

Freedom within Frames

The perception of paradoxical freedom among workers of the food delivery sector in Budapest

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Abstract

The food delivery industry is one of the most visible sectors of the platform economy, which has contracted thousands of people in the past years in Budapest. The thesis explains the inner paradox of criticizing but still participating and appreciating food delivery work by the delivery workers. Therefore, this research explores how Budapest's bike delivery workers accept, normalize, and justify the precarious working conditions emerging in the ethos of freedom and flexibility and how the hegemonic discourse of labor market flexibilization and the platform companies' promulgated imaginary of this work supports this normalization. This research draws on the empirical evidence from participant observation, discourse analysis of the workers' Facebook group, and semi-structured interviews with bike couriers and a manager of a delivery company. Food delivery workers appreciate the flexible work schedule, which helps them organize their wage labor around their reproductive work, additional jobs, and leisure. The extent of overseeing their schedule depends on the workers' social and economic background and dependency on the platform. The ethos of entrepreneurship and bicycle subculture supports the workers to accept, justify, and normalize the precarious working conditions. Additionally, bike couriers compare their job to the other available options in the Hungarian labor market, where delivery work appears to be relative freedom and less tangible exploitation. In addition, couriers normalize and justify the precarious and dangerous working conditions as a sports activity. The riders embrace the idea that they get paid to train their bodies, which is an otherwise expensive and tiring hobby. Workers use their knowledge of nutrition and pain management from previous sporting activities to increase their workload. Food delivery companies and journalists frame bike delivery as a challenging cardio activity. The painful and dangerous body experiences reveal the cleavage between platform labor and idealized entrepreneurship.

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Preface

25th June 2021, a Friday, was a sunny day, so I decided to walk instead of taking the tram in Budapest. I reached Astoria, one of the city's busiest intersections, where everybody passes quickly by in cars, on trams, buses, bicycles, or foot. On that warm early afternoon, Astoria was bright and loud. While walking toward the underpass, I saw a man lying on the sidewalk. Budapest is full of people living on the street, but he was not one of them. The people of the otherwise uncaring city reacted unusually, as there was a growing crowd around him. This man in his thirties was a cycling courier in the uniform of the NetPincér food delivery platform, who had fallen because of a crack in the cycle path. He was one of the thousands workers who participated in the sudden boom of food delivery platform companies in Hungary during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated curfews.

His head and legs were bleeding, and shop assistants and passersby rushed to help him. They offered to call an ambulance and take care of his bike. He refused because courier work was important to him. He needed to deliver the food first, and then he would go to the hospital. Why did this man decide to prefer working instead of accepting help? His delivery address was just a few hundred meters away on Budapest's main and "safest" bicycle path. The idea of not completing the delivery task, which he was so close to, was uncomfortable for him. Have you ever scrolled Facebook or played on your phone after midnight and could not stop even though you knew that you must wake up early the next day? Delivery work is somehow a similar experience to participating in such online activities. The tasks appear on the smartphone screen, and completing one comes with financial and symbolic rewards, craving new tasks and continuing to play.

Besides the psychological reasons, there was another more stressful factor for preferring to deliver fast food and not caring for his health in an emergency. The delivery workers of NetPincér are organized in a clear hierarchy. The workers are stratified into seven

working groups. The algorithm puts faster and more reliable workers into higher categories based on their work performance. The higher they are, the more shifts they can choose from, and the more freedom they have to schedule their working time and maximize their earnings. Even one non-completed task can cause category change, and it is hard to climb back to higher groups. NetPincér is not a sympathetic employer. Many couriers reported losing their position due to an accident or breakdown. Since an algorithm allocates the categories, there is nowhere to complain about injustice. In this case, the bleeding man would risk his earnings for weeks or even months if he accepted the help.

After refusing the ambulance, the man's attention shifted to his courier bag. The priority is clear. Delivering the order in perfect condition, then health. While trying to stop the bleeding, he was grateful that his delivery had not spilled since KFC sells soft drinks only in cans. Since the summer of 2021, all food delivery workers have worried about liquid orders because a government decree banned certain disposable plastics from the market for climate awareness reasons. As a result, restaurants usually use paper lids instead of plastic ones, so the courier bags often get soaked in soft drinks. Thankfully, this was not the case.

"It is great that I did extreme sports. I have already walked to the hospital with a broken leg" the courier said, trying to convince us that he would be fine. There is indeed some degree of machoism in this sentence, but so is the pride of the couriers. In Facebook groups, couriers tend to position themselves as heavy-duty, bright people who find a solution for every inconvenient situation. The everyday online discourse reproduces these expectations.

After this scene, I never met him again, and I probably would not be able to recognize him. But similar accidents happen daily in Budapest among the food delivery workers. In Facebook groups, riders occasionally make inquiries about their colleagues whose accidents they witnessed but did not stop for – mainly because they did not want to be late with their order.

Two weeks after the accident, I started to work as a food courier for Wolt, the main competitor of NetPincér. During my two months of fieldwork, I have not met anyone in person from the company except for other couriers. I signed my contract electronically on a bus from my smartphone, and a GLS courier delivered my uniform to my address. Flóra, a customer service member, activated my profile after I sent her a picture of the uniform. The following morning, on 8th July 2021, I wanted to start working, but the algorithm failed me. It indicated that I should work in another city, not in Budapest. As I submitted my location choice on the application, I had no proof that it was not my fault. The work had not started yet, but the power dynamics of the company had already become evident. *De jure*, I was a self-employed small entrepreneur in an equal partnership with the company. *De facto*, I was employed without the traditional employee rights. In addition, the position of the algorithm was unquestionable regardless of the failure. Algorithmic management is at the core of the platform-based food delivery economy, and it distributes tasks through applications (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). An hour later, Kati, another customer service member, wrote to the IT team, and they changed my location to Budapest. I was finally able to join the thousands of couriers in Budapest.

In the first chapter, I overview the platform economy and its embeddedness in neoliberalism. I detail the food delivery sector and highlight its bicycle segment, especially its subcultural and middle-class features. At the end of the first chapter, I present my research questions. In the second chapter, I focus on Hungary's food delivery platform scene. I introduce the legal framework, the working conditions, and the main dynamics of the food delivery companies. The second chapter presents the actors in the food delivery scene and the companies' points of view. At the end of the chapter, I offer eight portraits of the riders. In the following chapter, I present the research methodology. The fourth chapter explores workers' autonomy over their everyday schedules. In addition, it analyses the relative position of food delivery platform work in the Hungarian labor market and the work trajectory of the riders.

The fifth chapter presents how the (sporting) bodies and pain are socially embedded and how the companies and workers blur the line between delivery labor and sport. The last chapter summarizes the main findings of the thesis and outlines potential directions for further research.

Chapter one: The Industry

1. The platform economy

"Earn money whenever you want to", "You can be free and flexible at the same time.", "You decide how much you earn". If one visits the website of the food delivery company Wolt for potential couriers, one finds such messages (Wolt, n.d. a). "One of the biggest benefits of Wolt's platform is freedom", states the general introductory email for new couriers. Flexibility, freedom, and control are central elements of recruitment. Harvey (1989) argues that the condition and mode of production change in every new phase of capitalism, hence its culture. The transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation changed the form and ideology of production. The accelerating accumulation has shaped labor to make it as flexible as possible for the employer by mainstreaming new organizational structures, such as subcontracting and outsourcing. A new time and space compression type has emerged, fitting flexible production needs. Work volatility has become increasingly prevalent, and short-term plans and temporary contracts have become widespread. The outsourcing of the manufacturing plans from the core countries increased the importance of the service sector, where on-demand work is especially normalized. Since employers try minimalizing the risks and responsibilities coming from the unstable economy, their interest shifts them to atypical modes of contracting (Scholz, 2017; van Doorn, 2017), for example, via temporary work agencies, or as in our case, via platforms. The number of full-time jobs decreases, and with that, certain benefits also disappear.

Food delivery work is part of the platform economy. The platform economy concept captures temporary, freelance, and flexible jobs organized via digital platforms. After the 2008 crisis, the emerging mass- and underemployment, austerity policies, and increasing inequality made platform work attractive for the impoverished middle class in the core and some semi-peripheric countries (van Doorn, 2017, p. 900).

The combination of several social, technological, and political-economic preconditions made possible the rise of the platform economy. The technology of platform infrastructure and digital legibility of work provides space for the industry. Cheap technology and mass connectivity enable masses of people to join the platform economy. In addition, new consumer attitudes and preferences emerged, and the demand for platform-mediated services increased (Woodcock & Graham, 2019).

Despite the remarkable amount of competing scholarly views that have emerged about the platform economy, there is a loose consensus about the four principles of the sphere. The platform economy workers have irregular, unsocial work schedules depending on the customers' demands. The workers provide most of the means of production. Most works are paid at a piece rate and organized via platforms (Stewart & Stanford, 2017, p. 421). In addition, platform laborers work more hours for the same income as regular workers on average (Rani et al., 2021). There are severe critiques of the platform economy and increasing literature on the exploitative and precarious working conditions framed as freedom and flexibility (Freytas-Tamura, 2021; Kućinac, 2021; Sang-Hun, 2020; Zhao, 2021). Hence researching the platform economy is important as it introduces new production norms, which affect the whole economy (Cant, 2019). In 2021 in the European Union, an estimated 12 million people work in the platform economy, and 3 million people are 'main platform workers,' which means they work at least 20 hours per week or earn more than 50% of their income from this sector. 2,5% of the working-age population in Hungary did platform work, and 0,4% were main platform workers in the past year (Piasna et al., 2022, p. 15).

Regarding the sudden emergence of the platform economy, many highlight the novelty of the sector (e.g., Prassl, 2018). However, the platform economy is embedded in a protracted political and economic transformation, namely neoliberalism. In Brown's formulation, "Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused

on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.” (Brown, 2003). Harvey (2007) states that neoliberalism promises that the easiest way to achieving human well-being is through individual, entrepreneurial freedom. Neoliberalism advocates – besides privatization, deregulation, free trade, and austerity (Goldstein, 2010) – the flexibilization of the labor market. The global political and economic forces transform the level of the (self)perception of individuals to entrepreneurialism, redefines the individuals as entrepreneurs (Foucault et al., 2008). In entrepreneurship, the individual is their “own capital, producer and source of his earnings” (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 226), replacing the homo oeconomicus, who is just a partner of exchange. Workers become their own exploiters by being the producer and the entrepreneur simultaneously.

As Brenner and Theodore argue, existing neoliberalism is embedded in "national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 349), the economic relations are politically established. Thus, no matter how much the situation of the Hungarian food delivery sector fits into the international theoretical framework, one cannot interpret it without the nation-state, regional and local context.

The institutional framework of the platform economy regulation appears in a wide variety in Hungary. It creates diverse *new institutional fixes* (Peck & Tickell, 1994, cited by Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 356), evolving and contested by the conflict between the emerging and the inherited policy environment. The platform economy works not as a separately defined or regulated area of work (Kun & Rácz, 2019) but as an "innovative" segment of each sector, typically in fields where informality was previously central (Meszmann, 2018, p. 4). Since platform economy workers tend to appear as individual entrepreneurs, the legal environment makes it easier for them to enter the sectors of platform

work. Still, it does not support them in representing their interests. The legal approach of platform work exists in a binary model, i.e., workers are individual entrepreneurs and lack legal labor protection (Makó et al., 2020). Thus, labor costs and risks are individualized and borne by the riders and their household.

2. The food delivery sector

The food delivery industry is one of the most visible sectors of the platform economy, which has contracted thousands of people in the past years in Budapest. The sudden boom of the food delivery platform companies partly stems from the COVID-19 pandemic and Hungary's public spaces and human encounters restrictions. The growing interest in food courier jobs cannot be explained simply by the increasing unemployment rate, especially the massive layoffs in the hospitality industry, which forced the workers to participate in the sector. Firstly, since the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary has had a 2.4% labor shortage (KSH, 2022a). Secondly, the increase in newcomer couriers has continued after the reopening of the hospitality sector (Kiss, 2021).

The thesis focuses on the bike food delivery platform workers in Budapest. This research follows the distinction between platform work subcategories made by Vallas and Schor (2020) to capture the food delivery platform work. As they argue, some platform works such as care work, home repair, ride-hailing, and courier work form a separate category, as they are organized online via platforms but performed offline.

The most widespread method of food delivery is by bicycle. Working as a bike courier requires a smaller capital than being a car or moped courier. However, bike couriers are the most exposed to traffic and weather. Thus, the investigation of bicycle delivery reveals both the most common mode of couriership and the most extreme forms of working conditions in this sector.

Since the post-socialist transition, especially since the 2000s, we can observe the mainstreaming of cycling in Budapest, which has thus become a trendy, eco-conscious, middle-class activity. Several factors can explain the middle-class position. Environmentalist claims were a significant part of the democratic opposition during the regime change in Hungary. Since the beginning of the 1990s, cycling in Budapest has become the project of new social groups. Cycling has become the symbol of an anti-communist, open, Europe-oriented, democratic, and future-oriented aspiration. In the 1990s, foreign, primarily Dutch, funds were available to cycling activists and experts. Cycling was an instrument in a green and healthy city vision, and soon new cycle paths emerged in the capital (Tóth, 2019, p. 55-88). In the 2000s, cycling became mainstream in Budapest. Inspired by the Dutch examples, the bike courier scene was established. Members of the subculture used their bikes as free time activity, and couriers also affected the cycling fashion. This caused further leisure and fashion ramifications. Cycling as an extended family activity or a style has become a common choice for the broader social groups, especially for the middle class (Tóth, 2019, p. 89-118). In addition, several state-funded projects have supported the mainstreaming of cycling in Hungary, such as developing and increasing the cycling infrastructure and the public bicycle scheme in Budapest (MOL Bubi Budapest, 2022).

The subcultural features of bike delivery jobs (Tóth, 2019) have not disappeared with the mainstreaming of cycling and the emergence of platform food delivery companies in Hungary. It could even preserve and evolve its position during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hajtás Pajtás, the oldest cycling delivery company in Hungary, existing since 1993, has creatively adapted to the epidemic situation (Hajtás Pajtás, 2022). Additionally, in March 2020, Gólya Futárszolgálat bike delivery cooperative has been launched (Gólya Presszó, n.d.).

3. Research questions

The paradox of criticizing and still embracing the food delivery sector as a positive work choice is an active feature of the courier community in Hungary. The leading Facebook group of couriers (Futárok - WOLT - Netpincér, 2021) and my preliminary interviews are full of harsh critiques of the delivery companies. However, the delivery workers remain contracted by these firms and proudly perform the common identity of riders.

This research aims to explain the inner paradox of criticizing but still participating in and appreciating the food delivery work. Many questions arise. How do the food delivery workers in Hungary accept, normalize, and justify the precarious working conditions emerging in the ethos of freedom and flexibility? How is it supported by the hegemonic discourse of labor market flexibilization and the platform companies' promulgated imaginary of this work?

Chapter two: Food delivery platform scene in Hungary

There are three active food platform delivery companies in Hungary, Wolt, Foodpanda (previously operating under NetPincér), and Bolt Food. They are fast-growing international companies specializing in the platform economy, yet their diffusion in Hungary followed different paths. NetPincér was initially a Hungarian company founded in 1999 in Budapest and was bought in 2014 by the German Foodpanda company (Gyükeri, 2017). Wolt was founded in Helsinki in 2014 and arrived in Hungary in 2018. Wolt and Foodpanda existed in Hungary before the first lockdown in March 2020 (Pálúr, 2020), and their position has strengthened during the pandemic. Bolt Food, the third company, joined the Hungarian market during the pandemic in April 2020. Bolt was initially a taxi company founded in Estonia, which started Bolt Food in 2019.

These companies contract their workers as "partners" to avoid taxation and obligations. The first form of contracting in Hungary is the category of "item-based tax on small businesses" (*Kisadózó vállalkozások tételes adója, KATA*). As a registered KATA user, a worker pays monthly a fixed amount of tax (134 EUR, or 67 EUR if a student), including social security. In March 2022, more than 595 thousand people registered for KATA in Hungary (KSH, 2022b). For comparison, in March 2022, 4,592 million people were employed, i.e., worked at least one hour per week, was temporarily absent from their job, or received childcare benefit in Hungary (KSH, 2022c). The second form of employment is via temporary work agencies for students and pensioners. Couriers must decide whether to work with bicycles, mopeds, cars, or on foot. The workers bear the cost of the bike, phone, and maintenance.

When I contacted Bence, a manager from one of Hungary's leading food delivery companies, he supplemented the workers' publicly unavailable statistics. Approximately 57% of their couriers are contracted through full-price KATA, 29% with student KATA. 14% work via student work agencies and 1% via pensioner work agencies.

The income from platform work as a percentage of total payment is highly variable (Piasna et al., 2022). The Wolt couriers receive their wages calculated from base fees and distance fees. In some zones, scheduled hours with hourly shifts are also available (Wolt, n.d. b). Foodpanda organizes shifts. Within those, base fees and hourly wages are available (Foodpanda, n.d.). Because of the different fee structures, several couriers work at Wolt and Foodpanda simultaneously with the same KATA account. If someone cannot book suitable or sufficient shifts at Foodpanda, they can always flexibly work via Wolt.

There are several myths about the income of couriers. Clickbait headlines advertise that a courier can earn 700-800 thousand HUF (1800-2100 EUR) (Biró, 2021, Veres, 2020). According to the posts in closed Facebook groups, it is not impossible but not frequent. Some "legends" can earn even a million HUF per month, but it means working from Monday to Sunday, from 8:00 am to midnight and having a minimal personal life.

Admission happens via an online system. In Bence's company, the management is constantly experimenting with the length of the waiting time. At the pandemic's beginning, the maximum waiting time was up to four months. However, most applicants have already found other work during this time, so the management reduced the waiting time, and new applicants are now taken first in the application process. A crucial element of the application is the referral system, which speeds up the process of recruitment. In principle, couriers can only recommend candidates for whom they can take full responsibility. Although there is no retaliation in practice, the model works well, with active couriers offering the company a reliable workforce. When there are fewer orders in a more extended period, the company needs fewer workers, so they hire fewer new ones. The couriers do not have a minimum wage, and their income depends on the number of orders they deliver. When there are fewer orders, couriers try to avoid decreasing their income by recommending fewer acquaintances to be couriers. If there are fewer couriers than orders, the management increases the wages with bonuses.

Labor shortages are an ongoing problem for food delivery companies built on continuous growth. Moreover, couriers turn over quickly, so constant recruitment is needed. The manager says that refugees fleeing the crisis in Ukraine may temporarily solve the labor shortage. There is precedent for refugees working as couriers. The courier company contracts refugees, to whom NGOs help to buy out the KATA, thus getting them legal income.

Due to the shortage of couriers, the quality of training is deteriorating. As couriers reported, there used to be an hour-long interactive personal training, which switched to an online one, then to a 25-minute-long recorded video introduction. Although there has been a formal recruitment test in the past half-year, their results do not count. As the courier slang goes, food delivery companies hire anyone with a pulse. Foodpanda even pays for new couriers. If a courier invites a new one, who works 150 hours, the inviting courier receives 50000 HUF (130 EUR), plus the new courier also gets a voucher of 20000 HUF (52 EUR).

According to Bence, more than ten thousand couriers are registered in the company, while around twenty-five thousand delivery workers are on the country scale. Monthly seven-eight thousand couriers are active, and weekly four-five thousand. Most passive workers treat delivery work as a backup plan. They can always work as couriers and bypass the waiting list with their inactive status if anything goes wrong.

Most couriers work part-time. According to Bence, in March 2022, 13% of the couriers worked at least 36 hours per week, and 23% worked between 20 and 36 hours. This means that more than three-quarters of the couriers at this company work less than half-time. Bence assumed that 27% worked between 10 and 20 hours, and 37% worked less than 10 hours in this company. This trend is in line with EU figures. Delivery work tends to coexist and supplement other, not platform-based precarious incomes (Piasna et al., 2022, p. 42).

According to Bence, around 80% of couriers are male. This rate is above the EU average, where 59% of delivery platform workers are male (Piasna et al., 2022, p. 27). The

core of the workers are 30-40 years old men, who are changing their careers, so they need rapidly temporary jobs. At first sight, it would be logical for them to apply for unemployment benefits. However, the Hungarian state is not generous with unemployed people, as they receive the 60% of their previous income for no longer than 90 days. So, if someone loses or quits their job, they immediately start looking for a new one.

The rapid fluctuation trend resonates with the EU average in the delivery sector. 48% of the delivery workers started their job last year (Piasna et al., 2022, p. 20). However, Bence warned about the generalization of the workers since the primarily working people are the most visible, which makes invisible other couriers. Interestingly the company does not have data on gender and age distribution.

The population of couriers is stratified. The beginners can be usually recognized from their orange, substandard quality bikes rented from Donkey Republic company, which initially specialized in tourists. In line with Piasna's and Drahoukoupil's representative online survey research (Piasna & Drahoukoupil, 2021), delivery workers with lower social positions and more economic dependency on the platform can enjoy fewer flexible conditions of the work. Bence also confirms that food delivery is most rewarding when couriers do other work with the KATA contract. This way, they pay a fixed tax while working more jobs. In addition to shared KATA, the courier job is also financially advantageous as a student job.

Wolt couriers in Budapest do not have concrete shifts of work. Based on the narrative of the newsletter, it increases the rate of freedom. Couriers can theoretically work any time from 8 am until midnight. Orders organize the work, so lunch and dinner times are popular. Wolt motivates its couriers to work during busy periods (such as lunch, dinner times, and stormy weather) with frequent chat messages through the app and bonuses if this method does not work. It is common to wait to receive the first order. The anger of waiting for work is an active feature of the courier communities. The waiting, uncompensated work time is a core

attribute of the platform work, supporting keeping wages lower (Pulignano & Piasna, 2021). Bence's company's food delivery workers spend 20-30% of their online time waiting. At Wolt, in the absence of hourly wages, the couriers usually do not spend time together, as they are rivals. The farther the other courier is, the more likely to receive the order.

In contrast, online communication is highly active in Facebook groups. The official communication of Wolt by newsletters strengthens the stratification of workers by stating that hanging out during the waiting jeopardizes the chance to get an order, and couriers should not believe "rumors" from common Facebook groups. Wolt has stated that they have not contracted too many couriers, so everyone has enough opportunity to work.

Besides newsletters, companies also use other methods to prevent criticism of couriers. Foodpanda uses the institution of captains. In Budapest, there are three captains. In every other city, there is one. Captains are the link and the conflict zone between the couriers and the office. The couriers receive the captain's phone number and can call them if they have a problem. The captains filter the complaints and discuss them with the management every two weeks. Initially, couriers elected the captains. Since the boom of delivery companies, the "fleet" is not a community anymore, the workers rarely know each other, and now the captains are appointed. The captains receive some plus salary, and they are always in the first working group, so they have the privilege of choosing from the shifts first.

Still, there are problems that neither newsletters, bonuses, nor captains can help. Using a courier application is mentally and physically demanding, as it dictates a breakneck pace. The app shows how much time one must deliver the food. Usually, it is an unrealistic expectation, as the app sometimes even shows minus minutes. The goal is to complete delivery as fast as possible, maximize the salary, and adapt to the speed generated by the application. The tempo leads to high rates of accidents since it is self-evident to disregard the basic rules of Budapest traffic. The companies do not pay attention to the field of movement, as couriers do

not receive any information or training about the official or unofficial rules of the road. Wolt used to organize facultative training for couriers, but it is no longer available.

Besides the entrepreneurial and social features, cycling also brings some pride to the workers. It resonates with the two modes of trying to escape everyday life: festivals and cultural revolutions (Lefebvre, 2014). Compared to other physical labor, bike delivery endows the workers with the prestige of the urban bicycle culture and visibility, and it is even framed as a leisure activity. The recruitment of food delivery companies builds on the critique of white-collar jobs and highlights the resistant features of the bicycle subculture. The Facebook and Instagram advertisements position bike delivery work as something advantageous.



"Test yourself as a courier."

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Jelentkezz és csatlakozz a legfittebb futár csapathoz!

**TEDD MAGAD PRÓBÁRA
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"Go on an adventure, join NetPincer as a courier."

In addition to the prestige of the urban bicycle culture, working as a courier is also accepted as a middle-class activity. There is an increasing number of advertisements where non-delivery-related, well-known brands promote themselves with cycling or food delivery.

Culinary culture under COVID-19 restrictions was strongly linked to food delivery. That is how during the epidemic restrictions, the leading liberal weekly magazine *Magyar Narancs* gastronomic review included analyzing the quality of the food and the quality of the delivery and packaging.



“My immune system can take the strain! Béres Csepp Extra is Hungary’s number one immune booster.”

1. The riders

I will offer eight portraits of riders in the subsequent paragraphs. Together they provide an apt but not representative overview of the food delivery workers.

Alexandra says she applied to Wolt as she was disappointed in capitalism and the idea that she must spend a third of her life with wage labor. Earning just enough to live off was an exciting idea for her. Just before COVID-19, then twenty-four years old, Alexandra predicted the boom of food delivery platforms in her marketing thesis. She worked for four months as a courier with student KATA until the fall of 2020. Alexandra delivered food three times a week, for four-five hours daily, during the lunch or dinner period. She finished it because of the harsh weather, and she started to work in two companies. Alexandra comes from a middle-class background, so she said she did not work for money only because she liked cycling and had lots of free time. Now she studies Computational and Cognitive Neuroscience MSc and works via a student agency.

Just like Alexandra, Anna was looking for new paths in her life. She worked in HR and administrative positions for more than a decade, primarily with temporary work agencies. Three years ago, at age thirty-three, she quit because the job was tedious. Anna began to learn a new profession and wanted to initiate her own business. Working at Wolt with KATA is a temporary solution because she does not want to do nine to five office work anymore, but she cannot live off her business yet. Alexandra delivers food five times a week, four hours daily in the lunch period. She works other temporary jobs besides that, like working as a bartender. Many of these jobs are on weekends. She loves Wolt that she can have a day off whenever she wants. However, Anna hopes to live off only her business within a year.

Unlike Anna, Béla plans to courier work in the longer term. He is twenty-six years old and has been working as a full-time courier at Wolt for a year. Béla lives with his parents, so

he must pay only for his food and KATA. In the beginning, Béla worked nine and a half hours per day. Since he has a girlfriend, he adapts the work schedule to her to spend as much time together as possible. Like his father, Béla wants to switch to being a taxi driver in five years. As he says, it is the same algorithm system as food delivery, just for more money, albeit with more cost.

Like Béla, Csongor's leading source of income is courier work. Csongor is approximately thirty years old and lives in an outer district of Budapest. His original occupation is a real estate agent. Csongor narrates as downward mobility that he works for Foodpanda weekly for 30-35 hours since October 2020. Csongor takes weekends seriously. After Friday at 3 pm, he parties, goes on dates and works around his house. Csongor constantly multitasked in his room during our online interview, and he did not stop for a minute. As he noted, he has no free time. Csongor must learn how to repair the car since it is cheaper than taking it to a mechanic. Additionally, he must do administrative tasks and cook in advance for the whole week because it is more affordable. "I use my time economically. I spend the time usefully while I go to work by train. I schedule my weekends with things to do, but I can never do everything I write down. It seems realistic, but it is always scattered, gets out of hand, and something comes up. I try to sleep when I can sit down. On the way home, I read the messages on Tinder, and I answer them." Csongor stated that he is not a workaholic because he also has free time when he can do the essential things. As he notes, life is not about chasing money. It does not make sense if his personal life falls apart. After ending the interview, he nervously asked me to repeat that I would not share anything with Foodpanda.

Like Csongor, Flóra is always doing something. Flóra is twenty-four years old and started to work as a courier in the Netherlands because her Erasmus fund was not enough for housing. She has been working for Wolt since March 2020 because she had more free time due to online courses. Flóra works three hours per day, during the lunch or dinner period. However,

Flóra sometimes feels awful during her free time because of the urge to work, but she does not need the money. She lives with her parents only a couple hundred meters from where the courier injured his head. Flóra is an ambitious photographer, currently doing her MA and two freelance jobs. She imagines her career as not making a living from one thing. Due to this, she likes courier work as it is a different kind of work than photography. Nevertheless, the two areas are intertwined. A recurring game on Flóra's Instagram is posting a selfie asking her followers to guess what food she delivers.

Like Flóra, Jamal is also active online about delivery work. Jamal is the only interviewee I did not anonymize because it is his stage name. He hosts a popular YouTube channel, A Courier's Life, where he uploads videos of footage from delivery work and bicycle races. The channel has almost thirty thousand subscribers. His most visited video about a crash of a police car has nearly a million views. Jamal is twenty-eight years old, works as a bike messenger and food delivery worker for a decade. He is a captain at Foodpanda. It is very variable how much Jamal works per week, depending on the bonuses. If there is a reasonable fee, he works up to 60 hours a week. Jamal notes that it would not be possible to maintain his long-distance relationship, participate in bicycle races, and work with the YouTube channel if he had a less flexible job. In addition, Jamal praises Foodpanda because it is his first job where he can sleep enough. Finally, he does not have to start working at 8 am. "My life has changed completely. I feel so much better that I can finally sleep 7-8 hours a day without forcing myself to bed at 11 o'clock."

Like Jamal, Zsanett also had more important things in her life than delivery work. Zsanett is twenty-nine years old, and she works as a graphic designer. Zsanett was a full-time courier at NetPincér for four months from February 2021; she planned it as a temporary solution. She did not have a planned schedule of delivery work because it depended on the flow of developing her portfolio. On average, Zsanett worked five times four hours per week.

Compared to Zsanett, Mihály was less satisfied with food delivery platform companies. Mihály is twenty-two years old and graduated with Sociology BA. He worked two weeks for Wolt in 2018. Back in that time, Wolt organized the work into shifts. Mihály usually worked three hours daily to complete the money he got from his parents. Nevertheless, he had terrible experiences with Wolt, the dispatcher was too authoritarian, and the traffic was too dangerous. Since January 2022, Mihály has been working at the Gólya Futárszolgálat bike delivery cooperative. Although the wage is lower than at Wolt or Foodpanda, it is a stable position with a fixed schedule, and all the members are involved in the decision-making. As Mihály notes, in Gólya Futárszolgálat, the atmosphere is also better due to the cooperative organization and the subcultural features. Mihály is always preparing to be scolded as they did at Wolt, but it never happens. These riders will surface in the discussion in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter three: Methodology

I divide the research into three approaches: participant observation, discourse analysis, and semi-structured interviews. A significant advantage of participant observation is that I got to know the inner logic of riding, the couriers' working conditions, dilemmas, and opinions in detail. I worked as a bicycle courier at Wolt in July and August 2021 in Budapest. Although working as a food delivery courier is mostly a lonely job, there were several situations where riders had a chance to create discussions. Joining the conversations while waiting for the orders to get ready or for the algorithm to give a task in the uniform granted a level of intimacy and access that I would not have otherwise.

Although I did not work every day during the two months of the fieldwork, it was always with me in muscle soreness, tiredness, and the constant urge to work. Being the courier stayed with me even after the fieldwork. Whether I am in Vienna or Budapest, I feel automatic solidarity with the couriers and react unconsciously to the ring of a new Wolt task.

Like many who want to do a summer job, I fit into the field as a 23-year-old university student. However, I did food delivery as a researcher, which is a significant difference. I delivered food out of curiosity, alongside my daily routine, not for money. Hence there were specific layers of the reality of food delivery that I had no access to, even when I did the same job. For instance, I did not gain experience of how a full-time courier creates her work schedule or the physical effects of cycling in Budapest the entire day. I could reach these hidden segments of courier work through the Facebook groups and the interviews.

The communication of the couriers happens mostly on social media. While there are open Facebook groups for all the couriers, there are also closed groups for the workers of the same food delivery companies. Being an active courier has given me access to the closed forums full of personal experiences, screenshots of texting with support services, advice about riding, opinions, critiques, and debates about food delivery companies. The discourse analysis

of these Facebook groups aims to explore the formation of arguments and discussions about working conditions.

The third method is semi-structured interviews. I have conducted eight online and offline interviews with active and non-active bike Wolt and Foodpanda couriers working in Budapest, four women and four men. The youngest was twenty-two years old, and the oldest was thirty-six. I contacted them during my fieldwork, in a bicycle store, via online platforms and acquaintances. I have used these modes to gain access to as heterogenous interviewees as possible. It was uncomplicated to find them. The interviewees were keen to share their experiences, as courier work was relative novel work and experience in their lives.

The interviews lasted between one and two hours. In these interviews, I have learned how the couriers position themselves in their work, what are their opinion about the "freedom" and "flexibility" offered by the delivery companies, and how they accept, normalize, and justify for themselves the precarious working conditions. Besides that, I had two semi-structured interviews with a manager from one of Hungary's leading food delivery companies. I anonymized all my interviews except for one.

The authors of the emerging literature on platform economy primarily draw on policy reviews, interviews, and survey data. This thesis contributes to the scholarship by extending these methods with participant observation and access to closed online groups.

Chapter four: Autonomy over everyday schedule and relative freedom

"It is, therefore, excessively in interest of every mill-owner to organize his moral machinery on equally sound principles with his mechanical, for otherwise he will never command the steady hands, watchful eyes, and prompt co-operation, essential to excellence of product. (...) There is, in fact, no case to which the Gospel truth, "Godliness is great gain" is more applicable than to the administration of an extensive factory."

E. P. Thompson (1963, p. 361-362)

"I have spent years cultivating a reputation as someone who sleeps with bike messengers or better." (Del Tredici & Holland, 2014)

1. Everyday life, relative freedom, and entrepreneurship

The promise of freedom and independence makes the platform economy desirable for many workers (Schüßler et al., 2021). To understand the dynamics of this desire, this analysis relies on Henri Lefebvre's notion of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014), Wendy Brown's (1995) theory of relative freedom, and Foucault's concept of entrepreneurship (Foucault et al., 2008). These theories interpret and explain the social consequences of the neoliberal, flexible accumulation period. Hence, they support the statement that flexible accumulation is a shift in work organization, including the platform economy. Yet, none of them refer directly to platform economies.

These theories developed to interpret post–World War II Western social order shall be reconsidered in contemporary Central and Eastern European contexts. The second half of the 20th century in Western Europe coincided with the establishment of the welfare states and the

spread of consumerism, which the authors reflect abundantly. However, in the semi-peripheric Hungary during the COVID pandemic, these trends are not emphatic. Instead, contemporary Hungary is mainly described as a workfare state (Lakner & Tausz, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state management of the crisis reinforced this tendency when the government subsidies favored employers over workers (Czirfusz, 2021).

Building on and extending Marx's theory on alienation, Lefebvre argues that in capitalism, alienation does not belong only to the time of formal wage labor but is present in every aspect of everyday life, even in leisure. Therefore, to understand the nature of capitalist systems, one must analyze the ordinary structure, "the homogeneous, the repetitive, the fragmentary in everyday life" (Lefebvre, 1988, p. 87). Lefebvre developed the idea of the structure of ordinariness with the notion of rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2013).

Lefebvre presents two modes in which people strive for secession from the rhythm of everyday life: festivals and cultural revolution. Revolution in culture aspires to "create a style of life" (Elden, 2004, p. 118). However, festivals are different but not separate from everyday life, just a more intense form (Lefebvre, 2014).

However, just like Lefebvre's theory, the concept of freedom cannot be interpreted without its context because it is formed concerning the local sense of un-freedom. "Initial figurations of freedom are inevitably reactionary in the sense of emerging in reaction to perceived injuries or constraints of a regime from within its own terms", as Wendy Brown (1995, p. 7) states. Along this line, I argue that only a deep understanding of the freedom concept of riders framed by local economic, social, and political powers can lead to the explanation of the tension in their working conditions. From this point of view, the couriers working in precarious conditions are not passive actors but active participants in the transforming hegemony of work (Forgacs, 2000, Sopranzetti, 2017) who aspire to their freedom. Still, the riders' pursuit of autonomy is not just a simple characteristic of the work

organization of the neoliberal platform economy but a vividly stressing paradox. As Narotzky and Besnier (2014, p. 7.) formulate, "the tension between moral frameworks that stress dependency and those that underscore autonomy underlies contemporary practices of making a living."

The notion of freedom is strongly intertwined with the flexibility of work time in the platform economy. The time-culture of wage labor in post-industrial society shifts towards a new norm, where unpredictability is standard. Consequently, the former routines of the time division loosen, and atypical working times (weekends and nights) tend to strengthen (O'Carroll, 2015).

The actors of the platform economy frame the transformation of the work time as an individual decision, which is an advantage of entrepreneurship. "Platforms facilitate entrepreneurship and self-employment. This is a key feature of the platforms' discourse, as they argue that earners can be micro-entrepreneurs and architects of their fates" (Ravenelle, 2019, cited by Schüßler et al., 2021, p. 1223). The (self)perception as entrepreneurs offers a particular pride to the workers (Foucault et al., 2008), which eases the explicit power dynamics, the "control which drives many platform owners and managers" (Schüßler et al., 2021, p. 1217.). As Thompson (1963, p. 361-362) has written regarding the making of the English working class, the creation of a stable moral system is as important as the means of production in an industry.

Although the actors all exist within a capitalist, neoliberal flexibilized environment, food delivery platform workers have heterogeneous preferences (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021). Based on interviews and surveys with couriers in Belgium, Piasna and Drahokoupil have found remarkable differences in preferences about schedule flexibility, and these divergences are due to "different experiences of autonomy and control in platform work" (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021, p. 1398-1399). Workers with weaker positions towards the platform and more dependent

on platform labor are less able to enjoy the advantages of flexibility (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021, p. 1416). So, this is the freedom to accommodate the differential bargaining power of the workers freely.

2. Lefebvre goes East

When I asked my interviewees about their opinion about the flexibility of the work schedule, they were conscious of its limitations. An evident limit is that lunch and dinner times are financially more beneficial with higher fees. The companies also increase the fees when fewer couriers are available due to harsh weather or public holidays. Still, they supported the idea of flexibility in food delivery work. All of them have other essential activities besides courier work. Béla and Jamal prioritize their private life, and Flóra and Anna build up their businesses. My interviewees appreciated the idea of overseeing the structure of their own life. These couriers value that they can control and modify their everyday lives, the rhythm of ordinariness. This tendency fits Lefebvre's theory on everyday life and rhythmanalysis. Csongor, Zsanett, Mihály, and the authors of several Facebook posts used the freedom of flexibility to survive, working multiple jobs, or doing care work. Working as a platform courier is the first job where they could prioritize their reproductive life or more easily coordinate many flexible jobs.

After following several posts in Facebook groups where people share their life stories, I have seen Janka's. Janka wrote proudly that as a single mother, after doing a full-time job as an accountant, she still works as a Wolt courier nineteen hours per week. She was not available for an interview. "I haven't been able to go on a date for months. I don't have time for other activities." After sending the questions via Messenger, Janka answered by voice message. Initially, she started to work as a courier with her car to save for financial security. But in the meantime, her car broke down, so Janka had to buy a new one. Now she works to pay her car loan and not starve at the end of the month.

The flexible work schedule of platform delivery work means relative freedom compared to the local sense of un-freedom to the workers (Brown, 1995). The flexibility of the delivery work schedule is rare in the Hungarian job market. My interviewees, who have other jobs or projects besides food delivery, can harmonize them. Anna can have a free day if she is more tired of working in pubs or film shootings. Flóra can attend her university courses and work on her photography career while not worrying about the timing of food delivery. Zsanett could also prioritize her graphic design career while ensuring that her primary income is stable. Even those who work full-time, like Jamal, Béla, or Csongor, can shape their schedule far better than they do in a non-flexible schedule job. As Béla formulated: "I tailor my work to my life. I go to work when it suits me, when there is no other program. I live my life now and work in the in-between time. And I think that's the biggest positive of the job." The flexible food delivery schedule is "family-friendly", as he formulates. The advantage of flexible working hours appears clear in contrast with the shift-based lower-class jobs. Previously Béla worked in the hospitality sector and in a gas station, where there were unsocial shifts. "The gas station was 0-24, so you had to go there for a 12-hour day or night shift. There was a schedule, and it was written, but if someone was off sick, it changed. You could not count on it. It was not office work from eight to four."

Flóra, Csongor, and Janka have chosen delivery work for financial security to secure their livelihoods besides their intellectual job as photographer, real estate agent, and accountant. Based on the emerging literature on food delivery platforms, this work is especially desirable to the somehow marginalized parts of society, like (un)documented immigrants (Freytas-Tamura 2020) or students (Cant, 2019). In contrast, in Hungary, middle-class members also find food delivery work as a solution to balance other jobs, reproductive tasks, and leisure by overseeing the schedule of their lives and their income. Half of the interviewees already had a university degree when they started their current courier job. For Alexandra,

Zsanett, and Anna, food delivery means a recess in trajectory while they can figure out their life goals and careers.

Besides that, courier work requires different skills than intellectual jobs, which is a relief from the daily routine. Csongor noted: "I delivered in the morning. It was good for me because it was a bit of a switch-off. It is often stressful when you focus on the real estate business. When I get stressed, I switch off by cycling, doing different work, and there is money to be made." Delivery work appeared as a challenger intellectual career in the case of Alexandra and Jamal. As Alexandra noted: "I am proud that I did it. Fresh out of university, I said I would be a bike courier. Some people said, "Don't be a bike messenger with your brain and qualifications. So, it was a bit of pride for me to step out of the expectation that I would work in marketing. Instead, I went after my head." Jamal has already figured himself out, but he also met family expectations. "I studied computer programming at university. My family wants me to have an immediate option B in addition to being a courier. To take at least one programming course". Challenging intellectual careers resonates with the notion of the cultural revolution (Lefebvre, 2014), as it symbolizes secession from the everyday routine and the planned and expected career trajectories.

3. Relative freedom in the Hungarian job market

Delivery workers accept, normalize, and justify the precarious working conditions of delivery platforms. Primarily this happens via embracing the idea of entrepreneurship (Foucault et al., 2008). My interviewees internalized the idea of working as individual entrepreneurs and were proud of it. However, the praise of entrepreneurship does not exist without context but fits the couriers' trajectory paths. The other side of the coin is the disappointment, humiliation, and anger toward employment jobs. All my interviewees had previous jobs, and they found couriers work well compared to them. I understand it as relative freedom. I argue that working for a delivery platform can be perceived as relative freedom even without questioning the critique

of these platforms. The following paragraphs compare the interviewees' burdensome experiences in the Hungarian job market to delivery work.

None of my interviewees believed the official mantra of the companies that they are equal partners. They felt the hierarchy in every minute of work when given a job through an algorithm they could not control (Cant, 2019). But at least they do not have a direct boss, especially not bossing them. The motif of abuse of authority frequently appeared in the interviews from jobs of varying prestige. Anna and Flóra had such experiences with intellectual works. Anna quit her administrative job due to abuse of power. "In my last job, I had an awful experience with my direct manager. It was a huge relief that there are no malicious people. They do not tell me what to do, and it is up to me". Anna contradicted herself, as she later talked in detail about how humiliating restaurant workers and customers can speak to her. Still, at least they are not her superior. Zsanett worked in an illustrious NGO previously as a graphic designer. "It seemed like a wonderful job at first, but with a psychopathic boss. I fought with my boss at one time. And impulsively, I quickly went looking for a job, and then I felt very heroic for standing up for my principles and starting to deliver."

The power hierarchy is also vital in the hospitality industry. Flóra worked in cafes, restaurants, and Burger King before choosing Wolt. As she describes, working in the hospitality sector meant that her superior decided when to have lunch breaks or even sit down, which has overridden Flóra's biological needs. "This and the stress caused me problems, and it gave me reflux and constant stomach cramps. I like it when there is no boss to direct me." Flóra highlights that she can eat and go home whenever she wants with delivery work.

Béla also had terrible experiences in the hospitality sector and the gas station where he used to work. However, Béla points out that this feeling has older roots, namely from the school system. He always had a problem with the institutional rules, whether the authority was a teacher in the school or a boss at work. "I prefer to work alone. In school, why don't they give

us the material? I will do it myself. Why do I have to go in here? I feel the same way at work. I like in Wolt that no one is forcing me to do anything. You are not completely without responsibility here. But it gives you the feeling that you are not taking orders from the boss there. And I prefer this kind of thing."

Nevertheless, discomfort towards the superior is not the only reason the interviewees shifted to work alone. As Hochschild (2012) writes in *The Managed Heart*, emotional labor is an increasingly essential crucial part of work. The emotional labor cost is rarely recognized and leads to estrangement from personal feelings. There is less such thing in food delivery. Interviewees enjoy that they must only do mandatory emotional labor and socialization when they pick up the order and hand it over to the consumer. Béla is tired of working with people, mainly because of the hospitality sector. Alexandra noted that it is suitable for her mental health to be with just herself. Anna formulated most punctually the critique of emotional labor in other jobs. "What I like about it is that there's just enough interaction. So that it is not completely lonely, but there are no unnecessary connections that would take energy away." Still, access to social but emotionally not demanding further jobs depends on the individual's social position. Alexandra's current job is connected to sailing, which is her hobby. In addition, she feels that her colleagues and customers are similar people to her. Alexandra says that it "adds to life quality and the enjoyment of my work, instead of taking away from it." Mihály has heard about Gólya Futárszolgálat from channels of the leftist subculture he has spent the last years. Due to his connections, he now works in a comfortable work environment.

Besides psychological factors, there are also financial benefits of food delivery compared to other jobs in Hungary. Working as a platform courier can offer competitive hourly rates compared to other options. Mihály has chosen Wolt because it offered 1400 HUF (3,7 EUR) per hour compared to the average student job, which paid around 1000 HUF (2,6 EUR) per hour. Mihály worked via a student agency, so he did not pay his KATA, but the agency

detracted a certain percentage. As he noted, platform delivery workers do not want to join the Gólya Futárszolgálat bike delivery cooperative because it offers a lower income than the platforms. Jamal previously worked as a bike messenger, but those companies offered 110 thousand HUF (290 EUR) and 140 thousand HUF (370 EUR) per month. In Foodpanda, he earns more than ever before. The income at Foodpanda also exceeds the wages of Hajtás Pajtás, the elite of the bicycle subculture. Béla points out that the payment of Wolt also surpasses the wages in the hospitality sector and the gas station. "In Budapest, I think it's difficult to live off such basic jobs. If I can get paid at Wolt, I do not care about other things. We just got a raise. If we had a cut, I would be more interested in why. But they only increased the fees since I have been here. I do not have any reason to complain".

The critique of the food delivery platforms often focuses on the physical demand and the dangerous traffic. While recognizing these aspects, one must also acknowledge that other segments of the Hungarian labor market often offer worse physical conditions. Jamal noted that he does not feel extra fatigue after delivery compared to when he worked in a warehouse and stood for eight hours. He was even more tired then since his legs were not moving, and the lack of blood circulation caused extra tiredness in his muscles. The short and thin Csongor was used to do plasterboard installation in Denmark, which was more demanding than food delivery. "We did a couple of months there, it was cruel because we worked from morning till night, but we were well paid.". Csongor supplemented his income with cigarette smuggling in addition to construction. Anna believes that bartending requires more physical strength than food delivery. Zsanett also highlighted the physical side of bartending and how it changed her biological rhythm. Béla spoke about how his previous job had physically taken its toll on him. "Standing for twelve hours in a gas station was much worse [than food delivery]. When I started, on the way home, I collapsed, cried, sat down on the floor, could not walk, and my feet

hurt. It did not build me physically, it just broke me down because it is painful and tiring, but it does not build muscle or keep you fit. It just hurts."

Contracting workers as partners and not employees is another reason to criticize the platform delivery sector. As Béla formulated, he is his own slave. However, hiring workers as KATA entrepreneurs and not employees is common in Hungary anyway. Csongor could not remember the last time when he was officially contracted as an employee. For instance, this happened to him in a construction company, but he did not even have flexible working hours, as he has now at Foodpanda. Zsanett also had disappointing experiences with KATA contracts. Her current employer advertised her job as a full-time one. However, this job is project-based, which comes with increased uncertainty, and as a KATA worker, Zsanett does not have any legal basis against it. "Half of my friends are contracted via KATA as office workers".

Being a food delivery platform worker means the lack of traditional employee rights, such as minimum wage, pension, paid holidays, and safety regulations (Goods et al., 2019). In short, the lack of state protection. When I asked the couriers about it, they described how the state had neglected them. Many of them started food delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Hungarian state supported the interests of employers, which caused mass unemployment waves. When I asked Csongor about the lack of pension, he mentioned the case of the mandatory private pension system that the Hungarian state took control of in 2011. The case of the mandatory private pension system has caused significant mistrust in the government among the approximately three million people who have paid for it. The government spent almost 3000 billion HUF (8 billion EUR) to reduce public debt. Csongor noted: "We have seen what has happened to the mandatory private pension system, and we will see what kind of money pensioners must live off when we get there. Many things are changing. It is yours if you save for yourself and not in some pension fund. I do not think we should count on the state

because we have no idea what it will be then.” Compared to this, food delivery companies are correct because they pay as much as they promise.

Although workers were aware of their relatively advantageous position in the Hungarian labor market in many respects, they formulated critiques of the sector. Much of the criticism is that couriers are at the bottom of the industry hierarchy. Many customers are difficult to reach, and they and the restaurant staff tend not to treat couriers as equals, as Anna, Zsanett, and Flóra complain. If the restaurant makes a mistake with the order, it is often the courier who is blamed for it, and the power imbalance makes it difficult for the courier to stand up for what is right. Jamal made a video on his YouTube channel to show how often the McDonald’s soft drinks spill out. We met the evening before Jamal posted the video, and he was excited to see how the audience would receive it. He got a clear response since Foodpanda made him take down the video. Couriers state that the companies spend their resources on expansion and not improving the existing framework. As a result, the app often works poorly, and the bureaucracy is slow. In addition, the workers' income depends on the number of orders and couriers. In highlighted periods, they can earn well because of bonuses. But if there are not enough orders for some reason or the company does not give a bonus, workers lose control of their income, which leads to frustration and financial vulnerability. As Flóra noted, "sometimes I am ready to work, but there is no order, but there's a courier on every corner. Then I get so angry and upset, and I am mad at everyone." The lack of bonuses is not just a reaction to the local market. Jamal explained that when Foodpanda's owner, Delivery Hero, pulled out of Germany, it created a loss that the company had to gain back from other markets, such as Hungary. This is one of the reasons why there are fewer bonuses for Foodpanda workers.

Still, workers rationally chose food delivery platforms because it is relatively more tolerable than their previous work experience. They are not naive or under the influence of

false consciousness. On the contrary, they are aware of the sector's advantages and disadvantages and choose it deliberately (Sopranzetti, 2017).

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that food delivery workers embrace their work since the flexible work schedule helps them organize their wage labor around their reproductive work, additional jobs, and leisure, even if the extent of this depends on social position. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory on everyday life, I explained how the flexible work schedule enables the couriers to oversee the structure of their lives. I argued that the freedom of flexible work is successful in a semi-peripheric context, where workers use it to harmonize several responsibilities, such as additional jobs, reproductive labor, and sometimes leisure. Using flexibility depends on the workers' social and economic position and the hours spent on delivery work. The prestige of entrepreneurship and the urban bicycle culture are essential parts of how couriers accept, justify, and normalize this job. In addition, delivery work is positioned in the Hungarian labor market and carries many features that I analyzed as relative freedom (Brown, 1995). Despite that, couriers criticize their hierarchical and unpredictable working conditions.

After analyzing the schedule flexibility of food delivery, and its position in the Hungarian labor market, the subsequent chapter highlights the bodily conditions of food delivery, and along this line, it explores the limits of flexibility and freedom.

Chapter five: Embodied labor

"PB [Pierre Bourdieu] was saying the other day that he's afraid that I'm letting myself be seduced by my object but, boy, *if he only knew*: I'm already way beyond seduction!"

(Wacquant, 2004, p. 4)

"Anyone over the age of fifty who wakes up without pain is dead."

1. Body and Pain

The second motto of this chapter comes from aunt Janka, a famous character of the Hungarian Szomszédok [Neighbours] TV series, which ran in the 1980s and 1990s, portraying the life of a panel housing estate in Budapest. Aunt Janka's opinion points out how a healthy body is an insufficient privilege and not often granted to ordinary people. As Donna Haraway accurately captures it, there is no such thing as a natural body "existing outside the self-creating process called human labour" (Haraway, 1991, p. 10), and "the universalized natural body is the gold standard of hegemonic social discourse" (Haraway, 1990, p. 146). For a long time, the so-called Cartesian dualism (Descartes, 2013) dominated the literature on the body, which states the divide between extended substance and thinking substance, that is between the body and the mind. Nowadays, the collapse of the body-mind duality is undisputed, and their interconnectedness tends to be analyzed together (Csordas, 2002). Since the 1970s, the body has become a central topic of social sciences. (Csordas, 1994). Scholars do not explore the body as a natural entity but as "an entirely problematic notion" (Vernant, 1989, p. 10, cited by Csordas, 1994) deeply embedded in social relations and particular historical contexts (Csordas, 1994). Alternatively, as Foucault (2012) formulates, the body is a political object, and technologies of power and social institutions shape that.

Lefebvre (2013) developed the idea of rhythmanalysis. He argues that there are two contrasting rhythms, a cyclic one that comes from nature, while social practices create a linear one. The latter is connected to capitalist production and overwrites the cyclic rhythms and

natural needs such as hunger or sleep. The body is the entry point to rhythm analysis because this is where one feels the rhythm most vividly. The body is a metronome, an entry point to understanding social practices formed in the capitalist system (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 29).

Social inequalities are particularly present in sporting bodies since they reproduce and reward traditional physicality and gender norms. (DePauw, 1997, p. 420). During physical exercise, a person objectifies the values associated with the activities and manages her socially disciplined body. Training is a cultural product (Howe, 2011), and sport is one of the main sites where one masters her habitus (Blake, 1996, p. 23).

Ignoring pain is an essential part of elite sports' ethos (Howe, 2011). Neglecting pain contradicts its purpose: to warn the person that something harmful is happening to her body. Nevertheless, pain is relative, hence must be located within class, gender, ethnicity relations, and prior experiences with pain. It "may be totally unrelated to the physical parameters" (Tracey, 2005 cited by Jackson, 2011, p. 371-372). Pain is a lonely feeling, as an individual cannot share her experience. Hence, the handling can be more complicated than the pain itself. Sporting pain is even more complex due to hormone production. While doing sport, the body produces endorphins and, under dangerous conditions, adrenalin. These exercise hormones cause happiness and euphoria and reduce pain.

The consideration of bicycle courier work as a sport is a part of the industry's discourse. The recruitment advertising, like the posters presented before, shows bike delivery as a sports challenge. These ads highlight delivery work's advantageous and training features and hide the exhaustive reality. Reid (2019) journalist cites Jane Wake, a fitness guru, who argues that delivery work is good for the whole body, improving "agility, speed, upper and lower body strength". Reid (2018) even titled his article about his subjective experiences of delivery work, "Confessions of a Deliveroo rider: get fit by delivering fast food." The intentional blurring between sport and work also appears at the management level. The food delivery company,

Deliveroo's head of communications, stated that many couriers work this job partly because of the health benefits. However, the physical reality of courier work is more complex than simply idealizing it as cardio activity.

2. Food delivery is physical labor

Before entering the field, I set two rules for myself: to take care of my and my bike's safety. A couple of hours later, I failed both when I cycled between cars in the dangerous Rákóczi Street to arrive in time at McDonald's. In my ten years of cycling experience in Budapest, I avoided that street, but riding for Wolt overrode my previous norms. I started my fieldwork on the warmest day of summer 2021 when drinking enough water was an essential task for every courier. The restaurants sometimes helped by offering free water but sometimes made everything more difficult by not allowing the use of the toilet. Before even starting courier work, my parents voiced their concern about how the fieldwork would affect my health. The danger of courier work was evident to them. The news reported fatal accidents involving couriers several times that summer. Although these accidents were rare, delivery work had a severe and constant physical effect on me. Permanent tiredness appeared, which lasted even days after work. My body has changed, and my legs have become more robust. Previously enjoyable physical activities such as going on long walks, boxing training, and recreational cycling have become arduous. Riding has become a struggle with my own body to urge myself to better physical performance, even with the help of painkillers.

However, I was still in a privileged position as a researcher. In theory, I could always have stopped working if the circumstances were too dangerous. Why did this not happen very often? Firstly, due to my curiosity, I wanted to experience as much as possible of courier work, not just the version when I am well-rested, and the weather is nice. Secondly, I have become slightly addicted to courier work. The loss of control is not an individual experience. Flóra also noted her addiction to delivery work. We both felt that we had to spend every minute of our

free time with delivery, and when we could not do it, guilt appeared. The application constantly sent motivational messages, which exacerbated the craving to work. It was hard to forget that we could work every minute. This feeling resonated with the workaholic culture of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, contrary to these circumstances, I have never had an accident. However, once I almost fell when I checked an address while cycling on slippery paving stones during the rain.

3. Danger

Bike delivery is inseparable from danger. To make a living, one must cycle for hours in Budapest traffic. In addition, the companies pay higher rates when there is poor weather, so working in physically more unsafe conditions is financially more beneficial to the workers (Popan, 2022). All interviewees gladly talked about the dangerous working conditions emerging from the harsh weather, the traffic, the light conditions, and the fast tempo dictated by the algorithm. Consequently, many of them were close to having fatal accidents. Every courier has an internal limit to the risks she is willing to take at work. It is dependent on social background and personal factors too. Of the interviewees, Alexandra and Anna had the safest rules. When it started to rain, Alexandra went home. However, she was most privileged because she did not do this work for financial reasons. Anna also had some economic advantages because she lives in her sibling's flat, so she does not have to pay rent. Besides that, she worked longer for a platform delivery company than the others and articulated the easiest her claims and limitations in work. She stated that she does not work when it is raining, or the temperature is too low. Anna also does not go too fast since it increases the chance of an accident. "No one's food is worth hurting me or someone else." She also tries to avoid night hours when she can see less due to the light conditions. Although Anna is careful, she also has dangerous experiences in delivery work. "In the riskiest situation, the accident depended on a few meters. One evening, another courier was driving a car, and since he could not see any headlights, he

drove into the intersection without slowing down. Then he braked hard to stop, and we were able to stop simultaneously, and we were in front of each other. Another time I was not sure if a car would stop in front of me or give me the right of way, so I applied the brakes. It was a wet autumn day, and there were leaves on the side of the road. The bike slipped, and I fell on my bag, thank God. I'm fortunate, or maybe I'm a bit more careful, but I didn't have any big crashes or falls."

The others all worked during severe weather, which increases the chance of accidents. Jamal once could not see the red light in the fog. Fortunately, a car knocked into his bike, so he fell before entering the next lane, where a truck would have crushed him. When I talked with Csongor, he had just had an accident, jeopardizing his group position in Foodpanda. Fortunately, the company accepted the medical certificate, so he could stay in group three instead of slipping down. When I asked Csongor about this accident and his previous experiences, he replied. "I slipped and fell so badly that I twisted my ankle. I could hardly step on it, it hurt like hell, and I had to keep it wrapped for days. It was such a muddy mess on the road, and I was not paying enough attention. If you pay enough attention, it does not happen, and you develop this routine. How many times have I fallen? A lot. One night during winter, there were big bonuses, and I fell five times. The road was icy. But I fell so often that only the bike fell, and I bounced to my feet and caught the handlebars. As a stuntman, not because I am skilled, but because I had the routine. I was falling on my side, sliding, cursing, but it was nothing. I bounced up, I kept going, but I was falling a lot. The most serious accident was when the handlebars came loose; I lost control. I got scared, and my life flashed before my eyes. I lost control, but then I managed to pull it back. It was the most significant accident I've ever had, and I didn't even fall there." When Csongor was telling me these stories, there was a particular macho pride behind his sentences, almost bragging about the challenges of the work.

This pride resonates with the companies' idealized image of couriers, presenting bike delivery as a challenging and advantageous occupation.

The recruitment advertising, like the posters presented before, shows bike delivery as a sports challenge. These ads highlight delivery work's advantageous and training features and hide the exhaustive reality. Béla analogously reported his dangerous experiences. Béla also told an anecdote about how often he fell off his bike on the icy or rainy slippery road in the traffic while he was not wearing a helmet. Béla bought a strap for his pedal to be less slippery when raining. The disadvantage of the strap is that at the beginning when he stopped, it was automatically followed by falling since he could not pull out his foot. His most significant accident also happened due to this. He had just arrived at a restaurant when a pedestrian looking at her phone bumped into him, so he fell onto the restaurant's terrace. Béla took the winter hard, which was the first one he cycled through. In the bicycle subculture, the number of cycled winters ranks that person. Since the middle of December, his wrist has been hurting. Béla assumed that he had ligament injuries, but he did not go to the doctor and never used his accident insurance because, as he noted, it is too complicated. He works a lot when the fees are higher due to the severe weather. "The best income I ever had was when I was outside all day in the pouring rain in August. I was soaking wet, and then people tipped more because they pitied me. I could not put down the phone because new notifications kept popping up."

As Béla said, "There is nothing to be done. This job is dangerous. If you're not afraid, it's an excellent thing." He also referred to a "life-threatening" fountain as an inside joke, where every courier falls. In the Facebook groups, people call it the "courier cemetery." For Csongor and Béla struggling and surviving the unsafe working conditions provided a shared identity, which compensated the workers for the clear hierarchy and vulnerability. Both voiced that they know the company does not care about them, for example, by organizing training courses for them. There are always enough couriers contracted to deliver. If they do not do it, someone

else will. As Béla formulated, “My rival is the other Wolt courier. Anyone who works for Foodpanda is none of my business. I avoid other Wolt couriers when I do not have an order.” Competing for tasks is also a central feature of entrepreneurialism.

Mihály partly quit Wolt because he felt that bike delivery was too dangerous in Budapest. He almost crashed into cars several times. When he was out of work, he rode safely in the capital. Alexandra also did not feel safe during work. Her environment warned her about courier work, and when the pride of rebellion passed away, she started to agree with them. “There were many times that I did something stupid. I didn't think that I was so careless, and then it turned out that I could get into a dangerous situation, even if I were paying attention, and I'm not driving fast, and not crossing the red light.” When I asked her about the most dangerous situation, she mentioned that she almost hit a pedestrian on the sidewalk. In addition, she lost control of her bike and almost hit a car. After this, she felt that she had caused problems for herself and felt humiliated.

Besides acknowledging the importance of the weather and the other participants in the traffic, Csongor, Anna and Béla emphasized their skills, which could save them from a (more) serious accident. In Alexandra's case, individualization was also present, but she internalized the responsibility of the unsafe working conditions as a personal failure.

Even without the dangers of the traffic, bike delivery is severe physical labor, which exhausts the body. Due to the physical burden and monotony, the mind can sometimes “switch off,” as the interviewees and I experienced. Csongor explained this feeling in the following way: “When I am exhausted, my brain is sometimes paralyzed and automatic. It happens to everyone. The brain gets oxygen, just not enough to think, but my reflexes work the same. I can work, avoid cars, not get into accidents, and pick up food the same way, but I do not know where I am. I arrive at an address, and I have no idea whether I have come to pick up food or drop it off. Of course, if I thought about it, I would know, but I do not need to. Instead, I look

at the app. The fastest way to determine where I am going is to cycle and look at the little dot on the map, showing if I am going the right way. Honestly, a well-trained monkey could do this job." Many couriers listen to music to reduce monotony, which also increases the rate of danger.

Contrary to the international norms, both Wolt and Foodpanda had accident insurance. I asked Bence about this specificity, which goes against the strict market interests. He explained that in December 2020, a company courier died during work. Then the managers started to push the company to provide accident insurance to the couriers. Besides the moral reasons, the company also profits from it, as it facilitates recruitment and shows the company's social responsibility. And the workers use this option. As couriers reported, in the case of Foodpanda, the insurance company quit because too many workers had accidents, so it was not financially beneficial for them. Since the end of 2021, the couriers do not have accident insurance.

The pain and dangers of urban bicycle work highlight the unequal relationship between the workers and the company. The sporting side of bike delivery comes to the fore to accept this hierarchical relation. I explore how delivery work and sport are intertwined in the subsequent paragraphs.

4. Sport

Knowledge capital collected from the field of sport supported my entry into the field, as it already helped other scholars (Wacquant, 2004). Since I did sport from early childhood, I have known the preparation repertoire, the physical and mental challenges, and the importance of nutrition and recovery, which made me a better courier. The interviewees also utilized such knowledge from past sporting activities to increase their workload. Bike food couriers tend to normalize and justify the disadvantageous circumstances as sporting activities. All respondents did sport regularly before working as a courier, especially in childhood. However, they have diverse experiences. Jamal is the most serious about it, as he attends professional bicycle races

in his free time. For Alexandra, sport is part of her family's and personal identity, and she was a member of the Hungarian sailing team. Anna attended a high school specializing in sports. Others experienced sports as a hobby. Flóra and Béla used to go to the gym, and Zsanett sometimes jogged. Csongor used to work out to get shredded for the summer. Still, contrary to their former sporting experiences, courier work physically shocked them, especially at the beginning. When I asked them about it, they framed the answers as sports challenges. For instance, Jamal compared it to the first time he went to the gym.

Fatigue is not only the characteristic of the beginning, but it also remains part of the delivery work even after a lengthy period. As Csongor noted: "I come home, I sit down, I feel like I'm going to faint, I'm so tired after nine hours of work. I didn't even have a break." Even Jamal, the most professional courier, mentioned the tiredness after a ten-hour shift. To explain and compensate for the physical tiredness, the couriers constantly positioned their work to sports. Csongor noted that there are "real sportsmen" who cycle around fifty hours per week. Boasting results is an active feature of Facebook groups. The sporting rivalry also appears in the street, where primarily young male bike couriers sometimes compete by sprinting between traffic lights. Seeing delivery work as a sport gives an ethos, making it acceptable as a middle-class activity. Zsanett formulated this idea: "It was nice to do some physical work because cycling is not like working in construction. Cycling is a constructive activity, which made me more athletic." Anna was glad that while she stopped regular sport due to office work, it returned to her life with delivery. This whole activity was more about the sport than making money for Alexandra. Jamal synchronized his hobby with work. When he prepares for a bicycle competition, he sometimes chooses steep neighborhoods to work in, so it counts as training, even if he earns less. "I like it when I go up the mountain because that has a good training factor." Riders adored the idea that they get paid to train their body, which is an otherwise expensive and tiring activity. As Jamal said: "I don't go to the gym, just because if I'm going

to cycle, I make some money as well." Csongor stated that he would be otherwise lazy for cardio activities. Béla bragged that working during summer took off all his body fat. Contrary to the praise of delivery work, both Csongor and Béla admitted that they are too tired to build muscle on their upper body after work even though they would like to. Besides the conscious opinions about the advantages of sports, the riders sometimes sensed work as exercise due to hormonal changes. Anna compared this to the experience of long runs. "It's just hard to get started, but once you're in, it's great." Alexandra also mentioned that the flow of sport and the adrenaline made her forget tiredness and hunger.

There is a significant difference between seeing pain as part of labor or sport. Bike delivery blurs the border between sport and labor, implying that it incorporates sport's physical and ideological rewards to labor. Accepting delivery work as a sport also helps justify the pain it causes. When I felt pain for the first time during the fieldwork, I decided to take painkillers to be able to cycle. I built on my experiences in competitive sports, where quitting was a rarely chosen option. The interviewees also did not stop working due to pain, and the knowledge and ethos of sport supported this decision. Jamal struggled with pain in his hamstring muscles. He could not stand still and described the pain of the first ten minutes on the bike as torture. However, Jamal continued to work like this until he read about the problem and eliminated it by stretching. Csongor bragged that he never finishes work before the end of his shift. He explained that there is an hour at the most left when he can barely stand, so he always survives somehow. Otherwise, he shall write to the dispatcher, which is "a lot of time," who would probably give him a penalty point for that. "It's not worth it." Flóra also prioritized work over her health. "Even now, my back hurts like hell, but I want to work." The workers utilize their knowledge from their past sporting activities about pain relief to increase their workload. Zsanett always continued her work even when it was hurtful or very demanding. If it caused her too much pain, she cured it with a sports cream, which her family had used for decades.

Béla's knees and ankles hurt due to cycling, but he never thought about terminating his contract. "I wake up, and oh my God, it hurts. And then I had to sit on my bike the same way and cycle. When I get into it, it is better, and then in the morning, after I was resting, it hurt a lot. But I worked the same way then. I knew from my training that the body would get used to it, I just had to give it a little more water and nutrients, and sometimes, when it was very sore, I rested it. But I knew it would get used to it." Another courier recommended collagen protein during this period, widely used for bodybuilding. Béla looked it up online, and after reading good comments about it, he tried it. Collagen tastes terrible, but it worked for him. Just as he persisted through the first work period, he has never stopped during work ever since. "If I get tired, I don't care about it. I work as much as I planned to." Even Alexandra, who had the lowest financial but a notable sporting stake in the work, never stopped during lunch periods. After listening to these narratives, it became clearer why it was inconceivable for the courier to stop even when his head was bleeding.

4.1. Recovery

Sport does not only teach how to bear pain. Knowledge about recovery shifted from sporting to the context of food delivery also supports the increase of the workers' workload. I divide the topic of recovery into three sections: nutrition, stretching, and rest. Nutrition shows that although exercise and food delivery look similar at first sight, they have quite different purposes. While in the field of sport, healthy and balanced diets are at the fore, in bicycle food delivery, the consumption of carbohydrates, especially sugar, is primary. Sugar has been a source of quick energy since the 19th century. It has shifted from a luxury to a proletarian hunger killer, enabling fast, calorie-high, time-consuming meals during working time (Mintz, 2018). All interviewees highlighted the importance of ongoing nutrition as if it would have been the essential prerequisite of work. "If I don't refuel the car, it won't run, but if it has fuel in it, it goes out of the world,". Nutrition usually appears in the form of junk food during work.

Jamal ignores food quality, so he usually eats pastries and fast food during the day. In the evenings, he mostly eats canned products or sausages with bread. Csongor usually eats chocolate during work and brings coffee from home, another typical example of a hunger killer (Mintz, 2018). Béla admitted that he does not care about nutrition as long as he has enough energy. He usually buys something from a supermarket or eats a hamburger or a kebab in a restaurant from where he delivers food. The female interviewees were more concerned about their meals. Anna highlighted that she avoids junk food on purpose. She usually brings energy bars and water from home and prepares a warm meal in the evening. Alexandra also preferred energy bars during work and some fruits and sandwiches. She tried to memorize which food smelled the most appealing when she delivered it, and after work, Alexandra went back to the place and ate there. Hence, she overstepped the burdens of work and turned it into culinary discovery. Flóra paid the most attention to nutrition as part of recovery. She tried to make sure she got enough energy. Flóra drank BCAA, which is an amino acid used for bodybuilding. However, it also helps the muscle function of people who do physical work regularly. She tried to be aware of proteins, which she had already done before as she is a vegetarian. Sometimes Flóra consumes protein powders, soy protein, legumes, vegetable butter, and smoothies.

Stretching is another essential part of physical recovery after sport; however, it is not indispensable. So, it is not a surprise that most workers ignored it. They all knew that it would be necessary for recovery, but most of the answers I received were that they always plan to do it, but it rarely happens. The exceptions were Jamal and Anna, probably because of their institutionalized sporting background. The option of resting depends on the financial dependency on the platform. Csongor and Béla, full-time couriers, work regardless of the amount of rest they could get. Flóra works less than them, and she states that a half-day is enough for her to recover. This opinion contradicts the permanent back pain she complains about during the discussion. She cures it with regular massages, which she bought at a discount.

A secondary market reacts to such needs in the Facebook groups. Hence, masseurs, physiotherapists, and chiropractors offer their services at discounts. Alexandra was in the most privileged position, "If I was tired from the previous days, I didn't work."

5. Conclusion

Based on theories stating that (sporting) bodies and pain are socially embedded, I argued that bicycle food couriers in Budapest tend to normalize and justify the precarious and dangerous working conditions as a sports activity. The riders state that they get paid to train their bodies, which is an otherwise expensive and tiring activity. The workers utilize their knowledge from their past sporting activities about nutrition and pain relief to increase their workload. Sporting rivalry and boasting of results are active features of the courier community. Food delivery companies and journalists support this idea, as they frame labor as a challenging cardio activity. Although the workers proudly claimed to be entrepreneurs, the body experiences reveal the cleavage between platform labor and idealized entrepreneurship. The pain and dangers of urban bike work highlight the unequal relationship between the workers and the company, the heterogeneity of differently positioned workers, and the scarcity of workers' freedom.

Conclusion

The thesis aimed to explain the inner paradox of criticizing but still participating and appreciating food delivery work by the delivery workers. Therefore, I explored how Budapest's cycling food delivery workers accept, normalize, and justify the precarious working conditions emerging in the ethos of freedom and flexibility and how the hegemonic discourse of labor market flexibilization and the platform companies' promulgated imaginary of this work supports this normalization.

Drawing on the empirical evidence, I found the following trends. Food delivery workers appreciate the flexible work schedule, which helps them organize their wage labor around their reproductive work, additional jobs, and leisure. The extent of the freedom of overseeing their schedule depends on the workers' social and economic background and dependency on the platform. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory on everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014), I explained how the flexible work schedule enables the couriers to master the structure of their lives. In addition, I claimed that one should interpret the success of flexible working hours in a semi-periphereic context, where even middle-class background couriers utilize it to harmonize several responsibilities. The ethos of entrepreneurship (Foucault et al., 2008) and bicycle subculture (Tóth, 2019) supports the workers to accept, justify, and normalize the precarious working conditions. Additionally, bike couriers compare their job to the other available options in the Hungarian labor market, where delivery work appears to be relative freedom (Brown, 1995) and less tangible exploitation. Despite that, couriers criticize their hierarchical and unpredictable working conditions.

Drawing on theories stating that bodies and pain are socially embedded entities (Csordas, 2002, DePauw, 1997, Foucault, 2012, Haraway, 1991), I claimed that couriers normalize and justify the precarious and dangerous working conditions as a sports activity. The riders embrace the idea that they get paid to train their bodies, which is an otherwise expensive

and tiring hobby. Workers use their knowledge of nutrition and pain management from previous sporting activities to increase their workload. Sports competition and boasting about results are active features of the courier community. Food delivery companies and the journalists also frame bike delivery labor as a challenging cardio activity. The painful and dangerous body experiences reveal the cleavage between platform labor and idealized entrepreneurship. To make a living, one must cycle for hours in Budapest traffic. In addition, the companies pay higher rates when there is poor weather, so working in physically more unsafe conditions is financially more beneficial to the workers. The pain and dangers of urban bike work highlight the unequal relationship between the food delivery platform company and the workers and the scarcity of workers' freedom.

In line with this research, further research could analyze the work in the food delivery sector. Although the boost of platform-based delivery companies is a global trend, its realization is embedded in local tendencies. This thesis gave insight into labor flexibilization and the alternative labor market opportunities in Hungary. This opened the way for a comprehensive, macro-level overview of the transformation of the Hungarian labor market.

Another research direction could focus on the forms of resistance of workers. Workers often organize such mobilizations after the relative freedom of transport work in the labor market declines. There are emerging mobilizations from Brighton (Cant, 2019) and London (Butler & Jolly, 2021) to Lithuania (Transnational Social Strike Platform, 2021) and Italy (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017). Some segments of workers' resistance have reached the scale of the legal framework and created precedents by modifying the principles of the platform economy. In December 2020, the German Federal Labour Court ruled favor of a crowdworker, who had sued a platform company as it had not contracted him as an employee, but as a partner (Kormann, 2021). In March 2021, the Spanish government pronounced that people, who work for digital platforms, must be recognized as employees and not partners (Aranguiz, 2021). Both

cases show that the labor movement and nation-states have agency within the global institutional structure to influence and regulate the platform economy. Although there are no such grandiose events in Hungary yet, there are individual and lower-scale solutions within the system. In addition, there are two organizations representing the interests of delivery workers.

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