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Coercion and Consent under Techno-Economic Despotism: Workers' Alienation and 'Liberation' in the Amazon Warehouse

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Abstract

This article explores the role of subjectivity in workers' control in warehouses. Relying on Marx's theory of the alienated subject under capitalism, we analyse the narratives of Polish Amazon workers to understand how alienating work produces a contradictory consenting subject. Workers are both estranged from the labour process, commodities, social relations and themselves, and simultaneously reconstituted as agents with new potentialities. Reflecting Marx's 'civilising' dimension of capitalism, they are reconstituted as sellers of labour, consumers, individuals deserving respect and holders of legal rights. This transformation elicits workers' consent to alienating work conditions because these new possibilities depend on such conditions. Our study advances discussions of control in global warehousing by highlighting how workers' consent operates alongside coercion. It also advances our understanding of consent by showing that it is not merely a coping mechanism for meaningless work but rather emerges from workers' integration into capitalist relations.

Keywords

alienation, Amazon, control, liberation, logistics, Marx, warehouse

Introduction

The low wages, harsh work conditions, casualised contracts and extreme flexibility demands endured by warehouse workers worldwide have increasingly been documented over the past decade (e.g. Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018; Delfanti, 2021b;

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Gutelius, 2015; Schaupp, 2022; Staab and Nachtwey, 2016). Warehouses have become particularly significant locations in which to gain insight into the nature of managerial control, as the realisation of surplus value depends today, more than ever before, on labour power ensuring the 'seamless' circulation of commodities across the globe (Cowen, 2014; Harvey, 2019; Marx, 1978). This 'logistics revolution' reflects Marx's seminal insight that, to sustain itself, capital needs to create the physical conditions for market exchange to occur by constantly 'driv[ing] beyond every spatial barrier' and 'annihilating space by time' (Cowen, 2014; Danyluk, 2018; Harvey, 1975; Marx, 1973: 524).

The existing literature has pointed to how the control of warehouse workers commonly rests on 'techno-economic despotism', a regime of labour control centred on the combination of sophisticated algorithmic systems ('techno') and casualised employment leveraging workers' labour market vulnerability ('economic') (Vallas et al., 2022; Wood, 2020, 2021). On the one hand, stowing, picking and packing jobs are rationalised and deskilled, while sophisticated warehouse management systems algorithmically optimise operations, intensifying work and surveillance, resulting in what has been called 'digital Taylorism' (e.g. Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018; Delfanti, 2021a; Henaway, 2023; Staab and Nachtwey, 2016; Wood, 2020). On the other hand, casualised contracts, either direct or through third parties (e.g. Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Moody, 2019), fragment the workforce along employers, contractual statuses and socio-demographics, such as racial, ethnic and religious background and gender (Newsome et al., 2013; Tapia et al., 2023), complicating workers' mobilisation (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Benvegnù and Cuppini, 2018; Moody, 2019).

Although warehouse workers' consent to their own exploitation is sometimes included (e.g. Delfanti, 2021b; Vallas et al., 2022), overall, these studies emphasise how techno-economic despotism controls through coercion. They contrast this form of despotism with hegemonic regimes, which rely on ideology to control workers by eliciting their consent (Burawoy, 1979). They explain the prevalence of coercion in warehousing as reflecting workers' structural weakness vis-a-vis employers, even in countries with high unionisation (Dörflinger et al., 2021; Schaupp, 2022).

Despite their important insights, focusing on why coercive techno-economic despotism comes to prevail tends to leave its effects on workers' subjectivity outside the scope of analysis. Yet, as the burgeoning scholarship on the platform economy has shown, techno-economic despotism does not exclude workers' subjectivity from control (Kellogg et al., 2020). Gig workers are both coerced by algorithms and precarious contracts and often also consent to exploitative working conditions because gig work gives them access to job opportunities and makes them experience a sense of control – for instance, because they can decide when and/or where to work (e.g. Graham et al., 2017; Newlands, 2024; Peticca-Harris et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023; Veen et al., 2020). Taking stock of these insights, we argue that to adequately understand how control occurs in warehousing under techno-economic despotism, we need to also attend to workers' subjectivity – or their sense of who they are – and the role it plays in such control.

To do so, we draw on Marx's theory of alienation (Marx, 1974), which rests on the idea that work is not merely a productive activity, but a fundamentally formative one through which we become subject (Arthur, 1986; Raekstad, 2018; Sayers, 2011). Marx

argues that wage work under capitalism profoundly transforms us in a double, contradictory way. On the one hand, it estranges us from the labour process, the object of our work, social relations and, ultimately, ourselves as human beings. This aspect is in line with common psychological and sociological conceptualisations of alienation as a negative state, characterised by lack of control, unmet expectations and disillusionment (e.g. Blauner, 1964; Edgell and Granter, 2019; Glavin et al., 2021; Seeman, 1959; Shantz et al., 2015; Yuill, 2011). On the other hand, alienation for Marx also includes the potentiality for workers to develop a novel, more expansive and 'universal' sense of the self that is 'liberated' from traditional relations of oppression. Related to what he calls the 'civilising' dimension of capitalism (Marx, 1974; Musto, 2021; Øversveen, 2021; Sayers, 2011), this positive dimension of alienation is seldom mentioned yet paramount to understand the worker's subjectivity and the role it plays in control. Accordingly, we ask: What alienated worker's subjectivity emerges under warehouse techno-economic despotism? What role does this alienated subjectivity play in workers' control?

To answer these questions, we rely on the case of POZ1, the oldest Amazon warehouse in Poland. Amazon warehouses epitomise digital Taylorist, techno-economic despotic control (e.g. Delfanti, 2021a; Vallas et al., 2022; Wood, 2020), and are even considered to dystopically prefigure the work of the future more broadly (Gutelius and Theodore, 2019; Zanoni and Miszczyński, 2024). Our study draws on extensive interviews with workers, complemented by virtual observations of Facebook (Meta) forums and documents.

Our study makes three contributions to the extant literature on workers' control. First, drawing on Marx's theory of alienation, we unveil workers' subjectivity under techno-economic despotism in warehousing, which has largely remained outside the scope of existing accounts. We show how alienating work at once profoundly estranges workers and opens up new potentialities for them. It separates them from the work process, the commodities, other workers and themselves, but, by so doing, it also enables them to relate to these aspects in new ways, and to become owners of their own labour, consumers of commodities, individuals deserving respect from others and holders of rights protected by the law. We argue that, while mortified, workers are also reconstituted by these new relations as individualised subjects with agency *inside* capitalism, 'liberated' from relations of oppression in traditional society.

Second, the study shows the importance of workers' consent under techno-economic despotism, a mode of control that is only marginal in the extant literature. More specifically, it unveils how warehouse workers consent to alienating work because these potentialities for agency and self-development are predicated upon it. This consent, we argue, reflects their own profound transformation into capitalist subjects that engage with work, objects, others and themselves in novel, individualised and instrumental ways. This insight adds to current explanations of the difficulties of mobilising workers in global warehousing, which emphasise their structural weakness vis-a-vis employers (Dörflinger et al., 2021; Schaupp, 2022).

Third, drawing on a Marxian theory of alienation allows us to advance the current understanding of consent as workers' behaviour to cope with deskilled, meaningless jobs under capital's hegemony and ultimately reproducing capital's interests (Burawoy, 1979; Vallas et al., 2022). Marx's theory of alienation helps to reconceptualise consent as emerging from subjects' reconstitution as capitalist subjects, their enjoinment into

capitalism through engaging in work that does not only estrange but also 'liberates' them. This contradictory investment of the subject into capitalism is essential to unravel the complexity of control and resistance.

The missing subject in extant accounts of control in warehousing

Interest in warehousing work has recently grown against the background of the so-called logistics revolution, a term referring to the current phase of capitalism in which capital accumulation heavily relies on the rescaling and reorganisation of commodity production in global networks that 'blur the boundaries between transport and other forms of productive labour' (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Chua, 2022; Chua et al., 2018; Cowen, 2014: 104; Danyluk, 2018). This literature builds on Marx's core insight – later developed by Luxemburg (1951) and Harvey (1975, 2010, 2019) – that capital needs to ensure accumulation by tearing down spatial barriers to exchange and by accelerating the circulation of commodities, and his discussion of transportation as an integral part of the production process generative of surplus value (Marx, 1973, 1978; see also Danyluk, 2018).

Studies in warehouses have extensively documented how workers are often controlled through a despotic regime combining algorithmic management and precarious contracts (Vallas et al., 2022; Wood, 2020, 2021), which effectively 'assaults' labour (Danyluk, 2018). For instance, Delfanti's (2021b) ethnography of an Amazon warehouse in Piacenza, Italy, shows how control is enforced through a complex infrastructure of software and hardware that algorithmically organises the circulation of commodities. As in all Amazon warehouses, the warehouse management system directs day-to-day operations, including stowing, picking and packing, and incessantly monitors workers' movement and productivity (cf. Gutelius and Theodore, 2019). Work is organised along Tayloristic principles: rationalised, deskilled and algorithmically optimised, intensified and pervasively surveilled (e.g. Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018; Delfanti, 2021a; Henaway, 2023; Schaupp, 2022; Staab and Nachtwey, 2016). Barcode scanners continuously feed data into the Associate Development and Performance Tracker, a computer system that deploys opaque algorithms to benchmark individual workers' performance against an aggregated 'norm'. The least performing workers are continuously identified and terminated (Delfanti, 2021a, 2021b; see also Vallas et al., 2022; Zanoni and Miszczyński, 2024).

Despotic regimes of control of warehouse labour also crucially rest on highly precarious employment, both direct and indirect, reflecting the structural power of capital over labour (e.g. Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Moody, 2019). In some geographies, the logistic workforce's vulnerability reflects early-stage proletarianisation, stemming in its recent integration into global capitalism, and weak, capital-friendly labour legislation that offers little protection to stimulate economic growth (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Bonacich and Wilson, 2008). In high-income economies and more protective contexts (e.g. Dörflinger et al., 2021; Schaupp, 2022), logistic workforces are rather weakened by casualised employment and fragmentation through racialisation and/or migration regimes (see also Schaupp, 2022; Tapia et al., 2023).

Focusing on the coercion resulting from multiple coalescing factors, these accounts generally do not address how workers might be enjoined, as subjects, into consenting to their own exploitation. When ideological aspects are at all mentioned, it is to show their marginal role. Delfanti (2021b) refers for instance to the 'myth of modernisation' surrounding Amazon, a fantasy of global capital saving communities from deindustrialisation and unemployment by offering opportunities to hard-working individuals. However, whether and how workers buy into this fantasy and what it does to their sense of the self is left unexamined.

In a rare attempt to expand our understanding of control in warehouses beyond coercion, Vallas et al. (2022) examine how workers' consent is elicited by Amazon. They identify three key modalities: offering workers symbolic rewards, encouraging them to craft an identity of 'diligent worker' (*normative control*); leveraging workers' gratitude and sense of obligation for being hired (*relational control*); and interpellating workers as individuals with the choice to invest in their job to obtain upward mobility (*governmental control*). The authors conclude that the control regime rests on both coercion and consent. In their analysis, consent is produced by a hegemonic managerial ideology at odds with workers' 'real' material interests, along a classical structure–superstructure dualism. We hold that Marx's theory of alienation provides an informative alternative approach to understand workers' consent to their own exploitation in wage work.

Recovering the subject in control through Marx's theory of alienation

Although Marx's theory of alienation fell into disgrace with the demise of the Marxist tradition after the fall of real socialist regimes (Yuill, 2011), it is today increasingly being recovered across disciplines (e.g. Musto, 2021; Øversveen, 2021; Watson, 2020). This theory rests on a materialist theory of the human subject as developing through dialectical engagement with the objects of nature (Edgell and Granter, 2019; Sayers, 2011). It holds that wage work under capitalism introduces a deep and pervasive disconnection between human beings' work to produce goods and the basic needs these goods are meant to satisfy (Marx, 1973, see also Brook, 2009; Laaser, 2022; Musto, 2021; Øversveen, 2021; Sayers, 2011; Soffia et al., 2022; Willmott, 1990). Dispossessed of all other means of subsistence, individuals are forced to sell their labour power for a wage. Yet wage work estranges them from their work as an activity and the goods it produces, as both become commodities that no longer belong to them:

> The externalization [Entäusserung] of the worker in his [sic] product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien. (Marx, 1974: 38)

Furthermore, by atomising work and turning workers into appendages of a production machine, wage work alienates workers from each other and their very humanity, or 'species-being' (Mandel and Novack, 1970). This hampers the development of self-consciousness, as the worker 'denies' and 'mortifies' himself [sic], failing to 'develop free

mental and physical energy' in work and ends up 'feeling himself only when he is not working' (Marx, 1974: 41; Sayers, 2011). In other words, under capitalism work becomes a mere means to satisfy material needs, losing its formative role that makes us human.

The implications of alienation extend beyond the workplace, into the totality of the social. The pervasiveness of the commodity form and market relations in society 'severely distort[s] our self-knowledge, social relations and understanding of the world' (Brook, 2009: 9; see also Mandel, 1980; Yuill, 2011), leading to commodity fetishism, or the obscuring of the relations between producers behind relations between commodities, expressed through value in a seemingly 'free' market. In one of the rare engagements with Marx's materialist theory of the subject in organisation studies, Willmott (1990) pointed to how the self and its identity are themselves prone to becoming fetishised, as individualised subjects need to deal with the insecurity caused by alienation.

At the same time, for Marx, alienating work does not transform the subject and sociality in a solely negative way. It also carries a potentiality for workers' self-development that was previously limited to an elite: it reconstitutes workers as 'universal' subjects through broader capitalist relations (Marx and Engels, 1978[1848]; see also Vidal, 2020), erasing 'local' differences and dissolving communal bonds (Cohen, 1974; Øversveen, 2021; Sayers, 2011). Generating new, wider connections and relations beyond blood ties or traditional relations of oppression and servitude, alienating work represents for him a necessary step in the historical process of human development towards emancipation (Cohen, 1974). In this sense, capitalism thus also has a 'civilising mission', as it 'does away with national boundaries and prejudices . . . [with] the inherited self-sufficient satisfaction of existing needs confined within well-defined bounds, and the reproduction of the traditional way of life' (Marx, 1973: 313, in Cohen, 1974: 250). The expansion of commodity exchange entails new needs and new means to satisfy them and leads to the development of networks beyond local contexts, modernising relations, dissolving the traditional family and redefining gender relations (Musto, 2021). Capitalism thus creates both the material and subjective conditions necessary for a new subject with new capacities to emerge through universal human relations. It should be noted that for Marx, under capitalism, this 'liberating' process however remains truncated, as workers are dispossessed from the means of subsistence. Its completion requires a communist society.

Building on Marx's theory of the alienated subject under capitalism as open and contradictory to understand control in contemporary logistics, we ask: What alienated worker's subjectivity emerges under warehouse techno-economic despotism? What role does this alienated subjectivity play in workers' control?

Methodology

The research context: Amazon in Poland

Amazon is today one of the biggest online retailers worldwide, employing a total of 250,000 workers and about 25,000 auxiliary personnel (Amazon.com, 2019) across a global network of 320 warehouses (MWPVL, 2019). The company established its first warehouse in Poland, POZ1, in 2014 in Poznań, near the German border. Today, it runs

10 fulfilment centres and has offices located in Poland's major cities. Most of the parcels are destined for the German and European market (The First News, 2022).

Poland provides an ideal location for Amazon due to its capital-friendly environment (Bohle and Greskovits, 2007) and its geographic position inside the European Union, along the logistic corridor running from Asia to Europe. The Polish labour market is dominated by low-skilled, low-paid and casualised work, and an overqualified workforce resulting from the growth of tertiary education since the 1990s. Informal labour market practices remain diffuse (White, 2016). In 2020, 68% of the employers controlled by the National Labour Inspectorate (2021) were in breach of labour law, including failing to comply with health and safety measures (48.9%) and work time regulations (6.2%), and delaying payments (19.2%). Especially since its accession to the European Union in 2004, there has been massive and ongoing work migration, mainly to other European countries. Endemic work precarity and the normalisation of flexible employment (Mrozowicki, 2016) has to date strongly limited workers' mobilisation.

In POZ1, union membership is low and largely grassroots, self-organised through *Inicjatywa Pracownicza* (Workers' Initiative), which operates without paid staff. The institutional union *Solidarność* has only a symbolic presence (Amazon Workers and Supporters, 2018). Unions remain clinched by legislation requiring a high number of supporting workers to mobilise (Boewe and Schulten, 2019; Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018). Despite increased mobilisation in POZ1 to demand higher wages in 2022, to date there has been no successful strike ballot there or in any other Amazon warehouse in the country (International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle, 2023).

POZ1 covers 123,000 square metres, of which about 75% is storage, and counts 60 truck docks (Dembinska, 2016). On average, the warehouse employs about 6000 'associates'. About one-third are direct Amazon employees, while the rest are hired through agencies to deal with fluctuations in handled parcels, establishing 'a hierarchy of disposability' in the workforce (cf. Briken and Taylor, 2018). Hiring is non-selective, and the majority are women. The workforce is largely composed of Polish workers, reflecting the ethnic homogeneity of the region at the time of the data collection, before the influx of Ukrainian refugees (Owczarek and Chełstowska, 2018). Workers are recruited from Poznań and the surrounding rural area in a radius of 80 km, or a 2-hour commute (Owczarek and Chełstowska, 2018).

Like all other Amazon warehouses, POZ1 is divided into inbound and outbound operations. Inbound refers to the registration of all incoming goods into the warehouse management system database, including the receiving of the goods, the unpacking, quality control and labelling through an Amazon Standard Identification Number linked to a location in the warehouse, and the placing of the product on a shelf, or stowing. Outbound includes the picking of the products from the shelves, the packing and the putting into boxes, or totes, for the parcels to be delivered to clients by external couriers. On the shop floor, workers are organised in teams of about 20 workers led by a leader, supervised by an area manager and an operations manager (see also Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018; Delfanti, 2021a).

Workers work four days a week on 10-hour shifts, alternating monthly between days and nights, and have the possibility to work one additional day a week in peak times. Shifts include two paid 15-minute breaks and one unpaid 30-minute break. In 2019,

when the data were collected, the hourly wage of a newly recruited employee amounted to 18 PLN (about 4.15 euro) pre-tax per hour, well above the 14.70 PLN (3.41 euro) minimum wage. Benefits included monthly individual performance bonuses of 7.5%, an additional 7.5%, based on the overall performance of the warehouse, and one subsidised meal a day in the canteen for 1 PLN.

The study

The study is primarily based on 78 in-depth, semi-structured live interviews conducted by the first author with POZ1 workers. Complementary data include three interviews with trade union militants, press articles, and observations of Facebook forums. Interviews are suitable to generate data on how subjects experience and make sense of what they do and who they are in relation to others and the world. As they do not strictly pre-structure respondents' narratives or impose a specific vocabulary, they dialogically produce text that remains closer to their perspective (Roulston, 2021). The study of three workers' forums – AMAZON PL (ca. 17,000 members), Amazon Fulfilment Center POZ1 (ca. 7000 members) and Amazon Fulfilment Poznań POZ1 (ca. 8000 members) – as well as desk research of press articles on Amazon Poland, allowed us to triangulate the data across multiple sources (Turner and Turner, 2009).

Workers were recruited through posts on the forums describing the research, the funding source and calling active Amazon workers to participate. At the end of each interview, the worker was given the opportunity to refer the researcher to other potential informants (14 interviews out of the 78 were from referrals). Interviewees carried out a variety of jobs (e.g. stowing, picking and packing), 27% were Amazon employees, the rest were agency workers. A majority (56 out of 78) were female. About 21% were under 25 years old, 60% were 25–45, and the remaining 19% were above 45. About 37% came from the Poznań urban area, while the rest were from the surrounding region.

The interviews with workers were structured in two parts. The first part was open. Workers were asked to introduce themselves and to talk about their work as well as their personal and professional trajectory. In the second part, open questions were asked to gain insight into participants' work and experience, the work process and the technology used in the workplace, the relations with co-workers and managers, their professional trajectory, employment status and financial situation, and family situation. The interviews with trade union representatives dealt with their daily responsibilities, the union's challenges and issues, as well as relationships to local and national politics and media. The interviews took place in the participants' homes or in public spaces (e.g. coffee shops, parks) and lasted 45–180 minutes. In conformity with common ethical guidelines, we explained the goals of the study, anonymisation and confidentiality, and obtained written informed consent from participants to use the data (Flick, 2013). All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The collected data were analysed in multiple steps. First, to create a shared understanding of POZ1, we went through all the data sources in multiple rounds (Flick, 2013). A first thematic open coding systematised information on the history of the warehouse, HR policies and labour contracts, the division of labour between workers, the spatial organisation of the warehouse and its shifts system, the digital management of all

operations and the overall demography of the workforce. As Amazon organises warehouses in the same way across the world, we triangulated our data with scientific literature and international press coverage on Amazon.

In a second phase, to recover the subject and better understand control, we coded the interview data along Marx's theory of alienation using MaxQDA (Saldaña, 2021). First, we identified fragments expressing workers' estrangement from (1) the work process, (2) the handled objects, (3) other workers and (4) themselves (cf. Marx, 1973, 1974, 1976). Second, we identified fragments relating work at Amazon to self-development, self-realisation and 'liberation', indicating the transformation of workers' subjectivity and 'expansion' of their consciousness. Third, we related these fragments to each of the four above dimensions of alienation, along with corresponding 'civilising' dimensions reconstituting workers. This resulted in four inductively identified new relations of workers to the aspects of estrangement, turning them respectively into: (1) sellers of labour power, (2) consumers of commodities, (3) individuals entitled to respect from others and (4) holders of rights protected by the law. For each, we reflected on how they related to consent. Together, these four double dimensions of alienation unveil the profoundly contradictory transformation of workers' subjectivity through their work at POZ1 and its role in their control.

Alienation, 'liberation' and consent in the Amazon warehouse

Workers' narratives of warehousing work under Amazon's techno-economic despotism expressed the contradictory nature of alienation, filled with negativity as well as potentiality. Participants depicted in detail how algorithmic management and precarious contracts estranged and dehumanised them, fully in line with the existing literature on techno-economic despotism in Amazon and other warehouses. At the same time, they also extensively elaborated on how this alienating work deeply transformed and 'liberated' them. Following Marx, we interpret this latter as reflecting the 'civilising' dimension of capitalism, often neglected in accounts of alienation. We argue that workers' consent to alienating work cannot be understood without accounting for this 'liberation', which is predicated upon their participation in capitalism as labour, and thus indissolubly tied to it. In what follows, we analyse how this consenting capitalist subject emerges from estrangement and 'liberation', along Marx's four dimensions of alienation from the labour process, the object of work, others and oneself.

Becoming consenting sellers of labour power through alienation from the labour process

Speaking about their work in POZ1, workers depicted a prototypical techno-economic despotic regime in which the algorithmic warehouse management system allocated tasks to extract maximal value from labour. This system enabled management to continuously monitor work and identify and dismiss the less well-performing workers to be replaced with new ones.

Many elaborated on how they felt like cogs in the Amazon automaton, mortified and consumed by an uninterrupted flow of instructions requiring little thinking or social

interaction given to them by the scanner at an exhausting pace. Indeed, work in POZ1 is purposively designed to hamper workers' cognitive engagement, which might slow down the work pace and lead to mistakes. An older male picker explained: 'I do what the scanner tells me, there is no other option than "scan item" or "no item"' (#15). Many other participants said that they would 'work towards the score' (older female stower, #35), 'concentrate on the job, packing' without 'look[ing] around' (young female packer, #60) and try to 'keep [their] head below the surface' (middle-aged male stower, #5). They had to be quick enough to remain invisible in the system, meet the algorithmically calculated 'norm' and avoid losing their job. Overall, participants were highly aware of how, for Amazon, they represented nothing more than numerically expressed labour power, 'just a record in an Excel spreadsheet and if we turn red on somebody's computer, he [sic, a manager] will know what to do [alluding to dismissal]' (young female stower, #7).

At the same time, this deskilled, algorithmically organised, atomising work process that reduced workers to numbers was not solely experienced as mortifying. While critical, they also narrated how this same work process in some ways 'liberated' them. Many pointed to how they were *more* in control of their own work and the recognition and rewards that came with it, since in POZ1 they were less dependent on managers, co-workers and clients than elsewhere:

> I feel that it is all up to me and my performance. Don't need to lick the boss's boots or gossip in the kitchen. Just me and my pace. (middle-aged female picker, #41)

> I had a sales job where I had to talk to people, call them, convince, my wage depended on it. I felt hopeless because I could not bring results. (. . .) And now [working at Amazon] I don't need to look at anyone or even talk, I can just think whatever and deliver. (middle-aged male stower, #42)

Others emphasised how a non-selective hiring and work allocation system and evaluations exclusively based on performance gave them work opportunities they had not received before because they lacked formal qualifications. For the first time, they received the possibility to sell their capacity to work for a wage, turning it into valuable labour power: 'even with no experience or education, I was able to climb high. Nobody ever asked me about them, after I signed the papers [contract]' (middle-aged female stower, #37). A few women workers even argued that the anonymous wage work in the warehouse was less estranging than the unpaid reproductive work they carried out in their roles as mothers, wives and daughters: 'I could finally [mentally] rest, from my kids, from my [senile] mother, and the problems that were chasing me all the time' (middle-aged female packer, #64).

These fragments show how the algorithmic management system alienated workers from the work process and made them disappear as human beings behind numbers, putting them in harsh competition with all the other workers. Yet by abstracting them from existing social norms and relations, it also gave them a novel sense of individual control and ownership over their own labour power. Turned into atomised, 'universal', capitalistic subjects, they can sell their own labour power as a commodity, in exchange

for a wage (Marx and Engels, 1978[1848]; Vidal, 2020). This techno-economic despotic regime estranges and 'liberates' them from multiple social relations of dependency on others, and even oppression and servitude (Cohen, 1974; Musto, 2021), eliciting their consent to it.

Becoming consenting consumers of commodities through alienation from the object of work

In our interviews, workers also extensively talked about the multitude of commodities that incessantly flew through the warehouse thanks to their own labour, yet which were alien to them (cf. Marx, 1974) and neither their property nor meant for their consumption. Many observed how 'the scope of goods is incredible (. . .), from Bluetooth vibrators to vacuum-packed bread' (young male picker, #69), and that they picked and stowed things they had 'not dreamed about. (. . .) Like a golden chain, 160 grams of gold, something that Tupac [American rapper] would wear' (middle-aged male stower, #42). Some pointed to how many objects did not meet any actual need, but were nonetheless desired by customers:

> On these shelves, this is not only typical stuff. There are millions of items which nobody needs, but people buy them just to have them (. . .) like cheap gadgets or stuff that is on Aliexpress but is sold in Germany by Amazon. (middle-aged female picker, #11)

Participants were aware of how their labour was essential for turning these objects into commodities, by letting them swiftly circulate along a global value chain ending at the customers' doorstep, to realise their value as quickly as possible. A young male picker told us:

> [Customers] with one click can have almost everything they dream about. Literally, one click and it lands in front of the door. All products are on Amazon. Many things you don't even know exist. Not only Amazon has them on shelves, they are just one click away: 'Don't worry, you don't have to do anything. We will pick it, pack it and send it to you.' (#69)

Puzzled about customers' willingness and ability to pay Amazon's premium prices, they imagined a faraway customer, different from them and with a much higher income.

Yet also workers' relation to the objects they handled was not solely one of estrangement. Exposed to these commodities, as the dominant form of wealth under capitalism, for the first time they experienced, if vicariously, a world of novel needs to be met through conspicuous consumption: 'In the job, I saw how much people buy, and how much of that is stuff that I didn't even know existed because I never needed it' (young male picker, #14). Some imagined themselves consuming the products: 'I sometimes admire hardware stuff that people buy, thinking I would want something like that for my house' (older male stower, #50). Others reflected on how work at Amazon had turned them into consumers:

> Amazon gets people used to having money. If you do overtime several times, you can get up to a pretty good wage. Of course, at the expense of personal life, (. . .) An obvious calculation:

> two days of overtime, and you pay a monthly instalment for the car, no? (middle-aged female packer, #56)

Thanks to this wage, for the first time in their lives, they were able to consume more 'freely' and 'reward themselves' for their work, without constantly worrying about money:

> Since my mother has joined [Amazon], (. . .) doubling her income from previous work, a lot has changed. We went on holidays to the seaside for the first time I can remember, stopped thinking about bills, it really seriously changed our financial situation. (middle-aged female packer, #64)

> Being at Amazon, I value the income, it's not that it's a lot, but working overtime gives me an option to really be in a good position (. . .). With my first salary, I got a gaming chair, and smaller stuff, like games, or clothes. (. . .) it was easier with money, in a good way, but also in a stupid way, buying just toys (laughing). (middle-aged male stower, #38)

A middle-aged female worker observed how the Amazon wage and the increased ability to consume represented a 'step towards normality' (packer, #58), meaning it helped her to come closer to the ideal standard of living often associated with the rest of Europe. Her words point to the ambition to become part of a broader capitalist 'normality', improving her situation, echoing what Marx understood as the 'civilising' force of capitalism.

These narratives reflect the highly contradictory relation of workers to the multitude of commodities they handled in POZ1. This alienating work entails their separation from these objects, which are not their property. Yet it also structurally exposes them to an immense, global capitalist spectacle, in which all kinds of (alleged) needs are met through commodity consumption (cf. Debord, 1967). Although their wage only gives limited access to commodities, it does enable them to consume more, 'civilising' them. Participants are highly self-reflective of how this work turns them not only into estranged labour, but also consumers with an expanded capacity to buy to socially reproduce themselves. POZ1 workers thus consent to work alienating them from the objects they handle because of these novel possibilities predicated on it.

Becoming consenting respected individuals through alienation from others

A very prominent theme in POZ1 workers' narratives was their alienation from each other. Not only was the labour process in the warehouse extremely atomised by the technology, co-workers also continuously arrived and disappeared due to the high mobility in the warehouse:

> It is impossible to make real friends at work since we are moved around all the time and everybody minds their own [picking] route. (middle-aged female picker, #66)

Also, the temporary nature of the employment contract hampered the creation of meaningful social relations between workers and rendered attempts to build a shared sense of common interests and collective resistance, for instance through the coordination of workers to 'play' the algorithm, vain. Conversations on Facebook could not redress this

atomisation, as the large, public digital forums under Amazon's surveillance were used mainly to disseminate information.

Atomised and estranged from their co-workers, participants often saw them as competitors in the digitally organised labour process. Highly aware that chances to stay in employment depended on their ability to meet or outperform the digitally calculated 'norm', they predominantly talked about co-workers as competing labour:

> When I got hired, (. . .) I remember seeing people who were just super-efficient and I felt like I needed to be at least as fast as them. (middle-aged female stower, #34)

Some criticised other workers for performing too much, increasing the 'norm', against their own and all workers' interests: 'So many times I have yelled [at a colleague working fast]: "Slow down, you don't get paid by the piece, the pay is per month"' (middle-aged male picker, #3). Others were critical of colleagues who they believed were working too little, although this behaviour was more tolerated, as it 'lower[ed] the norm for the whole warehouse' (older male picker, #15).

Estrangement from social relations in the warehouse was, however, not only deplored. Some participants pointed to how, on the contrary, they liked the anonymity and the privacy accorded by the atomised jobs, the algorithmic management system and temporary contracts:

> In Amazon, you disappear, but that has a good side, nobody actually looks at who you are, they are only interested in your performance, and the fact that you need to follow rules. And this is something that gives me a good vibe in this work, everybody minding their own business. (middle-aged male stower, #43)

> At [name of previous employer], I was a bit of a sensation being the only openly gay person, but at Amazon I just disappear in the crowd. Nobody minds, nobody is interested. (young male picker, #69)

Contrasting Amazon with other workplaces, they appreciated the absence of social judgement and even public shaming:

> During my time at [name of previous employer], the manager ranked us and wrote the names on the board (. . .). The manager discussed that performance in front of everybody. This was hard because it was like public shaming. (middle-aged male stower, #31)

To regulate the residual, superficial interactions among mutually estranged workers, Amazon imposed formal rules requiring all to behave in a respectful manner towards anyone, independent of their job, gender, age, sexual orientation and any other personal characteristic. As violations could lead to disciplinary action and even termination, interactions were overall friendly and respectful: 'We try not to offend anybody. Sometimes, I held vulgar stuff to myself because I knew that there was somebody who might not like it' (young male picker, #19). Despite the diverse composition of the workforce, cases of harassment were rare, and when incidents did occur, managers intervened. Workers with subordinate identities in Polish society, such as workers with only lower education, elderly workers, female workers, workers from rural areas, openly LGBTQI+ workers and workers visibly

adhering to youth countercultures were particularly appreciative of these rules, which protected them from abuses by colleagues and managers. A lesbian worker told us:

> I've always been worried how people see me. At Amazon people have to follow the same rules, and are forced to behave in a similar way (. . .) you need to behave according to the rules. If someone crosses a line, it is up to a worker to report that, and management has to handle it right away, even if they don't agree, they have to talk to the person and handle it. I have my reason to think it is a good thing, but of course many would disagree but don't have a choice. (middle-aged female stower, #21)

For these workers, alienation from each other entailed novel – more 'civilised' – social norms that redefined them as 'universal' human beings equally worthy of respect as anybody else.

These narratives show how POZ1's techno-economic regime, digitally atomising workers and imposing casualised employment, estranged them from meaningful social relations with others. Other workers are fetishised, reduced to an anonymous quantity of commodified labour, against which they compete through the algorithmically calculated norm. At the same time, the erasure of social relations makes place for individual workers' increased independence from others in the warehouse. Amazon's regulation of residual social interactions through norms of universal friendliness and respect, independent of one's identity and status in society, equalised those interactions. Reconstituted at once as anonymous labour and human beings deserving equal respect, workers are not solely separated but also 'liberated' from each other and traditional social mores, a 'liberation' that enjoins them into consenting to their alienation from others.

Becoming consenting workers protected by the law through alienation from oneself

Finally, workers' descriptions of work under POZ1's techno-economic regime of control emphasised how it estranged them from themselves and life. They often referred to how the nature and pace of work, combined with long shifts and long commutes, took an extreme toll on them: limb injuries, back aches, physical exhaustion, stress and sleep deprivation, which they cynically called 'Amazonian diseases'. Their narratives epitomised work as a mere means to satisfy material needs, without any formative function, and alienating them from their own humanity. A middle-aged female picker told us:

> Over time, you learn the process: get the address on the scanner, this information, what you have to do, each step, and you process it in the back of your head. You do it intuitively, but your thoughts are somewhere else, not at work, you are thinking thoughts that are only yours (. . .). A part of your brain is analysing that you should go in the right direction, find the location, scan it, check if it's the right item. That work is about hitting the numbers. The rest, what I have in my brain, is my stuff: I plan a vacation, what to cook tomorrow. (#13)

Many others similarly mentioned how they purposely kept conscious engagement with the tasks minimal, redirected their thoughts towards something unrelated to work, or switched completely off, 'braindead' (middle-aged female picker, #6), like 'zombies' (middle-aged female picker, #20).

This estrangement reached deep into workers' lives, undermining them also in their roles as parents, children, spouses and friends:

> I feel like this work makes me less present for my daughter. It is not only about the hours of work but also about me being tired and trying to help her with homework, being half asleep and only thinking about going to bed. (older male packer, #72)

Others mentioned how they were too exhausted to go out with friends or on a date. Temporary contracts furthermore made workers extremely aware of their own disposability. Many told us how they did not know how long they could stay and if they would ever get a permanent contract:

> Will they extend my agency contract? Will they convert me [to permanent employment]? How long will the contract be? All I knew was that people get fired, so I was stressed. (middle-aged female stower, #48)

And yet, although this work consumed workers, it was not univocally experienced as dehumanising. They also explained how for the first time in their lives, the company respected them as workers, met the contractual terms, paid them their wage on time and complied with Polish legislation:

> The rules are simple: you do [the work], you get paid and covered [insurance and social security]. (middle-aged male stower, #39)

> After a few months I realised: Wow! Nothing surprised me here, it was exactly how they told us: the warehouse, the job, other workers and the intensity. In other jobs it always ended up with bad surprises, but not here. (middle-aged male stower, #43)

They often contrasted Amazon with past employers who arbitrarily changed the contractual terms and imposed upon them close personal surveillance and unpaid overtime, paid late, or threatened to fire them:

> [My previous employer] was a typical Januszex [Polish term for an early capitalist who wants to become rich quickly at others' expense], the manager yelled at me, swore, I constantly felt his eyes on me (. . .). In Amazon, they pay on time and calculate it accurately, while in my previous job the salary was never on time and they did not pay me for overtime and could fire me if I complained. (young male picker, #14)

> In [the other job], the boss would repeat that he had five [migrant workers] waiting to replace us, many times he would yell that he will kick us out with no pay (. . .). Working at Amazon, I had no problems like that. They do everything not to have workers bring them to court. (middle-aged male stower, #39)

Work at Amazon reconstituted workers into holders of real rights both in their employment relation with the company and in accessing welfare benefits, such as health insurance, maternity leave and retirement benefits:

> I know they are scared of the law but still it is quite comforting to know that nobody will get rid of me right away when I come back. (middle-aged female packer, #71)

> Amazon is cruel, but on paper it actually is perfectly aligned with all the bureaucracy in Poland, like the Code of Law, health inspections and so on. They will not get in conflict with any type of law (. . .). They won't risk anything, which is actually a good thing. (middle-aged female picker, #63)

Despite awareness of Amazon's self-interest, participants stressed how its compliance with the law turned them into holders of rights that were not a dead letter, and this amidst a labour market in which arbitrariness and abuses were the norm.

Participants' narratives of alienation from oneself are, again, imbued with contradiction. Work in POZ1 was experienced by workers as simultaneously mortifying and, in some way, 'liberating'. The profound estrangement from oneself, one's body and life caused by exhaustion and precarity comes with a reconstitution into a subject who has the legal rights and protections accorded by capitalist institutions regulating the labour market and their access to welfare services. Although Polish legislation only minimally protects workers, Amazon exploits them within the confines allowed by it. This compliance offers a 'civilised' employment relation, which remains exceptional in Poland, eliciting workers' consent.

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to advance our understanding of control in warehousing, which today plays a central role in processes of capital accumulation along global value chains (Cowen, 2014; Harvey, 2019). We drew on Marx's theory of alienation as double and contradictory to investigate the role workers' subjectivity, and more specifically an alienated one, plays in control in an Amazon warehouse in Poland. This role has been largely overlooked in extant explanations, which focus on how techno-economic despotism enforces coercion (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Cattero and D'Onofrio, 2018; Delfanti, 2021a; Staab and Nachtwey, 2016; yet see Vallas et al., 2022). Our analysis of narratives from workers at the POZ1 Amazon warehouse in western Poland makes three important contributions to the literature.

First, we uncover the complex and contradictory alienated worker subject produced under a techno-economic despotic regime. In Amazon's machine, work becomes a mere means of survival emptied of its formative role. At the same time, our analysis shows how alienation is not only mortification, but more complex and contradictory. Alienating relations from the work itself, the handled commodities, others and ultimately oneself at once involve potentiality and 'liberation' (Marx, 1974). We show how they turn Amazon's warehouse workers into sellers of their own labour power, consumers of commodities, individuals deserving respect and holders of legal rights.

We interpret the emergence of this novel subject to what Marx calls the 'civilising' dimension of capitalism. Capitalism pulls workers out of relations constituting the traditional way of life, breaking up their boundaries and, with them, oppressive relations and roles:

> the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language. (Marx, 1973: 494; Musto, 2021)

Through these capitalist relations, subjects become part of an ever-expanding mass of anonymous individuals with universal entitlements (Musto, 2021; Øversveen, 2021; Sayers, 2011).

Second, our study shows how the potentiality inherent in workers' alienated subjectivity relates to their consent to their own exploitation by capital. Often overlooked in extant analyses, which focus on how structurally weak workforces are coerced (Dörflinger et al., 2021; Schaupp, 2022), this consent nonetheless plays an essential role in their control. We argue that consent originates in the new, highly instrumental relations that workers establish with work, objects, others and themselves, which allow them to legitimately pursue individual goals, as agents, within the confines dictated by capitalism. As stated by Willmott:

> The capitalist mode of production reveals the constitution of human beings whose self-understanding is that of free independent agents who relate to both the natural and social worlds as *'alien' resources* for the realisation of their *private purposes*. (Willmott, 1990: 353; emphasis in original)

POZ1 workers' narratives surrounding the novel potentialities that work at Amazon has brought about in their lives illustrate this sense of agency and overtly express a degree of consent to the alienating work upon which such agency is predicated. These potentialities for self-development do not mechanically 'compensate' or 'offset' the negative effects of wage work under capitalism, as in a mere quid pro quo. Rather, they are part and parcel of the same alienated capitalist subject, who is at once estranged and 'liberated'.

This key insight echoes extant accounts of workers' consent in the platform economy, which similarly point to the 'liberating' dimension of gig work despite the despotism under which it is carried out (Graham et al., 2017; Newlands, 2024; Peticca-Harris et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023; Veen et al., 2020). This is in line with Marx's appreciation that 'marketisation' can also bring about positive effects for workers to the extent that it replaces 'oppressive protections' (see Fraser, 2013: 129). This is particularly visible in our case, which is embedded in a context where traditional relations of oppression to date still pervasively structure the economy and society. Whether the 'liberating' dimension of alienation will keep playing this role in further stages of capitalistic development and in other contexts is, however, an open question for future research to address.

Third, and last, our approach to workers' consent through Marx's theory of alienation advances current understandings of consent. Traditionally, theories of consent are grounded in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Consent refers to capital's ability to shape how workers make meaning of work so that they enact behaviour aligned with capital's interests without coercion. Consent is often expressed through workers' spontaneous creation of competitive 'games' at the point of production. 'Making out', or making 'real choices' within the narrow confines imposed upon them, helps them to cope with their deskilled work and give sense to it (Burawoy, 1979; Vallas et al., 2022). In this

understanding, consent is located in the realm of ideology, ontologically separate from the material relations of production, which it contributes to reproducing. In our approach, consent is, on the contrary, not related to sensemaking games, as workers are atomised and do not give meaning to their work. Consent is, rather, elicited by their deep reconstitution as agents 'liberated' through new multifaceted capitalist relations to work, commodities, others and themselves.

Workers' reconstitution as consenting subjects predicated on these capitalist relations furthermore advances current explanations of the difficulty of mobilising warehouse workers, which emphasise how techno-economic despotism effectively controls structurally weak workforces (Danyluk, 2018; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Moody, 2019; Vallas et al., 2022; Wood, 2020, 2021). Our study suggests that workers' consent might also complicate mobilisation. As held by Fraser (2013), individualised 'liberation' through capitalism 'strains in the fabric of existing solidarities' (p. 129), eroding the potential to organise collective forms of antagonism. It does, however, not exclude it, as the subject is never completely individualised. Indeed, despite all economic, organisational and legal difficulties, mobilisation has recently started to emerge in POZ1 (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2023).

It is precisely the contradictory and open nature of Marx's theory of the alienated subject that renders it productive to advance our understanding of control (and resistance) in contemporary global logistics. Unveiling the mortified-and-'liberated' subject, it avoids sweeping deterministic explanations of control, even under a pervasive techno-economic despotic regime. This approach to alienation moves it beyond the psychology of workers' disillusionment about unmet work expectations (Blauner, 1964; Edgell and Granter, 2019; Seeman, 1959) to be redressed by 'tinkering with the capitalist system' (Edgell and Granter, 2019: 36); for instance, through job design, improved person–job fit and more workers' voice, as commonly posited (Glavin et al., 2021; Shantz et al., 2015). Reaching deeper into workers' subjectivity by offering them agency as capitalist subjects, undoing alienation, would require, as held by Marx, overthrowing capitalist relations.

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