Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work. When Exit and Voice come at Great Cost

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Abstract. This paper investigates the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the future of work. It shows how AI systems used in employment and workers management not only automate tasks but may also reshape workplace governance by reinforcing discriminatory norms and constraining workers' equal power and collective bargaining. In particular, the paper argues that Hirschman's concepts of exit and voice, originally developed as responses to domination within organisations, are insufficient to address the deeper power structures and dynamics of AI-mediated labour. Instead, it explores how a neo-republican theoretical lens offers a more robust normative foundation for analysing the novel societal harms introduced by AI, while foregrounding non-domination and democratic practices at work. Moving beyond exit and voice, the paper highlights the importance of workplace democracy and suggests potential pathways for its operationalisation in the context of AI-mediated labour.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, future of work, non-domination, exit, voice

1. *Introduction*

There are two main challenges in addressing the question of AI and the future of work. The first is the problem of the *thema decidendum* – that is, identifying the core object or theme of the debate. Under the broad label of "AI and work" lie multiple, interrelated dimensions: the binary discourse on automation and job loss; the transformation of labour processes and workplaces; the wider societal impacts of AI on workers and citizens; and the responses of both public and private actors, including

regulatory and policy interventions. Clarifying what we mean by "AI and work" remains a fundamental task for researchers and society alike.

This is closely linked to the second challenge: the *thema probandum*, or the verification of the object of analysis. Once the theme is defined, we must explore the structures and dynamics shaping the AI-work relationship. A deeper understanding of this nexus requires attention to the governance of AI-mediated workplaces, the surveillance regimes embedded in them, and the lived experiences of workers affected by these technologies.

While debates around work, power, and technology often draw on Foucault or Bourdieu (Müller 2021; Sattarov 2019), this paper argues that tech-mediated work today represents a more complex configuration than fragmented "modules of governmentality not yet connected or accomplished" (Vormbusch, Kels 2021, 62). AI is creating new societal arrangements that demand a renewed normative framework – one capable of addressing persistent trends in labour relations, resisting emerging forms of domination, and promoting worker protection and democratic control in the design and governance of AI-mediated labour.

This paper contends that neo-republican theories of freedom, power, and work offer valuable tools for critically examining the rise of AI-mediated labour. These normative frameworks help to expose both the power relations embedded in AI systems and the structural societal risks they generate. Central to neo-republican thought is the concept of freedom as non-domination, and the conditions required to secure it, particularly in contexts marked by power asymmetries.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section examines whether, and in what sense, AI and the future of work constitute legitimate objects of political theory, and why a neo-republican lens is a productive interpretive approach. The second section explores Albert Hirschman's (1970) concepts of *exit* and *voice* as responses to domination within organizations and institutions. It argues that AI systems used for employment and workers management introduce novel risks that traditional accounts of exit and voice fail to address, particularly due to their neglect of structural power dynamics. Instead, a neo-republican approach offers more robust conceptual tools – such as the idea of a "vulnerability class" or the framework for "workplace democracy" – to identify and mitigate the risks of domination in AI-mediated labour. The conclusion summarises the main arguments and suggests directions for future research.

2. *Artificial Intelligence and work. The challenge of domination*

Workplaces have historically been sites of authority, where workers may be subject to employers' extensive powers. Not all authority is inherently illegitimate, but it becomes problematic when it results in domination – relationships where one party is structurally subordinated to another (Raz 1986; Jacob, Neuhäuser 2018). Recent political theory has increasingly turned attention to these dynamics, recognising that concepts like justice, legitimacy, and democracy are as relevant in workplaces as in formal political institutions (Anderson 2017). Despite differences from governments, workplaces are collective, structured spaces where decisions require justification, regulation, and enforcement. As such, political concepts – especially those related to power asymmetries and inequality – are essential tools for analysing them (Landemore, Ferreras 2016). This is particularly true when AI technologies intervene in and reshape work structures. Scholars have already pointed out how Big Tech – like Google or Amazon – blur the public-private divide, and their size, scope, and influence over public spheres (such as health, justice) demand scrutiny of their governance practices and legitimacy (Breen 2015; Sharon 2021; Stevens *et al.* 2024).

Crucially, AI is not just a technical field – it is political. It affects human autonomy, redistributes power, and redefines social norms. Scholars have increasingly called for political frameworks to understand these transformations, especially in terms of how AI reconfigures power relations (Véliz 2020) and how AI practices may perpetuate or challenge unjust social arrangements (Coeckelbergh 2022).

This paper aims to make visible the political dimensions of AI, especially when it shapes the public sphere of work, and it does so through a neo-republican lens. Neo-republican political theory – particularly as developed by Pettit (1997; 2012) – conceives freedom as the absence of domination. Freedom as non-domination refers to freedom from arbitrary or uncontrolled power, understood not merely as non-interference, but as protection from structural dependence on arbitrary or uncontrolled power from others (Pettit 1997; 2012; 2008b). This theory focuses on freedom as a status, rather than on isolated acts of interference. A person can be dominated even without being interfered with, as in the case of a slave under the constant threat of the master's will (Pettit 1997).

Building on this, Laborde (2010) and Gädeke (2020) further distinguish between agent-relative and systemic domination. The latter arises from social norms, institutions, and practices that embed power asymmetries into the structure of society. These norms, even when informal, can produce and sustain inequalities by assigning unequal roles, rights, and forms of recognition (Sandven 2020; Gädeke 2020). A systemic view thus shifts focus away from individual agents and toward the social structures and positions that enable domination. Domination is not just dyadic (between dominator and dominated, as in the master-slave example), but embedded in a wider context involving what Gädeke calls peripheral agents – those who reinforce oppressive norms without directly exercising arbitrary power (Gädeke 2020). Recent scholarship refers to this as structural domination, composed of three elements: dominators, dominated, and regulators – the roles, norms, and institutions that create and sustain asymmetrical power relations (Vrousalis 2021).

In AI-mediated workplaces, workers are rarely dominated by a single actor. Instead, they navigate a dispersed web of decisions, expectations, and behaviours, often governed by opaque algorithms and fragmented responsibilities. Here, domination does not stem from intentional control but from unaccountable systemic conditions**,** shaped by technological infrastructures, labour market dynamics, and embedded social norms (Vrousalis 2021; Santoni de Sio *et al*. 2021).

Most studies on digital labour and the gig economy adopt a platform economy lens, focusing on how online models reorganise production and management compared to traditional employment (Rahman, Thelen 2019). These analyses often highlight domination as a strategy of labour and market control, where platform owners or managers exert power over workers (Schüßler *et al*. 2021; Hänninen, Smedlund 2021). However, in AI-mediated work environments, domination may be also evident in the allocation of tasks**,** the silencing or enabling of worker voice**,** and the framing of roles and responsibilities – all increasingly determined by automated systems and algorithmic governance. These processes are often legitimised by widely shared norms of productivity, efficiency, and compliance, with little space for contestation or negotiation (De Stefano, Taes 2023).

This is why I argue that a systemic perspective on domination, which shifts attention from individual agents and dyadic relationships to struc-

tural conditions, offers a more adequate framework for analysing the persistent disempowerment of workers in AI-mediated labour – even in the absence of a clearly identifiable dominator (Santoni de Sio 2024; Santoni de Sio et al. 2021). While neo-republican theorists have addressed issues of work and power (Taylor 2017; González Ricoy 2019; Gourevitch 2013; O'Shea 2021; 2019), relatively few have extended these insights to work ecosystems where AI and digital technologies are embedded (Capasso 2022; Capasso, Santoni de Sio 2024). This paper contributes to filling that gap by applying a neo-republican framework to the evolving nature of work under AI. Ultimately, freedom in AI-mediated workplaces demands empowerment, institutional accountability, and normative evaluation of how work is structured and governed. This raises critical questions: which interests are most at risk in AI-driven labour environments? And what mechanisms can counteract systemic power imbalances, especially where some groups lack the capacity to express or defend their interests within the socio-political landscape of work? I argue that neo-republican theory offers useful tools in this regard, particularly through the reinterpretation of Hirschman's typology of exit and voice (Hirschman 1970; 2013). These two concepts – exit and voice – are fundamental to ensuring legitimate work relations that prevent subjection and domination (Breen 2017), but in this paper I argue they do not adequately address the underlying power structures and dynamics at play in AI-mediated labour. In the next sections, I examine the scope and implications of exit and voice, and the challenges that can arise to realise them when AI systems are used for employment and workers management, and I will demonstrate how neo-republican political theory can help rethink the mechanisms required to safeguard them.

3. E*xit and voice*

If we look at the emerging AI-driven labour environments, we can notice how AI systems used in recruitment and workers management create forms of data storage, aggregation, and algorithmic prediction that may pose societal harms for traditional labour structures and dynamics (Adams-Prassl 2019). There have been multiple cases in which AI systems used in recruitment had disadvantaged already marginalised

groups, reinforcing "old systems of power and privilege" (Eubanks 2017, 177). The recent AI Act listed AI systems used for employment and workers management as high-risk, since those systems may perpetuate historical patterns of discrimination, for example against women, certain age groups, persons with disabilities, or persons of certain racial or ethnic origins or sexual orientation (AI Act, Recital 57).

For example, Google was found to show job advertisements for board-level positions more frequently to men than to women (Kim 2017). The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights just ruled that Meta indirectly discriminates via its algorithm on grounds of gender when showing job advertisements (College voor de Rechten van de Mens 2025). A few years ago, Amazon had to scrap a CV-screening hiring tool it had been using because it was biased against women (Köchling, Wehner 2020). As a matter of fact, the CV-screening tool "taught itself" to favor male candidates by learning from ten years of historical resumes, which reflected male dominance in the tech industry. The system penalized terms like "women's chess club captain" or degrees from "all-women's colleges," while favoring candidates who used male-coded verbs such as "executed" or "captured" (Dastin 2018). Stylistic cues, such as the use of agentic versus communal language, may indeed signal cultural "fit" in male-dominated environments, further embedding structural biases in the functioning of systems (Fabris *et al.* 2025).

The Amazon case highlights two key forms of algorithmic discrimination: biased training data and proxy discrimination. The AI system reproduced existing gender biases embedded in past hiring practices, reinforcing them at scale. It also favored certain data often associated with men, showing how seemingly neutral data features in CVs can be correlated with – and act as proxies for – protected characteristics like gender (Barocas, Selbst 2016). AI systems are built to detect patterns that predict hiring success, but they can unintentionally rely on proxies that mirror past discrimination. Even when gender or ethnicity aren't explicitly included, algorithms can infer such traits and use them in hiring decision-making (Capasso *et al.* 2024).

Beyond the challenge of discrimination, AI used for employment and workers management can exacerbate other forms of societal harms. Soft control mechanisms over workers' routine, including persuasive pop-ups ads or nudging techniques, have been employed by Uber for steer-

ing drivers to stay online and have longer working hours, creating stress, pressure and power asymmetries (Rosenblat, Stark 2016). Supervision and surveillance tech-mediated practices have taken place, in the shape of ratings and reviews from users and co-workers, and in the shape of apps, screenshots monitoring, and wearable devices that monitor and track the productivity at work, and that can extend managerial prerogatives over the private life and off-duty activities of workers, like sleep- and health-habits (Ito-Masui *et al.* 2021; De Stefano 2020; 2019). These examples share a persistent work surveillance through omnipresent software and devices, active even outside working hours, and data-driven algorithmic evaluations occurring in different phases of the recruitment pipeline, starting from the sourcing and screening of candidates to the selection and evaluation phases of the workforce (Fabris *et al.* 2024). This can affect workers' identity and routines, exacerbating issues like overwork – where career prospects depend on being perceived as a hard worker (Watkins 2015) – and blurring the boundary between private life and work due to constant monitoring, which may indicate abusive employer practices and forms of domination (Anderson 2017). All these examples reflect a broader issue: the subjugation of workers is upheld by social norms that normalize and reinforce the widespread, increasingly arbitrary, and opaque use of AI-based employment and workers management – especially since the Covid-19 pandemic and the surge in remote work (Fana *et al.* 2021). If we adopt a neo-republican lens to address this question, we can argue that workers may belong to what Gädeke (2020) identifies as a "vulnerability class": social groups structurally exposed to domination due to shared characteristics – such as race, gender, class, legal status, or employment position – that place them at a systematic disadvantage within existing power structures. Realising freedom as non-domination in such contexts requires securing liberty both individually and collectively (Pettit 1997, 124).[1]

[1] According to Pettit a vulnerability class might include just one person, see Pettit 1997, 122 and for a criticism of this position see Gädeke, 2020.

3.1. Exit

Neo-republican theorists have emphasized exit as a key to ensuring freedom as non-domination: when the cost of leaving oppressive relationships is low, individuals are less subject to arbitrary power, especially in market and workplace contexts (Taylor 2017). Hirschman defines exit as the decision to leave an organization, highlighting internal failures (Hirschman 1970). In this view, exit acts as a corrective mechanism, forcing leadership to respond to feedback, recognize shortcomings, and adapt accordingly. From this perspective, if viable job alternatives, social benefits, or unemployment protections are available – making the costs of quitting or being fired low – then domination by employers can be avoided (Taylor 2013). The possibility of exit ensures that workers are no longer at the mercy of a master (Taylor 2021). However, lowering exit costs is not sufficient on its own. It requires careful normative and contextual analysis (Singer 2015). The concept of exit is multilayered: it involves the voluntariness of leaving oppressive relationships, obligations attached to a status, and the existence of alternative social and economic arrangements (Drugge 2021). In short, exit strategies must be understood within the broader systemic structures that shape them.

This is especially relevant in AI used in employment and workers management, since these technologically-mediated practices further complicate the scope and implications of the exit condition.

First, the voluntary ability to leave oppressive relationships, which is a key requirement for the power to exit (Gavrilets, Richerson 2017), is often limited, as workers internalize norms within AI-mediated workplaces and perceive few real alternatives to exit. Indeed, even if discriminatory or abusive behavioural patterns are perceived at the individual level, job applicants and workers might be hesitant or reluctant to counteract them. Job applicants with not-Western names admit to bearing the pressure of assimilating their profiles for better presentation, and often decide to modify their profile to assimilate with Western and English names, and mask or offset any visible factors that can lead to discrimination risks on the part of AI-based systems (Fabris *et al.* 2025). These systems actively participate in constructing the normative figure of the "ideal employee" and the behaviours they are designed to identify. In doing so, they cite and reproduce existing social norms about who qual-

ifies as such an ideal. At the same time, candidates attempt to "win over the algorithm" by aligning themselves with these idealised profiles and behaviours, in order to mitigate the risk of discrimination (Drage, Mackereth 2022). AI operates in relation to social behavioural norms and can reflect demands of the job market and broader systems of power, which often are played out in gendered and racialized differences between groups and individuals. This may lead to forms of "micro-domination": i.e., situations in which workers can acquiesce to a state of affairs which they might even wish to change, but which they prefer not to challenge because it is not considered a serious harm for the individual, or also because it requires too much power (in terms of motivation, resources and means) for being contested (O'Shea 2018; Lazar 2021a).

Second, we can also notice how applicants and workers are not deprived of obligations attached to a status. AI-driven labour markets in platform capitalism tend to be monopsonistic or oligopsonistic, providing a hierarchical infrastructure that collect data and micro-manage and control work (Srnicek 2017). In such a scenario, workers do not seem to have what neorepublican theorists call "a normative power" to challenge the obligations and the rules of the game that social relationships and social institutions place upon them (Blunt 2015). Workers can leave and terminate a work relationship, and in this sense they have a zone of control over the social and institutional relationships they engage with, but their choice of exit is circumscribed by the fact that arbitrary rules and powers are in place at a systemic level, where peripheral agents – as a range of labour market actors – are playing by the rules of the game and determine others' status (Blunt 2015). The persistence and regulation of such rules and relationships are exemplified in AI-mediated labour case in hierarchical company organisation, regulatory prerogatives in the shape of self-assessment mechanisms, the exacerbation of employers' control via surveillance devices, AI-management that can lead to discriminatory practices, poor social protection, the creation of forms of precarious work arrangements as self-employed and platforms workers, just to cite few (De Stefano, Wouters 2022). All these phenomena must be objects of justification by the part of providers, and should be considered as systemic constituents that need broader societal and democratic assessment.

Third, exit is a valuable choice as long as a system of different socio-economic organisations is in place. As is also highlighted by

neo-republican theorists, the power of exit is useless when there are no other choices worth considering (González Ricoy 2014, 214; see also Lazar 2018). Other workplaces can be dominating as well as the one we left: social norms persist in the wider social environment, and the location in a specific institutional system (Laborde 2010, 57), and the "badges of vulnerability" associated with this location or position does not change with the lowering of exit costs (Lazar 2018; Pettit 1997, 123). An exploited and discriminated worker remains such in exploitative and discriminatory society, even after the decision of quitting a particular work. In the apparent flexibilisation of work relationships there is the spectre of "decentralised domination": workers can enjoy a choice between benevolent masters that, despite not interfering with their choices of exit, are still masters, namely they have the (technological, but also economic, social, political) resources and prerogatives to set the rules of the game (Lovett 2012, 52). The dominance of few big, concentrated platforms and companies, and their expansion into new markets and public spheres, can create digital and non-digital social environments that are in urgent need of rules and norms to which those platforms should abide, in order not to exacerbate strong and unbalanced concentrations of power (Sharon 2021). Google, for example, has been found by the European Commission to engage in abusive and dominant conducts, by breaking antitrust rules and by restricting or preventing market competition.[2] While the EU is increasingly adopting measures to address anti-competitive behaviour as part of its broader digital regulatory strategy, these efforts do not fully address the growing dominance of a myriad of competitive tech companies – rather than by one or a few – that shape the nature of the digital economy, workforce, and public goods (Stevens *et al.* 2024; Sharon, Gellert 2023).

Finally, exit-costs can be high. Subjection might realise not only when there is the inability to exit, but also when costs associated with exit would be unreasonably high (Lovett 2012, 38-41; Blunt 2015). If we focus on the specific case of AI-mediated labour, the transformation of the delivery labour process, as in the case of Amazon, or other cases such as the transformation of professional roles like radiologists, workers in

[2] See on this point European Commission 2019.

logistics, and many others, have shown that work activities can be explicitly restructured, by directly impacting on tasks allocation. AI applied to mobile, industrial or service robotic platforms offers a new way to execute tasks. For example, robots can be designed to autonomously perform quality control processes on metallic surfaces in industry, with the result that the roles of operators are shifted to those of supervisors and the working roles are totally transformed (Czimmermann *et al.* 2021). In extreme cases these transformations can lead to work displacement and relocation, because workers are no longer able to be productive, qualified or well-paid, and important transition costs in the short term are placed on workers, which can lead to precarious, degrading working conditions (Ferretti 2021).

Mitigating solutions to the social impact of mass tech unemployment or degrading working conditions and domination may include the development of policies, like upskilling and reskilling programmes, or the proposal for an Universal Basic Income (Van Parijs 2004; 1995). But while the former can constitute a kind of social protection and a means to give voice to workers,[3] the latter seems to replace the question of protection *at* work with the question of protection *from* work, a kind of protection on the market that ensures that exit-options can be costless, resourced and protected (Lazar 2018; 2021b).

Even if sponsored by influential neo-republican theorists (Pettit 2008a), UBI has been heavily criticised as a mitigating solution for job losses due to AI-mediated labour, seeing in it a fatalistic and post-hoc method that does not address the real independence of workers (Santoni de Sio *et al.* 2021; Santoni de Sio 2024). However, there are other important reasons in favour of UBI rejection in this case. UBI makes the conditions and configurations of power and authority in work as fundamentally voluntaristic, strictly related to individual actions, and to flexibility and exit strategies within the economic world of market, neglecting possible debates about socio-political actions within workplaces. UBI does not eradicate the problem of domination, since, while it can recognise to workers as a class the possibility to move between and from works, it does not address nor challenge the structural conditions and

[3] See section 3.2 on voice.

asymmetric power structures upon which work is placed.[4] Even if at a first glance exit options may make individuals more independent in a dyadic and interactional perspective (with a specific company or employer), a broader perspective might be aware that any exit-choice should be assessed with reference to collective strategies, which may be heavily dependent on the reconfiguration of work and the set of rules and norms that this entails.

3.2. Voice

AI can also be employed in the post-hiring phase, particularly in performance and career management, task assignment, work allocation, and evaluation through tracking technologies (Fabris *et al*. 2025). In late 2020, trade unions affiliated with the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) brought the food-delivery company Deliveroo to court in Bologna, arguing that its AI system – named Frank – violated workers' rights, including the right to strike.

The Court of Bologna found that Deliveroo's profiling system, which assessed riders based on reliability and participation, failed to differentiate between absences due to trivial reasons and those due to strikes, illness, disability, or caregiving responsibilities. This resulted in discrimination against those with legitimate reasons for absence, potentially excluding them from the priority group and reducing their future employment opportunities (Trib. Bologna, Ord. 31 December 2020; Borzaga, Mazzetti 2022).

Frank did not account for the varied motivations behind late cancellations (i.e., cancellations within 24 hours), while the Self-Service Booking system compelled riders to log in and physically appear in the work area due to geolocation tracking. Failure to do so could lead to negative cus-

[4] Gourevitch criticises UBI for two reasons: it fails to meet the costs of leaving a work (work implies other non-material costs like the need of ties and creativity that UBI cannot compensate), and it does not increase the bargaining power of workers in regular and small disagreements norms that daily take place in workplaces, see Gourevitch 2013; 2016. Moreover, UBI requires a pluralistic approach, which should put a greater attention to other challenges, related to UBI maintenance, stability against political changes, and meaningfulness for workers. For further details see Lazar 2021b.

tomer reviews and a lower reliability score (Borzaga, Mazzetti 2022). Although Deliveroo was ordered to compensate the unions, the algorithm itself remained unchanged.

These AI-driven management tools created a rule-based power asymmetry, systematically disadvantaging riders marked by lower scores. This impacted their day-to-day decisions, long-term priorities, and future employment access (Capasso *et al.* 2024). AI-driven management systems often fail to consider workers' needs or the reasons behind their absence, overlooking context-specific and individual circumstances. This case illustrates how AI can hinder workers' ability to form social bonds, organize collectively, and join trade unions, which are all rights protected under Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). More significantly, it shows how algorithmic management can undermine collective bargaining, a key mechanism for workers to have a voice and influence how work is structured (*ibidem*).

Alongside the right to exit, "voice" is central to achieving freedom as non-domination in the public sphere of work (Breen 2017). Hirschman defines voice as the act of expressing concerns to change management policies (Hirschman 1970, 30). While exit represents independence from failing institutions, voice depends on robust procedures that empower individuals and communities to address injustices within organisations or institutions. Voice is a means to implement "institutional arrangements for workers" (Hsieh 2005, 116), such as possibilities to be represented on boards, right to have tribunals, or to express grievances and require justifications for managerial decisions (Hsieh 2005; 2008). Voice requires holding employers accountable and responsive to the interests of their employees via formal and informal methods, "whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion" (Hirschman 1970, 30).

Neo-republican theorists often frame the concept of "voice" in terms such as the "constitutional workplace" (González Ricoy 2014), "workplace republicanism" (Hsieh 2005), or "workplace government" (Anderson 2021). A real option for exit can strengthen voice, as both serve to protect workers' interests and reshape unjust norms (Hirschman 1970).

Yet, both depend on democratic principles ensuring equal participation in policy decisions – workers, like citizens, should not be subject to arbitrary structures (González Ricoy 2014). While "workplace democracy" is not a new concept (Cohen 1989), recent neo-republican definitions emphasize workers' equal power in relation to managerial authority (González Ricoy 2020; Breen 2015). Its goal is to ensure that workers' interests are adequately considered in internal decision-making and to limit arbitrary managerial control (González Ricoy 2019).

As seen in the Deliveroo case in Bologna, trade union actions and *ex post* collective bargaining remain important tools. However, fostering workplace democracy also requires *ex ante* measures, such as transparency in AI systems used for employment and management decisions (Collins, Atkinson 2023). Current AI systems often lack clarity regarding how worker data is used and how algorithmic decisions are made (De Stefano, Taes 2023).

For example, AI-as-a-Service (AIaaS) further complicates transparency. These systems – like AI chatbots or interview tools – rely on cloud-based infrastructures that obscure data processes, often involving underpaid or hidden human labour. Tasks such as data collection, training, and validation are outsourced to distributed, often anonymous, micro-workers (Newlands 2021; Bechmann, Bowker 2019). This global, invisible workforce sustains the AI economy yet remains largely unregulated (Bilić, Prug, Žitko 2021).

A broader concern is how lack of transparency and growing "labour invisibilisation" becomes normalized through organizational culture and social norms (Rabelo, Mahalingam 2019). While Recital 36 of the AI Act recognizes platform and self-employed workers, it fails to include explicit labour protections (AI Act, Recital 36). Voice mechanisms should not only provide recognition but also enable effective representation, by granting workers formal and informal means to challenge managerial decisions (Hsieh 2005; 2008). Although AI used in recruitment is classified as high-risk, requiring self-assessment under the AI Act and Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs) under the GDPR (AI Act, Recital 36; GDPR, art. 35, 3a), critics argue these internal assessments risk becoming empty formalities, and a mere "tick-box exercise" by employers that do not meaningfully support workers' voice (Collins, Atkinson 2023; Capasso *et al.* 2024).

To democratise the workplace, it is necessary to challenge power asymmetries that are not only sociologically illegitimate – in the sense of empowering groups while systematically disempowering others – but also morally problematic. According to Laborde, domination arises when institutions or norms fail to protect human interests that we have reason to value and "basic capabilities" that are essential for moral agency (Laborde 2010, 53-55). In this set of capabilities Laborde inserts a "minimal ability for self-direction and autonomy", socio-economic capabilities such as subsistence or health, and some level of control over collective life, which all contribute to resist domination and the internalisation of norms of subjection (Laborde 2010, 52, 56). Without such "democratic capabilities", individuals are deprived of control over "the parameters' of their own lives and control over one's own labour" (Laborde 2010, 60).[5]

Empirical studies show that platform workers, such as those at Deliveroo or Foodora, have developed forms of algorithmic resistance that "break" the algorithms and the control those companies assert (Bronowicka, Ivanova 2021). For instance, they try to decipher how algorithms assign tasks or manipulate their behaviours to avoid penalties, by riding slower to avoid distant jobs or masking GPS data (Bronowicka, Ivanova 2021; Cant 2019).

Yet, such individual resistance is not enough. Collective forms of resistance must also emerge to reshape the broader system of AI-mediated labour. Workplace democracy extends beyond exit and voice; it entails active participation in shaping social institutions that produce public goods and sustain public spheres – such as work, health, infrastructure, and many others. Collective forms may include public awareness practices like worker-led protests, campaigns, and collective learning and self-organisation. Scholars have documented how platform workers organize through radical unions, or by sharing information about shift-booking systems or new functionalities of softwares (Heiland, Schaupp 2021; Bronowicka, Ivanova 2021). These practices form new norms of visibility and contestation. A core tenet of neo-republican thought is the equal normative authority of all individuals: citizens are

[5] For an analysis on republicanism and capabilities in the economic realm see Claassen, Herzog 2021.

the source of the norms that govern them (Gädeke 2020). In the workplace, this principle demands that workers participate equally in shaping the rules and institutions that structure their labour.

Conclusions

This paper has explored how AI technologies are reshaping the conditions of labour, not only through technical processes of automation and data-driven management, but through the deeper, often opaque restructuring of workplace power relations. Far from being neutral tools, algorithmic systems contribute to defining who is seen as an "ideal employee", someone employable, productive and reliable, while reinforcing existing norms and introducing new forms of exclusion and control.

By focusing on case studies in AI used for recruitment and workers management, including the Amazon and Deliveroo cases of a few years ago, I have shown how AI systems can limit workers' ability to act collectively, challenge managerial decisions, and participate meaningfully in the governance of their labour. These systems do not merely mediate tasks, they participate in governing behaviour, shaping incentives, and narrowing the space for dissent and contestation. As such, they raise fundamental questions about freedom, accountability, and legitimacy in the workplace.

The paper has argued that traditional frameworks like Hirschman's concepts of *exit* and *voice*, while useful, are insufficient to grasp the structural and power dimensions of domination introduced by AI-mediated labour. Instead, a neo-republican lens offers a more robust normative foundation, capable of addressing emerging AI-mediated societal harms and foregrounding non-domination and democratic practices at work. Some recent studies have begun to address the relationship between AI, algorithmic management, and workplace democracy, by highlighting the role of co-determination in mitigating power imbalances (Klengel, Wenckebach 2021), the importance of transparent and inclusive algorithmic systems (Krzywdzinski *et al.* 2024), and the potential of participatory governance models in shaping autonomy and meaningfulness of work in the context of automation and technological change (Mardosas 2024). However, further research is needed to assess how different governance models (e.g. co-determination, worker participation, collective bargain-

ing) operate across sectors and concretely shape AI implementation in the workplace. Normative work is also required to refine concepts such as non-domination and workers' exit and voice, examining the conditions they require, the trade-offs they may involve, and how they might be translated into AI design and regulation.

Ultimately, if AI is to serve the interests of workers, and not merely those of employers or platforms, it must be embedded within institutional and contextual structures that enable transparency, contestation, and co-governance. This calls for the development of new theories and methods for *distributed* AI *power*, including co-creation between developers and community stakeholders, as well as strategies to mitigate societal harms arising in algorithmic and data generation, curation, and evaluation (Davis *et al.* 2021). Workplace democracy, in this view, is not simply a desirable ideal, but a necessary condition for resisting arbitrary power and reclaiming control over the increasingly digital terrain of labour.

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