JUST TECH

Motorcycles, Unfree Freedom, and Surveillance: Delivery Work during the Pandemic in Turkey

By: Ergin Bulut

LABOR & ECONOMY

Bulut, Ergin. "Motorcycles, Unfree Freedom, and Surveillance: Delivery Work during the Pandemic in Turkey" Just Tech. Social Science Research Council. May 2, 2022. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35650/JT.3032.d.2022

This essay is a part of the Just Tech Covid-19 Rapid-Response Grants. The Just Tech Covid-19 RRGs were awarded to research projects on the risks, opportunities, & challenges posed by technology in the context of Covid-19. Grantees ask critical questions and provide frameworks and methods that address these interventions with focused attention to issues of power, inequality, and social impact.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a global boom in instant delivery services and online sales. In Turkey, the electronic trade sector reached its three-year financial goals in the first three months of the pandemic. In the second year of the pandemic, prominent delivery firms, such as *Getir* (Bring), are even expanding their operations abroad. Yet beneath firms' global expansion and increasing profitability lies a disturbing reality: the delivery workers who have been essential to social reproduction during the pandemic are vulnerable to low wages, dangerous working conditions, and social stigmatization. To be specific, the deaths of delivery workers have increased ten times in Turkey due to their workload and the pressure for swift delivery during Covid-19.

In my SSRC funded project titled "Algorithmic Work, Vulnerable Bodies: Instant Delivery Workers and Turkey's Public Health Crisis during Covid-19," I researched how the lives of workers employed by popular delivery firms have changed since the pandemic. I interviewed almost forty workers employed at two instant delivery companies and three companies that relied on delivery workers for their increasing online sales after the pandemic. Except for one woman worker employed at a depot, my interviewees were men living and working in İstanbul, Turkey's largest city, with a population of more than 15 million

people.

Photo by Rowan Freeman

In my interviews, one particular tension kept resurfacing. That tension stood between workers' passion for motorcycles and the immense of bodily risk due to driving motorcycles in an algorithmically shaped labor regime that enforced workers' temporal and spatial surveillance (Gregory 2020). In this essay, I explore the triangular relationship between surveillance, freedom, and motorcycles as ambivalent vehicles melding joy and bodily risk.

I have two arguments. First, there are multiple layers to delivery workers' experience of surveillance during the pandemic. Depending on bodily risks, the severity of potential accidents, and the workload they must undertake, workers may be comfortable with, indifferent to, or critical of surveillance. My second argument concerns freedom, the opposite side of surveillance at work. In the delivery sector, freedom is mediated by motorcycles within the context of an unstable economy now struck by the pandemic. I argue that workers' experience of freedom enabled by motorcycles is an unfree freedom. Although the minimum physical contact with their bosses and the everyday joy of riding a motorcycle cultivates that feeling of freedom, bodily risks turn motorcycles into vehicles of servitude.

Multiple layers of surveillance at work: Acceptance, Indifference, and Criticism

Due to high youth unemployment, social control of delivery workers begins outside the workplace. Turkey is struck by a currency crisis that caused the national minimum wage to drop from 400–450 Euros per month to 270 Euros per month. In 2020 and following the first quarter of 2021, the youth unemployment rate rose to an average of 25.3%. In the country, one out of four persons between 15–24 ages are unemployed, producing high demand for employment in the delivery sector. Although new firms entered the market after the pandemic, legislative gaps and rising unemployment have depressed wages in the sector.

At work, data driven systems ensure surveillance. Although customers shop and press "submit" with the applications on their smartphones, workers and their bosses use another application to receive, organize, and perform deliveries. When an order reaches a firm's digital terminal at the depot, the depot staff prepare the order. The delivery worker makes sure that everything is packaged. Once the delivery worker starts the motorcycle, he must update his status and inform the customer that he is on his way. If approved by the app, a driver can take on multiple deliveries when customers are closely located. Once the delivery is finalized, the driver must press "finished delivery" to become "available" for the next delivery. These data enable supervisors to continuously monitor the duration of deliveries and locations of the drivers.

> *[B]eing surveilled can save their lives if they are involved in an accident—because their supervisors track them, they are immediately informed of potential accidents.*

How do delivery workers make sense of this? The delivery workers I interviewed are accepting of surveillance when it comes to their bodily safety. For them, being surveilled can save their lives if they are involved in an accident—because their supervisors track them, they are immediately informed of potential accidents. Aside from bodily safety, delivery workers may also be indifferent to surveillance, evoking what Lisa Dencik and Jonathan Cable (2017) call "surveillance realism" and ultimately normalize surveillance. However, this doesn't mean that all delivery workers are accepting of surveillance.

Some workers, however, are critical of how firms require them to signal their availability to the delivery system because, for them, non-stop availability violates their right to take a break. This availability is bolstered through performance evaluations illustrated by report cards (*karne*), which rate and classify delivery workers according to delivery numbers, delivery time, and levels of secure and economic driving. Murat (35) has been working as a delivery worker for the past six months. A high-school graduate, he is critical of the app's prioritization of profits over workers' well-being:

"I wish the app was designed to understand that a worker needs a 30-minute break after a certain amount of deliveries…I have the feeling that we are slaves. There are constantly new orders. I wish the

app gave us a break for ten minutes. Sometimes we work for 7–8 hours without a break, which diminishes our attention on the road."

I wonder and ask Murat if he was ever involved in an accident. "Thank God (*Allah'a şükür*), never," he says. But when I ask about his life after work hours, he becomes more critical of surveillance, which obliterates work breaks and produces overwork:

"That's a good question. I have 12 hours left after working 12 hours a day. But after freshening up, there is not much time left. Am I happy? Well, I am grateful to God (*Allah'a şükür*), let's put it that way. I wouldn't call it happiness, but at least I am not starving."

Murat's remarks about gratefulness for not starving and not being happy necessitate a multi-layered approach to understanding surveillance, because delivery workers adopt multiple approaches of acceptance, indifference, and criticality to get through their working days. Although there is truth to how delivery workers function within a "digital cage" (Vallas and Schor 2020), this digital cage involves tensions where Murat's gratefulness (*şükür*) is accompanied by another feeling of not being happy.

This co-existence of gratefulness and not being happy attests to the affective ambivalence of experiencing surveillance: Murat is not actively sad, but he is not actively happy either. He is grateful but this gratefulness is not an obstacle to criticism of work. What keeps him and his colleagues working, then? On the one hand, they make more than the minimum wage in a crisis-ridden economy—less than what they need and deserve, but they are not starving. On the other hand, the ability to ride motorcycles for a living in a suffocating socio-economic environment can feel liberating.

Motorcycles and Unfree Freedom

Motorcycles signify freedom and make delivery work appealing to my interviewees. Thanks to motorcycles and their mobility, delivery workers have minimal contact with bosses and other people. Consider Ismail (28), a former hairdresser who is still trying to finish high school. Since the pandemic began, he has been working as a delivery worker. Married with a child, delivery work helps him to make more money than minimum wage jobs. But İsmail sees added benefits to this work. "Initially, there was some fear. But in this job, you don't deal with anyone else. After they told me that the risk of virus transmission is low, delivery work became pleasurable since I enjoy riding motorcycles." Intrigued by this, I ask İsmail to broadly describe his job to those unfamiliar with it. He invokes freedom in his response:

"To me, it's really the best job to do. A motorcycle courier cannot do anything else. Why? Because we have no responsibilities. We are free. They say 'motorcycle is freedom' and I truly feel that freedom when I am on the motorcycle. My family wants me to open a barber shop. Sure, but how am I going to stay put in that place?"

Due to the pandemic, I was not able to conduct participant observation for my research. So, using photo elicitation (see Warren 2008), I asked delivery workers to *show me* how it felt to work as a delivery

worker. While they were not able to take photos due to their busy schedules, they did describe various scenes and objects, which were then turned into an illustration with the help of a design undergraduate at my home institution, Koç University. Ismail picked the image of a butterfly.

Ismail's depiction of delivery workers as a butterfly

> Ismail: It's free. It can also easily fall prey. It has a short life. We also take a lot of risks on the road and can get involved in accidents.
>
> Ergin: How does being a butterfly make you feel?
>
> Ismail: I wouldn't choose the butterfly if I weren't happy.

"When I am on the motorcycle, I have butterflies in my stomach," he adds to emphasize his passion for motorcycles. Despite this, İsmail would not hesitate to take another job if he finds one with better conditions and notes that he is aware of the stigmatization towards motorcycle drivers. "If they (customers) are sure that we carry the virus all around, why do they make orders to their homes?"

The freedom described by my interviewees is "both an emancipatory and an oppressive force," a freedom with a small "f" rather than a universal or absolute "Freedom" (Sopranzetti 2017, 69). Such freedom is one where a delivery worker takes advantage of the motorcycle's mobility and enjoys everyday distance to being in the immediate presence of a boss. In the midst of Turkey's crisis-ridden economy, this type of freedom enables drivers to "reconcile their personal desires and aspirations with the changing structural configurations of capital and labor" (Sopranzetti 2017, 69).

> *[M]otorcycles provide everyday spaces and moments of autonomy is important to understand how it is not just servitude but an ambivalent and contradictory form of unfree freedom that shapes delivery workers' lives.*

Yet, this freedom from bosses and relations with customers is full of tension in that the only responsibility of a delivery worker is "one's own life," as Murat starkly put. After all, as almost every interviewee emphasized, "the delivery worker's body is the bodywork of the motorcycle." On top of the immediate risk of injury and death, motorcycles mean debt, especially if the delivery worker is the faulty party when accidents occur. In such cases, bosses, from whom the delivery workers feel free, are the ones to make the driver pay for the accident costs, increasing the social burdens of an already precarious labor force. This is why I call motorcycles vehicles of unfree freedom—even as they offer delivery workers a sense of autonomy and independence, they transform their life energy into sources of profit and precarity that sustain hegemony. That motorcycles provide everyday spaces and moments of autonomy is important to understand how it is not just servitude but an ambivalent and contradictory form of unfree freedom that shapes delivery workers' lives.Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Turkey's instant delivery sector positioned itself as a problem solver and life saver, but such promises are ultimately political statements. Although governments, corporations, and celebrities discursively recognized delivery workers' labor, they were not prioritized for vaccination and have faced significant bodily risks due to the precarious nature of their work. Still, despite lack of recognition and bodily risks, the delivery sector has managed to offer workers a space of somewhat viable livelihood. This is possible in part because of high youth unemployment rates in Turkey. But it is also made possible by the ordinary joys of autonomy and independence, enabled by motorcycles, which provide an ambivalent and contradictory form of unfree freedom.

This essay emerged from research supported by a Just Tech Covid-19 Rapid Response Grant.

References

Dencik, Lina, and Jonathan Cable. 2017. "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance| The Advent of Surveillance Realism: Public Opinion and Activist Responses to the Snowden Leaks." *International Journal of Communication* 11: 763–81.

Gregory, Karen. 2020. "'My Life Is More Valuable Than This': Understanding Risk among On-Demand Food Couriers in Edinburgh." *Work, Employment and Society* 35 (2): 316–31.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020969593.

Sopranzetti, Claudio. 2017. “Framed by Freedom: Emancipation and Oppression in Post-Fordist Thailand.” *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (1): 68–92. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.1.07.

Vallas, Steven, and Juliet B. Schor. 2020. “What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (1): 273–94. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857.

Warren, Samantha. “Empirical Challenges in Organizational Aesthetics Research: Towards a Sensual Methodology.” *Organization Studies* 29, no. 4 (April 2008): 559–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607083104.