

# Remote Work and the Emerging Urban Proletariat Graduates: Ideological Analysis of New Labor Forms and Exploitation Mechanisms

Zhengting Liu<sup>1, \*</sup>, Yunyi Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peking University, Beijing 100091, China

<sup>2</sup> Trinity College Dublin, Dublin D02 PN40, Ireland

\* Corresponding author:

**Abstract:** Starting from Herbert Marcuse's theory of labour and emancipation, this study critically discusses the dialectical impact of telework on emerging urban proletarian university graduates through ideological analysis and factual case studies. The paper reveals that the apparent advantages of telework in terms of flexibility and autonomy actually obscure the ideological control of technological rationality and the mechanisms of modern capitalist exploitation. The discussion uncovers the unfavourable employment environment of inexperienced new graduates facing career instability, extended labour hours and intrusive surveillance in the context of telework. And it further reveals the importance of promoting social justice to ensure that new graduates can truly achieve labour liberation.

**Keywords:** Remote Work; Proletariat; Exploitation; Ideological Analysis; New Graduates.

## 1. Introduction

Remote work has grown rapidly around the world in recent years, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19. During the pandemic, many businesses were forced to shift to remote work due to policy requirements and reducing the spread of the virus, a change that has accelerated the development of remote work technologies and platforms [1]. And many businesses have continued to retain remote work options after the pandemic [2].

As an important part of the proletariat in emerging cities, the development of remote work has brought new employment challenges to college graduates. According to the Eurofound & ILO report, new graduates often face difficulties in finding employment, job instability and lack of security [3]. While remote work broadens employment, it breeds new forms of exploitation. This exacerbates the vulnerability of proletarian university students in the labour market [4].

The central contribution of this study is a focus on the unique effects of remote work on proletarian university students, adopting the critical analysis of Herbert Marcuse. Drawing on his theoretical framework on labour and emancipation, the study delves into the ways in which the phenomena of flexible exploitation and the casual economy of remote work perpetuate the capitalist system of exploitation within the existing technological and social context and explores the ways in which true labour freedom can be achieved.

## 2. Labor and Liberation Theory

### (1) Theoretical Overview

Herbert Marcuse is one of the leading figures of the Frankfurt School, whose theories focus on technology, ideology and social emancipation. He provides an in-depth criticism of technological rationality and ideology in *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse argues that modern technology is not only a neutral tool, but also a tool for the embodiment and

reproduction of capitalist ideology. Technological rationality is used to control and manage labourers in capitalist societies, allowing them to enjoy freedom on the surface. In fact, they are being exploited and controlled on a deeper level [5], leaving labourers trapped in a one-dimensional thinking, making it difficult for them to be aware of their state of oppression [6].

### (2) Theoretical Application

Marcuse's theory of labour and emancipation plays a key role in examining the modern remote working environment. Remote work appears to confer flexibility and autonomy. In reality, it can actually be a new form of exploitation [3]. The widespread use of remote working technologies and platforms reflects the development of technological rationality, and these technological advances have not only increased productivity but also enhanced the control of labour processes in enterprises [4]. At a conscious level, the concepts of 'freedom' and 'flexibility' of remote work are emphasised, hiding the actual mechanisms of exploitation. As a result, workers are less likely to recognise and resist their own oppression [5].

Marcuse's theoretical framework reveals the mechanism of hidden exploitation in remote work. It is shown not only in terms of working hours and labor intensity, but also in the aspect of social security and mental health of workers. In order to achieve true labor emancipation, these hidden power structures need to be exposed and challenged, accompanied by policy improvements and social change. Labourers are guaranteed the benefits of technological progress without being oppressed by new forms of exploitation [7].

## 3. Flexible Exploitation in Remote work

### (1) Extended Labor Hours and Work Stress

Remote workers often have longer labor hours than traditional office workers due to blurred boundaries between work and personal life, leading to an "always-on" work culture. Emerging urban proletariat graduates have just

stepped out into society and often have to take on more work assignments in order to prove their ability to do the job [8]. Research by Sandoval-Reyes et al. shows that remote work significantly increased employees' work stress during the pandemic ( $\beta = 0.269$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), reduced work-life balance ( $\beta = -0.225$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and decreased job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.190$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) [9]. These extended labor hours not only increase work stress but also negatively affect workers' mental health and quality of life.

#### (2) Lack of Social Security

Remote workers often lack formal social security, and inexperienced university graduates are particularly insensitive to this. These employees often work as contractors or freelancers without health insurance, retirement benefits, or other social security. Research by Hansen et al. indicates that about 40% of remote works do not have basic health insurance, and 35% lack any form of retirement benefits [10]. This lack of security makes proletarian college graduates more vulnerable to illness, unemployment, or other unexpected situations.

#### (3) Ideological Control and Technological Monitoring

Marcuse's theory suggests that technology is not only a production tool but also a means of ideological control. In the remote work environment, technological monitoring becomes a new Panopticon-like way for companies to control employees. Such controls have a significant impact on new graduates entering the workforce, who are more vulnerable to the pressures of monitoring due to their lack of work experience and social resources [11]. Vidal's research found that remote monitoring technology significantly increases employees' work stress and insecurity, especially in high-monitoring environments, where job satisfaction significantly decreases ( $r = -0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and work stress increases ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) [12]. Through remote monitoring software, companies can track employees' work progress and efficiency in real-time, increasing their psychological stress and eroding their autonomy and privacy.

## 4. Gig Economy and Informal Labor in Remote work

The gig economy refers to an economic model composed of short-term, temporary, or freelance work. With the development of digital platforms, the gig economy has rapidly expanded worldwide. Remote work in this setting has become an important part of this economic model, providing flexible work opportunities for many people [13]. Many digital platforms (such as Upwork, Fiverr) offer remote freelance opportunities, connecting global employers and employees through technological means.

#### (1) Lack of Stable Employment Relationships

Freshly graduated, emerging urban proletariat college students do not have enough capital built up to meet the challenges of the cost of living, so they will be eager to find a potentially unstable job first. As Scott argues, gig economy workers are particularly vulnerable to economic volatility and market shifts, as they are bound by short-term contracts and irregular jobs [14]. This leads to a lack of long-term job security for them [15]. For example, drivers on Uber and Lyft platforms often face job losses or reduced income due to rule changes [16]. This precarious employment reveals the increased control of workers by the capitalist system, forcing them to struggle in precarious and uncertain working conditions, with little job security and economic security [5].

#### (2) Lack of Career Advancement Paths

Remote workers have extremely limited pathways for career advancement. Due to the instability of their jobs and the uncertainty of their work environments, it is often difficult for them to obtain substantial opportunities for promotion and career development [17]. In this case, due to the lack of a systematic training and advancement platform, remote workers face difficulties in career advancement and skill growth [5]. This not only hinders the realization of individual potential, but also traps graduates in low-skilled, low-income employment, making it difficult to break free from the shackles of the capitalist structure.

#### (3) Lack of Access to Production Resources and Technology

Remote workers are often confined to a single and unknown project segment, which limits their perception of the big picture [18]. Their work is mainly focused on narrow, mechanical tasks, such as writing specific code modules in programming, which often lacks the challenge and learning space [19], which in turn hinders their in-depth understanding of the overall structure and process of the project.

This fragmented work style makes it difficult for workers to achieve comprehensive skill enhancement and thus their career development is limited. Marcuse's labor and liberation theory posits that workers should achieve self-development and liberation through labor, but in the gig economy, this opportunity for self-development is deprived [6]. Workers cannot engage in comprehensive, complex work tasks, causing their technical skills to stagnate and preventing effective career growth [17].

#### (4) Dilemmas of Platform Workers

A large number of graduates choose to become couriers that have nothing to do with their field of study when they are unable to find quality jobs [20]. In specific cases, delivery workers on platforms like Deliveroo and Uber Eats face extremely high work intensity and low income. Their income entirely depends on order volume and rating systems, where a slight mistake can result in demotion or dismissal by the platform's algorithm. Studies show that these workers work over 60 hours per week on average, yet their income is still insufficient to maintain a basic living standard [21]. This phenomenon further confirms the exploitation issues arising from the combination of remote work and the gig economy.

## 5. Ethical Issues and Social Justice

The development of remote work, while providing employment flexibility, is deeply mired in ethical dilemmas. The advantages of the 'flexibility' of remote work mask an essence of self-exploitation by the labourer and the shifting of responsibility from the enterprise [7]. Many companies utilize technological monitoring and algorithmic control to create a Panopticon-like system of round-the-clock surveillance, as described by Foucault [22]. The proliferation of "technological rationality" robs workers of their autonomy to develop and survive, and also continues to exacerbate their anxiety levels and health risks [12]. Workers in the gig economy, Especially graduates, are particularly vulnerable to economic instability and market shifts due to the lack of stable contracts and security [15]. This unfair labour environment has prompted scholars to question the teleological dimension, to begin to reflect on who are the real beneficiaries of technological progress, and to trigger a public reexamination of social justice and the protection of labour rights and interests. We should endeavour to ensure that scientific and

technological development truly benefits the graduates of the emerging urban proletariat, rather than becoming a new tool of exploitation.

## 6. Conclusion

The essence of remote work is analyzed in depth, showing that it is not only a technological leap, but also a continuation of the principle of capitalist exploitation. This seemingly flexible working model actually deepens the occupational instability and mental stress of workers, especially for recent graduates entering the workforce. They are often plagued by a lack of social protection and excessive surveillance, which not only erodes their professional autonomy, but also reveals the moral dilemmas and social imbalances in this economy. Strategic policies and social movements are needed to promote genuine labour liberation and social equity and to ensure that new graduates are able to develop in a fair and scientific working environment.

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