). First, what kinds of opportunities do delivery cyclists have available to them? Although some do take up platform work as a side gig or even hobby, many see no other opportunities for themselves. For instance, a large part of Deliveroo cyclists were migrants who could hold no other jobs or found this an attractive alternative. Especially paperless migrants had no other opportunities and saw the lack of physical presence of management in the industry as an opportunity. They could borrow a user from somebody else and nobody would ever know (Cant 2020:84,88-89). Allen told me that he took the job at Foodora out of necessity, not because he had any love for cycling. Allen had a master's degree from Malaysia in design. He wanted to be a sign-maker but found it hard to land any jobs in Norway. Even though some people choose to be delivery cyclists for various reasons, many see it as the only option available to them. The online hiring process enables people to easily access delivery platforms, even when they cannot land other jobs. Once I met a cyclist that could neither speak nor read Norwegian and that also had a hard time with English. Despite the difficulties in doing his job because of language barriers, he managed to land a job in Foodora. Peder told me that this was typical. Anybody could get a job in

Foodora. In a way, it is a good thing that people can get jobs. However, it is often not due to a choice, but rather a lack of other opportunities.

Foodora might allow people to easily get access to their platform, but they are also able to fire them again just as easily. At least those who are hired as self-employed workers. Bloodworth emphasizes the importance of following Uber's rules as an Uber driver in Great Britain. Drivers who did not follow orders could be summoned to the office or simply deactivated (2019:222). The same is true for Foodora cyclists in similar independent positions. Since they are not formally hired, they do not have the same rights as regular formally hired employees. This means that firing someone is as easy as turning off the app. Their access to the app is uncertain and so is their pay. Since most delivery cyclists are paid per drop or delivery, there is no way to know how much you will earn any given month. How much you can earn relies on how fast you can work, how many orders come in, and that everything goes as smoothly as possible. There is no time to relax since you never know when a good day will have to supplement a bad one (Cant 2020:51). Allen had the same experience. He told me that it was impossible to know which days were good for earning money. Sometimes Sundays were good, sometimes not. Nevertheless, he believed that Sundays especially were a good bet. But that is the limit to it, a good bet. Cyclists are unable to know exactly how much they will earn and therefore also unable to plan ahead. This makes it hard to invest in things like housing, a car, or a family. Although the content of their jobs is somewhat definable, they lack clear mobility. They also lack growth opportunities, and their voices are suppressed. The most important reason for this is the isolation imposed by new technology. Cant writes that the closest he got to a manager in Deliveroo was the guy handing out equipment (2020:22-23). The same is true for Foodora cyclists in Oslo. Employers create distance between themselves and the everyday work their companies facilitate. They create a digital wall between themselves and their employees. Allen told me there have been many cases where people try getting in touch with the management without finding a way to get in touch. The hiring process is left to computers, and like Deliveroo, the only person they meet is the guy in charge of equipment, and he is just as clueless as the rest. They are left to themselves without any natural way to meet colleagues, management, or anybody. Since deliveries are decided by the algorithm there is no way to build relationships with customers either. Repeating the same job endlessly, isolated from all other steps in the value chain, mobility ends up being hard to obtain. Their room for growth is limited. Especially Since their jobs are the result of dismantling bigger

processes into smaller parts. There are few opportunities to learn anything new. Their voices are stifled as well through isolation, separation, and exclusion from collective agreements and formal work life. Although parts of the workforce have been able to obtain a tariff, this is not the reality for all of them. A large part of the workforce remains self-employed, making them exempt from any agreements. The status of informal workers coupled with isolation makes their voices and ability to be heard weaker. This is not to say that they are silent. But the distances that must be overcome to bring about change are far longer for this group.

Most importantly, being a platform-worker means exposure to several safety and health risks. Aman, an Eritrean Uber driver, usually locked the doors while he was waiting for customers. He told Bloodworth that once he had asked a customer to confirm his name, to which he had replied "Just open the fucking door". Aman canceled the trip immediately and drove away. If a customer were intoxicated or otherwise unpredictable or violent, there was no panic button to push, drivers were left alone to handle the problem (Bloodworth 2019:239-240,243). For Deliveroo cyclists' danger was just part of the job, pushing themselves to earn more. The company took no responsibility for their safety since they argued cyclists should be understood as their own bosses, merely partnering with Deliveroo (Cant 2020:56). Although Calvin liked the freedom Foodora gave him, he often felt unsafe. He had nobody to turn to if something were to happen. This made him fearful, especially since cyclists often conflicted with the cars that they shared the streets with. Foodora cyclists are barred from several important welfare functions. Exactly which ones depend on how they are hired into the company. Peder told me that Foodora cyclists are hired in three different ways. First, they can be hired formally as regular workers. These workers get 2/3 of their payment as a monthly salary, and 1/3 depending on how much they deliver. They have drawn the longest straw and have the safest positions possible in the company. They have collective agreements, regular pay, and welfare available to them. They cannot be dismissed as easily since more laws apply to them, and their voices actually carry with the help of unions. However, they also have a way to go when it comes to mobility and growth. In addition, there are two ways of hiring self-employed workers into the company. Some self-employed workers are hired directly into the company, while others are hired through a third party handling their taxes and such. As far as the Norwegian workers-law is concerned, both groups should be understood as self-employed. This changes in relation to some welfare goods. Social security payments

differentiate between self-employed workers and freelancers (Alsos, Nergaard, and Thorbjørnsen 2022:11). Since the group engaged through a third party are not completely independent. They might be seen as freelancers. Either of the two groups has the right to get paid for the first sixteen days of being sick. During this period, it is expected that the employer is responsible for sick pay. Since both groups are self-employed, they have to economically cover these days themselves. After the first sixteen days, freelancers get full coverage from the state, while self-employed workers only get 80% of the coverage. Unemployment benefits are also tied to employment forms. Freelancers and regular employees can get help in cases where they are temporarily laid off or unemployed. This is not the case with self-employed workers. Their only option is to apply for financial assistance from the state, which grants much lower sums (Alsos, Nergaard, and Thorbjørnsen 2022:36,38). What might be the biggest challenge is pensions. Norwegian pensions are comprised of "folketrygd", "tjenestepensjon" and "AFP". Since self-employed workers and freelancers are informal workers, they are exempt from "tjenestepensjon" which is the part of the pension paid by employers. This means that they have to cover this part themselves. They have two options. Either, they sign an agreement called "innskuddsavtale" which is meant to mimic ordinary pension payments by an employer, or they sign an individual pension insurance. The only problem is that the first one only really benefits those who earn the most since the basis for social security decreases when the agreement is signed. The second one was never meant to be a substitute but rather a supplement. This means that the amounts you are allowed to save are quite small. Regardless of how bad the alternatives are, only 12% of self-employed workers created their own pension agreement in 2016. With varying wages and much uncertainty, fixed payment just seems too much for a lot of precarious workers. A lot of self-employed workers have so little money that setting aside funds to pay pensions or creating a buffer is unrealistic (Alsos, Nergaard, and Thorbjørnsen 2022:27-28,34,38-40).

Gig- and platform-based work is making its mark on the Norwegian labor market. New technology and organizational tactics are used to circumvent rules and regulations, refusing to treat delivery cyclists as regular formal workers. They hire a huge self-employed workforce exempt from collective agreements. These developments are not only bad for the societal model but also for the workers themselves. Delivery cyclists who for different reasons have ended up in a company like Foodora or Wolt get a bad deal. They have small chances for mobility, growth, or

making their voice heard. They are left under the violence of an invincible employer who theoretically can fire them at any time, and who pays unpredictably based on orders delivered. Most importantly they are barred from several important welfare benefits. The result is that they are plunged into a precarious state. The following chapters will take a look at how delivery cyclists imagine their futures from this precarious vantage point. What kinds of futures can they imagine, and how does it affect their understanding of the present? I will also be looking at how their view of the future and present are gaslighted by promises of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. Delivery cyclists are influenced by these promises but also acknowledge their own precariousness. How much space the different competing realities can get, determines how cyclists are able to picture themselves and their situation both presently and in the future.

# Chapter 2: The Impact of a confused present on an imagined future

## Phantasmagoria

Imagine standing in line, waiting for a show promising to challenge everything you know to be true. You have no idea what happens behind the thick curtains separating you from the spectacle you are about to witness. Before you have a chance to reconsider you are ushered into a dimly lit room and shown to your seat. You can hear the doors being locked behind you before the last lights flicker out. Everything is enveloped in complete darkness, save for the little platform in front of you. Eerie music starts playing in the background, and the presenter enters the scene. After a few words and magic spells, ghosts start appearing in the air above you. You know they cannot be real, but yet, there they are. You are left frozen in your seat. Not knowing whether to run, or stay completely still, just staring at the apparitions with your mouth agape.

Attending a phantasmagorical show in the late eighteenth-, or early nineteenth century must have been something like this. Unreal, scary, and disorienting. The term “phantasmagoria” is used to refer to such shows, and the technology used to facilitate them. It can be traced all the way back to the seventeen hundreds. There seems to be some disagreement about just when they were first put into use. One source trace them back as far as 1790 (Gunning 2004:1). While another one goes even further back in time, pointing to 1770 (Castle 1988:33). Whichever one of these years is the right one, does not really matter too much. Either way, we can determine that these shows can be traced back to the eighteenth century and persisted up until the twentieth. Slowly becoming the art of cinematography such as we know it today (Gunning 2004:4).

The most important part is understanding what phantasmagoria refers to. Most often it refers to magical spectacles akin to the one described above. Amongst the early pioneers of these phantasmagorical shows was the artist known as Robertsen, who was situated in France in the early eighteen hundreds (Castle 1988:31, 33). These shows are set up for the pleasure of slightly skeptical customers, not sure what they are in store for. It is a kind of illusionary show allowing people to transcend the world they know, and step into a spiritual realm beyond. For those operating the phantasms, this was a business aimed at making money in much the same way as a magician would. Phantasmagoria was entertainment and a show people were willing to pay for.

Isolated in a dark room, they would be exposed to sights of wonder, ghosts, and apparitions projected into the room (Castle 1988:27). These illusionary spectacles could be quite overwhelming for some onlookers. There are cases where people got quite frightened by what they were exposed to in these shows. (Castle 1988:39). There are records of people simply getting too much. Some left the room in a hurry to get away from something they had seen in the darkness, and the record states that many a woman fainted in the presence of ghosts and apparitions (Gunning 2004:4). There was some potential for these shows to be used for the projection of more pleasant imagery, and in some instances, this has been done. Even so, in most cases, they were used to scare or disturb those attending the shows (Castle 1988:47).

The technology used was not that dissimilar to the projectors used to show movies in modern cinemas. Phantasmagoria was an early form of image production, utilizing the technology in small-scale productions. The development brought forth by this business was a big inspiration for innovators to come and laid down much of the technological groundwork for the cinematographic industry which was to follow it. Although it is safe to say that the medium has advanced quite a bit since then, ghosts and apparitions still frequent quite a lot on tv, streaming platforms, movies, and other such media today (Castle 1988:41-42).

The projectors used to create the spectacle were a fairly new invention, and people were unsure how they were supposed to react to them. This was especially the case, seeing that they became popular at a particular time in history. People were believing themselves to be more rational than before, shedding old superstitions and beliefs. This was an age of scientific beliefs, and not so much one of magic (Castle 1988:52). The phantasmagoria found its place in the borderlands between science and superstition. It worked so well exactly because it challenged the existing convictions of the time. It was not something rational people tended to believe in. Nevertheless, they could see the phantasms with their own eyes, right there in front of them. Phantasmagorical shows did not aim to convince anybody, it was done to entertain them through the confusion (Gunning 2004:6). People were brought out of their comfort zones, and into dark isolated rooms. In these rooms, they were confronted with advanced technology, able to project apparitions that they could not believe in, but that were hard to explain away. At the crossroad between established truth and the supernatural, people were caught in the spectacle. Transfixed on the ghosts and goblins floating in the air around them.

Marx takes on the Phantasmagoria in *Capital*, *volume one* when talking about commodity fetichism. Commodities fulfill some wish people have. Some want based on factors such as hunger, thirst, boredom, or maybe even vanity. The main point is that it fills some kind of need (Marx 1932:41-42). For Marx, there were mainly two ways of deciding the value of things people make. First, the value could be based on the intended use of the thing in question. This kind of value is straightforward. People find materials in the wild, which they proceed to process into something useful to them. The value is inherent in the usefulness of the object (1932:81). The other way one can decide value comes about when the item produced transforms into a commodity. The object becomes a commodity when connections to production are severed, and invisible, and the steps of production become independent of each other. New mystical qualities appear, unbound to the original value of its use (1932:82-84).

The point Marx makes about phantasmagoria is often overlooked, seeing as it got lost in translation in many English versions of his texts. This also applies to the one I read. The word phantasmagoria is transformed to “fantastic form” through the translation process, leaving out some important nuances in what he writes. When it is switched back to the image of phantasmagoria, we are reminded that commodity fetishism is produced, not only an effect. It emphasizes the magical qualities the commodity takes on, and the spectacularizing dimension of it (Gunning 2004:9-10). The commodity takes on ghostly qualities like those projected by phantasmagoria, making new forms of superstition and myths. (Cohen 2004:201-202). Marx describes them as surrounded by magic and necromancy, their worth only assessable by comparison to other commodities in the market (Marx 1932:87). Like in the old shows produced by the likes of Robinson, phantasmagoric lights go on to project spectral images on top of the commodity. It creates properties where there were none. Like the ghosts and goblins of the old magic shows. Obscuring the real thing in favor of the phantasms.

Margaret Cohen uses Walter Benjamin to take the imagery of phantasmagoria as an analytic tool one step further. She draws on the duality inherent in the spectacle of the phantasms, capturing people in the space between belief and disbelief. Through his Arcades project, Benjamin wished to study the rise of capitalistic modernity and argued that it brought a kind of dreamlike dimension to the Western world (Cohen 2004:199, 205). He became interested in phantasmagoria as a tool to visualize his point (2004:207). Importantly he showed how the arcades, or what is

perhaps better known as shopping malls today, became a showroom for the phantasmagoria. It became a spectacle projecting ghostly apparitions, while at the same time keeping traces of production. People never completely lost track of that original dimension, projecting their hopes into modernity and the future it represented (Cohen 2004:212). Phantasmagoria was no longer exclusively pictured as an illusion, but rather as a complex show allowing a critical dimension and dialectic view (Gunning 2004:12-13). There is never one, or the other. Commodities might be hidden behind a spectral veil, but their underlying characteristic is still available for those who care to look closely enough. Originally phantasmagoric shows represented a conflict between what was perceived as rational, and the things people sensed in that dark room (2004:14). This duality is still present in terms of the commodity, existing simultaneously as the market projects it, and as it is produced. At a fundamentally rational level, people know that commodities are things produced by humans, but we humans are not that simple. We like to prescribe meaning and use our brains imaginatively. Castle argues that there are two ways of rationalizing the specters of our daily lives. Either we confront them as forgery, or acknowledge them as coming from inside, from a disillusioned brain (Castle 1988:53-54). Ghosts could very much end up haunting your mind if you get too caught up in them (1988:57). I will now attempt to use the phantasmagoria to shed some light on how the delivery cyclist is perceived and come to perceive themselves.

I am sitting opposite Endre in the canteen at his current job talking about bikes amongst other things. When I was a kid, I usually went cycling quite a lot. I would hang out with my friends after school, and we would often go out on our bikes. Then we would proceed to cycle until the sky changed color above us, earning us a scolding for arriving home late. I told him about the feeling of rushing down the steep hill by the dairy plant in my hometown. About the wind that rustled and pulled at me as I leaned closer to the handlebars. He responded rather well to this, letting his love for bikes beam across the table. He admitted that it had worked in a cynical industry but missed the flexibility of it. He started talking about freedom, clean air, and strengthening his body, cycling through the city. There was a dualism to how he viewed working for Foodora. On the one hand, there was freedom, flexibility, and wind in your hair. On the other, there was cynicism and exploitation of workers.

Platforms like Foodora advertise themselves as facilitators of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. This is what the platform sells its employees, and what they want them to believe about the work they are hired to do. (Lee 2021:4-5). These images gaslight the reality of their situation, hiding precariousness in favor of ideals that the company wants them to see. Flexibility, in part, is also what they are selling to their customers. People want easy access to food. They want a pizza, burger, or kebab delivered to their door. It is an easy solution for a lazy, late Sunday night. These apps alleviate you from the responsibility of making your own food, using your own time, and they present themselves as an easy solution on a tight schedule (Cant 2019:98). Algorithms change our understanding of the services performed by groups such as delivery cyclists. Movement, transactions, and what part Uber drivers or delivery personnel take, get transformed through the app. Customers only interact with the app, and not the real people who make up the process. They are naturally drawn to the convenience of it, seeing these apps as an ordered and clear alternative to the old ways (Del Nido 2022:140-141). The convenience of such services lies in the time and energy they save for the customers. Uber eliminates much of the waiting time associated with the traditional taxi industry and saves customers the trouble of hailing a car themselves. Delivery cyclists save the customer a trip down to a restaurant, bringing the food all the way home to the customer. In a way, they become the commodity that customers buy, produced inside the realm of the app (Gandini 2019:1045-1046). Both delivery cyclists and Uber drivers are given new qualities, produced through spectral images projected upon them as commodities (Del Nido 2022:143).

Amongst the middle class in Buenos Aires, the phantasmagoric spectacle of Uber blinded people to the plight of the traditional taxi industry. Even when judges ruled Uber illegal, they continued supporting their entry into Argentinian society. Uber represented modernity, innovation, flexibility, and choice to the people of Argentina. Such ideas overshadowed the actual reality faced by drivers, as well as the people behind the app. These phantasms allowed the middle class to renegotiate what was sensible. Uber became something inevitable to them. It was only natural that Uber should have a place in their society (Del Nido 2022:144,151). Companies like Uber attribute their success to such properties. Liberal thinking tends to view these companies as innovating entrepreneurs, freeing the delivery cyclists from the oppression of restricting formal work (Cant 2019:2,5). The fact that the very same liberation brings them into informality and precariousness is glossed over by the spectral hue of the phantasmagoria. Delivery services like

Foodora represent a clear challenge to the Norwegian model and the position of workers as it stands. Regardless of this, the Norwegian people seem to have taken to the industry, taking full advantage of the newfound flexibility. In 2019 Foodora, Norway sold more food than ever before, spreading to six new Norwegian cities, increasing their turnover by 85% (Lien 2022).

Customers are not the only group to be sold glossy ideas about freedom and flexibility. As illustrated through the example with Endre, cyclists themselves buy into these ideas as well. At least to some degree. Many delivery cyclists understand themselves as independent entrepreneurs, freed from the traditional bonds of labor. This is exactly what their employers wish them to do. Adopting identities such as entrepreneurs or even customers using a service, helps distance delivery cyclists from the rights of traditional formal work (Lee 2021:5). The people sitting behind all the data and algorithms aim to convince self-employed workers that they have freedom and are their own bosses (Bloodworth 2019:210). They want a commitment to flexibility and aim at persuading delivery cyclists that this is what they want themselves as well. They want delivery cyclists to be understood as something like equal business partners rather than employees (Cant 2019:62-63). Almost all my informants brought up flexibility as a positive and important reason for working in Foodora. Allen did not think this kind of flexibility would be possible in most other jobs, Calvin said the bike seat brought him freedom, and Peder thought delivery cycling was fulfilling work.  One cyclist told me this freedom offered an opportunity like no other. They could earn as much as fifty thousand NOK a month if they just boost their effort somewhat. To people like this, delivery cycling was an opportunity. It was up to cyclists themselves to make use of it.

Just as was the case with the viewers of the phantasmagorical spectacle, their understanding is dialectical. To a certain degree, delivery cyclists believe that they are given freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. At the same time, they acknowledge their precarious situation, aware that they should be treated more fairly. The narrative of flexibility and freedom is porous, penetrated in a way that illuminates the underlying conditions of their job.

“The combination of adrenaline, speed, skill, and insider knowledge of routes across the city was intoxicating at times, but once you started to get cold, tired, and bored, that intoxicating element of the work died away pretty fast” (Cant 2019:86).

Calvin did like the freedom Foodora gave him, but he also pointed out it often felt unsafe. There was no safety net in place if something were to happen. He often felt at odds with the cars in which they shared the street and knew he would be on his own if he ever got so unlucky as to hit one of them. The most important function of Foodora remained as a source of salary for him, and in this capacity, many found the industry lacking. Several of my informants worked two jobs or more, often going straight from one to the other. Some delivery workers showed resistance to the box they were neatly fitted into. Defining themselves as workers rather than entrepreneurs or some other disconnected category (Lee 2021:5). Cyclists refuse to wholly buy into the liberating capabilities of the flexible work platforms promise them. At some level, they also recognize that the job often brings on the opposite. Keeping them accessible, always with one eye on the phone. Fighting for shifts, getting paid per delivery, unable to plan further than the next release of available hours (Leonardi et al 2019:162-163). The flexibility, autonomy, and freedom promised by these platforms are far from the everyday reality lived by cyclists. It is but a phantasmagorical show, projecting fantastical spectral images both out and of and into the industry. Blurring the precariousness and control delivery cyclists endure.

**Imagined futures**

Delivery cyclists understand that they are put in an asymmetrical, precarious situation, working for Foodora. At the same time, they also believe that the job provides them freedom, flexibility, and autonomy to some degree. It is a dualism to their situation. Where they land on the spectrum between the two affects their actions. Some delivery cyclists have more confidence in the promises made by the company than others. Allen told me that you could earn as much as 50000 NOK in a month if you just worked hard enough. Although he did not see himself doing this, he thought it might be possible for others. He believed that the strain cyclists had to endure to earn that much is more dangerous than it is worth. It is not hard to imagine young and inexperienced employees believing themselves invincible and pushing for big payouts. I have worked with such individuals myself. The structure ceases to be the problem and the focus shifts to the cyclists themselves. Foodora becomes an opportunity for those willing to work for it. Others did not see Foodora as an opportunity, but rather a necessary step on the way to something else. Foodora was first and foremost a temporary way to earn some money. Endre saw himself as a visitor in the world of delivery cycling, never intending to stay there for long. He did not imagine a future for himself inside the company. Instead of seeing Foodora as an opportunity, many see it as a

temporary stop on their way. Some cyclists cannot imagine their futures within this structure, actively looking for ways out. Still, their feelings are not completely one-sided about these things. Allen believes that there can be a future within the system, although he cannot see it for himself. He would rather use his education to work as a designer. Regrettably, he had not been able to get a job within this sector as of yet. This made Foodora a temporary necessity for him.

Endre, on the other hand, saw the whole industry as a failing concept. He not only had trouble seeing his own future within Foodora but had trouble seeing a future for the company as a whole. For him, the future of this kind of business was dubious at best. He compared the industry to other app-based concepts such as Spotify and Netflix, arguing that Foodora could never be as successful. The home delivery industry, he believed, was too dependent on human labor. While businesses such as Spotify have the option to reduce themselves almost entirely to algorithms delivering music digitally, food has a more physical dimension to it. He believed that Foodora was doomed to fail. In the end, Endre left the company, pursuing other interests.

Peder had quite a different opinion about the perceivable future of food delivery platform industries. Peder admitted that these companies still had a way to go. Still, he believed that Foodora could be changed into a better version of itself. But for this to happen, something would have to be done about the current legislation. As things stand, Wolt has an unfair competitive advantage over Foodora. Wolt is a similar company to Foodora but operates differently. They currently only hire self-employed cyclists for their company. This means that they can operate with fewer expenses than Foodora. Peder did not think that self-employment would be the future of platform-based companies in Norway. He might be correct in that theory, seeing as new laws threatening to formalize the jobs of delivery cyclists were introduced this year (Stortinget 2023). After this unevenness is corrected, he believed it would only be a matter of getting enough customers. Unlike Endre, he thought they could make that happen. Being a delivery cyclist was not necessarily the best thing currently, but he saw great potential in the business. If there was a potential for the company to make good money, there was also a potential for employees to negotiate better conditions for themselves. Peder’s vision included a transformation of the current structure itself, making it more legitimate. Just as the cyclists buy into the company propaganda, Peder also believes in a future within their current occupation. While the former seeks to stay inside it and change themselves so they can utilize it better, Peder belongs to those who believe

that it is the system that has to change. Endre, on the other hand, sees his future outside the system. All of them react to their understanding of the current situation, and imagine their future in different ways, based on their present.

Delivery cyclists imagine different futures based on their present. Imagination is a theme with some history within anthropology. I will delve into that concept a little more before I go any further. Humans are able to use imagination to create a simulated understanding of things we have not experienced ourselves. Imagination is a prevalent analytical tool for anthropological studies. One of the most important contributors to this field is Arjun Appadurai. His work has a central place in this part of the thesis. Imagination is part of a social practice of negotiation between people and possibilities. People imagine things differently and try to come to an agreement on the official version. He is especially interested in how imagination is used to make global communities disconnected from the local setting, setting the stage for transnational identities (Appadurai 1996:31,38-40). These communities use their imagination to construct new possibilities, connecting themselves to group identities spanning across geographical borders. Appadurai writes that innovations in the field of international media have been especially important in facilitating these imaginaries. Diaspora all over the world consume text, images, video, and sound, allowing them to imagine places far away from their local setting. They end up imagining new communities, challenging established truths. These might be based on places from their past, but are being remade in their minds, based on what is presented through media (1996:4-5).

Although migration has been an important arena in the study of imagination, it is far from the only place it can be observed. In those times in our life when uncertainty takes hold of us, for any number of reasons, it is reasonable to suggest that room is made for the imagination to be applied. This can certainly be the imagined self during a time of displacement but does not have to be. People use their imagination often. They use it to construct themselves, to construct others, the future, the past, and even things. For instance, fashion is imagined as something temporary. Fashion is often understood as something one ought to buy before its time is up. As if clothes had an expiration date. Appadurai describes the consummation of fashion as a longing for a constructed nostalgic time that has no basis in experienced reality, disconnected from true memory. The present becomes the past right in front of us when observing fashion (Appadurai

1996:75-77,83). Countless imaginings are crossing our paths and getting negotiated between actors every day. Some become interconnected. They find a joint form, work as one, or end up working alongside each other. Others might end up in contradicting relations, unable to harmonize fully (Salazar 2011:593). Tourists coming to Java, Indonesia, expect the untouched and truly native in their dealings with the local people. In a mobile world, they are expecting to find immobile people, which they imagine to be more authentic. The local guides must suppress their own experiences as mobile citizens to accommodate their imagination. This becomes contradictory to how they view themselves. These guides wish to take part in the global, imagining themselves as apart from the picture painted by the tourist. They are left in a peculiar squeeze, as the very funds allowing them to be global citizens are derived from the tourists themselves (Salazar 2011:583-585). Imagination is a tool used to represent the world we live in and give it purpose. It is a creative endeavor that facilitates movement past any structural obstacles, power, and economic shortcomings. It is a mental exercise producing reality, as it is produced itself, as the product of its labor (Salazar 2020:774).

Appadurai understands imagination in the following way. Firstly, it is something that belongs to the regular everyday discourses, not something contained in things such as art, myths, and so on. Secondly, it is differentiated from fantasy which is a product of imagination. While fantasy can be broken down into something like a flight from reality or a fancy for the individual mind. Imagination, on the other hand, constructs reality for the individual. Imagination produces truth. Lastly, imagination can be constructed individually, or gain traction and become collectively shared. It is through negotiation it becomes the current truth (Appadurai 1996:5-8). For instance, when people are spread out globally, identity becomes harder to hold on to. Transgenerational knowledge has a hard time transferring between generations. There are few references to draw on, and those that exist are used to renegotiate the past to make sense of the future in a new setting (1996:43-44,56). As a result, something completely new is created, as a mishmash of all sorts of impressions. This new product of imagination is not any less true to the people who agree with it than any previous truth would be. In addition to the past, the future can also be used to shape the present. For my purposes, these imagined futures will be the most relevant. Delivery cyclists use their understanding of the present to understand their future and vice versa. Caught between phantasms and their lived reality delivery cyclists negotiate the present. In turn, the conclusion they reach affects what their futures look like, and thus also their present. Many of the

things usually attributed to the past, could possibly be better explained by a look at the future. It may very well be influenced by the past, but the future is where everything is headed (Bryant 2020:11,21). Talking to my informants I found that they had different ideas about what future their current trajectory would lead them to. Most of my informants did not see their future within the industry. Those who could, either saw a future through change or a future intended for others than themselves. None of my informants fully bought into the phantasm imagining their futures inside of the company as it is. Nevertheless, this is also an option, although those who push themselves often learn that it is not viable after all. For instance, a taxi driver called Kristian told the paper FriFagbevegelse that once, he suddenly found himself in the middle of nowhere with customers in his car. He could not remember when he had picked them up, or where he was going. Luckily, he found the information on the in-car computer. When he got back after delivering the customers, he told the journalist that he sat down and cried. This was the result of pushing himself to earn money, often working more than 24 hours at a time (Solstad 2018). Gig- and platform workers imagine their future inside the structure or outside of it. They also imagine they can make a future inside by changing the system. How the future is pictured can have a great impact on how the present is interpreted by individuals and groups. When people dare to imagine that different trajectories might lead them into different futures, change can be brought to the present (Ooman, Hoffman, and Hajer 2022:255).

Imagined futures are part of the everyday lives of delivery cyclists. The influences shaping these imagined futures are not always easy to perceive. Companies like Foodora seek control over the imaginaries produced so that people can be led to accept things they normally would not. Using phantasms of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy they seek to change their imagined trajectories. It might not be the case that Foodora is actively aiming at changing how they imagine their futures, but this is one result. The phantasms used by Foodora could be seen as “tools of futuring”. Both individuals and groups can take part in forming how futures are imagined, using specific tools to shape how the future is understood. These tools could be an analysis favoring a specific result, a climate model, or something else entirely. The tools aim at making people favor a specific imagined future. Nevertheless, it has to be collectively negotiated to gain legitimacy. Whether we believe it or not depends on the story told in the performance, and to what degree they tap into already established truths in our structures (Ooman, Hoffman, and Hajer 2022:258-261). One such example is the artist Puff Daddy, who has been framing himself as an advocate

for black rights. He has been using his celebrity status to bring forth important issues to those listening to him. Many fans from the demographic he talks about, see him standing up for their struggles. Many of his fans live under worse conditions than him, and for them, he also ends up representing what their futures could be. He has obtained wealth, fame, and success. They imagine themselves in his shoes, consuming his politics, music, and clothing brand. This might seem well and good, but the clothing brand represents somewhat of a clash with the values he is projecting. At the same time that he promotes justice, his clothing line is produced in Honduras under horrendous conditions (Tsing 2009:165). This controversial side of it is glossed over, and what the consumer sees is the phantasm presented by the likes of Puff Daddy. These articles are sold imbued with an imagined future and sold to young poor men without the same opportunities. They end up representing a way out. A way to mobility, respect, and riches (Tsing 2009:165-166).

The future is unknown to all of us. There is no way to know what it will bring. Nevertheless, people like to indulge in imagination, predicting possible futures for themselves and others. It is natural to dwell on what might come, and delivery cyclists are no exception. Delivery cyclists riding along the streets of Oslo have plenty of opportunities to reflect on what their futures might hold. It seemed like my informants often imagined something better for themselves, both inside and outside of their current occupations. For cyclists like Calvin and Allen, Foodora was the only viable option presented to them. Working for the food delivery platform industry was a way to make a living, getting paid. They ended up being delivery cyclists out of necessity rather than any desire to cycle. Calvin used his weekends delivering newspapers as a side job while working for Foodora. When I asked if he had any free time his response was laughing.  Allen was very clear that he did not plan to stay in Foodora longer than necessary, and he told me that he would prefer almost any other job over his current occupation. They both felt stuck, imagining their futures somewhere else, doing something else. This is not to say that their minds were completely one-sided on this topic. Allen did like the flexibility of it, which he believed was unavailable in most other jobs. Calvin loved adventuring throughout the city. He thought the job gave him a very special geographical understanding of Oslo. It just was not enough to warrant them to stay, and they both saw it as a temporary face they had to go through.

On the one hand, delivery cyclists know that Foodora offers less than ideal circumstances, and therefore think of it as less valuable than other more "legitimate" occupations. This makes them more susceptible to imagining that Foodora is a stepping stone to another, better life somewhere else. On the other hand, they are constantly fed a narrative about flexibility and freedom from the capitalist society, as well as their employer. Inside this narrative they are responsible for their own luck, framing Foodora as an opportunity ready to be seized. These are arguments used when defending self-employment and platform-based work. The informal structure of delivery cycling becomes an opportunity, ready to be seized. Peder believed that cyclists convinced by this had an unfortunate point of view. He said that they might earn a lot, but they would also end up costing society when they crashed from overexertion. Like them, he imagined his future inside the company. But unlike them, he believed that the system itself had to be changed to be viable. He did not imagine a future where his efforts inside of the current structure would make him wealthy, but rather he imagined that structural changes were the way to go. His imagined future saw the end of self-employment and the dawn of a tidier operation.

Companies like Foodora want to be seen as legitimate businesses with good morals. Phantasms of flexibility, freedom, and autonomy are among the tools used to construct such an image around them. Delivery cyclists are gaslighted into believing that operating as self-employed is to their benefit. A phantasm of opportunity is constructed, confusing their view of the situation. Nevertheless, it is not completely convincing. Although they buy into the images sold to them in some capacity, they also know that their situation is less than ideal. They are stuck in a dialectic relationship with Foodora, acknowledging the bad and the good at the same time. This situation affects how delivery cyclists can imagine their futures. On the one hand, they know that the structures they are working under do them no favors, exploiting their labor. This makes them able to imagine their futures outside of the business, viewing Foodora as a temporary situation. On the other hand, phantasms of freedom and flexibility challenge this notion. Delivery cyclists are told that they can find a good future within the company, as long as they work for it. This narrative makes it possible to apply the imagination inside of the structure as well. Cyclists are told that they just have to be patient, apply themselves better, and work harder. This reasoning is making anything less than ideal about their current occupation into the fault of cyclists themselves. Some buy into this, working hard to earn wealth. How long the illusion might keep them is hard to say. Others see some good in it but know that the structure must change. Their future is inside the

company but on different terms. Delivery cyclists negotiate both their future and present. How they view their present affects the future and vice versa. Going forward we will go into a discussion about identity, and how delivery cyclists are perceived. Delivery cyclists are understood as data and numbers translated through an algorithm, commodities, as well as time and energy saved. Seldom are they seen as workers in the classical sense. Delivery cyclists themselves might see this somewhat differently, continually negotiating their identities.

# Chapter 3: How are delivery cyclists perceived

## Identities

We were sitting in the cantina at his current job when I asked Endre how he felt about being labeled a worker, in the common understanding of the word. Endre was one of the central figures during “Rosastreiken”, or The Pink Strike, back in 2019. I figured this connection must have given him some opportunity to reflect on their standing compared to other comparable groups. Unionism and worker identity have historically been a huge part of the Norwegian culture, and I knew that he would have had to reflect on the role he had played as a part of the movement. I asked him if Foodora-cyclists like him felt connected to the category, as an industrial worker might do, or did they see themselves as somewhat of an outlier representing something slightly different. He answered me in the following way. Most cyclists did not see themselves as part of such a category in any significant way. The class concept, as he saw it, did not fit their self-image. Very few would describe themselves as something like proud workers, creating solidarity under such a term. He thought that this kind of identity was tied to more “legitimate” forms of work and that their jobs did not qualify as such. This echoed the feelings of several cyclists I talked to during my fieldwork.

This is not to say that no sense of identity was present, or that delivery cyclists never did understand themselves as workers to some degree. Some definitely did, still fighting for their rights as such. When that is said, for a lot of cyclists Foodora never achieved the status of terminus in their lives. As James Bloodworth argues, you are supposed to escape from “working-class” jobs in the modern world, they are merely a step on the ladder to something better (2019:x). Delivery cyclists would understand their occupation as a temporary point in time. Foodora was not somewhere where they planned to stay, but rather something bound to become their past. For some cyclists such as my informant Allen, this was merely a way to survive while they were waiting for the next job to come along. The fact that it felt like a necessity would probably contribute to it feeling less like a choice, and more like something brought upon them. Caught between delivery cycling, and applying for benefits from the Norwegian welfare state. Some jobs are viewed as something necessary. If they had believed there to be other (better) choices available, they would probably have taken them. This was apparent from the reaction of

immigrant colleagues talking to Bloodworth at an Amazon warehouse in Great Britain. His presence there surprised them, they could not believe that an Englishman would choose such work voluntarily (Bloodworth 2019:15). This impulse to get away might be due to how precarious workers are treated in their occupations. Businesses like Uber, Amazon, Wolt, and Foodora have made it their strategy to treat their employees quite badly. Companies like these isolate and strip away subjectivity, making their employees almost like objects. Objects which they can fit seamlessly into their individual processes of production.

Bloodworth describes listening to a young Romanian coworker arguing with security guards at the Amazon check-in. He was expecting a call from his landlord and wanted to keep his phone. The guards would not let him. He observed several such indignities while being employed at the Amazon warehouse. They were allowed half an hour of lunch but spent most of that time getting to the cantina and queuing for food. Most of it was gone during the first wave of employees. There would be people monitoring that nobody was late after lunch (2019:11-15). Amazon used a point system and could "release" employees if they got six of them. You could get points for things like being slow, late, or sick. You could do everything perfectly but end up getting punished for sudden sickness. Idleness was frowned upon, and this even included the time used to go to the toilet. Which was particularly bad since they were down a couple of flights of stairs. Bloodworth describes his time at Amazon as being under a totalitarian state (2019:39-42,48). Uber was much the same. Even though most drivers were promised freedom and flexibility, they were expected to accept 80% of jobs to retain access to the app. Often drivers would be shut out of the app as a form of punishment. These periods often lasted around ten minutes but could go on for longer. You had to follow the company rules however unreasonable they might seem. Denying them could lead to a warning, or deactivation, which is the same as being fired (Bloodworth 2019:221-223). They were continually rated based on what jobs they took, how many, whether they canceled anything, and customer feedback. This could feel especially unfair. Drivers could end up banned from the app as a result of irrational ratings from customers having a bad day (2019:225-226). Similarly bad conditions are also found among the companies hiring delivery cyclists. Surveillance and strict control are nothing new. Henry Ford used to walk among his employees with a stopwatch. The new thing is how surveillance- and control technologies have taken such measures to a whole other level (Hertz 2021:157).

Deliveroo, which is a similar company to Foodora, was supposed to offer a fully flexible job alternative for people craving more autonomy. They soon found that the reality of it was rather different. Delivery cyclists were expected to work at certain times. The company informed them that they had to work at least four hours over the weekends twice a month. They were also expected to wait for deliveries in certain places as well as where and what to deliver (Cant 2019:23-24). This is not so different from the situation for delivery cyclists in Foodora which is a similar company. Self-employed cyclists are promised freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. In reality, they are strictly controlled and sanctioned for any transgression of loosely defined rules. The delivery cyclist Endre told me that self-employed cyclists had to be careful about saying no to orders, although they officially had the opportunity to do so. Turning down orders, waiting too long before accepting an order, clocking in too late, or delivering too late, were all things that could affect the overall score in the app. In the short term, this could result in delivery cyclists being locked out of the app for a while. No one I talked to could say for sure whether this was an intentional punishment or just a coincidence. In the long term you got the less desirable pick of shifts, and in a worst-case scenario could probably lose your job. Shutting people out from the app could be easily done, seeing as most delivery cyclists have no formal employment. Self-employed delivery cyclists lose their jobs when they are denied access to the app.

They are controlled through an app, effectively shutting away their subjectivity through isolation. Foodora cyclists are hired online, never officially meeting anybody holding higher positions in the company. The only person they are physically introduced to is the person minding the equipment depot. And as Allen said, he knows as much as they do about the management. Although their subjectivity clearly does not go away, it is effectively hidden, making it less visible throughout the process. Management takes on a digital form through companies such as Foodora and Deliveroo. There is no physical manager, and in Deliveroo, even dispatch is substituted by an algorithm called “Frank” (Cant 2019:44-45). Relations between delivery cyclists and customers are translated to rigid orders from an algorithm. The app also decides what tasks are to be done, in which order, and how they are to be paid. The app controls how delivery cyclists are able to do their work, and also what counts as a good performance (Gandini 2019:1045). Buying something from Foodora entails talking to an app. When customers order food, their wishes are filtered through the app and translated into tasks for the delivery cyclists on the other side. How these tasks are to be done is entirely up to the algorithm. Working with a

delivery cyclist out in the field we encountered what is called a stacked order. This is when a delivery cyclist gets multiple orders at the same time, hence stacking. When the time to deliver came, the cyclist had no control over which one to deliver first. Sometimes the app would prioritize the closest one, other times it would not. Sometimes it would leave what happened to be both the closest and longest waiting customer until the end. The inner workings of the app are left as a mystery to delivery cyclists in Foodora and Deliveroo. They get little information from their employers if any at all. This makes it hard to know why they are directed the way they are. Cant describe it as an authoritarian system with no room for discussion (2019:58). Everything is bundled into the app. The cyclists are made available through the app, and it regulates interactions with customers, give them tasks, and pays them. All relations of production stay within the confines of the app. Gandini argues that although the work done by delivery cyclists or Uber drivers is not digital, the platform is the actual point of production (2019:1045-1046). Since the option to go out buying food was always there, the most important commodity being produced is the time and effort saved on that trip. The algorithm offers to save us time and energy, facilitated through using the physical labor of delivery cyclists.

This is not to say that all cyclists necessarily have an entirely bleak view of their current occupation. Foodora promises freedom, flexibility, and the feeling of wind flowing through your hair. And cyclists buy into this to different degrees. Some of them describe their love of cycling in detail and couldn’t dream of doing something else. The delivery cyclist Peder told me about his love for cycling and described the feeling of coming home after a day on the bike seat as fulfilling. For him, doing something tied to cycling seemed to be his dream job. He also told me that Foodora seldom was enough to sustain a person on its own and that most often cyclists had several jobs to make it through their everyday lives. He had been part of the Pink Strike in 2019 and acknowledged that their working conditions were still less than ideal. They were not completely without love for their occupation, and neither were they completely without agency within this system. They were resisting their situation in different ways, as we will see in the last chapter. If there are two sides involved, there will always be negotiations to define the borders between them. New technology is used to tip the scales but also recreates the basis for such negotiations. Cyclists are often left fighting an algorithm rather than physical managers who have distanced themselves through the use of technology and algorithms. Nevertheless, the fight goes on. Delivery cyclists are caught in the dualism and keep an internal negotiation going at the same

time as the external one. On the one hand, they are persuaded by the promises made by Foodora. This entails both the things they actually can promise, and the things they want cyclists to believe they can promise. On the other hand, they know they are being treated badly. Cyclists reject being treated worse than they believe that they deserve. They reject the company's drive to reduce them to mere parts of the production.

The result could be said to be a battle of identities. The company wants to define them as objects and commoditize their labor for the good of profit. One way they do this is through creating phantasms of freedom and flexibility, as we have seen in chapter two. Another, that I will discuss in the following paragraphs, is isolating them, and reducing them to some base characteristics through the use of technology and specific strategies. Going forward I will use the concept of "audit cultures" taken from Marilyn Stratherns book by the same name, to clarify this somewhat. Meanwhile, cyclists are constantly negotiating their status. Affected by various factors such as to which degree they have bought into the phantasms projected at them, where they believe their futures to lie, their reasons for joining the company, and so on. They are fighting an increasingly asymmetrical relationship, driven forward by technology.

**Audit culture and the commodification of time**

We are currently in an age where financial and moral logic is increasingly intertwining, where techniques of auditing are being connected to accountability (Strathern 2000:1-2). Techniques that historically have been exclusive to the financial sector, and accounting, have been brought into new arenas, infiltrating arenas of everyday life. Systems of measurement, ranking, and auditing have become important tools for contemporary governance (Shore and Wright 2015b:421). Being audited has become a normal thing for groups like students and employees. Every contemporary professional life and organization has to put up with being inspected and audited. (Shore and Wright 2015a:22-23). Auditing used to be an evaluation of numbers and data, to see whether the entity being audited got everything in order. It is a form of internal control, meant as a last defense against any potential errors. I have been part of a team of auditors myself, going through the accounts of a voluntary organization. We sat down with the financial manager of the organization. Our job was going through the numbers, checking that everything was in order. We checked that every financial expense had the proper paperwork and receipts available, we did the numbers, matching them to the bank statements, and so on. When we found

everything to be as it should be, we signed on a paper branding the books as acceptable. This ensured that any errors would be picked up on and that the person in charge of the money could be held accountable. This is the traditional form of auditing.

Lately, auditing has been extended to the management of people and organizations. Management through numbers is nothing particularly new. Sylvanus Thayer incorporated a grading system into the American West Point Military Academy as early as 1817. At the start of the twentieth century, Frederick Taylor further developed these ideas, and Ford applied such ideas to his assembly line production. Robert McNamara, a former manager for Ford, even tried to apply numerical systems to the Vietnam War (Shore and Wright 2015b:423-424). The modern version of auditing and the beginning of an audit culture is thought to have started around the time of Thatcher and the ideas of New Public Management. An auditing culture was growing, taking auditing out of its original associations to finance and bookkeeping, and bringing it to new parts of professional life. Audits signalize inspections, scrutiny, visibility, and measuring of businesses, organizations, and people (Shore and Wright 2000:59-60,63-65). Lately, numerical techniques have become more institutionalized, broadened, and financialized than ever (Shore and Wright 2015a:24-25). Auditing has grown far beyond the strategies of a few actors, to the point that some would suggest it has become part of the culture. I have no plans on weighing in on how incorporated it truly is, but it has indisputably become a huge factor in today's society.

Shore and Wright believe that audit culture brings about at least five effects. It transforms, classifies, isolates, totalizes, governs, and perverts (Shore and Wright 2015b:421). Entities are transformed and transform themselves into something that reflects the values and priorities of auditing. When the Danish government decided universities should be measured at sectoral, institutional, as well as individual levels, it had an effect on academic self-understanding. Professors started understanding their worth through the numbers they produced (Shore and Wright 2015b:429). I remember having the same experience working as a forklift operator in one of the warehouses of a major grocery line in Bergen. The job consisted of driving around a warehouse gathering orders and stacking them on pallets to be driven to stores in the region. Every item stacked on the pallet was scanned by a computer on our truck. On a small screen, you could see your pick rate, which was also available to management. The better you were at stacking, finding your way around the storehouse, and so on, the better your numbers were. Many

of us took great pride in “good” numbers, making it a major talking point during lunch. Auditing technologies create a situation where performance is necessary to accommodate demands. Whether you believe your worth to be based on numbers or not, it is necessary for auditing to function (Shore and Wright 2000:72). This applies to delivery cyclists as well. I do not know if cyclists honestly believe their worth to be measurable in numbers, but they do have to perform for the algorithm. For instance, there was a big difference between the attitude of a fellow student of mine working for Foodora, and other informants. The student did not rely on income from the job as much and therefore did not care much about the rating. He turned down orders he did not want, knowing that his rating would worsen. This was not a luxury afforded to those depending on the company for their living. Some cyclists, who did not rely on the pay, nevertheless took pride in a good score. Dan was one of these. He proudly showed me his perfect score in the app, talking about how he never was late or sick. He was rewarded with a gold medal inside the app, proclaiming him “number one”.

Secondly, audit culture classifies. Measuring the abstractness of the world around us is not easy, auditing depends on being able to transform it into something more manageable. Things are categorized and identified to be measurable (Shore and Wright 2015b:426). Bruno Latour’s fieldwork amongst scientists in Brazil is useful to visualize this point. Scientists bring flowers, dirt, and other pieces of nature into their laboratories. To be able to understand these samples they must be transformed into terms the scientists can understand. Nature is abstract and must be made more concrete to be understood. Words and numbers become referents for the plant, making it quantifiable. Nature is classified, given a name, and characteristics. These referents become representative of nature. They are translated into the language of science and made understandable and debatable (Latour 1999:34-36).

In the same way, targets of auditing are transformed into referents to be more easily understood by auditors reviewing them. When delivery cyclists are subjected to the algorithms of Foodora, they are transformed into numbers by those who have an interest in measuring them. Everything that happens outside on the streets of Oslo, gets translated through the app. They measure things like speed, how many orders they accept, and so on. These statistics end up representing delivery cyclists as referents instead of the real thing. What matters is compliance and time. Those in charge have no real way of knowing the reality of their everyday lives. Breaking delivery cyclists

down into characteristics represented by more easily understood data makes it easier to audit them. Delivery cyclists are reduced from a complicated whole to understandable words and numbers. The work delivery cyclists do get translated through the algorithm, representing them through referential data. The data referents for the real-life experience of delivery cyclists. Thirdly, they are isolated and totalized (Shore and Wright 2015b:426). Foodora cyclists get reduced to a couple of numbers representing all that they are. Talking to them I know they are so much more than the numbers which the app is representing them with. But for the sake of auditing, this is what they become. A collection of data, making them accountable in the eyes of management.

The fourth effect is governance. Performances are measured and assessed. People are reduced into numbers which makes it possible to judge their performances and hold them accountable. These numbers are also used by people themselves to self-govern, working hard to meet what are often impossible targets. The fifth effect is perversion. When entities are transformed, categorized, isolated, and totalized, immoral results might ensue (Shore and Wright 2015b:426). Choices are made based on numbers that hide their original real-life context. For instance, when Foodora left Canada in 2020, it was not as problem-free as the company wanted people to believe. They saw their capital as mobile, only hiring independent self-employed workers. Youngrong Lee shows us that moving Foodora was no different from moving traditional industrial companies. The platform is not disconnected from the local market and moving would have real-life consequences for cyclists depending on the work it gave them (Lee 2021:23,33-34). Foodora could not see the real-life people working on the ground, only how they had defined them in their contracts. It is not necessarily just a gig for cyclists, for some of them, it is their livelihood.

In this process, it is possible to see a commodity being produced. Cyclists are transformed, classified, isolated, and totalized. They are made into something auditable for the company. At the same time, the app transforms the picture we customers get to see. Interactions with cyclists are translated and transformed through the algorithm, hiding much of their subjectivity. Of course, some contact is made during the time of delivery, but at that point, the deal is already made. Cyclists have no control over which customers they will go to, and customers cannot rate them. So, building customer relations are in large part pointless. On a basic level, they are

transformed into time and energy saved for the people using the app. The algorithm tries to transform them into an object which it can sell. The object is time. It tries its best to hide the subject behind it.

So, what exactly does this entail? I would argue that in the eyes of customers, delivery cyclists are first and foremost reduced to time and energy, which can be bought and sold through the app. In order to clarify this, I would like to talk a bit about commodities. According to Miller the studies of commodities and consumption first gained real traction amongst anthropologists in the 70ts with people like Douglas and Bourdieu (Miller 1995:142). The concept itself originates much further back. It is perhaps best known from the works of Karl Marx. For him, commodities are objects existing outside of ourselves, fulfilling some purpose, or wish amongst those who are meant to consume it. It makes no difference where this need originates, just that it is there (Marx 1932:41-42). This means that the object has value, which in its turn makes it viable for trade. This value typically does not stem from some inherent property of the thing, but rather from their social relations to other things. The price of one thing is based on how other things are valued. Through the exchange, these things are measured up against each other. The standing of one thing in relation to another is negotiated, and its value is decided (Appadurai 1986:3-5). We only know what something is worth in relation to something else, the concrete materialistic value such an object might grant us, is forgotten.

Georg Lukacs pointed out that the separation of subjectivity is a specific problem of our time. Exchange value separated from humans and derived from the sociality of things was less prevalent in “primitive” societies. Although it was not entirely absent. When people gained more than they could consume, objects took on an exchange value rather than a use value. The same was often true when they were bartering with people outside their local setting (Lukacs 1971[1923]:85). Commodities are things meant for exchange. In the modern capitalist setting, their value derives from relations to other things. It is their particular social potential that sets them apart from other things. The only relevant social trait of a commodity is its exchange value (Appadurai 1986:6, 13).

The commodification of society does not stop with the social life of things. Humans get commodified too. Lukacs uses the concept of reification, to show that social relations are prone to be reduced to things. The relations between people take on the character of things, a “phantom

objectivity" hiding the subjective aspect (Lukacs 1971[1923]:83). The human aspect disappears behind the commodity status the relation takes on. Issa refers to Lukacs when she writes that the naturalization of commodities as having a life separated from the worker also entails that they only can be understood as a step in the production, and a commodity themselves. They are but an object, abstractly controlled (Issa 2017:92). What previously might have been done by a single craftsman gets split up into smaller tasks, isolated from the whole. The subjective knowledge that previously set great craftsmen apart, gets rationalized and calculated by machines. Humans are no longer the masters of production, in control of the process, rather they have become a potential source of human error. Their most important attribute is no longer skill, but the time they have available to grant the process (Lukacs 1971[1923]:88-89). What was believed to be intrinsic to the person, now becomes something to be sold on the market. Subjects are becoming just as abstract, formally understood, and objectivized as the objects themselves (1971[1923]:100,105). Foodora does its best to control the work of delivery cyclists through techniques such as auditing, phantasms, and wages. The labor they control is sold forward to customers in the form of time and energy saved on restaurant runs.

It is not coercion that binds the modern worker to commodity status, but rather a distortion of reality. Being a commodity becomes the normal mode of existence and is perceived as the natural state of things. People see themselves as part of the natural forces of the capitalist market, doing what any human would do. The market becomes a force of nature, where the entirety of the process becomes invisible to us (Foucault et al 2008:282). In Western societies, nothing is understood by its material reality alone. Everything is thought to have some kind of value. A house might ensure your pension while a car protects against isolation (Appadurai 2006:19). In this system Foucault believed that the modern human became an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. Isolated and alone. Left to make their own success. They themselves are capital that can be sold on the market, the producer of what they sell, and a source of income. Their biological qualities and qualities acquired throughout life takes part in facilitating their worth (Foucault et al 2008:226). Society becomes dependent on workers convinced that their capacity to work is a commodity to be sold (Lukacs 1971[1923]:92). Controlling the beliefs of workers becomes key to controlling their work. Cyclists are struggling under powerful norms, to maintain their subjectivity. This is hard when you are isolated and hidden in numbers.

Saying that work makes the worker a commodity, is not the same as saying that people are commodities. Commodity status can change over time and differ throughout spheres and localities. Being a commodity in one part of your life does not entail that you are in another. To talk about this, I will employ examples of modern slavery in Brazil. This was one of the last countries to give up slavery, waiting until 1888 to make it illegal. However, this was not the end of slavery in Brazil, and it did not leave the country completely, and there was a flare-up in the 1970ts. These modern slaves are often young men from poor regions, getting lured out to the properties of insidious landowners and kept there (Issa 2017:91,96). Appadurai points to three variables that any student of the social life of commodities should be aware of. Commodity phases, commodity candidacy, and commodity context (Appadurai 1986:13-15) Firstly, things can move in and out of commodity status. When young men, or others, became slaves in the Brazilian countryside, it was for a limited time only. Holding slaves was not formally legal, and therefore they could not hold people indefinitely. It was important to look somewhat legit facing officials and NGOs that frowned upon such practices (Issa 2017:95). They entered a market, objectified as slaves under the rule of landowners. After a few months, they were released, free to continue their lives as they saw fit. They did not stay slaves but rather visited the status for a time. Secondly, there are criteria for deciding if commodities are available for exchange or not. There are reasons why they would prey upon young men from poor areas. These were people who would not be missed, and therefore eligible to become slaves without too much fuss. Their precariousness was what made it possible to dominate them in this way. Thirdly, things can move in and out of commodity contexts. Take the example of a painting. For an art thief, a painting might be something with great monetary value. They see it as a commodity that hopefully will fetch a good price on the black market. This is different for the people at the museum. For them, the same painting might be perceived as priceless (Kopytoff 1986:82). The same thing might be looked at from different perspectives, making it glide in and out of commodity statuses due to context. This will also apply to delivery cyclists, who are commoditized at work, but not so much at home.

Nothing is just its materiality, and everything has value. That is to say that nothing is viewed as beyond commodity status, everything has its price (Appadurai 2006:19). It is important to note that this conviction is not total, which is apparent when looking at delivery cyclists' resistance to being objectified and treated badly. We will get back to this in the following chapters.

Nevertheless, they are treated as commodities, and I believe that their particular situation strengthens this process. Phantasms, precarity, audit culture, and technology all contribute to transforming them into objects to be used in the process. Reality gets hidden behind phantom objectivity (Issa 2017:93). This is comparable to phantasmagoria. Their subjectivity is obscured by phantasms.

The people who became slaves in Brazil had no real choice in the matter. They might have been able to avoid being dragged into it, but as soon as they were there, they were stuck. From the moment they started working they were given heavy debt. It was legitimized by referring to the food they had eaten, transport, and other things. They were physically kept there until the debt was paid (Issa 2017:98). Delivery cyclists have a lot more choices than this. Foodora cyclists can be divided into two groups. The first are those who are completely dependent on gig work, and the second are those who are less dependent. The first group depends on this occupation as their only source of income, basing their economic and social security on it. The other group sees it as more of a part-time occupation, using it for additional income (Lee 2021:29). Most of my informants fit into the former category. Dan was an exception to this. He did this work as a hobby, besides being a guest researcher at one of the big institutions of Oslo. For him, Foodora carried less importance than some of my other informants. It is also the case that groups such as students use Foodora to earn some extra money besides their student loans. These cyclists do also belong to the second group. On the other side, there are people like Allen who depend on his involvement in Foodora to make a living. He had been unable to land a job, despite having an education in design. Norwegian employers have not been ready to accept his degree, which he took in Malaysia. Foodora was one of the few available choices. He felt that he had to take this job to survive, even complimenting his salary with a job in a staffing agency on the side. He told me that cycling was not that usual back in Ghana. He did not particularly care for cycling back then, and nothing had changed regarding that. To People like Allen, working for Foodora is hardly a choice, it is only one of several undesirable choices available to them. They in turn are replaceable labor power, available through their precarity. Different life situations create a different basis for delivery cyclists. Some might have it as a hobby, or just a source of extra income. Others view it as the only available option to make a living. On top of this, cyclists are subjected to the phantasms projected by companies such as Foodora, trying to hide the realities of it. Although delivery cyclists might sometimes get tricked into believing that they are signing up

for something they are not. Their situation is far from that of the Brazilian slaves. They can leave at any time and enjoy some basic rights through the law. That is not to say that this is a realistic option for all of them. Precarious situations can make such work necessary, making people stuck without really forcing them. Allen worked at Foodora since this was the option presented to him. He will probably quit the day some better opportunity presents itself.

As is the case with most workers, their value lies in the labor power they can produce. Cyclists are isolated in the process. Everything goes through the app. The app receives, translates, and transforms interactions with customers and restaurants. It is also responsible for transforming those interactions into tasks for the cyclists, and it also forms the basis for payment (Gandini 2019:1045-1046). Their influence on the process is minimalized, only responsible for specific tasks. Processes are broken down into parts, leaving the physical labor to the cyclists. Giving cyclists such a specific role removes the need to know the whole process. Making their tasks as basic as possible also makes them more interchangeable. Specific abilities become less significant, allowing them to be replaced more easily (Lukacs 1971[1923]:166). They are reduced to parts of the process, in the eyes of companies like Foodora, deriving their value from their time and effort. labor power is then resold to customers, who save themselves from the hassle of bringing an item from point A to point B. Customers know there are restaurants and cyclists, but mostly relate to the algorithm as an intermediary. Almost all interaction is removed.

Their subjectivity is hidden. There is no common ground for cyclists to get to know each other. Delivery cyclists are always on the move, as isolated units. Connecting to colleagues becomes something they have to do on their own. Some do, especially those connected to the union in some way. There are chat rooms and Facebook groups dedicated to such endeavors. They are also hidden from customers, and even from the companies employing them. The cyclists told me that they seldom or never meet anyone with any real positions of power within Foodora. The only person they get to meet after signing up is the equipment manager, giving them their bags, jackets, and so on. After this, they are left completely on their own. There is no meet and greet, no presentation round, or anything like that. If delivery cyclists are interested in connecting to their colleagues, they have to make that happen on their own time. The app transforms them into numbers, referring to them in another language more understandable to those who wish to control them. They are isolated, hiding their subjectivity away. The only way they can express

themselves inside this process is on the seats of the bike, or through short interactions with customers. This does not help them much, even when they are excellent cyclists, delivering on record time. Putting on their best smiles, and charming the people they deliver to like no cyclist before. It does not amount to much. Interactions with customers are too limited. They might be happy or unhappy with the services provided, but this does not reflect on the individual cyclist. They have no way to make a customer base and seldom see the same customer twice.

The algorithm decides where delivery cyclists go, in what order they deliver, and when they deliver. Any attempt to force their subjective choices into the process is met with sanctions. There is an attempt to hide their subjectivity behind algorithms. When delivery cyclists are viewed from the other side of the app, they are transformed into commodities, measured on the grounds of characteristics deemed appropriate for what they have become. On their side of the algorithm, they stay the same, but this is not what we see as customers. Customers as well as management interact with the translations of an algorithm, buying and selling labor power. Many cyclists feel like they have no real choice, seeing Foodora as their only viable option. Others are convinced by the phantasm created to lure them in. Some cyclists view cycling as a hobby, or something on the side, while others see it as a stepping stone to something greater. Most of them view their occupation as situated in a specific moment in time, something temporary. They are commodities such as the early Marxists perceived workers to be, strengthened by the isolating effects of modern technology and techniques of governance.

It is time to circle back to the question I referred to at the start of this chapter, which I asked Endre. Do cyclists understand themselves as workers? Or boiling the question down to its essence. How can we understand identity among cyclists? I guess it depends on your point of view. Cyclists might understand themselves as workers, colleagues, or individuals caught in relations of necessity, never planning to stay. Looking at them from a different vantage makes another picture. Who you are is also produced in relation to what is wanted from you (Butler 2009:11). Those who interact with delivery cyclists turn them into data and auditable numbers. They are transformed into commodities, as well as time and energy saved. Delivery cyclists are subjects and objects at the same time, negotiating their standing continuously.

# Chapter 4: Resistance

### Fighting an algorithm

Delivery cyclists depend on an app for the conversion of their labor power into money. The app hides them from customers and even management, behind algorithms and numbers. When someone orders something from Foodora, algorithms translate it before the information reaches the cyclist. Cyclists receive these customer interactions as neatly packaged tasks. The framework for performing their job is set by the algorithm, and most interactions are filtered through it. The app, and consequently management, has a lot of power over delivery cyclists. Self-employed cyclists are promised freedom and flexibility. Although they might get some of that, they are also subjected to numerical control mechanisms, gaslighting, and precarity. The app uses numbers to make delivery cyclists auditable, making it possible to judge them based on scores. Every second week new shifts are released that vary in length from somewhere around two hours to eight. Some days are more profitable than others and picking first is a great boon. The picking of shifts is divided into five pools, where those with the best ratings get to pick first. The worse your rating, the longer they have to wait before you can pick your shifts. The worst-case scenario is having such a bad score, that their app gets turned off by the company. Delivery cyclists might get a message on their screen stating that they are “off hire” and effectively closed out of the app (Reinholdtsen 2021) The fear of such a fate weighs on them. I want to start this chapter by zooming in somewhat. Talking about how delivery cyclists interact with the app on a day-to-day basis, rather than its broader effects. This will allow me to go into some of the ways delivery cyclists resist their situation, by thwarting it.

There are a plethora of ways to understand the app. Allen believed there were some basic truths most cyclists could agree on, but that most details remained diffused. Newly employed Foodora cyclists do not receive enough training in the app to understand its workings. Starting a new job in Foodora, you are told the most basic and necessary details to be able to do the task allotted to you by the algorithm. The rest you must figure out yourself. Allen told me that there are tools inside the app, which are necessary but never taught. For instance, there are application forms for sick leave and an FAQ available in the app, ready to be discovered. Cyclists are mostly kept in the dark about the workings of the app. This makes it hard to work both with it and against it.

They cannot do much else than the tasks it gives them. This gives management much power. Although I do believe the algorithms might go beyond even the understanding of management in some cases. This is technology tasked with interpreting data, unexpected results are not farfetched. However, knowing for sure would entail talking to those elusive people in charge. Either way, this leaves room for speculation amongst delivery cyclists. I will try to paint a picture of how this app materializes in their everyday lives, as well as some of the ways it is interpreted. These interpretations lay the foundation for how resistance is exercised, by prescribing characteristics and logic to the uncertainty of the algorithm.

The app functions like this according to my informants. Firstly, delivery cyclists arrive inside one of the designated work zones. The algorithm has divided Oslo into different zones, which the cyclists keep within. They are not able to receive orders outside of these geographical spaces. Two such zones are the ones centered around the districts of Grünerløkka and Majorstuen. These two are especially desirable due to the high density of orders. Cyclists are expected to log in within the times defined by the shifts they got during the last shift release. Logging in late means that a robotic voice will call you up and announce that you are late. This ends up earning cyclists a dip in their personal rating.  When they are ready and logged in, tasks start popping up on their phones. The app gives you an order. Self-employed workers can choose whether they will accept or decline this order. Allen told me that he could not see any information about the order before he accepted, but this seemed to be different for those who were self-employed. In the case that they choose to decline an order they run the risk of getting sanctioned by the company in different ways. Sometimes the app would lock you out of the system for a while, but most often it would just entail a dip in ratings. After accepting, the information about the pickup point comes up on the screen. At this point, self-employed workers could see a map with the first part of the order. The second part of the order would be available after picking it up from the restaurant. Allen told me that there was an option to decline the order again at this juncture, for instance, if something like distance made it unreasonably hard to deliver. He would call in and explain the situation to dispatch. I am unsure if this practice had any consequences. Delivery cyclists would get paid extra per km for long rides between the restaurants and customers. They would not get paid extra for a long ride to the restaurant itself. Either way, having many small runs would pay more than a couple of long ones, so cyclists preferred not going too far.

Cyclists could take breaks but had to notify the app first. Sometimes brakes would not get approved. Delivery cyclists did not always know the reason why this happened, stating it as somewhat random. Allen told me the cyclists covered by the tariff were entitled to ten-minute breaks every hour, and that taking a half-hour coherent lunch break was usually fine. Sometimes they were denied this, especially in cases where the break was taken late in the shift. I imagine getting breaks was somewhat harder for cyclists who were not formally employed, but rather self-employed. How long you had to wait for orders varied somewhat. During rush hours cyclists could go almost without stopping, other times they had to wait. Allen told me that they would get sent to restaurants earlier when there were fewer orders, often standing by for a long time. Most often there were plenty of orders to go around. Unlike cities like Bergen, Foodora cyclists seldom had to sit around waiting for new orders in Oslo. Peder told me that payment was safer in the capital since orders were further between in both Bergen and Trondheim. Sometimes orders will stack. This means that several restaurant pickups will come at once. The cyclist has to pick up a stack of orders, which is to be delivered at the same time to different places. The waiting time can become quite long for the customer since there is no automaticity in that the person who ordered first will get their food delivered first. This is left to the app to decide. Often it just seems to decide this at random. At least that's how my informants viewed it. Calvin told me that the app confused him profoundly in its workings, while Allen told me that although he did not understand it, it most definitely worked for the management rather than cyclists. Sometimes it seemed to work for no one, making mistakes. I was involved in picking up an order where the point of delivery was completely wrong. The addresses had somehow gotten messed up, and we had to call dispatch before the order could be delivered. Errors like these take up a lot of time. When the app does something wrong or messes up, cyclists are seldom compensated for the time they lose. My informant had been dismissed when asking for this during a similar prior event. If nobody picked up on it, it could potentially harm your ratings, since the algorithm had no idea about the circumstances behind the cyclists being late with an order. As with most technology, the app had its faults. For instance, it worked differently on Apple and Android, it made mistakes as before mentioned, and was dependent on private phones which could be easily dropped and broken.

The app rated cyclist on the grounds of five variables displayed in the app. These were shift no-shows, acceptance rate, the number of actual versus planned hours, late logins, and how many "special hours" the delivery cyclists take. Firstly, it keeps track of how many shifts the delivery

cyclist does not show up for. If they take on a shift, which they for any reason cannot or will not do, they can get a penalty added to their score. Things like sick leave would be restored to the rating after the paperwork was done. This meant going through the hoops of the algorithm, which were not always easy. Allen had suspected COVID and got this documented by the municipality after taking a test. This did not fit the required format and could not be accepted. He then got a written note from his doctor confirming that he was indeed sick. This was also not accepted, and he ended up just accepting that it would affect his ratings. The system was too rigid to accept anything less than a standardized form from the doctor. When things like this happen there is no good way to contact the employer to explain things. Many functions follow predefined templates unable to cope too well with the unexpected. The only way to complain was to send an email. The second one was the acceptance rate. You can get a score between 0 and 100, depending on how often you accept the tasks given to you. Sometimes taking a task meant losing money, going outside of a preferred zone, going to a restaurant with an especially frustrating staff, or some other disadvantage. Accepting a bad task could mean losing a lot of time and money in the short run, while not doing it affected the future through ratings. Cyclists working as self-employed had to balance these considerations all the time. Sometimes there were legitimate reasons to give away an order. This could be the app making a mistake, the customer, or the restaurant. In such cases, Peder believed that cyclists had to take a screenshot and document the moment. There were no guarantees that legitimately declining an order would not bring your score down. Often you had to defend yourself, persuading dispatch to fix it. The third thing is how many hours delivery cyclists work compared to how many hours they planned to work. The fourth variable affecting ratings was punctuality. You were expected to be ready and logged in on time. The fifth one offer somewhat of a road to redemption for cyclists with a point problem. Working undesirable days, busy days, and such, can afford you a boost in the ratings. You can make yourself available in the app, taking work when it is needed. Peder usually worked a lot of Sundays to boost his ratings. This worked as an incentive to get cyclists out onto the road on days when they normally might not have gone. In addition to these five variables, there are some further things cyclists might or might not believe about the algorithm, that is worth mentioning. All of my informants were pretty sure that customers had no way to affect ratings. Although they could affect their jobs by wasting their time. For instance, Delivery cyclists often found that customers had moved from the place they were supposed to be, expecting them to come and find

them wherever they moved to. Not taking shifts might earn you a call from dispatch. Even though he was a self-employed cyclist, Dan got a phone call asking why he had not taken work for a week. Dan did not believe this had affected his score in any way. There were some uncertainties about the extent to which the app monitored cyclists. Allen and Calvin did not believe that the app listened to them or surveilled them in any blatant way but knew that it followed their geographical movements and the like. They told me that the algorithm would give those that rode too many long shifts even more of them. And that cycling too fast would do the same thing, as the algorithm saw that you could handle it. Some things delivery cyclists believe to be true, might just be the reality of the app. Others might be the result of misinterpretations of the signals the algorithm gives them. Delivery cyclists have many different beliefs about the app and its algorithm. Some they share and some are held by a few. They negotiate their own truths about the app while interacting with it. The interpretations they make lay the foundation for how resistance can be exercised, by prescribing characteristics and logic to the uncertainty of the algorithm.

**Utilizing the hidden transcript**

Delivery cyclists are hidden behind an app, isolated from their employers. Most of what they do are filtered through an app. The app is rigid, leaving little wiggle room for expression. Punishing those who stray too far off the path through the use of a rating system. Although they are sold phantasms hiding the realities of the app and working for Foodora, they do not fully buy it. Cyclists know that their situation is less than ideal, imagining ways to a better future. For things to change, the current situation must be resisted. But how do delivery cyclists exercise resistance in the situation they are in? To talk about this, I want to utilize James Scott and his ideas about hidden transcripts. The public transcript is the negotiations we see in everyday life, between the ones in power and those subordinated to it. This is not the whole story. The real feelings of groups such as delivery cyclists are hidden away from the public. What happens in the public sphere is a play, acted out from both sides. The public transcript is what happens on stage, in the light. At the same time, there is a hidden transcript, where a counterculture can be acted out backstage (Scott 1990:2-4). What kind of resistance is launched backstage, behind the visible relationship between Foodora cyclists and their employers?

Both dominated groups and those dominating them, keep up the appearance of the public transcript. The maintenance of power is a continuous task. Those in power have to play their

parts in such a way as to keep the balance intact. They must reinforce their strength through action. What is important is that the public pictures are kept up. Those in power also have a backstage where they are able to let loose. For instance, Brahmin castes amongst Hindus often break codes of cleanliness and pollution in the private sphere. Out in the public sphere, the distinction between them and untouchables are strictly maintained (Scott 1990:45,49-51). Management in Foodora circumvents interactions and direct negotiations of power by hiding themselves away from cyclists. Their execution of power is delegated to the app. Through techniques of auditing and numbers, cyclists are reminded of the asymmetrical power relations. While cyclists are reminded of the opportunities for freedom and flexibility, they are also aware of how easily sanctions can befall them. The public transcript is used to strengthen the position of power in the eyes of the dominated. It is a public display of the proper order between the two. It is also used to keep social facts outside of public scrutiny. It is an opportunity to display and glorify power while painting a picture of a unison front (Scott 1990:52,55-56). Phantasmagoria is an excellent tool when it comes to hiding social facts. Through phantasms, the realities of being a delivery cyclist get blurred. Ideas of freedom and flexibility become part of the public transcript Foodora wishes to uphold. This is one of the most important ways in which precariousness, uncertainty, asymmetrical power, and exploitation are hidden. When Uber came to Argentina, it undermined the existing taxi industry. They professionalized the movement of people by car. They ruined the livelihoods of taxi drivers and led to a drop in wages for everyone in an oversaturated market (Del Nido 2022:93-95). Uber operates much like Foodora. Drivers get tasks delivered by an app. They are expected to play by Uber rules and take the tasks given to them without asking too many questions. Getting on the bad side of management, your account could be logged out for a while, you could be summoned to the office, or even be deactivated. They pay far less than is necessary to make a living, seeing drivers as customers using their platform rather than employees they should care for. Travis Kalanick, one of the co-founders of Uber, believed that people could blame themselves that they were poor since they would not take responsibility for their own “shit” (Bloodworth 2019:222,229). Despite this Uber was welcomed almost as heroes by the middle class in Buenos Aires. They attacked taxis using language about monopoly, freedom of choice, effectiveness, competition, and flexibility. By May 2016 Uber had over half a million downloads, even though they had been judged illegal in the city. The middle class believed the people wanted Uber. The opinions of judges were dismissed, and they believed that

the numbers presented by Uber spoke for themselves. More than 30% of work disappeared for taxis, meanwhile, the middle class told them to stop being lazy and find work (Del Nido 2022:2-3,89,98,201). In the same way, Foodora might be glorified in the public transcript. They are seen as bringers of convenience, opportunity, and freedom. The brighter they are able to make such selling points shine, the more shadow falls over the less ethically sound sides of the business. Lastly, the public sphere is used to paint a picture of a unison front. The subordinated groups must not be able to see cracks in the armor of their dominators. The public transcript also works as a reinforcement of their roles. Through enactment, their roles are strengthened (Scott 1990:67).

The hidden transcript is what exists backstage, hidden behind a rigid border. This border between what is publicly projected and hidden is continuously negotiated between the actors. Every hidden transcript is specific to a time and a place and consists of a variety of both language and action (Scott 1990:14). This hidden sphere is where the rules of the public sphere can be shed, granting delivery cyclists some room to relax. Hidden away from those in power, solidarity and kinship can be built between cyclists. Cant believes that delivery cyclists organized through two channels in particular. The first one was out in the streets, for instance, where cyclists started their shifts. The second one was online groups like WhatsApp and Facebook (Cant 2019:37-38). Foodora did not facilitate an official way for colleagues to connect. Innovation was used to isolate them, creating asymmetrical relations. At the same time, technological innovations could also be used as a tool to draw them together. By making WhatsApp groups, and other online spaces, riders were able to create a basis for engaging politically outside the control of management (Leonardi et al 2019:165-168). This was the case for the Foodora cyclists I talked to as well. They use digital platforms to communicate outside the reach of the company. The chatting platform Slack has been especially important for Foodora cyclists. Many of them were already members of a group called Riders Club Norway, which is a gathering of working cyclists in Norway (Bals 2021:519). Another way to keep up the hidden transcript is communication in the streets. I have not found that this way of communicating is very widespread in Oslo, at least not among my informants. There are relatively few large gatherings of cyclists in a single place. It is not as if they ignore each other out there, gathering for a drink after work and the like. But in contrast to what I used to see living in Bergen, cyclists do not sit together socializing in large groups. Another way is unions. They have meetings and their own online forums for cyclists.

This is arguably a bit more open, but what specific union members tell their representatives is also hidden from management.

Scott believed that subordinate groups could accept domination in cases where there are real possibilities for mobility. And situations where there is a foreseeable future where the subordinate can become the dominator. Coupled with atomizing and surveillance. Such variables narrow the possibilities greatly (Scott 1990: 82-83). Foodora neither offers real mobility inside of the company nor manages to atomize and monitor them sufficiently to create full acceptance. Delivery cyclists might be swayed to a certain degree, but there is a dualism in their understanding of the company. They both accept and reject their situation at the same time. So, the reasoning for playing along exists outside of acceptance. This could be geographical division, brutal reprisals, or cynicism after past mistakes. Most importantly, acting directly might not serve the subordinate anything. They keep up the imagery that power wants to produce, they earn nothing by disrupting this (Scott 1990:85-87). Self-employed delivery cyclists will not go out of their way to work against the app or slight their company. They know that doing something like that will not improve their situation, but rather bring the eyes of management upon them. In most cases it will not amount to even that, seeing as the app is perfectly capable of sanctioning small acts of defiance by itself. Resistance must be done smartly. It can be done collectively as it was with The Pink Strike in 2019. There is both power and anonymity in numbers, this is why dominators often are afraid of such gatherings. For instance, slave owners in the United States of America made it illegal for more than five slaves to gather at the same time, without a white man present (Scott 1990:63-65).

In addition to mobilizing, Scott listed up a selection of different methods for acting out hidden resistance in the public sphere. Methods most often build on disguising either the message or the messenger. Through tools such as spirit possessions, gossip, magic, rumor, anonymous letters, and threats, the messenger is separated from the message (Scott 1990:139-140). An example of this can be found in Malaysia. Women were moved from rural settings into a growing industry in the 1960 and 70s. This change was not easy to accept since it threatened the existing cultural order. Women suddenly found themselves in subordinate positions, subject to men they did not know. These women were expected to be shy and obedient. Now they suddenly found themselves possessed by spirits more often than they ever had before. This allowed them to vent fears, and

frustrations, and create space to resist their social setting. Afterward, they could claim amnesia, separating the messenger from the message (Ong 1988:29,33,38). Techniques such as these ensure that the message can be seen in the public transcript but make it hard to tie it to anybody. The dominators are left without a clear view of who to punish for the transgression, since nobody has officially challenged them directly. In other cases, it is the resistance itself that is hidden. For instance, a group of slaves in Georgetown got punished for singing a hymn. Singing was not a transgression in and by itself, but the lyrics were revealed to hide references to freedom and the North (Scott 1990:153). Delivery cyclists also hide their resistance. By manipulating the app, they manage to make their acts of resistance fly under the radar of algorithms and management. Scott mentions a couple more methods for resistance. Firstly grumbling. The subordinated use of glances, sounds, attitudes, and other subtle signs of their displeasure. Keeping it at a level beneath what warrants punishment or sanctions. Secondly, the use of codes hidden in clothing, song, tales, and so on. Meant for those who see the hidden transcript. Next is the use of oral traditions, folk tales, symbolic inversion, and ritualistic inversions such as satire, parodies, and carnivals (Scott 1990:155-158,169,167,173). Resistance is done in such a way as to minimize the risks involved for those doing it. They use hidden transcripts as a base for launching their attacks on the dominant reality. It is the public transcript that creates the necessity for the hidden one. The more dominating the public one is, the stronger the hidden one will become, counteracting it from the shadows. Scott uses the term infrapolitics to describe actions passing politically unseen, or that do not qualify completely. But which is nevertheless political (Scott 1990:27,197-199). Borders are continually challenged, testing the balance between those who are subordinated to power and those who wield it. The worst-case scenario for those in power is that the subordinates feel bold enough to bring the hidden transcript to the surface. Opposing them openly. Failing to control the subordinated groups could even lead to actual social change (1990:192-193,227).

Scott has met some critique. One of these is especially worth mentioning in relation to my text. The theories presented can be seen as part of a romanticization of resistance and the subordinated. The fear is that people going out of their way to look for resistance can find it where there is none. An essentialization of subordinated people as passive should not be exchanged with a belief that they are always showing resistance. People’s actions are more complicated than that (Ballard 2022:309). It is important to be careful when interpreting actions. I believe that looking at the instances where cyclists stray from the path laid out by the algorithm

might say something useful about how they relate to their current situation. In subtle ways they are changing their own reality, slowly building a new one. Always with an eye on their imagined futures. Now I will go into some of the ways in which delivery cyclist resistance materializes.

Dan told me that the process of getting a job at Foodora had been pretty straightforward. He had visited their website, pressing buttons until all forms were filled in. Then he had to take a picture of his bike, and suddenly, he had a job. Delivery cyclists received some training but did not get proper training in the app. Calvin said that he had gotten to know a lot about the rules for cycling in Norway, but almost nothing about the app. This was the case for delivery cyclists working for Deliveroo as well. And Cant writes that theories about the inner workings of the app were many. For instance, some believed that the app scanned their location every fifth second, choosing restaurants based on that information. This was only guesswork (Cant 2019:59). This uncertainty about how the app works, allows for some variation in resistance. Dan believed that the best place to log into the app was Grünerløkka. This area had good orders and often did not require that he hauled food great distances. This was different in places like Nydalen. Nevertheless, sometimes he would get an order that was to be delivered far outside of that zone. In such instances, he would ride all the way outside of the zoned areas, and circle back into Grünerløkka. By doing this he reduced the risk of getting orders in whichever zone the delivery had taken him. Peder did not believe this was a viable tactic. He did not believe that you could dodge orders by cycling outside of the areas. Allen said that the trick was delaying the delivery. That is to say, cyclists would deliver the food, but not notify the app before they were safely inside the prosperous zone again. This way they could dodge bad zones, without going all the way outside of them. He also told me that people working in what is characterized as less-than-desirable zones would cherish long deliveries if the delivery brought them to a good area. Calvin agreed that there were good and bad zones but believed that there were some built-in mechanisms in the app that moved them between zones automatically. So, he believed it was fruitless trying to work against this. None of them could know for certain how the algorithm worked. They used the information they had to make sense of it. Peder and Calvin did not believe this particular technique to be viable. In Calvin's case, he simply saw other routes to manipulating the app as more fruitful. Peder, for his part, was dedicated to the union, using them as his tool. He was generally more skeptical when it came to tricks like these, as he believed the way to change went through more official channels. Another way the app was manipulated was in an attempt to

acquire breaks. As mentioned before, getting breaks could be a challenge. Sometimes they were allowed them and sometimes they were not. When cyclists were denied brakes, they had several techniques to circumvent this. Calvin told me you could call in to dispatch with a sly excuse. For instance, you could tell them that there was something wrong with your bike that had to be fixed. In such cases, they had no other choice than to accept the brake. It was impossible to continue the shift without a bike. This being said. I was told that some cyclists had ended up walking a couple of deliveries after their bikes broke down. Another trick was waiting a couple of extra minutes before registering the delivery, taking a break this way. This brake could also be used to get back to a good zone. Allen told me that brakes at the beginning or end of a shift were never allowed. He acknowledged that some cyclists would get around such rules by using tricks like the ones above. He had lately become more careful when it comes to such endeavors. This was the second time I talked to him, and he had become afraid that the algorithm would know due to GPS locations. He could not risk his score worsening and proceeded more cautiously. Delivery cyclists resist the app's expectations in small ways. They do this from the safety of anonymity, and a hidden transcript. But this is not the only way resistance is done.

Not all resistance is carried out in the hidden transcript. Delivery cyclists and other gig workers also resist their situation more openly. This was the case with gig workers hired by Amazon. These are people browsing through small tasks, completing them for a fee decided by employers. This kind of work is often associated with machine learning, as tasks are designed to feed data into algorithms and artificial intelligence. These workers are self-employed, working under precarious conditions just as delivery cyclists. Gig workers have been known to show resistance both in the hidden and public transcript. In the hidden transcript, they made an app called the "Turkopticon" where providers were rated, helping them sort through bad tasks. Parts of this informal workforce also took more direct action, arranging a letter campaign in 2011, and sending letters directly to Jeff Bezos (Jones 2021:86-87). Another example is the solidarity strike undertaken by Deliveroo employees in 2016. Deliveroo cyclists took collective actions supporting the employees at Byron Burgers who were sold to the British Border Agency by their employers, refusing to deliver from the company (Cant 2019:vii). This was just the first spark leading to several strikes led by the delivery worker unions in the country. The second of these strikes was aimed at Uber Eats and its agreement with McDonald's. Picket lines were put outside of restaurants and the collective action ended up spreading across Great Britain. These strikes

prioritized things self-employed workers cared about, such as waiting, and strengthened these groups rather than fitting them into old systems (Cant 2019:161-162,170-171). There are new unions like “Independent Workers of Great Britain” trying to organize precarious contracts and self-employed workers. Believing traditional unions were unable to fight for them (Jones 2021:84). February 2019 the trade union club for Foodora cyclists delivered their tariff demand. Before this they had been working on a smaller scale, sharing victories amongst themselves on digital platforms. This could be things like ensuring that the conditions for specific cyclists complied with the law (Bals 2021:521-522). After the negotiations broke down, Foodora cyclists began the strike that summer. At this point, the club had about 86 members. Cyclists gathered in huge numbers to ride through the city and also made the centrally located Youngstorget a base for bike repairs and information spreading. The deputy chairman of the club came up with the name “Rosastreiken” or The Pink Strike, a fitting name considering how visible their pink shirts were in the cityscape. The company fought back. Amongst other things, they hired a commercial company that spread false information, even making a website (Bals 2021:522,524-525). The cyclist club ended up winning and had grown to almost twice the size at that point, having 230 members (2021:526). This victory did not come without negatives. While Foodora cyclists celebrated their victory, a new company was making its entrance. Wolt went ahead and eliminated one of the most important factors that had made the strike possible, formal workers. By only employing self-employed cyclists they could circumvent unionism and function much cheaper than Foodora. Union representatives concede that asking for much more in the current competitive environment would be damaging since Wolt has an unfair competitive advantage (Bals 2021:527). Foodora also has a large pool of self-employed workers. In 2021 over 60% of their employees were self-employed (Knutsen 2021). The union keeps working for its members, but before self-employed workers get acknowledged as formal workers with all the rights that entail, a large part of the workforce will be beyond their reach.

**Reconstructing reality**

In a previous chapter, I argued that delivery cyclists imagine different futures for themselves both outside and inside of their current occupations. The future is unknown, but that does not stop people from indulging in imagination in an attempt to grasp that which is to come. Foodora is understood as something temporary for many cyclists, understood as a stop on their way to something they deem a better future. Foodora becomes a step on a ladder to something different.

The future becomes somewhere else for these cyclists. Others understand their futures as inside of the company. This is believed to be achievable through a combination of the betterment of the self and the betterment of the company they are employed in. On the one hand, they are sold a picture of themselves as entrepreneurs responsible for their own success. On the other hand, they acknowledge the company's role in the situation they are in. Either way, they are all imagining a better future for themselves. I will use the remaining pages of this chapter to argue that their resistance could be seen in relation to these realities. Resisting their current state could be understood as a way of bringing those imagined futures closer to reality.

Bruno Latour argues that humans for far too long have seen themselves as a brain in a jar, looking out on the "natural" world. We often see ourselves as separate from, rather than part of nature (Latour 1999:9-10). He underwent fieldwork amongst scientists looking at nature, soil, and forests in Brazil using this to illustrate his points. These scientists go out into the forest looking, measuring, and gathering. They view themselves as somehow separated from the things they study. To be able to understand what they see they are dependent on translating it into a language they understand. When they move themselves and nature out of the field and into the laboratory they could theorize with more confidence (1999:26,29-30). Not unlike auditing techniques, they use numbers and categories as references for the real material realities of what they see. Plants taken from nature are brought back, given a name, a number, and become a referent for the real world. These referents can be used to translate nature into something understandable, recognizable, available, and discussable. It also makes it possible to find patterns in the data (1999:34,53). What scientists are left with is not an exact copy of what is out there, but rather a representation of it. They take something material from nature and transform it into data and numbers. These numbers make nature more accessible, but also merely reference it. When Foodora filters delivery cyclists through the app, they are doing the same. They transform the reality of delivery cyclists into data recognizable to the algorithm and those who manage it. They create referents that point to the real thing but are not.

In the laboratory new realities can be produced, and new actors can be brought to life. Scientists bring a referent referring to the real world and put it through several "trials" or experiments. They are subjecting their truth to resistance, strengthening the reality of the thing through every trial it completes successfully. Afterward, the thing is subjected to another trial at the hands of those

with the expertise to challenge it. Scientific colleagues resist its truth, putting both the thing and the scientist through trials of their own. After successfully getting through all hurdles, it is decided that something more than text has been created. Science becomes something like an event or an obstacle course to complete (Latour 1999:123-124,126). Foodora transforms delivery cyclists into data. This data is used to transform them into something different than their material selves. They are given a score, dictating their worth. Like a scientist, auditors are constructing trials for the data they gather. These trials tell them whether cyclists are good employees or not. Measuring them with a score. Through the process of transformation, they are reduced to commodities and auditable data. A version of reality contending with their own is created through the use of referents. Delivery cyclists exist as they were, but so does this new representation of them, different but also the same. They exist both as human beings and as numbers. Things can be fabricated and real at the same time. Everything referents say about reality is not necessarily untrue. Either way, we must be aware of the human aspect (Latour 1999:132). When humans are reduced to numbers it is also easier to treat them differently. They are hidden behind referents, made by algorithms. Their biological selves are hidden away from the company. All they see are numbers referring to them.

Through trials of strength, new realities are made. Science is not a relation between things and humans. It is an event creating entities through action, like an experiment. For instance, the French scientist Pasteur discovered ferments specific to lactic acids, theorizing that fermentation happened as the result of microorganisms. Pasteur found a gray mass which he constructed a presence for. Pasteur took that gray mass and ran it through trials including human actors, non-human actors, and actors like apparatuses, and laboratories. Through these trials, the ferment came into being. He started with an abstract gray mass. This mass was given substance and made more real through articles, characteristics, and other implementations (Latour 1999:141,148-150). The existence of the said entity is negotiated with all actors involved, also the non-human ones. This is the case for Foodora cyclists as well. The algorithm is an active participant in negotiating who and what they are. The strongest narrative becomes the truth. Those who can resist the most resistance hold the strongest truth.

Foodora cyclists might see themselves as workers on their way through a temporary, unwanted step in their career. As entrepreneurs ready to take on a system promising them opportunity and

riches, or as part of the workers' movement, ready to take up the fight against an unjust system. Employers on their side, refuse to see them this way, making attempts at redefining delivery cyclists into something that suits them better. Through techniques of auditing, they attempt to reduce delivery cyclists to numbers and data referencing the real thing. This is part of an emerging audit culture that Shore and Wright believe to bring about five effects. It transforms, classifies, isolates, totalizes, governs, and perverts (2015b:421). Delivery cyclists are transformed and transform themselves into something reflecting the values and priorities of those that audit. They are classified, categorized, and identified so as to be measurable. They are isolated and reduced to mere numbers. A collection of data that can be made accountable in the eyes of management. All this amounts to a tool for governance. Cyclists are transformed into the language of algorithms, auditable by the company. When entities are transformed, categorized, isolated, and totalized this way, unwanted and even immoral results might ensue. This is the start of a process of commodification, part of a development where what was once understood as subjects become abstract, unrecognizable, and understood as objects in the eyes of others (Lukacs 1971[1923]:100,105). Delivery cyclists are isolated, made into numbers, and their subjectivity is hidden. Their worth is reduced to the labor power they can produce, and we as consumers see them as time and energy saved. Who you are is produced in relation to what people want from you (Butler 2009:11). Those who interact with delivery cyclists turn them into auditable numbers. They are transformed into commodities and energy saved for the consumer. Delivery cyclists become subjects and objects at the same time, depending on your viewpoint.

Delivery cyclists do not accept this transformation and resist it as best they can. Their most important adversary is the app and the associated algorithm which functions both as a boss and point of translation between the different parts of production. The app translates cyclists into numbers and rates them. It rates them on the basis of how many shifts they take, how many orders they accept, how many hours they work, punctuality, and their willingness to take on undesirable workdays. However, this is only what was clearly stated. Some cyclists believed there were more variables affecting their ratings, others did not. The algorithm encompassed so much more than was clearly stated, and the exact scope of its functions eluded most – if not all – cyclists. This meant that there was room for speculation and testing of limits. Cyclists know that their situation is less than ideal, making resistance a dangerous endeavor. Precarious workers have little to contend with in a relationship characterized by asymmetry. James Scott shows us

how they can still resist their situation utilizing the hidden transcript. While the public transcript is what happens on stage, the hidden transcript is where countercultures can be enacted without drawing too much attention (Scott 1990:2-4). Hidden from the eyes of management, delivery cyclists trick the algorithm into giving them longer breaks, better routes, and so on. Resisting their situation without endangering their situations unnecessarily. Operating underneath the radar of algorithms and management. Of course, delivery cyclists do not operate fully undercover, the strike in 2019 is a prime example of that. This, however, is not a luxury afforded to all of them. Especially self-employed workers dependent on the company might find the dangers involved too dire. Perhaps this will change through new laws strengthening the position of such employees. A new law introduced this year might make it mandatory to give delivery cyclists formal full-time contracts (Stortinget 2023). This law, however, has yet to be tried in court so we do not know if it will apply. It will be exciting to watch its development.

Bruno Latour shows us how scientists use referents to represent their objects of study inside the lab (1999:34,53). Just as scientists transform nature into data and numbers, so is Foodora transforming cyclists. They are transforming the material reality of delivery cyclists into data, creating referents representing the real thing. This is what they fight. They fight algorithms, phantasms, isolation, commodification, and transformation in a drive to define their own reality. Some of them imagine changing the structure or finding another reality outside of it. These are the cyclists who resist their current mode of being. They are negotiating reality. Drawn between the expectations of others, phantasms projected at them, and their own precarious situation.

Algorithms working together with isolation and phantasms produce the reality in which Foodora cyclists are situated. They are not completely convinced by it, but so is the nature of realities, always negotiated. Looking to their future they figure that things should probably change. They imagine taking that step into a new reality. To do this they have to resist their current mode of being. Through tactics performed from the vantage of the hidden transcript as well as openly in the public one, they push the limits set by bosses and algorithms. The algorithm expects them to behave a certain way, behaving like good employees. The phantasms of flexibility, freedom, and entrepreneurship are nudging them along that same path. When delivery cyclists fight for a tariff, manipulate the algorithm for breaks, or resist in other ways they go into negotiations with the algorithm and their bosses. They are negotiating what the reality of delivery cycling should

entail. Algorithms, auditors, phantasms, and management are resisting such resistance as best they can. Since losing ground would be accepting that the very reality they are creating could change.

## Concluding remarks

I set out to explore the realities behind new forms of employment brought on by gig- and platform-based companies such as Foodora and Wolt. Focusing on the Nordic-based food delivery company Foodora I wanted to explore themes such as identity, expectation, resistance, and reality. Foodora is just one of many brands operating in the gig- and platform economy. Foodora is owned by Delivery Hero, which operates all around the world, and there are several companies like Delivery Hero out there. Although admittedly Delivery Hero is one of the biggest. Either way, the scope of this industry is huge. These companies bring with them new organizational techniques and technology, changing the rules of labor market relations for thousands of workers.

This thesis came about as a result of my interest in labor politics and trade unions. I knew I wanted to write something within these themes. I became interested in the growth of companies such as Foodora, worried about the effects it would have on the relatively orderly forms of the Norwegian labor market. One of the most central characteristics of the Norwegian societal model is balanced negotiations between employers, employees, and the state (Barth, Moene, and Willumsen 2015:17-18). Companies like Foodora threaten to erode this balance, bringing about asymmetrical relations between the different actors of the tripartite collaboration. That being said, unions remain strong in Norway. As I am writing these concluding remarks LO just emerged victorious after they went on strike in central negotiations. This negotiation is what is known as the interim settlement, which only adjusts wages. Two years of weakened purchasing power for its members, and the fact that executive salaries had grown significantly in the same period built up their frustrations. Unions finally had enough and called for the first strike in these negotiations since the last world war. One of their central demands was additional salary supplements for low-paid groups. They managed to get a result that shows that unions remain strong in the country. LO leader Peggy Hessen Følsvik announced that they had enough resources to wait out the employers who are represented by The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO). Supposedly they could have remained on strike for one and a half years. They ended up striking for a week.

Foodora became part of LO back in 2019 when they won the strike with almost 230 organized members backing them up in the company (Bals 2021:256). It is easy to think that this development would bring about better conditions for Foodora cyclists, and to some degree it did. A minority of delivery cyclists working under formal and permanent employment enjoy the security of a tariff agreement. At the same time, most delivery cyclists could not take part in it, remaining self-employed (Knutsen 2021). They continue existing alongside formal employee-employer relations. Using Standing's seven forms of labor-related security it became clear that these cyclists were living in a precarious situation (Standing 2011:10). Asymmetrically connected to their employers, not fully acknowledged as ordinary formal workers.

Delivery cyclists understand that they are being taken advantage of. They are kept accessible, always with an eye on their phone, fighting for shifts, getting paid per delivery, and unable to plan further than the next release of available hours (Leonardi et al 2019:162-163). At the same time, they are told that the job brings them flexibility, autonomy, and freedom. Delivery cyclists know that this is not the whole truth, but some also choose to partially believe it. They are drawn between reality as it is, and the reality they are encouraged to see. One of the questions posed initially was: How do they understand themselves? I have chosen to ask this question concerning how they envision their own future. Through imagining the future, delivery cyclists can begin to make sense of their present (Ooman, Hoffman, and Hajer 2022:255). Some delivery cyclists understand their status as something almost liminal, between two stages. Just another step into the world of real work. Other cyclists see the potential in their current occupation and choose to fight for it. Cyclists taking this stance were often those on regular permanent formal contracts. Some cyclists believe that the fault lies within themselves, believing that they must change to utilize the freedom and flexibility allowed them in Foodora better. Seeing delivery cycling as an underutilized opportunity. It is paramount for companies like Foodora to create imagery that keeps their cyclists happy. Holding them within their structures. Promises of flexibility, autonomy, and freedom help facilitate this grasp, making it easier to imagine their futures within the company, without having to change it.

In the eyes of employers, delivery cyclists remain numbers to be audited, commodities to be sold, and revenue to be had. They are not understood as workers in the traditional formal sense of the word, and employers fight to uphold this reality. Delivery cyclists find small and safe ways to

fight back using their isolation to their advantage. How the algorithm actually works is unclear to many cyclists, and they have their own theories about how resistance can be implemented. For instance, some cyclists believe they can avoid less profitable zones by bypassing the area restrictions of the app. Delivery cyclists are not fully acknowledged as workers. The tariff agreement of 2019 only makes a difference for a small group within the company. Most cyclists remain self-employed, and Wolt employs cyclists as self-employed exclusively. The same thing happened in Sweden and Denmark. Foodora signed a tariff agreement in Sweden and Just Eat signed an agreement in Denmark. Just as was the case in Norway, the tariff only covered a small portion of their employees, with most cyclists remaining self-employed (Ilsøe and Söderqvist 2022:15).

Norwegian Foodora insists on its intention to be an orderly company, while Wolt continues to hire cheap self-employed labor. Director of Foodora Norway Elisabeth Myhre says that they have to do the same to be able to compete (Solstad 2023). Norwegian unions seem to be agreeing to this. One of my informants who is tied to the union showed sympathy towards the company. Understanding that they need to uphold their competitiveness. Unions may be able to force a change in delivery cyclist identities. Making customers, restaurants, and employers acknowledge them as real formal workers. To do this, the rules of the game must be changed. As long as companies like Foodora are allowed to hire delivery cyclists as self-employed, their situation cannot be improved. The new law that was introduced this year can be just the thing to change this. It says that anybody subjected to governance, management, and control should be defined as an employee (Stortinget 2023). Delivery cyclists working for Foodora tick all these boxes and should probably be treated as regular formal employees. It has yet to be tried in a court, but if they find that this is the case with self-employed cyclists in Foodora and Wolt, they will have no choice but to hire them as regular employees. It will be interesting to follow the development. Will Foodora leave as they did in Canada and Australia, or will it lead to a new era for delivery cyclists?

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