

**Class identity of platform workers:  
A comparative study of employed and self-  
employed food couriers**

Alexandra Seehaus

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative qualitative investigation of class identities in platform work. It examines how employed and self-employed food couriers in England and Germany position themselves within socio-economic hierarchies.

The self-organisation of workers in the platform sector, particularly among food couriers, has raised much interest among scholars (Joyce et al., 2020; Vandaele, 2021). While the working conditions and resistance of couriers are widely studied (Trappmann et al., 2020; Cant, 2020; Stuart et al., 2024), their identities have not been the focus of empirical research, and few platform researchers have applied a class perspective (Robinson 2017).

This research asks how couriers perceive their socio-economic position within society and investigates what shapes their class identities. It follows an integrated approach to class analysis (Wright, 2005) and conceptualises class identity as an element of class consciousness (Mann, 1973; Gurin et al., 1980; Keefer et al., 2015). A key assumption is that class identity develops over the life course through an interplay of work and life experiences (Mann, 1973).

Based on 33 in-depth interviews with couriers in Germany and England, which were analysed following the coding system of Grounded Theory (Glaser et al., 1968; Glaser, 1978), the thesis shows that these workers are largely aware of their socio-economic position. Their class identifications reflect the job's role in their lives: as side income on the journey to professional middle-class careers, a shared struggle necessary to make a living, and a move up from worse jobs. The thesis argues that the misidentifications in this study are not primarily the result of misrecognition but reflect the material reality of parts of the courier workforce.

By offering an explanation based on material changes in the world of work, the thesis takes forward debates about middling tendencies and class disidentification in modern capitalism (Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 2015; Irwin, 2018). It demonstrated that the context of platform work and its role in people's lives can both obstruct and support the development of working-class identities among different parts of the workforce. It thereby also aids the understanding of resistance and consent in the platform sector (Galière, 2020; Purcell and Brook, 2022; Stuart et al., 2024).

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# Table of Contents

## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1 Research Questions and Objective .....	11
1.2 Summary of Key Findings and Contributions .....	12
1.3 Thesis Structure .....	16
Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Class and Class Identity.....	19
2.1 Different ways of looking at class .....	19
2.1.1 Exploitation and inevitable social change.....	20
2.1.2 From social closure to static schemes .....	22
2.1.3 Stability through misrecognition.....	24
2.1.4 Materialist class analysis after the cultural turn.....	26
2.2 Class identity .....	30
2.3 Class identity in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century.....	34
2.3.1 Class identities in decline? .....	34
2.3.2 Work context .....	37
2.3.3 Precarisation .....	39
2.3.4 Wider life context and care relations.....	42
2.3.5 Ideology.....	44
2.3.6 Conflicting identities .....	48
2.3.7 Participation in collective action.....	54
2.2.8 New manifestations of class identity .....	55
2.4 Summary .....	56
Chapter 3: Platform Food Courier Work.....	59
3.1 Platforms as capital-labour relations.....	60
3.2. Food Courier platforms and their Labour Process.....	65
3.2.1 The business model.....	65
3.2.2 The labour process.....	68
3.3 The Platform Food Courier Workforce .....	82
3.3.1 Who works as a platform food courier? .....	82
3.4. Resistance in the food platform sector.....	85

## VIII

3.4.1 Individual Misbehaviour.....	86
3.4.2 Industrial Relations Context and Collective Action.....	87
3.4.3 Organising Collective Action .....	92
3.5 Conclusion.....	94
Chapter 4: Methodology.....	98
4.1 Overview of the Research Design .....	98
4.1.1 Comparative Research Design .....	99
4.1.2 Sampling Strategy .....	100
4.1.3 Research Methods .....	103
4.2 Data Collection.....	106
4.2.1 Interview Structure .....	108
4.2.2 Reflection on Challenges in the Data Collection – Interviews on Class .....	110
4.3 Data Analysis.....	113
4.3.1 Analytical Approach .....	113
4.3.2 Analytical Technique .....	116
4.4 Methodological Limitations .....	119
4.4 Conclusion.....	121
Chapter 5: Working as a Food Courier.....	122
5.1 Pathways.....	122
5.2 Pull and Push Factors .....	124
5.2.1 Pull Factors.....	124
5.2.2 Push Factors.....	130
5.3 Dependency and Prospects.....	132
5.4 Experiences .....	135
5.4.1 Negotiating Pay: Accepting and Hoping.....	136
5.4.2 Physical Labour: Short-Term Challenge and Long-Term Risk .....	140
5.4.3 Harassment and Assault.....	143
5.4.4 Limited Realization of Flexibility .....	145
5.4.5 Missing Care and Recognition.....	147
5.4.6 Independence and Isolation .....	151
5.5 Conclusion.....	154
5.5.1 Employees and Contractors .....	155
5.5.2 Fragmented Realities .....	156

Chapter 6: Class Identifications.....	162
6.1. Class self-identifications.....	163
6.1.1 Middle-class positioning .....	165
6.1.2 Belonging to the working-class .....	178
6.1.3 Disidentification .....	195
6.2 Conclusion.....	202
Chapter 7: What Shapes Class Identity .....	206
7.1 Biographic factors .....	207
7.1.1 Experiences of Social Constraints .....	208
7.1.2 Experiences of social mobility.....	213
7.1.3 Experiences of Migration .....	218
7.1.4 Summary of Biographic Factors .....	224
7.2 National Comparative Factors .....	225
7.2.1 <i>Self-perception and Expectations towards the Platforms</i> .....	226
7.2.2 Participation in Labour Resistance.....	238
7.2.3 Summary of Participation in Labour Resistance .....	245
7.3 Conclusion.....	247
Chapter 8: Discussion.....	249
8.1 Summary of findings .....	250
8.1.1 Moving on, coming to terms, or fighting for a good enough deal.....	250
8.1.2 Belonging to a class versus. aspiring individually.....	252
8.1.3 Biographic experiences of social inequality pre-empt and shape experiences at work.....	254
8.1.4 National differences in culture and industrial relations matter .....	255
8.2 Key Contributions.....	257
8.2.1 No boss, no worker .....	258
8.2.2 Class identity before, beyond and in between work .....	265
8.2.3 Resignation and Consent .....	273
8.3 Conclusion.....	281
References .....	285
Appendices.....	317
Appendix A: Conceptualization of Class Consciousness .....	317
Appendix B: Interview questions skeleton guide.....	319
Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire.....	322

Appendix D: Transcription Conventions ..... 327

Appendix E: Request to participate ..... 328

Social media - Facebook..... 328

Social Media – Twitter to IWGB..... 328

Social Media – WhatsApp- Correspondence ..... 329

Appendix F: Participant information Sheet ..... 330

Appendix G: Consent Form ..... 332

Appendix H: Sample Table ..... 333

Appendix I: Table Class Identifications ..... 334

## List of abbreviations

ALLBUS	German General Social Survey (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften)
BES	British Election Surveys
BSA	British Social Attitudes Survey
CASMIN	Comparative Social of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations
EP/EPG-scheme	Erikson–Goldthorpe scheme/ Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero scheme
FAU	Free Workers Union
GBCS	Great British Class Survey
GESIS/GGSS	German General Social Survey (Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften)
GT	Grounded Theory
ISI	Ideological Social Identity
ISSP	International Social Survey Program
IWGB	Independent Workers Union of Great Britain
LPT	Labour Process Theory
NGG	Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststaetten
NSER	Non-Standard Employment Relationship
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-economic Classification

PCI	Problem Centred Interview
SC	Social Class based on Occupation (formerly Registrar General's Social Class)
SCOT	Social Construction of Technology (SCOT
SEG	Socio-economic Groups
SER	Standard Employment Relationship
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SST	Social Shaping of Technology
Verdi	Public Service Union (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft)



## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines how food couriers in different contexts make sense of inequality and how their self-positioning within socio-economic hierarchies relates to the courier job and other factors in their lives. A key contribution of the study is to present a unique, qualitative investigation of class identities in platform work based on an analysis of German and English platform workers.

The motivation for this study lies in the challenges that a rapidly changing world of work and ongoing processes of individualisation pose for the understanding, organisation, and representation of workers' interests in a time of reinforced class inequalities.

The growth in the service sector, the development of transformative technologies, globalisation, and the neoliberal turn towards deregulation have affected Western societies socially, culturally and politically (Glyn, 2007; Perez, 2010; Streeck, 2017; Jessop, 2023). As a result, employment relationships, work trajectories, workplaces, communities, and jobs themselves are changing. Work and employment are increasingly characterised by feminisation, flexibilisation, fragmentation and financialisation (Rubery, 2015). This is partially the result of a shift from industrial to financial capitalism and its ongoing evolution and crisis (Windolf, 2005; Lapavistas, 2011). It is also closely linked to the increasing importance of information and knowledge in modern societies (Castells, 1999; Powell and Snellman, 2004).

Contrasting the widespread experience of standard employment by former workforces, traditional working-class communities and their union-led movements, the labour force of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is increasingly diverse and flexible (Kalleberg, 2009; European Parliament, 2016). It consists of a growing number of remote and freelancing workers, the digital nomads (Eckhardt and Atanasova, 2024), who present a vital part of the growing gig economy (Woodcock and Graham, 2019; Vallas and Schor, 2020). The expansion of temporary work (Doerre et al., 2009; EUROSTATS, 2023) and outsourced contractors in segmented labour markets (Purcell, 1998; Eichhorst and Tobsch, 2015), as well as low pay in growing sectors like call centres (Burgess and Connell, 2006; Woodcock, 2017), reflect only part of the new extent of precarity (Kalleberg, 2009; Alberti et al., 2018). The strongholds of former working-class movements in automobile factories, mines, and steelworks have been considerably transformed through the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2017).

Social change over the past four decades has acted to blur extant class differences, prompting some scholars to foresee the death of class (Pakulski and Waters, 1996): imagining capitalism without it (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Certainly, welfare state programs and policies have diffused class conflicts, and the diversification of occupational structures make class locations increasingly ambiguous, leading to fewer shared labour market experiences between workers (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Clark et al., 1993). Ideas of class and class identities also crumble under rising affluence and consumerism, which has shifted attention from materialist towards post-materialist issues (Clark et al., 1993; Inglehart and Abramson, 1994).

In the face of persisting and increasing socio-economic inequality (Piketty, 2014; Nachtwey, 2016) and the continuous attacks on working conditions in many sectors and countries (European Parliament, 2016), objective class inequalities and their profound effects can hardly be disputed (Scott, 2002; Weeden et al., 2007; Kraus and Keltner, 2009; OECD, 2014). While suggestions that class has lost its relevance in modern Western societies (Beck, 1992; Pakulski and Waters, 1996) are slowly being refuted, class identifications have become more ambivalent (Savage et al., 2001) and class-disidentification is common (Savage et al., 2010; Irwin, 2015). For several decades, “to be working class and proud was considered an oxymoron” (Bloodworth, 2019, x). Rather than evoking pride and a sense of community, the working class and the jobs associated with it were seen as something people should escape from (ibid.).

Individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and moralised discourses around class (Lamont, 2000; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs and Wood, 2009) made socio-economic positions appear as the result of individual performance and attitudes. They have ultimately become framed as a matter of self-responsibility and individual agency (Lessenich, 2009; Frericks and Höppner, 2019). Research shows that fewer people may see coherent classes, and some even disavow class, but more importantly, accounts of class and self-positioning are not absent but “multi-faceted, complex and in process” (Irwin, 2018). In some countries, like England, working-class identification remains comparably high despite the growth of white-collar jobs (Heath et al., 2009). These ambiguous tendencies suggest that more in-depth research is required to explore the contemporary shifts in class identification.

Platform workers present an ideal case for such an investigation. The recent eruption of labour resistance - like the strike waves in the UK since 2022 (Hodder and Mustchin, 2024) and especially in the platform sector over the past ten years (Joyce et al., 2020; Woodcock, 2021;

Umney et al., 2024), give reason to investigate whether these cases of class struggle go hand in hand with a revival or even an emergence of new forms of class identity. It is, therefore, interesting how platform couriers make sense of social inequality and how they see their position within social hierarchies. While the relationship between class identity and class action is not easily defined (Mann, 1973; Heiland and Schaupp, 2020), the platform couriers' unity in action makes a collective identity likely.

Platform workers also present an intriguing case for research because their work context may shape class identification. Despite being a highly heterogeneous workforce and locally dispersed, couriers have successfully organised across the globe and formed lasting networks and solidarities, and it's been indicated that minority communities within the workforce played a crucial part in this (Cant, 2020). There is thus the question of whether the characteristics of the workforce, the workers' social background, biographic context, and motifs in the job promote views and identities that encourage such class action. The working conditions could drive identity formation among food couriers. The depersonalised character of algorithmic management and the avoidance of social protection and management accountability leave merely an instrumental interest between labour and capital stripped bare of other relations. It has been argued that such a re-established cash nexus (Westergaard, 1970; Marx et al., 1984; Joyce, 2020) while presenting a strong moment of control, can also be a key driver for resistance, with slight shifts having the potential to set off contestation and antagonism (Joyce, 2020).

The transformation of society and work, the shift in class discourses, and the new waves of labour resistance pose the question of whether workers see inequality and conflicts in their workplaces through the lens of class, what class means to them today, and whether it still functions as a performative concept in the organisation and representation of workers' interests.

Against this backdrop, this research aimed to examine how workers make sense of social inequality and their own position, and what constraints or enables their identification with class. The thesis explores the class identities of platform food couriers and what shapes them. It is based on 33 biographically integrated interviews conducted with couriers in England and Germany, which were analysed using the coding system of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). The study of employed couriers in Germany and self-employed couriers in England does not present a systematic country comparison. It does, however, allow an understanding of class identity and the conditions of its formation in contrasting contexts with

different employment models, and industrial relations regulations. By applying an integrated understanding of class and defining class identity as an element of class consciousness (Mann, 1973; Wright, 2009; Keefer et al., 2015), the research draws attention to the structural and cultural forces shaping class and class identity (Chibber, 2022).

The couriers' class identifications are further contextualized in their subjective work and life experiences, providing biographic insights into how workers came into the courier job, how dependent they are on it, and how they experience the work. A key point of the thesis is that the increasing heterogeneity of the workforce has a role to play in shaping platform couriers' identification with social class. Despite working blue-collar jobs, many couriers still identified as middle class. This had as much to do with the characteristics of the job as the role the job played in their lives. The thesis seeks to uncover how couriers characterise and distinguish working and middle-class identities and the political implications of such characterisations. The thesis further draws attention to the varying depths of class identification and their link to participation in collective action. It contributes to resurgent debates on class and class identity and to a better understanding of platform workers as a growing workforce and the conditions of their mobilisation.

### The death and revival of class

Working conditions across Europe have been deteriorating. Wide-reaching re-regulation has reinforced old inequalities (Piketty, 2014; Groh-Samberg and Hertel, 2015; Nachtwey, 2016) while the ongoing process of precarisation has created new objective uncertainties and subjective fears throughout society (Salmon and Heery, 2000; Castel et al., 2009; Vallas and Prener, 2012; European Parliament, 2016). Class feeling, thinking, and acting have persistently shaped people's life chances via care work, education, political attitudes, and health (Ball 2003; Sayer 2005; Evans 2006; Savage 2015, Reay 2005). Social inequalities and their effects on people's lives have, in many ways, become more severe since the COVID-19 pandemic (Palomino et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021; Blundell et al., 2022) and left subjective feelings of a worsening situation (Hövermann and Kohlrausch, 2020). The relative worsening of many workers' socio-economic situation and the increasing gap between rich and poor could easily be read as reinforcement of class inequalities (Piketty, 2014; Nachtwey, 2016; Umney, 2018).

However, while increasing inequality has not remained unnoticed, for several decades, neither public discourse nor protests have suggested that these developments were understood as a matter of class. In fact, there is strong ambiguity in workers' perception of inequality and their hesitation to frame their own situation in terms of class. People of different socio-economic positions tend to locate themselves in the middle of society, refer to their own 'ordinariness' and are reluctant to describe others in terms of class (Savage et al. 2001). Particularly, those positioned towards the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy reject class labels (Skeggs, 1997; Savage, 2015). There are various explanations for these phenomena as results of processes of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Clery, 2012), ambivalence in the perception of agency and structural conditions (Miles et al., 2013; Trappmann, Seehaus, et al., 2021), optimistic perception and expectation of social mobility (Keefer et al., 2015, pp. 271), a strong identification bias towards the middle (Vogel, 2009; Kadritzke, 2016; Irwin, 2018) as well as reference group perspectives (Evans and Kelley, 2004). At the same time, there is a strong indication that ideological and cultural shifts play a crucial role. The discourse around class has become moralised, and people, thus, feel uncomfortable talking about class inequalities (van Eijk, 2013; Irwin, 2018). While some reject an identification as working class to avoid the associated stigma, others refrain from calling themselves middle class for fear of being considered snobs (Skeggs, 2004; Bennett et al., 2008).

These obstacles in talking about class and identifying with it are linked to the political and academic discourse about class itself. Class analysis in Europe has been on the defensive since the 1990s (Savage, 2016; Bach, 2018), when it was suggested classes were dissolving (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) or had become a 'zombie category' in individualised capitalism (Giddens, 1981; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Because of these debates, the concept of class as an analytical category has been almost completely abandoned in Germany (Kadritzke, 2016, pp. 639) and, from a Marxian perspective, has lost much of its substance in the UK (Savage, 2016; Bach, 2018).

Although these arguments about the end of class have neither empirically nor theoretically proven convincing (Curran, 2018), the structural narratives of class analysis have not fully recovered yet. The rebirth of class analysis was predominantly driven by cultural approaches (Mythen, 2005; Scott, 2006; Atkinson, 2007; Atkinson, 2010) and by contributions that attempt to readjust class theories and empirical research through multidimensional (Della

Porta et al., 2014) and intersectional perspectives (Crompton, 2008a; Skeggs, 2015). There is a new debate now that “class structures, struggles and modes of domination persist as doggedly as ever” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 26). Classes and class identity have changed their form or manifestation (Flemmen, 2013) just as class structures have become more fragmented nationally and globally (Standing, 2009).

It needs to be asked how people today make sense of class inequalities. At least for the UK, research on people’s lay perception of inequality shows that there still is some identification with social class, even if people have highly diverse ways of perceiving and describing class-relevant issues (Irwin, 2018). Recent statistics have also indicated a slow rise in class awareness and working-class identity despite the growth of white-collar jobs (Heath and Bennett, 2023). Despite a widespread individualised way of sense-making, it is plausible to assume that individuals are redefining themselves collectively in the sense of social class.

Class research, primarily through cultural approaches, has started to explore what these new forms of class and class identity look like, identified new phenomena, and offered first explanations. However, a revival and refinement of materialist approaches remains nascent, with much work left to do (Haubner, 2017; Chibber, 2022). Revived materialist perspectives can challenge, expand, and complement explanations of class ambiguity, middling tendencies, and disidentification. Instead of focusing on cultural and ideological factors, they can elucidate the role of structural transformations and the dynamics of power and exploitation.

#### Class Identity in flexibilised Capitalism

Considering that the working class has always been socially and spatially divided by gender, race, location, migration, uneven development, and variation in working conditions (Das, 2012, pp. 26), it must be asked what it is, at any time and place, that enables unity among different sections of the working class (Ibid.).

Research so far has identified various factors which are considered to shape class identity and consciousness. Beyond the unresolved question of whether someone works in blue-collar or service work (Bell, 1973; Hochschild, 1983; Ikeler and Crocker, 2021), studies suggest that the workplace and factors like job security, working conditions and patterns of control and supervision shape people’s awareness of class (Beynon, 1973; Burawoy, 1985; Vallas, 1987). At the same time, broader life context and care relations are increasingly recognised to shape class

identities (Reay, 2005; Crean, 2018; Irwin, 2018). With the ongoing cultural shifts of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), class identity has also become, for some, a moral issue (Sayer, 2005). This is strongly influenced by ideological discourses that touch on questions of dignity (Lamont, 2000), stigma and recognition (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) and respectability (Skeggs, 1997). The use of class language is considered more stigmatised or stigmatising in some national contexts than in others (van Eijk, 2013). Class identity has further been considered to be influenced by the fragmentation of society along the lines of, for example, gender and ethnicity and the role that associated identities play in people's lives (Leggett, 1968; Zingraff and Schulman, 1984; Crompton, 2008a). Lastly, the experience of collective action is also regarded as a potentially strong promoter of class identification (Langford, 1994; Maurer, 2001; della Porta et al., 2014). That class struggle can exist independently of widespread class identity and consciousness has been indicated historically. Radical strikes broke out in companies whose workers, in the majority, expressed contentment and cooperative attitudes just a few years earlier (Goldthorpe, 1969; Mann, 1973; Heiland and Schaupp, 2020). While it is possible that conflict potential was not recognised due to inadequate research instruments (Fantasia, 1989; Heiland and Schaupp, 2020), it may also be argued that workers' class consciousness and action developed spontaneously. This would not necessarily indicate an explosion (Lefebvre, 1968; Glucksmann, 1968) but reflect class consciousness's bumpy rather than linear development (Mann, 1973, p. 48). Overall, class consciousness and identity are just as much a matter of primal social experiences as they result from socio-economic positions. Their study must, therefore, recognise the role of subjective meaning as much as its structural causes (Allen 1974, p. 10, 14).

Since many of these factors are subject to continuous change, there is further reason to revive investigations into the formation of class identity among contemporary workforces. Based on prior research, it must be asked how the flexibilised working conditions and subjective feelings of uncertainty induced by ongoing precarisation may influence identifications with class. Equally, digitalisation can be assumed to have made a noticeable impact on working conditions, especially regarding skills, direct control, and supervision, which are considered relevant to worker's perception of class. Fragmented work trajectories, shifting work-life balances, and the role of identity-based social movements all indicate the need for new research in class identity.

## Platform work and the struggle of food couriers

Platform workers are among the most visible groups of protesters across the globe (Umney et al., 2024). Platform work has been expanding globally for almost two decades, and a rapidly growing number of workers are earning their income mainly or partly via platforms (Schor et al., 2020). However, many improvements promised by a ‘new digital economy’ have proved to be an illusion, bringing casualisation and neo-taylorisation (Briziarelli, 2019). With the rise of platform companies and their competitive business models, criticism about pay, employment status, and health and safety has been growing (Bessa et al., 2022).

Across different platforms for cleaning services, repair, childminding and various courier and delivery services, some of the strongest labour unrest has been in the food delivery sector, with workers protesting through wildcat strikes, logoffs, and demonstrations (Joyce et al., 2020; Bessa et al., 2022). It is challenging for couriers to organise collectively for many reasons, including their local dispersion across towns, the diversity of the workforce and the high turnover. Nonetheless, couriers in various countries have been able to establish not only online communities like other remote platform workers but also build enduring offline networks. (Woodcock, 2021; Cini, 2023). Their resistance has been interesting for scholars because of the role that collectives, supporting communities and grassroots unions played in the organising besides or instead of mainstream unions (Vandaele, 2018; Vandaele, 2021; Stuart et al., 2024).

The work of platform food couriers can be described as unskilled, physical labour mainly performed by male workers, many of them with migrant backgrounds. Riders have little contact with customers and are not required to perform emotional labour. Their work is not collectivised as they carry out deliveries by themselves. Compared to the work in grocery delivery that is centralised through the warehouses, the task of food couriers is more isolated and contact with colleagues is only possible if typical waiting zones are established by the workers themselves. The job is often associated with time pressure due to the principle of on-demand delivery.

While the job of a courier in general – for example, in postal services – has a long tradition, platform courier work brings some new elements. There is no standard to reflect on the development of employment relations and working conditions. Food couriers are part of a business model defined as “lean platforms” (Srnicek, 2017, pp. 50), which provides intermediary digital infrastructures characterised by their concentration on specialised tasks (in this case, food delivery). Platform food couriers are part of the rapidly growing ICT-logistics sector and, as

such, are subordinated to automatic supervision by algorithmic management technology in the form of an App (Srniczek, 2017; Griesbach et al., 2019).

Having disrupted traditional industry models by rewriting the rules and creating new dynamics, the platform economy poses new challenges regarding the social protection of worker rights and representation (Forde et al., 2017). Workers are primarily independent contractors rather than employees, with the German market presenting an exception. Because of the lack of stability and protection in self-employment, platform work can carry many risks. It is characterised by low pay or non-payment, a lack of work or overwork, irregular hours, pressure from customer ratings, the risk of ‘deactivation’ by the platform algorithm, lack of transparency or accountability in decision-making processes, and a low level of social and employment protections (Forde et al., 2017; Joyce et al., 2020).

Besides their technological novelty, platforms ultimately present capital-labour relationships and management systems (Joyce and Stuart, 2021) in which dynamics of control and resistance play an important role in shaping working conditions (Gandini, 2019). Thus far, the work context of platform food couriers is not fundamentally different from that of traditional industrial or service workers who have formerly been the focus of research on class identity. However, the new business and management models and the dynamics of control and resistance make them a novel and interesting case for studying class identity and its conditions. While much research has explored the working conditions and resistance of food couriers (Trappmann et al., 2020; Cant, 2020; Stuart et al., 2024), few studies have considered class in their investigation of platform workers (Robinson, 2017; Milkman et al., 2021), and the identities of these workers have not been the focus of empirical research.

### Research Gaps

Class identity requires new investigation since many studies, although still valuable, are dated. They neither reflect the effects of recent waves of precarisation and increasing inequality nor capture crucial changes like digitalisation and the growth of platform work. Since the platform food courier sector and its heterogeneous workforce reflect relevant social developments that characterise Western capitalist societies today, couriers are highly suited for explorative research on class identity.

Moreover, class analysis of the past decades has predominantly been taken forward by cultural approaches. While the focus on consumption, values, and morale has broadened our understanding of class and sensitised research for the role of cultural and symbolic struggles in the reproduction of class, materialist perspectives have been upstaged. The renewal and refinement of class concepts and empirical analysis have been slow and one-sided, with few fundamental contributions from a materialist perspective.

Considering the current state of research on class identity, the central identified phenomena – disidentification, ambiguity, and middling tendencies – require further exploration. The fact that class language is more controversial in some countries than in others suggests that findings on class identification are most meaningful if evaluated against the backdrop of their specific context. The focus on a particular group of workers and their work and employment models rather than a random sample can help to better understanding these phenomena. Further, more in-depth approaches are needed to detect the subtle shifts and reformations of class identity under changed circumstances. Inductive qualitative research is most suitable for further exploring the meaning of class identities and conditions for their development.

Since new research indicated that care relations, reproductive work in general, and life outside of work are relevant for forming class identity, further research must investigate not a separate sphere but the links and boundaries between life and work. The fact that a multiplicity of co-existing identities must be expected in modern workforces further suggests that more biographic research is necessary to explore the development of identity against people's life course and biographic experiences of inequality.

Against this backdrop, this research investigates how platform food couriers describe their position in society regarding social class, what these identities mean to them, and how their working and living contexts shape these class identities.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows: After outlining the research questions and objectives that guide this thesis, I present the study's key findings and arguments. I then demonstrate how the research has contributed to existing literature. Finally, I outline the thesis structure.

## 1.1 Research Questions and Objective

This thesis examines how workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century make sense of their own position within social inequality and whether and how they identify in terms of class. The study aims to elucidate how the construction of class identities relates to individuals' work and broader life contexts and to offer explanations of the conditions that promote and hinder working-class identifications.

Focusing on a new sector characterised by technological innovation, flexibilisation, and potential precarity for its heterogeneous workforce, the thesis sheds light on the role that structural transformations and resulting changes in the world of work play in workers' identification or dis-identification with class. With much research having centred on cultural and ideological factors, this thesis brings in a focus on material conditions and adds explanations based on changed working and living conditions. It seeks to produce new empirical insights to shed light on the issue of 'class ambivalence' and middling tendencies (Savage et al. 2001; Payne and Grew 2005; Reay 2005; Irwin 2015) by further exploring people's commonly observed hesitation, uncertainty, and evasiveness when describing their position in terms of class. It also aims to understand how relevant the context of platforms work, the algorithmic control and other working conditions are to how couriers see their class position. By applying a comparative perspective, the thesis also elucidates the role of biographic, cultural and institutional differences. Overall, it contributes to the question of whether and how class, as an academic and lay concept, is still relevant to the understanding, organisation, and representation of workers' interests.

The key objective of this thesis is to show how couriers locate themselves within their image of society and what this identification means to them. It seeks to identify and characterise the central class identities that food couriers in this study hold. With platform courier work being a low-paid, unskilled blue-collar job, the thesis seeks to show whether couriers' class identifications align with this or which other criteria they put forward to define their position.

A further objective here is to establish which aspects of their lives, work context, or broader national institutional context are relevant to how the couriers identify with class. In particular, the thesis explores the relationship between courier's broader life experiences and their work-related experiences in constructing their class identities, as well as the relationship between cultural and structural influences. The thesis seeks to identify relevant factors that shape the courier's class identities.

Based on the theoretical and methodological framework that will be elaborated upon later, the following research questions constitute the basis of this thesis:

**How do food couriers identify in terms of social class, and what meaning do they assign to the class positions they identify with?**

**What shapes food couriers' class identities? What are the conditions that enable or promote working-class identities?**

To answer these questions and achieve the objectives, the study examines food couriers' subjective accounts – their life stories and reflections on work and society. In-depth biographic interviews were carried out with 33 platform food couriers in Germany and England, which were analysed following general principles of qualitative data analysis and, in particular, the coding system of Grounded Theory (Glaser et al., 1968; Glaser, 1978).

Since the research understands identification with class and wider class consciousness as an ongoing process which develops over a person's life course and is based on the interplay of work and life experiences as well as experiences of collective action, rich narrations present the most suitable form of data to reconstruct workers' experiences and identifications.

The combination of a narrative interview approach with cross-country comparison allows to contextualise the couriers' work and life experiences rather than depicting them in an abstract space (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011, pp. 604, ref. to Elder and Giele, 2009). The comparison between England and Germany enables us to study workers' experiences and perspectives in essentially the same job within contrasting platform models and their working conditions, as well as in different levels of social protection, industrial relations contexts, and class discourses.

As this research focuses on the interplay of subjective meaning and material conditions, a Grounded Theory coding system is helpful in that it forces a strong grounding in the data and emphasises the interviewee's subjective and situated sense-making. The thesis's findings and arguments are rooted in rich, high-quality data and a rigorous and credible analysis.

## 1.2 Summary of Key Findings and Contributions

This thesis presents four key findings.

Firstly, the thesis finds that the working-class and middle-class identities of the platform couriers are qualitatively different and have political implications.

Middle-class identifications were characterised by aspirations for improvement, a sense of individual agency, and an identification with the entrepreneurial aspects of the courier job or entirely different professional career prospects. Working class identifications, on the other side, emphasised dependency on work, low pay, strenuous work, a sense of shared situation and struggle, and a sense of injustice. The class identifications generally varied in terms of their depth. Some are mere descriptors based on socio-economic markers, others express boundary-drawing towards others, and some express a sense of belonging and shared struggle. However, overall, I argue that although both identifications describe socio-economic differences, middle-class identifications are overall labels for an individual situation, while working-class identifications signal a sense of a shared situation and belonging to a community.

Secondly, the thesis finds that the job characteristics and the meaning the job holds in the couriers' lives matter to the way in which they identify with class. The self-employment status and algorithmic management facilitate disidentification and middle-class identifications because the autonomy and flexibility of work allow couriers to see themselves as independent from bosses and other workers while also factually improving their working and living situation and providing them with a sense of agency. However, working-class identifications may evolve around occupational identities, experiences of collective action and broader life experiences of being disadvantaged. The latter are linked to the job when, for example, neglect by the platform companies or wage theft are experienced and cause outrage.

The meaning that the job holds biographically shapes couriers' experiences on the job and their perceptions of the working conditions. It also matters for their attitudes towards class action and whether they consider change through collective action possible and desirable. For many couriers, the platform job presents a good enough deal. Depending on various factors, including their class background and alternative labour market chances, they move on, come to terms and cope with the conditions, or fight for improvements.

Thirdly, the thesis found that class identifications were shaped by biographic experiences. While experiences of social constraints enabled identifications with the working class, experiences of social upward mobility and migration clearly promoted middle-class identifications or rejections of class. Many couriers with migrant backgrounds experienced their migration as improvement of their socio-economic situation which to them suggested a middle-class identity or an overcoming of class. The few cases in which couriers' migrant backgrounds

did not align with a view of themselves in the middle were when experiences of racism and exclusions led them to question their previously taken-for-granted status.

Fourthly, the thesis found that the wider cultural and institutional contexts matter for the formation of working-class identities in two ways: First, the different expectations towards work and employment standards in both countries shaped the perception of conflicts around work and mediated middle-and working-class identification. Couriers who identified as workers clearly pointed out conflicting interests between couriers and platforms, while others who framed them as lack of recognition or the result of bad organising held up middle-class identifications, often despite their dependency on the courier job. I argue that narrower expectations of platforms and fewer perceptions of conflicts with the company do not promote an identification as a worker. Second, the industrial relations context in Germany, particularly the works councils, which facilitated the transformation of moments of collective action into long-term collectivisation and repeated experiences of collective agency.

The thesis makes two substantial contributions to the field of class analysis and identifies challenges for the future study of class identity.

The thesis challenges and complements explanations of class ambivalence, middling tendencies and disidentification (Savage et al. 2001; Payne and Grew 2005; Irwin 2018), by offering an alternative explanation of these phenomena through a materialist lens. It argues that not the evasion of stigma alone leads blue-collar workers to disidentify with lower- and working-class positions, but also the relative upward move/mobility that platform work presents for some. For parts of the workforce with limited alternatives in the labour market, the flexibility, autonomy and additional earning potential in platform work are experienced as an escape from worse work and employment contexts and present an improvement within their work trajectories.

Second, the thesis explains class identities beyond the work context through wider life experiences. It argues that experiences of social constraints, social mobility and migration play a crucial role in forming workers' views of social inequality, injustice and their position in society. This echoes and expands the claim by feminist Marxists and feminist class researchers that class relations cannot be reduced to the context of wage labour (Crean, 2018), because this is not where exploitation necessarily begins or ends (Haubner, 2017).

This thesis further contributes to the emerging literature on platform work by offering a nuanced biographic understanding of who comes to work as a platform courier, why, and how

they experience the job. This complements the body of knowledge on the working conditions in platform food delivery (Wood et al., 2019b; Franke and Pulignano, 2023; Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023) and courier's protest (Heiland and Schaupp, 2020; Cini, 2023; Stuart et al., 2024). The study provides two explanations for why a large part of the workforce consent or put up with unsatisfactory working conditions rather than resist. First self-identified middle-class couriers do not frame problems in the job as antagonistic but as a result of lacking recognition or bad organisation. Second, the varying biographic meaning that the job holds for different parts of the workforce, means that the problems are either relativised because they present an overall improvement, or, as a temporary issue, are negligible. For many, individual coping appears more feasible than collective resistance. These findings contribute to understanding consent in platform work by adding to debates about the interplay of material and ideological discursive aspects in shaping couriers' experiences and evaluations of working conditions (Galière, 2020; Purcell and Brook, 2022; Morales and Stecher, 2023; Vallas and Schor, 2024).

The research, overall, provides valuable in-depth insights on platform workers as a growing workforce. It accounts for important developments in flexibilised capitalism – namely, the increasing role of service work, an overall trend towards precarization and the impact of digitalisation on work organisation and working conditions. Understanding food couriers' perceptions of living and working conditions and their take on inequalities in the workplace and society helps to draw a more accurate picture of the workforce in Western welfare states.

The thesis further demonstrates the relevance of materialist perspectives in class analysis to explain the shifts in class identification.

The thesis finds a need for future research to systematically conceptualise the temporal dimensions of class to further explore the interplay of work and life context. To understand class identity under conditions of modern capitalism, researchers must not only centre the work context itself but also explore its role within individuals' life trajectories.

The research findings also have implications for the field of platform research. Considering the role of flexibility and autonomy in enabling middle-class identities, it must be asked at which point decreasing fees and intensified precarity for many full-time couriers outweigh these benefits and shift their evaluation of the job and their position towards the company and society.

It is also of interest to better understand the role that collective action can play in shifting narratives and perceptions and indubitably affecting a sense of collective identity and agency. A more systematic comparison of the views and identities of collectively organised couriers versus those who are sceptical or unaware of collectives and unions would be useful to shed light on this.

### 1.3 Thesis Structure

The remainder of this thesis is arranged in the following chapters. **Chapter 2** reviews theoretical approaches within class analysis and maps out central controversies. It makes a case for the use of an integrated approach to class analysis (Wright, 2009) with reformulations by feminist Marxists (Haubner, 2017) and Marxist thinkers (Chibber, 2022) to revive a structuralist perspective to understand the reproduction of class society. Class identity is defined within a wider concept of class consciousness (Mann, 1973; Wright, 1985; Gurin, 1985; Wright, 2000a; Keefer et al., 2015). Reviewing empirical literature on class identity, the chapter carves out ambivalent findings on self-identification and summarises factors influencing its development, including the role of work and broader life context, intersecting identities, collective action and ideology. The chapter reflects critically on the performative effect of the historic political debate about class and the normative meaning carried by class as a common-sense concept. Bringing together different lines of thought, the chapter outlines a sensitising framework for the study of class identities that guides the research to look at the interplay of moralised discourses and structural changes in the world of work to make sense of class identities.

**Chapter 3** provides an overview of food platforms as businesses and workplaces. Making sense of platforms as capital-labour relations (Gandini, 2019), it uses Labour Process Theory (Thompson and Smith, 2009) to map out the dynamic of control and resistance for both national contexts. It describes different control mechanisms and outlines forms of individual misbehaviour and collective protests, indicating considerable differences in the context of employment status and industrial relations in Germany and the UK. Drawing a picture of the food courier workforce, the chapter indicates how the specific exploitation in the job is linked to the social situation of couriers, thus relating the social to the technical class composition. Lastly, the chapter links research on platforms with the literature on class identity to ask how moments in the labour process and resistance in the food courier sector may aid or obscure the

development of a working-class identification. The chapter provides crucial context for the specific conditions under which couriers form identities.

**Chapter 4** outlines the study's methodological approach and research methods. It details the philosophical assumptions guiding the study and argues that a comparative qualitative research approach is suitable and effective for exploring class identifications of platform workers. The rationale and procedure for data collection are outlined. The chapter explains why the study follows an integrated methodological approach combining elements of in-depth interviews with semi-structured interviews for the 33 interviews that were conducted with food couriers in Germany and England. It further explains why the analysis follows the coding system of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978) and how this was realised in practice. Finally, the limitations and quality of the data, the analysis process, and ethical standards are considered. The chapter offers a refined, sensitive methodological approach to studying the class identity of workers in Germany and England in the twenty-first century.

**Chapter 5** starts by exploring what it means to work as a food courier. It asks how research participants came to work as couriers, why they pursued this job, how long they intend to stay in it, how dependent they were on the income and how they experienced platform work and working conditions. The chapter gives evidence of the vast diversity of the workforce. It shows that participants did not simply start the courier job because they could not find other work or needed an easy side job to finance their education. Participants also picked up courier work because they wanted to escape abusive and alienating types of work and employment and were using the autonomy and flexibility of the job to recover from health issues. It further shows how couriers negotiate pay, the physical aspects of work, risks, flexibility limits, and the ups and downs of working alone. The chapter shows the relevance of the food courier job to the interviewees' current situation and overall life course. It thereby sheds light on the interviewees' expectations of work and working conditions and how they negotiate the benefits and downsides of the job in the face of their dependency.

**Chapter 6** shows how participants locate themselves within the class structure and whether they are wholly or partly conscious of their position and common interests as a class. It presents the courier's class identifications and their meaning. Central characteristics of middle— and working-class identifications are delineated, and three different types of disidentifications

are distinguished. Exploring how couriers relate their identification with class to their life stories and work experiences, the chapter indicates where structure, ideology, and a sense of agency play into the construction of class identities.

**Chapter 7** examines biographical and national contextual factors that influence the formation of couriers' working-class identities. It shows how experiences of social constraints and social downward mobility encourage identifications as working class and under which conditions experiences of migration may challenge middle-class identification. It shows how country-specific standards and expectations towards work and employment mediate class identifications and how participation in labour resistance facilitates the construction of working-class identities. The chapter shows the role biographic experiences, national contexts, and collective action play in forming class identities.

**Chapter 8** discusses the findings and their contribution to the literature. It draws together the conclusions of each empirical chapter and reflects on existing literature on class identity and platform work. Three contributions to the field of class analysis are discussed, as well as two contributions to the field of platform research. The thesis concludes by arguing the need for refined conceptualisations and research on the temporal dimension of class, a more comprehensive exploration of the role of flexibility and autonomy for middle-class identifications in other types of platform work and focussed comparative research on organised and non-organized platform workers to understand how misrecognition, consent and resignation are overcome. The chapter highlights the study's value within academic and political debates by showing how it enhances our understanding of inequality in today's world of work, points out moments of stability and change in flexibilised, digitalised capitalism and opens new avenues for further research.

## Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Class and Class Identity

At the core of this thesis are the following two assumptions. First, the situation of workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is considerably shaped by the social relations of class divisions, which manifest in economic, social and cultural inequalities. Second, by studying workers' class identifications, we can understand the persistence and reproduction of class inequalities and, most importantly, gain crucial insights into the potential and conditions for resistance against these inequalities.

This chapter explains how these assumptions are derived from class theory, lays out central terminology and outlines the conceptual framework that guides this thesis.

First, it explores the meaning of class and its political dimensions. Discussing different approaches to class analysis, the chapter maps out central controversies within class analysis and indicates potential solutions. It focuses on how class analysis can convincingly theorise the role of culture and structure to explain the reproduction of class inequalities and asks how new manifestations of class identity should be explored. The chapter combines different approaches to studying class identity and explains why class identity is here conceptualised as an element of class consciousness.

Second, the chapter discusses empirical research on class identity, focusing on factors influencing class identity. The literature review touches upon the role of work and broader life context, uncertainty in financialised capitalism, collective action, and ideology.

In this chapter, I argue that a revived materialist approach that acknowledges cultural forces and locates their role in the reproduction of class is best suited to understanding class identities if complemented with the idea of mediated class locations and a Marxist feminist reconceptualisation of exploitation. I also argue that more in-depth qualitative research is needed to explore further the complexities of class identifications and how they are used to negotiate the contradictions of life in capitalist society.

### 2.1 Different ways of looking at class

Class describes a hierarchical divide between major social groups that does not result from individuals' characteristics but their social relations to each other. This means that, contrary to other theories of stratification (like milieus or social strata), the class concept defines the position of one group as dependent on that of another. To think of society as a class society essentially means, therefore, understanding inequality as a result of social relations. The social relations of

class divisions can be viewed in economic, social, and cultural terms. The following section distinguishes different meanings of class, identifies shortcomings and strengths of various approaches and suggests ways to approach central controversies in this study.

### 2.1.1 Exploitation and inevitable social change

Karl Marx's work established the foundations for much of class analysis. Three distinct meanings of the term *class* have been applied in his work. Besides the *general model of class* as the most abstract conceptualisation, class is used as a categorisation for the *concrete analysis of class in specific societies* and to describe and analyse *collectively organised social actors*.

Firstly, in Marx's *general model*, class is understood as constituted by the processes of domination and exploitation and the consequent struggle and conflict between labour and capital. Marx sees a class society as characterised by conflict between the two main forces, capital and labour, which define the two main classes – bourgeoisie and proletariat. While the first owns means of production via which profits, rents and interests can be gained, the members of the second must sell their labour power in exchange for wages (Marx, 1867 [1887], p. 127). This conceptualisation offers a causal model for the emergence of inequality and the foundation of fundamentally contradictory interests and, hence, an antagonistic character of the relation between capital and labour (Groß, 2015). Inequality is, thus, not simply a result of an unequal distribution of goods within the population but of different sources of income. While workers gain income by their productivity as a workforce, capitalists accumulate surplus via exploitation. In this model, a class's income is in a causal relation to the other class's income: the disadvantage of one class is the benefit of the other, and the capitalist's wealth is responsible for the working class's poverty (Groß, 2008 [2015], p. 21f.). Class is, therefore, fundamentally defined by the relations of domination and exploitation.

To reiterate, since it is the central concept here, exploitation, in Marx's view, stems from the location in the production process: the appropriation of another's labour for one's own advantage or that of a group. In terms of class, this translates into the appropriation of the collectively produced surplus value for the ruling class at the cost of the ruled class (Haubner, 2017, p. 27). Exploitation (as with any of Marx's concepts) must be understood from a historical perspective, as it builds on a distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist exploitation. Surplus labour and exploitation are terms that Marx uses throughout the analysis of various class societies, but the phenomena described by them take on a historically specific form.

Exploitation in capitalism today mainly takes place in ways that are subtle and obscured rather than through direct force and physical violence (Groß, 2015, p. 17), facilitated through hegemonic ideologies that legitimise the existing order (Gramsci, 1971). The exploitative character of peaceful exchange processes is masked by the illusion of exchanging equally valued goods in any market – by the reduction of labour to just another commodity (Polanyi, 2001; Groß, 2015, p. 17).

Secondly, for the *concrete analysis of class* in specific societies, class is used to define different positions within the historical process of production and specific power relations to analyse the motion of capitalist development. Such categorisations are subject to change and must be reevaluated alongside changes in the capitalist cycle of production, consumption and distribution. Class here describes the manifestation of antagonistic social relations in different class locations which compose the class structure. Together, these conceptions of *class* offer the foundation of a model that explains collective action and social change, which are then subject to the analysis of class formation.

This is where the third meaning of class originates, as Marx also used the term in the sense of a practice in the field of political and social struggle (Haug et al., 1983, p. 736). The difference between class as an *objectively defined place* within social relations and as a *collectively organised social actor* (Wright, 2000, p. 34) has most prominently been captured by the notions of *class-in-itself* and *class-for-itself*. While the former describes the position of labourers, the shared situation under the power relations of capital and common interests derived from them, the latter refers to the constitution and organisation of a class as a collective actor, such as through coalitions in trade union action or political struggles (Haug et al., 1983, p. 743). More fitting here are the original terms “class formation” or “class organisation” used by Marx and Engels (1978) and Weber (1922, p. 302, 927, 305), which through the notions of “organisation” and “formation”, capture the character of this particular meaning of class as a process as well as a result (Wright, 2000, p. 34).

In contrast to the social relations that define class in an abstract sense and as specific categorisation, class formation is characterised by cooperative social relations (ibid, p. 191). This includes relations of strong solidarities and highly self-conscious organisations in which significant sacrifices are made for a collective goal, but it can also mean more instrumental relations and looser forms of collectivity like social networks and social movements (ibid). This

way of conceptualising class formation invites to go beyond a focus on formal organisation and acknowledges “any form of collectively constituted social relations which facilitate solidaristic action in pursuit of class interests” as an “instance of class formation” (ibid, p. 191f.).

The Marxist approach is unique in that it lays out a conceptual framework for two dimensions of analysis: the analysis of class structure that aims to understand the social structure and the relations between classes, including their interests and dynamics, and the analysis of class formation that asks how those individuals occupying empty spaces in the class structure – or enacting different positions – collectively organise to engage in class struggle (Wright, 1985, p. 10). What it lacks to some degree is theorisation for those processes in between. Marxists have struggled to explain how members of classes come to recognise or misrecognise their class interests and why and when they engage in collective class action or not (Chibber, 2022, p. 4). Being deterministic, assuming that workers as a revolutionary subject would necessarily become aware of their class interests and organise around them with other workers, is one of the major weaknesses in Marxist theory. This gap might be explained by the fact that dialectical materialism was developed in criticism of static theories of society and social order (Allen, 1975). Its strength – of offering class struggle as a model for social change – has led Marxists to see change as inevitable rather than contingent and has left mechanisms creating stability under-theorised (Chibber, 2022).

What a Marxist understanding of class offers, nonetheless, is a unique frame to analyse society and social inequality with a focus on antagonistic interests created through different social positions and roles within the processes of exploitation. Most importantly, it is invaluable because its general approach – the use of dialectics to study reality as a changing phenomenon – imposes a processual and historical understanding of society (Allen, 1982, p. 55).

Other theories of class centre different mechanisms as root causes of social inequality, often aiming to make up for the perceived shortcomings of the Marxist theory. The following section turns to Max Weber’s understanding of class as a position in the market, which views classes as determinants of life chances. The subsequent section discusses Bourdieusian approaches and their conceptualisation of class as social practice and value struggle.

### 2.1.2 From social closure to static schemes

Weber defines access to the resources of product and labour markets as decisive criteria for the composition of the class structure (Weber, 1922, p. 532). Class is here characterised by three

main aspects: it is a causal component of actors' life chances, it rests on economic interests and wealth, and it is produced and reproduced under the conditions of the labour and commodity markets. The possession of material resources, accumulated via advantages in the marketplace, results in distinctive qualities in terms of the standard of living. Unlike Marx's focus on exploitation via different types of income, the Weberian perspective centres social closure as its core mechanism, which restricts access to occupations as markers of social status and factors in the distribution of financial resources (ibid).

While the combination of class and status in Weber's approach allows for a more detailed description of social structure and its implications for the lived experience of social actors, it also blurs the line between the material and ideological bases of society and may be regarded as lacking analytical clarity (Sorensen, 1991, p. 79). While class and status both aid the analysis of conflicts for scarce resources, their epistemic interests and research questions are distinct. Classes are rooted in the economic order reflecting the structure created by the process of production, while status groups emerge from the social order and are linked to the sphere of consumption (Weber, 1922, p. 539; Giddens, 2014, p. 29; Groß, 2015, p. 26f.). In sharp contrast to Marx's analytical frame, Weber does not theorise class action as a motivator for social change but rather emphasises the relative independence of social action from class positions (Groß, 2015, p. 28). Although Weber's concept of class initially focussed on status groups (ibid., p. 33), later Weberian scholars applied it to class relations (Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992; Bourdieu & Steinrück, 1997) and made use of it for the understanding of modern class societies (Parkin, 1979; Wright, 1997).

Weberian-inspired research like that by Goldthorpe and his Nuffield class scheme presents an important and interesting development within class analysis by opening a useful angle from which to understand modern service societies by differentiating manual and service work and acknowledging positions like self-employment (Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992). Goldthorpe's earlier studies from the '60s and 70s and those of other scholars of his time still assumed social cohesion and thus were strongly motivated by the question of how individuals become aware of the interests linked to their class positions and connect and organise around them (Savage, 2016, p. 63). His later studies, however, dropped questions about solidaristic identities and the formation of classes, together with other fundamental Marxist thoughts on domination and exploitation (ibid). Stripped of many of the more politicised concepts,

Goldthorpe's scheme operationalised class based on the nature of employment relations and thus allowed the capture of crucial differences between those with labour contracts and those in service employment (Goldthorpe, 1981; Savage, 2016; see, e.g., Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992). Later, the Nuffield scheme, also called the Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero (EPG) scheme, was successfully applied for the study of class-related political and voting behaviour (Oesch & Rennwald, 2010; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). It was also refined to account for modern employment relations (Oesch, 2006).

Although these classificatory approaches significantly advance the understanding of social mobility, they have problematic limitations. Besides being inevitably reductive and promoting a static perspective on class by neglecting questions of social change, their focus on occupations fails to capture the role of increasing income differences and thereby fails to engage with important public and political debates (Savage, 2016, p. 64).

### 2.1.3 Stability through misrecognition

A very different conceptualisation of class has dominated the academic debate about class since the late 90s and helped to lift it out of its decline (ibid, p. 62). Studies like *The Making of the English Working Class* by E. P. Thompson (1974) anticipated the cultural turn in class analysis when they moved away from an analysis of structural and materialist underpinnings to empirical, in-depth studies of the sociocultural manifestations of class in everyday life. Class is no longer defined through processes of exploitation or social closure but via class effects – and thus as a social and cultural formation (Thompson, 1990, p. 137).

Pierre Bourdieu laid crucial foundations for a new strand of research, often referred to as cultural class analysis (Savage et al., 2001; Devine et al., 2005; Flemmen et al., 2019). Building upon Weber's linking of class and status, Bourdieu understands class “as the contingent outcome of the operation of capitals, habitus and fields” (Savage, 2016, p. 67). According to Bourdieu, classes must then be understood as “sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 198).

Having moved away from underlying assumptions about economic mechanisms within capitalism that create and shape class, cultural class analysis lays open the complex sociocultural mechanisms that contribute to the reproduction of class in modern societies. Like Goldthorpe,

Bourdieu refrained from thinking about the working class as a revolutionary subject. Foregrounding the analysis of capital as relevant resources, rather than actually utilising conceptualisations of class, he concludes instead that working-class people's lack of capital puts them in a more isolated and disorganised position and that the common "culture of necessity" among them inhibits their aspirations as well as their resistance (Savage, 2016, p. 66).

Consequently, research moved away from a search for heroic working-class identities and consciousness. In their research agendas, class analysts turned their attention to the growing middle classes and the elites (Peterson, 1992; Lawler, 2008; Savage, 2008; Clarke et al., 2009; James et al., 2009; Butler and Savage, 2013; Nachtwey and Seidl, 2024), while overall focusing on the exploration of what Bourdieu describes as "misrecognition" (Savage, 2016, p. 66).

Based on the observation that working-class people whose lives are clearly marked by social inequalities do not see themselves as belonging to any class, Skeggs later described this phenomenon as "dis-identification" (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001). Both descriptions and the arguments around them present a possible resolution to what Savage termed the "paradox of class" – the decline of clear-cut class identification at a time when social inequalities were increasing (Savage, 2016, p. 66).

With a new level of depth, the cultural approach draws attention to the role of hegemonic discourses and cultures that reflect power imbalances and depoliticise the question of social inequality by suggesting a naturalisation of social relations (ibid, p. 67). Positions at the bottom of the hierarchy are considered problematic and require justification. This cultural perspective fuelled a growing interest in the moral aspects of class, and scholars explored processes of moral boundary-drawing as well as cultural and symbolic value struggles (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Skeggs, 1997; Sayer, 2005). Besides exposing the many hidden injuries of class and the internalisations of stigma and devaluation (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012), cultural approaches also drew attention to the subtle resistant narratives of dignity and moral virtues (Lamont, 2000; Skeggs & Wood, 2009; Farrugia et al., 2016). Besides diagnosing the decreasing availability of positive class identifications for those in working-class positions, cultural class analysis shows that class is still emotionally significant and shapes the individual's sense of self (Savage, 2000; Savage, 2016, p. 66). Some of this research has a strong focus on purely cultural dimensions of everyday life (Lamont, 2000), while other scholars embed cultural elements within a wider structural frame (Bertoncello, 2015; Skeggs, 2015, p. 217).

As part of this cultural turn, scholars increasingly reflected on the interrelation of political and academic debates about class and revealed the stigmatising effect of class language as a classification tool. Based on research with people in working-class and underclass positions, Skeggs brought attention to the fact that “any attempt to describe distinctions within symbolic systems of value cannot help but reproduce those symbolic value distinctions” (Skeggs 2015, p. 216). She shows that a static conception of class as a means of classification often implies value judgements which become performative because the class is also a lay category of everyday life and, at times, enters public discourse as an instrument of political discourse (Skeggs & Loveday, 2015). In that sense, cultural class analysis, to some degree, explores the effects of former eras of class research that rejected political elements of class theory for the sake of conceptual clarity but, in so doing, contributed to the depoliticisation of class discourses.

Overall, the cultural turn has significantly contributed to filling the blind spots in Marxist studies. The focus on misrecognition and moral discourses allows a deeper understanding of what inhibits social cohesion and collective formation, thereby facilitating the reproduction of class inequalities. Cultural class analysis has, however, thrown the baby out with the bathwater when it fundamentally challenged the independent force of economic structure and foregrounded the role of cultural meaning. Marxist and Weberian class analysts have long criticised the neglect of the economic core of class in Bourdieusian studies. Many scholars who followed the cultural turn assumed structures to be subordinate to constellations of meaning (Chibber, 2022, p. 17). The consequent tendency to equate class with other forms of social hierarchy, to treat it as classism and to focus narrowly on questions of value struggles, classed behaviour and identities suggests that the cultural approach has lost touch with the peculiarity of class – the fact, that it directly governs people’s material well-being and therefore motivates them in a unique way to know and internalise the codes they need to apply to participate in their structural location (ibid). Despite their many achievements, the lack of a theory of class structure in cultural approaches means that they have limited explanatory power for understanding the reproduction of class society (Riley, 2017).

#### 2.1.4 Materialist class analysis after the cultural turn

Important scholars like Savage and Skeggs, who followed the cultural turn, eventually integrated traditional Marxist and Weberian concepts into their frames to allow a better understanding of

economic processes (Savage, 2016, p. 59) or situated cultural questions in the broader understanding of class that can capture the role of the economic structure (Skeggs, 2015).

Outside the cultural school, Eric Olin Wright developed an integrated approach to class that brings together Weberian and Marxist elements. Wright's frame accounts for some of the complexities of modern class structures of affluent societies: the growing middle classes and the ongoing financialization of everyday life (Lai, 2018; Karaagac, 2020). With the concept of *contradicting class locations* (Wright, 1978, p. 31; Wright, 2005), he offers a way to understand better the complexity of the relationship between class location and class interests. Along the connecting lines between each class position (triangle of the proletariat, bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie), Wright locates a contradictory location which carries elements of both of the classes it is in between: for example, semiautonomous wage earners like lawyers, doctors or consultants (Atkinson, 2015, p. 32).

Integrating theoretical frameworks obviously comes with many practical and epistemological difficulties. This might be one of the reasons why Wright's approach has not yet been widely applied. Similarly, those attempts in which Bourdieusian scholars lean on Marx, Weber and Goldthorpe have not undertaken systematic theorisation. Thus, much work is left to be done to construct a convincing integrated approach.

Another way class analysis may continue to develop is by rethinking and refining the individual theoretical frameworks and their concepts. Feminist and Black feminist scholars have contributed considerably to the theoretical development of different class approaches in this way (Collins, 1993; Bannerji, 1995; Gimenez, 2001; Federici, 2021), as have scholars in education, psychology, disability studies and global labour studies (Lopes, 2011; Keefer et al., 2015; Jacobsen, 2023; Nowak, 2024). Some refined conceptualisations, like a sociological definition of exploitation (Haubner, 2017) will be introduced throughout the literature review.

One general approach to rethinking class analysis after the cultural turn has recently been offered by Vivak Chibber in his book *The Class Matrix* (2022). Equally acknowledging the achievements of cultural class analysis while also criticising its theoretical assumptions, Chibber makes a promising attempt to make sense of the roles of value struggles and misrecognition from a materialist perspective. He decisively argues that class structure does indeed causally shape the meaning orientation of the actors, and not the other way around, but acknowledges the centrality and decisiveness of culture in many spheres, locating culture more concretely within the Marxist

framework (Chibber, 2022, p. 16f.). Emphasizing that structural class theory does not have to be deterministic in how it understands the transformation from class interests to class formation, Chibber suggests that Marx's approach and Marxist scholars should have predicted uncertainty in this process rather than assuming that workers would inevitably unite around their common interests and form a class-for-itself. According to him, this wrong assumption is not imposed by the theoretical framework itself.

Consequently, Chibber follows Marx's argument that capitalism generates conflicts of interest as well as resistance to domination but departs from classical Marxist interpretations by arguing that because of its many preconditions, collective resistance cannot be assumed to be a likely, let alone an inevitable occurrence even when workers do recognise their joint interests. Chibber goes on to suggest that, hence, the more attractive form to resist domination would be an individual rather than a collective one (ibid, p. 18). Following this shift in assumptions, the central role of culture is then located in the recognition of class interests and the transition from individual to collective resistance. Culture and subjective identification come to play in constraining class formation rather than class structure (ibid).

Stability of the capitalist system is then, according to Chibber, not explained by cultural factors – that is, by hegemonic ideologies of the ruling classes generating legitimacy and, thus, creating consent. As a fundamental mechanism that generates stability by making workers comply with employers' authority, Chibber identifies workers' *resignation* as a reflection of the structural conditions. Given the difficulties of organising collective resistance and pushing their interests through, Chibber sees resignation as a rational response to the circumstances in which workers find themselves (ibid, p. 19f.).

Consent still plays a role, albeit a secondary one. Unlike in many cultural approaches, consent is not only seen as legitimacy induced by cultural socialisation but also as a result of the coordination of interests between employers and employees. This way of looking at the relation between structure and culture and desisting from idealising workers as revolutionary subjects has several advantages. For one, it brings attention back to the negotiation processes of interests and the question of how the contexts of political environment and industrial relations shape material conditions for workers and define the rules and playing field for collective resistance. Secondly, it takes seriously workers' agency by assuming that people are generally "able to understand

their situation, successfully navigate its challenges, and act in accordance with their interests” (ibid, p. 20).

Rather than limiting itself to questions of moral boundary drawing, falling for the idea of a false consciousness or an assumption of inevitable collective resistance, Chibber’s perspective can approach the questions of how workers come to recognise shared interests and whether they will organise collectively through the lens of structural and cultural conditions. He offers a useful frame that can facilitate a new conversation between structural and cultural class analysis. Following this approach, class identifications can be understood to lie at the intersection of cultural and structural conditions. The approach provides a focal point in the explanation of stability and change because it presents a compilation of concrete experiences of inequality, ideological discourses about those inequalities, and evaluations of the possibility of collective organising and potential for change. It reflects not only a sense of belonging and habituated classed values and behaviours but also evaluations of the possibility of asserting one’s interests.

For this study on the class identities of platform courier workers, I borrow perspectives and concepts from different approaches to class analysis to address the gaps presented above and navigate other challenges, which will be laid out below.

Fundamentally, the understanding of class in this study follows the Marxist assumption that opposing interests rooted in the class structure create an antagonistic relationship between groups in different social positions. Leaning on Wright’s integrated approach, this study acknowledges that class positions have become much more complex and contradictory. While still considering exploitation as a central mechanism in the creation of class inequalities, this study assumes that other mechanisms like social closure and value struggles produce discrimination, exclusion and limited access to market and life chances, which create different levels of exposure to exploitation and thereby also different experiences of exploitation. Considering the variety and complexity of class positions, class interests are not considered to be as straightforward as they were in the production and factory settings of the industrial era. It is generally not assumed that objective class interests were at any point simple and easily identified, but they have become more complex due to the shift towards service work and the increasing impact of financialisation.

Furthermore, the study follows Bourdieusian-inspired perspectives in recognising the roles of value struggles and moral discourses in creating disidentification and misrecognition

with class positions and interests (Savage et al., 2001; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012; Trappmann et al., 2021). These phenomena reflect important cultural developments towards individualisation and have been fuelled by depoliticised public discourse about class, on which academic class analysis itself has had an impact. The study, however, rejects the idea that contemporary ideological contexts and discourses are the only, or even the main, forces in inhibiting social change and reproducing existing inequalities and, thus, class structures. Instead, it follows Chibber's rethinking of the Marxist notion of the inevitability of collective class formation based on recognising shared interests. Even in protected settings of modern welfare states, class inequality is unique in the way in which it shapes people's lives and their chances to improve their situation. I assume here that the experience of different class positions does shape the way in which individuals experience and make sense of the world, and thus that, it influences the ideas that they resonate with. The experience of class is also considered to have an impact on whether and how individuals think about collective solidaristic action. In short, this study takes Chibber's suggestion seriously that, besides misrecognition, resignation may be an important reason for individuals not to engage with the idea of collective organising in most contexts, even if they identify with others and are aware of shared interests.

To account for these assumptions in this study, class identity will not be studied as scholars commonly do by applying a cultural approach to class. Although it is acknowledged that these studies shed light on important phenomena and developments, class identity will here not be explored through the lens of class communities, lifestyles or habitus. Instead, class identity is conceptualised within the frame of class consciousness. Class identity here plainly means any identification brought up by an individual which has class content. Such class content may relate to their workplace or occupation and address experiences of exploitation or alienation but may also be rooted in other experiences of socioeconomic inequality or reflect a sense of belonging to a socioeconomic group.

## 2.2 Class identity

Class identity is here understood as an individual's self-identification with class content or class-pertinent effect. According to Wright, *class content* is when people address matters of private ownership or exploitation. For a class identity to have *class-pertinent-effects*, it must convey

intentions, choices and practices affecting a person's way of operating within the given class relations (Wright, 2000, p. 193).

In this study, class content is purposely understood in a wider sense, accommodating a meaning of class that goes beyond a narrow economic concept of exploitation, integrating the relevance of gender and migrant labour following Haubner (2017, p. 205). Haubner's sociological understanding of exploitation sees it facilitated through processes and positions of exclusion and social vulnerability. Such a refined understanding of exploitation is sensitised to the role of practices of discrimination that are based on power imbalances. For the study of class identity, this conceptualisation also allows acknowledgement of the interrelation with different forms of inequality and related identities. Class identities with class content could then be either straightforward identification as exploited workers or more subtle identification as privileged in terms of market and life chances reflecting processes of social closure. For example, they may include views of oneself as a socioeconomically disadvantaged disabled woman or a self-identification as financially privileged due to being a white man in Western Europe. In line with an integrated approach, such class identities may also be rooted in other experiences of socioeconomic inequality beyond the work context or reflect a sense of belonging to a socioeconomically defined group. Class content may manifest negatively as disidentification, nonbelonging, or boundary drawing towards individuals and groups.

Defining class identities via class-pertinent effects allows the capture of much of what Bourdieusian scholars have explored: it sensitises for the role of class habitus and a wider sense of class, which may not be articulated in clear class language but may be relevant for how a person navigates class experiences. This may also include subtle, moral processes of boundary drawing. Since group identities are defined by distinctions between "us" and "them" (Lockwood, 1966; Turnbull, 1992; Westergaard et al., 1989), the identification with a class implies distinction from, and boundary drawing towards, another class or classes.

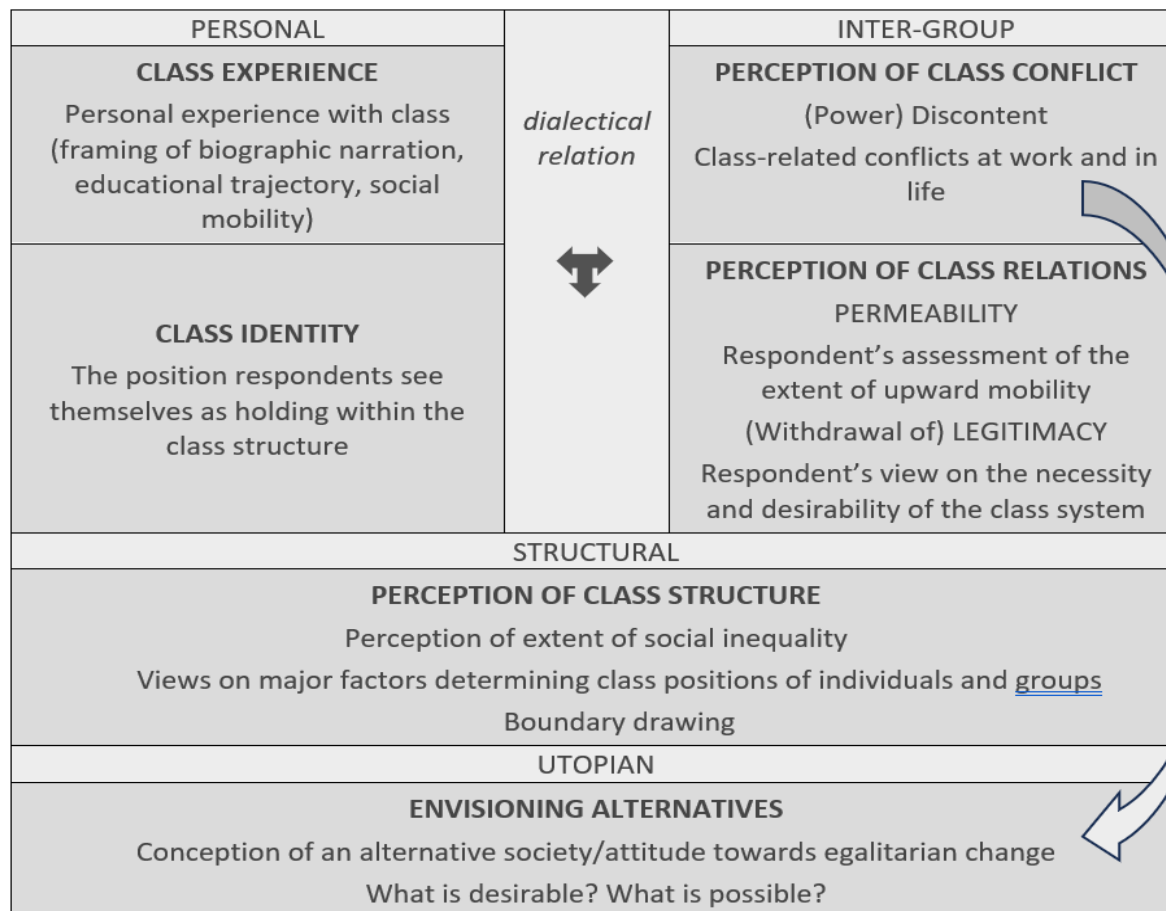
As this study seeks to be equally discerning of the role of social structure in shaping class identification as of the cultural context, class identity is located within a wider conceptual framework of class consciousness. Class consciousness is generally understood as a set of individual perceptions, beliefs and identifications regarding a socioeconomic position within society, which develop over one's life course and is based on the interplay of work and life experiences (see Mann, 1974; Wright, 1985; 2000; Gurin, 1995; Keefer et al., 2015). This

approach is distinct from research which uses class consciousness interchangeably with class identity (e.g., Savage et al., 2001) or which defines it as a collective consciousness and, therefore, studies class formation (Lukacs, 1971; Glabermann, 1996; Braverman, 1998). Following empirically grounded conceptualisations, class consciousness is considered to encompass six elements: (1) personal experiences of class; (2) class identification; (3) perceptions of class conflict; (4) perceptions of class relations, including beliefs about legitimacy of inequalities, and social mobility; (5) perception of social structure; and (6) conceptions of alternative societies (Mann, 1973; Gurin et al., 1980; Zingraff & Schulman, 1984; Wright, 1985). A visualisation of different definitions and the rationale behind this conceptualisation can be found in Appendix A.

Leaning on Michael Mann's theorisation of the development of class consciousness, these different elements do not simply adjoin each other but build up on each other. Class identity is seen to relate dialectically to class experiences, perceptions of class conflict and class relations, and only the recognition of these elements allows an understanding of one's total social situation within an image of the overall social structure and inequality. Based on this, a person may compose their visions of an alternative society, evaluating what kind of social change is possible and desirable (Mann, 1973, p. 13).

While Mann, like others (Wright, 1985; Langford, 1994), considers a revolutionary class consciousness to be a "rare occurrence" his idea of development follows Marxist theory in assuming an escalation of class consciousness when awareness develops across these elements. As a worker connects her own concrete experiences to an understanding of the wider social structure and potential alternatives, consciousness grows – or, as some Marxists say, "explodes" (Mann, 1973, p. 13). This model allows us to think about class consciousness in the stages of its development, as in Lenin's idea of a workplace consciousness that may or may not develop into a generalised consciousness (Lenin 1960 [1899]). The relationships between the elements of class consciousness and the process of its development are illustrated on the next page.

This framework focuses on the role that a person's work, life context, and experiences of inequality play in their identity formation, as well as the relevance of class language and ideologies that guide their perceptions of conflicts, class relations, and social structure.



While a class identification may be rooted in a perception of inequality, it is another question whether this inequality is experienced and described as problematic in the sense of deprivation or devaluation, and yet another question whether it is perceived as unjust. A class identification may articulate shared interests with others of the same group without raising any notion of the group being relatively deprived or this being rooted in the system rather than personal failings (Miller et al., 1981, p. 495). These distinctions are relevant to understanding the transformation from class identity to class consciousness and are crucial to the kind of class action that might be taken. Someone may identify as poor, lower or working class and perceive themselves as deprived without seeing this rooted in injustice. Thus, they may make direct attempts to change their own situation not towards the workplace or political system but towards themselves (ibid). Equally to the question of whether someone who identifies as working or middle class legitimises perceived inequalities or experiences them as exploitation (Bottero, 2004, p. 955), it also matters whether individuals see possibility for social and political change. A person might

not openly criticise the illegitimacy of hierarchies or articulate experiences of deprivation as part of their identity if they do not see a desirable and possible alternative.

Because class identity is analysed here with the ultimate goal of gaining a better understanding of the reproduction of class society, its analysis will focus on how identifications carry and negotiate the existing social tensions or contradictions in the Marxist sense – how they reflect the coextensive existence and production of stability and conflict in a capitalist society (Chibber, 2022, p. 1).

### 2.3 Class identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

This second part of the chapter presents empirical research on class identity. It engages with debates about the decline of class identity as a result of cultural and structural changes, mainly relating to processes of individualization and deindustrialization in Western countries. I show that while there have indeed been changes in class identity over time, they are less significant in their extent and more complex in character than predicted in theoretical debates, and they require further nuanced investigation through qualitative and quantitative research.

#### 2.3.1 Class identities in decline?

There have been many debates on why and since class identities have declined. It has been argued that class identity has lost significance due to deindustrialisation and changed work contexts (Pakulski & Waters, 1996), rising affluence and individualisation (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), as well as changes in the political landscape (Heath et al., 2009). The lack of class identification in Western countries has also been described as a likely outcome of the fragmentation of modern societies (Birkelund, 2002, p. 218). While the end of the proletarian life context was already documented in the 1970s (Kudera, 1976), most of the scholars above argue that the decline in class identity accelerated in the 80s and 90s.

Due to individualisation, it has been argued that class communities and identities have lost their strength and meaning, and therefore, class has lost its role as a normative reference group for shared values and behaviours (Merton, 1949; Heath et al., 2009). Social class would also no longer be significant for social formations since it is no longer a strong stimulus to either individual or collective action (Beck, 1992, p. 92; Heath et al., 2009, p. 23).

Ulrich Beck suggested that class identities are no longer inherited but, like life-worlds and biographies, are chosen. Because the structures of the welfare state and labour market are

eroding social cohesion, people's prospects in life now depend on their own choices (Beck, 1992; Heath et al., 2009). Success or failure in postmodern societies depends on an individual's capacity to get educational credentials and make independent career decisions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 32f.), which allows the experience of a personal destiny (ibid, p. 33) but also requires individuals to piece together their own guidance (Silva, 2013, p. 145).

Beck also argued that the increased significance of risks and risk exposure would replace class as the principal inequality in modern society. Because actors would reflexively define risk, so-called *relations of definition* would become analogous to *relations of production* as defined by Marx, meaning that actors in more powerful positions could minimise their own risk while maximising risk for others (Beck, 2006, p. 333).

Further, it has been argued that objective features of class (income, position in the hierarchy) and subjective features (consciousness, lifestyle, leisure interests, political attitudes) are decoupling. Occupations are no longer considered the result of collective forces and traditions but of individual decisions (Heath et al., 2009, p. 23).

Despite these extensive theoretical claims, there has been little systematic empirical research on how the subjective aspects of class have changed over time (ibid, p. 22). The research on class-based voting behaviour and political attitudes presents a big exception here, especially more recent investigations on the increasing support for right-wing populism (Flemmen & Savage, 2017; Jarness et al., 2019; Flemmen et al., 2022; Westheuser & della Porta, 2022). Those who have conducted empirical research find that class remains an important feature of subjective social awareness, albeit manifesting in different forms (Savage et al., 2001; Heath et al., 2009; Irwin, 2015; Tilley & Evans, 2017).

National and international surveys for Europe, and in some cases for the US, provide a good foundation to evaluate how class identities have changed over time. In particular, data sources like the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) include unprompted questions on class identification in which respondents are free to choose their own terms and definitions to define their class before being offered categorized answers. Besides capturing self-perception of class locations, the survey also asks respondents to define or select how they define class regarding themselves and others. These quantitative findings suggest that most theoretical claims overestimate the extent to which class identity has declined.

A majority of people in Britain still express class identities, and this has not declined over the past 50 years (Heath et al., 2009, p. 28; Tilley & Evans, 2017, p. 45f.). A slight decline in working-class identification is considered to mainly reflect the change in objective class structure, with fewer people working in jobs that are typically defined as working class. (Heath et al., 2009, p. 28). Even despite sociologists estimating a decline of manual jobs by 50%, data from the BSA show that 57% of people in Britain identified as working class in 2005, compared to 37% seeing themselves as middle class (ibid, p. 28f.).

Considerably fewer people in Germany feel that they belong to the working class. Only between 15% (ISSP, 2019) and 22% (ALLBUS, 2021) identify as working class, while 73% (ALLBUS, 2021) to 80% (ISSP, 2019) consider themselves part of the middle class. Regardless of the specific data source, research on Germany shows a clear, growing discrepancy between subjective and factual class situations, with more people considering themselves part of the middle than can objectively be defined as such (Dorn et al., 2023, p. 30). This middle-class bias is well-documented in Germany and other nations (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Bellani et al., 2021). The study on self-location in 21 nations by Evans and Kelley in 2004 already indicated a difference from the UK, where working-class identification is more common, even for those in middle-class jobs (Tilley & Evans, 2017, p. 56). Comparisons with other Anglo-Celtic countries and Canada also suggest that people in Britain would rather identify with lower segments of the middle class than with the upper-middle class (Evans & Kelley, 2004, p. 19).

The persistently high levels of working-class identification in Britain can partly be explained by the limited effects of social mobility. Various studies agree that class identity resists experiences of social mobility because it reflects not only where people are but also where they come from (Heath et al., 2009; Tilley & Evans, 2017, p. 56). Although the number of those in objective working-class situations has declined with social upward mobility (Heath & Payne, 2000; Goldthorpe & Mills, 2008), their working-class background may still make them identify as such. The parallel inflation of educational degrees is another possible explanation for this tendency since qualifications do not necessarily lead to higher income and other status gains, which convey a sense of a middle-class existence (Tilley & Evans, 2017, p. 56).

A moderate change can be seen in how people characterize class positions. While occupation is still the most important aspect for people to define their own and other people's class positions (Heath et al., 2009, p. 33f.), increased income differences are being noticed, and

the working class is not associated as much with workers any more but with being poor – which raises questions about the stigmatization of these positions (Tilley & Evans, 2017, p. 57).

Although the occupational basis for class identity is eroding mildly and steadily (Heath et al., 2009, p. 34), the general view persists that those in white-collar jobs are part of the middle class, and those in blue-collar work are part of the working class. These findings suggest that the job someone does is still considered to be a strong indicator of class identity (ibid., p. 32).

The most relevant and noticeable change is the weakening impact of class identity on political views and party preferences. There are debates about whether this so-called “class dealignment” is down to individualization or a reaction to changed politics (Heath et al., 2009, p. 36). In the British context, the lost force of class as a normative reference group for voting behaviour occurred around the same time as New Labour’s period of government when the party lost touch with its working-class roots (ibid). Others argue that political parties were forced to adjust in reaction to the changes in class structure. Labour and the Conservatives became more similar, class differences in party preferences disappeared, and thus, new alliances and patterns of voting behaviour were forged (Tilley & Evans, 2017, 165).

The findings of in-depth, interpretive research studies discussed in the following sections provides a more nuanced picture of the changes indicated above.

### 2.3.2 Work context

Early working-class studies argue that perceptions of work, society and politics are shaped by the impact of work, kind of work and working conditions (Leggett, 1968). Extrinsic work characteristics like job security, patterns of supervision and working conditions may even be more important than the actual content of the job if they go against workers’ expectations (Vallas 1987). Even within the same company, the particular features of a factory or plant can make a crucial difference in the development of class awareness (Beynon, 1973, p. 108), suggesting that features of workplace regimes (Spenner, 1983; Burawoy, 1985; Vallas, 1987) can shape class identity in relatively independent ways.

More recent studies suggest that collectivization encourages solidarity, while control fosters opposition and routinization, heightening workers’ boredom and irritation (Aronowitz, 1992; Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 4). While employment relations, wages, benefits and job security seem to make a difference, the effect of unions and unionization, which help to shape work organization and employment relations, is more ambiguous (Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 4)

Although service work is widely assumed to be less likely to generate class identities (Fourastié, 1952; Touraine, 1971; Bell, 1973) because white-collar workers' (including frontline service and clerical workers) "marketing mentality" could hardly be at odds with capital (Bell, 1960, p. 182), empirical research results are unclear. This is particularly true for emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and care relations or meaningful worker-client relationships that may or may not reveal conflict and fuel class identification (Lopez, 2006). It has recently been suggested that service and non-service work are discontinuous, and instead of interactions and their content, general job characteristics – such as managerial status (negative), union membership (positive), pain and discomfort (positive) and job insecurity (positive) – shape class identity and consciousness (Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 2, 7).

Strong arguments have been made for the role of occupational identities in the formation of class identities. A cross-sectional study of different industries in France saw the strong and revolutionary awareness of class among foundry workers, miners and skilled engineers rooted in their sense of occupational identity and their opposition to changes linked to the implementation of mass production (Touraine, 1971; Mann, 1973, p. 41). While many working-class communities have been dissolving, occupational communities can sustain a similar sense of collective identity and solidaristic relationships between members. Shared values and norms are still cultivated within the work context, with work relationships extending into private lives (Blauner, 1960; Salaman, 1971; Allcorn & Marsh, 1975; Bulmer & Salaman, 1975; Strangleman, 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2006, p. 836), creating a sense of similarities and boundary drawing towards others (Jenkins, 1996; MacKenzie et al., 2006, p. 836). Mackenzie et al. (2006, p. 836) draw attention to spatial and temporal factors, indicating that occupational identities may be more likely to form in occupational communities in which commonality results from being in a shared isolated location and subject to a peculiar rhythm (Blauner, 1960; Salaman, 1971; Bulmer & Salaman, 1975; Strangleman, 2001). This is relevant in contexts like factory towns and shift work (China Labor Watch, 2023), but also has implications for spatially dispersed workers who follow asynchronous rhythms and are, thus, isolated from each other.

It has been argued that occupational identities have become more important as social identifiers than class and thus may replace former class identities (Colbjørnsen et al., 1987, p. 71). Others have expressed fundamental doubt that the workplace significantly shapes working-class imagery (Blumer, 1979) or that work or job experience has a generalised effect on working-

class imagery (Tanner et al., 1992, p. 447). Savage's study from the early 2000s found that class identifications were barely linked to concrete occupations, employment contexts or collective work experiences but only broadly to the fact that one must work to make a living. Otherwise, social upbringing and other factors seemed more critical (Savage et al., 2001). It has, however, been argued that this is not a reason to neglect the role of work and occupation but rather to examine the changing role of employment and occupational identities in creating individual and class identities (Brenner, 1989; MacKenzie et al., 2006).

Based on these findings, deindustrialisation and the shift to more service work cannot alone be held responsible for the slight decline and shifted meaning of working-class identification. However, with many service jobs seen as white rather than blue-collar, more workers may likely consider themselves middle class even if low- and semiskilled service jobs do not generate more income than many low-skilled blue-collar jobs. It seems plausible that the wider meaning of work in a person's life plays a role in how much their work experience shapes their identification. Since the increase in non-standard employment has been significant in many Western countries, precarization presents another relevant factor in how changed work and employment contexts might shape class identity.

### 2.3.3 Precarisation

With the change in labour market dynamics, formerly stable and secure working- and middle-class jobs with standard employment relationships (SERs) have become more flexible. The increased uncertainty in the employment relationship can go together with volatile or low income, restricted welfare claims, health risks and limited chances for qualifications and personal development. Precarious work may also be characterised by a lack of recognition and restricted or blocked access to social networks (Hense, 2018, p. 40). Research has also noted an increasing lack of representational security and, thus, of collective voice in many types of work and employment (Standing, 2009; Kalleberg, 2009) as well as in social locations (Vosko, 2009, p. 2), particularly linked to citizenship (Standing, 2009). The increase in precarious self-employment also means that a growing number of workers are without direct control but are subjected to different forms of self-exploitation (Murgia, 2017). Unlike dependent workers, self-employed workers are, in theory, free from an authority-employment relationship and exercise agency over their working lives (Murgia & Pulignano 2019). However, in practice, this is not always given, especially in the form of bogus self-employment, which is often imposed on workers and taken

up out of necessity rather than opportunity (Bögenhold and Staber, 1991; Gill, 2002; Buschoff and Schmidt, 2009; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021, 2).

As a consequence of the precarization of work and employment, a wide range of “insecure, volatile, or vulnerable human situations was created” (della Porta et al., 2014, p. 1) that expand beyond types of work and sections of society for which nonstandard employment was already the norm before the re-regulation of labour markets (Aulenbacher, 2010; Alberti et al., 2018). Precarization has further come to affect the wider life context (Klenner et al., 2012), causing a lack of stability, or adding additional pressures via reproductive work, care responsibilities and housing situations (Jungwirth & Scherschel, 2010, p. 111, 128).

In this thesis, precarity is not considered to be constitutive of class – either in the sense of the precariat constituting a class for-itself or in-itself, as suggested by Guy Standing (2009), and partly by reports on the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015). I follow political and theoretical arguments against such definitions of precarious workers as a class (Breman, 2013; Hardy, 2015; Wright, 2016; Alberti et al., 2018). Precarization is here understood as a process that creates new uncertainties and risks, is embedded in the development of capitalism (Hardy, 2015, p. 12) and to varying degrees inherent to all labour-capital relationships (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 5). It is thereby also closely intertwined with processes of financialisation, digitalisation and the recommodification of work (Rubery, 2015; Rubery et al., 2018).

How threatening the subjective uncertainties and objective risks for financial independence, social integration, and social security are for individuals and groups depends on many factors – questions of agency, risk affinity and available resources – that are closely linked to people’s socioeconomic position (Kraemer, 2008). Precarisation is not simply the return of insecurity into post-Fordist workers’ lives (Eversberg, 2014). It presents a loss of control over the own future due to the subordination of more and more areas of life under the needs of the economy (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; Marchard, 2013). In reaction to Beck’s idea of a “risk society”, it has been argued that class, rather than having been replaced by risk processes, is a “key site of social structuration for risk processes” (Curran, 2018, p. 38). Inspired by Sennet and Cobb’s thesis of the “hidden injuries of class”, the increase in uncertainty that working classes have to navigate today has led scholars to speak of “the hidden injuries of risk” (Silva, 2013, p. 144). Those from working-class backgrounds struggle to navigate radically privatised economic

and social risks like unemployment or illness because they sense their lack of vital cultural, economic and social resources (ibid, p. 146).

Precarization of work and employment not only deprives people of crucial securities but also of markers of their identity (Standing, 2009, p. 28) and their sense of social recognition and integration into society (Dörre et al., 2013; Doerre, 2014). The experience or even mere fear of precarity might result in short-termism or a “precarized mind” incapable of long-term thinking and planning (Kraemer, 2008, p. 31), and may even evoke anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (Standing, 2009, p. 34). Fear of descent and simultaneous optimism about social upward mobility have been found to fuel self-exploitation and thereby cause states of burnout and exhaustion (Nachtwey, 2016, p. 166; referring to Voswinkel, 2012).

On the level of individual experiences, precarity has widely been normalised (Rubery, 2015) and is seen as somewhat unavoidable, especially among young workers (Hassard & Morris, 2018; Trappmann et al., 2023). Even if precarious working arrangements are experienced as problematic in some ways, criticism is hindered because precarity is downplayed and legitimised in many ways – as a transitional stage, as a price for autonomy or self-realisation or simply as something that is accepted as inevitable after repeated exposure (Trappmann et al., 2023). Research has also shown that the potential of flexible work arrangements for personal development or as a probation period on the way to a secure job is mainly realised by those with the necessary resources, but turns into an unmanageable challenge for those who lack the cultural, emotional and financial resources to cope (Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2021; Trappmann et al., 2021). The ambivalent effect of individualisation becomes evident in the way in which, for those with higher education, self-employed work may present a chance for a step up despite work intensification and boundary-blurring, while this may not be the case for those with lower levels of education or lower-skilled jobs in general (Murgia and Pulignano, 2021)(Murgia and Pulignano 2019, 6). The effects of such precarity have also led to a decreased sense of belonging to local and professional communities (Sennett, 1999; Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Murgia and Pulignano, 2021, 5).

These effects on the individual lead to broader normative consequences for society. It has been suggested that a lack of social recognition and occupational identity might create an ethical vacuum (Standing, 2009, p. 35) and that a climate of growing “normative insecurity” and the fear of sliding into precarious employment may have a disciplining effect even for those in secure

positions (Brinkmann et al., 2006), thus fuelling a divide between privileged permanent employees and disadvantaged precarious workers (Nachtwey, 2016, p. 164). The revival of bourgeois virtues as a justification for discipline and duty under constant uncertainty and fear of social descent could be seen through the lens of class action mentioned above (Groh-Samberg & Hertel, 2015; Nachtwey, 2016, p. 166). Higher educational aspirations and social manners are used to demonstrate superiority in intensifying fights for distinction, and people from the middle classes seem to process their fear and insecurity partly by disparaging more vulnerable groups (Heitmeyer, 2002, p. 12; Nachtwey, 2016, p. 167). It has also been noted that to affirm their own position, middle-class people seem to cancel their solidarity with the weak and distance themselves from lower classes. Those who suffer social descent or fail to ascend must consequently consider their situation a personal self-inflicted failure (Nachtwey, 2016, p. 165ff.). Overall, it seems that a precarious environment undermines cooperation and moral consensus, as the ongoing commodification of individuals and their whole lives lets moral reciprocities become fragile (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Hauser, 2008; Standing, 2009; Nachtwey, 2016).

These findings on subjective experiences and the wider social effects of precarisation are just as relevant as the study of concrete precarious work and employment because they impinge on social norms, subjectivities and perceptions of social inequality. They are, therefore, deeply intertwined with perceptions of class and the question of which positive identifications are available to individuals. That the experience of precarity has some potential to form positive identities to make sense of unjust inequality and to organise around it has become apparent in movements in the aftermath of the financial crisis from 2008, such as the *precariados* and the May Day movements (Foti, 2017).

#### 2.3.4 Wider life context and care relations

Experiences in the workplace do not meet a blank sheet. Individuals have already formed ideas, attitudes, orientations, and identities before entering the labour market. Some people may never join formal labour markets and paid employment because they simply cannot work, do unpaid reproductive work, or are trapped in unfree labour. Two things need to be acknowledged. Firstly, direct exploitation through paid labour, although central to a Marxist conceptualisation of class, is not the pivotal experience of every person under capitalism. Secondly, even those who spend a considerable part of their existence in paid work have a life before entering the labour market and make significant experiences outside of work.

This is particularly relevant as the time before entering the labour market gets longer due to prolonged educational phases and generally prolonged paths to adulthood, often with incomplete economic independence (Wiezorek & Stark, 2011; Cote, 2014). Experiences with educational institutions can be formative of class identities of students as well as parents (Reay et al., 2008; James et al., 2009; Devine et al., 2012). Work trajectories have also become more fragmented, with alternating phases of work, training and non-work (Heinz, 1999; Heinz, 2003). While a good work-life balance has become an important preference for parts of younger generations (Duffy et al., 2023), many simply try to find secure, decently paid-work (Albert et al., 2015; Peakon, 2019).

Following feminist interventions, class research broke with the common practice of equating a male partner's job – which has frequently constituted the primary source of income in a household – with the class position of their female partner (Atkinson, 2015, p. 88). Making individuals rather than families the unit of class analysis allowed to consider the specific situations of many women as well as of other positions in the social hierarchy for whom direct and indirect exploitation are entangled with oppression and not entirely or directly defined by labour. This shift helped to question the Marxist conceptualisation of labour as the one “pre-eminently privileged category ... permitting knowledge of a subject, and so the knowledge of subjugation and alienation” (Haraway, 1995, p. 97) and to widen the perspective for other activities and experiences that might promote views which induce criticism and ideas for change. Based on the idea that many women have a dual relationship to class because their labour power is exploited in paid employment while they are also dependent on their partner's wages (Barrett, 1988), Wright developed the concept of *mediated class locations* (Wright, 2005). These locations capture the role of a person's wider context and material conditions by looking at one's job and social background. Such mediated class relations can be relevant in shaping a person's views but must be understood as embedded in institutional and cultural settings (Wright, 1997; Atkinson, 2015, p. 85). They have the potential to capture the persistent gendered participation in the labour market and the domestic division of labour (Dieckhoff et al., 2016; Garcia & Tomlinson, 2021) and may help to make sense of phenomena like lower-skilled working-class men taking on childcare (Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Norman et al., 2014; Norman, 2020), especially when they are in and out of work due to lack of labour market opportunities (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006).

Margaret Crean (2018) suggests that the context of family and private can also induce an affective formation of class consciousness, which, drawing on concepts by Wright (1985) and Gurin (1985), she terms *care consciousness*. In line with research on the role of gender (Guard, 1996; Jones, 2001), emotions (Reay, 2005) and mediating class relations, Crean's research underlines the point that the wider life context affects people's identification with class.

Other scholars have emphasised the temporal perspective of the development of class identities. Although class position and identity can change with social mobility and are therefore not necessarily permanent, social class background has a lasting legacy (Bourdieu and Steinrück, 1997) which may only slowly reduce throughout the life course (Heath et al., 2009, p. 23). It has been demonstrated that people generally have a complex understanding of continuities and change in their lives and that this allows them to understand social structure and their own position within it through their biographic experiences (Irwin, 2018, p. 218). The experiences of social mobility – upward and downward – were here formative for how people conceived of social inequality (ibd.). However, this does not mean that experiences of hierarchies in people's everyday lives do not obscure the nature of existing inequalities, can hinder recognition of one's class location and inhibit collectivised resistant class identities (Bottero, 2004, p. 997). Overall, the state of the literature indicates the need for more biographic research, which can capture temporal aspects in the development of class identity throughout the life course while also opening the perspective to wider life experiences and care contexts.

### 2.3.5 Ideology

Class identity and consciousness are also shaped by discourses (Keefer et al., 2015, p. 274). Depending on the political myths dominating these, some class identities may be less legitimate than others (Haraway, 1995, p. 95) and, equally, some identifications may be more legitimising or in resistance to the social structures in which they are placed (Haraway, 1995; Gimenez, 2001; Castells, 2009). Ideology, in the form of discourse and normative codes, is thus crucial to understanding what stimulates some class identities and inhibits others (see Heath et al., 2009).

Since the Marxist definition of ideology as the ideas of the leading class is somewhat mechanistic, it makes more sense to follow the perspective of neo-Marxists like Gramsci in arguing that the ruling class creates consent by using “emotionally resonant ideas to create a sense of community and, consequently, shared interest that transcended class boundaries” (Gramsci, 1971; Umney, 2018, p. 154). From such a perspective, ideology can be seen as a

relatively autonomous domain. While in general, ideology “is present in all societies at all times” (Allen, 1975, p. 23), an ideology can be classified as the dominant hegemony “if it represents the interests of a dominant group as being in line with the ‘natural’ order of things or the general societal interest” (Langford, 1994, p. 120). Such ideas are most likely to create an accepted sense of shared interests and community and thus be effective and pervasive if institutionalised (Allen, 1975, p. 24) – culturally, politically or legally.

As an alternative to a Marxist-inspired notion of ideology, these problems can be understood through Bourdieu’s idea of *doxa*, which describes the common-sense norms that develop due to historical struggle in particular fields. Like ideology, what is part of the doxa is not necessarily “natural” or “true” but is commonly perceived as such. Drawing attention to the effect of norms and ideas on actors in any field, this concept is sensitive to the difficult role of researchers. Despite having reflexive knowledge, social scientists are still, to a high degree, immersed in a specific place and time, and therefore, can “never be a full ‘fish out of the water’” (France & Threadgold, 2016, p. 624). Slightly different from the neo-Marxist notion of ideology, the concept of doxa does not see as much intent and instrumentalisation of ideas on the side of a ruling class. While Bourdieusian scholars consider recognition and misrecognition of doxa to be unequally distributed, they recognise that all actors in any field are somewhat prone to misrecognition because of their spatial and temporal situatedness as human beings (ibid, p. 625).

From both Bourdieusian and neo-Marxist perspectives, the negotiation of what is natural, in shared interests and legitimate, is seen as an interaction of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic views and values, rather than assuming a one-sided relationship in which the ideas of the ruling class determine the thinking of the rest of society. This does justice to an understanding of society under constant struggle, in which stigma, discrimination and inequalities are not purely the outcome of oppression but also subject to resistance and reappropriation.

Today, it is especially the middle-class narrative (Shelsky, 1965; Kadritzke, 2016), discourses on individualisation (Beck, 1992; Clery, 2012) and demand for self-responsibility (Lessenich, 2008) which are part of the dominant paradigm inhibiting class identification. Meritocracy is accepted as a leading and just principle in the philosophical analysis of real and hypothetical norms of justice (Rawls, 1993) and empirical research on justice (Wegener, 1995; Wegener & Liebig, 1998). Meritocracy is known to be easily instrumentalised depending on how it is defined (Sandel, 2020), and while it has widely been disguised as a myth (Bloodworth,

2016), it still presents a powerful discourse that organisations and institutions uphold (Clarke et al., 2024). Discourses around meritocracy even create ambivalent effects among those in socio-economically disadvantaged positions, as has been shown in research on underprivileged university students' coping with the lack of opportunities (Fernández et al., 2023).

Hand-in-hand with persistent trust in meritocracy goes a frequent overestimation of the extent of social mobility and a strong belief in values attached to individuality and individual responsibility. Sociopsychological studies already indicate an effect of these ideologies on people's negatively changed attitudes towards poverty (Manstead, 2018, p. 8; Clery et al., n.d.). In the context of flexibilized capitalism, a new ideological narrative is added that helps divert from a social critique of exploitation, the *New spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007), where an *entrepreneurial self* and an *entployee* facilitates acceptance of self-exploitation (Pongratz and Voß, 2003; Brockling, 2015). Such entrepreneurial discourses promote 'class optimism' (Gill, 2014), and a new *ethic of solution* legitimises the elite's entrepreneurialism in digitalised capitalism (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2024). Simultaneously, alternative ideological offers such as the new conservative (Bluhm & Varga, 2018) and nationalist and racist narratives promoted by right-wing populism, deflect from class cleavages (Gilroy, 2002).

As a result, class appears as a matter of personal choice. The imperative of individualisation and the idea of a meritocratic society with social mobility have refigured identity as something to be owned and articulated as a property of a person (Skeggs, 2004, p. 59) with its commodification mainly benefiting those in middle-class positions (ibid; Curran, 2018) This also means that signalling belonging to a class is not per se a neutral description but can appear as an evaluation of personal decisions that require justification.

As economic success is unattainable for many workers, material values are replaced by moral standards, varying with gender, national context and ethnic community (Lamont, 2000). Studies on working-class culture have shown how emotions and moral values mediate their class identities (Sayer, 2005), negotiating a lack of recognition and stigmatisation (Sennett & Cobb, 1972), and linking them to a predominant urge to gain "dignity" (Lamont, 2001) and "respectability" (Skeggs, 1997). It is no surprise that with the change in culture and ideology, class identity has become more problematic due to the internalisation of class-related stigma. Stigma is not only created in personal interactions with individuals who carry a stigmatised status; lower status can also be assigned via structural discrimination through social policy or via

institutional practices that are shaped by negative attitudes (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022, p. 1,158). Eventually, these two avenues lead to the exclusion of the stigmatised person or group. On the other hand, stigma is also internalised in the form of shame and makes the affected individuals withdraw (Reeve, 1993; Scambler, 2009; Chatzitheochari et al., 2022, p. 1,158). Class-related emotions like shame, therefore, play an essential role in the symbolic reproduction of inequality (Neckel, 1991). Stigmatisation here shows as *stigma consciousness*, which manifests in the responses – behavioural and psychological – of the stigmatised individuals themselves who are threatened by the experience of stereotypes in daily life (Pinel, 1999; Link & Phelan, 2001; Chatzitheochari et al., 2022).

These ideological aspects help to explain why various studies have found an incongruity between the perception of class “out there” and class as identity (Savage et al., 2001, p. 884). While many individuals recognise inequality and the existence of a broad class structure (Irwin, 2015; Irwin, 2018; Manstead, 2018), there is defensiveness, refusal and ambivalence when it comes to identifying in terms of class (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001; Payne & Grew, 2005). When asked to identify in terms of class, people refer to their own “ordinariness” or show an “omnivorous refrain” – emphasising people’s equal worth regardless of social position (Savage et al., 2001, p. 886; Payne & Grew, 2005; van Eijk, 2013). In the case of precarious people, this defensiveness shows through economic, cultural and moral boundary drawing towards others, by an identification of who they are not and through complicated notions of “belonging” (Savage et al. 2015, p. 352; Trappmann, Seehaus, et al., 2021).

Since class has become a heavily loaded moral signifier (Bauman, 1987; Savage, 1987; Skeggs, 1997), belonging to anything other than the middle class indicates individual failure, and the tendency to identify as middle-class must partly be understood as “a moral claim” (Irwin, 2018, p. 218). It has here been argued that identification with the middle class, being apologetic when talking about people below oneself, or decoupling class and worthiness can be seen as attempts to deny, invert or flatten hierarchies (van Eijk, 2013, p. 533). In empirical studies, it seems that people are more comfortable identifying in terms of class after it has been clarified that “class” does not necessarily have to be understood in a moral sense (ibid).

The apparent ambivalence about self-identification could also be understood as uncertainty about class in general (Payne & Grew, 2005, p. 908), or as an attempt to reclaim individuality when being made a social cypher (Savage et al., 2001, p. 889). The denial of

individuality that seems to be implied in an identification in class terms may be a threatening thought to people (ibid, p. 884). Overall, these findings suggest that the absence of clear class identity is not a sign of the absence of class differences but rather are ways in which class manifests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Flemmen, 2013, p. 192).

Various studies show that the ability to draw on cultural capital plays a central role in the way in which people construe their class identity (Savage et al., 2001; Reay, 2005; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). Taking on working-class labels in an empowering way generally appears to be more accessible for men (Skeggs, 1997). Today, even among men, it is only a minority that proudly identifies as working class, while it is young, mainly male professionals who can playfully make use of class labels (Savage et al., 2001). That class identification is more problematic for disadvantaged groups in the social hierarchy has also been proven by the precariat's low participation in the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015). In line with this finding, class identification today shows much higher levels among wealthier classes and particularly low levels among the poor (Keefer et al., 2015, p. 271).

As indicated above regarding the concept of doxa, ideology is relevant on the side of researchers, too. It has been pointed out that scholars apply many assumptions when they problematise the disidentifications of those in lower- and working-class positions but accept the identifications and disidentifications of those in the middle-class (Bottero, 2004). According to Wendy Bottero, such perception of the working class as “the dog that didn't bark in the night”, is rooted in the questionable assumption that disadvantage stimulates class identities (ibid, p. 996). This reminder to class researchers to reflect on their own assumptions is even more important considering that objective advantages and interests, are difficult to define under conditions of financialised capitalism and are not necessarily experienced as such. Bottero therefore rightly emphasises what is assumed in the notion of doxa: that many of the aspects in society (activities, rules, etc.) that reproduce hierarchies are neither intended nor experienced as class conflicts or struggles; as part of everyday life, they are simply mundane and omnipresent (ibid, p. 994f.).

#### 2.3.6 Conflicting identities

Workers in general, and even blue-collar workers as a specific group, have never been a homogenous lot (Leggett, 1968, p. 3). Other dimensions of inequality also create social hierarchies, advantages and disadvantages, and different subjectivities, identities and political struggles. Scholars agree that classes in modern societies are internally fragmented along the

lines of gender, “race” and ethnicity, and ability (Jenkins, 1991; Birkelund et al., 1996; Crompton, 2008), with many indications of age being another crucial dimension of inequality (Lopes, 2011; Cote, 2014). What is more controversial than the fact that these different dimensions of inequality exist and interact is how they relate to each other and *what* causes some of them to become part of an individual’s identity and consciousness and not others.

There is a crucial difference between class identities and identities relating to other social categories of inequality. While gender, “race”, age and ability are largely grounded in observable differences and considered to be natural, belonging to class groups can be difficult to recognize in everyday life, and the social inheritance of class and its necessity in capitalism is hidden by ideologies suggesting a voluntary membership of class. Because the idea that enough merit and willpower could change one’s class position takes away the legitimacy of class identity for those at the bottom of the hierarchy, class presents a “latent identity” (de Regt & Weenink, 2003; van Eijk, 2013, p. 528). While gender identity, for example, seems more legitimate in its “naturalness” and less legitimate if it is changed, a working-class identity requires legitimization if it is considered a matter of choice (Keefer et al., 2015). These differences, to some degree, facilitate identification with gender and “race” but make class identity more ambiguous.

Class identity is also somewhat in competition with other forms of group identity rather than being complemented by them (ibid, p. 274). A study on industrial textile workers in the 80s, for example, suggests that it is very ambiguous whether “race” or membership of a minority or marginal group supports or undermines class identifications. The research by Zingraff and Schulman indicates that racially discriminated against and marginalised groups might be more susceptible to class conflicts than communities of white workers and thus could be more likely to form class identities. This is because they are often uprooted and experience greater occupational and economic insecurity, making them more vulnerable – for example, in mass redundancies. At the same time, their background and embeddedness in alternative communities and cultures are seen to make racially marginalised workers more independent from paternalistic cultures in industrial villages and thus promote more activism and militancy (Zingraff & Schulman, 1984, p. 111). Although prior research in America suggests that minorities are less likely to support dominant ideologies and are more egalitarian (Leggett, 1968; Robinson & Bell, 1978), this was not reflected in the identifications of the textile workers. Besides a general tendency of Black workers at the time to identify with a lower class designation (Coleman & Rainwater, 1979;

Zingraff & Schulman, 1984, p. 111), the racial or ethnic division seemed to result in boundary drawing and to inhibit the formation of a united group (Geschwender, 1977; Zingraff & Schulman, 1984). The study does, however, leave open whether this is because the marginalised workers drew boundaries based on the strong sense of belonging to their communities or because social cohesion was made difficult due to prior boundary drawing by white workers.

Overall, the link between “race” relations and class inequality, as well as between “racial” identities and class identities, remains underexplored. Despite the formulation of theoretical perspectives from Dependency Theory (Singer, 1950; Baran, 1957; Furtado, 1965), notably the World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 2011) and the Racial Capitalism perspective (Robinson, 2000; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Issar, 2021; Chhabria, 2023) that break with Eurocentric perspectives, racism has had little in theorising about labour (Nowak, 2024) and in conceptualisations of class (Callinicos, 1993; Lamont, 2000; Bannerji, 2005).

The links between gendered and class identities was explored by some traditional feminist working-class studies (Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982). However, attempts at systematic theorisation remain rare and incomplete (Bhandar & da Silva, 2013). Due to the strong historic focus of class analysis on the study of white, abled, working-aged men in Western countries, one of its main weaknesses lies in the fact that it developed a generalised idea of class subjects as white male workers who are directly dependent on wage labour. This has, in fact, neglected the reality that class subjects are always diverse (Dowling et al., 2017) and positioned within a multiplicity of hierarchies and relations of (mutual) dependency.

The Marxist approach to conceptualising anything besides exploitation as secondary contradictions, which are not viewed as economic relations themselves and thus are assumed to be resolved with the overcoming of capitalism, has found many critics. Part of the problem is that class, via a narrow concept of exploitation, is centred around paid labour and, therefore, as mentioned above, has difficulty capturing the situation of those in dependency relationships, mediated class locations, unpaid work and unfree labour. Marxist scholars have also failed to capture racism and sexism as genuine ideological formations and, consequently, reduced struggles against them to purely cultural or symbolic conflicts rather than addressing their close entanglement with economic (class) relations (Dowling et al., 2017, p. 413f.).

The insufficient conceptualisation of the relationship between class and other forms of inequality affects the understanding of class structure itself and the evaluation of classed

attitudes, behaviours, identifications and class struggles. An approach to class that determines everything from an economic angle tends to underestimate phenomena like sexism and racism and explain them away as something else – for example, as fears for the future, economic uncertainty or social legacies (El-Tayeb, 2016, p. 19) – instead of acknowledging them as widespread, deeply rooted attitude patterns (Dowling et al., 2017, p. 415). In recent debates about the rising support for right-wing populism among working classes, this has led to severe misjudgements and oversimplistic academic and political arguments justifying right-wing voting as a protest against downgrading and a hurt sense of justice (Neckel, 2016; Stegemann, 2017; Fraser, 2017; Doerre, 2017; Dowling et al., 2017, p. 414f.). Rather than dealing with the contradictions of cultural and economic change, such explanations facilitated the acceptance of discriminatory ideologies.

Weberian scholars have mainly integrated other forms of inequality as matters of social status (Crompton, 2008b) or used the concept of social closure to make sense of age discrimination in employment contexts (Roscigno et al., 2007). But, overall, there has been little development. Bourdieusian researchers tried to overcome some shortcomings of the original work by applying the concepts of social, symbolic and physical capital (Flemmen et al., 2019). Lareau and Weininger (2003) have criticised the narrow notion of cultural capital and argued for a wider definition of the concept beyond matters of aesthetical preferences, attitudes and pursuits in the sense of low- and high-brow culture. Their definition as a “micro-interactional process through which individuals comply (or fail to comply) with evaluative standards of dominant institutions” (ibid, p. 53) was successfully applied by scholars to explore the relation of social class and disability in the context of accessing welfare state support (Jensen 2023).

A different way of approaching the relations between these forms of inequality comes from intersectional approaches rooted in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s study of discrimination in the context of the US American legal and justice system. Crenshaw used the concept of intersectionality to show how the experiences and interests of Black women were politically marginalised and theoretically erased (Crenshaw, 1989) because they did not adhere to either the discourse of feminism or antiracism alone but, as a product of intersecting patterns of both sexism and racism, were qualitatively different (Crenshaw, 1991b, p. 1,244). Beyond the triadic relationship of race, gender and class (Belkhir, 1993), scholars have then utilised the concept to understand the relationships between inequalities linked to race and disability (Ben-Moshe &

Magaña, 2014; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019), and class and disability (Butler-Rees & Chatzitheochari, 2021; Chatzitheochari et al., 2022; Jacobsen, 2023).

Intersectional approaches and the identity politics that have resulted from them offer a better understanding of inequalities by revealing issues from a marginalised perspective that aims at overall inequalities and their relations to each other (Putschert, 2017, p. 20; Dowling et al., 2017, p. 415). Their emphasis on the simultaneity and instantaneousness of inequalities rooted in race, gender, class and other aspects is crucial to understanding inequalities today (Bannerji, 2005). However, like many feminists and Bourdieusian researchers who made a significant cultural turn, intersectional scholars leave questions of economic inequality and exploitation underdeveloped. Their studies often focus only on the links between gender, race and disability, without including class. If class is included, it remains vague or is used interchangeably with classism. This issue is fundamentally rooted in a lack of distinction between underlying mechanisms that create these inequalities. Cultural and intersectional approaches frequently fail to distinguish between structure and culture and thus neglect the different characters of discrimination and exploitation.

From a Marxist perspective, class is not just another form of ideology that facilitates and legitimises oppression. It denotes exploitative relations between people or groups of people mediated by their relations to the means of production (Gimenez, 2001). The failure to analytically distinguish these mechanisms makes it impossible to define the relations and interactions between them, and thus between gender, class and “race”. Consequently, these perspectives conflate class with class identity, class formation and class consciousness, making no distinction between class as a structural category, identity and mobilised collective force.

Just as it is problematic to assume subjective common interests between members of the working class, it is not reasonable to assume shared subjective interests, ideologies and politics based on gender, race and ethnicity. Those groups are divided into classes and strata with contradictory and conflicting objective economic interests, while people sharing a class location are divided by gender, “race”, and ethnicity. It cannot be taken for granted that either of these groups identifies or organises around one of these categories (Gimenez, 2001, p. 24).

Another problem that comes with a cultural focus on different identities is that the exposure of differences and related inequalities becomes an end in itself and loses its political impulse (Dowling et al., 2017, p. 415). By simply creating a hierarchy of discriminations and

leaving class undertheorised as just another oppression, intersectionality fails its revolutionary potential (ibid, p. 31). That intersectional analysis can complement class analysis in a useful way is shown, for example, in the context of education and family research. Rather than constructing simplistic (accumulative) hierarchies of inequality, Ben-Mosche and Magaña (2014, p. 101) conceptualised the intersection of race, disability, class and gender from the angle of caregiving by utilising the concepts of paid and unpaid labour. However, as with Weberian, Bourdieusian and traditional Marxist approaches, there is a lot of empirical and theoretical work to be done.

As has been argued above, class analysis has failed to recognise that there is not one generic, homogenous or actual class subject (Dowling et al., 2017) but that there is and always was a variety of subjects with different (naturally and socially) assigned characteristics for which capitalist exploitation manifests in varying degrees of intensity, in different forms, and which creates different problems and thus differing identities and consciousnesses. Focusing on the different identities and specific problems of various groups cannot happen as an addition at the margins of class analysis but must be a central part of a viable theoretical approach to class. Such an approach must then account for the role of economic mechanisms of exploitation and the social and cultural mechanisms that shape and facilitate the specific forms in which exploitation occurs. It must be able to acknowledge that mechanisms of oppression and exclusion – whether structural, institutional or interpersonal – relate to mechanisms of economic exploitation via various pathways that determine advantages and disadvantages, and which define who is exploitable, in what ways, and to what extent.

Black feminist Marxists have worked towards solutions for some of these shortcomings (Bannerji, 1995; Bannerji, 2005; Roberts, 2014; Federici, 2021). As Bhandar and da Silva (2013) argue, Black and third-world Marxist feminists “have consistently developed critiques of capitalist forms of property, exchange, paid and unpaid labour, along with culturally embedded and structural forms of patriarchal violence” (Collins, 1993; Monture-Angus, 1999). One convincing step to capture these relations lies in the above-presented refinement of the concept of exploitation suggested by Haubner (2017). Viewing oppression and exclusion as facilitators for exploitation, but at the same time acknowledging racism, sexism, etc., as independent ideologies that follow their own logic, allows the joint consideration of structural and cultural factors in the reproduction of class societies and their internal fragmentation. Another helpful perspective has been offered by Collins, who conceptualises the relationships between class,

gender and race as “distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression” (Collins, 1993, p. 26). Collins uses the term *interlocking* to describe the connections of linking systems of oppression on a macro level in order to distinguish them from the notion of intersectionality, which she views as a microlevel process (Collins, 1997, p. 74; Gimenez, 2001, p. 26f.). This distinction avoids the conflation of structures and position-taking described above. It helps to distinguish between material inequalities and power relations that constitute oppression and create different positions in a system and the “doing” of differences in interactions with others, which then contributes to the reproduction of existing structures (Collins, 1997, p. 75; Gimenez, 2001, p. 27). The ways in which individuals and groups occupy social positions within the interlocking structures of oppression (Collins, 1997, p. 74) include habituated, classed views, preferences, practices, and identities, as well as questions of moral boundary drawing and discrimination.

The theoretical and empirical literature suggest that class identities can compete or align with other inequality-related identities and that more research is needed to explore these relationships. Further explorations require conceptual clarity to avoid conflating different dimensions and mechanisms in creating and reproducing these structural inequalities.

### 2.3.7 Participation in collective action

It has been argued that the symbolic and cognitive work during mobilisation can develop collective identity without previously existing schemes (Maurer, 2001, p. 39). Some suggest that this was the case in the precarious movement: that collective action developed before preexisting consciousness (Mathieu, 2011; della Porta et al., 2014, p. 16). While this is not entirely convincing, it is plausible that events of collective mobilisation promote morale and, thereby, further action that strengthens collective identity (Piven and Cloward, 1978; Melucci, 1996).

Collective action is not always strictly political and linked to a strong anti-capitalist consciousness, as shown in Beynon’s study on Ford workers (1973/1984) or Langford’s study on Canadian Postal workers (1994). Regardless of political or social motivation, collective action provides a context in which people in a weaker, potentially stigmatised position can develop positive, empowering visions of themselves (Langford, 1994, p. 111; Pauchadom, 2011).

Industrial action plays a crucial role in forming class identity, as it presents “emotion-laden moments of intergroup conflict and ingroup solidarity which are not commonplace in working-class life” (Langford, 1994, p. 110f.). Therefore, it is not surprising that workers, especially those who have not yet had much experience and involvement in industrial action,

may change their views as a result of participation in strike action (ibid., p. 116; Kelly, 1998). It appears less relevant whether a change of concrete conditions is achieved or not, as the unusual experience itself effectively allows new insights and reflections (Langford, 1994, p. 111). What seems to be more critical are prior orientations and motivations for participation, as these necessarily shape the forms of solidarity that are felt and practised towards other workers (ibid, p. 113ff.). While situational solidarity only seems to temporarily motivate participation in industrial action, deeply internalised solidarity has been linked to more intense and long-term involvement (ibid, p. 116, 119). Overall, strikes or other forms of collective action creating a protest community can facilitate the development of class identities and vice versa.

### 2.2.8 New manifestations of class identity

Overall, the decline of class identification predicted by theoretical scholars is somewhat exaggerated, and changes in class identification are, in many ways, more subtle and complex in their character. Middle-class identification is generally on the rise but is much more common in Germany than England. On a large scale, identification as working-class may resist experiences of intergenerational social mobility into middle-class jobs but could also be linked to the devaluation of educational degrees and their failure to translate into stable, well-paid employment. Further, the increasing income inequality and its partial decoupling from occupations seem to cause uncertainty about the relevance of these markers.

While work remains crucial for most people to make a living, and thus is likely to shape their view of the world and their position in it, the fragmentation of work trajectories and the shift to more flexible and precarious employment might change how much priority the experience and meaning of work have over other aspects of life.

The interrelation of class and other dimensions of inequality may add uncertainty about the character of inequalities and cause further ambivalence about class identity. Other identity markers are potentially more accessible because they are more legitimate in their apparent naturalness and could, therefore, overshadow class. Equally, experiences of indirect exploitation, exclusion, and oppression related to gender, race, or disability could fuel awareness of social inequality and thereby facilitate class identification.

Cultural class analysis has demonstrated that moralised discourses about class have resulted in questions of legitimacy of different positions and identities, which leaves particularly those in lower- and working-class positions to deal with devaluation and stigma, which inhibit

positive identifications with class. As part of the dominant paradigm, middle-class narratives, individualisation, demand for self-responsibility, and the myth of meritocracy inhibit working- and lower-class identifications. These effects seem to be enforced by precarisation, which further disadvantages those who lack the cultural, social, and economic resources to navigate risks and uncertainties successfully. Precarious employment is likely to complicate the recognition of class positions because it creates ambivalent experiences, is often normalised and legitimised by those subjected to it.

Collective action can be relevant to overcoming the effects of devaluation because it provides a context in which people in a weaker, stigmatised position can create positive, empowering visions of themselves and experience collective agency. However, the forms of solidarity that are forged seem to depend on wider perceptions and attitudes relating to class. Further, disidentification with class seems to be linked to an underestimation of inequality and an overestimation of social mobility.

The state of research on class identity shows that various structural and cultural factors influence whether people recognise their class location and whether suitable identifications are available to express belonging and shared interests. More in-depth and biographic approaches are needed to understand and explain disidentification, ambiguity, and middling tendencies in class identifications and the overlap or conflict between identities. Inductive qualitative research is required to further explore the subtle shifts in class identifications and carve out the impact of cultural and structural changes. The literature here also suggests that empirical research must be considerate in dealing with the moral connotations of class positions and identifications.

The review of relevant research has also demonstrated that further theoretical and empirical work is needed to better equip class analysis to understand the complexities of internally fragmented class societies under financial capitalism.

## 2.4 Summary

By pointing out shortcomings of different approaches to class analysis, this chapter has shown that much theoretical and empirical work is left to be done for the study of class identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One central controversy that has been elucidated upon is the role of structure and culture in the reproduction of class society, which affects the question of how class identity can be conceptualised and studied. Cultural class analysis sees this process of reproduction as largely

rooted in nonmaterial dimensions that operate without individuals consciously acknowledging them (Lopes, 2011, p. 96), which is reflected in the growing research on the symbolic meaning of class, classed norms and values, and stigmatisation. On the other side, Marxists and some Weberians explain the reproduction of class through the way in which an individual's situation in the labour market and the economic relations provide them with opportunities and resources which open and constrain the universe of choices that they can consciously make (ibid, p. 97).

The chapter has made the case that Marxist approaches do not need to be a “fading force” within class analysis (Atkinson, 2015, p. 181) only because the field has recently been dominated by quantitatively oriented schemes and cultural class analysis (Atkinson, 2015, p. 118f.). Following Chibber, I have argued here that an integrated approach, which revives a materialist perspective that acknowledges and locates the role of cultural forces in the production and reproduction of class society, may help to address this problem.

I have further shown that through a static understanding of class, class analysis loses its political character and focus on social change while also failing to deal with the fragmentation of work and life trajectories and the shifting role of work throughout life. I have argued that a dynamic approach to class is vital: (1) to avoid the negative performative effects of depoliticised academic debates on class seeping into public and political discourse, further devaluing and delegitimising those in lower- and working-class positions and (2) to allow a temporal perspective on people's life courses, which captures the interlocking with age as another factor for inequality and acknowledges cultural and structural changes that have led to more fragmented trajectories in which a momentary job or income alone may not allow to define someone's overall class location.

I have emphasised that there is no revolutionary (worker) subject per se (Dowling et al., 2017, p. 419) but complex subjects with complementing and conflicting experiences, perceptions, attitudes and identities. I pointed out how traditional approaches to class analysis failed to properly integrate the roles of gender, “race”, age and ability and thus left the relationships between them and class under-theorised and underexplored. I have demonstrated that an understanding of class needs to centre the processes that constitute class to allow for a more dynamic perspective and distinguish class from other social categories of inequality. I have indicated that a wider conceptualisation of exploitation that includes questions of exclusion and oppression is one way to acknowledge the indirect exploitation of those in mediated class

locations and to understand how the oppression of women, Black people, different age groups and disabled people make them more vulnerable to exploitation. Following these distinctions, recognition or misrecognition are not considered to constitute class directly but are seen as sociocultural processes that mediate exploitation through exclusion and oppression.

To acknowledge some of these considerations in the research on platform food couriers' class identifications, I have drawn a sensitising theoretical framework that brings together three lines of thought. It, overall, follows Wright's integrated approach to class analysis in that it sees class rooted in exploitation and antagonistic interests while also recognising the crucial role of social closure and value struggles in the reproduction of class structures. The framework further draws on Wright's conceptualisation of class identity and class consciousness. Thereby, Bourdieusian notions of cultural belonging and habitus can be captured as *class-pertinent effects*, and articulations of material interests and power relations can be understood as class identifications with *class content*. The embeddedness of class identity as an element of class consciousness ensures a processual and dialectical understanding of class identity as something that develops in an interplay with wider beliefs and perceptions about social class. The theoretical frame that sensitises this research further draws on Marxist feminist conceptualisations of exploitation, which move beyond a narrow economic angle and see exclusion and discrimination as relevant mechanisms that facilitate exploitation and can, therefore, be relevant *class content* of identities. Such conceptualisation also directs the attention beyond a narrow focus on wage labour. Lastly, the frame draws on Chibbers' suggestion to locate questions of ideology and value struggles within a materialist understanding of class. Rather than believing that cultural aspects lead to the reproduction of class structure, e.g. by legitimising inequality, I follow Chibber in assuming that material conditions are crucial for this reproduction but, particularly in class identities, are closely intertwined with cultural norms and values. This sensitising framework allows to understand identification as the result of a negotiation of experiences and perceptions of structural conditions and ideological discourses, capturing material effects and questions of social legitimacy.

## Chapter 3: Platform Food Courier Work

To study the class identities of platform food couriers, it is essential to understand more about food platforms, the couriers, and their working conditions. Reviewing mainly empirical literature, the chapter provides an overview of what characterises food platforms and courier work, who does the job, and the meaning of this for couriers' class composition.

The chapter first presents the key principles of platform companies before making sense of them as labour-capital relations.

Secondly, it provides background on food platforms' business and investment models and shows how the exploitation of workers takes place in these companies. Influenced by a Labour Process Theory perspective (LPT), the chapter sketches out the dual dynamic of control and resistance in the food courier sector. It shows what management methods food platforms in Germany and England use to control the labour process that couriers are subjected to.

Thirdly, the chapter draws a picture of the food courier workforce, indicating how the specific exploitation in the job is linked to their social situation and, thus, how their class location is defined not only by the technical but also by the social class composition. Lastly, the chapter engages with the other side of the dual dynamic underlying labour-capital relations. It shows how food couriers have resisted the conditions and control exerted by platforms, outlining the nature of individual misbehaviour and collective protest in both countries. I indicate how the different contexts of industrial relations have shaped resistance.

By presenting these aspects, the chapter sets out the context and conditions of platform food courier work, thus defining the situation in which couriers work and develop their views about class and class identities. Following Joyce and Stuart (2021), in their perspective on platforms as a new management system with enhanced control and new sites for resistance, I indicate moments in the labour process and resistance of food couriers that speak to the literature on class identity. The chapter concludes by highlighting factors and national differences that may promote the development of working-class identities. As I will further show throughout the thesis, the formation of class identities is highly dependent on many contextual factors. The specific work experience and, thus, the dual dynamic of control and resistance play a role in this and are closely intertwined with the social composition of the workforce and the broader institutional setting that supports different narratives and actions.

### 3.1 Platforms as capital-labour relations

Digital labour platforms have attracted interest because of their new coordination and intermediation processes (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 372). They provide a digital infrastructure for groups to interact with each other (Srniczek, 2017; Cant, 2020, 12). Via digital technology and algorithms, labour supply and demand are brought together by connecting users and workers in a complex constellation to buy or sell a service and essentially to get tasks done (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Graham and Woodcock, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; Franke and Pulignano, 2023). The requested service and labour are provided ‘on-demand.’ (Wood et al., 2019; Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 373).

Throughout the whole process, data are extracted from the interactions. With new technology not only allowing the tracking of transactions but, more importantly, predicting transactions and activities (Heiland, 2021; Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 372). They have, therefore, raised interest from a technical perspective (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), and as a new economic formation (Srniczek, 2017; Joyce and Stuart, 2021). From a labour perspective, further discussed below, specific interest has focused on algorithmic ratings, incentive mechanisms and digital monitoring (Gandini, 2019; Bathini and Parth, 2021; Franke and Pulignano, 2023). One of the supposed central benefits digital platforms have for their users is that they deploy metrics and data within the platform-worker-user relationship and allow the reduction of transaction costs (Lehdonvirta et al., 2019), thus improving the efficiency of coordination processes, decision making and organisational learning (Kellogg et al., 2019; Cini, 2023).

While these are general features, there is a large variety of labour platform models. Research has broadly distinguished between locally tethered, offline work and remote, globally dispersed online platform work (Irani, 2015; Kuhn and Maleki, 2017; Vandaele, 2018), also called ‘virtual global service’ (De Groen et al., 2016) or ‘web-based’ platform work (Schmidt, 2017). Distinctions have also been drawn along the products and services provided, the required skill level, or the nature of the work. Considering the work and its value creation, a distinction has been made between platform-mediated work (marketplaces like Amazon, in-person service provisions like Uber and Airbnb, and remote service provision like Upwork) and platform-mediated content creation (Kenney and Zysman, 2016). Platform work may also be specified as a cloud-based skilled *professional consultant and freelance work* (on platforms like Upwork), *offline service work* (like ride-hailing, care and repair work) that is mediated via platforms,

*micro-tasking* in platform-related human intelligence tasks (like content editing and moderation), as *aspirational labour* of content creators, and even the *venture labour of architects and technologists of the platforms* (Vallas and Schor, 2020, 16.3f.). Other typologies have been offered, too (De Stefano and Aloisi, 2018; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023).

Within this wide variety of platform companies, food delivery platforms present a specific case. Compared to, for example, translation or online sex work platforms, food courier platforms are more specifically geographically tethered because the services provided through the platforms are carried out by workers who need to be in a specific place to carry out this work (Srnicek, 2017; Cant, 2020, 12). At the same time, the work is considered low skill; compared to content creation, for example, it does not require aspirational labour but is subjected to much tighter control and thus less autonomy than much of content creation work and freelancing work that is mediated by platforms. The specificities of the food courier work are explained in more detail below. While such typologies are useful to highlight the differences within platform work, they also brush over important nuances, as has been shown in the case of online sex work platforms, which, although in principle being characterised by globally dispersed online labour, can be surprisingly nationally bounded (Stegeman, 2023).

Rather than centring the character of platforms as tech start-ups and infrastructures or overemphasising the novelty and effects of algorithmic control, critical research has sought to understand platforms as capital-labour relationships (Moore, 2017; Gandini, 2019; Stewart et al., 2020), as a capitalist business model (D. Azzellini et al., 2022), or, more specifically, as a management system (Joyce and Stuart, 2021). Focussing on their capitalist use means treating platforms as what they ultimately are – capitalist companies that combine technological development with old-school exploitation (Cant, 2020: 12).

What characterises platform work, besides the technological aspects, is that it is, in most cases, dis-embedded from institutional settings meant to decommodify labour, like welfare systems, labour laws and collective representation and collective bargaining (Wood et al., 2019b; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023). Platforms typically avoid standard regulatory regimes (Moore and Joyce, 2020) and create pervasive legal and regulatory arbitrage (Joyce et al., 2023). Rather than, for example, following and applying legal and normative standards around employment, platform businesses use platform governance mechanisms that control the central network

interactions to regulate exchange (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2022; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023).

Platforms impose the conditions under which workers connect with users (Wood et al., 2019b). They can adjust the workforce depending on demand (Graham and Woodcock, 2018), and, in various ways, expose workers to market forces (Wood et al., 2019b). Risks are shifted to workers who are frequently independent contractors and thus excluded from social protection, while platforms also outsource the majority of 'fixed capital' to their workers (Srnicsek, 2017; Cant, 2020, 66), requiring them to use their own equipment (De Stefano, 2015). Although worker-provided equipment is not entirely new (Stanford, 2017: 384; Joyce and Stuart, 2021: 165), platforms have been able to push back on the widely established balance between what the company provides and what workers provide. For workers, this has resulted in the necessity to invest part of their income in an increasing value of 'inelastic' commodities that allow them access to work in the first place (phones, mobile data, mopeds) (Cant, 2020, 68), leaving them with a reduced value of 'elastic commodities' they can purchase from the rest of their income (Cant, 2020: 68) With workers providing not only labour but also capital, platform companies may also be understood as corporate rent seekers that exploit workers' and users' dependency on the technology they offer (Cant, 2020, 66).

Platforms also decide which data and information to share with workers and users, exerting control through information asymmetries (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Bathini and Parth, 2021). While these data are central to their strategies towards market expansion, they also use them to foster competition by sanctioning and rewarding users and workers (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 377). Thus, the platforms' algorithms and data processing present a black box to users and workers, which is used to control and increase dependency (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 377). Most importantly, the commonly used dynamic price-setting is a calculative technique that allows platforms to optimise efficiency at the expense of other market participants (Shapiro, 2020; Franke and Pulignano, 2023).

Although concealed behind the technological interface, platforms present a social arrangement or relationship (Richardson, 2020), which requires more attention from research (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 372). However, rather than simply understanding them as companies paying people to do a job and extracting value from them as they work (Cant, 2020, 12), the specific 'triangular' arrangement of how platforms connect users and workers (Schörpf

et al., 2017; Lehdonvirta et al., 2019) needs to be analysed as a more complex conglomerate of capitalist relations (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 372).

Studies applying a Marxist perspective have started to specify the forms of commodification, valorisation and control in digital labour platforms. The relations within platforms have, for example, been explored by tracing the cycles of empowerment and disempowerment between platforms, users and workers (Franke and Pulignano, 2023). Joyce (2020) makes sense of platforms through the Marxist concepts of subsumption and the cash nexus. Understanding subsumption as a continuum reaching from formal to real subsumption, he locates platform work mainly in the area of transitional sub-forms and formal subsumption, meaning they present a re-emergence of a historically prior form of subsumption. Rather than in the case of real subsumption, where exploitation is organised via the transformation of the labour process through new machines, production techniques or forms of work organisation, platforms extract unpaid labour by reorganising the labour process through large concentrations of capital and introducing new relations of domination and subordination (Joyce, 2020, 545). In the sub-forms, the labour process is rarely changed, but the presence of venture capital in platforms provides workers with the necessary ‘conditions to labour’ – mainly infrastructure - and thus increases their dependency (Joyce, 2020, 546). Such subsumption processes re-establish the old cash nexus, a ‘single-stranded’ monetary relationship of capital to labour, essentially stripping the relationship down to an instrumental attitude to work based on the self-interest to make money. Such perspective allows us to understand the uprise in platform work as a consequence of such reorganisation and the cash nexus as simultaneously a means to control labour and a trigger for its resistance (Joyce, 2020, 549). This perspective is valuable because it distinguishes between the legal aspects of employment and employment as a social relation, and because it offers an alternative way to distinguish platform models along the different forms of subsumption in them. It poses the question of why some types of work and services can be controlled directly under a reorganised labour process and others, like some creative work, can only be integrated into capitalist exchange networks (Dario Azzellini et al., 2022).

Because of the everyday use of self-employed workers by platforms, it is difficult to say how many people work for or via platform businesses, their share of individual incomes, and the overall economic growth. Estimates from 2019 suggest that less than 4 per cent of workers in

Europe consider platform-based gig work their main job and their primary source of income (Wallerstein et al., 2020; Dario Azzellini et al., 2022).

Regardless of their exact size and performance, the development of platform companies has been assumed to change the landscape of the broader economy (Srnicsek, 2017; Cant, 2020, 12) by actively shaping markets, including labour markets (Forde et al., 2017). While they have even been compared to computers because of their wide-reaching effects (Cant, 2020, 13), critical interventions in the debate about platforms warn against researchers falling for technological determinism when studying platforms (D. Azzellini et al., 2022; Joyce et al., 2023). Rather than overstating the transformative effects of platforms and assuming them to define a new period in social or capitalist development, it has been suggested that platform research would benefit from a focus on contingencies, long-term development and incremental change through the development and use of technologies (Joyce et al., 2023). This is so far mainly done by researchers applying sociological approaches like the Social Shaping of Technology (SST) (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999) or the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) (Russell and Williams, 2002). These understand technological development as an ongoing process and help facilitate an understanding of the sociality and materiality of technology (Joyce et al., 2023, 154). Equally from a labour studies perspective, the character of platforms as social relations has been emphasised in approaches making sense of platforms as an “evolution of management methods”, following in the footsteps of systems like Taylorism and human resource management (Joyce and Stuart, 2021: 166). Without overemphasising the novelty and technological aspects of platforms, such perspectives highlight how platforms have changed the organisation of work and thus brought new elements or at least a new combination of elements of control and resistance that make for new experiences for workers and potentially new markers for their class identification.

To better understand the social relation and the commodification and exploitation of labour in the specific case of food courier platforms, the following section presents an overview of food platforms’ business model and the labour process with its variations in Germany and England.

## 3.2. Food Courier platforms and their Labour Process

### 3.2.1 The business model

Food delivery platforms connect restaurants that sell food, customers who want takeaway food, and couriers who deliver the food. They mainly coordinate these parties in areas with sufficient numbers, like urban centres (Heiland, 2021, 10), and reduce the overall transaction costs of the process (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 379). However, as explained further below, they are by no means a passive mediator.

For customers, this offers a variety of restaurant options, an easy ordering system via a user application on their phone, and a traceable preparation and delivery process that lets them know in real-time how their order is going and when their food will be with them. They have the chance to input feedback through rating systems and comments on food quality and preparation time, and, in return, they can use the processed data by using the restaurant ratings for their decision-making. (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 379).

For restaurants, the platform service usually expands their potential customer base beyond their area since they get listed in the customer application and become visible. Orders can easily be placed through the standardised system. They may also benefit from the statistics on food preparation times generated by the platform and provided in the form of marketing advice to increase sales (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 385). In exchange, they pay a commission to the platform for each order, which may be around 30 per cent if using the platform's delivery service and lower if using their own couriers (Ibid). The platforms adjust these commissions to capture maximum value, taking a higher share from smaller restaurants and a lower share from bigger restaurants with higher sales. In some cases, prominent chain restaurants may have some form of premium membership that grants them special conditions (Heiland, 2021, 10; Franke & Pulignano, 2023). The app rating system that uses customers' and couriers' ratings influences the restaurants' ranking in the customer application, thus, their chance to make further sales (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 381). In this way, platforms have substantial control over the market.

The platforms provide couriers access to work through an easily accessible and open recruitment system (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 380). Most platforms have low requirements, meaning anyone with a right-to-work and in most countries without a criminal record can register. The couriers download the courier application and, depending on the model used by the platform, are more or less flexible in choosing their working time, which is often but not always

linked to employment status. Self-employed workers or independent contractors will usually decide when to work, guided by the information on demand provided by most apps. In other models and with employment contracts, couriers have fixed shifts, which are distributed through an online-shift system. When signed in to work, couriers get assigned delivery jobs through the algorithm and, guided by the map and instructions in the application, plan the timing of their journey and make their way to pick up orders from restaurants and drop them off with customers. The App is, in many ways, empowering for workers (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 380). It offers them a flexible and widely autonomous way of working and, although there are considerable differences between apps, provides flexible earning potential through performance bonuses and demand-related boosts. However, the work accessed through food platforms has typically been characterised by information asymmetry, one-sided flexibility, safety risks, low social and employment protections, and unpaid labour (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Forde et al., 2017; Gregory, 2021; Pulignano et al., 2023). These downsides linked to exploitation and precarity will be discussed below.

Providing technology to connect these different parties presents a business model for platform companies. They create three applications—one for customers, one for restaurants, and one for workers. Collecting and processing data via these applications creates user value for restaurants and customers when facilitating the delivery service. By charging fees and commissions from restaurants and customers, platforms generate revenue and profit margins by keeping labour and material costs low.

Within this general model, there are many variations. While some platforms focus on a delivery business model providing a vast fleet of own couriers for restaurants, others function mainly as delivery service aggregators, primarily being an intermediary for customers and restaurants with their own couriers. Most platforms offer a marketplace while also providing a delivery service. In some countries like the UK, the platforms also offer restaurants the option to rent space for an edition kitchen or so-called dark kitchens (Woodcock, 2020). This allows busy restaurants to outsource their delivery-only operations and increase sales (Cant, 2020: 126f.). Food delivery platforms may also generate income by selling advertising space on their website or app to restaurants, food manufacturers, or other businesses (Deliveroo, 2022; Wang, 2023; GroupM, 2023). Technology is not only central to these businesses because it reduces transaction costs and produces user value that can be valorised. It also allows low-cost expansion because

the algorithmic management can be replicated in various new locations for little or no additional cost. Only one central head office is needed to supervise the app's function; thus, few local offices are required even with an expanding business (Cant, 2020: 50).

The growth of platform businesses meets a demand on the side of customers. While the takeaway culture promoted by these Apps may seem like a luxury of modern, mainly urban, lifestyle, it has also been framed as a reflection of a broader crisis of social reproduction (Cant, 2020: 100). While a variety of food is offered, including more expensive options like Sushi or Thai food, the primary preference for takeaway food in the UK is in the cheaper segments like Pizza, Chinese, Burgers and Indian food (Statista, 2023) and seem to present the majority of deliveries from food platforms (Cant, 2020). According to Cant (2020, p. 98), the average customer is not so much an urban hipster but a regular 'knackered' white-collar worker with enough spare budget to occasionally outsource some of their reproductive work. He delivered to single parents, people on hangovers, and late-night office workers - to people without sufficient facilities, skills and time to prepare a meal.

Although food courier platforms have been among the fastest-growing businesses in some areas in the past ten years, they are not necessarily among the most profitable (Cant, 2020, 2). While many of them had increasing revenues, only since very recently are the leading platforms in Europe moving close towards profitability, reporting positive net income before tax and other costs (FT, 2024). Like many other gig economy businesses, food platforms usually rely on investment bubbles to create global start-ups that can disrupt existing markets and business models. The aim is often to gain a monopoly position in the market. This means there is high competition between platform food companies. Those companies that do make profits go public and, in the long run, try to buy smaller competitors.

Deliveroo was the first big food platform in the UK to go public, and despite being barely profitable, its value was estimated at around five billion dollars (Makortoff, 2021). Shortly after UberEATS, for example, started to become profitable in a quarter of their service locations in the UK, registered as a public company and began to sell shares in the stock market in 2019 (Cant, 2020: 138). Although rumours that Uber was going to buy Deliveroo's European operation did not materialise, it affected the share prices of other big competitors like JustEats (Ibid, 139).

In Germany, Deliveroo left the market, and Foodora was consumed by JustEATS and incorporated into Lieferando, which subsequently became the market leader and still is, despite

new companies like Wolt and (temporarily) Food Panda having joined in 2020/21 (Kapalschinski, 2021; Ksienrzyk, 2021). Platforms rely on exploitative practices to attract further investments and aim for a monopoly because they are often barely profitable, even with minimum wage payments (Cant, 2020). This raises the question of whether food delivery platform models as they currently stand are sustainable or whether we are likely to see more change and restructuring.

To understand how platforms control couriers and exploit their labour to generate profit, the following section outlines the labour process for the two models dominating England and Germany.

### 3.2.2 The labour process

Labour Process Theory is not adopted as a broader theoretical perspective here but is merely used to elucidate class issues in the work context. From an LPT perspective, the capitalist labour process is characterised by a control and resistance dynamic (Thompson and Smith, 2009), which is essentially the manifestation of the class antagonism between capital and labour that underlays “all forms of paid work under capitalist relations of production.” (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 159f.). Since workers' capacity to labour (Edwards, 1986), or labour power (Marx, 1976), needs to be transformed into actual labour to extract surplus value and ultimately generate profit, there is a “control imperative” for capital (Thompson 1990, 100). Consequently, management on behalf of capital seeks to control the labour process – standards, equipment, ways of work, speed, intensity, etc. – to overcome the “indeterminacy of labour” (Thompson and Smith 2010, in Joyce and Stuart 2021, 161). Whether this results in profit for a capitalist is a different question; the underlying dynamic is still present for Marxist and non-Marxist LPT (Edwards, 1986; Thompson, 1990; Braverman, 1998; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, p. 160f.) At the same time, labour develops tactics to resist this control, which makes the dynamic a dialectic process that exists in a historic-specific form but is constantly changing and open to transformation. (Thompson and Smith, 2009). Different management methods have been applied throughout history and across different workplaces and industries.

Different types of managerial control are used in food platforms. For many, but not all, the technological infrastructure and data processing of the platforms are central (Veen et al., 2020). These are used to organise the courier work (its intensity, times, quality, location, etc) into

a productive process and allow profitability (Thompson and Smith, 2009; Gandini, 2019; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 235).

From the various management methods used in platforms (Moore and Joyce, 2020, 5), three groups can be distinguished: 1. Algorithmic management, which includes the algorithmic allocation of work, digital tracking and monitoring, and integrating customer ratings; 2. Pay, the setting of prices and rates of pay and the extraction of commission; 3. Broader forms of regulation, such as the use of different employment types like self-employment or independent contracting, as well as legal and regulatory arbitrage (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 167). They reflect the major points of debates on platform control and will be used here to illustrate the differences and similarities between the situation for couriers in both countries.

### *3.2.2.1 Algorithmic management*

The algorithmic allocation of work is central to the organisation of platform food courier work. The partially automated labour process supervision and coordination, often referred to as algorithmic control and management (Ivanova et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2019; Duggan et al., 2020), are used to coordinate the labour process centrally. The ‘real-time dispatch algorithm estimates preparation and delivery time and assigns a courier in a good location within seconds of receiving the order. The only human effort involved in this process is supervising this algorithm, which is done by workers in centralised offices (Cant 2020, 45). The algorithm also guides the courier’s behaviour by communicating prices, suggesting routes and monitoring the completion of the tasks (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2020). The algorithmic management system, thus, replaces the dispatcher as supervisor of the couriers, as it would have existed in a traditional courier job (Cant 2020, 4). It consequentially changes the chain of demand by replacing a person in an intermediary class position while also transforming the role itself (Cant 2020, 44). At some points, apps like Deliveroo and Foodora still had a ‘driver lead’ or rider captain, who were in-person contacts and general problem solvers, while the Apps already automated other functions. This technology is implemented to gain an advantage over other companies in profit production. It is meant to increase labour productivity and thus produce more surplus value that can eventually be converted into profit (Cant 2020, 45f). Besides allowing more complex and cost-efficient coordination, the technology also increases the amount of data that can be collected from the labour process than could have been done through human dispatchers (Cant, 2020, 46f.). It is also widely considered to avoid human error. Although it

does not avoid favouritism that existed with human dispatchers, algorithmic management may implement more efficient ways to prioritise or victimise couriers (Cant 2020, 50). Last, one of its advantages lies in the fact that it can easily be replicated in new locations and supervised centrally without needing to rely on skilled, experienced, and reliable dispatchers (ibid.).

Algorithmic control has been described as an essential means of disciplining platform food courier workers via the use of penalties, such as account disconnection or lowered priority in working hours, and for administering performance rewards and economic nudges (Rosenblat, 2018; Wu et al., 2019; Griesbach et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023). However, despite efficient coordination of the labour process, algorithmic management failed to take over this second function of supervisors at the beginning of food platforms. When Deliveroo used to pay an hourly wage with a bonus per delivery, they did not have the supervision and control over the workers that a human in the location would have had; who knows the couriers. Thus, the couriers could take advantage of that system and work less because there was no force for intensification to secure a high order volume per hour (Cant 2020: p. 50f.). How resistance and control evolved dynamically, and new disciplining methods were integrated is shown in more detail the section on resistance.

Recording and monitoring have been highly debated in the literature on platforms because they allow platforms to evaluate their workers and provide continuous feedback on performance from ratings and rankings based on different criteria (Griesbach et al., 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). In both countries, monitoring and performance tracking used to be more relevant in earlier stages of the food platforms when they used shift models that set priorities in allocating working time based on couriers' performance. At the time of this study, Deliveroo had already switched to self-employment with open log-in for couriers at any time, and Uber Eats and Food Panda were using the system. The shift allocation within Lieferando does not consider performance rankings. Although the platform has the necessary data, they do not use this control tool. The same seems true for Wolt (Information based on interview data)

Customer ratings have been critically discussed in the literature because they pressure couriers and discipline them to tolerate abusive behaviour to avoid lower ratings and consequential loss of earnings (Huws et al. 2017, Moore 2018, Rava and Dourish 2016). However, customer ratings are not as relevant for this study since, of all the platforms represented in this research, customer ratings were only integrated into Uber Eats.

Some have described couriers' location tracking, which is part of the monitoring process, as gamification (Woodcock and Johnson 2018), while others argue it is more of a continuation of old-school management methods (Joyce and Stuart, 2021:168). The following section on pay and incentive setting discusses this in more detail.

Beyond the fact that control and coordination are partially automated through the app, handling information around these processes has been discussed as a distinctive feature. Courier workers generally understand the app's outputs because they are given to them as instructions. However, they usually do not know the processes and calculations in between and are thus left to speculate (Cant, 2020: p. 58). The same is widely true from the perspective of unions, works councils and regulators. Not knowing exactly what happens in the App makes understanding grievances and interventions more difficult. This element of uncertainty and opacity has been referred to as information hierarchy, asymmetry, or even a black box (Cant, 2020: 60; Heiland, 2022). One aspect that mainly affected self-employed couriers in the UK is the App holding back information on the delivery destination until the courier has accepted an order, arrived at the restaurant and confirmed pick-up (Woodcock, 2020; Franke and Pulignano, 2023). Only then are they told where they must go and how far they must deliver. However, this has been adjusted over time. Moreover, Deliveroo and Uber Eats couriers who are paid per piece rate are now informed about the destination upfront. For couriers in both countries, there exists uncertainty about whether couriers received tips that they had been given by customers (Cant, 2020; Heiland, 2021). The black box character of algorithmic management is present for UK couriers when their accounts get suspended or deactivated without them being given further information. The setting of variable prices and varying boosts is another moment when couriers in England plan and work with ideas of what to expect based on their experience but cannot know for sure if, when and why their earnings change. This has been described as calculative asymmetry (Shapiro, 2020).

A significant moment of information asymmetry – the digital production of space (Heiland, 2021) – affects mainly employed couriers in Germany who work for Lieferando or Wolt. Heiner Heiland emphasises that working spaces are “an intentionally created environment and as such an instrument of managerial control and object of resistance” (Heiland, 2021, 12). In line with an LPT perspective that here focuses specifically on the so-called “spatial fix” of capital and labour, Heiland describes that workers are provided with a controlled autonomy that lets them navigate within specific spatial corridors whose size and borders do not only change

frequently but generally remain widely unknown to couriers (Herod, 1997: 15; Heiland, 2021: 4, 8). One way this works is via the login zones, which allow workers to sign in for shifts or simply receive orders. While staying close to certain areas or restaurants is a recommendation for freelance couriers, it is an instruction for employees (Heiland, 2021, 10). This control mechanism allows work intensification for platforms with employed couriers, which would otherwise be achieved through piece-rate pay. The spatial corridors and geofencing allow companies like Lieferando to limit the couriers' movements and stop them from hiding from orders during their shifts. The corridors or orders are reinforced here through the use of sanctions, like logging couriers out if they stay outside defined areas for too long (Heiland 2021, 10).

While the information asymmetry does affect couriers, it has been pointed out that the core of the problem here is not the transparency per se but how it affects pay. Further, Joyce and Stuart draw attention to the fact that although there is much uncertainty involved, platforms also provide a vast amount of information since working times and tasks are documented with great detail, which is somewhat unusual for many other jobs (Joyce and Stuart, 2021).

The depersonalised management via the app may create alienation among workers, fuel competition, and isolate couriers from office workers. Because the algorithm makes cooperation between management and workers widely unnecessary and impossible, no direct boss can be held accountable for problems. It has been suggested that this may lead to workers turning on each other rather than against management (Cant, 2020, 63f.), especially since higher-skilled office workers and those in management positions remain widely invisible to the couriers and vice versa (Cant, 2020, 63f.). Thus far, the black box may be used to disconnect couriers from each other and create an additional divide between street workers and office workers, obscuring the fact that the platform companies exploit both groups. It has indeed been found that algorithmic changes regarding the login system and the prioritisation of specific groups of workers generate a “reconfigured, fragmented and compliant workforce”, ultimately disconnecting labour (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023: 1). Similarly, the combination of algorithmic management and the piece-rate system has been feared to undermine embryonic solidarity between couriers because they are competing for orders and to create conflict between couriers and restaurant workers since a delay of the latter may cause couriers to lose out on more orders (Cant, 2020, 52f.).

At the same time, the absence of in-person management means that there is little opportunity for coercion. Thus, motivation through commitment cannot be created in the food courier sector as in other modern workplaces (Cant, 2020, 62). On the contrary, Cant suggests that the algorithmic management in food platforms creates alienation and a lack of commitment: “When workers have all the capacities to understand their labour removed and their social cooperation becomes the substance of a faceless system of control, intense alienation is the inevitable result. As deskilled workers with no control over the labour process, who are forced to follow instructions again and again, we became demotivated and uncommitted to the platforms.” (Cant, 2020, 62). From this perspective, the lack of commitment due to the depersonalised management aligns with the idea that platform work establishes a purely instrumental relationship between the platform and workers. Such alienation and lack of coercion would only leave the previously mentioned cash nexus that may make workers comply because of their dependency, but it may also quickly lead to antagonism (Joyce, 2020).

While it is true that the App does not care, it does not share information, and does not allow much compromise, but simply calculates data to provide a set frequency of repetitive commands that need to be followed (Cant 2018, 59), couriers in both countries do, in fact, have considerable autonomy while carrying out their work. To some degree the control through the algorithm remains an illusion (Woodcock, 2020).

Self-employed couriers in the UK, although monitored in the completion of tasks and their rejections, can reject orders without having to fear de-activation. As shown further down, this freedom is utilised not only to avoid certain deliveries and to have autonomy over their workflow but also to influence price rates. Equally, even when employed, couriers in Germany do not necessarily need to follow exactly the route suggested to them by the App’s map. While this is again an element in which the algorithm extracts data from the courier, and improves routes by learning from couriers, it also does give couriers autonomy over their work.

This ambivalence between moments of control via algorithmic management and couriers’ autonomy poses the question of whether this autonomy is intentionally given to them as a controlled autonomy (Heiland, 2021), as part of a socio-ideological management method (Morales and Stecher, 2023) or is simply down to the incompleteness of any of capital’s attempts to control the labour process.

### 3.2.2.2 Pay

Pay could be seen as one of the biggest differences between the German and the UK food platform models. Since the work of German couriers is based on employment contracts, they receive a fixed hourly wage, which currently is 12 Euros per hour for Lieferando. In England, where couriers are self-employed, they do not work on fixed shifts but show up in a delivery area and work for how many hours they want. As independent contractors they are not legally entitled to the national minimum wage, which since April 2014 is at £11.44 an hour.

Their pay depends on the number of deliveries they do within their working time and the variable fees per delivery. How much a company offers for an order depends on the delivery distance, but other factors also play into it and can make a noticeable difference. In the UK this variable payment system, like Uber's "surge-pricing" system is a way to respond to fluctuating labour demand (Joyce and Stuart, 2021: 168). It allows companies to get more workers out in bad weather or during busy times while demotivating workers to show up during quiet times when fewer couriers are needed. The per-drop piece wage in the UK context allows the companies more direct control over work intensification. It forces workers to either work faster or earn less (Cant 2020, 51). It may be important to note, that at some point in the early days of Deliveroo there were five different payment structures operating within the platform, with hourly rates in areas with low order volume and wage depending on the average wage and unemployment rate in the area (Cant, 2020, 109f.). This has all been reduced to one model now.

While the UK system is more aligned with the idea of a gig economy in which workers are paid for each order and potentially highly precarious because of the uncertainty around their earnings, the hourly wage in Germany is closer to the idea of a standard employment model with earning security. Thus far, the payment in both countries presents a stark contrast.

However, it has been pointed out that these differences might be overstated (Schloss 1898, 13, Joyce and Stuart 2021, 171), because output and time are usually closely linked - hourly pay or time-wage usually has a piece-basis and vice versa, a piece rate has a time-basis. Low piece rates, it is argued, have less to do with the piecework system, but with platforms attempting to evade regulation and with increasing competition between workers (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 172). While the payment system might not be so different in some ways, the piece-rate system creates somewhat more uncertainty and fluctuating earnings for couriers in England.

At the same time, other aspects play into the actual earnings that the couriers take home and the question of how hard they need to work for their money.

Three aspects here encourage efforts in both countries and partly force work intensification onto couriers or create unpaid extra time or costs: extra pay incentives, outsourced material costs, and the regulation of delivery zones and distances.

Lieferando couriers can theoretically pocket a bonus if they manage four deliveries per hour over 3 hours. This, however, is not achievable for most riders. A more commonly applied bonus is given to those couriers who work many hours throughout the month. How many deliveries per hour and shift are realistic for the couriers depends on the delivery radius and the distance couriers need to cover per order. It is relatively common in Germany for customers to give courier tips, which thus are relevant to their income per hour.

In the UK, Deliveroo and UberEATS use boosts and “double-orders” to top-up fees during severe weather conditions and less busy times. Thus, these function to avoid labour shortages (Franke and Pulignano, 2023).

These incentive settings in both countries have been seen as an element of the gamification happening in many platform businesses and could be described as consent-based control methods (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Wu et al., 2019), together with the tracking of the task completion in which couriers can see their every move in the App’s map. Whether this mix of gamification and piece rate pay leads to an internalisation of the platform's priorities or presents easy points of conflict between workers and the platform is a subject of debate (Woodcock and Jonson 2018, Woodcock 2020, Joyce and Stuart 2021, 168, 172).

While pay is used to control labour and intensify the couriers’ efforts, it has also been a leading cause of resistance among workers (Joyce, 2020; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, p. 172), as I show further below. This has been visible around the lack of transparency and unannounced changes to piece rates in the UK as well as to experiences of unannounced expansion of delivery zones that resulted in fewer bonuses and in experiences of straight-out wage theft in Germany.

Overall, the UK model of pay shows more elements of gamification and work intensification not only because of the variable pay rates and piece-rate pay itself but also because of the use of the flexible use boosts and partial use of performance rankings in UK platform companies like Uber Eats. More than the hourly wage model, it forces workers to take on the task of managing their own productivity (Cant, 2020, 52). Workers need to speed up the

work process to make use of the peak times to make up for less well-paid hours when the order volume drops (Cant, 2020, 52). It has been indicated that the link between performance and pay exposes couriers to significant risks because they try to work their way through traffic faster (Mendonça et al., 2023). This risk-taking behaviour comes with no responsibility for Deliveroo since the company is not required to provide statutory sick pay or support for bike or car maintenance.

While pay has been a major point of conflict in food courier platforms, Cant points out that the piece-rate pay in the isolated courier work makes collectivisation much more challenging than in other industries in which piece wages that caused outrage were not individual ones but collective ones. Because the labour process in for example factories relied on cooperation between workers, it was much easier to come together to engage in bargaining with the foreman or management over a better piece rate (Cant, 2020, 53).

A practice that generally influences the pay of couriers in both countries is the outsourcing of material costs by the food platforms (Srnicsek, 2017). Generally, couriers in both countries and most companies must provide their own mode of transport, equipment, and mobile data. Where the platforms provide equipment, like the branded bags, they usually charge couriers for them. Consequently, the platform courier workers are forced to include the tools used in the production process as their own ‘means of subsistence’. They have to buy what they need for work from their own wages or earnings in order to reproduce their labour power (Cant, 2020, 67). Because of this element of the business model, these platforms have been seen as “part of a trend towards a regressive redefinition of the means of subsistence” (Cant, 2020, 68) In Germany, couriers have contested this, and thus, platforms like Lieferando and Wolt have had to make significant concessions regarding replacement bikes, maintenance allowances, and support for equipment and mobile data.

### *3.2.2.3 Wider forms of regulation*

Food courier platforms in Germany and England originally built their business model using independent contractors or self-employed workers as couriers. This reflects a widely observed shift in platforms from open to closed employment, which has been associated with a retreat from direct control (Vallas and Schor, 2020). This business practice in platforms is also described as “legal and regulatory arbitrage” (Fleischer, 2010; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 174) and serves to reduce costs and risk by outsourcing them to the workers.

Through self-employment, companies can avoid standard regulatory arrangements such as pension and social security contributions and costs for sick, paid annual, and maternity leave. In the case of Germany, which falls under EU regulation, this would have amounted to 25 cent savings on the platform wages bill (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 174). In the UK context, with overall thinner welfare provisions and lower tax contributions, this might be a lesser amount, but it presents an immediate financial benefit. Besides the more direct cost saving via pay and benefit contributions, the self-employment status presents platforms as mediators rather than as employers and thus helps them evade related responsibilities. At the same time, it deprives the workers of essential employment rights, like the right to organise collectively and to engage in formal collective bargaining processes (Cherry and Aloisi, 2016; Forde et al., 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 175).

Due to the lack of employment protection, independent contractors also free the platforms from any long-term commitments. This arrangement shifts the risks of fluctuating demand throughout the day, as well as throughout recessions, to the worker, thus furthering the commodification of labour (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 384).

The crucial difference between employment and self-employment is the level of personal subordination. In the legal context of Germany, personal dependency defines an employment relationship, while personal freedom characterises self-employment (Weiss et al., 2020; ETUC, 2022, 3). Whilst food platforms in Germany started with the use of independent contractors, they soon had to offer employment relationships, and since 2021, the share of employees in the platform sector has considerably increased (Weiss et al., 2020, 5; Fairwork, 2021). While many of these are on fixed-term contracts, Lieferando is now offering its couriers permanent contracts (Just Eat, 2021). Switching from self-employment to employment status means that couriers in Germany now fall under the labour law rather than the civil code; they are entitled to labour rights like minimum wage, holiday and parental leave as well as paid sick leave, which are guaranteed to them by the employment law (Fairwork, 2021). While Volt offers the option to work as an independent contractor, employment dominates in Germany. All big food delivery platforms in the UK have self-employment models – UberEATS, Deliveroo and JustEats, and smaller companies like Stuart and Food Panda. It has proven difficult for couriers and unions to bring companies to offer employment contracts, and legal steps are complicated. The non-transparency of the algorithmic management makes it difficult to prove personal subordination

and make a case for employment status since information about the mechanisms of control, management, and the evaluation of work is not accessible to the workers (ETUC, 2022, 6).

The employment status of food couriers presents one of the central differences in structuring the labour process in Germany and England. England presents the original gig economy model in which workers are connected with the platform as self-employees, or in other words, (mis)classified as ‘independent contractors’ (Cant 2020, 69). The current model in Germany (and other European states) deviates from this way of organising platform labour. That the employment status of couriers was contested in Germany reflects the broader trend that platform workers become classified as employees in such parts of the globe where the standard model of employment is more common (Joyce et al., 2020; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 175).

Whilst couriers in Germany have some social protection and employment rights that are absent for self-employed couriers in England, it cannot be taken for granted that Lieferando or Wolt necessarily provide all benefits and rights associated with this. As shown below, the need to insist on employment rights creates conflict between couriers and the company.

It has been noted that “self-employment is not inherently empowering or disempowering, but its effects depend instead on how contractual differentiation is wielded by state and capital.” (Alberti et al. 2018, p. 9). This holds partly true for the self-employed couriers in the UK, for whom their contractor status comes with pros and cons compared to the employed couriers in Germany. Overall, they may be described as more vulnerable and exposed to intensified competition among each other in times when the platforms enlarge their workforce (Frank and Pulignano 2020). Also, these couriers are not always fully aware of their legal situation, like the fact that self-employment requires them to register for tax purposes (Cant, 2020, p. 71).

However, at the same time, self-employed couriers in England do factually have more freedoms and more flexibility in their work (Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 381). In the self-employed system, couriers may cancel the order if a restaurant takes too long and the restaurant has the risk of the order not being picked up in time by a new courier being assigned. They are empowered by the platform, which allows them flexibility in choosing their working times and options to maximise their earnings (Franke and Pulignano 2020, 381). In the UK, couriers may also feel empowered by being able to choose which orders they accept or decline – a choice that is limited to employed couriers in Germany. Similarly, couriers in England have the freedom to choose which companies they want to work for and which Apps they want to download and use

at which times, which theoretically gives them “mobility power” (Smith, 2016). How this plays out in practice and whether couriers actually have bargaining power through this mobility between companies is another question. Combining Apps simultaneously might result in being disciplined for multi-apping due to the App’s monitoring. Since the rates for Uber and Deliveroo, which cover most areas, have declined, the factual bargaining power here is minimal.

Considering the legal arbitrage of food platforms in Germany and England in the light of the workforce characteristics points to a particular level of precarity faced by some couriers. The uncertainty of earnings and the lack of employment security for self-employed couriers in England may be particularly problematic for those financially dependent on the job, including many migrant workers. This is accelerated by the fact that the UK has a more liberal welfare system that offers comparably weak protections in the case of lost work and income (Filgueiras and Antunes, 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Schor et al., 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 232).

Table 2: Management methods in food platforms in comparison

	<b>UK</b>	<b>GERMANY</b>
<i>PLATFORMS</i>	Deliveroo, UberEATS, Stuart	Lieferando, Wolt
<b>ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT</b>		
<i>ALGORITHMIC ALLOCATION OF WORK</i>	Can reject orders; Free login within zones; Orders distributed based on proximity to restaurants; No personal contact with supervisors or management	Limited freedom to reject orders; Unknown borders of delivery zones (space becomes contested); Shift distribution non-transparent; No personal contact with supervisors or management
<i>DIGITAL TRACKING AND MONITORING</i>	GPS tracking; Monitoring for multi-apping Risk of deactivation Perform. rankings not applied	GPS tracking; Performance rankings not applied (Minimum of 2 orders per hour)
<i>CUSTOMER RATINGS</i>	Only relevant at Uber Eats	-
<b>PAY</b>		
<i>THE SETTING OF PRICES AND RATES OF PAY</i>	Variable fees £2.80- £4.50 > no guaranteed income Boosts can apply	Hourly wage ~ 12€, Bonus: 1€ per delivery above 100s order; Work intensification through expansion of delivery zones

<i>SOCIAL PROTECTION</i>	Limited sick pay No pension contributions National Health Insurance	Statutory sick pay Social insurance and pension contributions included in some contracts
<i>COSTS FOR EQUIPMENT</i>	with courier Pay for bags	Minimum equipment and clothing provided; Maintenance rate for vehicles and bikes
<i>TIPS</i>	Uncommon (non-transparent)	Common (non-transparent)
<b>WIDER REGULATION</b>		
<i>EMPLOYMENT STATUS</i>	Self-employment	Predominantly Employment (fixed-term mini, midi jobs, part-time, full-time, permanent contracts)
<i>LEGAL AND REGULATORY ARBITRAGE</i>	Collectivisation and interest representation are restricted	Employee rights and benefits
<b>SOCIO-IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL</b>		
<i>APPEAL TO AUTONOMY</i>	Historically stronger	Historically weaker

These three groups of management methods may be complemented by one more aspect, which plays a vital role in mediating the dual dynamic of control and resistance on food platforms: socio-ideological or nonnormative control (Sturdy et al., 2010; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 231). The literature that engages with this type of control draws attention to the way in which the flexible labour relations of digital platform business models align with the wider neoliberal ethos and its appeal to autonomy (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Fleming, 2017), with studies providing empirical proof of how the value of autonomy is intentionally mobilised by platforms (Rosenblat, 2018; Gandini, 2019; Galière, 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Shibata, 2020).

Following the observation that platforms grant autonomy in exchange for “permissive power” (Vallas and Schor, 2020), Morales and Stecher (2023, p. 231) point to the role of economic and cultural national context in configuring capital-labour relations. They conceptualise “the autonomy axis” as a specific socio-ideological control strategy that platforms use to “strengthen the adjustment of workers to their particular work process” in order to sustain an open, often highly precarious employment relationship (Morales and Stecher, 2023, 247). Showing the interaction with other methods of control, they argue that platforms actively promote a representation of workers as autonomous through operating the apps and organising

the work process” (Morales and Stecher, 2023, 247), creating the illusion of working as a free subject while requiring self-regulation via the monitoring and ranking systems. The reflection of performance in rankings and pay is used to elicit an experience as an individual decision-maker who has control over their earnings (ibid.). The study indicates that depending on the type of platforms and how the autonomy axis interacts with other applied mechanisms of control, the value of autonomy may be given a wider or more limited scope (ibid., 247). Hence, Morales and Stecher conclude (2023, 247), and thereby confirm other research in the observations that, although the autonomy that is given to platform workers may be very narrow and limited, it holds importance in the everyday experience of platform work (Kaine and Josserand, 2019; Schor et al., 2020; Haidar and Keune, 2021).

The study of Uber and Pedidos in Chile further indicates the role that the precariousness of the labour market and the neo-liberal contexts of societies play. They show that liberal welfare institutions can reinforce neo-normative control in platforms with a low level of social protection, like in the case of Chile, a country that has undergone radical and extensive neoliberal reforms (Harvey, 2007; Stecher and Sisto, 2019; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 234). They argue here that in such a context, workers rely more strongly on values like autonomy, self-employment and entrepreneurship as sources of social recognition and valuation (Araujo, 2019; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 248).

Similarly, from a Foucauldian perspective, it has been argued by Galière (2020) that rational control is reinforced by normative control via techniques of subjectification. Her study demonstrated that piece-rate pay and shift distribution, which are coordinated through algorithmic management, both promote “hyper-meritocratic ideals of justice” and thereby create consent (Ibid, p. 358).

As shown above, the variety of these management methods offers platforms opportunities for enhanced control of the labour process, the potential to commodify labour time and outsource risks and costs (Polanyi, 2001; Wood et al., 2019b; Vallas and Schor, 2020). These different dimensions of control “overlap, reinforce, and complement each other; however, they can also clash and destabilise one another.” (Veen et al., 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023, 232). It is important to note that these management methods and practices must be understood as “historically and theoretically ... fractured, partial and contradictory” (Hyman, 1987, p. 35; Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 162). Besides control not being the only or even the central strategic

concern of management, even management methods that are intended to control the labour process can never straightforwardly do so but face resistance (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 162).

This section showed that in the food courier sector in Germany, not all opportunities are seized. Besides the fact that specifically the role of algorithmic control in fabricating consent, compliance with, or internalisation of platform companies' rationales and aims has been overemphasised (Ajunwa and Greene 2019, Griesbach et al 2019, Wu et al 2019), the amount and character of resistance in the sector (Joyce et al 2020) indicates the limitations of control not in the food platform sector and in general. Although the digitalised management methods in food platforms present an evolution in how managers control workers at the point of production, they do not resolve the conflict and resistance from the side of work (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 159).

Before I engage with the other side of the dual dynamic, the types of resistance with which couriers reacted to the different ways of control, I briefly describe the workforce itself.

### 3.3 The Platform Food Courier Workforce

To better understand why people want to or need to work under these conditions, we must consider who these people who work as food couriers are. This is essentially to grasp the social class composition of the food platform workforce and understand platform workers within wider capitalist conditions.

#### 3.3.1 Who works as a platform food courier?

Defining the workforce is difficult for two reasons. Firstly, the workforce has widely been observed to be heterogeneous, with some variety in different regions and urban areas. Hence, there are different groups to consider, and depending on their mode of transport, some may be more or less visible to the public eye, unions and researchers. Secondly, since courier work has a high turnover, a large part of the workforce constantly changes, and reliable numbers are difficult to acquire. Additionally, platform companies, despite acquiring and processing vast amounts of data, rarely publicly provide statistics about their workforces, unions, or works councils.

Studies usually distinguish between two or three main groups of people who make up the courier workforce: One, young students who are mostly financially dependent on student loans or parents; two, people mainly employed or self-employed in other types of work that they

combine with platform work, and three, those for whom the platform courier work is the sole source of their income (Cant, 2020, 96f.; Franke and Pulignano, 2023, 375).

Those who combine platform work and other jobs seem to present a smaller share, while students present a larger part of the workforce, and full-time workers make up a smaller share but carry out the largest share of actual deliveries due to their higher volume of working hours (Cant, 2020, 96f).

To further specify, the literature indicates that students are usually native citizens, use bicycles for deliveries and only work for a couple of months or years maximum. Those for whom courier work presents their primary income have been observed to be, on average, older, usually migrant workers using motorised vehicles (Cant, 2020, 89).

Debates on platform work, in general, have pointed out the heterogeneity of the workforce and the role of dependency in particular (Schor et al., 2020). How reliant workers are on the income from platform work to make a living ultimately determines whether and how the job makes them precarious (Forde et al., 2017; Kuhn and Maleki, 2017; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Vallas and Schor, 2020). It's been suggested that with low dependency, platform workers may have more choices in the labour market, potentially have more autonomy over their working conditions and pay in the platform job, and have, therefore, higher job satisfaction than workers who need the job (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Schor et al., 2020). Only more recently has there been a growing interest in the socioeconomic stratification of platform workforces and the question of how it mediates the way in which workers' wider characteristics and life context make them vulnerable to various kinds of risk related to platform work (Doorn, 2024).

In terms of gender, food couriers present an overwhelmingly male workforce, with numbers for Deliveroo in Belgium reporting only 11.4% female couriers (Drahokoupil and Piasna, 2019).

Across all three groups, levels of precarity are present as a motivator to top up income or to look for alternatives to conventional employment to make a primary income. Three main factors are mentioned in the literature that may be relevant in facilitating the exploitation of these workers: 1. The high rents and living costs in urban areas, which affect all groups but means that even those who have another income or are financed by loans or parents, might need to seek additional income. Student loans are often too low to cover rent and living costs, and well-paid jobs in cafes or within the university are limited. 2. The overall labour market situation plays a

role. Overall, many jobs in the unskilled segment are low pay and stressful in different ways (Bloodworth, 2019). With many students and side jobbers needing extra income, this labour market segment has become highly competitive, and a lack of language skills and experience easily presents a barrier to getting work (Cant, 2020, 87).

3. The overall precarity linked to migration, residency and right-to-work status, which in other work contexts has been described as “multiple precarity” (Birke and Bluhm, 2020; Birke and Neuhauser, 2023), makes these workers particularly exploitable. Similarly, racialised structures that are typical for low-income service work in general, have impacted platform work (van Doorn, 2017; Doorn, 2022).

While migrants seem to make up a large share of the platform workforce, there are various categories of migrants whose situations and experiences are very different (Cant, 2020, 90). For some, it may be only the low requirement for verbal communication and the ability to change the app's language setting that lowers the barrier for those who lack language skills, which may be EU migrants, non-EU migrants or even international students. But more notably, platforms like Deliveroo are highly attractive to migrants without the right to work and to asylum seekers who need to top up their low allowance. Unable to find formal work without the necessary documents and status, these migrants may rent accounts from others as it is one of the few options for them to make money (Cant, 2020, 89). These workers can be assumed to be under more financial pressure and in a more precarious situation since they work informally. However, it should be noted that renting accounts is not a move used exclusively by those without the right to work. Renting accounts may happen to avoid waiting times, mainly since companies limited access to bike couriers and prioritised cars. Also, organised short-term renting of accounts is offered via social media websites and partly used as a tactic by couriers who have been disciplined with a suspension or deactivation of their accounts (McCulloch 2019).

Understanding who works as a food courier and how different the levels of dependency among couriers are indicates that some workers are more exploitable and exploited than others. It draws attention to the fact that besides the control in the workplace, wider sociopolitical factors like (global) market pressures and wider conditions of social reproduction define how workers may experience the job and whether they resist the working conditions in any way. It's been suggested that workers with different competencies and higher skills are in a more advantageous position in the labour market and can thus exert more marketplace bargaining power (Silver,

2003) than many low-skilled workers who have fewer chances to attain better jobs individually and are thus considered more likely to choose collective protest as a bargaining strategy (Cini, 2023). With a heterogeneous workforce like that of platform food couriers, many factors must be considered to explain or even predict workers' ways of bargaining.

### 3.4. Resistance in the food platform sector

Further following the LPT perspective, the before-mentioned control methods are considered to cause resistance – an essential part of the dual dynamic within capital-labour relations (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 163). Underlying is here the assumption that the experience of paid work plays a central role in generating labour resistance (Hyman, 1975), and this experience, in many ways, is shaped by the management methods controlling the labour process in the attempt to actualise the capacity of labour. However, as already noted, just like control is fractured and contradictory, so is the drive to resist. Structural deterministic interpretations of Marx and (resulting) functionalist LPT perspectives (Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1988; Edwards, 1990; Edwards, 1992; Braverman, 1998) assume resistance to be inevitable. However, following more critical interpretations of the control and resistance dynamic, it is a question for further conceptualisation and empirical research whether this drive translates into actual resistance, as are the nature and outcome of such resistance (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 163). While the concept of resistance in LPT so far remains underdeveloped (*ibid.*, 164), frameworks have been put forward to define misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), formal groups and more formal collective resistance in the form of unionised action, like strikes (Edwards 1989). Against a dichotomous conceptualisation that only looks at control and resistance, Burawoy brought in the notion of consent, which resulted from his observation of non-conflictual interactions between workers and management (1979). This is where labour process theory and class analysis encounter a similar problem. If the structure and underlying dynamic of the labour-capital relation does not inevitably lead to resistance in the form of organised collective class struggle, there are many in-betweens. These reflect the complexity with which the effects of structure and ideology are intertwined in shaping workers' actions. To briefly connect to the debates in class analysis that were laid out in the prior chapter: If workers engage in consensual agreements rather than in resistance, it can then be asked whether this is a result of misrecognition of their situation as emphasised by cultural class analysis (Fantasia, 1989; Savage et al., 2001; Devine et

al., 2005), or of resignation as suggested by the revived structural approach by Chibber (2022). Even more, if resistance is not presumed in a non-deterministic perspective, and it is an open question whether the drive to resist translates into actual resistance, research must engage not only with the difficult dialectic of structure and culture but also with the difficult interplay of consciousness and action.

The subject of this research is located at this exact junction—the class identity of platform workers. To provide the last piece of context for engaging with the experiences, perceptions, and identities of the platform food courier workers in this study, the following section gives a brief overview of the forms of resistance that have been observed in the food platform sector. In the case of platform courier workers, resistance is clearly present in England and Germany in various forms and with varying effectiveness.

#### 3.4.1 Individual Misbehaviour

Despite the various management methods presented above, food couriers in Germany and the UK, like many other platform workers, quickly figured out that “platform algorithms are malleable and open to challenge and modification” (Joyce and Stuart, 2021: 167). Research shows that couriers applied a broad palette of micro-political and resistant practices, overcoming many control attempts without fearing bigger consequences (Attwood-Charles 2019).

In the early phases, some organisational misbehaviour evolved around the control over space and its close link to work intensification. Couriers individually tried to make work easier by switching off their GPS signal so that the app would not find them when assigning orders. When GPS signals were only taken for signing in in specific areas but not constantly checked, couriers took advantage of this gap. The app fixed this shortly after by making an active GPS signal a precondition for the app to run. Manipulating GPS signals to fake their location was another form of misbehaviour that couriers used to avoid sanctions, wage deductions and deterioration of individual performance statistics if they were not in the starting area on time (Veen et al., 2020, 40; Van Doorn and Badger, 2020, 11-13). Some also used this to control in which areas they worked and to reduce work intensity (Heiland, 2021, 10). Couriers who wanted less work would pretend they were further out to hide from orders, and self-employed couriers wanting more work pretended they were closer to busy areas to receive more orders (Ibid.)

Employed couriers in Germany share locations with each other, and mobile service is so poor that they cannot receive orders through their app and can hide from shift work (Veen et al

2019). Self-employed couriers in Germany would have to try to avoid these places to make money (Heiland 2021, 10). In the UK context, which mainly consists of freelancers, this tactic of misbehaviour is not an option for resistance.

Workers also try to use the changing price rates in reaction to weather and labour demand to their own advantage (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 169). Through the exchange of information in informal groups, couriers learned that orders with low fees would come back at a higher rate if they were repeatedly rejected by couriers, meaning that individually, but also in smaller groups, they were able to bring the price for undesired deliveries up before taking them (Griesbach et al., 2019, 6). Tactics in which couriers try to influence rates through such rejections and by training the algorithm have been compared to known practices of output restrictions used by workers to bargain better rates with their foreman (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 169). The not-uncommon theft of food could be seen as another form of misbehaviour by couriers to turn the balance of advantages and disadvantages of the job in their own favour (Gilbert, 2019; Veen et al., 2020).

These forms of individual resistance already indicate the limits and dialectic effects of management control methods and, in particular, the overrated role of algorithmic management in solving the issues around the transformation of labour capacity into actual labour.

#### 3.4.2 Industrial Relations Context and Collective Action

One reason platform work has been described as precarious is that many workers lack interest representation (Forde et al. 2018). Because platform companies are relatively new, workers can rarely rely on existing forms of institutional voice like established works councils and union representatives. Indeed, platform work has been considered an overall challenging environment for trade unions (Vandaele, 2018) and institutional gains so far remain limited to a few countries (Stuart et al. 2024: 2).

While the resistance in the platform sector and thus of app-based delivery workers happens in a comparably un-institutionalised area of industrial relations, it has been shown that different institutional logics are still relevant. Industrial relations contexts, supportive communities and political traditions shape the resistance of food couriers. Research thus far indicates a link between the different resources, political scripts, and potential for institutionalisation available to platform couriers in different countries and the forms of protest, involved labour actors, action repertoires and even motivations and forms of collective solidarity

that can be observed (Cini, 2023; Stuart et al., 2024). The following section highlights relevant differences and similarities in the situation of platform food couriers in both countries.

Since many platforms operate with independent contractors, self-employment presents considerable legal obstacles to unionisation. The EU competition law, for example, restricts the ability to conclude collective agreements for solo self-employed workers, and only the application of additional guidelines may solve this issue (ETUC, 2022, 8). As shown above, the characteristics of the workforce as young and dominated by migrant workers present a sociocultural obstacle to mainstream unionisation. Essential awareness about trade unions and labour rights needs to be built, and language barriers overcome. Additionally, the insecurity and fear of retaliation due to the use of self-employment and fixed-term contracts as part of the business model present another obstacle to union organising, which is further obstructed by platforms actively trying to undermine and obstruct worker activism and busting (ETUC, 2022).

Because of these difficulties, platform workers must take widely self-organized collective action. Depending on the region, they can use different resources. Research from the Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest shows that in countries of the global south, protests in platform work are mainly led by grassroots movements (Umney et al., 2024). In contrast, mainstream unions play a more critical role in supporting platform workers in many Western European countries. (Joyce et al., 2020: 5). Overall, trade unions (traditional and grassroots) have been involved in more than half of all the food delivery worker protests in Europe (Trappmann et al., 2020).

Germany and England, however, present a specific contrast case within Europe. Recent efforts to capture platform work and protest through comparative institutional analysis (Stuart et al., 2024) makes sense of the national variety through five different industrial relations regimes suggested by Visser (Visser, 2009). Following this conceptualisation, Germany, as a social partnership regime, is generally associated with strong collective bargaining and codetermination through company-based works councils. England, in contrast, as a liberal pluralist regime, is characterised by low union density, company-based bargaining, little state intervention and conflict-driven industrial relations dominated by employers (Stuart et al., 2024, p. 4).

App-based food delivery workers in both countries are among the most active in Europe when protesting. However, with 27 percent of all documented protest events of food couriers in Europe, the UK has the larger concentration (with 118 protest events between 2017 and 2023)

compared to Germany's share of 13 percent, which in that sense is similar to protest numbers in Spain and France (Stuart et al., 2024, p. 6).

While informal groups of workers are most dominant in food delivery worker protest events globally and in Europe, in social partnership countries like Germany, about two-thirds of events involve mainstream unions, which are almost absent in liberal pluralist countries. (Stuart et al., 2024, p. 9f). As I show below, union support is still relevant in England, but via the grassroots union IWGB, which supported much of the unrest. In both regimes, the respective type of union usually works together with informal groups of workers to organise protests (ibid., p. 11). It's suggested that the high activity of informal worker groups in the platform sector in general and in particular in those industrial relations regimes with fewer or less strong mainstream unions, these groups fill the gap in representation (Stuart et al., 2024, p. 17).

Different strategies are applied, and the different types of action are linked to the variety of resources available to couriers and to the grievances dominating each country. Again, these are likely connected to the different employment statuses and the conditions they create. Regarding the grievances that motivate protests, England and Germany reflect the general patterns identified for their industrial relations regimes. In England, pay was the main motivator for most disputes in the past years, while employment status and working conditions were less relevant. Thus far, England reflects the global picture, with pay generally being the leading cause for labour protests on platforms (Trappmann et al., 2020). In Germany, like in other Western European countries, working conditions, employment status, and regulations on union representation were similarly important as pay in causing disputes (Joyce et al., 2020, 4f.). While pay issues drove 31% of protests, working conditions motivated 25% of actions and grievances around costs and equipment were behind 14% of protests (Neumann, 2023). That pay is a major point of conflict in platform work is not surprising since other industrial relations contexts have shown that the subjective linking of output with earnings always presents a potential point for contestation (Buchill, 1976), especially when pay rates are being recalculated (Joyce and Stuart, 2021, 173), frequently happening in the variable piece-rate system in UK food platforms. These numbers for both countries reflect the overall situation that pay and pay-related issues are far more important in causing labour unrest in platform food delivery work than the more prominently discussed algorithmic management (Trappmann et al., 2020).

In liberal pluralist countries like England, protest most typically takes the form of strikes, while in social partnership countries like Germany, couriers typically protest via public demonstrations and institutionalisation (Stuart et al., 2024, p. 13). The stark contrast between both regimes regarding protest forms has been considered to indicate a potential link between mainstream unions and demonstrations and the support of grassroots unions and strike action (ibid.). The comparably few cases of legal action in liberal pluralist countries suggest that protest is not as strongly motivated by employment status claims as in other regimes (ibid.).

Food couriers in the UK are mainly self-organising with the help of grassroots unions like the Union of International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), an important actor in organising precarious workers lacking mainstream union representation (Però, 2020; Stuart et al., 2024, p. 17). Due to the self-employment status of couriers, there is no legal obligation for the platforms to recognise trade unions as representation. At the same time, the role of mainstream trade unions in the UK platform sector has been seen with scepticism (Woodcock and Cant, 2022). When Deliveroo recognised GMB as the sole independent trade union for its couriers in the UK, agreeing to a voluntary partnership in 2022, this was seen as a backroom deal that undermined the IWGB in their attempt to pursue couriers' right to collective bargaining in the supreme court (IWGB, 2022). GMB has not been actively organising couriers, does not question the self-employment status and, thus, does not threaten exploitative business practices (IWGB, 2022).

Workers in Germany are making use of emerging movements and grassroots unions while also being able to rely on stronger labour regulations and institutions of workers' voice representations (ETUC, 2022, 5). Compared to most EU countries, the unionisation process in platform work in Germany is relatively advanced (ETUC, 2022, 7). The smaller Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG) and the big service sector union (Verdi) represent the interests of food couriers in Germany, and regulation provides a low bar for the establishment of works councils. Lieferando workers organised works councils in 20 branches, starting in 2017 in Cologne. Also, Germany has strong labour and local courts that made important rulings on working conditions on platforms and workers' status (ETUC, 2022, 5). This reflects the different power resources available in different countries, with the UK offering mainly associational power (in the broader sense) and Germany also equipping couriers with some institutional power (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003; Atzeni and Ness, 2018; Trappmann et al., 2020, 2f.).

These different setups and resources resulted in resistance in both countries following different strategies. Especially mainstream unions in Germany were working via legal strategies, like in the case of a Lieferando courier who, in 2021, supported by NGG, achieved the decision that the platform as an employer needs to provide work equipment (including an adequate bike and smartphone) rather than only paying a small compensation for the use of own equipment (ETUC, 2022). Although hesitant due to the low membership levels, unions in Germany may engage in negotiations about a collective agreement with platforms to improve working conditions and pay for the employees, as has happened when the NGG negotiated with Lieferando over a 15 Euros hourly wage, a 13<sup>th</sup> salary, appropriate bonuses for Sunday and public holiday work, six weeks of annual leave and full payment for the last journey home (ETUC, 2022, 7). Different protest actions peaked in 2018 and 2021; while unions supported some of them, many were organised by movements, FAU and independent groups (Neumann, 2023). Protests and strikes were even more crucial in the UK, where the lack of institutional power via works councils and union bargaining makes wildcat strikes (also flash strikes) one of the only ways for couriers to voice complaints. Thus far, couriers in the UK are more heavily dependent on pursuing a logic of membership (Vandaele 2018, Offe and Wiesenthal 1980).

Table 3: Industrial Relations in Food Platform Sector in Comparison

	<i>UK</i>	<i>GER</i>
	<i>Labour Actors</i>	
<i>Mainstream Unions</i>	GM (recognised?)	<b>VERDI</b> <b>NGG</b>
<i>Grassroot Unions</i>	<b>IWGB</b> IWW	FAU
<i>Emerging Movements</i>	Rebel Roo (Brighton)	Deliver at the limit, Deliverunion, Gorillas Worker Collective,
<i>Works Councils</i>	(no legal provisions due to self-employment)?	<b>20 councils</b> (August 2024)
<i>Collective Action</i>	Wildcat Strikes	Demonstrations, Legal Action
<i>Action repertoire</i>	Disruptive (informal)	Cooperative (formal)
<i>Motivators for resistance</i>	Pay	Pay (31%) Working conditions (25%) Cost and equipment (14%)

\*Main labour actors in bold

The lack of recognition and rights in England presents a structural weakness in the interest representation of food couriers. However, it also meant that workers could organise freely and did not have to give notice to the company if they did go on strike, which by some has been interpreted as a strength lying in the precarity of the workforce (Cant, 2020, 114). Further, the workforce of food platforms shares many characteristics with groups that are underrepresented in trade unions – migrant workers, Black and minority ethnic workers and younger workers (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Hodder et al., 2018, 476). That it is difficult to organise these workers as union members becomes apparent in the German context where food couriers, despite being in a more supportive industrial relations context, are far from achieving an organising density that would allow them to enter official collective bargaining processes. This is not only because of the workers but also because mainstream unions in Germany showed little initiative to invest in the active organising of platform workers, waiting for workers to self-organize and become part of collective action later. They mainly stuck to support via individual casework and legal battles.

Thus, the low support from mainstream unions in England might not be a significant weakness. It can be argued that the militant direct action of the IWGB worked well to convince couriers and especially migrant workers to join collective action (Cant, 2020, 114). The absence of works councils in England, however, means couriers have less access to information and less participation in the decision-making processes within the companies, which puts them in a more difficult position.

### 3.4.3 Organising Collective Action

For food couriers to organise collectively in any form, they must overcome the lack of co-location of the delivery labour process (Nicholls, 2009; Heiland, 2021, 11). They often do this through informal in-person interaction in the log-in or starting areas and via exchange on WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Through these informal meetings and chats, couriers can exchange experiences and information about platforms, help each other figure out the job and give each other practical support, generally, and when situations like accidents and assaults occur. These spaces, which may be compared to communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003; Cini, 2023), can present surrogate sources of solidarity (Rosenblat, 2018; Vallas and Schor, 2020: 16.7) and help to nurture embryonic solidarity (Cant, 2020, 23), which later may become relevant for political organising and the development of more enduring solidarity.

While there is little concrete research on food delivery workers, research on ride-hailing workers has shown that their use of online communities has facilitated the development of collective identities. By forming collective norms, engaging in communal activities and having shared rituals, these gig workers formed social bonds that were considered relevant for collective organising (Maffie, 2020, 140). Other studies on remote gig workers' use of digital spaces also indicate its importance for the formation of a work-related identity and collective organising (Wood et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018).

The personal contact established in informal groups is central to recruiting allied riders for political communication channels (Heiland, 2021, 11). When the platform companies realised that couriers were using starting areas and login points for recruitment, they widened the starting areas so that couriers would not gather within a close radius (Heiland, 2021, 12). This is just one of many examples of how the control-resistance dynamic plays out in the growing platform food delivery sector. Similarly, when the pulse system was integrated into the Deliveroo App in the UK, indicating to workers how busy it was, fewer people would gather around in zone centres and have a chance to make contact (Cant, 2020, 122).

However, when bigger meetings of couriers take place on the streets, they are very visible, and there is a public dimension to their organising (Cant, 2020, 105). Over time, various apps have also started to deprioritise cyclists, and bit by bit, more deliveries are being taken over by mopeds and cars. Such reconfiguration of the workforce that is generally considered to present a barrier to mobilisation (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023) is seen to have weakened the prior solidarity among cyclists who presented a driving force in protests and strikes in Germany as well as in the UK (Cant, 2020; Heiland, 2022).

Similar to the workforce, informal groups, WhatsApp chats, and resulting collectives are mostly male-dominated (van Doorn, 2017; Franke and Pulignano, 2023). Migrant workers are very present in the organising structures in England and crucial for any collective action that Deliveroo couriers take in the UK, and many of the strikes are led by them (Cant, 2020, 88). Besides language barriers presenting an obstacle, migrant workers also bring in different experiences and knowledge from their countries' strike and trade union contexts, and not all are necessarily sceptical towards unions (Cant, 2020, 90). For example, the first wildcat strikes in London in 2016 were significantly shaped by the tactics of Brazilian couriers (Cant, 2020, 90). This may be because migrant workers often are the ones working full-time and are therefore

more committed to decent pay and have more workplace leverage in a strike (Cant, 2020, 89) Another reason for the strong presence of migrant workers in collective action in the UK may be the IWGB's grassroots organising approach.

On the other hand, in the German context, migrant workers are present in public protests. However, they are strongly underrepresented in most works councils and even in some informal workers' groups and collectives. Like the UK context, FAU's grassroots union strongly organise couriers from different national and ethnic backgrounds.

Platform work has seen that, with the help of the media and the instrumentalisation of social media by workers, public shaming of companies offers an informal process of collective bargaining to achieve increased piece rates. In Germany, couriers from *Liefern am Limit* (Deliver at the Limit) were able to achieve substantial bargaining power through the media representation they mobilised with their protest actions.

Overall, organising platform courier workers is difficult for many reasons, including the diversity of the workforce and the high turnover. Nonetheless, couriers in both countries have been able to establish not only online communities like other platform workers (Woodcock, 2021; Cini, 2023) but a combination of online and enduring offline networks, which are likely to enforce each other (Cini, 2023, p. 139). This combination is likely due to the fact that their work, although isolated through the labour process, allowed the creation of shared physical spaces and thus localised forms of organising. As suggested by Cini, leaning on the idea of communities of struggle (Però, 2020), the experience of shared working space among couriers is likely to form relatively more stable collective identities among couriers than in other remote digital platform work (Cini, 2023, p. 140).

The way workers avoid and contest control, platform companies react by adjusting the algorithm and payment systems, and couriers adapt their tactics and forms of resistance clearly shows the dynamic character of the capital-labour relationship in less than ten years.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The chapter has set out the context and conditions of platform food courier work and highlighted the present dynamic of control and resistance. Thus, it has defined the situation in which couriers work, which is an integral part of the context under which they form their class identities.

The work in food courier platforms is characterised by a comparatively high level of autonomy for a low-skilled job. Whilst there are considerable differences between the employment of couriers in Germany and self-employees in the UK, different mechanisms of control keep workers' pay low whilst trying to ensure predictable numbers of orders for the platforms. In England, this is regulated directly through variable pay and incentive mechanisms, which add a more substantial element of gamification. In Germany, work intensification is more difficult to achieve overall. Still, the expansion of delivery zones presents an indirect mechanism to make couriers work harder for the same pay and makes bonuses less likely. The incomplete disciplining function of algorithmic management has opened various gaps for workers to avoid control over their labour power. In both countries, couriers have resisted low pay and mechanisms of control and discipline in various individual and collective ways. The past ten years in food platforms in Germany and England have seen a fast-spiralling dynamic of control and resistance in which management and workers constantly adjusted to the changes made by the other side. This happened under different legal contexts and different cultures of industrial relations. In Germany, institutions like works councils make it easier for workers to stabilise and perpetuate resistance. These works councils mostly consist of students with a native German background. UK couriers are more reliant on continuous organising and mobilising of strike action and community building with the help of grassroots unions, which they have been very successful with, not least because of the militant approaches of some migrant communities in the workforce.

What still needs to be learned in terms of class dynamics is how relevant this work context is for members of this heterogenous workforce and how their experience of the work relates to their wider life experiences and shapes their perception of inequality and their own class identity.

Looking back at the prior chapter, which reviewed the literature on class identity, a few connections can be drawn between what research has found to influence class identity and the context of platform food couriers. Although food couriers are, in a way, service workers, the job does not have the same level of contact with customers that requires a meaningful relationship with them, which may obstruct the perception of exploitation. In thus far, questions of care and emotional labour (Fourastié, 1952; Touraine, 1971; Bell, 1973; Hochschild, 1983; Lopez, 2006) are here negligible.

Since the prior chapter has established that the actual content of the job may be less relevant than the supervision patterns, job security and concrete working conditions (Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 2, 7, (Spenner, 1983; Burawoy, 1985; Vallas, 1987), it could be argued that the different employment status in both countries, which provides high job security for couriers in Germany may resolve some conflict between couriers and management there and thus negatively affect the development of working-class identity. Although different control mechanisms factually cap the pay level in both countries, the experience of hourly wage and securities versus variable piece rates and lack of protection could leave a stronger sense of precarity among couriers in England. The English scenario, in that sense, reflects more directly the reduction of the working relationship to the cash nexus, which is considered a potential trigger for resistance (Joyce, 2020) – thus bearing potential links to working-class identity.

The local dispersion of workers on the job and the reduction of meeting points and times present challenging conditions for workers to develop communities and a sense of shared experiences and belonging (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2023). This and the heterogeneity of the workforce make the development of an occupational identity less likely (Blauner, 1960; Salaman, 1971; Allcorn & Marsh, 1975; Bulmer & Salaman, 1975; Strangleman, 2001; MacKenzie et al., 2006, p. 836). Similarities are not always obvious; thus, drawing boundaries between workers and management is far from straightforward.

Whilst bicycle couriers are carrying out physical labour, it is an empirical question whether they experience physical pain and discomfort, which are considered to promote identification as working class (Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 2, 7) within the frequency and number of hours that they work. The bigger part of the workforce, those couriers in cars, do not work physically in the same sense, and whilst long hours in the car and traffic risks may be relevant for them, they do not share the same working conditions as bicycle couriers.

The absence of direct supervision and the general level of autonomy - although perhaps a “controlled” one - may reduce perceptions of conflict in the workplace and thus undermine the formation of a class identity that builds on a distinction between “us” and “them”. The comparably higher degree of autonomy in the UK may align with narratives of an entrepreneurial self that navigates the platform’s control through individual tactics. At the same time, the strong exposure to market forces on UK food platforms may be the reason for more radical criticism and protest.

While there has been collectivisation in both countries, the stronger degree of institutionalisation in the light of the literature suggests that this could positively affect the class identification of couriers in Germany compared to the UK (Aronowitz, 1992). However, since the effects of unionisation are ambivalent, it is difficult to say how different forms of collectivisation relate to the development of working-class identities (Ikeler & Crocker, 2021, p. 4). Whilst institutionalisation might make resistance more successful in achieving concrete improvement and helping build occupational communities, it may not promote a broader or radical solidaristic identification with workers in general.

What might make a relevant difference, too, are the varying levels of dependency on the job. Since research suggests that the experience of working for a living may be more relevant in forming working-class identities than concrete job characteristics, the feeling of dependency on a low-income job could be a pertinent factor for food couriers. After all, in both countries, pay has been the primary reason for conflict and resistance. However, due to the heterogeneity of the workforce and only some couriers being heavily dependent on the job, this would only apply to a fraction of the overall workforce. The issue may also be more relevant in the English context with lower predictability of earnings. At the same time, the literature suggests that the precarity of that type of bogus self-employment may fuel short-termism and generally deprive workers of markers of their identity (Standing, 2009, p. 28). Because of the normalisation of precarious work (Hassard & Morris, 2018; Trappmann et al., 2023), the precarity of the working conditions in food courier work may be accepted rather than presented as a reason for outrage and conflict.

Whilst these assumptions can be drawn from comparison with former research, it is ultimately an empirical question of how these workers experience platform courier work in their particular life contexts and whether and how this relates to their identification in terms of class.

The following chapter moves on to the empirical part of the thesis. The in-depth analysis shows what it means for the interviewees in this study to work as food couriers — how they got into the job and how they experienced the above-described working conditions.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in this research. It first presents the research design and lays out the rationale for choosing a comparative qualitative research approach. As part of this, the main underlying philosophical assumptions are presented and justified. Then, the sampling approach, and the procedure and time frame for acquiring the 33 interviews with food couriers in Germany and England are described.

Secondly, the chapter presents the approach to data collection. It explains why the study follows an integrated interview approach combining elements of in-depth biographic and semi-structured interviewing. This section presents the design of the interview guidelines and explains how the conceptualisation of class identity as an element of class consciousness shaped the interview questions. It reflects on the challenges associated with discussing class and how the interview design addresses them. The third section of the chapter presents the approach to data analysis. It explains why the analysis follows the coding system of the Grounded Theory (GT) methodology (Glaser et al., 1968; Glaser, 1978) and provides an overview of the coding procedure. The final section of the chapter reflects on the methodology's limitations. Overall, the chapter suggests a refined, sensitive methodological approach to studying the class identity of workers in Germany and England in the twenty-first century.

### 4.1 Overview of the Research Design

Studying class identity as defined above requires a micro-level analysis. The aim is not to study class as a collective action or historical process but to access individual workers' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes through their subjective accounts – their life stories and reflections on work and the society they live in. A qualitative research approach is most suitable for accessing such subjective accounts, interpreting them, and understanding them in order to identify notions of class identity and how these relate to the interviewee's life and work experiences.

This research is rooted in the assumption that knowledge is never created in a vacuum and acknowledges the general hierarchy of the research process. As researcher I shape every part of the research process from the formulation of the research question, choice of my theoretical lense, to the design, data conduction, analysis and dissemination. The biases created through this

hierarchy have a number of political implications (see Corlett & Mavin, 2018, p. 21; Gubrium et al., 2012, p. 557) including the reproduction of hegemonic ideas, potential mis- and underrepresentation of social groups as research subjects and underrepresentation of social groups as recognized knowledge produces (Wigginton and LaFrance, 2019).

Following such assumptions about knowledge creation, which contradict positivist research philosophies rooted in the idea of scientific objectivity, does not mean following a purely interpretive approach. While this research agrees that it is impossible to capture an objective reality, (Denzin & Lincoln 2000), it does not believe that the reconstruction of the production of social meaning is the only valid way of gaining knowledge and doing research. Rather, the research is sensitised by the arguments of feminist standpoint epistemology, which suggests that how we access external truth outside the observer can never be neutral (Storr et al., 1995). Acknowledging the effect of the researcher in the process of knowledge production means that the researcher must be accountable for the ways in which they affect the process (Haraway, 1988; Llewelyn, 2007).

Throughout this chapter I indicate my attempts to acknowledge hierarchical moments in the research process, reflect on my own positionality and indicate when and how I tried to counteract power imbalances during data conduction and analysis.

An interview study was conducted to compare the class identifications of employed and self-employed food couriers. The following section explains the rationale behind the comparative research design and presents the research and sampling strategy.

#### 4.1.1 Comparative Research Design

Comparison has been described as the ultimate sociological method and as an extension of the societal archive of social alternatives (see Geertz, 1983). By confronting one's social normality with other forms of socialisation, a comparison breaks open the self-evident character/appearance of social matters of fact (Lessenich & Borchert, 2012, p. 14). A comparative approach allows one to understand the specifics of an individual case by putting it in relation to other cases and thereby revealing the case's particular constellations of characteristics or characteristic values. At the same time, the social relevance of a characteristic that a group of cases shares becomes visible only when reconstructing its interactions with other elements of a social context (ibid). Analytically, this suggests that research must take into account different institutional settings – to consider macro-social structural formations in terms

of their guiding ideas, symbolic representations, cultural justifications, legitimising interpretive patterns and power-based configurations of interests (Lepsius, 1990; Lessenich & Borchert, 2012, p. 14). Because comparative research provides valuable contextualisation that lets us see more clearly what is general and what is particular, it is not surprising that many studies of class and class identity have historically applied comparative approaches (see, e.g., Leggett, 1968, 1973; Mann, 1973; Wright, 2000).

Existing research has benefited from comparative approaches in many ways in terms of the range and quality of findings. The study of class consciousness in different national contexts has confirmed the role of cultural settings for the awareness of alternative ideologies, as well as the relevance of different union cultures (Mann, 1973, p. 36). Comparing the class consciousness of workers of different “races” and ethnic backgrounds has revealed the strong influence of community culture and experiences of racial inequality in shaping class identification and class action (Leggett, 1968; Leggett, 1973; Zingraff and Schulman, 1984). Contrasting the attitudes and beliefs of service and non-service workers has challenged the idea that the character of service work per se would produce differences in class consciousness (Ikeler and Crocker, 2021).

This study looks at platform food courier workers with different employment status: self-employees in England and employed couriers in Germany. Rather than centring the national context itself, the focus lies on the employment situation and thus the potentially different levels of precarity associated with it. This comparison aids the examination of class identity in two ways. It allows us to study workers’ experiences and perspectives in essentially the same job within different institutional and regulatory settings, different degrees of autonomy in their work and potentially different levels of precarity. A comparison of workers from these different contexts allows us to understand the commonalities and differences in workers’ class identities and overall class consciousness, rooted in the contrasting conditions of their development. Especially through the narrative interview approach, a comparison allows us to contextualise people’s work and life experiences rather than depicting them in an abstract space (Brannen & Nilsen, 2011, p. 604; citing Elder & Giele, 2009; Nisbet, 1969).

#### 4.1.2 Sampling Strategy

Overall, 33 interviews were conducted: 16 with self-employed couriers in England and 17 with employed couriers in Germany. These were carried out between March 2021 and September 2022. By the time the last interview was conducted, ideas and patterns were starting to be

repeated, with few new angles and insights for the research question. While this was not yet a point of theoretical saturation, the sample was sufficient to condense the analysis and draw the first conclusions.

The acquisition of participants was pursued through on-street recruitment, gatekeepers in unions, the snowball system, and online recruitment through social media platforms. Access to couriers in Germany was also supported through contacts from prior research carried out by a colleague.

The empirical research process was kept comparatively open for the first six months – conducting and analysing pilot interviews in both countries before making further decisions on the sampling process and focus of the analysis. This procedure also left the option to adjust the individual questions and the structure or style of the interviews. After the first six months, the field research tools, sampling strategy and focus of the research question were slightly adjusted, and from there on, the research followed a planned procedure. While data collection, analysis, and writing occurred parallel and intertwined, the research did not fundamentally follow a grounded theory approach. The analysis's focus was not shifted to accommodate new and surprising findings that could fundamentally challenge or redirect the research question. Any findings that pointed towards new research questions and angles were noted to enrich the evaluation and discussion of the central empirical findings and guide future research endeavours.

The research is based on non-probability sampling: participants were not selected randomly but based on a few considerations relevant to the research question and the qualitative interpretive research approach.

The study considers the food delivery workforce's diverse and highly gendered character. Therefore, the sampling strategy specifically aimed to reach women as a minority and to include workers of different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. However, the aim of the study was by no means to represent proportionately these characteristics of the workforce. This would not be in the sense of a qualitative research design like the one applied here. The aim was not to be representative but to capture the diversity in order to allow for in-depth comparison that can enrich the interpretive understanding of the phenomenon in question: notions of class identity and its development. In this regard, gender and migration are considered dimensions of inequality that intersect with class and precarity. The impact that gender may have on work-life balance, experiences of inequality, and conflict at work make it relevant. On the other hand,

migration background may be important due to factors like racial discrimination, legal status and recognised formal and informal skill levels. Both features can potentially affect other forms of group identity that may complement or conflict with class identity.

The heterogeneity in terms of level of education and dependency on income is a specific characteristic of this workforce. Not only has it shown to be challenging in the organising processes (Cant, 2020), but it generally distinguishes this group of workers from other, more homogenous occupational groups that have been the subject of research studies on class identity and class consciousness in the past, e.g., postal workers (Ikeler and Crocker, 2021), mine workers (King, 2019), textile workers (Zingraff and Schulman, 1984) or automobile workers (Leggett, 1968; Goldthorpe, 1969). To account for this specific characteristic, the sampling actively included long-term dependent couriers as well as temporary, less dependent students who used courier work as a short-term side job. Additionally, the research aimed to include a wider age range of couriers closely linked to dependency levels and education.

Another aspect considered in the sampling strategy was the couriers' participation in collective action. While protests and industrial action were ongoing in both countries, the research aimed not to interview people just after a particular protest event or to ask them about their concrete experience. However, since research suggests that class identity and class consciousness might rapidly develop through participation in collective action, the study aimed to include couriers who were in some form organised or who had participated in protests, as well as those who had not had any involvement in collective action related to their courier work. As can be seen in the sample overview below, this part of the sampling strategy could not be realised successfully for the sample of self-employed couriers in England.

Table 3: Demographics of the study sample

		Number of Interviews		
		England	Germany	Total
Age	18–35	10	13	23
	36 and up	6	4	10
Gender	Female	1	2	3
	Male	15	15	30
Migration Status	None	7	7	14

	Background	1	2	3
	Experience	8	8	16
Education	Higher	4	11	15
	Medium	10	6	16
	Lower	2	-	2
Class Background	Working	11	4	15
	Middle	5	13	18
Particip. in Collective Action		-	9	9
Economic Dependency		9	16	25
Total		16	17	33

#### 4.1.3 Research Methods

This part of the chapter presents and justifies the approach to data collection and data analysis and gives a detailed account of their application in the research process. This first part explains why the study follows an integrated interview approach, combining elements of an in-depth biographic study with a semi-structured interview technique. The following three sections provide insights into the interview structure, the analytical approach and the coding procedure.

The research understands identification with class and wider consciousness about class as an ongoing process that develops over a person's life course. It is based on the interplay of work and life experiences as well as experiences of collective action. It follows that an adequate research method must allow for biographic reflections.

Rich narrations, as generated in biographic or life-story interviews, provide the most suitable data to reconstruct workers' experiences and identifications. As life and work are hardly separable but tightly bound together, life stories can offer a comprehensive view of their interrelation. This is particularly important as it has been found that it is not just "impossible to understand life without work experience and vice versa but that it is also difficult to give priority to either of them when aiming to understand and explain attitudes and behaviour of individuals in industrial societies" (Dex, 1991, p. 10).

Biographic interviews are a methodological tool with great potential in analysing class identity because they encourage complexity. They allow the production of data that "capture structural frameworks, contextual plurality and individual singularity" (Caetano, 2015, p. 238).

Through unravelling a person's perspective on their overall life, narration also gives access to various sets of understandings about the world (Strangleman, 2012).

When conducting life-story interviews for this research, the interest did not lie with the inner structure of the narrative discourse – “the possibilities and constraints that the narrative structure imposes on discourse” – as is the focus of biographic research developed by Fritz Schuetze (Bertraux & Kohli, 1984; see Schütze 1983, 1984). In this study, the interest in life stories lies in the various types of narrations that exist within the overall narrative form – more specifically, with the expressions of the basic relationship of the narrator to the world, as has been addressed, for example, by advocates of oral history (Grele, 1979; Bennett, 1983). This is relevant only insofar as these types of relationships are not understood as reflections of personality types but as social categories. How a person relates to the world is a result of their subjective experience and sense-making as well as their embeddedness in social structures and institutions. As illustrated by Bertraux and Kohli (1984, p. 231), perspectives towards life are very different for people in different situations and circumstances, as a comparative study on working-class housewives and male elite groups has shown (Bertraux-Wiame 1979).

Instead of following one specific methodological approach within the field of biographic analysis, this project follows an integrated methodological approach (Mrozowicki and Domecka, 2013; Caetano, 2015; Lahire, 2019) which allows us to understand the biographies – as well as the narrations produced through the semi-structured guidelines – as expressions of reality and simultaneously as a social product (see Caetano, 2015, p. 233). Overall, the biographic interview approach used in the first part of the interviews serves the study of class identity in three ways.

First, the biographic narration provides essential information in the form of a personal, educational and work trajectory, as well as contextual information on family, friendships, romantic relationships, health, etc. At the same time, the form of narrating these aspects and stages of life provides insights into the interviewee's subjective perspective – their experiences, perceptions, beliefs, etc. Together, both types of information enable an understanding of the interviewee's relationship to the world and how it is shaped by their specific living situation.

Secondly, the biographic narration aids the research of class identity by providing insights into how the interviewee's worlds of work and life are intertwined and thus shape their views on working conditions and inequality, as well as their perceptions of the choices and constraints that led them to where and who they are in terms of their socioeconomic position.

Thirdly, the biographic perspective allows us to consider the character of the process of developing class identity. Rather than treating an individual's identifications and consciousness in terms of class as a fixed condition, understanding them as embedded in the biographic context allows us to view a particular class identity as a snapshot. Rooted in past experiences of a concrete living context, class identity can then be understood as a preliminary result that is, to some degree, a transitory stage.

To cover the broad range of aspects that constitute class consciousness and thus relate to class identity, the open biographic interview technique was complemented with a semi-structured interview element. This was done to ensure that more specific angles on class relations and conflicts at work could be covered in all interviews. While pure biographic interviews are suitable for many research purposes, their free flow does not ensure that specificities on work, politics, and social positions are covered in each interview.

Research has shown that workers spontaneously bring up topics relevant to their everyday work experience, particularly their experiences of changes at work. For instance, the topic of technology came up automatically when doing a life-history analysis on workers in a sector rapidly influenced by technologisation. (MacKenzie et al., 2017, p. 737), as did workers' self-identification in terms of occupational community and their class-based thinking when facing mass redundancy (MacKenzie et al., 2006, p. 834). However, when it comes to class, the situation is more complicated. The lack of class language and public class discourses, as well as the moral stigma attached to class, may make it less likely for people to bring up class and inequality as topics. Spontaneous articulations of class-related issues seem to come up only under specific circumstances or in specific contexts. As this research is concerned with workers who do not necessarily face mass redundancy or significant and publicly discussed changes in their field of work, it is not a reasonable expectation that class would be brought up spontaneously by a majority of interviewees. Since it has also been argued that it is more likely for older workers to bring up class as important theme, and the gig economy is characterised by a younger work force, class needed be brought up as a topic by the interviewer. Consequently, the guidelines made sure to either pick up on, deepen, and specify the talk about class or prompt the interviewees to reflect on their work and life in terms of class. Additionally, the semi-structured part allows for better comparison between individual cases, groups, and countries.

Merging different interview types is not entirely new or unique, but prior research has proven it to be a valuable approach. Integrated interview approaches have been used successfully for research in various fields, and some conceptualisation has been done for the particular case of the problem-centred interview (PCI) (Witzel, 2012). The PCI combines different styles of qualitative interviewing. It integrates an open beginning – in this case, a biographic narration – with a semi-structured thematic interview (Scheibelhofer, 2008, p. 404). This approach allows us to understand answers to strongly concept-driven questions against the backdrop of people's own relevance structures reflected in their life stories. Initially, the approach was developed to research young people's experiences with unemployment, and it generally aimed to address everyday problems which the respondents had practical knowledge of and an urge to deal with (Witzel, 1982; Witzel, 2000; Witzel and Reiter, 2012). It has been applied in various research fields for the study of biographical experiences and orientations in migration processes (Scheibelhofer, 2008), in the sociology of medicine (Badke 2001), to inquire into gender-specific violence (Pech, 2002) and to study the field of social work (Schmidt-Grunert, 1999).

For this research on class, the integrated approach, as it has been conceptualised for the PCI, is valuable because it prioritises understanding what is relevant in the interviewees' perspectives before bringing in more concrete, concept-driven questions. Instead of focusing by default on wage labour and workplaces as central contexts and conflicts, the approach allows interviewees to lay out the elements that they consider to be of most relevance, which might relate to reproductive work and care relations or with social conflicts beyond or intersecting with class like gender, sexuality, "race", citizenship or environmental issues.

## 4.2 Data Collection

The main tool for data collection for this research is the integrated interview (explained above), which combines biographic and semi-structured elements. In practice, these interviews comprise three parts: after an initial stimulus inviting the interviewee to tell their life story, subsequent, so-called 'immanent questions' are asked to clarify themes covered in the narration, and the third, semi-structured part then introduces new topics through external questions.

The spontaneous narrations produced by the stimulus varied from ten minutes to about one hour. Overall, the interviews lasted between 50 minutes and just under five hours, with an average length of two hours and 45 minutes.

Additionally, a short questionnaire was taken by each interviewee to collect essential demographic data like their level of education, current income situation, living costs, family background and social networks. This questionnaire can be seen in Appendix C. The information was used to define people's class background and to better understand their living situation. Beyond that, the questionnaires were not systematically used as part of the data analysis, but merely helped to fill the gaps when questions arose from the interview material.

Since open and narrative interviewing is a skill that can be learned like any other form of data collection and analysis, some training, preparation and experience are beneficial to achieve good interview data. Besides generally being a careful, "active" listener (McCracken, 1988, p. 14), part of the challenge of interviewing is to choose and sensibly apply adequate communicative strategies. It has been advised to lead an open interview as if it were the "extension of ordinary conversations" and to treat the interviewee as a partner in the research project rather than testing and examining them (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 10). To achieve these standards, it is necessary to create a comfortable interview situation and establish a relationship of mutual trust. This requires seemingly simple skills like engaged communication with potential interview participants and some basic consideration of the social meaning of the interview location (Gubrium et al., 2012, p. 213).

Before any interview, I explained the research, the interview procedure and the use of the interview data to the person I was hoping to gain as an interview participant. I sent each contact who signalled interest an information sheet and consent form (which can be viewed in Appendices E and F) well before an interview appointment so that they could take their time to look at it. I made sure to offer various ways of communication and offered chats to ask open questions before agreeing. Mostly, people did not have many questions but were simply interested in the research and were willing and open to be guided through the interview. Participants generally showed trust in my use of the data if their identities were anonymised. If they felt they had said something that they would not want to be quoted, even in an anonymised form, they signalled this in the interview. Each participant was made aware verbally and in written form that they could withdraw their consent to the interview at any time.

While these kinds of interviews would ideally have been carried out in person in people's homes or quiet public places such as community centres (Herzog, 2005; Gubrium et al., 2012), due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were instead mainly conducted via online video calls –

although some of them did take place in outdoor spaces, and some later post-lockdown interviews were carried out in cafes and office spaces. Despite some scepticism, there was no indication that the online interviews in any way created a less suitable atmosphere for the interviews. On the contrary, most interviewees seemed very comfortable doing the interviews from their own spaces via video calls.

Some prior interviewing experience with the same integrated approach – informal testing of interview questions and a pilot interview in each country – served as preparation for the data conduction for this research. Nonetheless, neither good communication nor good interview techniques can fully overcome some difficulties related to the positionality of the researcher and the research participants, particularly in studying a sensitive topic like class. These problems are discussed further below.

The majority of the interviews were transcribed, and to ensure confidentiality, the transcriptions were anonymised and stored securely.

Although the research follows an approach of neither biographic analysis nor conversation analysis, it requires a reconstruction of the interviewee's subjective perceptions and experiences, which involves subtle and emotional matters related to identity and personal beliefs. It is, therefore, important not only what is said but also *how* it is expressed. Consequently, a detailed, verbatim transcription was used, following a modified version of conventions for conversation analysis (Selting et al., 2009). This can be viewed in full detail in Appendix F.

#### 4.2.1 Interview Structure

Overall, sensibility and balance are required when designing the entrance question for the interview and the guidelines. McCracken (1988, p. 14) emphasizes that one of the main objectives of qualitative research – “to discover how the respondent sees the world” – makes it essential to formulate questions as unobtrusive as possible without opening Pandora's box but finding ways to still “impose order and structure” (ibid). In order to get people into a mode of recalling and narrating and allow them to expand as much as necessary, it is recommended to collect the memory-intensive narrative at the beginning of a longer interview when people are less time-sensitive to the length (Dex, 1991, p. 6). The stimulus that introduces each interview goes as follows: “I'd like to start by getting a sense of your life history. // I would like to ask you, [Name], to tell me the story of your life. How did you become the person that you are today?”.

The second part of the interview, the subsequent questions, depended on the given biographic narration and thus varied a lot from case to case. Nonetheless, I regularly asked for more details about the family home and relationships with parents, siblings, and friends, as people tended to keep that part short. I also frequently asked further questions about educational trajectory and transition into the labour market, especially if interviewees indicated trouble at school, a lack of orientation, or problems in their personal lives.

The third semi-structured part of the interview was designed with the conceptualisation of class identity as an element of class consciousness in mind. It reflects the dimensions and elements of class consciousness which were presented in Chapter 2. The six elements (perception of social structure, perception of class conflict, perceptions of class relations, experience of class, class identification, envisioning alternatives) are translated into open questions about experiences of work and everyday struggles, conflicts in the workplace and society, and views on social order and politics, as well as on daydreams and wishes for the future. Especially in the beginning of the guidelines, interview questions were adjusted depending on the interview flow. I ensured that each interviewee talked about their transition from school to work, their work experience in general, how they became food couriers, how they experienced the work as couriers, and whether they were aware of and what they thought about recent or ongoing protests. A skeleton of the interview guidelines can be seen in Appendix B. Questions that I asked consistently towards the end of the guidelines were aimed at participants' views on politics, social conflict and class:

- How do you feel about politics?
- What do you think are the most important conflicts in English/German society?
- Do you think class still matters in England/Germany today?
- Can you walk me through a time when you felt like social class mattered in your life? Do you feel like social class differences play any role in your daily life?
- How do you see yourself compared to your parents (economically, socially, etc.)? What were their lives like when they were your age? // How do you see yourself compared to others your age (school peers, friends)?
- If you had the power to change three things (in this country/this society) in an instant, what would you change? Why?

The question I asked each interviewee at the end was about their future before giving them a chance to say anything they might want to add. I asked them what their life would look like ten years from now or what they would like it to look like. This question often presented interviewees with a throwback to job interviews. Besides presenting a somewhat lighter, more personal ending to the interview after several concept-driven questions, the prompt to discuss their future had another purpose. The interviewee's vision for the next ten years expresses what developments and changes they consider desirable and realisable regarding their personal life. It thus connects to their evaluations of their own position in society while also linking back to their accounts of what they think should and can be changed about society.

#### 4.2.2 Reflection on Challenges in the Data Collection – Interviews on Class

Interviews on sensitive topics like class and class identity present challenges that must be addressed throughout the empirical process. This section discusses the three main difficulties: First, active knowledge production and positionality in a hierarchical interview situation; Second, moral connotations of class; and third, the general bias in research participation.

Following the assumptions of Marxist feminist standpoint theory, the hierarchies in the process of knowledge production must be considered in the research process. In terms of the methodological approach, this is meant to reflect on my own positionality as a researcher and my position and assumptions shaping the knowledge that is produced here. It also meant reflecting on the situation of the research participants. It isn't sufficient to draw attention to precarious workers via the research question, but the methodological process also needed to ensure that these workers are given appropriate space and conditions to express themselves and that their testimonies are taken seriously. I outlined above how the structure of the interview supports interviewees in expressing their own priorities and perspectives. However, this does not mean I did not influence interviewees in the way they approach talking about their work and class. The framing of the research in the information material and upfront conversations shapes the interviewees' expectations just as much as the interview setting and questions. Even narratives produced through the most open minimalist research stimulus are inevitably shaped by the interviewees' and researcher's dispositions and expectations (Denzin, 2001, p. 24; Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646, 663; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 113; Nilsen, 1996, p. 17).

One way to practically adjust the research process and balance the playing field somewhat was to build trust with the interviewees and create a comfortable atmosphere in which

both sides can act as partners in the research as much as possible. This does not eliminate all the hierarchies in the research and interview process, but reduces them during data collection. Stronger inclusion of research participants in the research design and analysis process presents another way of dealing with positionalities and hierarchies. While mutual learning circles were part of the original research design for this study, they had to be omitted due to practical limitations and delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. The second challenge for the data analysis relates to the above-mentioned but is more specific to the character of the research topic. In the case of interviews about social class, attention needs to be paid to the questions of how my own “situatedness” in terms of class may affect the interviewer–participant dynamic (Mellor et al., 2014, p. 12). It has been noted that to appear and operate as “intrusive ‘superior’” may further stigmatise and diminish research participants in already disadvantaged positions (Hey, 2008, p. 575). Romanticising people in disadvantaged situations might present the other end of the problem spectrum. Engaging in reflexive practices in general and in particular about one’s position as a researcher can be one way to address these issues (Smith, 1994; Crean, 2018).

The research therefore followed the principle of reflexivity, and tried to bring awareness to my positionality throughout the whole process (Storr et al., 1995). My working-class and East-German background sensitise me to experiences of hierarchies and stigma. Being a white woman with higher education I hold considerable privilege compared to the majority of interviewees and was likely perceived as privileged. My positionality as a researcher was likely to promote defensive, justifying or rejecting accounts about class by those interviewees who associated moral stigma with being considered in a lower- or working-class position.

Being a researcher with a Marxist lens, I look at the couriers in my study as workers who are, to different degrees, subjected to mechanisms of exploitation, oppression and exclusion, which position them within social relations of class and other dimensions of inequality. I also view my research participants as actors equipped with different levels of resources and personalities that help them understand, navigate and oppose conditions of inequality. At the same time, I view these couriers as active agents in their own personal lives and potential agents of their collective interest representation as workers and agents of their wider political interests.

A first step to systematically evoking reflexivity in the data collection process was taking field notes after each interview, including information on the interview acquisition process,

upfront communication, and the interview situation. This information and the impressions were useful for actively reflecting on the interview technique, providing context for the analysis, and capturing nonverbal aspects of the interview situation, which could complement the transcripts. They may capture thoughts and feelings about the interview situation that are likely to be forgotten but which might have shaped the conversation.

Another way in which I approached the challenges of positionality in relation to class inequalities was to consider research that sheds light on potential classed behaviour in the interview situation. This meant, for example, reflecting on the differences in people's discursive skills (Caetano, 2015, p. 232). Not only in the analysis but already while leading the interviews, I was conscious that the accounts produced during an interview depend on an individual's abilities to express themselves verbally. Social and cultural background, education, gender socialisation, and many other aspects shape the way individuals talk about themselves, their experiences, perceptions, attitudes, identities, and beliefs.

3. It was to be expected that the sample would be biased in various ways. Research has demonstrated that people with less formal education are less likely to participate in research, while factors like curiosity as well as therapeutic or economic interest can motivate individuals to participate in research interviews (see Clark, 2010, p. 400). Similarly, members of groups might be motivated to participate in research to gain representation or political empowerment or to inform change (*ibid*). At the same time, a fear of unwanted intrusion and misrepresentation could make people hesitant to participate in research (Armitage, J., 2008; Clark, 2010).

This is clearly reflected in the sample. Even towards the start of this study, couriers were considered an over-researched group, and activists and union representatives got frequent requests from academics, journalists, and even politicians. Having personal contact with activists in Germany made a crucial difference in gaining trust and field access. Using a snowball system via recommendations from works councils and union members allowed me to convince a lot of organised couriers in Germany to take the time to participate in my research. While some might only have seen it as part of their duty to help with research to inform change, some activists also seemed to view the research as a form of representation for the resistance. Thus, It is not surprising that the German sample's activists, union and works council members are strongly represented in a study of class identity.

In the UK context, on the other hand, standard emails to unions and collectives and messages to individual activists on social media brought few to no replies at all. In one case, an activist wanted to take part after checking in with his union first, but eventually, this communication petered out, and the interview never happened. Without a gatekeeper to organise couriers in the UK, I did not succeed in gaining access within the necessary timeframe.

As platform work in the UK is particularly precarious, the sampling strategy here used financial incentives to win participants who would not be motivated by any collective mechanisms and who, even if curious about the research, might have been held back by a lack of time or confidence. Each participant in the UK was offered a £20 voucher for a high street shopping website.

In line with the above-referenced research findings on biases in interview participation, some of my interviewees saw participation in the study as a chance to express specific concerns about their work or generally valued the interview to reflect on transitions in their lives that related to the courier work. Thus far, they can be seen to have had strong personal motivations to take part in the research.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

### 4.3.1 Analytical Approach

The data analysis follows general principles of qualitative data analysis and, in particular, applies the coding system of the GT approach (Glaser et al., 1968; Glaser, 1978). The following section explains why a GT approach to coding was decided on in the first place, which strand of GT is followed, what implications this has in terms of assumptions, how the coding procedure was applied as a result and its place in the overall process of analysis.

The general approach of GT suits research because it takes the ongoing construction of meaning and realities by actors in social settings (Suddaby, 2006, p. 633) seriously while also offering a pragmatic way to develop theory based on an ongoing interpretation of empirical “reality” (ibid). Unlike phenomenological approaches to analysis, the GT approach moves far beyond rich descriptions of people’s subjective experiences and their life worlds. Applying the process of double hermeneutics (Giddens, 1993), the approach specifically aims to lift the interpretation of data to a conceptual level, abstracting them to develop theory (Suddaby, 2006, p. 635f.). Thus, the GT approach aligns not only with the overall qualitative research method but

also with the particular subject of this research – workers’ experiences, perceptions, and identifications. It is also in line with the study’s aim to reconstruct the couriers’ class identifications and offer explanations for their development.

Overall, the approach suggests a non-linear, spiral-like research approach, which was partly adopted in the research. Data collection, data analysis and constant comparison were carried out simultaneously, and, where necessary, adjustments were made to the theoretically guided sampling process.

Another reason to follow the GT coding system is rooted in the lack of alternative approaches. Marxist theory and the method of historical dialectics leave many open questions regarding empirical work, particularly on a micro level. The fact that the GT approach is comparably open and pragmatic in terms of epistemological and theoretical assumptions provides room to accommodate a materialist theoretical framework like class theory without predetermining the process of data analysis. Without ignoring questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology altogether (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639), it supports a research process that consciously takes a step back from theoretical assumptions during data analysis. It also allows the researcher to make a judgement on when and how to adjust the approach in line with their own theoretical framework and assumptions. While aligning assumptions of Critical Social Theory and Marxist perspectives with GT remains an ongoing endeavour, useful guidance has been offered by the strand of Critical Grounded Theory (Hadley, 2019).

Despite its methodological limitations, which will be discussed further below, this combination has many advantages. As this research focuses on the interplay of subjective meaning and action with material conditions, GT's coding system is useful because it forces a strong grounding in the data and emphasizes the interviewee’s subjective sense-making. This is relevant to investigating class identification as a constantly developing process strongly shaped by biographic experiences, and also because the research is particularly interested in changes in class identity. It aids an open, explorative analysis of the data that only feeds in theoretical concepts and frames in a more controlled way at certain stages of data interpretation and thus avoids a narrow, too concept-driven focus in the analysis.

As a method of analysis, recent versions of GT follow the idea of abduction or “analytic induction”, meaning that “the researcher moves between induction and deduction while practising the constant comparative method” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639; Thornberg & Charmaz,

2013, p. 2). An abductive process finds a rule for a phenomenon that so far has not been explained. It does not draw conclusions from two known variables (case and result, or result and rule), but from one known variable (the result) to a hypothesis about the rule and, thus, reasons about the case. Abductive processes therefore do not necessarily provide final findings, but their validity is to be tested. They present a best prediction based on incomplete observations (Reichert, 2003).

Accordingly, the coding approach requires the researcher to constantly move back and forth between different stages of interpretation or coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 5). After reading the data and openly coding them (also described as “initial coding”), the process moves on to a more abstract level of interpretation in which codes and themes are put in relation to each other in order to form categorical codes and finally theoretical codes and concepts (selective or “focused” coding) (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 5).

Coding can essentially be described as “defining what the data are about” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 6) or what is happening in the data (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). Analytical questions like “What is the participant’s main concern?”, “What is taken for granted by the participant?” (i.e., what is said and not said), “How does the process develop?” or “What categories are indicated by this incident?” are used to guide the open coding process, which is often done line by line or sequence by sequence (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 5f). Additionally, GT uses theoretical codes – ideas and analytic tools that are imported from sensitising theories – to relate the prior data-based codes to each other and integrate them into theory (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 9). This reflects “theoretical sensitivity” as one of the core principles emphasised by different strands of the GT approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Suddaby, 2006, p. 638), which essentially means an ongoing interaction between the researcher and the data.

The writing of memos accompanies the coding process and allows to constantly reflect alongside theory and develop theoretical concepts while also providing a base for the decisions that have to be made in the theoretical sampling process (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 13f.). It has been advised to apply the whole procedure in a creative manner that does justice to the character of the data and the research question, rather than simply following the steps in a rigid, mechanical way (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638).

The GT approach has proven useful in various research disciplines, fields and interests. The use reaches from the study of organisations (Sutton, 1987) and management strategies

(Browning et al., 1995) to sociological research of biographic experiences and coping strategies of young precarious workers (Mrozowicki and Trappmann, 2021).

Besides GT's pragmatism around epistemological questions, one of the main advantages and challenges of the coding system is the simultaneously clear and flexible procedure. This guides data collection and analysis while leaving room to take in the data and reflect on them against different theoretical frameworks.

Like any type of interpretive method, an analysis based on grounded theory is best done in a group so that interpretations can be collected, discussed, evaluated, and selected by people with different backgrounds and perspectives. Accordingly, group analysis sessions with colleagues were organised to complement the individual coding process, make the interpretations more robust and achieve higher credibility (Tracy, 2010, p. 842).

#### 4.3.2 Analytical Technique

The analysis of the interviews started with pre-analysis during the conduction of the interview and ended with the writing of the findings based on analytical summaries, tables, and memos that captured codes developed in the interviews. The following section presents the pre-analysis, and the three steps applied in the analytical coding process. It explains how the analytical approaches to biographic narrative research and the coding strategy of the GT approach produced the findings presented in the next chapters.

##### *Pre-Analysis*

The first analysis started while conducting the interview. Active listening to what is said and not said was crucial to identifying the interviewees' main concerns, deciding on subsequent questions, and finding a way to introduce the external themes in a relatable way. While listening, I compared the biographic narration and further narratives to other interviews. I evaluated whether and how to inquire into peculiar phrasings or gaps in the life stories, for example, when interviewees did not mention parents or partners or even the courier job in the biographic part.

The pre-analysis continued while writing the interview notes, in which I documented background information on the interview acquisition, like the time, setting, and reflections on the atmosphere, thoughts and feelings, and how these might have shaped the interview.

The transcription process, when carried out by me, presented another part of the pre-analysis. Transcribing generally requires an attentive form of listening to what is said and how

things are said. This process allowed me to reflect on the interview design and technique, note questions for the analysis, and think about further data collection. The transcription also allowed me to get to know the interviewees' ways of speaking and to identify verbal peculiarities, relevant gap fillers and pauses that might indicate emotions around themes, thoughts and people, which can easily get lost in the transcript and thus cannot be accounted for in the analysis.

I openly read through each interview for the first ten cases to familiarise myself again. I marked sections that caught my attention in any way, not just strictly related to the research question, and made open notes. In the case of transcribed interviews, this was mostly done on a printout and otherwise while listening to the audio file. Although it was time-consuming, this extra step was useful in the first phase of the research since it allowed me to notice general themes that were brought up and whether the interviewees related their story to the prior talk and introduction of my research topic, or the information given on the information sheet.

The pre-analysis ensured an open perspective on the interview while also preventing the feeling of getting lost in the data. It provided a time and structure to recognise and process the complexity of each case and informed the (focused) analysis on class identity without blurring it.

After the pre-analysis, when questions about language, interview dynamics, narration structure, and side themes were less distracting, I began the process of analytical coding.

#### *Analytical Coding Process*

Following the rationale of the GT approach, the analytical coding proceeded through various cycles, starting with a round of open or 'initial' coding, followed by focussed and eventually axial coding (Saldaña, 2009). The research does not claim to have undergone a complete cycle of theoretical coding.

Open coding was done on the whole interview to explore the narrations in relation to the research question. Following the rationale for the integrated interview design, particular attention was paid to the beginning of the interview. The formal process of open coding started by reading the interview, focusing on any aspects related to class and inequality. In this step, open codes were also made for anything pertaining to the elements of class identity, e.g., notions of collective identity, criticism of work and employer, descriptions of collective action or ideas on how work and society could be different. This part of the coding process prioritised in vivo codes – also called “verbatim” or “literal” coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 91) – to avoid applying a class perspective that was too narrow too soon. This type of coding reflects an emic perspective taken

in the analysis, meaning that, at this point, the interpretation follows the research participant's perspective, which is particularly suitable for research that prioritises the participant's voice.

In this step, particular attention was paid to the biographic narration, meaning that coding partially took place in the form of line-by-line analysis, and the broad structure and themes of the biographic narration were identified. The beginning of the interview was selected because, as explained above, the spontaneous construction of the biographic narration is crucial to reconstructing people's experiences, identifications and understanding of the world (Caetano, 2015, p. 238; Strangleman, 2012). The participant is required to make decisions to construct a condensed but nonetheless detailed and closed story of their own life and becoming (Schuetze, 1982; Schütze, 1983; Schütze, 1984; Szczepanik and Siebert, 2016). To a degree, interviewees are free to set their own priorities in the ways they talk about themselves and their lives. Partly, these accounts are habitual and thus also reflect the relation of class habitus and class identity. Some people separate their public life from their private or family life, while others have a specific problem they want to talk about and build their life story around. Others introduce their place of birth and their family and continue with an institutional trajectory, chronologically describing and evaluating their time in kindergarten, school, university, and so forth.

The codes developed in this first step provided an overview of what was happening in the interviews without yet drawing close connections to other interviews and theoretical concepts. The result of the pre-analysis and open coding were noted at the beginning of the analytical summary for each interview. Main biographical aspects are summarised, and guiding themes are identified that are relevant in shaping the interviewee's view of themselves, their life and the world surrounding them.

In the next step, the *focussed coding*, I mapped the codes as well as some quotes and visualised potential links between them. Overall, I looked for thematic and conceptual similarities in codes and, where necessary, merged them into the same code or summarised them under a wider category. For example, the in vivo code FALLEN BEHIND, which occurred in two interviews, I used to code phrases and passages in other interviews which dealt with not having met own or others' expectations or perceived average standard in a certain social context:

“none of us are really doing our dream jobs or anything that we said we would at this age”

“I'm an eternal student, the stereotype of a studied taxi driver.”

“Everyone I went to school with is some kind of professional now, but, you know (3) much more than me I am like, way down on the (.) like (.) I’m riding a bike, delivering pizza, kind of thing.”

The phrase *STUDIED TAXIDRIVER* was also taken as an in vivo code, which, together with other codes, was merged under the category *STATUS INCONGRUENCE*. Both eventually became subcategories to the theme *EXPERIENCE OF DOWNWARD MOBILITY*. This again related closely to the category *WORSE OFF*, which captured many interviewees’ evaluation of their own socio-economic position compared to that of their parents and indicated a sense of *GENERATIONAL DOWNWARD MOBILITY*.

As the next step of the analysis, I went through a cycle of axial coding, which can generally be seen as a transitional cycle between the initial open coding and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 261). This step in the process is generally useful for describing characteristics or attributes of categories or specifying relations and exploring conditions, context, or consequences of processes (ibid.). I considered theoretical codes that might be imported to reflect on the categories.

The final step of coding in a grounded theory approach is the so-called selective or theoretical coding, which “specifies the possible relationships between categories and moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63; quoted in Saldaña, 2009, p. 224). By forming a higher-level category that discovers a significant problem, conflict, or primary theme, theoretical coding presents a further level of abstraction on the way to forging a grounded theory (Saldaña, 2009, p. 268).

As described above, as part of the general procedure of the GT coding process, thoughts were captured in memos, analytical summaries, and analytical tables throughout the analysis process. Memos included reflections on the interview design and style, observations during the interview conduct and analysis, and expanded on codes and their relationship with each other.

#### 4.4 Methodological Limitations

There are three main limitations as to how this approach can answer the research question.

The first limitation concerns the access to knowledge on workers’ class identity. I observed class identity by observing manifestations of people’s experiences, perceptions, thoughts, values and self-descriptions. The research can, however, always just captures a limited

snapshot of social reality. No matter whether we access the materialisation of those in declarations and practices – by observing people and their practices or asking them to tell us things from which we can reconstruct their class identity - research only ever captures a “particular, temporal cutting of social reality” (Caetano, 2015, p. 230) and thus cannot entirely account for the possible ways in which, e.g., an individual’s experiences and thoughts change over time and are structured differently a few years later (ibid).

A second limitation is common to many studies of social issues. It lies in the expression of the research participants and has already been addressed in part in the reflection on data collection. When studying such manifestations – especially those based on the spoken or written word, and thus on language – the data that can be studied are highly shaped by an individual’s capability to express themselves and to react and respond to the researcher. When basing research on individuals’ discourse, the manifestations provided for interpretation will be selective, following the individuals’ own priorities and their ideas of social desirability in the particular context (ibid).

A third methodological problem follows from the interpretation: ways in which meaning is constructed and presented. Multiple difficulties are attached to the double hermeneutic process of interpreting individuals’ interpretations of the social world (ibid). When studying class identity, it is asked how individuals interpret the social world and construct meaning in it. Nonetheless, in this case, it is necessary for the researcher “to address their knowledge of social reality and their own practices and representations” to make sense of others’ attitudes, behaviour, ideas, etc. (ibid). At the same time, sociological concepts are not just used and applied by the researcher when making sense of the research subject but can also be discussed with the participants: they can “be incorporated ... into [an] individual’s interpretive discourse” (ibid). As shown above, this is the case in this research: the interview is designed in such a way that class as one of the central theoretical concepts might or might not be brought up by the interviewees themselves, but a discussion about it is always prompted towards the end of the interview.

On the level of interpretation, the integrated interview design also causes methodological problems for the analysis. As different types of data are produced but the same method of analysis is applied, there needs to be a coherent methodological approach underlying the empirical work. This has not yet been addressed systematically in the literature, and no clear solution can be presented here either. To work around this problem, a preliminary solution was

simply to stress the importance of reflecting on and laying open “epistemological, methodological and criteriological challenges” (Corlett & Mavin, 2018b, p. 22), and being transparent about the production of data and arguments.

It might also be argued that the de-contextualized analysis that usually comes with the GT coding system presents an additional limitation. As data fragments are compared out of context, across people and biographies, in a way this always pursues the “discovery” of some underlying pattern or law. It has been argued that this has implications for what can be discovered (or created) and what (more situated) understanding may remain out of sight or be difficult to retain. However, this has been avoided through the wider analytical approach taken in this study. As explained above, the pre-analysis, rich notes, and focus on biographic context made it less likely for data to be fragmented and pulled out of context.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

As laid out above, a reflexive, interpretive, comparative research approach is adopted to explore the class identities of platform food couriers. I have explained how the epistemological stance, the overall research approach, theoretical approach and the method of interview design and analysis align and suit the research objectives of this study. Combining biographic and semi-structured interview parts provides the necessary rich data to examine food couriers' subjective accounts – their life stories and reflections on work and society – to explore their identification regarding social class. This narrative approach does not only limit typical challenges of class identity by giving interviewees a chance to set their own priorities without forcing abstract concept into the debate. These data further allow to capture the interplay of subjectivity meaning and material conditions which are crucial considering the integrated approach to class analysis that guides the research.

The sampling strategy presented above accounts for the heterogeneity of the workforce and took into considerations factors that potentially shape class consciousness, therefore including collectively organised couriers, migrant workers and worker with varying perspective in the job. Throughout the whole research process, reflexivity about positionality and specific problem with class analysis were considered and accounted for as much as possible. The findings presented in the next chapters are based on rich valuable data and a rigorous and thus credible analysis.

## Chapter 5: Working as a Food Courier

This chapter delves into the experiences of food couriers, exploring the meaning they ascribe to their work and how it fits into their broader life context. It addresses four key questions: “How do interviewees come to work as food couriers?”, “Why do they pursue this particular job?”, “How dependent are they on it?” and “What are their experiences and perceptions of the work?”.

The findings presented in this chapter are derived from rounds of open coding of the couriers’ biographic narrations and work experiences as well as on focused coding that further investigated the emic codes for pathways, pull and push factors and experiences that were developed in some cases, across the whole sample.

The chapter shows the relevance of the food courier job to the interviewees’ current situations and overall life courses. It thereby sheds light on the interviewees’ expectations of work and working conditions and how they negotiate the benefits and downsides of the job in the face of their dependency.

The findings presented here expand existing knowledge about the diverse food courier workforce presented in Chapter 3 and add an in-depth biographic perspective on its widely observed heterogeneity. This knowledge helps to understand how people construct their identities about work and their socioeconomic situation within society. Examining the experiences of food couriers illuminates the complex interplay between work and life, offering a nuanced picture of the socioeconomic dynamics at play. It allows a biographically contextualised understanding of how and why couriers identify with the job and how this is linked to their self-positioning regarding social class.

### 5.1 Pathways

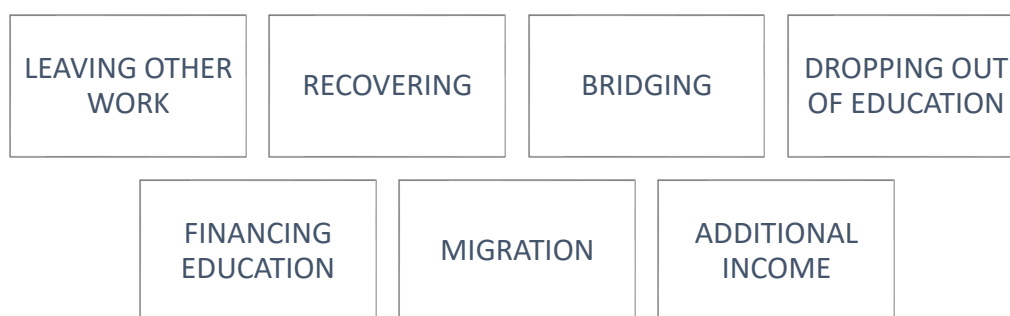
When the interviewees embarked on their food courier journeys, they were at different life stages and involved in diverse forms of work, education, and transitions. This chapter identifies seven pathways that led workers into the courier job.

For a small number of research participants, food courier work was their first full-time job. Two interviewees, for example, faced challenging family situations and had to abandon their education or training to make a living by working as full-time couriers. In other instances, the food courier job was taken up during full-time education, providing additional income while

studying or during holidays. International students in the sample took up courier work to finance themselves and their degrees abroad. In a few cases, interviewees started working as couriers to augment the income from their main job. While their essential living costs were covered, the platform job afforded them additional comforts or allowed them to make savings.

One case, in the English sample, got into food courier work while the hospitality sector was shut down during the COVID lockdown. Since he was on a zero-hour contract rather than in regular employment, the interviewee used platform work to bridge the time until other job opportunities in his original field of work reopened.

**Image 1** Overview of pathways into platform food courier work



In two cases, the job was the first opportunity to make an income after migrating to a new country. All other interviewees got into food couriating after leaving other work or employment and needing a new source of income. Some of these interviewees did not simply leave one type of work and went into another but were recovering from health issues – primarily mental health struggles – relating to their former jobs. These interviewees used the food courier job as a form of step-by-step reintegration into the labour market. The courier work allowed them to recover while still earning money.

While all interviewees wanted or needed to make money and, thus, had to find a job, these different pathways show the various situations people were in: in different stages of their lives and their educational and career trajectories. These pathways broadly reflect what research already knows regarding the social class composition of the workforce. It is dominated by students, migrant workers and, in a far smaller share, workers who top up their first income (Cant, 2020; Franke and Pulignano, 2023). What these pathways indicate in addition to that is that education drop-outs and workers in recovery may be relevant groups that deserve further

consideration. While they do not present a large share in the workforce, their cultural capital, and the relevance of the job in their life can be a crucial motivator for collective action.

The following section explains the manifold reasons why interviewees chose courier work over other types of work.

## 5.2 Pull and Push Factors

A combination of factors induced interviewees to sign up with platform companies like Lieferando or Uber Eats. The following seven factors were identified from the biographic interviews. They show that while the job has many positives, moving to courier work is often a reaction to suboptimal conditions in the labour market and negative experiences in other work contexts rather than a proactive choice. Interviewees were conscious of their options in the labour market. They reacted to abusive, alienating and excluding experiences at former workplaces and to the dissatisfying financial prospects in other jobs.

**Image 2** Overview of pull and push factors



\*Push factors are marked in bold.

### 5.2.1 Pull Factors

Overall, five pull factors were relevant in the interviewees' narrations of how they came to work as couriers: 1. the quick and easy onboarding process, 2. its flexibility, 3. the sense of autonomy in the job, 4. the variable earning potential, and 5. the physical activity of cycling. The first four were relevant to all couriers when starting the job. No matter how different their backgrounds and perspectives were, a sense of autonomy was a crucial factor for each interviewee. Some became disillusioned with the earning potential over time, but others kept being motivated by it,

as shown below. Flexibility was not quite the same for couriers in Germany and England and, thus, was more relevant for couriers in Britain. The fifth factor, cycling as a physical activity, was only relevant for bicycle couriers in the sample and not applicable to the four couriers on motorised vehicles.

1. The low entrance criteria and quick onboarding process made the job easily accessible for those who lacked formal skills and certificates or were looking for a fast way to earn money. This made it a convenient job for those who studied and those who were changing jobs. One of the German students described it as the first thing he could get his hands on. Less than two weeks after applying he was able to start working and earning money. In England, some couriers also liked that they could withdraw their earnings at the end of the week or whenever needed rather than waiting until the end of the month.

2. The flexibility and, thus, the job's work-life balance made it attractive to couriers in various life situations. For the students in the sample, courier work enabled them to plan around lectures, learning times and exam periods. Particularly in the English sample, students appreciated that they could take their jobs home during the summer months. Similarly, an interviewee who lived on a canal boat used the flexibility to continue his courier work while being moored up in different cities. Those with young families appreciated the flexibility as they needed to align work and care responsibilities. Related to the different employment models and variance in the labour process laid out in Chapter 3, the potential for flexibility looked different for couriers in Germany and England, as did their ability to realize that potential.

In England, where couriers work on a solo, self-employed basis, they decide when to work and when to pause. The English sample includes three fathers, two of whom had young children, and one had a baby. The former two felt motivated by the possibility of stopping working during the school run, picking up their children, being home for bedtime, or taking weekend days off for family time. The father with the young baby saw the flexibility as advantage because he could pause work for several months to be the prime carer for his baby daughter, allowing his partner to continue her shifts in a supermarket. The possibility of paid carer leave as part of an employment contract was not brought up here – either because it was not considered or because it did not appear to be a realistic expectation. For another courier in England who had gone through some hardship over the past years, the chance to take breaks for prayer throughout the day was a reason to value the job's flexibility. For all these reasons,

couriers in England saw an advantage in self-employed platform work over jobs organized in shifts. The interview data here reflect findings from the literature on precarious work and platform work that emphasise the positive perception of many precarious work contexts (Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; Trappmann et al., 2023) especially of flexibility (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Wood, 2020) and autonomy (Ivanova et al., 2018; Morales and Stecher, 2023)

In Germany, where most delivery companies now work on an employment basis using shift models, there is considerably less flexibility than for couriers in England because they must sign up for shifts and, at times, are assigned shift hours without having a choice. For many students in the sample, the attraction of the flexible work patterns was still similar because they could apply for fewer shifts in busy periods. However, for workers who had left other jobs, flexibility and work-life balance meant something slightly different. The combination of flexibility and basic employment security helped six couriers in the German sample to cope with or recover from health issues, which were partly brought on by former employment. The couriers here emphasized the ability to adjust their working hours, as well as the option to take sick days to keep stress down. For most of these six interviewees, working as a food courier meant an overall reduction of working time and pressure, paired with flexible work within a secure setting. This aspect of flexibility as a pull factor to allow recovery was somewhat present in two English cases but, overall, much more pronounced in the German interviews.

3. Another strong factor that pulled people into courier work was its autonomy – especially the felt absence of supervision. Almost every courier mentioned the benefit of not having a supervisor looking over their shoulder. Interviewees took pride in the feeling of “being your own boss”, particularly in the context of self-employment. Like with flexibility, the appreciation for autonomy must be understood against the background of former work experiences and relative expectations. Interviewees contrasted their autonomy as couriers with repeated bad experiences in former work contexts. To give just one example, Nick, a courier from Leeds who then lived and worked in Cologne, compared his work as a food courier with his former job in a call centre. He had a difficult early childhood, which caught up with him in his teenage years and disrupted his educational trajectory. Having finished school with less than good A-levels and not having learned a trade, Nick went into call centre work, which he did for almost ten years before becoming a courier:

The office is a different lifestyle. You at least have got a sense of autonomy, you know. You feel like you work independently for yourself, to choose as you do. ... Because you've not got a manager constantly looking over your back who will pull you into the office at any stage. In an office environment where you're strapped to a desk, and you've got to be available to take a call at any given moment— And there is someone physically watching you. It probably is, in reality, watching— the app, but you're told your target is two an hour, and I'm doing better than that. As long as you are doing that, you feel like you've got a bit of freedom to choose what pace you work at and when you wanna take a break and whatnot.

Nick, 33, male, Germany, 3 years into the job

Besides a sense of freedom, Nick also clearly points out the different levels of work intensification. While the targets set in the call centre meant constant pressure, having achievable goals created a considerably different work experience for him and gave him the feeling that he could decide how he wanted to work to achieve these targets.

Although some call centres are infamous for their work intensification and intentionally high staff turnover, Nick's experience is not exceptional in that it relates to these extremes only. Similar contrasting accounts about autonomy were present in cases where people left warehouses, restaurants, or garden centres. Narratives about autonomy and the absence of direct control were particularly present among older workers. Especially in the English sample, which includes three couriers delivering by car, and more couriers in their late 30s and 40s, interviewees strongly emphasized that they were their own bosses. While there were other factors at play, too, as shown below, the absence of direct supervisors was particularly important for those beyond their mid-30s trying to set up a life for themselves or being breadwinners for their families. Being aware that their work and every movement are tracked through the app and that misbehaviour could have consequences, most couriers had no illusions about the control management could eventually exercise over them. However, the feeling of autonomy from the absence of personal supervision presented a preferable deal for most interviewees. Thus, for the workers in this sample, autonomy or a sense of independence was a relevant pull factor towards platform work. The sense of autonomy gave them a positive experience and allowed them to construct a positive self-image despite knowing that the absence of control was partly an illusion.

I showed in chapter three that autonomy and flexibility are highly debated in the literature on platform work. Their limitations and controversial character as normative control tools (Wood et al., 2019a; Galière, 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023) are reflected in the interview data for this project, which will become clearer throughout the following chapters. However, the pull

factors suggests that relative to former work and employment contexts, many couriers in this sample experience the gained autonomy and flexibility of the courier job as a meaningful improvement in their lives. Rather than suggesting couriers would fully buy into the platforms' appeal to a sense of autonomy, these data indicate that it is the relative experience against the background of their overall work trajectories, that shapes this positive perspective.

4. The flexible earning potential was another factor in why workers preferred courier work over other jobs. Those who worked on the side liked the idea of being able to work depending on how much money they needed at the time. The incentive system also motivated couriers because it promised them the chance to increase their income if they performed well. The variable earning potential allowed some to push their income up when they wanted or needed it. This factor was slightly pronounced in English cases, but also present in German interviews. Interestingly, some couriers clung to the idea of higher earning potential even when they were aware that, in the end, their choice of working hours and income potential was limited due to the overall pay structure and varying peak times throughout the day and the year. The discrepancy between the initial motivation and the actual realization is elaborated on in the couriers' experiences around pay below.

5. The physical character of the work was an attractive pull factor for cyclists, particularly those who were enthusiastic cyclists or recovering from or coping with health problems. Many bicycle couriers described themselves as "active" or "into cycling", seeing cycling as enjoyable rather than work. Some students who picked up the work as a side job also cycled for leisure, owned a good bicycle or could use decent bikes belonging to their parents. Other interviewees were keen to become more active and saw the job as a chance to exercise while earning money. Particularly, those who felt that former jobs had taken a toll on their health experienced cycling as an easy but stimulating task, helping them to cope with mental and emotional struggles and neurodiversity. The following excerpts from couriers' accounts illustrate how cycling as an activity made the job attractive for different workers. A German courier, Fabricio, found cycling not only enjoyable but also helpful in managing his ADHD, which he struggled with in former jobs. Although he was critical of the working conditions in the platform sector and got involved with others to demand improvements from the company he worked for, he stuck with the job and the cycling because of how it benefited him:

It does me a lot of good. I used to do night shifts mainly; it does me good to cycle through the city at night because of the lack of irritation; there is less irritation. You feel good and still get to peek into the restaurants and bars. You still get to see people, and the movement makes me feel good and better. It really does me good, it sounds silly, but it brings me joy. But of course, it is also a super hard, strenuous job.

Fabricio, 52, male, Germany, migration background, 4 years into the job

Thiago appreciated the cycling, because it helped him during a long-term depression after leaving his former profession. He could not get a foothold in hospitality management when he and his partner came from Spain to the UK, so he started online trading. Although he would be okay without the income, the courier job got him out of the house when he lacked motivation and interaction:

I was depressed for three years ... and then what could I do? I did all the paperwork for her [partner], taxes, and everything, and I managed to earn an income from other sources. But I was still very low. And then I found the gig economy. ... When I am in this state of mind, when I only think about problems, and I am down, what I can do is get a bicycle, work for seven hours, get a lot of hails, and your perspective is better. There is something fantastic about cycling. You can see the traffic, and you can't think about problems.

Thiago, 43, male, England, migration experience, 4 years into the job

Another courier who valued the physical side of the job is Nick, mentioned above. Having seriously injured his feet in an accident while already unhappy with his call centre job, the work on the bike gave him back a sense of mobility and agency:

I was told I wouldn't live an active life. When you have something like that taken away from you and are made to realise the things you'll miss, I was quite keen to live an active lifestyle. And the job that I've got kind of enabled me to do that. And it started with a few hours, day by day. And I ended up finding that I'd actually do alright full-time for me. ... And I've been here a few years now. And I managed to get my own flat, and yeah.

Nick, 33, male, Germany, migration experience, 3 years into the job

These cases present examples of how the physical work on the bike appealed to people in different contexts. While for some, the physical outdoor work was simply convenient, fun or a straightforward, stress-free way to earn money on the side, for others, it fulfilled a wider purpose in their life, like offering a needed way of coping and recovering that they did not find in other jobs. While literature has pointed out the risks and the repetitiveness of the physical sides of the job (Cant, 2020; Gregory, 2021), the in-depth interview data tell an additional story of how workers temporarily find ease in simplicity and physical character of the work. It shows how overall, they consider advantages and disadvantages of the job and evaluate them in comparison to alternatives.

### 5.2.2 Push Factors

The above-discussed features of the courier job already indicate that one of the most prominent reasons for people to go into platform courier work is a strongly felt need to avoid the downsides of other work and employment contexts. Autonomy and flexibility are attractive because many interviewees had negative experiences with hierarchies and control in former companies. Besides the abusive behaviour of supervisors and managers, interviewees with migrant backgrounds also mentioned experiences of racist discrimination, leading them to want to leave former jobs within teams or with direct supervisors. Having worked on low or minimum wage before, some interviewees were tired of doing hard and unrewarding work without the prospect of improving their pay. They were conscious of the many exploitative jobs around them. One younger worker who saw senior trained workers in a company bring home slightly less than what he could earn as an untrained full-time courier ended up disillusioned with other options in the labour market. He feared that investing in long, low-paid apprenticeships would not pay off in the future.

Interviewees also sought to avoid more alienating work contexts. They described former jobs as dull and lacking in purpose and, in some cases, found the jobs or company practices to go against their ethical standards. Basti, a German courier, left his well-paid job in marketing because he no longer wanted to sell people things that they neither wanted nor needed:

After studying, I worked in my field for three years – in marketing, start-ups, and that, the classic, internet performance hoo-ha. And at some point, I realised for myself that that wasn't enough ... everything was getting more extreme and nasty, and I did all that bullshit marketing. ... The work teams were great, but in the end, what you were working for, the product, that was shit. And then, at some point, I made the decision. I told myself, "Yo, what else can I do than this nonsense? Well, cycling, I suppose." ... And I'm not destroying anything with it. I can square it with my conscience.

Basti, 28, male, Germany, 2 years into the job

While Basti did not consider the courier work particularly useful to society either, he preferred it because he thought it less harmful. Some others shared this perspective. Only a few couriers found the job purposeful, and when they did, this was particularly during the lockdown, when they delivered groceries to isolated people. Some felt that delivery companies and their jobs should not exist, criticizing the platform's disruptive and exploitative character. Most couriers in the sample did not express thoughts on the job's value and ethics, and generally did not seem to worry much about purpose. Overall, couriers did not want to be bored at work, be part of

something that was obviously problematic, be discriminated against, be bossed around, or feel exploited in the workplace, so they left and looked for other options.

2. For a large group of couriers, having limited options in the labour market and, thus, difficulty in finding good work pushed them towards courier work. Depending on their formal training and skill levels, some workers were less well-positioned in the labour market than others. Half of the interviewees had higher education or were studying for a degree. Some had finished school but had not undergone or completed professional training or did not intend to work with the skills they had learned. In some cases, their training and certificates lost value due to migration. Two interviewees who came to the UK as refugees had not had the chance to complete school or start professional training. A large group of interviewees with higher education lived as migrants in England or Germany and lacked language skills, with some also facing racist stigma. Most in this sample did not actively seek to become food couriers but had difficulty finding other suitable jobs. Afik, a 29-year-old courier from Bangladesh, is one example. He came to Berlin to do a master's in computer science, already held a bachelor's in mechanical engineering, and, although still learning, spoke German well. When he arrived, he took up work in a warehouse to quickly generate some income. Because the warehouse work was very routinized and challenging to get to, and because he had qualifications, he aimed for a more professional side job in the IT sector, without success. After many rejected and unanswered applications, he found out about Lieferando and Gorillas and started courier work instead. By the time of the interview, he had worked as a courier for about a year. Five others in the German sample had similar difficulties finding jobs despite their education.

Other interviewees struggled because they lacked formal qualifications and did not have much guidance during their transition into the labour market. Billy, for example, had never completed training but did various side jobs after school. Initially, he had hoped to become a musician but did not know how to go about it and could not make a living from it. After he left different day jobs in retail, he struggled to find better work:

And then, I started working in a shoe shop and was there for about four years. It was just something that was really boring. But um, yeah, I was like, I've not got much going on. So, I just got into that. And after that, there was a bit of difficulty trying to get work. I was in and out of universal credit. And then I was in and out of little things, very little things. But then eventually that progressed into the courier stuff.

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Without formal skills or a particular trade, some of the interviewees could only access routinized

or semi-routinized service work or manual jobs that were not fulfilling to them. These often came with the issues presented above, as well as low pay and fixed-term or zero-hour contracts. For many lower-educated couriers and those with degrees from different countries, opportunities for work were limited and came with downsides. Hence, finding a temporary side job or a permanent full-time job required them to compromise considerably.

Various pull and push factors were at play when people signed up as platform couriers. The different motifs identified in the interviews show that many workers in various situations had chosen the suboptimal working conditions in the platform food courier job over equally bad or worse working conditions and climate in other types of jobs. They preferred a sense of autonomy and flexibility over more hierarchical, often dull and low-paid jobs. Those who had limited options or were recovering picked self-exploitation and, in some cases, physical risks in the courier job over alienation with good pay or in combination with exploitation or abuse in other work contexts. The factors that drove interviewees out of different types of work and into courier work also show that the work and income model of the platforms gave them a sense of agency that they were missing before. This was particularly important for couriers who were not doing the job on a short-term basis while studying but for whom courier work was a long-term prospect. Many of those had stumbled in and out of jobs without clear direction and expectations. Only through negative experiences did some of them figure out what they did not want or could not cope with, and some did not develop a positive orientation towards work at all. Overall, the move into courier work for many native students who were looking for a side income was driven by convenience through quick onboarding and flexibility. In contrast, for those who needed to make a living and had limited options, the move to platform work was a reaction to bad working conditions and their limited options due to their suboptimal position in the labour market.

The following section provides an overview of the couriers' dependency and long-term prospects. This shows further the role the job has in different interviewees' lives and, thus, what relevance any experience in the job may have to their overall life and work trajectories.

### 5.3 Dependency and Prospects

Many students in the sample received financial support from their parents or had a student loan to cover their basic costs. Thus, they only relied on the courier job for additional comforts. This

is true for seven students across the whole sample. Some, however – particularly the five international students in the German sample – were heavily dependent on an income from work. The food courier job was crucial to finance their rent and food while studying. All the students in this sample anticipated that they would only do the job for a defined period. They pursued other lines of work in the long run, building careers in product design, engineering, programming, and management, and could expect higher incomes in the future. The job generally had limited relevance to their overall lives and identity, except for some who depended on it and were politically invested. This is elaborated on in the following chapters.

Only two couriers, who were not students, worked for additional income or were only partially dependent on the courier job, as can be seen in the table below. Thiago was not as reliant on the courier income as he was earning money through online trading, and his partner's job provided them with a decent income. Another English courier, Samantha, had a full-time job, which provided her with a primary income, while the courier work allowed her to finance weekend trips abroad and save up to buy a flat. Both intended to do the job long-term, but not permanently.

The situation was different for couriers who relied on the job as their primary source of income. For example, one courier in England was conscious that neither he nor his partner had prospects of getting a permanent employment contract and would struggle to get a mortgage. He needed the job to finance his running costs and secure enough money to eventually buy something small outright without relying on credit from a bank. Others were the single breadwinners in their families and, thus, strongly depended on the courier job's income. Tobias, for example, a 28-year-old courier worked six days a week, often ten hours a day. Tobias' family had migrated to England from the Caribbean when he was a teenager. He “works smart”, as he said, to get the most out of the time and effort he put in. Nonetheless, he needed to work long hours to make enough money to provide for his two young children and his wife, who stayed at home as the primary carer. Another of the parents in the sample was separated from his former partner. Miro got into courier work after experiencing burnout and leaving an interesting but very stressful project management job in a successful start-up. He was 35 at the point of the interview and kept a modest lifestyle and shared an apartment with a friend to live off part-time courier work. This allowed him to take on half of the care work and half of the financial needs for his young daughter. Billy, who was introduced above and was a parent too, also aimed to share the

breadwinner role with his partner. Since they could not afford to pay for a nursery, he took on most of the care work so that his partner could keep her job in retail and provide most of the income. The couple was muddling through at the time of the interview, waiting for their daughter to be old enough for them to claim financial support for kindergarten so that Billy could return to working more regularly and add his share to the household's income.

**Image 3** Overview of dependency levels and prospects

	DEPENDENT	PARTIALLY	ADDITIONAL INCOME
PERMANENT	LARS, FABRICIO, THEO, Avi, Mebratu, Billy, Tobias		
LONG-TERM	MALIK, <b>TIA</b> , NICK, BASTI, JANNECK, MIRO, Tom, James, Raaib	Samantha	Thiago, <b>Jimmy</b>
SHORT-TERM	TABEA, <b>DAVID</b> , <b>DHAVAL</b> , <b>SATVIK</b> , JOSH, Geno	<b>AFIK</b> , <b>Liam</b>	<b>MICHAEL</b> , <b>SEBASTIAN</b> Brian, <b>Mateo</b> , <b>Henry</b> , <b>Dylan</b>

\*GERMAN SAMPLE

\*Students

Of the 22 couriers in the sample who were dependent on the job, the 16 workers who planned to stay long-term or permanently in the courier job strongly preferred autonomy and avoided working in hierarchical contexts with superiors. Negative experiences in former jobs had driven them into platform work. Many of those, but mainly the seven dependent couriers who intended to do courier work permanently, also lacked the skills or formal qualifications to access other types of autonomous work. In some of these cases, their degrees or training had become devalued because of migration or become irrelevant because interviewees did not want to work in their former trade anymore. Three of the dependent couriers who intended to keep the job permanently were in their late 20s, while the other four were between their late 30s and early 50s. They either did not consider or had had difficulty getting into retraining.

More diverse is the group of 12 workers in the sample who had long-term plans to work as food couriers but eventually aimed to do something different. In some cases, these workers enjoyed working as a side job and could imagine continuing the work even when starting or following up on other professional work. This includes the cases mentioned above of Thiago and

Samantha. They valued the ability to top up their income through a job that did not necessarily feel like work, giving them a change from their usual, often desk-bound employment. In other cases, the jobs fit into the interviewees' current work-life balance, and they aimed to continue while it worked well but were eventually aiming to return to former or new professions to earn more money. For them, the courier job was a welcome break, or else it sustained their life well enough but did not allow any higher comfort or progress, which they eventually wanted to have. Some interviewees in this group used the job's work-life balance while recovering from health issues. The remaining three cases were similar to those intending to be couriers permanently. However, they aimed to change into the taxi business, truck driving, or start their own business.

These differences show how heterogeneous the food courier workforce is. When considering what the job means to different people, their lives and identities, the answers vary considerably depending on how they got into the job, how long they aimed to stay, and how much they relied on making the job work for themselves. The interview data underline the argument that different levels of dependency considerably impacts the perceived job quality in platform work (Schor et al., 2020). Whilst some needed to find a way to navigate the rules of the food courier game to create a sustainable long-term income, for others, it was merely convenient, and they could leave at any time if the job did not suit them anymore.

#### 5.4 Experiences

Most couriers in the sample, no matter how they got into the job or how long they had been working, found the companies to be poorly organized, to communicate inadequately and to lack communication channels. Couriers also lamented a lack of transparency around the pay structure and delivery radius. The physically demanding character of the work and the exposure to traffic risks stood out among the 29 bicycle couriers in the sample. Various couriers faced stigma related to their jobs and even encountered harassment during work. The interviews also showed a discrepancy in couriers' experiences of isolation, a sense of neglect by the company, and their longing for autonomy – particularly in the German sample. A sense of community was mainly limited to those few, often homogenous groups of couriers involved in organizing, or other small, fragmented groups of migrants. A strong ambivalence was present in the couriers' view that the job offered decent pay while they also experienced decreasing fees. The following sections

present some of these experiences to illustrate the tensions and contradictions in couriers' everyday work lives.

#### 5.4.1 Negotiating Pay: Accepting and Hoping

Different problems around pay were prevalent in the German and the English sample. The experiences were shaped by the differences in the pay systems rooted in the different work and employment relations and the different cultural contexts and industrial relations in both countries, as presented in Chapter 3.

Overall, many of the couriers considered the work to bring in good money. The pay level was generally accepted for the kind of work that is required. Those working full-time in Germany, who could pocket the bonuses, were especially happy with their income. Because of the number of hours that they were working, they were likely to reach the point where they were earning extra with every delivery, which eventually added up. While these workers represent a minority within the workforce in Germany, they are the ones who mainly depend on the job and are then able to make a decent income with 30 to 35 hours of work. Even if they had previously worked in considerably better-paying jobs, full-time couriers thought they “earned well” with the courier work – knowing, however, that the job did not allow them to make significant savings.

The situation was different for some of the students in Germany who worked only on a mini- or midi-job basis and could not get the bonus for high delivery numbers. Being less invested in the job in the long term and having other, better-paid options for flexible work available, some of the students in the German sample were less satisfied with the money they could earn through the courier work. Sebastian, who was initially ambitious, trying to crack the records on his road bike, quickly lost his motivation to perform well because he felt he was not rewarded for his effort. However much he cycled, he was not getting any of the bonuses and instead struggled to get enough shifts when his company started hiring too many couriers. Since he was only doing the job on the side, he did not get priority in the distribution of shifts or benefit from the top-up of the hourly pay. Receiving notification about being in the top ten fastest European couriers felt like a joke to Sebastian since he was not getting any financial remuneration for his performance. Eventually, he quit and looked for other side-income options.

The overall satisfaction with pay was also not shared by a couple of the politically organized riders in the German sample, who questioned whether minimum wage was sufficient considering the traffic risks that riders were exposed to. As much as they agreed that the job itself

was easy and, in many ways, enjoyable, so people were ready to do it for low pay, they emphasized the accidents and casualties that had happened. Tia, one of the organized riders, strongly felt that compensation was needed to recognize the risk factor of the job. At the time of the interview, Tia was 38 and had worked as a courier for one and a half years while finishing her PhD, which had led her to move to Germany. She and other activists raised awareness for the dangers that time on the road brings and argued that 15 Euros per hour were a more appropriate remuneration to reflect these risks. However, Tia knew this was a minority perspective and that many couriers viewed it as a classic minimum-wage job and, therefore, would not ask for higher pay. Most couriers had relatively low expectations around pay and applied a short-term perspective that ignored the job's daily and long-term risks. The fact that activists had higher expectations towards pay is possibly linked to their more privileged backgrounds and education, and thus higher expectations, as well as their wider knowledge and overview of common injuries, accidents, and the long-term impact of the job. The different experiences and feelings about physical labour and risks are shown further below.

The situation around pay was more difficult for couriers in England. Like the employees in the German sample, many considered the pay level justified for the kind of work, and some emphasized that they could afford everything they needed. Again, the advantages of working autonomously and flexibly were considered more important than better pay. Many workers noticed differences between the companies but also observed a general trend of decreasing fees. Those who had worked for different companies usually preferred Stuart; however, they were not offering their services in many areas and did not need as many workers. Uber Eats was found by many to have the lowest fees and to be unsupportive when difficulties arose. Some of the newer companies in the market, like Food Panda, were considered problematic because they were seen to be poorly organized and not attuned to the legal situation in England. One of the couriers had repeatedly experienced delayed or incorrect pay and was in an ongoing legal dispute with the company. Most couriers felt that whatever was offered by the companies, they were all following similar trends of decreasing fees, and the couriers thought this was out of their hands. Most used whichever company covered most of the market and could reliably offer them work.

Billy, for example, is one of those who has done the job for a while and worked with different apps. He saw himself and his colleagues as their own bosses who worked when they wanted to and under the conditions they wanted to. He did not want to ask for more rights or

better working conditions because he feared this would eventually reduce flexibility. However, Billy felt that the companies were trying to pay as little as possible and believed there needed to be reasonable rates to make the situation work for everyone. Although he was not happy about the decreasing delivery fees, it was not bad enough yet to make him consider other options. The same was true for another English courier in a different situation. Brian, a student who only worked for extra income, found the pay generally volatile but had observed a noticeable decrease over time. Nonetheless, the job still worked for him because he could pause and pick up the work whenever he wanted:

If the price of having this amazing flexibility is getting paid slightly less every so often, it hasn't hit the point where it's not worth it to me yet. And like they keep getting me to come back by putting more boosts on, maybe I'll be fine. Sometimes, if the base fee is less, if it's a busier day than before, you get the same amount of money like it's just luck out of the draw if you get some good orders. If you have to wait longer in a restaurant, that can have the same effect as being paid less. Like there's so many other factors that determine how much money you can get for that.

Brian, 23, male, England, 2 years into the job

Brian accepted that there was an element of the unknown about how much he could earn per hour. Besides the incentives offered by the company to get people out, he believed that luck was involved and that some strategic navigation of the work could make a difference. The uncertainty and the chance to get that little bit extra out of the hour kept him and many other couriers in England hopeful and motivated.

There are various ways in which the couriers tried to “be smart about it” and make the apps work for themselves. While couriers in Germany had to take most deliveries they were offered, couriers in England frequently declined deliveries, usually if a restaurant took too long. They only accepted these deliveries if the fee had been increased or when absolutely nothing else was on. In both countries, the workers had a good overview of what was going on, which could cost them time or effort. They shared information on restaurants that were known to waste time and thus landed on an informal blacklist.

Some couriers in England who worked for extra side income only went out when the boosts were up. A couple of English bicycle couriers followed a strategy of only doing short deliveries in busy city centre areas, covering only short distances and being able to do more deliveries per hour. Another way in which they tried to maintain a sufficient income was by combining jobs from different apps. Billy would never simultaneously use multiple apps and try

to deliver orders from several platforms at the same time since this would be against the rules. He would risk having food go cold and being found out by the companies. What he did, however, was log in and out of different apps to be able to get orders from higher-paying apps and then top these up with other lower-fee deliveries:

If the boost is not good, then I've got to start varying and being a bit more strategic in how I will make the money that day. It's just not worth it sometimes— like Deliveroo is not really worth it for me. What I'll try and do is, I'll try and get a really good Stuart, like if the Stuart pay is like £8, then I can get a Deliveroo within the hour, and it's already pushed me over the amount. So, it's about being smart with how you wanna fulfil your time.

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Other couriers in England used multiple apps simultaneously to compensate for less busy times, in the morning and lunchtime shifts, or during quiet summer months when students are gone. Which of these strategies people used depended on how much they worked, how flexible they were and how strongly they relied on their income. For those working full-time and drawing their primary income from the courier job, the decreasing fees often left them no option but to work an additional hour or two. As much as workers managed to navigate the low fees, the rising costs of living started to worry some couriers, as they realized the limits to their ability to hold a steady income, let alone increase it to keep up with rising costs.

Implicit in many accounts of pay was the assumption that the skills and effort required for the job justified lower pay. The pay was considered good, considering what could be expected for this kind of work. The accounts of many couriers signalled that different types of work deserved different remuneration levels. This suggests that the discourse around more and less valuable skills is widely accepted. While politicized riders in the German sample tried to offer alternative narratives to evaluate the pay level through risk factors rather than skills, most couriers did not take on these perspectives. The awareness of other factors like busyness, luck and restaurant waiting times reflects how particularly self-employed couriers adopted the market logic under which their pay is not fixed but subject to many volatile factors. The flexible element in the pay in both countries and the flexibility around working hours gave many couriers enough of a sense of agency over their income to keep considering the work worthwhile. In this sense, ideologies around skills, market logic and the agency suggested by the variable income potential shaped the couriers' experiences and views around pay. At the same time, the accounts reflect an awareness of the power imbalance within the company. The workers may not have seen much point in complaining about the pay level because they did not see a way to change it, especially

in England. Having come from other low-pay backgrounds or stressful and alienating work also played a role in creating acceptance for the pay, just like the fact that the pay level was ultimately considered a necessary trade-off for flexibility and autonomy. Rather than the gamified payment system itself creating a positive perception of platform work (Wood et al., 2019a) the in-depths data show that the wider life context and work experience within the low wage sector are relevant in shaping the experience of platform work and its incentive mechanisms. They do however also reflect how the incentive setting through the algorithm appeals to workers sense of agency (Galière, 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023).

#### 5.4.2 Physical Labour: Short-Term Challenge and Long-Term Risk

The bicycle couriers frequently mentioned the physically demanding nature of the work and the exposure to risks. With 27 cases, this reflects most of the sample and was indicative of a majority of the couriers involved in organizing. However, bicycle couriers overall present a minority share of platform fleets in both countries.

Most riders reported that in the beginning, they had to get used to the level of exercise when delivering for a long shift or several days in a row. Couriers talked about having achy and shaky muscles, being exhausted at the end of a workday, constantly being hungry and frequently stopping during shifts to get snacks. Although most riders enjoyed the exercise that the job provided, they were aware that the work put a heavy strain on their bodies.

Most bike couriers said they could not see themselves doing this kind of work in ten or twenty years when they would be considerably older. Some thought it would come at the cost of health issues like repeated injuries in the long run. Nick, a courier in Germany who was recovering from a bicycle accident at the time of the interview, had become acutely aware of what it meant to be in a physical job and not be fit and healthy. After having repeated trouble with an injury and being off work for nine months, Nick reflected on the advantages of being an employed courier in Germany rather than working self-employed as he used to do in England:

I fell over and dislocated my shoulder, and since then, I've been on sick pay. Because I am on a permanent contract, sick pay is there. I've got the health insurance, so I've got the financial sort of support. Money is coming in every week, so I have been able to pay my overhead just about. Back in the UK, if I was self-employed, God knows what situation I would be in. I'd be homeless or with my family. I would be completely dependent on them.

Nick, 33, male, Germany, migration experience, 3 years into the job

With this experience, Nick was sure he did not want to do the job forever. Although it was good for him to get a break from his former stressful office environment, he wanted to find a job that was slightly better paid, allowed him to make savings and was safer in the long run. He hoped to learn a new skill, “get off the bike and back into the office”, to work on a career. Because he had already experienced various injuries, Nick was impressed with the older couriers who were still on the bike all day, but he was sure it would not work for him.

Those who were determined to make the job work permanently switched to e-bikes or planned to get a car to make the work physically easier. Only two couriers who intended to work permanently delivered only by bike, partly because they benefited from cycling and partly because they had neither a driving licence nor a car. They were both aware of the risks and, within their politically organized contexts, advocated for health and safety improvements.

Besides the ageing and the continuous strain on the body, many couriers were cautious because of the traffic- and weather-related risks. Although most were confident cyclists and did not mind cold and wet weather too much, those who had done the job for more than a summer had experienced difficult and dangerous situations. One interviewee had left his former job in grocery delivery because he found the heavy loads physically too demanding, especially if apartment blocks had no lifts. After changing to takeaway delivery, he was carrying lighter orders but still felt very exposed to traffic risks, especially in rainy weather since he was working on a motorbike:

The work itself is good but very dangerous for us. I've slipped twice with the bike; the employer doesn't know if you do. They also don't know that we are in danger every time. You could be run over. I would rather want to be able to deliver by car.

David, 36, male, Germany, migration experience, a year into the job

Besides the rain, extreme temperatures in winter and summer made the work much harder for couriers. Some reported that during the COVID lockdowns when couriers were not allowed inside restaurants, they spent the whole shift cycling or waiting outside in the cold. In England, some couriers had to leave their bikes behind and finish orders on foot due to heavy snow and the lack of winter services. For some UK couriers, the extra boost for the severe weather conditions was sufficient to justify the additional risk and still go out; others stayed home and chose to work on easier days. In Germany, some couriers saw the company as responsible for protecting workers from having to work during extreme weather like heavy snow and storms.

More than the weather, couriers saw the inadequate equipment and health and safety support provided by the platforms as the main problem. Couriers in Germany expressed that they needed better quality gloves, warmer jackets and better bags. They reported issues with the design of the bags, which caused them back and shoulder problems. At the same time, most couriers found ways to solve these issues for themselves. Although it was against the company's policy, they built constructions to fix their bags to bike racks. Works councils tried to offer additional training to make couriers more aware of how to cycle safely and set up their bicycles safely for their hips and knees. In Germany, these problems were gradually addressed by many of the companies, and couriers acknowledged small improvements.

Couriers in England neither experienced this nor expected it to happen. They mostly framed it as their own responsibility to invest in the job and upgrade whatever they needed. Those who planned long-term bought their jackets and gloves and, in some cases, mounted hand protections onto the bikes. Students who only did the job a couple of times a week and for a limited time did not worry too much about being wet occasionally or damaging their backs.

While time pressure was not a problem that stood out in the data, some couriers in the English sample felt that the incentive to get orders out quickly added to safety risks when in traffic. In both countries, even those who had not had any accidents themselves were aware that couriers regularly experienced accidents and that some had even died on the job. More than their own risk affinity, couriers saw problems with how others saw and treated them. They reported worrying experiences with other traffic participants, mostly cars in busy areas. Whether it was a general diffuse feeling of danger when on the road and being overtaken by vehicles at high speed or concrete incidents – most riders felt that they needed to be highly alert during work to minimize the risk of accidents. The description that Geno, a bicycle courier in England, gave exemplifies how many of the workers felt about the physical aspects of their work and what it meant for them to be out on the road a lot:

I was wearing two, three, four pairs of clothes, but I was mentally prepared. More than the cold, what was scary was that people on the street didn't respect us much as cyclists. So, you always keep eyes everywhere. It is already a bit tense, and I had a few times where people – maybe they were in a car, taking over me and start screaming out the window. I got attacked by kids with snowballs one night, like lots of random stuff. Like people insulting me.

Geno, 34, male, England, migration experience, 7 months in

Those out on bicycles are more visible as couriers and more exposed to other traffic participants and potential accidents. While some would listen to podcasts or music on the side, many who were out for longer and in busy areas felt that was impossible. For one German bicycle courier, Basti, the focus required in traffic was one of the reasons why he could not do the job for more than 30 hours per week even though he was used to the traffic in Berlin. Despite having built up his physical endurance, after two nine-hour shifts, he needed a day off to recuperate because his concentration was decreasing to a point where he felt it was unsafe to work. These experiences of physical and mental limits and considerations about long-term health impacts were more common among those working part-time or full-time than those working on the side.

There was a notable difference in the approaches that self-employed workers in England and employees in Germany took to physical risks and safety. Those with employee status were not only aware and appreciative of the opportunity to have paid sick leave but, in many cases, also had expectations towards the employer to provide better equipment and safety support in severe weather. Some only voiced general wishes or preferences, while organized couriers in the sample actively demanded change. Self-employed couriers in England, on the other hand, showed a strong sense of self-responsibility in equipping themselves, adjusting their way of working and planning for times when they could not work as much. As part of being their own boss at work, most saw it as their responsibility to deal with the risks and uncertainties of the job.

#### 5.4.3 Harassment and Assault

Being shouted at by people in passing cars or harassed by teenagers, like Geno described above, was not an uncommon experience. The couriers felt looked down upon by others, encountering anything from disparaging remarks from family members and pitiful comments from customers to different degrees of verbal and physical violence by strangers in the streets. The way in which experiences of stigmatization played into the workers' sense of class identity is shown in the next chapter. This section focuses on showing some differences in the ways in which couriers in Germany and England talked about experiences of harassment and assault at work.

Although the snowball attack on Geno was only a prank by some teenagers, it meant that he had to discontinue his shift because he could not continue delivering food with a wound on his forehead and blood on his face. Other interviewees, too, thought the line between a harmless prank and harassment was a fine one. Although the couriers had the impression that people only meant to make a joke when shouting at them, most lost their tolerance for the annoying and

distracting behaviour over time and, in some cases, considered them offensive and threatening. Some interviewees' accounts of assaults suggest that couriers generally had good reason to be suspicious of verbal harassment, taking it as a warning sign of potential escalation.

Several couriers in England reported that they tried to avoid certain areas of cities because they expected more problems there, especially when working evenings. Billy, for example, was very conscious of the different risks that he was exposed to as bicycle courier.

London, it's just like such a horrific image of people getting their bikes nicked all the time and people getting attacked. It's the same thing here, though. Like I've had people attack me before. People tried to pull me off my bike – just dodgy stuff. Going into dodgy areas, it's just horrific. So, when you know about that though, when you're smart with how you work, like– I just don't go in them areas and I don't work at night. If it gets dark, I just come home.

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Billy talked about some of the attacks that he experienced, and although he too was assaulted by young teenagers, he once felt seriously threatened because they were in a big group and some of them were wearing balaclavas. Eventually, Billy adjusted the way he worked; he became more careful and started to avoid potentially dangerous areas and times of the day to keep the risk of assaults and harassment down, even if it meant missing out on profitable evening shifts. Nonetheless, he emphasised the couriers' self-responsibility, saying that it was mainly those couriers experiencing problems who were not savvy about how they work. His view and approach are quite different from those of organized couriers in the German sample who expected support from the company to stay safe.

Janneck, a 21-year-old rider in Germany who had been a courier for 3 years experienced a severe attack in which a group of people tried to steal from him and threatened him with a glass bottle. He eventually had to call the police and press charges against the aggressors. In his view, Lieferando had been very engaged, checking in on him throughout the evening. He appreciated the support even more because he knew the company had not always acted like that. In the past, couriers were left by themselves to deal with difficult situations and, in one case that Janneck referred to, a courier had died on shift without the company noticing. While Janneck was aware of controversial views on the GPS tracking system that the company uses, these incidents made him think of the tracking as useful rather than problematic. He considered it necessary for the company to follow couriers' movements and check in with them. Like other couriers in the

German sample, Janneck felt that the platform companies were responsible for their employees' safety even though there were far fewer reports of harassment and assault in the German sample.

In the English sample, the majority had never had any issues, but considerations about dangerous areas were much more present than in the German sample. While the data are not clear enough to speak of a pattern, it is interesting to note that questions of assault and harassment may be another area in which the self-employment status and different national contexts support a much stronger sense of self-responsibility among UK workers. The fact that those few couriers in England who had had intense experiences felt that they themselves needed to adjust to these risks, while organized couriers in Germany with less severe experiences saw safety as the employer's responsibility, is worth noticing. For English bicycle couriers, the fear of assaults may ultimately have limited their freedom and flexibility on the job because they would decline deliveries or finish shifts before peak times, meaning they would miss out on earnings, while in Germany, couriers were more tightly bound to agreements with their employer: they had to stick to their shifts and could less easily decline deliveries.

#### 5.4.4 Limited Realization of Flexibility

In both countries, many couriers did not fully realize the potential for flexibility that had initially attracted them to the job. In the German context the tighter control over the work processes and logistics presented clear boundaries to workers' flexibility. In the English model, the decreasing fees and previously mentioned safety risks indirectly limited how flexibly couriers could navigate their working time.

Exclusive to couriers in Germany was the experience of overstaffed shifts through the way in which the workforce was managed. In some cities, more than in others, companies like Lieferando hired more workers than needed to cover the number of deliveries that came in. Consequently, some couriers could not get enough shifts and had to stay available for last-minute changes in the shift plan. At the same time, those couriers who got shifts would sometimes spend their working hours waiting for jobs. Although the employed couriers in Germany got paid regardless of the number of deliveries, for the workers, standing around was worse than having a busy shift. Most would have preferred to be busy for time to pass quicker and to stay warm in rain and cold weather. For two of the students in the German sample, the overstaffed shifts at Volt and Lieferando were one reason to look for other side jobs. Not getting shifts when they wanted them already meant less flexibility than they had hoped, and not getting to cycle much in

other overstaffed shifts made the job less attractive. The expected advantage of courier work, that it was an easy job that could be combined with cycling as a hobby, did not pay off in the way some had hoped. Those with an athletic interest in cycling would try to go as fast as possible to figure out their best times. However, the ambition and competitive effects of rankings would wear off after a few weeks when they realized they still could not achieve the bonuses, or when a restaurant took longer to hand over the delivery, and they ended up waiting around.

At the same time, some couriers in Germany did not mind less busy shifts or even occasionally made an effort to work a little less. Across the German interviews, couriers felt that the expected minimum workload was manageable, and while some preferred to keep busy, others occasionally tried to get some quiet time between deliveries. The German employment-model led couriers with ambitions and motivation to become frustrated with the limitations of the delivery process, shift planning and bonus systems. In the English self-employment system, in contrast, where the couriers' income depended on the number of deliveries, the gamification aspect was more present and kept couriers motivated to figure out smarter ways of working. This also kept their hopes up to increase their income. While the workers were, overall, not under as much time pressure as some literature on platform courier work and gamification has suggested, their flexibility was considerably limited in the German model. In the English context, flexibility was only indirectly limited for some couriers – especially those who were dependent on the income and struggled to make a sufficient income since the fees steadily decreased, meaning they had to put in extra hours. Since they were already working full-time, any extra hour meant that they were losing the flexibility to choose their working times or take evenings or weekends off, which had been a strong motivating factor, especially for the family fathers in the sample. Another indirect limitation to the flexibility that was indicated in the English sample was the adjustment of working times and areas for those who had experienced or feared harassment and assault. Such adjustments always meant couriers had to wait longer for other deliveries or get more hours done during the day to avoid working in the dark.

A different problem resulting from the overstaffed shifts and prolonged waiting times in Germany was that some couriers felt deprived of their purpose when they had to wait around for prolonged periods. Several workers said that when there was not enough delivery work, they felt reduced to being pure marketing – a moving billboard, as one courier put it. The less busy shifts made some couriers aware that part of their purpose as a highly visible fleet was to provide

marketing and a sustainable image for the company. In contrast, the less visible cars got most of the deliveries done. The couriers who were collectively organized and had educated themselves about the company and the workforce were the ones who dealt with these contradictory feelings most. They wanted to be doing a useful job, but they knew that their purpose did not entirely lie with the actual delivery of food. Understanding the business model of many of these platform companies, some organized couriers also had to negotiate that their work was not part of a profitable business model but that the companies needed constant investment to establish a monopoly position in the market. For some, this meant they could not reasonably compare their situation with the exploitation of industrial workers in factories or mines since the financial streams of the businesses they worked for differed. Despite questioning the purpose of their job when they had to wait around, the couriers in Germany mostly needed to or wanted to continue because they were content doing a job that was more enjoyable than others they had or could access. In the English sample, this issue did not appear at all, most likely because self-employed couriers were free to avoid quiet times and did not hang around if there was not enough work.

#### 5.4.5 Missing Care and Recognition

Many couriers felt that platform companies did not appreciate them as workers. Regarding the above-mentioned lack of health and safety support, pay, communication, and transparency issues, feelings of lack of care and recognition were brought up.

Interviewees' accounts varied in how much they expressed their expectations. Couriers in Germany had broader expectations towards the company to be a good employer. In contrast, the expectations of couriers in England were mainly limited to transparency and decent pay. Since the German part of the sample had many organized couriers, which the English sample did not, this observation should be treated cautiously. Politically active couriers are likely to be more sensitive to the employer's responsibilities and, thus, more critical. While considering this bias, the data indicate that there may be a relevant difference between what couriers in both countries expect and how this is connected to their idea of themselves as workers.

The couriers criticized the companies' communication and said it was generally difficult to speak to anyone when problems occurred with an order, payment, or insurance. They only received information about changes to the app a week in advance or, in some cases, after they had already been implemented. In both countries, the early platform companies used to have team leaders or rider captains who would function as communication channels between

management and the courier fleet, helping with the onboarding process, providing couriers with feedback on their performance and organizing shift plans. Across all interviews with couriers who had experienced this system, the workers had a positive view of these team leaders. Many missed having someone to talk to directly and ask questions before filing formal digital claims, complaints, or requests. The rider captains made a crucial difference by simply presenting a point of contact – making couriers feel understood, cared for and supported in solving problems. The couriers' accounts in these interviews indicate that contact hotlines, hubs and informal WhatsApp group chats insufficiently replaced this support.

One reason couriers questioned the companies' interest in them was the impression that their feedback was not valued. Several couriers felt that, through their practical experience and knowledge of working with the app, they had valuable reflections and advice to offer for further developments and to help improve working conditions and the overall business. However, their suggestions were not implemented despite being asked for online feedback. At the same time, crucial changes were undertaken without consulting them, which also raised concerns about transparency within the companies. Lieferando's decision to expand the radius of delivery areas is one example that considerably affected couriers' everyday work by impacting how long deliveries took and how long couriers would commute to and from work. Even significant changes in the companies' development, like the merger of Foodora and Lieferando, were not communicated to the workers whose contracts and work were affected. Not being given a voice in these decisions made some couriers feel that their perspective did not matter to the company.

A general lack of transparency was also criticized. This concerned the pay structure (in England), tips, the calculation of distances, the question of when and why accounts were blocked, or how performance rankings and priority to shift preferences came about. For some, like the British courier, Billy, this resulted in fundamental mistrust towards the companies:

I'm sure I've seen a tip pop up, and it's gone after I've done the delivery. And I've been like, hold on a minute, am I going crazy? There's all these things that are closed behind doors, and you're not 100% what's going on. And because there's no one there to talk to—they've got the freedom to do it. And they can just switch you off. And that's the scariest bit about it. They can turn you off at any time and just say, we've noticed fraudulent activity on your accounts, or make something up, and then you're going to lose your job. So scary.

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Billy was one of the couriers who wanted to stay in the job for the long run and was happy with the self-employment. He did not have high expectations of the company but took a relatively sober view of its business model and its view of the workforce. Billy knew that he and most of his mates who had been doing the job for a while were not the kind of workers the companies sought. They wanted “some teenage kid who is going to smash out loads of quick deliveries and then disappear”, as he described it. He was trying to make the job work for himself and his family despite knowing that he did not fit the company’s logic and preferences for high performance and turnover. The company not offering good enough fees was something that he depicted as a momentary misbalance rather than a general sign of his work being undervalued. In his view, both the company and the couriers need to make money, and it was about finding the right compromise to make it work for everyone. Other couriers in the English sample had a similar view. They did not feel cared about but did not expect the companies to do so since their main purpose and priority was to make money as a business.

Much more than in England, couriers in Germany expressed issues with the companies as a matter of lacking recognition. They raised questions of appreciation and care, particularly regarding contract extensions. When fixed-term arrangements ran out, couriers asked whether and when they would get new contracts, but Lieferando rarely communicated and did not commit until the last minute. One courier who was advised to register with the job centre whilst the question about contract extension remained open felt so unappreciated that even when he was finally offered a permanent contract, he decided to switch to a competitor. Like Billy’s perception that the platform companies in England want quickly disposable workers and high turnover, couriers in Germany also felt that the platforms, despite operating with employment contracts, did not value or try to keep them on as workers. Two other couriers in the German sample specifically criticized the pay differences within the company. The fact that office employees got higher pay, benefits, and paid overtime while couriers were the face of the industry and were out on the road all day was seen as demonstrating an apparent lack of appreciation from their employer. Although they were not unhappy with the financial remuneration, these differences made them feel that their commitment, work performance, risk exposure and overall contribution to the business were not being valued.

Drawing on experiences in other jobs and types of work, a German courier who was active in a works council felt that platform companies lagged in their responsibilities as

employers, particularly in comparison to the public service sector. He saw very little protection and guidance from the platform companies towards their employees, which is also reflected in the couriers' criticism about the lack of information and support during the COVID lockdowns. In his view, the company intentionally avoided transparency to maintain uncertainty about how the app functions. He identified a problematic contradiction in this lack of information and guidance in the face of the disadvantages that come with the precarity of the job.

The issues laid out above made couriers feel ignored, neglected, and undervalued, eventually making even those who wanted to stay lose their commitment to the companies. In contrast, some couriers mainly talked about positive experiences and did not report any incidents in which they had to rely on their employer for anything other than wages. For some others, the fees, sick pay, or maintenance cover worked simply as they should.

The different experiences and levels of dependency might explain why many platform workers continued their work, even if the companies seemed indifferent to them. As shown above, for many couriers, the job was better than the alternatives, and they wanted to or had to stay and try to make the job work for themselves. However, experiences in which established platform companies did not care about their couriers made it easy for couriers in Germany to join the competition. Seeing management maximize distance and remain intangible through the limited – and increasingly one-sided – communication through the apps led some also to let go of their commitment. In England, their self-employed status made couriers feel less committed to the platform company in the first place. However, since financially dependent couriers are already juggling multiple apps to bridge quiet times, completing the exit to another platform was not feasible, and couriers came to terms with low fees. Additionally, the different employment statuses and the cultural and institutional settings in both countries may explain why the ambivalent experiences of autonomy and neglect seem more contradictory and problematic to German workers than those in England.

Couriers in both countries would have liked to have had a contact person, and workers in both contexts struggled to some degree with the absence of a tangible supervisor or employer. Despite avoiding hierarchies and control, couriers did not want to feel left entirely to themselves. The difference is whether workers were only looking for better basic guidance and support or also for validation in their workplace.

#### 5.4.6 Independence and Isolation

While many liked its autonomy and flexibility, the character of the work also meant little interaction with other people. As shown above, there was little communication with management or supervisory roles. Also, there was limited exchange with restaurant staff and customers, and contact with other couriers was not part of the job. Couriers are spatially dispersed during their work, and as a heterogeneous and temporary workforce, they are fragmented in many ways, not least socially and culturally. The absence of a shared workplace, individualized tasks, perceived otherness and different biographic situations did not support interest in and formation of a wider community. It was up to the individual couriers' efforts, interests and capacities whether they got involved with others, thought about shared problems and solutions, or stuck to themselves.

While not everyone felt isolated and lonely, most couriers felt left alone with the frustrations of the job. Some described it as an "individual existence", and some even found it challenging for their well-being to be out on the road and alone with themselves all day. Many couriers had worked in teams before and missed the social side of other work contexts. Even those who tried to chat and connect with other couriers found it difficult because there was little continuity in encounters, which made it difficult to form relationships.

The change in onboarding processes meant that those who started working for Deliveroo more recently got their gear delivered and started working without any in-person guidance from another courier. One courier said, "You literally feel like you're out on your own" before having a chance to invest some effort to get to know others. Without an in-person induction and the former rider captains, it depended widely on luck or initiative whether new couriers got in contact with colleagues. This was especially true in the English context, where there was even less occasion for contact and communication.

Some cities in Germany used to have hubs in which couriers would meet each other, and waiting points like benches near busy areas were common meeting points for couriers in both countries, allowing them to exchange experiences and have an outlet for complaints and criticism. Some couriers in England mentioned that in these temporary informal groups, they realized that orders would return at higher rates if several others rejected them. The spontaneous gatherings during waiting times presented a space to share practical knowledge about the job and sometimes views on protest events. For some, digital spaces like messenger groups served the same purpose. Since it is considerably more difficult for car couriers to meet people on the street,

they mainly had to rely on these chats for exchange. In fact, none of the car couriers in this sample talked about interacting with other couriers in the interviews. The questionnaires, however, showed that car couriers, like most couriers with a long-term or permanent orientation, had at least one or two other couriers in their closer social network.

While the chat groups helped break the isolation, they had problems. Conversations often focused on criticism and complaints and could be overwhelming for some. A courier in Germany, Nick, for example, found it challenging to manage his work-life balance while being concerned with workplace problems in his free time. Although he benefited from the collectivization and union support during an extended sick leave, he left the communication channels soon after:

I had to remove myself from it. It's just best to get on with your job. It kind of like brought my work into my personal life and it was constantly pinging off. And it's always people complaining about the same things. And you end up feeling bitter about what you are doing. So, it's just healthier for me to get out of that chat and keep some distance from it.

Nick, 33, male, Germany, migration experience, 3 years in

Especially for those who had to make the job work long-term, critical communication was not only helpful but also confronted them with difficulties and problems they did not feel they could escape or change. Couriers weighed whether investing time and energy in the work was worthwhile. On some level, many had come to terms with the working conditions and pay and doubted that improvements could be achieved against the companies. They were not interested in becoming involved in protests or unions and preferred contact with a couple of mates in similar situations.

Other couriers also actively chose not to connect with colleagues. Some students in the sample wanted to get their hours done and had no motivation to establish a social network with colleagues. The couriers also felt the heterogeneity of the workforce and did not always think they had much in common with others they saw on the road; this was particularly pointed out by three white students who noticed that they were a minority group among the platform couriers.

The heterogeneity of the workforce caused fragmentation in many ways that made the formation of overlapping social groups and collective action more difficult. Many couriers did not see a shared experience or struggle; they considered themselves to be in a different situation to others – because they were students and not dependent on the job or because they felt that they had a different approach to work than others who, in their view, ignored the rules. In some cases, superficial cultural differences created subtle barriers that meant people would not try to

approach each other. The interviews indicate that couriers were looking for people they thought were in a similar situation or background when they tried to make contacts at work. Those with migrant backgrounds seemed to connect with other couriers who spoke their native language.

Language and political culture differences also seemed to play a role in organizing contexts. Among the works councils in Germany, there is only a minimal number of migrants who, according to the observations of some of the German works councils, are frequently marginalized in discussions. While some cities had strong and independent migrant worker groups, in most places, the majority were young white male couriers working the job either full-time or alongside doing university degrees. Politically organized couriers with migrant backgrounds in Germany knew that they were doing things differently, often less structured, than most German works councils. Sometimes, the language barrier meant that those with migrant backgrounds would not be taken as seriously as they did not express themselves with the same proficiency. One of the English couriers who once joined a union meeting expressed that sentiment against migrant workers who approached the meeting like a social event.

We were getting meetings, and a lot of people didn't really understand it. I'm not racist. I don't even know why I'm saying that, to be honest. But there was a lot of people there that didn't speak English fluently and didn't understand what was going on. And they were turning up at these places where people were unionising, and they were like— it was like a party. And they didn't know what was going on.

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

This was only one small reason, among others, why he was not convinced to join a union. Assumptions about workers with migrant backgrounds and different approaches to collective protest made organizing and social cohesion among workers a complex problem. Besides the social aspects of these communities, not all couriers were even aware of options to collectivize. Compared to some younger workers, the family fathers in the sample, who were, on average, older, had less time to invest in these contexts. The same may be true for couriers topping up the income from their day jobs. Consequently, broader communities of colleagues and collectives formed through organizing by works councils and activists were not necessarily wanted by all, and they were not accessible to everyone in the same way.

However, those couriers engaged in collective work usually felt they had found a community among their colleagues. For them, the exchanges during meetings and socials made up for being alone during work. They provided them with an additional purpose within a work context that otherwise was not fulfilling. Most organized couriers in this sample were aware that

they presented a somewhat homogenous group and could collectivize because they had fewer responsibilities or problems taking up time and energy than other couriers had.

Whether couriers coped with problems alone or in smaller groups or whether they were interested in forming and joining a community with others seems to be closely linked to their perspective on the job, their time capacities, their cultural background and their belief in whether and how helpful collectives are in making a positive difference to their situation. Couriers were undoubtedly aware of the objective differences within the workforce. Some took these as a motivation to organize. Feeling the problems of the job themselves made them anticipate how much more difficult it had to be for those who were more dependent, had fewer options and were less capable of using their agency to demand improvements. Other couriers overlooked similarities and shared difficulties but exaggerated the differences within the workforce, trying to distinguish themselves and their approach to work from that of others. This tendency is elaborated on in the next chapter.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown various pathways that lead people into courier work, the different motives for choosing the job, and differences in dependence and perspective. Based on a comparative sample for England and Germany, I have offered an in-depth illustration of the heterogeneity of the food courier workforce and provided a biographic background and details that go beyond what ethnographic and case study research has offered so far. I have given an overview of the various experiences relevant to the couriers in their everyday work lives and demonstrated how the heterogeneity in pathways, dependency and perspectives shapes experiences of the job.

The pathways and pull and push factors laid out at the beginning of this chapter show that many couriers start working because it seems convenient, flexible, and easily accessible. While it is a temporary arrangement for most students and an additional income, some students, often with migrant backgrounds, are highly dependent on the income. The chapter has shown that for many, going into courier work is a reactive move rather than a proactive choice. Various factors had driven interviewees in this sample out of former jobs and hindered them from getting into better forms of similarly autonomous work. Lack of language skills, formal qualifications, and recognized skills, as well as more subtle questions of orientation during the transition from

school into the labour market, played a role here. Interviewees went into courier work to avoid stress, alienation, abusive behaviour, and racism in other jobs and because it aligned better with their health and well-being needs. The autonomy and flexibility were highly relevant because they gave many a novel sense of self-determination and agency.

#### 5.5.1 Employees and Contractors

The work experiences showed some differences between the different employment models in England and Germany. Overall, the employed couriers in Germany had different expectations towards the companies than the self-employed couriers in England. Workers in Germany problematised the lack of care and recognition from their employers. At the same time, self-employed couriers in England treated this as a regular aspect of autonomous work. They did not hold the platforms responsible for more than pay and fundamental transparency. The different expectations and approaches of couriers in both countries also showed in the dissatisfaction with physical strain, risk, and harassment, which were mainly relevant for cyclists. Employees in Germany framed these as a problem that needed to be addressed by company management, whereas, in the English context, couriers focused much more on their individual capacity to deal with these difficulties. Couriers generally coped with risks or adjusted how they worked, which in England sometimes meant they missed out on flexibility and profitable shifts. For the English couriers more than the German ones, autonomy meant self-responsibility. Couriers in both countries did in some way negotiate the ambivalent experience of logarithmic management – the benefit of autonomy and freedom from direct control going hand in hand with some level of indifference and lack of accountability from the side of management. Another slight difference indicated by the data is the meaning of flexibility in the different models. The limited flexibility and earning potential in Germany made the job less attractive for some students. Still, they meant that others found the relative security of the German model helpful for recovery and coping, something less prevalent in the English sample.

The bias in the sample – the high number of collectively organized couriers in the German sample – means that strong comparative conclusions cannot be drawn from the data. However, these observations indicate distinct patterns that may be linked to the different employment models and both countries' cultural and industrial relations legacies and are thus worth further investigation. The partial normalisation of precarity is clearly visible in interviews in both countries (Rubery et al., 2018). Whether the apparent stronger acceptance of self-

responsibility and uncertainty among the self-employed couriers could be rooted in the gamification and gig character of this arrangement, but could also be linked to the more liberal welfare state model in England and its overall stronger appeal to self-responsibility (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Funke and Picot, 2021) which presents a somewhat distinct regime of precarity to Germany (Hardy, 2015). It seems likely that a combination of both facilitates different expectations towards the platforms. The thesis expands on this in chapter 7. There, I also pick up on the possibility that the different industrial relations contexts and the interviewees involvement in collective action (Langford, 1994) shapes these different expectations around employment and how this may mediate class identities.

### 5.5.2 Fragmented Realities

It became clear throughout the whole sample that food couriers negotiate and navigate the positive and negative aspects of the job against the background of their prior work experiences, their evaluation of their current situation, their estimations of their scope of action and available ideological narratives. The differences, ambivalences and tensions in the experiences presented above reflect these negotiation processes among different groups of couriers. The pay was not simply good or too little, physical labour was not per se a burden, and autonomy and flexibility, although improving for many, were not enough for some who had greater expectations.

The experiences and perceptions of the job are, to some degree, relative and, paired with the heterogeneity of the workforce, create a variety of views on the job. Focusing on the experiences related to pay, autonomy and community formation, I briefly summarize the ideological narratives and structural institutional elements which stood out in the interviews.

#### *5.5.2.1 Market Logic and Self-Responsibility*

Although most couriers in this sample did not actively apply a clear critical ideological perspective to make sense of their work experience, how they talked about problems clearly reflected some common ideological narratives. The acceptance of low pay, for example, was partially rooted in the belief that a lower income was justified in relation to individual performance and skill levels. It was also legitimized by workers weighing off business interests against their own, viewing the market logic and the platforms' profit-making interest as natural givens. Interviewees' experiences around pay, safety at work and expectations toward the

companies also reflect a strong sense of self-responsibility, especially in the English sample. The views of other couriers indicate presumption and racist ideas about migrant workers.

Preexisting critical political views clearly shaped the views of some politically active couriers. However, for a few of them, experiences of conflicts and collective agency pre-empted critical political thinking, and so these couriers did not express coherent ideological views but were piecing together and negotiating a variety of contradictory thoughts and views. Overall, for some, the difficulty in identifying interests and conflicts and in formulating direct criticism is clearly linked to moments of ideologically rooted misrecognition. This reflects the shifting norms and values described in chapter 2 as a result of individualisation and meritocratic beliefs. Struggles in the labour market are experienced individually and seen as result of personal choices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, 2006). The increased commodification of labour in precarious forms of employment is clearly normalised by a large part of the sample (Nachtwey, 2016; Rubery et al., 2018) self-exploitation is not necessarily recognised as such (Murgia, 2017). As will be shown further below the idea of an entrepreneurial self (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Brockling, 2015) is indeed internalised by some couriers and finds a fertile ground in the labour process of platform work as will be shown in the following chapters (Ivanova et al., 2018; Morales and Stecher, 2023).

#### *5.5.2.2 Illusion of Agency and the Sense of Autonomy*

The absence of direct personal contact with management made any perception of conflict and a direction of criticism more difficult. Couriers were pleased and often relieved to experience a sense of autonomy and self-determination at work that they may not have had before. This is expressed clearly in the experiences described above.

Although low pay was a problem for many, it was rarely framed as exploitative. The bonus system in Germany and fees and boosts in England had a crucial part in this since they suggested a flexible income with the potential to be a better deal than the fixed pay in other jobs. The incentive and gamification element of the job kept up the workers' hope to increase their pay through better and more innovative ways of working. This essentially lets the earning potential in the job appear to be a matter of individual agency. Former studies have already indicated the role of gamification in the platform sector and particularly in courier work (Woodcock, 2020) and potentially divide the workforce by putting couriers in competition with each other (Cant, 2020; Mendonça et al., 2023). As will be further shown in the next chapters, the couriers are overall

aware of the limitations of the flexibility and autonomy in the platform context. That the appeal to their agency nonetheless takes root among many, has to do with the biographic context in which couriers take up the job. As shown above and indicated in research on the dependency on platform work, this situation varies across different groups of gig workers and can considerably shape their perception of the job (Schor et al., 2020).

With ideas about self-responsibility, market logic, and the increased sense of agency through the incentive system, couriers find it challenging to identify power imbalances and moments of exploitation. Much of the criticism against the platforms was instead communicated as matters of recognition or bad management. Criticism of alienation rarely came up at all.

#### *5.5.2.3 Moving on or Coming to Terms*

That workers were aware of their position in the labour market was expressed directly in their views and indirectly in their habituated approaches to work and life. For the students among the couriers who had multiple income options and other career prospects for the future, their temporary perspective and low dependence on the job meant that they did not need to worry about the downsides of the job. They would either tolerate them for a short while or find another side job. Other workers with fewer options and different prospects had come to terms with their situation and lowered their expectations. These couriers were used to low pay and lousy working conditions; thus, the pay did not appear too bad and was also considered a trade-off for the job's flexibility and autonomy. Some who had little orientation and support during their transition from school into the labour market had barely developed standards for good work. They never had a better job, nor could they realistically envision one where they would have all these benefits without facing downsides like high stress and responsibilities which they did not want to take on. From this perspective, the courier job was not just an okay arrangement but a good deal and even presented an improvement to many. Couriers also navigated short- and long-term thinking about the job. Some focused entirely on the here and now, determined to make as much as they could while they could, while others, often those who were older and had had experiences with accidents, injuries, or harassment, played it more safely and long-term. The variability in pay through boosts, bonuses and variable hours kept the hope alive of compensating for lower fees or increasing pay when necessary. Collective solutions and alternative narratives were considered by very few couriers who were already organized but barely even considered by most self-employed couriers in England.

#### *5.5.2.4 Assessing Costs and Benefits of Work Communities*

The role of the different life situations that couriers were in and the various problems they had to deal with also became apparent regarding whether they were looking for a community in the workplace. The isolation created through the work setting and labour process was not a problem for all couriers. Some did not want or need social interaction related to their work or to collectively organize to improve working conditions or pay. Hence, some couriers had no interest in or need of casual communities or politically organized groups. Those who felt isolated and wanted to interact with others had to show initiative actively. Couriers in England overall had a more difficult situation because there was less structure that facilitated meetings, and car drivers were widely limited to online spaces to form connections. When couriers considered joining communities at work, time capacity played a role, as well as the practical and ideological barriers that came with the heterogeneity of the workforce, the language barriers for migrants, the different cultural backgrounds and the objectively different perspectives and levels of investment in the job, as well as ideologically shaped othering. Most couriers clearly followed their interests linked to their situation in the job, which, for many, meant that there was little point in forming or joining communities in the first place. For others, it meant that a community involved a considerable investment of time and effort, and some couriers had reasonable doubts about whether collectives or unions were the right place for them. Those who were in it for the long run especially had to estimate how likely positive improvements were and negotiate whether it was beneficial to them to focus on the negatives of the job if they had to get on with it either way. Consequently, some tried to get the best out of it without thinking about more considerable structural change. They focused on what they could do through their individual agency, like finding tactics to make the most of the given conditions, being smart about how they worked by combining multiple apps, reacting to boosts, consciously aiming for bonuses, picking more profitable deliveries, using faster vehicles and in some cases simply putting in longer hours. Communities were attractive and accessible to those who found groups of equals and had reason to believe that improvements were attainable through collective action. This may depend heavily on the context of industrial relations. Existing successful protests and the works council format in Germany facilitated organizing and potentially made it easier for couriers to consider further change achievable. Especially in England, individual agency was emphasized, while collective solutions were rarely mentioned or viewed with enthusiasm. The interview data so far speak to

findings in the literature that widely observe individual coping and forms of individual misbehaviour and find forms of collective organising and action to vary considerably depending on the concrete context (Cant, 2020; Cini and Goldmann, 2021). Whether couriers engage collectively depends a lot on whether minority communities or any social communities facilitate a space to form communities of resistance. The findings so far also speaks to Chibbers argument, that workers carefully evaluate their options and are likely to not consider unions and collective action not because they do not recognise their shared interests, but because they consider the risks and costs of such engagement to high and the outcomes uncertain (Chibber, 2022). The next chapters will further show that workers directly and indirectly show awareness of power relations towards the company, but that in many cases, ideological narratives and boundary drawing also play a role.

#### *5.5.2.5 A Good Enough Deal*

To summarise, there are many criticisms and negative experiences, but overall, most couriers enjoy the work and prefer it over other jobs. Overall, the job simply presents a good deal for many, albeit in different ways. Breaking it down to the two strongest contrasts: for short-term workers who only need additional income, the job is temporarily convenient, and most downsides are acceptable or negligible since they can leave at any time. For the dependent workers anticipating doing this kind of work permanently, the job presents an improvement to other jobs, and since their negative experiences and awareness of limited options have lowered their expectations, workers come to terms with the negatives. It was a smaller group of workers in the sample who were dissatisfied with aspects of the job but, at the same time, were biographically invested enough in the courier work to want to or need to continue, and at the same time, also see a purpose in forming a community and collectively organising. Rather than simply misrecognising the exploitative and oppressive aspects of the job, couriers' accounts of work experiences showed a complex amalgamation of ideological beliefs, habituated approaches, awareness of their own situations, interests and existing power relations, and evaluations of their chances to achieve improvements.

The discussion at the end will pick up on these points and ask further how the couriers' perspectives of their work situation and class identity relate to matters of ideology or result from structural factors that limit their scope for criticism and collective action but make individual perspectives more feasible.

The following chapter explores how the food couriers in this study identify in terms of social class and how this relates to the courier job. I show how they draw on work experiences and wider life context to construct working- and middle-class identities or to disidentify with social class.

## Chapter 6: Class Identifications

In this chapter, the food courier's class identifications are presented and analysed. Building on the previous chapter's exploration of the diverse pathways that lead individuals to work as food couriers, this chapter unites their broader class experiences, perspectives on social inequality, and the intricate relationship between their work as food couriers and their class identification. In doing so, it presents a spectrum of class identifications among food couriers and offers a key to deciphering the meaning they attribute to different class positions and identities.

The central question is where respondents see themselves within the class structure and whether they are wholly or partly conscious of their position and common interests as a class. In line with the conceptualisation in Chapter Two, this includes any self-identifications with *class content* in the broader sense or with a *class-pertinent effect* (Wright, 2000, 193). The analysis, therefore, focussed on aspects related to both: It examines accounts in which interviewees talked about matters of private ownership and exploitation. In line with a wider concept of exploitation (Haubner, 2017, 205), these also include issues like discrimination and vulnerability about their socio-economic situation, as well as disadvantages and privileges regarding their market and life chances. It also considers narrations that reveal intentions, choices, and practices that influence their interactions within the given class relations. These manifestations of class identity can be positive or negative, such as disidentification, nonbelonging, or boundary-drawing toward individuals and groups.

The analysis focuses on self-identifications brought up in the biographic narrations, as well as self-identification or disidentification prompted by questions later in the interview, like the following:

How do you see your position in this [relating to how they described social hierarchies]

How do you see your position compared to that of your parents?

How would you describe your situation compared to your peers/ friends?

The different self-identifications and aspects characterising them are illustrated with core examples to show the deep interrelation of biographic context, structure and ideology. As dense descriptions, these illustrations use the specific case to highlight general characteristics of

particular modes of class identification. While couriers brought up various terms and class positions, I focus on three main categories: working class, the middle class and disidentification.

### 6.1. Class self-identifications

Of the 33 interviews conducted, almost half of the participants saw themselves either fully or partially in the middle of society. Altogether, 12 interviewees identified as workers or part of the working class. A couple of these 11 cases also described themselves as “lower down” in the socio-economic hierarchy or used the terms “lower class” or “underclass”. The other five interviewees did not identify in terms of class in any way. They either rejected the idea of class altogether or didn’t see themselves within the class structure despite acknowledging the existence of class differences. A complete overview can be viewed in Appendix H and I).

*Table 1: Class Identifications*

	<i>UK</i>	<i>GER</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>MIDDLE CLASS</i>	11	5 (+2 double)	<b>15 (17)</b>
<i>WORKING CLASS</i>	2 (+3 ambivalent)	10	<b>12 (15)</b>
<i>DISIDENTIFICATION</i>	3 (+3 ambivalent)	2	<b>5 (8)</b>
	16	17	33

The narratives weren’t clear and coherent, as was to be expected. In some cases, those who identified as middle or working class also rejected or downplayed the relevance of class inequality or only identified hesitantly. The brackets in the table indicate where couriers had ambivalent identifications or simultaneously identified as workers and middle class.

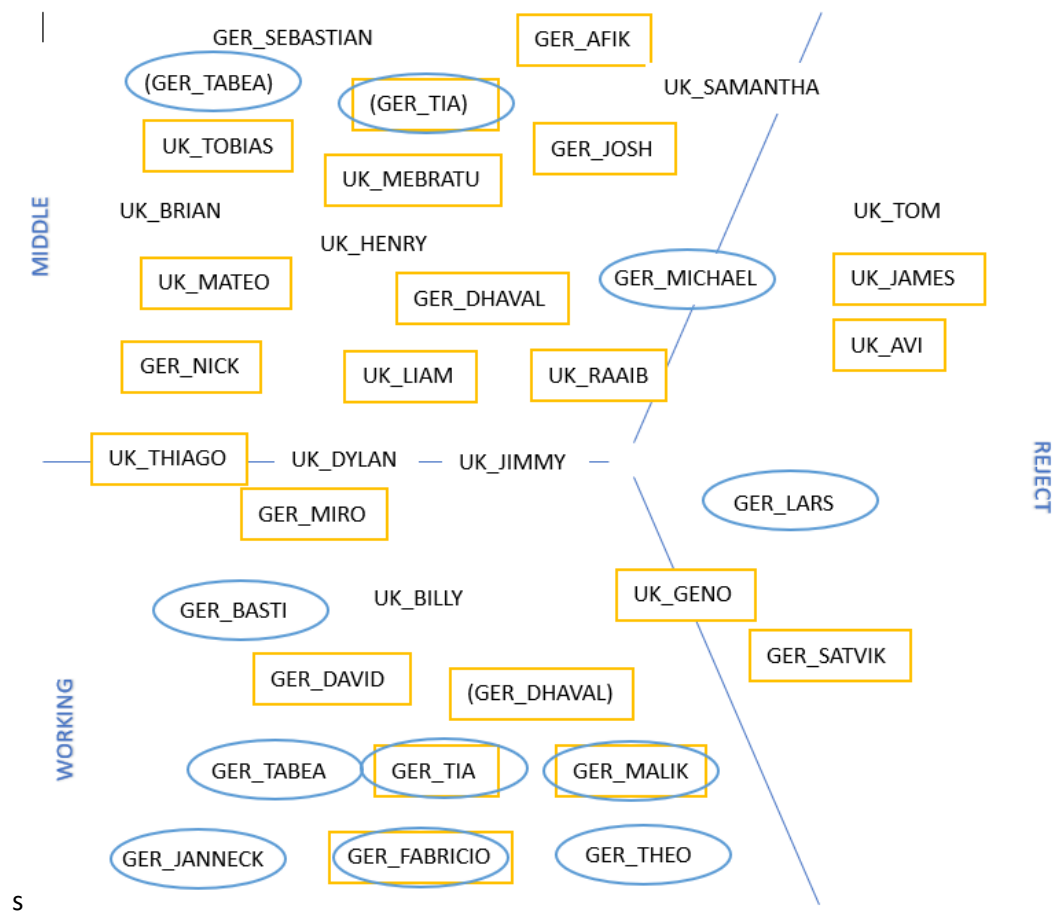
Two themes emerging in the data would need further investigation but would go beyond this thesis: a generational sense of social downward mobility and an identification as a “migrant” or “foreigner”. More than half of the sample felt they were financially worse off than their parent’s generation. Interviewees here referred to housing and mortgage costs, inflation, and less long-term commitment to a workplace. While they partly saw this as a trade-off for having more freedom and autonomy over their lives as well as living in a culturally more global world, there was a clear perception of living in economically less prosperous times.

A couple of interviewees used the terms “migrant” or “foreigner” as distinctions and as empowered descriptions within political contexts. Others applied them to describe an outside

perception when discussing experiences of discrimination, often relating to racial stereotypes and language skills. In Chapter 7, I discuss some of this concerning status incongruence, which affects middle-class identification, but I do not treat it as a separate class identification here.

The following graphic spatially visualises this sample's three primary identifications with class. It shows some people's overlapping identifications and their proximity to other positions. The yellow rectangular frame denotes a migrant experience or background. The blue oval frame indicates participation in collective action, and the brackets label identifications with two classes or an identification and disidentification by the same person.

### I. Visualization of class identifications



\* Yellow rectangular frame denotes migrant background

\* Blue oval frame denotes participation in collective action

\* Brackets label double or ambiguous identification

For example, the label for UK\_Samantha, in the top right corner, crosses the boundary of middle-class identification and refusal of class. This illustrates that Samantha mainly identifies as middle-class. Still, since individual accounts aren't necessarily coherent, she doubts the existence and relevance of class differences and sometimes rejects the idea that she or others belong to any class. The letters "UK" mark cases conducted in the United Kingdom, while GER marks those cases that are part of the German sample. Like Samantha, the label for Geno is positioned between two fields – in this case, a bit further down, between working class and refusal. This shows that whilst Geno mainly identifies as part of the working class, he does so partly reluctantly while relativising the relevance of class. How this happens and how it can be understood will be discussed later. The visualisation here indicates that class identifications are not necessarily unambiguous and straightforward. Geno's case is framed in yellow to point out that he has a migrant background or migrant experience. Cases that are additionally framed in blue indicate that this person is politically active in terms of participating in organising or protesting.

The chart also shows some of the case labels in two different fields, in which case one of the labels will be in brackets, e.g. GER\_Tabea being positioned in the Working-class field and (GER\_Tabea) being positioned in the upper left corner of the middle-class field. Unlike Samantha or Geno, Tabea isn't between two positions but is in line with different criteria that describe her position differently. Considering her current position as a food courier and not earning much money, Tabea describes herself as working class. At the same time, she does not fully identify with it because of her social background – coming from a relatively wealthy and educated family. The existence of two parallel class identifications has a strong temporal component relating to the past and sometimes the future. Since many of the interviewees are between 20 and 35, they are in various ways in transition periods, in which their position in society is not (yet) fully detached from that of their parents. This will be discussed below, as well as the phenomenon that middle-class positions - even when not reproduced economically and educationally - still stick. In contrast, working-class positions are presumed to be overcome easily.

#### 6.1.1 Middle-class positioning

Of the 17 people in the sample who in some way described their position as middle-class or "in the middle", ten did so without doubt or reference to other potential positions or identifications.

The other six interviewees fall under two categories: those who saw themselves between two positions and those who simultaneously identified as workers because they did not see the working and middle class as mutually exclusive social groups. The latter identified as middle class because of their privileged background and prospects, which put them in a better position than others. Still, they ultimately saw the necessity to work as a central criterion for both. These interviewees had gone through some form of political socialisation or had experienced social up- and downward mobility, which, in their perspective, relativised the differences between working and middle class but highlighted the difference between “common” people who rely on an income from some kind of work and those with entirely different levels of wealth and status.

When identifying as middle class, interviewees mainly referred to three aspects: (1) a decent living standard, (2) aspirations for improvement, and (3) individual agency. The following sections introduce them in detail before drawing a general conclusion of what characterises the middle-class identification of couriers in this study.

#### *6.1.1.1 Decent living standard*

Couriers who identified as part of the middle class referred to having comforts and safety nets in their lives. They described their situation as “normal” or “average”, pointing out they were “neither rich nor poor”. Some couriers who identified as middle-class avoided any distinction from others. Some identified as middle class by describing their position as “privileged” regarding their social status, financial safety, and support during education. Interviewees here also talked about stability, not having to worry, making savings, and having disposable income.

This aspect of middle-class identification shows that, to some degree, the positioning in the middle is an attempt to find a neutral descriptor for one's situation without making value statements about oneself or others. At the same time, it indicates that people consider lower positions characterised by more severe problems and worries that are absent in their own lives. Some view being in the middle as a result of having privilege, advantage, and support, while others view it as an outcome of individual agency.

Josh, a 28-year-old Scottish courier living in Germany, talked about his upbringing when asked how he sees his class position in society:

“I grew up definitely like middle class in the suburbs with a nice house, like a garden and stuff. He has a bachelor's in business studies and took time out travelling through Europe before moving on to a master's degree.-Although Josh has been working as a courier for almost a year,

lives in a small flat and says that he has barely any money, his class identification relates to his social background, education, and feeling of not having any disadvantages. He saw his current living standard as a result of his free choices and did not consider it permanent since he had no doubts about being able to get into more skilled and prestigious work. As a UK citizen in Germany, he also did not see himself as a “real immigrant” but as someone who needs to put work into improving his language skills if he wants to work in the country for longer. Other than that, as a white man who fluently speaks English, he felt that people viewed him positively and were welcoming and respectful. He did not feel discriminated against or disadvantaged in any way.

Other couriers, too, linked their class position to their parents and the comforts they grew up with. Michael is a 22-year-old courier in Duesseldorf who started the job while studying law and being financed by his parents. When categorising himself, he focussed on his parent’s attitude towards education and the financial situation, which provided him with a safety net and supported him throughout his education. Asked how he would describe his class position, he answered:

„Privileged, I would say. My parents always managed to enable me to do everything. I’ve got A-levels, I can independently manage everywhere because I can study and all A-levels weren’t a problem, but my parents ensured I exerted myself. (...) Financially, if I hadn’t any money at all or the flat burned down, my parents could help me. And yes, my flat is paid for, so fundamentally, I’m in a very good position. In terms of wealth, I’m completely average in my age group. But because of my parents, I always have pretty good chances, especially compared to people whose parents don’t earn so much.”

Michael, 22, male, Germany, 1 years into the job

Besides having a safety net, Michael also described his parents’ status because it gave him opportunities and choices. Since he was in education when giving the interview, it was barely possible for Michael to define his class position in socio-economic terms without referencing his parents or speculating about the future. Meeting people from different social backgrounds while studying made Michael aware of his “privileged” upbringing. Nonetheless, he thinks that the welfare state balances out most inequalities and that students from poor backgrounds get sufficient financial support to put them in a situation similar to his.

Another student courier, Sebastian, offered a similar description of his middle-class background when asked where he sees himself within society. He is 23 years old and just about to finish his bachelor’s in engineering in Hamburg, doing the courier work for additional income:

„My parents are probably earning above average. I've never thought about what that means or how much the average is. But we were able to afford that my mum didn't work until three years ago. Around about like this, I would categorise it. I was always able to rely on there being money. I also got a lot of financial support from my grandparents, and I benefitted from that extremely.”

Sebastian, 23, male, Germany, 1 year into the job

Drawing on parents' financial statuses was standard among couriers still in education or in the early stages of transitioning into the labour market and becoming financially independent. Most expressed a sense of being advantaged or privileged by being supported, having choices, and not worrying about money. However, this notion of privilege is often relativised later when quite a few emphasise that, just like others, they must work hard to get where they are.

Those who identified as middle class but did not come from middle-class backgrounds, who were not building an alternative career path, did not talk about privilege but about having a good and comfortable life and being able to afford what they wanted.

The fact that the standards for a comfortable, decent living are different across the sample is noticeable in Samantha's interview. She is a 33-year-old courier from the south of England who has worked as a food courier for six years. She made her primary income as an accountant and only delivered food in the evenings and on the weekends to save money for a flat and afford weekend trips abroad. Samantha comes from a more modest working-class background, unlike the other three case examples. She grew up as the youngest of three children of a housewife and a fireman. Before training to become an accountant, she worked in various retail jobs. She sees herself as average, just without having a husband and kids. Financially, too, she considers herself in the middle despite indicating that she can just about make ends meet.

“And I'd say that I'm middle class now. I haven't got a massive, massive place to live in. But I've got food in my fridge. I've got money in my bank account. I haven't got a mansion, but I've got enough. So, that's why I'd say I'm middle class. Don't get me wrong, the week before payday, I feel like I'm lower class, but then, don't we all?”

What others described as a comfortable life and support and encouragement to further their education was less prominent in Samantha's narration about her life. A decent life for her means being able to save money with a second job and to afford to travel to gigs in her leisure time. Comparing herself with other people of her age, Samantha sees a lot of differences but considers them a question of choices and lifestyle rather than class. Her discussion of class emphasised that she is content with her living standard and able to afford some comforts without daily worrying.

Many student couriers from middle-class backgrounds who also identified as middle class had a limited range of social contacts to distinguish their class position. They said or indicated that while growing up and going to school, they were mostly surrounded by people in similar socio-economic situations. When they drew boundaries towards others to define their position in society, they spoke abstractly. They made assumptions since most of them did not have contact with people who were significantly worse or better off than they themselves. Brian, for example, described the school environment as relatively homogenous, saying that most people came from well-off backgrounds.

Two cases who identified as part of the middle based on their standard of living didn't draw clear boundaries towards the working or lower class. They described their social background, comforts, and advantages in life as those of the middle class, but they also considered themselves workers. For Dylan and Jimmy, a distinction between the middle and working class only made sense regarding comforts but didn't hold up on a deeper level. To both, the middle- and the working-class were fundamentally the same, since ultimately, both groups relied on an income from work. For couriers, these reflections were based on political perspectives from the left. In another case, experiences of social mobility prompted a courier not to distinguish groups below the upper class fundamentally.

Nick considered "working class" a somewhat old-fashioned term associated with the industrial era. Thinking that the working class in countries like England and Germany did not exist anymore, he only distinguished between the lower- and upper-middle-class and the super-rich. For him, despite different comforts and lifestyles, there was not much of a difference between the lower and upper middle class since, in his view, both eventually were exposed to similar risks:

"They say you're ever only two steps away from being homeless. It takes two things to go wrong in your life, and you could find yourself in a position where you are homeless. I've witnessed that on my mother's side. But that applies to both the lower and the upper middle class (...), whereas there is a small section of society that is ridiculously well off in ways that can't be compared with, and it is just a different ball game entirely. I know, I've never seen that. But, if you are extremely rich, it is a whole different level."

Nick, 33, male, Germany, 3 years into the job

As someone who has experienced social upward and downward mobility in his life, Nick is one of the few cases in the sample who subjectively identified as middle class but did not draw many boundaries downwards. Instead, he pointed out a difference between the middle and the upper

class. Some others, too, mention distinctions between “common people” and “the rich”, indicating fundamentally different realities. The rich generally remain abstract in the interviews since most have never had personal contact with anyone from that socio-economic group. Interviewees who mention the rich mostly do so very briefly. Some criticise excessive lifestyle and privilege, indicating unfairness around life chances. However, even some who identify as middle class and hold up ideals about meritocracy do not fundamentally question the legitimacy of extreme wealth.

#### *6.1.1.2 Aspirations for improvement*

Rather than simply describing the living standard of their upbringing or their present situation and status, the middle-class narratives also evolve around plans and aspirations for change and improvement in the future. For temporary courier workers in education, this meant pursuing higher-skilled jobs and professional careers. Those without educational prospects, planned business adventures, savings, and moves into better types of work.

As mentioned above, couriers were aware of the heterogeneity of the workforce and the different meanings that the job held for others. Brian, for example, a 23-year-old courier in Loughborough, saw himself in a fundamentally different position from most couriers with migrant backgrounds since he was neither dependent on the job nor planning to do it long-term. He drew boundaries between himself and most of the courier workforce based on these different levels of dependency and opportunities. He was conscious that, while others had to stay, he was going to move on and work as a product designer in the future and not as a food courier:

“Like the difference between them and me is that they must be out there. I don't have to be out there.”

Brian, 23, male, England, 2 years into the job

Early in his biographical narration, Brian described himself as a “very studious kid”, and he was then studying in the third year of his Bachelor's. Throughout his school trajectory, he was highly focused on educational success to make it into his current course. Much of his narrations revolve around his passion for his subject of study, his determination to pass the institutional thresholds, and his goal to become a product designer. He started courier work during the school holidays during lockdown and continued when he started studying away from home.

Coming from a financially very well-off middle-class background, his parents covered his running costs, and Brian only used the courier job to make money for specific things he

wanted to buy. For moral reasons, he did not want to take advantage of privilege and aimed to live like a “regular person”. He was, however, aware that his freedom to choose if and when to work presents a crucial difference between him and other parts of the workforce. When discussing the use of multiple apps and different approaches to work, Brian repeatedly emphasises the difference in dependency on income and, thus, the difference between him and other food couriers. Like other interviewees, he criticised multi-apping because it causes longer delivery times, causes the food to go cold, and carries a high risk of having the account blocked. He assumed that it is mainly done by people who really need the money to make a living, already work full-time, and have to get out even when it is quiet.

Brian also described differences regarding the investments people make in the job. He emphasized that those with few other options who were doing delivery work for longer invested in buying an E-bike because it allowed them to make more money. He doesn't see any point in spending money on a better bike or rainproof clothing because he only works a couple of times a week, does not need to be particularly fast, and if it rains heavily, he either does not work or gets wet for a few hours.

Brian clearly did not identify as a food courier because he is neither invested in the job in the long run nor dependent on the income nor sees relevant commonalities between him and most other couriers. He already has a sense of occupational identity and ethics relating to his aspired career in product design. While he does not have distinct political views, nor identifies collectively with any social groups; he tries to adopt other people's perspectives and needs in his professional role. Asked about his views on politics, he explains why he is not interested in it:

“because the stuff that (.) a lot of laws are about like immigration policy, doesn't concern me. I already live there. Like it's not an issue for me, but it is an issue for other people. And it's difficult for me to empathize with them or empathize with them on my own accord. As a designer, I am obviously supposed to be able to empathize with them, but when I'm just living my life, I'm not going to think about other people, I suppose. Yeah, I seem to care less about other people.”

He approaches environmental issues similarly. While not thinking about them in his private life, he incorporates sustainability principles in his product designs because he considers them part of the work. Brian's case illustrates how, as a student from a middle-class background with career aspirations unrelated to the courier job, he identifies with the middle and the profession he is investing in through his educational trajectory. This, for Brian, is a much higher priority than the temporary courier work.

Instead of constructing commonalities and any collective identity with others doing the courier job, Brian focused on the differences within the workforce. He drew boundaries in terms of dependency, work approach, and labour market chances to define his societal situation. His views on courier work, society, and politics show that he is highly individualized and does not see much of a shared reality or struggle with others. His positioning in the middle revolves around his comfortable background, focus on achievement in terms of education, and professional aspirations.

The role of aspirations for class identification also featured strongly in Henry's case. He, too, is from a financially well-off background. He had just finished his master's in engineering, was very much into riding bicycles, and had delivered food for nearly six years. He identified with engineering as a profession and described himself as middle class while also emphasizing differences and even cleavages between him and other food couriers.

Like Brian, Henry had an early interest in his subject of study. Training to become an engineer took priority in his life, while the courier job was only a convenient side income and, at times, a nice distraction from his studies. Henry had high ambitions and aimed to work at the forefront of engineering. His occupational identity was also indicated when he discussed the economy and why capitalism and competitive markets are necessary. In his view, nobody would do anything without profit. Hence, to be innovative, especially in engineering, companies need to be able to make a profit; otherwise, there wouldn't be any investment.

Henry centred on the heterogeneity of the food courier workforce. While he saw himself as an engineer and cyclist, he did not identify with the courier job or other couriers. Instead, he distinguished himself from couriers "breaking the rules" or "taking advantage" by multi-mapping, signing up mopeds as bicycles, using electric bikes, and renting out accounts. Henry tells a long story about seeing the same moped couriers driving around with Learner-plates for years - to save on road tax, as he says. Henry associates this kind of rule-breaking with migrant workers, saying that while he doesn't think that all Eastern European drivers do this, "all of the drivers who do do this are Eastern European". His criticism points out cleavages within the workforce similar to what Brian described. Brian, however, linked the more creative approaches to the job to the question of dependency, while Henry drew boundaries simply to distinguish himself. Emphasizing that he values competition, hard work, and fairness, he wants everybody to play by the rules, so no one gets an advantage over the other:

“Because these people are- I think that's what irritates me- They have a job, and they are earning money, yet they continue to do it the incorrect way and break the rules. ... you start as an immigrant, and you don't have much, and then you work, you've got enough money to buy a moped, you know. ... I fully understand bending or breaking the rules when you're really, really trying to scrape by. But when you are just breaking the rules to maximise your profit instead of just getting the profit that the others are earning because they're abiding by the rules, I don't think that's fair.”

Henry, 25, male, England, 6 years into the job

Essentially, Henry feels that he is being unfairly disadvantaged because other couriers are breaking the rules. When challenged on this idea in the interview, he recognizes that most of the rule-breaking does not affect the financial outcome of his work. Nonetheless, it “irritates” and “angers” him, as it goes against his values and the legal order.

Henry views other couriers as competition rather than colleagues doing the same job and being subjected to the same problems. Feeling disadvantaged in the competition for profitable rides, Henry sees a cleavage between honest and cheating couriers. Conflicts are caused by the rule-breaking of migrant couriers who exploit legal loopholes and lack of control. A fundamental conflict between workers and company management does not exist for Henry because he believes in the necessity of profit and market logic, and on top of that, he considers the working conditions and pay reasonable. He feels strongly enough about the courier job to be competitive about it while at the same time not being financially dependent on the job and being sure to enter high-skilled professional work. He sees no commonalities and collective identity within the courier workforce but identifies with his future career as an engineer. For him, this is not only about the money he will earn but about getting to the top of his field.

Both case examples illustrate how those from middle-class backgrounds with middle-class identifications centre their identity around aspects that have nothing to do with their side job as couriers while at the same time being aware of their privileged position within the workforce and distinguishing themselves from other couriers. This is fundamentally different to other interviewees who identified as working class constructed narratives of similarities and shared situations despite coming from middle-class backgrounds and having career prospects.

Other cases who identified as middle-class didn't have such strong occupational identities linked to their field of study. Here, aspirations for development and improvement evolved around getting back into education, completing language courses, retraining and learning marketable

skills, starting one's own business, saving up enough money to buy a car to do delivery work, or simply saving up to provide kids with financial advantages in life.

This aspect of people's identification with the middle is partly about being in transition since many are working towards something else, but more generally, it centres aspirations for future improvement. Interviewees emphasised that they have not reached an endpoint in what they want to achieve regarding education, position, income, and overall socio-economic situation. Those who identify as working class—albeit not having reached all their goals either—do not choose to centre this aspect in their narrations about class.

#### *6.1.1.3 Individual agency*

Regardless of whether interviewees linked their position in society to the courier job, most who identified as middle class related this to a belief in their own agency in shaping their life and class position. Henry, who was already mentioned above, generally expressed a strong belief in meritocracy. However, he recognized that meritocracy is limited by an almost impenetrable barrier between the aristocracy and the rest of society. The upper class, which he sees as defined by status and networks rather than only financially, closes off opportunities for outsiders. While he does not think everyone can gain that kind of status or become a multi-millionaire, he does not see social upward mobility restricted within the rest of society. In his view, everyone can achieve a comfortable middle-class position; for some, this simply takes more time and effort:

“Well, I think you can work hard, and it is the jumping-off point, which I think is the difference between privilege and non-privilege. Getting into that best job or whatever sometimes requires the privilege of having access to the people who can get you those jobs or whatever. But you can still eventually get there. I think you will work your way up and it just takes longer. That's all. But I do truly believe everyone can reach a certain position and have what I would call a comfortable life.”

Henry, 25, male, England, 6 years into the job

Henry's case illustrates how critical biographic experiences and the benchmark for comparison are when forming views on class and when evaluating one's position. Although he grew up with parents who both worked in real estate and made a very comfortable income, he did not see himself as privileged, like other interviewees in a comparable situation. This is because he compared himself to people from his hometown and from university who went to private school and got a head start through connections and internship offers that were not accessible to him. Privilege for him is not associated with money or access to education, as others described it.

Having parents who got well-off through investments and being a high achiever, his view on class focused on where he experiences barriers in his own life, which are social standing and social connections that would open doors to opportunities and speed up career trajectories.

Within his idea of society, social constraints exist only towards the very top, but individual agency can achieve everyone a comfortable life. As someone who prides himself on working hard, Henry signals that through his own agency and performance, he is achieving everything possible within the sphere of fair competition. If he were not excluded from the social spheres of the aristocratic upper class, he might achieve more or get to where he wants to be even faster.

Other cases had similarly strong beliefs in the general role of individual agency in society and their personal lives. Samantha, who was also mentioned above, when talking about her own position in society, reflected on different lifestyles and how these might fit with the idea of a middle class. Like Brian and Henry, she did not identify collectively in the sense of class. Still, she emphasized the role of will, self-belief and hard work in shaping one's life and socio-economic situation. As indicated in one of her quotes above, Samantha does not think there is much inequality in society. Although she knows that people come from different backgrounds, Samantha believes that social upward mobility is possible for everyone:

“I've managed to get on perfectly alright. And I think if I'd been born in a council estate or to poor parents, then it would be up to me to get out of there. I think everyone has the ability to – no matter where you come from, what your background and ethnicity is – everyone has a chance to get out and get what they want and to prosper as much as they want to.”

Samantha, 33, female, England, 7 years into the job

While she doesn't think it is the only relevant factor, Samantha believes that a lot in life is about attitude and whether you believe in yourself. Referring to the success of famous business entrepreneurs, she says that everyone must fight to get where they are in life and that you can't take over the world with an attitude of “I-can't-do-this”. Her emphasis on self-belief and agency is deeply intertwined with her core life experiences of hers. Having dealt with mental health issues and overcome a depressive crisis, Samantha feels empowered by her self-development. She forefronts her individual agency to the point that outside barriers and inequality have no space in her life story and identity. Asked if class ever played a role in her life, she firmly denies:

“No, no. The only thing holding me back, I found, was me most of the time. When I was a young kid, I just thought, I'm young, dumb and stupid. No one's gonna listen to me. But

time goes on, and you gain confidence .... And yeah, once you learn to fight with yourself - I mean, it's a big, big lesson to learn – you learn to pick yourself up. Once you've learned that, you can do most things, I think.”

Her experience of overcoming difficulties by changing her attitude leads her to frame achievement in life and one's social position as a matter of individual agency and self-responsibility. Class becomes a result of hard work, both on the job and on oneself.

Another UK courier who comes from a working-class background but has a strong belief in his agency and identifies as middle class is Raaib. He is 36, grew up between England and Pakistan and has been working as a courier for six years. When he trained to become a car mechanic, his father passed away, and Raaib had to change plans and start working full-time to support his mother and five sisters. Since he didn't have any professional qualifications, he took up a job as a food courier. He likes the job because he makes enough money to save a bit, and the flexibility allows him to pray throughout the day. His belief is important to him and has helped him cope with various struggles that he has experienced in the past years.

Raaib sees three different levels of class in society: the lower class, the middle class and one that is higher up and comprises millionaires and billionaires, who he jokingly suspects to be mostly in London. Asked where he sees himself, Raaib describes himself as part of the middle class. For him, class is mainly defined by the amount of money people have. When asked where he sees himself, he says he wants to improve his financial situation further. However, he does not aim to become rich since he thinks more money brings more problems. He is a labour voter because the party is supposed to be good for people on the lower level and for workers and unions; he is, however, not convinced that this is still the case. Despite his voting preference and affinity towards union, Raaib strenuously denies that class ever shaped his life in any way. He refers to his agency:

“Social class never really affected me. You just believe in yourself and do your best. I never felt let down, I always faced all my problems. Ups and downs happen, it's just part of life. You just deal with it and move on.”

Raib, 36, male, England, 7 years into the job

Prompted whether it wouldn't have made a difference in his life if he could have finished his training as a mechanic rather than having to pick up a job to finance the family, he explained that struggle is a good thing. Raaib argued that rich families get problems when there is no struggle because their kids become lazy and spoiled. The moral values of hard work and struggle are

continuously emphasised here and in some other cases. Believing in oneself, working hard, and dealing with difficulties rather than complaining about them are present themes throughout middle-class identifications and disidentifications. The overall signal is that everyone is responsible for their own lives and has the power to shape it.

For couriers doing the job long-term, like Raaib, Tobias, Mebratu Samantha and Nick, the flexibility and autonomy they experienced in the job also played into their sense of agency and their perception of themselves as middle-class. Not only did they emphasise not having a boss or having to stick to shifts, but they were also proud of working according to their own preferences and needs and feeling in control of their earnings. Especially in the UK sample, with the independent contractors, the flexibility, autonomy, and absence of direct hierarchies in the courier work aligned with middle-class identifications. Biographically, the job also presented an improvement compared to former low-paid, boring or oppressive employment.

#### *6.1.1.4 Summary of middle-class positioning*

I have shown that middle-class identifications express aspirations for improvement, a sense of individual agency, and identification with entirely different professional career prospects or with the entrepreneurial aspects of the courier job.

Those who did not identify with the food courier job but saw it as a secondary income or a period of transition based their middle-class identification on their prospects for future careers in professional employment. Those who saw themselves as couriers aligned the job with their middle-class identification because it presented a considerable improvement in their standard of living as well as their experience of work – namely, feeling a sense of flexibility and autonomy over their time and earnings.

I showed that middle-class identifications were in some ways aspirational or in the making even when people were not actually in a transition period. While it was not certain that some of those in transition would reproduce their parent's financial and economic standard of living, their educational trajectories were sufficient for most of them to consider themselves middle class. A privileged upbringing and safety net gave them confidence that they would achieve what they set out to do.

Further, I showed that middle-class identifications go hand in hand with meritocratic beliefs and boundary-drawing towards other couriers. The emphasising of one's agency when talking about social inequality partly signalled the deservingness of one's position

linked to the idea of a meritocratic performance-based society. This was particularly strong among cases from middle-class backgrounds. In other cases, agency was emphasised to allow interviewees to position themselves in the middle rather than having to locate themselves in lower segments of society, which would have negative connotations, like being stuck and passive about one's life. This became clear in Raab's interview, partly in Samantha's accounts on class, and was present in other cases who identified as middle class or disidentified with the class when coming from working-class backgrounds.

The middle-class identifications in this study centre on the individual, its differences from others, and its possibilities and potentials. As I show in the following, this distinguishes them from working-class identities, which almost all construct a community of some sort. Being average or normal doesn't so much mean being like others, but not being part of a special group, not being part of the group of the super-rich who are potentially spoiled, and not belonging to the poor and disadvantaged. By constructing a neutral place for the individual, the middle-class identification, although in most cases acknowledging the idea of class and social hierarchies, relativises the relevance of hierarchies, often not only for one's own life but for all members of society.

#### 6.1.2 Belonging to the working-class

The working class identifications in this sample mainly related to five aspects: (1) dependency, or the need to make a living through work, which was often linked to (2) specific types of work, working conditions and low income; (3) a sense of connection to the job – either to the work itself, or to the social aspects of the workplace, and (4) a perception of a shared struggle. Those working-class identifications that signalled a deeper sense of belonging were also characterised by (5) a sense of injustice linked to one's social position or class experiences. These five aspects of working-class identifications are described and illustrated below.

The analysis also revealed a variety of nuances across working-class identifications, reaching from general descriptions as a worker, to specific identifications as couriers and riders which carried notions of an occupational identity, to critical perceptions as precarious workers or servants. While some of these were simply labels, others reflected a deeper sense of belonging, and some functioned as empowering political label.

Moral connotations played a role in some working-class narratives, too. Various self-identified workers relativised and justified being part of the working class. They signalled virtues

and contentment, emphasized moderation, and indicated that they were content or had come to terms with their situation using phrases like “I’m happy with what I’ve got” or “I’m better off than lots of other people”. In one case, which is presented in detail throughout the chapter, a working-class label was only adopted reluctantly, partly because moral connotations were deeply internalised and because the idea of the working class was misaligned with biographic core experiences.

#### *6.1.2.1 Dependency: working to make a living*

Working-class identifications in the sample frequently referred to the fact that one must work to make a living. Many who identified as workers did so with reference to their dependence on the courier job. Not being able to sustain oneself without going to work seemed a clear indicator to some that they were part of the working class. Besides the necessity to work, the working class here also referred to a lack of orientation, formal skills, and opportunities to change. Some cases also referred to their social background and their parent’s dependency on work. While for some couriers, this element of dependency was dominant, in other cases, it was secondary or played a minimal role.

One case that strongly referred to dependency when identifying as worker was Billy who was mentioned in the prior chapter. Asked whether he thought that class was still an issue in the UK, Billy said that he saw a divide between rich and poor but didn’t see himself as either. Although he grew up poor and saw some similarities between his parents’ situation, mainly his dad’s self-employment, and his own, he does not describe himself as poor. He sees himself as a worker because he makes an income through his work and earns enough money to not struggle in the same way as his parents did:

“I think, literally, exactly what I say: I work and earn my money, and I make what to afford to live. And sustain an average kind of life. I don’t worry too much about money. I also don’t have loads of it.

Billy is 39 years old and has been a food courier for almost 6 years. He described his onboarding with Deliveroo as a transition. To him, working as a food courier meant overcoming the random bar and retail jobs that he had done before. With the delivery job, he found something that works for him since he enjoys the freedom and flexibility of being a self-employed courier. Compared to former employment, it allows him a sufficient level of financial comfort, which seems to make the crucial difference between identifying as poor and identifying as a worker.

“I’m very fortunate; I know I am. Like I’ve gone from earning very little money or not having any, to- and it did start with Deliveroo. ... So, I just saw something which I was able to grind, and I just kept on grinding on it and then eventually it became something that was, um, profitable to me. Yeah”

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Dependency on the job is not the only aspect that Billy refers to when identifying as a worker. However, the necessity to work and the ability to make a living from work by finding work that can financially sustain your life were prominent in his interview. It could be argued that Billy finds it easy to identify as a worker because, compared to his parents, he has improved his situation and being a worker rather than being poor is something to feel positive about.

Another interviewee reflected more specifically on the lack of choices that he had, making it clear that courier work was one of the better options that he had at this point of his life. Not seeing a perspective to improve education, skills and type of work played a role when interviewees defined their belonging to the working class via the courier job.

While Geno categorized himself as working class, his case presents somewhat of an exception. He only reluctantly took on the label of the working class and negotiated the relevance of class hierarchies, which reflects internalised stigma and a sense of shame about not having come further. However, part of the reason why he eventually positions himself in the working class is his dependency on work and his difficulties in pursuing other avenues during his youth.

Geno is 34 years old, originally from Italy, and lives and works in the UK. He only got into courier work because he could not work in hospitality during the pandemic and had to temporarily find another job. His narration about his class identity presents a stark contrast to others who had no hesitation when describing themselves as workers:

“I probably gonna be considered in the working class-level but I’m personally happy to work and be able to look after myself with the work I am doing. I think it’s healthy. I don’t believe a live style can be sitting at home and looking at the income coming in your bank account. I don’t think that’s healthy. Like I mean there are differences, but I don’t know. I’m not going to start fighting against them.”

Geno, 34, male, England, 7 month into the job

Like Billy, Geno connects the idea of being working class with the dependency on work. As the quote clearly shows, he picks a descriptor rather than identifying as part of the working class. It

is how he thinks others would describe him. Throughout his interview, Geno didn't introduce class language by himself, but only identifies in response to my direct question about class.

The way in which Geno justifies his working-class status as something healthy and emphasizes that he is content with his situation, can be understood as a way of rejecting class stigma. For one, he rejects the stigma for his own life and identity, but also for other people, when he says later in his interview that he doesn't want to pay too much attention to class differences.

This struggle to identify with class can be understood through the lens of moral class discourses and through biographical context. In the following chapter, I show how the experience of upward mobility (paired with migration) and the perception of strong agency explain some middle-class identifications and disidentifications. The same phenomena explain Geno's specific hesitation and the use of justifications when locating himself in the working class.

Geno grew up with his grandparents in a small village in Italy. He had a happy childhood, spending most of his time outdoors, helping his grandpa with jobs around the premises and being taught brick laying. Geno explained that his parents were very young and overwhelmed with the task of raising a child and split up. Since they were both working full-time in the nearby factory, Geno only saw his father on occasional weekends when he was tired from work.

Geno felt that he didn't have much guidance on what to do after school. He struggled to find his own way, as can be seen in two episodes of his life. Being overwhelmed when having to choose a specialization in school at the age of 13, Geno decided to train as a plumber since he did not want to become an electrician and did not think that there were other options than what the school suggested to him. Later, around the age of 20, when Geno pursued a change in his life and wanted to study psychology, he got discouraged by the lack of support from his family. Although he had thought about it for years and already passed the entrance test, he gave in to his parents' concerns and his own financial worries:

“my heart was pumping. I was excited. But then you've got people telling you 'common man, you studied as a plumber and now you want to become a psychologist, what's going on in your head?' and you've got people telling you that sort of thing ... Also like, financially I had to look after myself. Maybe I would have found a way, if I would have fight a bit more but I was a bit scared as well. How am I going to cope with a part time job paying rent and afford university, I don't know. It was too much stress that I couldn't maybe handle it, so I gave up on the idea.”

Geno reflected on what was holding him back. Besides the lack of support from his family, he talked about the culture of the village, where people work the same jobs that their parents worked, and about the institutional difficulties of getting a loan. Mostly, he questioned his own agency in the situation and concluded that he was too insecure, “didn’t have enough mental power to take the decision”, and “was not strong enough” to go through with his plans. Part of the stigma that he associated with being working class is clearly linked to the fact that he blames himself for staying in the working class when he could have chosen another path.

Instead of studying psychology, Geno got a job in the nearby factory, then went from working in a warehouse to a very low-paid, self-employed office job for a plumbing company. Eventually, he started working as a bricklayer, which he settled with for five years because it allowed him to be outdoors and reminded him of the time with his grandfather. Only much later did he make a second attempt to change his life, in which he moved to the UK and became a hospitality worker. As he improved his English, he eventually found a position in a popular chain restaurant, where he stayed for almost 6 years and worked his way up to an assistant manager. Trying to be closer to nature, Geno then took up seasonal work in a ski resort in the Alps and, in the summers, did hourly paid hospitality work in England.

He considered himself to be in a good place, having broken free from his home village, the dark warehouses, and the machismo culture of bricklaying. The change in the sector and the migration present a huge improvement for Geno that resembles upward social mobility. Geno struggled to align this experience with the idea of still being working class – something that he associated with manual labour and rough work culture:

“like this switch- I left a job that was dirty, physically super heavy, people were shouting at you, and now I'm in England where I've got a job where I am clean all the time, and I can talk with people. Actually, I'm supposed to be with people all the time and that is a part of my job. That respect at work is something I never had before I came here. Here you've got a manager at the end of the shift that tell you 'Good job.' and give you a high five. It's something small but it's something that I've never seen before.”

The distinction between different types of work is discussed in the next section. I show there that strenuous physical work, low pay and low-skilled work function as another marker for a working-class identity. In Geno’s case, the improvement from comparably harder and worse paid jobs into cleaner and better paid and higher skilled work is part of what makes him struggle with fully identifying as working class.

Geno started working for Deliveroo because the lockdowns during the pandemic meant that there wasn't any work in hospitality. The job as a food courier is not something he identifies with. He enjoyed being outdoors and didn't mind the hourly pay if he was only doing the job temporarily and stayed under the tax threshold. However, the job is not what he wants to do in the long run. Hospitality work gives Geno meaning in his life since he enjoys the social aspect and wants to provide a good service in a good business, which, as he says, the courier job doesn't enable him to do.

Geno's description of why he would be considered working-class relates to the need to make money, a lack of orientation and a perception of barriers in trying to improve the own situation. Different from other interviewees, it does neither relate to the courier job, nor signal a belonging to a wider community. The hesitation when adopting the label "working-class" is linked to a lack of class language, an internalization of moral discourses, and to the self-image he developed based on his life story: a story of breaking free, moving into clean work, being respected, and aligning what he enjoys with making an income. A biographic experience of not fitting in and moving beyond the narrow working-class culture during his upbringing makes him struggle with the categorization as working class. His case also exemplifies the incoherence and ongoing negotiation present in many accounts on class and class identity in the sample. His account moves between habituated and reflected identification as worker, and moments of disidentification. It shows conflation between status quo and ideal conception of the world, switching between criticism and downplaying of social hierarchies.

#### *6.1.2.2 Hard work for little money*

Couriers who described themselves as working class linked this to the character of the work that they were doing and to the fact that they were earning a low income. The character of the work entailed different things. For some it meant physical or risky work, while others pointed out the service aspect of the job, or the low entrance and skills requirements and skill.

For Tabea, a 25-year-old courier in Germany, the positioning in the working class seemed obvious considering the work she was doing. While she had also worked in hospitality, went to university to study, dropped out and was planning to start an apprenticeship in the medical sector, she defined her class identity through the job that she was currently doing to finance her living and that shaped her day-to-day life: "Considering my job, yes [I am working class]. I do a super strenuous job for very little money."

Despite coming from a middle-class background, to Tabea, the experience of working a physical job that left her exhausted, and paid only enough to get by, was relevant to her when asked how she would describe her own position in society. Whilst Tabea considered the pay from the courier job too low, other couriers who identified as workers felt that they were earning enough. They instead linked their identification as working-class to fact that the job didn't require the skills and higher education that many of them had.

Others like Fabricio focussed on the service character of the job. Fabricio is 52 years old and grew up as a guest worker child, as he describes himself. After dropping out of university, undertaking some business adventures, explores club life and working various odd jobs he got into courier work, which he had been doing for 4 years. Although Fabricio had to get used to the physical work and criticised the risks and the health and safety issues, his main points of reference for his identification as worker, were the feeling of being a servant and doing a precarious job. Fabricio didn't see himself and his colleagues as employees but compared them to traditional servants in stately homes since they were bringing food to people in better situations:

“We are servants. What else? Minute slaves. I mean we are doing simple service work, right. Back in the days you still had the servant rooms under the roof. Today, we need to drive or cycle in the suburbs, or take the tube when it's raining. And we aren't even fully employed by some family that is nice to us. Instead, you can book us for a delivery fee between 1,8 and 2,90 Euro, and for 90 seconds we become your servant ((laughs)).”

Fabricio, 52, male, Germany, 4 years into the job

In his view, it's not a classic working-class job like being on a construction site. He sees the job as something in the limbo, an odd job, like many of his former jobs, that were kind of new and not fully regulated yet. This sense is enhanced by the fact that Fabricio isn't aiming for a life-long career path or for a particular occupation. He is constantly searching, finding, and creating spaces for himself and for others. This is partly because of his perception of being different and not fitting in with his environment and partly because of the negative experiences he had when working as an employee in larger organizations. One company didn't work out for him because he didn't align with its values and had politically problematic customers. He left another company because of racist comments by one of his direct supervisors. Fabricio was aware that switching jobs throughout his life meant that he wasn't climbing up any career ladders, but all his life stayed “some kind of gap filler, right.”

He explained that many of his works council colleagues were offended when he first used the term *servant* and urged him not to speak so disrespectfully. Fabricio, however, uses the term servant partly as a realistic description that reflects his perception of the hierarchies around him and partly reappropriates the term politically to point out power imbalances and exploitation. While he is an elected, active part of the works council, he sees himself in the opposition. He doesn't consider the council to be representative because of its large share of students who were never planning to work as couriers long-term and have avoided doing actual courier work since being elected. He sees them as a privileged minority:

“This generation of students that got degraded to servants, right, the WHITE students, THEY slipped into our works councils. And when they talk about working conditions, they are actually talking about the disappointment of their expectations towards their careers and NOT about the workers. ((laughs)). This is my position, right. And for some of them the labour dispute was finished in the moment they became works councils. There are some who on Twitter don't even label themselves as servants or Lieferando couriers anymore, but only as works council; ah, right, yes, I am works council now; I am missus or mister works council.

Fabricio did not feel a sense of belonging in this group and didn't identify with other works councils as colleagues. He emphasised the differences within the workforce and clearly positioned himself on the side of those couriers in more precarious situations.

Rather than only talking about the formal Lieferando fleet, Fabricio is also concerned about the outsourced workers, the independent couriers who work directly and often informally for restaurants. While these are not the workers that he officially represents as a works council, these are the precarious conditions he has in mind when thinking about the food courier job and his agenda for change. Fabricio doesn't identify with the most precarious food couriers either, since he is aware that his situation is, in many ways, more privileged. Not only is he a German citizen, but he also has the chance to go to university. Despite having worked many weird and precarious jobs, he got a permanent contract as a courier and has extra protection from redundancy. Partly out of shared experiences and partly out of solidarity, he identifies as a servant and precarious worker. The migrant workers are important to him because he, too, has experienced discrimination and exclusion and strongly identifies with the guestworker background of his parents.

“My mother was a housemaid, housemaid in Barcelona, yes, well, and my father was a carpenter. I don't have any problem with this anymore; I have recognized which class I belong to, and why should I say anything else? Of course, I've read sociological texts for

long enough, I understand it, and if I say anything else than servant, then I am lying to myself.”

Through his abstract understanding of social inequality and power differences, Fabricio doesn't see terms like *guest worker* or *servant* as stigmatizing or disparaging but appropriates them as political terms. In his working-class and migrant identification, Fabricio combines the status of his parents, his own experience as racialised worker, as well as his experience in the courier job, and his works council role. At the centre of this identity are the servant aspect of the job and its precarity.

This notion of being part of a class of precarious workers is even stronger in the interview with Tia, a 38-year-old courier in Germany who has been doing the job for one and a half years. Tia's journey to identify as a worker is similar to that of Fabricio in the way that she, too, became aware of social inequalities early on in her life and later made sense of these life and work experiences through sociological concepts that she engaged with at university. However, Tia made these experiences on the other side of the social spectrum. Having grown up as part of the white privileged minority in a West African country is something that Tia brings up early on in her biographic narration. Seeing the racial inequality around her, she started to understand that other people's lives are “pretty tough” compared to her own. She reflects on her parent's social and financial status as that of a traditional middle-class family, with her dad being a technical engineer and her mother having been a teacher, fine artist and gallery curator before becoming a full-time mother. The family was well off, and the mother was very invested in her children's upbringing.

Tia went to university with a middle-class outlook of becoming an architect, but after meeting new people and spending time abroad she changed her subject to sociology and politics and studied anarchist theories while becoming involved in black union movements. She organized educational workshops with social justice movements during her masters, before starting a long PhD journey of 7 years, during which she relocated to Germany.

After her scholarship ran out, she took on various jobs in data entry and online marketing to finance herself. While she found these jobs boring and alienating, they allowed her to make some savings to focus on her research for a while. When that money had come to an end, and she hadn't finished the PhD, Tia was desperate for money and started to work as a food courier. Although she enjoyed the cycling and the flexibility, Tia strongly criticized the working conditions: the bad quality and insufficient cover of equipment, the low pay, and the lack of

transparency and participation in decision-making. Tia also emphasized how physically burdensome the labour felt to her. While in the beginning, she used to do eight hours of riding in a day, trying to get the work out of the way in one go, she soon had to reduce her working time to four-hour shifts to make it more manageable. She criticized that those having to work full-time and carry heavy loads got back pains over time or damaged their bikes. This experience and the sense of being a servant towards the customers was part of Tia's identification as working class:

“We are precarious workers. We are delivering food to rich lazy people, you know, stuff like that. I mean there are definitely those kinds of sentiments, (...) there is a definite sense of we are like an underclass that are delivering to these rich people who just are lazy.”

Tia, 39, female, Germany, 1,5 years into the job

Various aspects came together in Tia's narrative of her class identity. There was also the fact that she needed to make money to sustain herself during a prolonged educational path. Although her dependency on the job was only temporary, the feeling of having to stick to this kind of job, because she struggled to get more skilled work without German language skills, was also formative. Lastly, and this is most dominant in Tia's case, her identification as a precarious worker was an expression of political commitment to the situation of other couriers and workers in general. I elaborate this point further below in the subsection on experiences of a shared situation and shared struggles.

Whilst this was never the only aspect, the character of the work and the low income were a relevant point of reference for many couriers who identified as workers. It was particularly prominent in those cases who were planning to be on the job for longer, but it also applied to temporary couriers like Tia and Tabea. Interestingly, cases that emphasized these aspects in their narratives about class identity weren't only focused on the courier job but drew connections to the situation of other workers in various difficult and precarious conditions.

### *6.1.2.3 Occupational Identity*

Many couriers who identified as workers did not simply need the money but also emphasized their connection to the job, and some even expressed a sense of occupational identity. They identified specifically as couriers or riders, and usually saw this as a subgroup of workers in general. It was those who really enjoyed the job, despite its downsides and who had found some form of community in the context of platform courier work who expressed their working-class position straightforwardly and even as an empowering identification. This was mainly couriers

who had made friends with other couriers in their private lives or were politically organized and had become part of a protest community. These couriers often mentioned standards towards their work, a concern about the outside perception of their job, and were invested in the job.

Most couriers who expressed this aspect when identifying as working class were politically organized. The sense of connection and occupational identity is closely intertwined with couriers' perceptions and experiences of being in the same situation and part of a shared struggle. However, since not all were involved in collective action, this aspect is briefly discussed separately.

Billy, for example, who was described above, didn't want to get involved with unions and didn't believe that the company would increase pay. Nonetheless, he found a sense of community in the workplace and identified with the job and his colleagues. When he talked about himself and other couriers, Billy used a collective "us" or "we". He did so when he explained how couriers realized the changing fees while gathered at meeting points and how they discussed tactics to influence them:

"So, when you've got a whole bunch of people together who are very closely connected, and they're all talking, and they can see what the fees are, that's when they've got trouble because we're working against them. And then we kind of see this, they're ripping you off kind of thing. But I know that they've got a- they got to function as a business, so they've got to work out how they can make money. But then we've got to make money."

Billy, 39, male, England, 6 years into the job

Over time, Billy invested in the job and professionalized his way of working, which allowed him to adjust to the different ups and downs of various delivery companies and their changes. He took pride in his work and wanted to keep standards up. While he used the "we" to talk about himself and his colleagues, he drew clear boundaries towards workers who didn't play by the rules, mainly referring to migrant workers. His worry was that the rule-breaking would undermine the standards of his job if people were not insured, had not done training, or were not legitimately registered.

Billy's case shows a clear identification as a worker that is linked to the meaning of the food courier job in his life. Billy is financially dependent on the job and, at the same time, wants to make the job work because he likes it. In line with his overall views on inequality and his criticism of the company and its management, his identification as worker is not simply a label picked to answer the question but is linked to his collective identification with other couriers

who found a job that makes them a living. Billy's case illustrates how the status as a self-employed can align with a sense of collective occupational identification as well as with an identity as a worker.

#### *6.1.2.4 Shared situation and struggle*

Most working-class identifications were driven by an overall sense of political solidarity and a sense of a shared situation and struggle. In some cases, this sense developed organically through the experiences at work and the participation in collective action without them having predefined political-ideological convictions. In other cases, this kind of solidarity evolved from abstract political perspectives that were then applied when people, usually from middle-class backgrounds, came to work in the courier job. They started to share experiences and identified with those more strongly or permanently exposed to the working conditions while being aware of the differences in their standard of living and life chances.

While acknowledging the different standards of living that put them in a more comfortable situation, they otherwise emphasised the similarities rather than drawing boundaries between working and middle class to distinguish themselves. This was done to signal solidarity with those who were bound to work in lower-paid jobs and bad working conditions in the long run.

This theme was prominent in Basti's identification with class. He was 28 years old, held a bachelor's degree in business management and had worked as a food courier for about 2 years while also being involved in organising via the FAU and the rider collective.

He didn't directly identify with the term worker but said that he and other colleagues identified with the more specific description of their job as rider or courier. Basti defined his identification through the shared experience and shared struggle of food couriers, in which he also included grocery delivery, which was organising protests around the time of the interview.

“We probably wouldn't agree on workers, but on riders definitely. Yeah, we would agree on one overarching terms like that and say, this is us. We all have the same struggle, we all have the same desires, we do like the job.”

Basti, 28, male, Germany, 2 years into the job

Basti makes it clear that a level of investment in the job is part of this identification. This doesn't necessarily mean a long-term plan to do the work for the next ten years, but that he genuinely enjoys the job itself, albeit being extremely critical of the working conditions. A sense of

connection with the job and colleagues is what he considered to make the crucial difference between him and someone who sees themselves as an employee and would work anywhere without being particularly committed to a particular job or community. He felt “*in sync*” with his courier colleagues because they were occupied with the same topics and struggles.

Basti repeatedly used “we” when discussing his work context. His feelings of solidarity and community were linked to the work itself and his experience of protesting and organizing with other courier workers. He was involved in a collective of couriers in his city who offered a social space to facilitate exchanges and to provide mutual support. They were in touch with unions and organized works council elections for their local branch. Having an exchange with others to share experiences and problems contributed to Basti’s identification as a rider. While he emphasized the specific aspects of the courier job that connect him and others, he did see himself and his colleagues as a subgroup of workers. He compared the identification as a rider to the way workers in the coal mines used to identify as miners.

“Worker is more like something universal, like a fundamental term. ... if you think, for example, of coal or something like that, you’ve also got the ‘Kumpels’ (coal miners). They are also generally workers, but I think they would also identify as coal miners. And I think that’s similar with riders, that you are rather a rider, right, or courier, whatever, however you want to call it. But I do believe we have some form of connection there. Especially because if you like the job, independent of how it is seen from the outside.”

Basti’s case exemplifies how the experience of being in a shared situation and part of a shared struggle can create a collective identity with colleagues and workers in the broader sense. Basti simultaneously relates the working-class identification to his family and upbringing, with both his parents having working-class jobs. Since he has higher education and alternative career prospects, in his case, the working-class identification is partly adopted out of political commitment but also rooted in concrete experiences and in his social background.

Tia, described above, combines similar characteristics that make her identify as working class. However, unlike Basti, she comes from a wealthy middle-class background and is temporarily drifting into a more working-class life. When she became a food courier, she already knew other food couriers through her organizing work and was in touch with the rider collective. Tia’s identification as a worker is partly linked to the food courier job but even more so to the experience of collective action with groups that are challenging and protesting the working conditions. For her, like for other activists, the union and collectives gave her a strong sense of community. Within the anarchist union, Tia is part of a sub-section of workers with migrant

backgrounds. When discussing joint action planning, Tia uses the word “we” and describes the group as a form of political home that’s become a central part of her life.

“It's a kind of a strange and cool, I think it's really nice that they have a foreigner section even though the word foreigner is really strange, ... Anyway, it was nice because it is this place where non-German speakers feel like they still have got a political home, and we were- it was cool. I liked it that we could- I felt at home there, (...) We are kind of seen as a bit of a renegade, kind of rebel group that doesn't stick to the right rules, and we don't do things the right way and we don't have our reports in the right way and whatever, so yeah. It's a weird thing, but yeah ... it was definitely nice for me to feel like I had somewhere where I felt like politically integrated.”

Tia, 39, male, Germany, 1,5 years into the job

The joint organizing work and protest action were essential for Tia’s identification as a precarious worker. However, she recognized the ambivalent character of her class position – coming from a middle-class background and relying on precarious physical labour to finance her life while working on her PhD. Previously, she had actively put herself in contexts where she worked with disadvantaged workers to improve their agency and conditions.

Since Tia knew she was more privileged than many other couriers, her identification as part of the workforce is driven by political conviction and is bound to the feeling of a resisting community among riders. Being part of a union movement and of different collectives, Tia is convinced that many of her colleagues share a sense of collective identity.

Tia’s case is particularly interesting as a working-class identification because of the factors that seem to mediate the mismatch between her social background and her subjective class identification. For one, developing a political class consciousness is crucial in Tia’s life and shapes her educational and career choices. She actively breaks with a clear career trajectory to become an architect when changing her subject area to follow her political interest in sociology. She became a political activist scholar rather than picking up a well-paid professional career job. Her anarchist views provide an ideological ground for her solidarity with discriminated and disadvantaged workers. Through her commitment to social justice movements and worker struggle, she actively experienced collective struggle and solidarity, making her part of a collective resistance long before she was protesting as a food courier. In the courier context, she involved herself in the organizing of a works council. Despite it not aligning well with her anarchist position, she considered the step necessary because of the precarity of the job. As

activists, she felt they needed protection from termination and dedicated paid time for organizing.

In this sense, her identification didn't develop from the experience of an actual working-class life but from political views and experiences of collective organizing and protesting. At the same time, Tia also experienced an involuntary break with her middle-class background. While she started with political work that also offered a potential career path in academia or trade unions, this potential wasn't realised over time. Having migrated to a new country without sufficient language skills or the supportive networks she had at home, she had difficulty finding well-paid jobs or promising contacts in foundations, unions, or universities. Not only is she not reproducing her parents' financial status, but for a while, she genuinely struggled to maintain herself financially and reproduce a comparable social status to that of her family. Tia spent her day-to-day life on small project work and fixed-term contracts for the past years without a clear perspective to secure a stable job after her PhD. It can thus be argued that Tia has, in some ways, genuinely been drifting into a more working-class life. In this sense, her case represents how social downward mobility combined with an anti-capitalist ideological frame and participation in class struggle can shape a working-class identity for someone from a privileged middle-class background.

However, the privileges of her social background eventually kept her in an advantaged position even while she was struggling financially. Not only is she cultured and highly educated, but an inheritance allowed her to buy a flat and pay a mortgage rather than a much higher rent.

Like Tia, other couriers with higher education had leftist political attitudes when they started working as couriers and got involved in collective action. Their working-class identifications sprung from political convictions and commitment, while at the same time, many felt ambivalent about their class position since their skills and degrees did not translate into professional careers or took longer than expected.

For those from working-class backgrounds who did not have pre-existing leftist ideas to draw on, the experience of collective action gave them a sense of community, belonging and collective agency. However, their working-class identifications were expressed less confidently but negotiated and deprioritised against identifications as riders, couriers, or lower class. The class identifications of these couriers related to a sense of injustice, which was partly rooted in the experiences of the courier work but often evolved through broader life experiences.

#### 6.1.2.5 *Sense of injustice*

In most cases, working-class identification was linked to experiences or perceptions of social injustice. This sense of injustice did not only evolve around the work context but also educational trajectories and experiences with the state. Experiences of having been disadvantaged, excluded, and discriminated against had instilled a fundamental awareness in some couriers that the conditions around them were not fair. Couriers referred to these injustices in their narratives about class and their societal position. Rather than expressing straightforward and empowered working-class identities, some couriers who related their class position to experiences or perceptions of injustice also mentioned terms like underclass or lower class.

Even in Geno's case, which I showed above and who is hesitant to identify as working class, the social inequality is considered illegitimate. Since he struggled to align his views of society with his life experience and the request to describe his own position, his account was incoherent, partly accepting the idea of being a worker and partly rejecting class altogether.

Throughout his whole interview, Geno expressed a critical perspective on inequality and discrimination, particularly about racism. Although he hasn't engaged much with protest movements or unions around delivery work and does not frame his own life as unjust, he is conscious of inequality in general and problematizes it:

“Well, not my life, but then if I think I feel like about other people's lives. Probably, I'm lucky. I'm lucky. I was being lucky but for other people probably this is more effective and make me feel bad, angry for this. But for my personal experience where I feel like I grew up having all I needed and even more. These differences don't really play a big role in my life. Yeah. I'm happy with what I've got.”

Geno, 34, male, England, 7month into the job

The idea of class and structural inequality does not fit into Geno's idea of himself and his own life, but he expressed a sense of injustice about other people's lives. Rather than trying to tell the story of a middle-class existence like others in comparable situations, Geno accepted that he is part of the working class. While he is a unique case in the sample, his case shows how complex and incoherent people think and talk about class. It shows how interwoven class experiences, available ideological narratives, and structural conditions are and that the formation of class identity is a lifelong process.

Many other examples could illustrate the sense of injustice. Couriers talked about unfair treatment in school, by the welfare state, by the state in general, and by employers, including the

platform companies. It is this sense of injustice, no matter in which context it developed, that makes them question the legitimacy of social order, and thereby also sensitises them for unfairness and conflicts in the workplace.

#### *6.1.2.6 Summary of working-class identification*

This section showed that working-class identifications were more concretely related to work in general and the food courier job in particular. Dependency on work featured prominently as an aspect of working-class identification across the sample.

While for most who were planning to stay in the job for longer, flexibility and autonomy were crucial, those who identified as couriers or workers did not primarily emphasise these aspects of the job. They discussed cycling as an activity and the service character of the job, but mainly work communities, with colleagues who became friends and shared experiences in problem-solving and collective action. Even if separate from the courier job, those who identified as workers did so based on ideas around low-skilled, physical types of work and a low income.

This section also showed that a large part of those identifying as a worker or working class held a critical view on overall class relations, particularly at work, and were involved in some form of collective action in the food courier sector. Regardless of the concrete aspects that couriers associated with the working class, the identifications have in common that they refer to shared situation and experiences. They are fundamentally collective identifications, that construct or relate to some form of community and construct a collective “we”. In some cases, working-class identities carry notions of deeper belonging, and some were adopted ideologically as empowering labels rather than developed through experiences.

Overall, more couriers in the German sample identified as workers than in the UK. This is why more of the cases used to illustrate these five different aspects are from the Germany. This difference is likely related to the bias in the sample, with the absence of collectively organized couriers in the UK sample. However, the fewer working-class identifications in the UK sample may also be linked to the different business models of platform work. The more flexible and autonomous work as a self-employed in the UK seems to promote a self-perception as an entrepreneur that purveys a sense of middle-class existence.

### 6.1.3 Disidentification

Those who disidentified with class or rejected the idea that inequality was relevant to their lives shared many aspects of middle-class identification. They referred to standards of living but more to subjective contentment with life than to material conditions. They discussed plans and aspirations for further self-development and socioeconomic improvement. They emphasized agency and achieving one's dreams and downplayed inequality. However, instead of constructing middle-class narratives, people placed themselves outside the class hierarchy or rejected its idea.

#### 6.1.3.1 Types of Disidentification

Three types of disidentification can be distinguished: (1) cases that downplay the existence and relevance of social inequality and consequently do not identify in class categories; (2) cases that perceive social hierarchies and justify existing inequalities but avoid or actively refuse to describe themselves in terms of class; 3.) cases that recognise and criticise social inequalities but position themselves outside hierarchies.

In all cases, the disidentification seemed to be linked to the fact that, given their living standards, they could not convincingly construct a middle-class narrative. The first two types of disidentifications also seemed linked to the fact that interviewees had come to terms with their situation and saw little point in thinking and complaining about inequality. The third type is mainly based on one individual case. Still, it is included since its patterns are relevant to understanding what makes people reject class as a market for their situation and identity.

**I.** An example of someone who doesn't relate to the idea of class at all and thus represents the first category is James. He was 41 years old, lived in the north of England, worked as a food courier for about six months, and planned to continue for a couple of years. James came to the UK as a refugee from Eritrea, where he had lost part of his family. He didn't have the right to work for the first ten years in the UK and only survived with support from friends and his church community. When he finally got an official status, he started working in logistics. James quit the job after some years because his supervisor always gave better shifts to the white employees and never offered him a permanent contract despite him always being on time and doing excellent work. Although he mentioned the different treatments relating to skin colour, James never called it discrimination. Prompted about racism, he said that it's not a big deal anymore compared to what it was like when he arrived.

After working for some temporary employment agencies without getting into stable employment, James signed up for food delivery platforms instead. He preferred the work because he had much more freedom to decide when and for how long he wanted to work. He said it allowed him to spend time with his wife and daughters, and he enjoyed not having a supervisor. By combining different Apps and putting in the hours, he managed to earn enough to support his family. During busy times, when his daughters were in school, he worked up to 60 hours per week.

While he is happy with the job, he criticised the fact that the fees are generally too low, especially during the daytime. He believed that strikes could push companies to pay more because he heard about that in Spain, but he wouldn't go on strike himself because he couldn't miss out on the income. Also, since he hasn't seen any positive change in the UK, he doubts there will be pay increases, holiday pay or insurance. In the long run, James wants to get a Category C driving licence to return to logistics as a lorry driver. He hoped that way he would secure a permanent job.

When asked about class, James said that areas like the UK and Europe are much better and safer than most places in Africa. For him, being in a peaceful place was a significant improvement. He considered himself lucky to live in England: "I'm alive. I've got my family. I've got a job. I'm in a good place." He genuinely seemed to struggle with the concept of inequality. After some back and forth, he responded that he was simply thankful for what he had and didn't like people complaining. He referred to other couriers, who always complain no matter how much they earn. All James wants is peace and to feed his family. He emphasized that he was perfectly happy.

**II.** Another case who disidentified with class, Avi, also stressed that he was happy with his life and didn't think that class was relevant to it. However, Avi's disidentification was different; he did not generally deny the existence and relevance of inequality but rather naturalized and justified hierarchies while also making a point of his ability to improve his life further.

Avi is 45 years old and has worked as a food courier for eight years. He grew up in Columbia as the son of a secretary and a truck driver. After working as a carpenter for about ten years, he went to Spain to work in hotel catering. He was keen to leave the country because he disliked the political situation and didn't see a future in the Columbian labour market. He later

moved to the UK because he was hoping for better pay. In England, he worked for various fast-food companies before becoming a food courier. He enjoyed the work because of the autonomy and flexibility that it gave him. Avi liked the idea of being his own boss and controlling his hours and earnings. He was saving money to start his own food business in the future.

Asked about inequality, Avi was quick to say that inequality has always existed, framing it as a natural order. In his view, rich people have earned their money by working hard or being talented. He referred to top football players who get paid for their excellent performance. Avi also referred to Elon Musk to argue that people get wealthy because they invented useful things for others. According to Avi, everybody can become rich regardless of their social background:

“Definitely. You can become rich, and you can change your life; you can play the lottery. People can study. If I compare myself to other people from back home, then I earn more money, because I went away. If you want to make more money, you may have to move.”

Avi, 45, male, England, 8 years into the job

When he compared himself to people from his home country, he talked about his sister and her friends, who work in professional jobs but complain that they earn less than him. For Avi, the key to improving is to work hard and make sacrifices, which, in his case, meant leaving the country. Even having a family should not hold people back since they can leave them temporarily and bring them over later. Regarding the UK, he didn’t see any reason why people can’t have a good life:

“you don’t have an excuse to not go to university or get a job. You can get a student loan, and I see people looking for workers everywhere. People on benefits are just lazy people, and they would rather receive 70 pounds per week. But then don’t complain that other people are rich.”

When asked about inequality within Uber Eats, Avi was torn. He considered it unfair that he wasn’t paid more since the company could increase the fees. At the same time, he believed they also needed to make money as a business. He concluded that there wasn’t anything that he could do about it. He didn’t want to go on strike because he did not believe it would change much. Instead, he focussed on what he could do individually to improve his life. He holds on to his long-term plan to open his own business someday and doesn’t want to complain too much about things because he has come a long way and is proud of what he has achieved:

“I came here with nothing. So now I have my flat and my car and I can pay for all I need. So yeah.”

Two aspects play a role in James and Avi's disidentification. First, inequality becomes irrelevant against the background of other experiences in their life stories. Having improved their lives partly through their agency led them to downplay inequality. In James's case, it is surviving a violent conflict and starting a new life in a safer country. In Avi's case, migration plays a crucial role, too. Moving to Spain and the UK significantly improved his working and living situation. Second, they both have come to terms with the inequality around them, partly naturalising and justifying it or downplaying its relevance. They do not criticize and don't appreciate other people complaining. James believes change is unlikely, and Avi thinks change will only happen through individual action. Both their disidentifications are linked to a sense of resignation. Having no concept of or hope for a collective agency to create significant changes like improvements around pay, they focus on what they can do via their individual attitudes and agency. Both cases show that people's disidentifications with class and rejection of class relevance are not only closely connected to their sense of dignity and an attempt to construct a positive image of themselves and their lives but also to their perceptions of what is possible.

**III.** In the last type of disidentification, class is rejected as part of identity despite recognizing and questioning the legitimacy of class inequalities. As mentioned earlier, interviewees did not always distinguish between what is and what should be when talking about class. Their narratives about class and their self-positioning frequently conflate normative statements that inequalities should not exist with the wishful thinking of having overcome or circumvented class.

Tom's narrative exemplifies this, and while his case is specific, the same pattern is present in other interviewees who identify as middle class or disidentify with class. Tom is a 36-year-old courier in Manchester who fully recognized the existence of different classes and defined them by how many taxes people must pay. He speaks about the lower, middle, and upper classes but sees the main distinction between the rich, not paying taxes, and everyone else paying more the more they work and earn. Tom discussed inequality mainly around taxes and people not being allowed to live for free anymore because everything costs money. He organised his life and work, trying to stay out of that system as much as possible. His accounts of class are ambivalent. He partly recognizes that financially, he would be at the bottom, but considering how happy and content he is with life and how much he has experienced, he sees himself on top of the middle. Ultimately, he does not want to place himself in these hierarchies since, in his view, they should

not exist. Because he avoids links to institutions and governments and can easily do so by living on a canal boat, he described himself as outside of social class:

“To the side. I wouldn't say I'm even in it. I'd literally say I'm that little pocket at the side. I don't pay national insurance (...) I'm still not classed by the government; I'm not classed as having an address. But- (3) if I did have to pay and I was in the system (3) I don't know. I feel like from doing life the way that my head works, I always- I've got everything that I want. I don't- I'm. I'm- I am happy.”

Tom, 36, male, England, 2 years into the job

For Tom, this includes having a good relationship, owning his boat, and working in the way he wants. The self-employed courier work sits well with his attempt to live outside the system. After many negative experiences with employment and feeling exploited and unvalued, being his own boss is important to Tom to feel like he has achieved everything he wants. Since he did not want to make money for other people anymore, work more than what he was paid, and pay high taxes, while rich people don't, the self-employed work as a courier is like a way out for him. The flexibility allowed him to stay below the income tax threshold, and the autonomy lets him feel like he controls how he works.

In Tom's case, partial disidentification with class is a way to avoid defining oneself as working or lower class and associating oneself with the presumed lack of agency. He signals that he does not let himself be exploited by employers or via tax inequality but is taking himself out of the system. Not being an employee nor seeing himself as part of any social group, Tom does not consider collective approaches to change. Like James and Avi, he emphasizes his individual agency to achieve what he wants.

In some ways, Tom's narratives on class resemble those of couriers who identified as working class, especially since he acknowledged the existence and relevance of class differences. However, his focus on individual agency and his emphasis on the courier job's entrepreneurial aspects distinguish him.

His actual class position partly explains why he disidentifies with class rather than constructing a full middle- or working-class narrative. Tom does not come from a well-off, stable background, does not have higher education, and is not in what would generally be considered a comfortable financial situation. The fact that he gets by and is content with his life is insufficient to create a middle-class narrative. He recognizes this when he descriptively positioned himself at the bottom of the financial hierarchy. Unlike most couriers who identified as working class, he

does not have higher education or an alternative career plan or is involved in collective organizing. He tried to do his own thing without engaging with other couriers more than necessary.

#### *6.1.3.2 Summary of disidentification*

Overall, the rejection of class or refusal to identify comes from those in more vulnerable and disadvantaged situations in the sample. In distinction to the aspects that characterize middle and working-class identities, the disidentifications in this study are mainly constructed by those who lack convincing markers for a middle-class status but want to preserve a sense of agency and dignity that they presume to be undermined by a lower or working-class identity.

The disidentifications clearly have to do with the moral discourses that exist around class and reflect individualist narratives around self-responsibility and self-determination, as well as ideas about performance-based success in a meritocratic system. However, this is not only about questions of stigma associated with lower positions or virtues and deservingness associated with the middle. Disidentifications point to what is not associated with the working class and, thus, creates a misalignment of agency and class for all those who cannot convincingly create middle-class narratives or activate empowering working-class narratives. If they accept social hierarchies as a result of individual performance, as is suggested by hegemonic narratives, and position themselves at the bottom, they consequentially would have to frame themselves as failures. They would either admit to lacking the capacity to perform better or to being too lazy to do better.

A critical class narrative that recognizes the injustice of hierarchies but does not offer prospects for change is equally difficult to align with a positive self-image. Accepting that unfair social constraints shape the world and one's life without believing in change puts people in a fundamentally passive position. Thus, neither allows for an empowering narrative about oneself.

The disidentifications, even more clearly than the middle-class identifications, show how the couriers navigate their self-positioning between these options. They do so against the background of very different biographic contexts that open and obstruct different perspectives. As I showed in Avi's case the disidentification is an expression of a strong belief in meritocracy in which he emphasised his individual agency in alignment with his experience of migration and improvement of his economic situation. Avi and James share the experience of more severe degrees of inequality. While their accounts of class reflect ideological misrecognition of their

position in society, they also reflect the factual improvements that they made. Most importantly, they reflect scepticism and pessimism about collective/ structural change. This resignation either lets them overemphasise the opportunities to improve or makes them come to terms with inequality. In either case, complaints about it are not justified.

In those cases that legitimize social hierarchies as a result of individual performance, inequality is recognized, but the existence of social constraints and political reasons behind it are not. Instead, everyone is considered the maker of their own fortune. Interviewees who construct this line of thought present themselves as successful in that they have achieved a situation with which they are happy. They do not question those in better-off positions but consider their fortunes justified, and the lower position of others is seen as their own responsibility. Albeit similar to some middle-class accounts, this perspective is more extreme and does not acknowledge the role of social structure and constraints at all. Those who articulate it do not position themselves within a hierarchy or use any form of group-related categories to define their own situation. Because the narratives about inequality have strong moral implications for working and lower-class positions, interviewees who cannot convincingly construct a middle-class position based on their educational and material conditions can only preserve a narrative of agency and dignity by disidentifying.

This perspective is different from the second type of disidentification, which showed an unease about the moral connotations associated with social hierarchies. In the second version, interviewees do not engage with the question of individual agency or whether social constraints exist. They merely acknowledged the existence of differences and played down their relevance. Unlike those who identify as middle class but also try to avoid expressing judgements about people in lower class positions, those who refuse to identify do so because they cannot convincingly describe themselves as middle class. At the same time, they lack class language and empowering identifications as workers, which would allow them to construct a positive narrative about themselves that does not degrade them to passive victims. Consequently, these interviewees place themselves outside social hierarchies to maintain an image of themselves as contemptuous and in control of their lives. This perspective on and positioning in terms of class avoided making judgements about others and pre-empt judgements made about themselves.

The third type of disidentification equally allows workers to preserve a positive narrative about their own agency. While Tom's image of society did not cast negative moral judgement on

lower classes, a positioning outside of social hierarchies is nonetheless more empowering to him, who takes an individualist approach to dealing with problems of unfairness and inequality.

An empowering working-class identity was not available to those who avoided or rejected identification with the class for three reasons. First, they lack the education and abstract political perspectives that allow others to question meritocratic beliefs and identify structural constraints that take responsibility, thus creating negative moral connotations for their social position while also preserving their sense of individual agency. Second, they have, in most cases, not had positive collective experience in the sense of a workplace community or a community of resistance, which could foster a sense of collective agency. Third, they have core biographic experiences that are more central to constructing their identities, which are difficult to align with class narratives.

## 6.2 Conclusion

To conclude, the chapter showed how the couriers identify in terms of class and what these identifications mean. It distinguished different aspects that characterise the working- and middle-class identifications as well as disidentifications in this study. Based on these aspects, I argue that the working class and middle class are not in the same way categories to position oneself within the social hierarchy but are qualitatively different. While both categories are used as descriptors of socioeconomic differences, middle-class identifications label an individual situation and aspirations. In contrast, most working-class identifications are not simple descriptors of oneself but signal a sense of a shared situation. Rather than prioritising boundary drawing, working-class identifications evolve around and prioritise similarities within a group. While this does not always translate into a profound sense of belonging, it indicates community in some form.

While the disidentifications shared aspects of middle- and working-class identifications, there were noticeable differences. Those who disidentify usually weren't from middle-class backgrounds and lacked markers to construct a middle-class status convincingly. Disidentification was a way to preserve agency and dignity in their self-image, while it was also a reflection of the difficulties of aligning biographic experiences of improvement and agency with class narratives.

Various case samples illustrated how moral connotations of class, questions of agency and dignity, and different work and life contexts influence the constructions of class identities.

The specific work context and the biographic meaning of the job were relevant to how interviewees identified. The type of work and the labour process were less important to part-time and temporary couriers with alternative career paths. However, the novel experience of flexibility and autonomy facilitated disidentification and identification as middle class for those who settled in the job for longer. The specific labour process, particularly in the UK context, removed them from experiences of direct hierarchies, and the felt level of control over working times and earnings presented an overall improvement for many, making them feel like they were their own boss.

This experience of agency in the job, together with other biographic experiences of agency, offered interviewees a way to construct middle-class belonging or disidentification with class who otherwise would have struggled to construct positive class identifications. Those in disadvantaged situations, especially, could not access positive identifications as working or lower class. For those with few choices in the labour market, the job presented an improvement that suggested a form of upward social mobility and, thus, a middle-class position or even an overcoming of class.

Working-class identifications, on the other hand, were more strongly related to the physical strain and risk of the job, as well as to low income and a sense of community. The differences within working-class identifications showed that a middle-class background, higher education, and participation in collective action allowed interviewees to adopt the label of workers or couriers as an empowering identity. Others were more hesitant or descriptive in their identification with the working class and also had to negotiate questions of stigma and self-responsibility.

The chapter showed that working-class identifications are not evenly distributed across the sample. Few UK couriers identified as working class, which may be partly rooted in the sample bias but may also be linked to the high degree of autonomy as self-employees in the UK.

Some further general observations can be made. Middle-class positions - even when neither reproduced financially nor status vice - still stick. Couriers identified as middle-class based on education or the safety net provided by their parents. In contrast, working-class positions were presumed to be overcome easily. Minor improvements in education, living

standards, or working conditions were enough for interviewees to consider themselves above the working class.

Further, prolonged phases of adolescence and multiplied periods of transitions presented a challenge to people when describing their class position. Even interviewees in their late twenties and early thirties felt they had not arrived at a stage where they could define their class position independently from their parents' socio-economic situation.

While class identity relies on comparison with other people, the range of contrast is limited within the social classes one has contact with. In cases in which interviewees described a homogenous upbringing, but also in many other cases, their image of class relied partly on first-hand experiences of differences and commonalities but, to a large degree, used second-hand information and assumptions. In most interviews, the poor and rich remained abstract and sometimes entirely absent. These parts of the picture, where actual contact and experience are missing, were filled in with narratives predominantly shaped by cultural and media representations and broader ideological narratives in the forms of stereotypes. While this was most obviously reflected by the references to prominent entrepreneurial figures and their success stories as self-made millionaires, it showed in many small and less tangible ways throughout the interviews.

Reflecting on these meanings of class identifications and disidentifications in the face of theoretical definitions suggested by Wright, three things can be stated with class identity being defined by class content or class pertinent effects. There is little class content in a Marxist sense of concrete accounts about private ownership or exploitation. However, interviewees defined class in general and their position through market-related perceptions of inequality, which align with Weberian conceptions of class. A sense of disadvantage and exclusion or privilege was more prominent across middle- and working-class identifications. However, regarding class-pertinent effects, the sense of a shared struggle and the concrete experiences of collective resistance as a class practice were relevant to the working-class identifications.

The analysis of class identification and the boundary drawing towards other workers also raised questions about the role of ideology and employment relations in prompting lines of conflict between workers. While Henry's insistence on fair competition was exceptional within the sample, the boundary drawing towards rule-breakers was not. Others, like Brian, discussed the different approaches to the job more neutrally, and a couple of couriers expressed explicit

criticism. Since such boundary drawing was not present in the German sample, this may indicate that solo-self-employment and stronger exposure to market forces prompt these internal cleavages. In this sense, the competition within the UK workforce could be considered a factor that impedes the formation of collective identification among self-employed workers. However, the data also indicate that more than an actual competitive situation between solo self-employed workers, it is internalized ideas of order, meritocracy, and fairness that led couriers to perceive a conflict between themselves and those with other approaches to the job. This was shown in Billy's case, who drew strong boundaries towards rule-breakers despite identifying as a worker. However, for him, the problem wasn't with any advantage or disadvantage. He did not worry that other couriers would cost him rides, as Henry did, but was unhappy with the neglect of the existing order.

The following chapter builds on these findings and discusses in more detail what biographical and national comparative factors shape how couriers in this sample identified with class.

## Chapter 7: What Shapes Class Identity

Having shown what characterises middle- and working-class identities, this chapter moves on to demonstrate what aids and obstructs the collective identification as working class.

To enquire about class identity is essentially to ask whether an individual class subject is conscious of their own identity and common interests as a class. This ultimately aims at understanding whether there is a possibility for unity among different sections of the working class to identify wholly or partly as working class and recognise their common interest, e.g., an end to exploitation, alienation, exclusion, and oppression.

The prior chapters have emphasised the heterogeneity of the workforce, pointing out different backgrounds, pathways, levels of dependency on the courier job, and prospects in the labour market. These various situations explain to a degree why some interviewees see themselves as middle class and others describe themselves as workers. However, across the sample, there was by no means a linear relationship between the interviewee's class background or current class position and their self-identification. Instead, what has been indicated in Chapters Five and Six is that the ways of identifying do not entirely relate to objective criteria and are partly not consistent with the criteria interviewees used to describe the structure of society. Instead, class identification is, in many ways, a question of relative evaluation. In short, identifications are subjective. Interviewees negotiate objective criteria and their subjective experience to evaluate their own situation and position. To do so, they draw on various experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of themselves and the world they live in. As the prior chapters pointed out, class identifications are interwoven with different ideological narratives. This confirms what other research has shown with much elaboration, that the different social positions and their supposed causes carry moral connotations (Lamont, 2000; Sayer, 2005; Trappmann, Seehaus, et al., 2021; Halewood, 2023).

However, neither class position, ideologies, dependence on income from work, nor educational and skill levels explain why some identify as workers and others do not. The chapter's centre is the question of which other experiences and conditions play into the couriers' self-perception in class terms. It asks what stands out in the accounts of those couriers who emphasise the need to work for a living, the strenuous character and low pay of their work, injustices, and a sense of a shared situation and struggle. The chapter gives evidence of

conditions and experiences which shape their perceptions of class and create a sense of unity and shared identity.

Following the conceptualization of class identity as an element of class consciousness, this chapter also sheds light on its interrelation with other elements of class consciousness. As laid out in the theoretical chapter, class identity is understood to be dialectically interrelated with five other elements that together constitute class consciousness.

The class identity of a subject dialectically relates to their class experiences and perceptions of class relations and class conflict. It is, thus, linked to an individual's assessment of the extent of upward mobility (permeability) and their view on the necessity and desirability of the class system ([withdrawal of] legitimacy). It links to whether someone is discontent about existing power relations, e.g., expressed as perceptions of conflicts at work or in general life (class conflict). Further, class identity relates to a subject's perceptions of the overall class structure or the extent of inequality. As well as their view of an alternative society or the question of what kind of change they consider desirable and attainable. In the following, I indicate where specific experiences and conditions shape class identity but are also formative of perceptions of conflict, class relations, structure, or evaluations of alternatives and change.

The chapter is organised into two parts, the first presenting biographical and the second national comparative factors that influence how interview participants identify in terms of class. It shows how wider biographic experiences, national contexts and experiences of collective resistance may encourage or consolidate working-class identities. It provides a broader perspective to understand class identification in a way that acknowledges the relative and subjective experiences of structural conditions. It also provides a better understanding of conditions and experiences that allow different ideological narratives to take root.

### 7.1 Biographic factors

This first part of the chapter lays out the relationship between three biographic experiences and the interviewee's identification. It first demonstrates how experiences of social constraints and social downward mobility encourage identifications as working class. Then, it thoroughly analyses how migration experiences discourage couriers from seeing themselves as workers unless a middle-class status is questioned by a sense of incongruence caused by an outside perception of a foreigner and experiences of racism.

These experiences stood out across the interviews - often prominently in the biographic narrations and interviewee's accounts on class and inequality. A sense of agency and structure, for example, which is reflected in the experience of social constraints, was often indicated right in the first part of the interviews when research participants constructed their life stories. Similarly, experiences of migration and social mobility came up in interviewees' narrations about their lives, their answers on how they saw their own position within society, and also when talking about how they came to work as couriers.

Essentially, all these experiences go hand in hand with certain perceptions of class relation: the extent of upward mobility and the question of whether a class system was considered legitimate. Those who experience social constraints see limited upward mobility and question the legitimacy of social inequality. For interviewees who experienced downward social mobility, the picture is more complex since some of them see their socio-economic descent as a result of their own decisions. Nonetheless, they tend to question the legitimacy of social hierarchies.

Social inequality is not legitimised by those who question their middle-class identifications due to a sense of status incongruence resulting from devaluing outside perceptions.

By presenting these different experiences in relation to class identification, this part of the chapter shows the relevance of wider life experiences for class identity, which is not separate from but goes beyond the concrete experiences of the workplace and job characteristics.

#### 7.1.1 Experiences of Social Constraints

Many events and developments reported in the interviews indicate that social constraints were shaping interviewees' lives, that their choices were limited, and that external conditions shaped their decision-making processes.

However, most constraints weren't interpreted as such by the interviewees themselves. Few couriers in this sample deliberately portrayed events or circumstances in their lives as something that prevented them from moving forward. This was already indicated earlier in the case of Geno, who reluctantly described himself as working class but did not see obstacles in his life as structural constraints but as a result of his own capacities and attitudes. As shown in the prior chapter, middle-class identifications and disidentifications mainly went hand in hand with narratives about aspirations and agency rather than emphasising limitations or obstacles.

In contrast, several couriers who identified as working class described how they felt held back by external conditions and expressed a sentiment of unfairness or injustice. Most of these interviewees also described their own situation as somewhat disadvantaged.

Interviewees experienced social constraints in various ways. They talked about the *educational system* and the rigid rules and pathways that structure educational trajectories, not leaving space for deviation. This came up in various interviews across the whole sample. One German interviewee, in particular, felt he was being denied educational chances. After he had left high school and later, at 19, felt ready and focused enough to finish his qualification for higher education, regulation didn't allow him to pick up education in a way that was accessible to him.

The same interviewee pointed out the *lack of welfare support for young people* in Germany. He saw lots of support for university students but not for someone like him who had left home early, had to make a living, but tried to get back into education and training. He considered himself and other people in his situation to be unfairly disadvantaged.

The state was also experienced as unjust and constraining through *institutional racism*. Being classed differently and not treated equally, even after obtaining citizenship, was experienced as limiting personal life chances. In other cases, *racist discrimination* in application processes was experienced as a constraint for career development and discouraged personal ambitions.

Some interviewees, especially self-funded students, also experienced it as a constraint in their lives that most companies paid very little for side jobs. The trade-off of valuable time to earn barely enough income to scrape by was considered unjust. The lack of a sufficient financial income also caused considerable stress, which made it difficult to focus on other things in life, including main tasks like studying. *Low pay* was here framed as something that causes other problems in life and thereby could hold someone back from realising plans and ambitions.

In the cases in which interviewees felt that they were constrained or held back by laws or stereotypes, interviewees addressed the problems mainly to the state as regulator and responsible caretaker, and only in some cases to companies or employers.

In one case, the criticism of institutional racism was directed against a more general "they", which seemed to refer to either politicians or the majority group of white Germans. David, a 36-year-old master's student from the west of Africa who raised this issue, generally felt that he and other migrants were not taken seriously. His biographical narration and reflections on

class and politics were a testament to his struggle and suffering while trying to gain a foothold in Germany. David debunked the promise of equal rights through citizenship as a “bluff”, a sham, an empty promise. Reflecting on the reasons behind these inequalities, he pondered whether there was an active intention to make the lives of immigrants difficult: “*Sometimes I have the impression that they want us to suffer even more. I have this impression.*”. Although David had been working hard for the past years and had invested a lot to do a master’s degree in Germany, he could not get his wife to join him, and thus, the couple had to further and further delay their plan to start a family. Rather than progressing, David struggled to make enough money to finance himself and his studies and pay for flights home whilst also sending support to his wife and parents. Despite his attitude and efforts, he felt that he couldn’t realise his plan to build a career and life in Germany and instead was constantly trying to get by with what he had. Whilst he was disappointed and readjusted his expectations, David was by no means fully coming to terms with the inequality and constraints he experienced. Although he was disillusioned and tired from his struggle, he remained angry and fundamentally criticised inequality as a result of politics and capitalism. David did not simply identify as a worker but also described himself as a “victim of the system”. His interview clearly showed how recognising the role of social inequality, social constraints, and injustice in one's own life aligns with an identification at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Whilst this identification in David’s case is not empowering, it points to a shared experience and an abstract community of other immigrants. Besides the immigration restrictions, David's perception and identification are also linked to his experience working as a low-paid courier because he struggled to find other work despite having a higher education. He did not enjoy the physical aspects of the work but felt held back by the fact that he could not get a job as a student assistant or in the industry that matched his qualifications.

Those who raised constraining injustices and addressed them to responsible actors all identified as working class or saw themselves further down the social hierarchy.

In other cases, interviewees raised issues of inequality and injustice without assigning any responsibilities to a person, group, or institution but framing them as a result of bad luck or fate. These cases either identified as middle class or did not identify in terms of class.

Interviewees here talked about their *family background* being constraining, either because of the low financial support they could offer compared to other families or because of conflictual family relationships that negatively impacted their educational trajectory. The different capacities

of families to offer financial support were also brought up about career trajectories. Being provided with a car and money for a driving license, which allows access to work and training opportunities further away, was considered a privilege only available for some. Consequently, it was seen as an advantage that helped some progress faster than others who had to work for these things first. The financial situation of oneself and one's family was also brought up regarding access to healthcare, emphasising that quicker access to services – particularly for mental health concerns – could shorten sick leave and thus again improve chances to progress education, training, or career.

One participant considered disparities in IQ and their implications for employment and income prospects unfair. He criticised that even when showing goodwill and effort, not everybody could achieve higher education certificates and, hence, have access to the same chances. Interestingly, different ability and capability levels were rarely brought up in the interviews.

An example here is the German courier, Lars. Although he recognised inequality as a social problem and described several aspects of his life in which he felt unfairly disadvantaged when reflecting on his class position, he didn't frame these circumstances and experiences as matters of wider inequality or injustice, let alone labelling them with specific class language. Instead of identifying as a worker or lower class, Lars constructed a middle-class identity based on the postmaterialist attitudes that made him content with a simple life and his ability to budget.

Nonetheless, Lars was actively involved in labour resistance. In his view, demanding better equipment and pay was asking for what was reasonable and already legally required rather than a big political issue. Unlike other cases introduced before, Lars' participation in collective action wasn't rooted in deeper political motivations but in a perception of conflict in the workplace that he wanted to stay in for the long run. The labour resistance in the courier job was his first point of contact with political debates around work, and he had only started to learn and think about class inequality very recently, wanting to read more about it. The courier protests present a starting point in his political socialisation, which may or may not evolve into consistent political views and class identification in the future. At the point of the interview, Lars did not assign any responsibility for the unfair constraints he felt throughout his life. His discontent and complaint focused entirely on workplace issues in which he expected the platform company to

provide better working conditions for its employees and the state to enforce existing legal regulations to protect employees.

His case exemplifies two things that were also present in other interviews: Problems at work and social inequalities are not necessarily understood to be connected, and social inequality may be experienced and considered unfair without any actor being considered responsible. This suggests that in the absence of class language as a tool to frame perceived problems as conflicts, critical views may foster identification with colleagues but not working-class identity in the broader sense.

Considering ideas about the processual development of class consciousness, Lars' account may be understood as a fragmented class consciousness (Goldthorpe/ Wright?). In Lenin's perspective, such awareness is described as *workplace consciousness* in which perceptions of class conflict are limited to the work context without connecting to a wider perspective of social inequality and class (Lenin, 1960).

Accountability may be relevant here since it implies that what is experienced as unfair is not out of one's control but the result of a decision-making process and, thus, open for change. The relevance of responsibility and prospects for change is also reflected in the kind of constraints the couriers brought up—most relating to the state and few addressing the platforms they worked for or other businesses. Most of the above-mentioned experiences of constraints can be classified as experiences of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion rather than experiences of exploitation.

There are many reasons why exploitation might be less in focus when interviewees in this sample talk about their life and work experiences. One potential reason is the age and life stage of many interviewees. Most couriers in the sample are relatively young and, so far, have spent more time in education than in the labour market, let alone working for one company. These interviewees have more experience with the educational system's hierarchies and problems than with working conditions, let alone in different workplaces. Another reason might be that there is an *expectation towards the state to fulfil a duty of care*, which has been disappointed. The state and economy are widely treated as different spheres and different expectations of justice and fairness are directed towards the state but are not applied to businesses and markets in the same way. In fact, few interviewees expressed strong expectations towards companies to provide fair

pay or working conditions. Also, more than private companies, the state as a democratic institution may be considered within one's zone of influence.

This analysis of the experiences of social constraints and their relation to working-class identifications illuminates the intricate web of class identity and other elements of class consciousness. The experience of inequality and justice in the form of social constraints is present in most cases, in those who identify as workers, and in some who disidentify with class. While they clearly shape identifications as workers, other aspects are relevant too.

It matters whether these constraints are merely framed as problems but not as conflicts in which one side can be held responsible. It thus goes hand in hand with a perception of class conflicts. The question of accountability also indicates that it matters whether such constraints are considered avoidable and whether change is considered possible and within one's scope of action. Whether and how interviewees envision alternatives thus also matters for whether and how experiences of social constraint shape a collective identity as part of the working class.

The question of desirable and attainable change may also explain why interviewees bring up social constraints in relation to the state rather than experiences of exploitation relating to business and markets. However, the effects of ideology are also clearly present. The economy and businesses are not seen to be subjected to moral and ethical standards and rules in the same way. Hence, there is an underlying acceptance of the free market logic of competition and profit-making, which conceals exploitation and makes low pay and over-hours appear necessary for businesses.

Why experiences of constraints were more present in the German data is further discussed in the second part of the chapter on national comparative factors.

### 7.1.2 Experiences of social mobility

How couriers in the sample identified in terms of class was closely tied to their own sense of relative improvement or worsening of their situation. Interviewees who felt that they did not reproduce the socio-economic status they observed in their close environments but felt their position was changing for the worse were acutely aware of social inequality and mostly adopted working-class identities. Interviewees who experienced upward social mobility in any form or thought that they managed to reproduce a socio-economic position similar to that of their parents and peers identified as middle class.

The analysis indicates that the individual sense of social mobility is crucial in shaping interviewees' class identity. It points towards their overall perception of agency and structure when evaluating their own place in society and is thus closely linked to the prior section on social constraints and the question of what role the courier job plays in their life courses.

The interviewees who experienced social downward mobility mainly came from educated and affluent backgrounds. Being conscious that they were less well-off than their parents and peers, some described a feeling of falling behind. Some also expressed a sense of status incongruence, having reproduced educational achievements but not financial stability.

Narratives of having “fallen behind” were mainly prominent among interviewees whose trajectories were either characterised by a lack of orientation during their education or transition into the labour market or who left a more stable or promising path of work or education. While people had various reasons to divert from former pathways, in several cases, stress, burnout, and mental health concerns played a role in their decision to re-orientate and work as food couriers.

These experiences of falling behind and the sense of status incongruence were closely intertwined. While many of these interviewees had higher education, they considered themselves in a “lower position in financial terms” and often framed this as the result of their “own decision”, “own fault, or “own responsibility”.

This was, for example, the case for the 38-year-old Tia, the union organiser mentioned in the prior chapter. Asked how she sees herself in comparison to other people of her age, she emphasised the difference between her and former classmates:

“Everyone I went to school with is some kind of professional now, but, you know (3) much more than me I am like, way down on the like- (.) I'm riding a bike, delivering pizza, kind of thing. So yeah, but I didn't think that's because I was disadvantaged or anything. I think that's like a product of various choices that I've made.”

Tia, 38, female, Germany, 1,5 years into the job

Tia was conscious that working part-time as a courier was not something that a lack of other opportunities had forced her into, but setting personal and political priorities meant that she was delaying the completion of her PhD and thus delaying and minimising her career prospects. Despite recognising her middle-class upbringing, Tia identified as working class, partly for political reasons but also because it presented her lived reality for the past five years of financing her studies through fixed-term part-time jobs, including manual labour as a courier. Her experience of downward mobility was intertwined with the experience of being a migrant in

Germany, lacking crucial language skills and networks to further her career and access better jobs that reflect her level of qualifications. Despite having prospects for higher-skilled jobs and her class identification partially being a political statement, the sense of social downward mobility of doing low-paid service work while her childhood peers and family members were in well-paid professional jobs played into Tia's identification as precarious workers.

Her case illustrates that a sense of having fallen behind can promote identification with the lower spectrum of the social hierarchy, even when it is considered the result of one's own choices.

In other cases, couriers who felt their socio-economic situation had deteriorated and considered themselves part of the working class did not feel this was their own responsibility. Janneck, for example, although he enjoyed the courier job in many ways and was collectively fighting for better conditions, he did not want to work as a full-time food courier at this point in his life. If it weren't for the financial struggle, he'd instead finish his A-levels and start an apprenticeship. Getting back into education to improve his prospects was difficult since he would have to train and make an income. His sense of downward mobility was not something he considered his own fault. He felt that family conflicts and the structure of the educational system had put him in an unfavourable situation:

„Well, back then, it's not like I said, oh, I want to move out. I would rather have worked for two years and contributed to the rent rather than, like now, having 600 Euros overhead costs..... If I were to start evening school now, I could only work during the daytime and only for about 30 hours, that would be something like 1000 Euros. After paying rent and bills, I would have less than someone on Hartz IV.”

Janneck, 21, male, Germany, 3 years into the job

Janneck had many positive associations with the courier job because it helped him become financially independent when he had to move out from home and gave him a sense of recognition and community. However, he also felt that by continuing to work as a courier, he was further and further postponing his way back into education and expressed a feeling of being behind his former peers from school. While he didn't keep in touch, from scrolling through social media, he gathered that most had moved on to different kinds of lives, going to university, travelling or doing holidays abroad, and overall “making their own way”. At the same time, he felt stuck and struggled to move forward. Janneck's case illustrates how the feeling of having fallen behind by having to stick with courier work instead of progressing one's skills and

prospects plays into the identification as working class. Janneck did not have pre-existing leftist political beliefs like Tia, which led him to join the labour resistance. For him, the sense of downward mobility, combined with the experience of structural constraints in the form of a restrictive educational system and lacking welfare support, developed a sense of injustice. He talks about his experiences of social inequality in life without any explicit class language but clearly expresses a sense of injustice. This and his clear perception of conflicts at work make him identify as working class and with other people in disadvantaged positions even though he does not use explicit class language like other activists.

These two examples show different emphases on agency and structure in explaining social mobility in one's life and thus in shaping one's life course and position within society. Among the 8 cases in the sample who felt that they had fallen behind, only Janneck and one other case saw this as a matter of social injustice rather than a result of their own actions. Their experiences of social downward mobility and social constraints gave them a tangible understanding of what it meant to live in environments with lower economic standards, to be disadvantaged and to reach the limits of one's agency. Their identification as workers or couriers was mainly rooted in their experiences of social downward mobility in combination with the feeling of being held back by factors mostly outside their control.

Other cases that expressed a clear sense of downward social mobility either did not talk about specific reasons or saw their situation mainly as a matter of self-responsibility. These interviewees still constructed middle-class identities unless other additional factors like political views encouraged a working-class identity, as in the case of Tia and another German interviewee, Theo. However, these couriers had either complex cases of upward and downward mobility or saw their current situation as temporary and felt they had the necessary skills and qualifications to switch to better-paying work if they wanted to. This shows again that the biographic and temporal perspectives are crucial for understanding class identity and that a working-class identity is adopted by those who have doubts about whether they can improve their situation considerably.

In contrast, couriers who experienced some level of social upward mobility generally played down inequality, emphasised their own agency, and identified as middle class. Those who managed to improve their situation came from working-class backgrounds and were either second or first-generation migrants. Whilst each of these cases had indeed bettered their

situation, half of them neither had an education or income level in line with any standard definition of middle-class (Oesch, 2006; Savage et al., 2013; Williams, 2017; National Office of Statistics, 2021). However, they saw a clear distinction between their situation and their parents' manual labour jobs, low-income, or cultural environment, and this in itself aligned with their idea of having achieved a position in the middle class.

Another group of cases, also with migrant backgrounds, who had not clearly improved their situation but rather reproduced a similar socio-economic standard to their parents in a different country, still subjectively felt that they were much better off than their parents or former peers. They, too, de-emphasized social inequality and identified as middle-class.

In fact, most interviewees in the sample had neither notably moved up nor down but had reproduced a socio-economic position similar to that of parents or peers to which they compared themselves. Within this group, those from a traditional working-class background described themselves as workers or working class, and interviewees from higher educated and affluent backgrounds identified as middle-class.

These findings show that the sense of social mobility is crucial for class identification, and that it is strongly shaped by concrete experiences that put a perspective on social inequality.

Based on the data, this sense of social mobility can be understood as a construct evolving around various factors: *Firstly*, the prospects that interviewees see for themselves or where they see themselves heading; *secondly*, whether they see this as an improvement or as a change for the worse in comparison to relevant others like their family or peers, and *thirdly*, the causality that they assign to changes or continuities in their socio-economic situation – whether they consider it a result of their individual agency or structural conditions.

The analysis here also shows that a person's status quo has limited relevance for their self-identification regarding class. The sense of social mobility expresses the important temporal dimension of class identification. It accounts for how someone's evaluation of their current situation relates to their view of their past and future. The sense of mobility reflects the question of whether an individual feels like they are only temporarily in a situation, perhaps considering it a phase or step on the way somewhere else and are thus less likely to identify with it, or whether they are experiencing a more profound, lasting change that considerably shapes their living situation and perception of themselves. The subjective perception of social mobility is particularly interesting and relevant in the context of this specific group of workers, for one,

because of the heterogeneity of the food courier workforce in terms of background, education, dependency, and prospects, and secondly, because they reflect an increasingly fragmented work and life trajectories of many people in western welfare states. In heterogeneous workforces with fragmented trajectories, the sense of social mobility varies perhaps more than in other workforces and thus affects whether this workforce can form a collective class identification.

The concrete experiences someone has on the job define their everyday work and life to a certain degree. But beyond this, the job has relevance in a temporary perspective. It may present a goal, a transition, a mere sidestep, a new start or an unintended endpoint, and thereby can have very different meanings within a person's biography. This was laid out in Chapter Five and is strongly reflected here in how social mobility shapes the courier's class identities. Equally, the job's character and income potential are relevant compared to interviewees' standards and expectations as they are defined by their social background, peers, and prior experiences. The sense of social mobility expresses whether this job has overall relevance in their lives and if it presents an improvement or a worsening of their overall situation. It also reflects how their situation and broader trajectory came about – an evaluation of how interviewees see the role of structural conditions and individual agency in shaping their lives and their position within society.

To summarise, the perspective of social mobility plays a vital role in understanding the class identification of the interviewees in this sample. It goes beyond considering where people are now and considers their sense of where they are coming from, where they are heading, and whether this is influenced mainly by themselves or other factors. Commonly used markers like the level of education and income that people use to define their class position are meaningful as expressions of the momentary status quo as a fixed place in a social hierarchy. They are, however, most relevant when contextualised within the individual's biographic experiences and understood within the temporal continuum of past and future.

### 7.1.3 Experiences of Migration

As mentioned above, migration experiences in most interview cases were associated with a sense of social upward mobility and, thus, with middle-class identifications. This section will trace this in more detail and show what is different in those cases in which interviewees with experiences of migration question their middle-class identity or identify as working class.

Interview participants in this sample had migrated to Germany or the UK from states with higher inequality, less regulation, and less social and employment security. The data show that most interviewees perceived their migration into a wealthier and less unequal country as improving their socio-economic situation. This perceived social upward mobility suggested to them that they've reached a middle-class position.

When asked whether they thought that class still mattered and how they saw their own situation, their answers reflected their migration experience. Considering their position in society, interviewees emphasised that migration itself had already improved their situation or was expected to do so. In cases of involuntary migration in which interviewees were forced to emigrate as refugees, other criteria became comparably more relevant than questions of relative inequality – for example, physical safety and predictability in the new country presented fundamental improvements that made class differences appear secondary or negligible.

In other cases, in which migration was pursued voluntarily to seek a better financial standard of living, interviewees felt that their situation had improved because they could switch to a different trade or earn more and make savings. In some cases, migration was experienced during childhood. These Interviewees compared their trajectory and situation with their parents, who came as workers to a new country and had to work hard to build a life for themselves. Against their parents' struggle, interviewees considered their own trajectory easier. They felt privileged to have language skills and access to education and professional jobs, which, for them, too, suggested that they were middle-class or on the way to becoming middle-class. The improvements in overall inequality and the living situation didn't need to be significant. Two interviewees migrated from the UK to Germany, and the comparably minor improvements in employment status and sick pay were noticeable enough for the interviewees to consider themselves in a better position.

This overall sense of improvement due to migration was not without contradiction. Whilst interviewees emphasised financial improvement or chances for development, some also talked about downsides. Three international students in the German sample from comfortable middle-class backgrounds in their home countries spoke about the loss of status they experienced when coming to Europe. Although they were successful and ambitious master students and studied towards professional career paths, they were seen and treated as foreigners. All three had, to some degree, been looked down upon by others and treated with dismissal. One of these three

is David, who was mentioned above and for whom the struggle in Germany made him consider himself not only as down in the social hierarchy but also as a victim of capitalism and institutional racism.

The interview shows that his expectations of Germany and the life he would be able to build there were deeply disappointed. Feeling treated like a “second-class citizen” fuelled his critical view of inequality and his social position. Despite almost having finished his degree, in the face of a constant struggle, a middle-class identification did not make sense to him, unlike most other interviewees with migrant backgrounds.

The other students, Afik and Dhaval, considered themselves part of the middle but felt tension between their self-perception identification as middle-class and the outside perception as foreigners, resulting in their treatment as lower class.

All three master students with migrant backgrounds in the German sample came with the expectation that migration - whilst being a chance for personal and career development - would also be a significant economic investment rather than an instant improvement of their financial situation. All three depended on courier work to finance study fees, visas, and living costs. The two students who encountered comparably fewer difficulties relating to their migrant status preserved their perception of themselves as middle-class, linking it to their educational achievements, their prospects for economic gains and a sense of self-fulfilment in their respective career paths. However, even for those two, everyday life experiences as foreigners in Germany challenged this identification (to different degrees) and created a sense of status incongruence.

Dhaval, for example, a courier in Ulm in his mid-twenties, describes how in his home country, India, he and his family see themselves as middle cast but that it does not matter much in their life. They are still common, as he says, and hang out with people from different casts and different religions. Dhaval says that in India and Germany, it’s now all about the difference between the poor and the rich. Many people compare themselves and think that they are not enough and aspire to a particular style of consumption. Regarding his class position, Dhaval describes that it’s all irrelevant in Germany because his status as a foreigner is always foregrounded:

“When I come to Germany, it’s not happening; there is no cast system, zero. But what I am facing is- people call me *Auslaender* [foreigner]. They are classifying me. They have a classification. They think of me as alien because we came from outside of Germany. They

see us as outsiders. We are not the same culture, we have not the same colour. We are not the same at all. Easily, they can identify me as *Auslaender* when I walk somewhere or sit somewhere.”

Dhaval, 26, male, Germany, 2 years into the job

To Dhaval, being seen as “Auslaender” goes hand in hand with a perception of his economic class position. He describes many situations in which he experienced discrimination, was avoided, or looked down upon. He points out the role of clothing and how his appearance led people to treat him differently. A shopkeeper near campus who would greet everyone but him and his Indian friends suddenly became friendly and polite when he had finally saved a bit of money and got a fresh haircut and a new jacket. While he felt that it was very offensive how she had ignored them before, even when they said “Good day”, Dhaval had worse. He described how people in public transport judged him by how he looked and what he was wearing, seemed to associate him with trouble and were afraid of him. He feels people don’t sit near him on the train but are always a bit further away. While he does not blame them because he can comprehend their thoughts and fears considering the stories and images in the media, he still feels the judgement:

“They don’t think that about someone who wears a Gucci or even a Zara jacket that they may hurt them or could kill them. You look nice, you look stylish. But if I wear a black jacket, black beanie, and backpack, and maybe you have a wound on your hand, they think, ‘Of course, he must have gotten into a robbery. Of course.’ ((laughs)). I try to be myself and show people myself and that they are safe with me. .... But that’s how it is: classification going on. Maybe there is a fear. That’s how I feel in Germany. They say we are not racist, but in their mind, they have a specific thing in their head. ‘You came from another land; why are you working here?’

To Dhaval, describing his class position in Germany is impossible without considering how others perceive him because there is a fundamental gap between who he knows he is, and what people think of him and the country he comes from. He had to assure people that it was not all like in “Slumdog Millionaire”, and he needed to justify what he was doing in Germany, not only to Germans but also to European immigrants who consider him a foreigner despite their own migration background. His case illustrates that his perception of his own position and status in society was questioned by his status as a migrant in Germany, which made it more difficult for him to keep up the idea of being part of the middle of society.

The other student, Afik, who was 29 years old and from Bangladesh, also struggled with the financial difficulties of being an international student and being classed as a foreigner.

Despite coming from an educated family of professionals and generally seeing himself as middle class, he, too, felt devalued due to stereotypes and not being able to have the easy and outgoing lifestyle that other students had. He described that, at times, people did not treat him as equal and had ‘biases’ against him because he was from a South Asian country. Nobody in his program would help him when he encountered difficulties with the language. While he kept up the identification as middle class, he recognised the challenges and hardships of his time in Germany:

“And at times, I feel it's better to either be really, really poor or really, really rich because, from a middle-class family, I can't apply for the scholarships; they think we can work. And so we are working, but then again, we cannot study more properly, you don't get extra studies. So, it was hard. (...) But currently, the current situation is really, really bad. ... We are always having financial troubles, everyone, ... if you are a student here in Germany, you'll always face financial troubles.”

Afik, 29, male, Germany, 1 year into the job

At the beginning of the interview, when talking about his upbringing and education in Bangladesh, the comforts and privileges of being middle class are emphasised. However, when he talked about his time in Germany, the middle class is increasingly characterised by hard work and constant struggle. Afik's case, just as Dhavals's, shows that migration not experienced as upward mobility may challenge the identification with the middle class or require a reinterpretation of what it means to be middle class.

In the context of migration experiences, the middle-class identity may also be understood as a retrospective justification for experienced difficulties and hardship and a way to create a coherent and positive story of a successful migration. The data indicated that interviewees who voluntarily pursued migration at an adult age to improve their situation felt a need to justify their decision, and this context found a middle-class identification to be more coherent with their overall narration of themselves. At the same time, those who came out of necessity emphasised gratefulness for their situation, which is potentially another reason for their self-positioning in the middle of society. In both voluntary and involuntary cases of migration, moving to and settling in a new country came at various costs. Besides the above-mentioned forms of discrimination that some experienced, many also faced a devaluation of their skills and certificates and encountered challenges around the acquisition of language skills.

Additionally, the migration went hand in hand with social and cultural uprooting and thus a dis-embedding from peer and family contexts. Depending on the person and their unique

migration routes, this could be more or less difficult. As mentioned in Chapter Six, Avi, for example, considered it necessary to make sacrifices to get somewhere in life. He felt that other people back home who envied him but didn't come to the UK were unwilling to do what it took to get a good life. Others also talked about the difficulties of being away from family, worrying about ill parents, or not being able to spend time with loved ones. Most interviewees with migration experience adjusted their overall expectations.

To summarise, migration experiences have a notable effect in shaping class identity. The interviews with food couriers in this sample have shown that migration experiences are closely intertwined with experiences of social upward mobility and with the question of how individuals perceive the role of agency and structure in their biographies. The migration experiences mainly promoted an identification as middle-class among couriers who did the job permanently and, from an outside perspective, lacked typical markers of a middle-class position, like education and financial security. When the migration itself and the courier job presented an improvement, it signalled to them that they had achieved a position in the middle of society. The substantial autonomy and flexibility they experienced in the courier work played a crucial role in this. Although they were doing a dependent job that is considered low-skilled, they could make a better income and work more autonomously than they did in prior jobs before or after migration. This allowed them to portray themselves as their "own boss, " contributing to their sense of social upward mobility and their self-perception as middle-class.

Such a sense of social upward mobility related to migration was not present in interviews with couriers who already came from middle-class backgrounds in their home countries and instead experienced the outside perception and treatment as a foreigner as a status incongruence. Their self-understanding as middle-class was broken or fragmented through the experience of migration and depreciation. The role of the food courier job, although temporary, reflects this downgrading to some degree because it wasn't their first choice to make an income from courier work. Instead, it was one of the better of several suboptimal options that were available to them.

Those with a migration background who didn't have a sense of social upward mobility and didn't identify as middle-class also clearly reflected on structural conditions as a barrier and injustice.

#### 7.1.4 Summary of Biographic Factors

Three biographic factors predominantly shaped the class identifications of the couriers in this sample. The sense of social mobility, experiences of social constraints and the experience of migration stood out throughout the narrations. These factors have illustrated how critical a life course perspective is to understand class identities within a heterogeneous group of workers like food couriers. They demonstrated that the temporal dimension inherent in the question of social mobility is crucial in contextualising momentary work and life experiences. Understanding the wider meaning that the job holds for an individual helps to determine the relevance of workplace experiences for a person's evaluation of their social position.

The sections above have also shown that the sense of individual agency among many interviewees dominates their experience of their biographic trajectory. While even the experience of social downward mobility does not always suggest an identification with the lower or working class, a clear perception of social constraints and injustices made interviewees view themselves as workers, working class, or lower class rather than middle class.

The experience of unjust social constraints was relevant enough to question the self-perception as the middle class of those interviewees who came from middle-class backgrounds and had migrated for educational and professional development. The disappointment of some of their expectations and repeated experiences of devaluation and perception as foreigners shook up interviewees who otherwise saw themselves in a comfortable or even privileged situation.

These biographical factors further reflect how class identity is interrelated with other elements of class consciousness. Firstly, the sense of upward mobility can be understood as a specific class experience that relates to a middle-class identity and potentially links to perceptions of class relations, suggesting an overestimation of the general degree of social upward mobility. Secondly, a sense of social downward mobility and an experience of social constraints can be understood as class experiences that relate closely to an identity as part of the working class. Both were linked to specific perceptions of class relations—a sceptical assessment of the overall level of social upward mobility.

Similarly, the experience of social constraints as injustice relates to perceptions of class relations. These will likely make individuals more aware of power relations and more sceptical of their legitimacy. Although this was not systematically analysed at this point, the interviewees

who did experience social constraints and framed them as injustices also questioned the necessity and legitimacy of certain state regulations and working conditions in their jobs.

Furthermore, the migration experience could be seen as one with a class character that mainly related to middle-class identities and a downplaying of social inequality. The interviewees viewed their own position in society higher up because their overall situation had improved in contrast to the level of inequality that they were familiar with in their home countries.

There are undoubtedly other biographic experiences that shape how individuals identify in terms of social class. The ones presented here reflect what stood out in this particular sample of food couriers. More focused sampling would be necessary to allow for further systematic comparison between cases to explore these patterns further regarding how they promote working-class identifications. While the presented experiences of social mobility, social constraints and migration are rather broad, they reflect some of the crucial characteristics of the workforce – the large share of migrant workers, the high number of students and the group of workers who, for various reasons experienced difficulties or turned away from the primary labour market and higher skilled jobs with a standard employment relationship and found refuge in platform courier work.

## 7. 2 National Comparative Factors

This second part of the chapter presents national comparative factors that shaped the class identity of couriers in this sample. It demonstrates how country-specific standards and expectations towards work and employment mediate the couriers' perceptions of workplace issues, affecting how they identify in terms of social class.

It first shows that only when conflicting interests were identified between couriers and platforms did couriers identify as workers. Since the expectations towards the platform companies went further in the German context where couriers are employed, the data indicate that the expectations linked to the employment status provide better conditions for identification as a worker than self-employment in England.

Secondly, it explores the role of participation in labour resistance for class identification. Based on the German sample, I demonstrate how the specific context of industrial relations and

the institution of works councils support the development of working-class identities by facilitating and perpetuating collective experiences.

These factors were mainly identified in the analysis of the semi-structured part of the interviews when couriers talked about their experiences of delivering for the platforms, their ideas about good work, and their views on social conflicts and class.

Like the biographic factors, the national comparative factors demonstrate the interrelation between class identity and other elements of class consciousness. The couriers' expectations and self-perception towards the platform companies show how perceptions of class conflicts and class identity are linked. The analysis of the courier's participation in collective action indicates links between class identity, perceptions of class conflict and ideas about change.

This part of the chapter also suggests explanations for the higher number of working-class identifications in the German sample and reflects on the limitations of the sample size and the bias regarding the lack of politically active interviewees in the English sample.

### *7.2.1 Self-perception and Expectations towards the Platforms*

This section presents the different views of food couriers in the German and English samples on employment status. These views did not directly shape the couriers' class identifications. Rather, their perception of themselves as independent contractors or employees and their related expectations towards the companies mediated their perceptions of conflict in the workplace.

I demonstrate how disappointed expectations around employment standards lead couriers in Germany to note conflicts between themselves and the company, which encourages their identifications as workers. Showing the different views and expectations of couriers in England, I argue that the self-employment status and the more competitive environment it creates fuel isolation or may shift the perception of conflicts towards other workers.

#### *7.2.1.1 Employees in Germany*

As laid out in Chapter Five, most interviewees in the German sample felt that the platform companies did not care about them as couriers. Much of the criticism addressed the lack of safety at work – the inadequate equipment, little support in case of sickness or accidents, and lacking guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Couriers were also dissatisfied with the lack of financial recognition, late and incorrect payments, and the lack of transparency, participation, and adequate communication. While even some organised couriers used to think these issues

were linked to the company's start-up status and bad management, they, over time, realised that there was intentional neglect behind many of the mistakes affecting couriers.

The expectations of most collectively organised couriers were not radical. Very few envisioned a considerable wage increase, and most simply wanted the company to comply with existing labour regulations. One works council member, Janneck, criticised precisely that and was also angry that Lieferando consistently undermined the rules it set itself in company agreements. According to him, the company abused its power and knowledge over workers. It was banking on the fact that most workers did not understand the regulations or were too vulnerable to stand up for their rights and file legal complaints. He referred to migrant workers who often lacked language skills and to workers with criminal records who may be hesitant to engage with the law. Janneck emphasised that he was not upset about individual incidents but about the frequency of mistakes and the lack of commitment by the company to solve problems.

Many of his expectations towards the job and his employer had not been met over the two years he worked as a courier. As a member of a works council, he also knew that many other workers were affected by similar issues. Having repeatedly seen the company undermine basic standards eventually made him question the situation further and further.

Although Janneck did not use explicit class language to frame this as a conflict of interests between capital and labour, he articulated a conflict between management and couriers. He described the management as an intentional and strategic actor that undermines employment standards and spoke of attempted wage theft when he criticised late and incorrect payments. He also criticised the alienating aspect of the work when, during quiet times, he had to cycle around without an order simply to be present and advertise the company. What angered him most, however, were not the exploitation and alienation itself but how these issues expressed a lack of recognition from the company. In this respect, Janneck's case illustrates how the expectations that came with the employment status evoke disappointment and discontent with pay and working conditions and lead him to frame these problems as conflict rather than simple mistakes.

Tabea, too, voiced clear expectations towards the employer throughout her interview. As soon as she realised that Foodora (now Lieferando) didn't care about improving the working conditions, she and other couriers started a worker collective and demanded better equipment to work more safely. Like Janneck, Tabea framed the problems at work as an intentional strategy to keep expenses low. In her view, health and traffic risks were inherent to the job and required

planned prevention and protection by the employer. But Lieferando had no interest in taking on such responsibilities. During a severe weather situation when a heavy storm made being outside, let alone working, very dangerous, Tabea observed how the platform management seriously neglected the couriers' safety. While the local management had sent office workers home, it told couriers to stay in the city and continue work while waiting for further guidance. Since that guidance never came, couriers were left to fend for themselves and decide whether to terminate their shifts.

The incident sparked a lot of anger among couriers and presented a crucial moment in the organising because couriers' complaints received wide media attention. The fact that the management had openly lied about shutting down the business due to danger, while couriers could prove that they had received orders, meant Tabea was aware that the company only cared about revenues and its image. In her view, Lieferando had “crassly disgraced itself” during that situation.

Being employed made a significant difference in this situation because the choice to end the shift lay with the employer rather than the courier, as would be the case for self-employees. In fact, couriers in the English sample didn't experience comparable conflicts around severe weather. They voluntarily went out to benefit from the incentivising boosts or decided not to work under dangerous conditions. For Tabea, experiences like the storm made conflict between workers and the platform company obvious since their safety was treated as secondary to business interests.

She had a similar experience around the question of adequate pay. The platform's intention to avoid extra costs due to pay became apparent to her when Lieferando's management tried to divert the problem and stir up conflict within the courier workforce. One manager argued that the low wage was only necessary because of the lousy work ethics of some couriers, which put an economic strain on the company, suggesting that their fellow couriers caused the payment issue:

“They said we would need to motivate our colleagues to work better and sign off sick less often if we wanted to have a Euro more. He suggested to us that our colleagues are taking the Euro from us. That was his argument. It was crass. ... I don't know how exactly the company structure works, but so much money is being put into this. .... we felt like they were taking us for fools.”

Tabea, 25, male, Germany, 2 years into the job

Tabea insisted that the company has to pay adequately and comply with standards, not a matter of how well anyone in the company works or how often they sign off sick. Her narrations clearly show expectations towards the platform company as an employer, which, when not met, are perceived as conflicts of interest between workers and the company. Tabea did not buy into the business logic the management tried to instil. In her view, the high number of sick leave was due to the demanding physical character of the work and the lack of care and communication within the company. She referred here to the shutting down of communication channels through rider captains and support hotlines, which left couriers disconnected and alone.

The perceptions of conflict at work that arise from her view on the employment status and the expectations linked to it are crucial because they create this sense of shared struggle and belonging. Overall, Tabea described her living situation as comfortable and in line with a middle-class standard. Despite doing a minimum wage job, she felt free from existential fears and uncertainties that she knew characterised other people's lives. Nonetheless, she identified as a worker and with other couriers who were being treated unjustly by the platforms. She saw them together on the same side in their conflict against their employer.

Other couriers in the German sample had talked about problems and dissatisfaction with working conditions but didn't frame these issues as a matter of conflicting interests. All these couriers identified as middle class. They either coped with the aspects of the job they disliked or planned to leave the job for one with a different platform or in a different sector altogether.

This was, for example, the case for Afik and Dhaval, who were mentioned above as two students who felt their middle-class identification crumble due to their experience of living as migrants in Germany. Neither of them was particularly critical of the platforms when they started. However, being dependent on the job and repeatedly experiencing the companies' neglect of their rights made both increasingly frustrated with the courier job. While Afik didn't feel cared for due to the lack of support after an accident, Dhaval went as far as thinking that the platforms weren't merely chaotic but "taking the piss" with workers. However, none of them framed these experiences as matters of fundamentally conflicting interests. They articulated dissatisfaction and planned to leave the job, but neither critically reflected on the platform's interests and intentions.

Nick, too, who identified as middle-class, experienced many problems and wasn't always happy with the platform he worked for. He had been a courier in the UK before coming to Germany and appreciated the employment status, the securities and compensations it offered. He

considered them an improvement to the conditions in the UK. Although he was expecting fair treatment, he didn't see conflicting interests between the couriers and the company.

When Lieferando wasn't sorting out his sick pay after an accident, Nick asked for support from the union to get what he was legally entitled to as an employee. Another time, when the company made mistakes with his contract, he got help from the union to protect him from wrongful termination of his contract, when despite contradictory statements in the paperwork, he had a permanent contract. Although both incidents caused severe problems for Nick, he frames these incidents as "confusions" or the result of "process-driven" admin systems. He did not see any intentional misconduct. Similarly, he found the equipment insufficient but bought his own since he didn't consider it reasonable for Lieferando to provide high-quality equipment for every worker. After all, they were a delivery company and not a clothing manufacturer, as he remarked.

An aspect that Nick was most critical of was the measuring of the couriers' cycling distances and the calculation of their millage allowance. Although he appreciated the new cover of bike maintenance costs, he criticised that it was not "accurate" in the way it is measured:

"Because the way they track your distance is just from where you pick the food up to where you drop it off. It doesn't record your return journey to the restaurant, and that can be very close or five kilo-metres away. And it would be nice to have an accurate representation of what distance you've been doing and what you are getting paid for that distance so you can work out whether it is fair or not."

Nick, 33, male, Germany, 3 years into the job

He criticised the lack of transparency and that couriers can't judge whether their allowance is fair. While he negotiated the pros and cons of the new system, his perspective remained mainly technical – it was concerned about optimisation, not questioning the company's interests.

Across the presented cases in Germany, being an employee went hand in hand with certain expectations towards the company, which didn't stand out among self-employees in England. They further show that if something was problematised, it wasn't automatically considered a conflict between workers and the company. Couriers either coped with these problems or left to look for another job. In cases where an antagonistic relationship was identified based on problems with working conditions and pay, the couriers identified as workers.

The following section turns to the self-employed couriers in England. It shows how their narrower range of expectations may obstruct or redirect a perception of conflict in the workplace.

### 7.2.1.2 Self-employees in England

In the English sample, self-employed couriers set different priorities in the way they articulated expectations towards the platforms and voiced dissatisfaction. As presented in Chapter Five, couriers in England mainly expressed discontent about the lack of transparency and decreasing fees. While other things were problematised, too, the couriers didn't convey an expectation of employment standards in the same way as in the German sample. As mentioned above, severe weather did not create moments of conflict, and questions of safety at work were generally assumed to be one's own responsibility. This might be because workers in England are generally used to different standards regarding working conditions, pay and social benefits. However, the differences in expectations are also clearly rooted in the perception of oneself as an independent contractor. Autonomy and self-determination were emphasised as strong advantages of this arrangement and, for most, made up for the lack of benefits and employment protection.

Overall, this meant couriers addressed a smaller range of expectations towards the platforms. With them also being perceived as mediators, there was less perception of conflicting interests between the couriers and the companies. In some cases, the self-employment status even seemed to shift the focus of problems towards other workers. Issues that could be seen as conflicts between workers and management were, by some, framed as conflicts with other workers. As contractors who earn their money gig by gig, couriers in England were in competition with each other. While their exposure to market forces overall didn't play an important role in the interviews, it did come up as boundary drawing towards groups of workers considered to not play by the rule.

One example was the problem with false registrations brought up by many UK couriers but didn't come up in the German sample. The false registration of moped and motorbike drivers as bicycle accounts was considered to cause two problems. It blocked bicycle slots, which some found problematic because of the long waiting times that bicycle couriers already faced in many areas of England. Also, motorbikes took over short-distance deliveries meant for bicycles rather than doing medium- and long-distance deliveries. While this ultimately results from the companies' lax control and supervision over these processes, some interviewees took offence at the fact that other couriers were exploiting these gaps and came to see them as unfair competition.

A similar perspective was already illustrated in Chapter Six, on the case of 25-year-old Henry, a student who, although not dependent on the job, felt ambitious about his performance. He took offence at how some couriers manipulated E-bikes and motorbike couriers who avoid road tax. I demonstrated how his positioning in the middle, rather than indicating any collective identification, went hand in hand with boundary drawing towards others. This exact boundary drawing also means that expectations for rule abidance are not framed as the platforms' responsibility but as each individual courier's moral obligation, even if the gaps of control and regulation can help them in their struggle to make a living. Henry created a clear “us” and “them” when he explained how these falsely registered couriers were taking jobs away from the actual cyclists and “screwing over” other workers.

Henry notes that the transitional periods, when the platforms made changes to the ranking, shift system or fees, had always been the most profitable for workers. From an LPT perspective, it could be argued that these phases open a space where control over the labour processes is less tight and thus allows workers better earnings before the company readjusts and optimises control and exploitation. However, in Henry’s view, the profitability of these transition periods gets lost not because of the general interest and intent of the business but because some groups of workers take unfair advantage. Instead of locating conflicting interests between the workers and the company, he constructs an opposition between the honest, hard-working and crafty workers:

“They know how to manipulate the system a bit better, and as that period goes on, it gets harder and harder for the honest worker to make some good money. Cause there's always people taking advantage of the system, like with booking out the whole week. That's not fair. Yeah. Like- erm (2) don't know, there's always people who are (.) crafty.”

Henry, 25, male, England, 6 years into the job

Henry applied the same perspective to other issues he encountered on the job. Instead of pointing out the company’s responsibility to organise verification of couriers, a fair shift distribution, close gaps in the algorithm, and enforce regulations, Henry points towards differences within the workforce. His expectations are not with the platforms but with the individual workers, and his conflicts are not with the management but with couriers who don’t play fair.

In quite a few other cases, for whom the job had limited relevance, interviewees had strong preferences for self-employment and limited expectations toward the platform companies,

which meant that there was little to no ground to see conflicting interests between workers and the company. Here, too, interviewees identified as part of the middle rather than as workers.

Samantha, for example, a 33-year-old part-time courier, was perfectly happy with her self-employment as a courier, and even when being given a choice to work on a contract with Just Eats, she preferred to stick with Deliveroo and Uber Eats. Like many in the English sample, Samantha didn't expect more from the platforms than to set fees upfront and pay reliably. In her view, complaints about low pay weren't justified because, as self-employees, they could leave whenever they wanted. Although she recognised the pay had decreased over time, she considered the distance-based fees fairer than the prior base payment of four pounds per ride. She didn't see herself as a worker but as a subcontractor who could choose how to work and when to decline a job.

“They can pay us whatever they want; we don't have a minimum wage. That's the reality of being self-employed. If you don't like it, you don't have to do it. I don't understand why other people would be upset about it. But I'm not; it is what it is. They tell you how much you're gonna get paid before you accept the delivery. If they didn't do that, that would annoy me. But if you wouldn't do that order for that amount of money, then don't do it. They're giving you the choice.”

Samantha, 33, male, England, 7 years into the job

The self-employment and the pay system worked for Samantha because she had the security and benefits of employment in her main job. She explicitly said that she wouldn't want to do the job full-time, because the working hours and income aren't guaranteed but also because no holiday or sick pay is offered. In her view, these are simply not part of the deal when self-employed.

Ultimately, Samantha's general expectations of employment are very similar to those expressed by couriers in the German sample. The difference here is that Samanta – because she sees the job as a side income – accepts self-employment as standard for the food delivery sector. Based on the role that the job plays in her life and how she has different expectations towards her work in employment and self-employment, there is little ground on which she would experience and perceive a conflict between the platform and its workers. As she described it, the work as a self-employed platform courier is a relationship of equals. Samantha did not see any power imbalance in workers' dependency on making a living from work or in the fact that few companies in the market define prices and conditions, resulting in limited choices for couriers to go elsewhere. While she was aware that many do the job for their main income, she did not take an empathetic perspective to evaluate the conditions for others than herself. Based on her

personal positive experience as a courier, Samantha normalised and justified the lack of protection and certainty in self-employment. She partly does so through the contractual arrangement itself, assuming equal and fair conditions under which couriers offer their labour for sale. This perspective aligns with her overall perception of social structure. When identifying as middle-class, Samantha also framed different living situations as outcomes of free choices rather than structural conditions and injustice.

Unlike Henry and some other cases, Samantha did not see other couriers as competition, nor did she criticise how others approached the job by circumventing rules and regulations. Her way of looking at things was completely detached from other couriers.

A reason self-employed couriers expressed fewer and more minimal expectations towards the platforms may be that many had changed from various suboptimal forms of employment into self-employment. Many of them had already lowered their expectations regarding pay and working conditions. It also means that they consciously aimed for a different arrangement to avoid certain downsides of employment, such as direct hierarchies and personal interaction with superiors. After leaving employment arrangements with many directly noticeable conflicts, self-employment for the platforms presents an overall improvement. It thus may not be a situation in which further expectations and perceptions of conflicts are foregrounded.

To only briefly draw on one more case, these lowered overall expectations and relief from former employment contexts stood out in the interview with Tom, who was already taken as an example of disidentification in the prior chapter. Tom's case shows how the biographic context and the role the jobs play in the couriers' lives may contribute to an acceptance of the platform's self-employment standards and to a neglect or downplaying of conflicts at work.

Because of his past experiences, Tom was disillusioned about working for a boss or company and felt exploited and let down by employers. He was dedicated to doing a good job when he worked in a retail shop. During busy periods, he worked for months without a day off but with extra responsibilities because the shop owner was not in town. Instead of getting personal or financial recognition for his commitment, Tom felt taken for granted. When he had almost reached the number of months as an employee that would have entitled him to a payout when leaving the company, his boss made him redundant, only to call him up a week later to reemploy him:

“I got screwed over at the end. It just made me realise about companies and stuff. People like me- I do have a trade, but I don't work in it. So, if you're not working in a trade and are just working for a company, Tesco or whatever, you're literally just a cog in the system, and they're not bothered about you, no matter how you feel about the job. When they're making you try to treat it like home and all, it isn't. They're trying to make you have a feeling for that job. ...Broke my back for that.”

Tom, 36, male, England, 2 years into the job

After changing to work for Deliveroo, Tom saw himself as his own boss. He didn't want to work in his carpentry trade anymore because of the low rates and because he didn't like working to someone else's specifications, which did not interest him. The job for Deliveroo didn't pay that much either, but it gave him flexibility and autonomy and made him feel in control of what he was earning, which, at this point, was all he wanted and expected from a job.

“I like being able to choose when I can work. And I've always tried to find jobs where I'll have a contract with them, but I am the person who will change our contract. I try to be my own boss, even in a company. So, I work by the hour, and I'll get paid for exactly the number of minutes I work. And that's fair. We've already agreed on the amount of money. That's fair, not like I've got a contract or whatever, and I've got to do 48 hours a week, but I only get paid 45.”

After trying out different jobs and arrangements that hadn't worked for him, Tom was now primarily interested in earning money. Working self-employed was a way for him to avoid exploitative employment. He did not see conflicts with the company, and some minor problems that he noticed in the process and the algorithm were merely a matter of optimisation to him.

That Tom did not consider an identification as a worker might be related to his intense focus on independence and autonomy, making him see himself outside traditional categories of workers and employees. For him, self-employment seems incompatible with being a worker. Overall, Tom's case illustrates that problems in the workplace may be ignored or perceived as minor because self-employment per se evokes few expectations and also because workers have lowered their expectations, which makes them experience being a contractor as an improvement.

The English cases above illustrate that the comparably few and low expectations of self-employment open less potential for perceptions of conflicts between couriers and platforms. They don't consider health and safety or equipment maintenance the responsibility of the company they work for but their own. Similarly, while many would like the pay to be higher, some do not even see this within the company's responsibility, either because of their status as a for-profit business or because, as independent contractors, they agree to the offered fees upfront.

Part of this picture is that many consider increased fees by the platforms unlikely and shift the focus to optimising their earning without hoping for better pay. That couriers in the English sample did not express strong expectations around employment standards also must be seen in the light of a sector in which the main alternative is zero-hour contracts with Just Eats.

The couriers' positive views of self-employment were linked to former work experiences, experiences in the courier job, and the job's relevance within the wider life context. Negative past experiences and lowered expectations put self-employment in a positive light. The autonomy led couriers to dismiss other expectations. Those couriers in England who embrace the self-employment status of the job and focus on self-responsibility identify as middle-class or reject the idea of class, with Billy presenting the only exception and being somewhat of an outlier. In contrast, those English cases who identified as workers were more critical of self-employment in the platform sector and reflected on its effects on couriers in different circumstances.

Overall, the normalisation of low standards of protection in the English context and the acceptance of self-employment as a standard in platform work presents a barrier to the perception of conflicts within the work context. With pay being perceived as untouchable, there are few other expectations that lead couriers to recognise conflicting, antagonistic relations in the workplace. Hence, an identification as worker in the sense of a positioning on the side of the working class appears less evident in a self-employed context.

### *7.2.1.3 Summary of the Role of Expectations*

These findings indicate how vital the benchmark of comparison for each national context is. What is expected in a particular setting sets a standard and shapes how work and working conditions are experienced. Where social protection, equipment costs and bike maintenance weren't a general standard, their lack was rarely criticised. Because the self-employees focused mainly on pay, other aspects of working conditions didn't fuel perceptions of conflict. Also, understanding themselves as independent, autonomous contractors who interact with the companies on an equal, free basis encouraged middle-class identities among couriers in the UK.

In the German sample, on the contrary, the expectations towards care and protection linked to employment status meant that couriers voiced dissatisfaction on various matters in which the platform companies were falling below set standards. While the criticism does not

always frame these issues as conflicts of interest, when it did, this perception of opposition went hand in hand with an identification as workers.

The data indicated that self-employment and competition between couriers divert the perception of conflicts towards other workers. Some couriers foregrounded differences between themselves and other groups of workers and their approaches to work. At the same time, self-employment may make courier work even more individualised and isolated.

To contextualise these findings and the ones presented in the next section, a specificity in the sample must be considered. While data collection in Germany included politically organised couriers engaged in unions, works councils and social movements, the English sample did not. This presents a considerable bias, which is relevant for evaluating the findings.

The worker identification of many German couriers and their perceptions of conflicts between themselves and the company may have, after all, less to do with their views and expectations towards employment than with their experience and views as collectively engaged workers, something that is discussed in the next section. However, the protest of organised food couriers in Germany achieved employment status in the first place and made most companies abandon the self-employment model in the sector. Whether this outcome in Germany is due to different institutional settings, momentum in the organising or different expectations and claims towards employment is difficult to say. In England, unions and initiatives in the sector also demanded employment status, although without success.

Because of the sample bias and the overall small number of cases, this study cannot draw a strong conclusion on this point. It can, however, be said with certainty that the data analysis indicates that different expectations around employment status evoke differences in the perceptions of conflicts and, thereby, affect the couriers' class identification. Further in-depth, comparative, and quantitative research would be needed to explore this link further.

The disappointment of expectations and a perception of workplace conflicts might not directly translate into an overall identification as worker for different reasons. One of those might be the relatively low relevance of the job and, thus, the minor role these conflicts play in the overall life context. Another reason may be conflicting views regarding other elements of class consciousness, e.g. an optimistic view of social mobility, legitimisation of inequality, or a perception of relative equality within the overall social structure.

### 7.2.2 Participation in Labour Resistance

Whether couriers participated in collective action shaped their class identities. Nine couriers in this sample were involved in collective labour resistance, including participation in protest and wildcat strikes, engagement in worker collectives, works councils and unions. Since all these cases are part of the German sample, the following section talks exclusively about Germany.

Six of these organised couriers identified as workers. One considered himself middle class, and another, Lars, mentioned in a prior chapter, disidentified with class. Of those six who identified as workers, two cases, Tabea and Tia, described themselves partly as middle-class due to their social background and living standard but politically identified with the working class. I demonstrate how the experience of collective action relates to the couriers' working-class identities and briefly explain the few middle-class identities in this group of collectively engaged couriers.

Four of the couriers who were involved in collective action and had a clear working-class background referred to this background as part of their identification. Since each of them liked the courier job and planned to work in it for a while, their identification was also shaped by their occupational identity as bicycle couriers. I show that besides the social background and the enjoyment of the job, the involvement in labour resistance clearly sharpened their identification as couriers and workers. I also show how participation in labour resistance plays a role in the formation of working-class identities for couriers from middle-class backgrounds.

Overall, labour resistance encouraged or strengthened working-class identities in three ways which are elaborated on in the following: by presenting a learning space to understand the broader economic and political context of the workplace, offering an experience of agency and collective power, and providing a community and, thus, a sense of belonging.

#### 7.2.2.1 *Understanding conflicts at work*

The involvement in collectives, unions and works councils presented a vital learning space for the couriers in which they took a critical look at their work context. Understanding more about the business model of the companies, the position and strategies of their employer and the wider regulatory context, the couriers developed an awareness of the conflicting interests within the company. Consequently, they saw themselves as opposed to their employer. How exactly this opposition was defined and whether they considered it resolvable is a different question. The mere engagement with their workplace and the working conditions allowed them to perceive

opposing positions. The exchange of knowledge and experiences also raised expectations, e.g. around health and safety, pay, and data protection, as discussed in Chapter Five. Most couriers involved in collective action were dissatisfied with the pay and practices that allowed wage theft, and they considered the long-term risks in doing the job.

Through their collective engagement, the couriers also learned about issues within the workforce. As mentioned above, Janneck, for example, became aware of the pressures and lack of voice for couriers with migration backgrounds or criminal records. Learning about the income differences between office and courier workers was another aspect that made him aware of inequalities within the company and thereby sharpened his identification as a rider. After familiarising themselves with labour laws, Janneck and others realised that many of the problems they struggled with were not isolated events but deliberate attempts to reduce costs.

Couriers involved in labour resistance who identified as workers or couriers also repeatedly described how they came to understand the broader purpose of bicycle couriers. This was not predominantly food delivery since this was largely done by the car fleet and outsourced couriers. As the following quote by Fabricio illustrates, they realised they were moving marketing:

“Lieferando isn’t a company; it’s a marketing agency, that’s it. In the business report, we are not listed as workforce or staff; that’s the office people in Amsterdam and Berlin. We are listed as advertising material: Online ads, TV advertisements, placards, and riders. We are visibility; we are like orange rabbits to distract everyone.”

Janneck, 21, male, Germany, 3 years into the job

Several collectively organised couriers also realised that another purpose of the bicycle fleet was to produce and collect data to develop the algorithm further. They knew the ultimate goal was to fully automate the jobs as soon as the legal restrictions fell. Some pointed out that this way, the companies would save money from wages and avoid problems around labour protections and pay that they, as activists, were raising. How relevant the learning process was for the activists is demonstrated in the way Malik discussed the limitations of their efforts as a works council:

„Many lack language skills and knowledge of how these modern digital companies are run. We had to learn this first. We didn’t know what agile working was. We didn’t know what data science meant. We didn’t know about all these participatory things around regulations, behaviour in the business, labour law, and safety at work; we had to learn all this first. And still, we are realising we can’t reach this because you must master these technologies; you have to have a say in them.”

Malik, 34, male, Germany, 6 years into the job

He indicated how difficult it is for works councils and activists to challenge an employer like a platform whose control mainly manifests digitally. The learning processes they underwent whilst participating in labour resistance made many aware of their rights, means of applying pressure, and crucial limitations, like their inability to shape the actual working process through the App.

Those who weren't politicised before gained an understanding of power imbalances within the workplace and often beyond. A deeper contextual understanding of the platform sector strengthened their understanding of conflicting interests and power imbalances rather than focusing only on the immediate concrete problems. This encouraged recognition of different sides in a conflict, which they could then identify with.

Malik viewed the learning as an ongoing, uneven process, with some activists having a deeper understanding of the conflicts than others. From his perspective, the fight with Lieferando needed more work councils with a clear understanding and solid stance to challenge the company with the necessary perseverance. For that, many works council members needed more training to grasp how fundamental the conflicts are and how much pressure was required to make change without being manipulated by the company management.

“The fact that you can't get out of it and that these conflicts need to be fought out, even need to be looked for, many don't understand that, and they are not able to deal with conflicts. Many of them simply hope that the employer will give in. And these things don't get you very far with the employer. The employer is very clear: I'm going to cut them off from any information, so they don't have an opportunity to participate. The question is always, who can keep going for longer?”

Malik did not have radical views and took an overall pragmatic approach compared to anarchist union members. Nonetheless, he recognised conflicting interests and power imbalances between workers and the company and took a clear stance for the interests of couriers in his role within the council. Despite having prospects for higher-skilled jobs, he continued because he felt he could make a difference. But he was sceptical whether other works council members had a deep enough understanding to position themselves clearly enough in the conflict to drive fundamental changes rather than being fobbed off with small wins.

For him and other activists in the sample, the learning processes during their involvement in labour resistance strengthened their view of themselves as workers beyond the definition of having a working-class background or being part of a low-income bracket of society but as part of a group that was struggling against another group with antagonistic interests.

### *7.2.2.2 Experiencing collective agency*

Through their involvement in labour resistance, the couriers gained not only a broader contextual understanding but also a sense of self-efficacy. The interviewees' narrations show that the experience of agency plays a vital role in creating a sense of collective power.

In some cases, a sense of collective agency was experienced through actual strength in numbers when protests or strikes achieved heightened media attention. In other cases, agency was felt through institutionalised power in the form of legal procedures carried out as part of the works councils, often achieving overall improvements for the whole fleet. Couriers involved in labour resistance got contracts extended for themselves and other workers, reversed redundancies, and gained access to company information they were told they couldn't have. Some couriers met with company lawyers, national CEOs, and politicians. Some used language like “not letting them get away with this”, “to make something happen”, and “to pay it back to the management” when they discussed their motivation to protest working conditions.

These experiences of collective agency did not necessarily contrast with a sense of individual agency but complemented it. Couriers felt proud of collective achievements, and in many cases, labour resistance was the first time that they experienced themselves having a broader impact on the world around them. This showed, for example, when a courier whose contract was terminated for having logged in late a couple of times felt empowered by his experience with the rider collective and unions and decided to challenge the company and get his contract renewed. The courier was proud of his perseverance, which achieved something that most workers didn't get at that time – to talk to the management, be rehired, and even be given a permanent contract. This success was meaningful to him beyond the contract itself because it showed him what he could achieve if he pushed for his rights as an employee, even in a depersonalised company where legal standards were frequently ignored.

The strong feeling of agency for collectivised couriers is expressed in narrations about couriers returning from training seminars, who are full of motivation and ideas on what to change and how to challenge the employer next with the new knowledge and procedures they learned about. Many interviews with collectively organised couriers showed that the success of prior actions and the prospect of further improvements gave couriers an optimistic outlook on further change. Understanding the processes by which they could do so gave them ever-new

ways of pushing for their interests and seeing themselves as part of a group that achieves things together.

### *7.2.2.3 Finding community and belonging*

A third aspect of labour resistance that consolidated working class identities or helped to form them in the first place is an experience of community and belonging. Being part of a group of couriers who organise together – in WhatsApp groups, union socials or works council meetings – gave them the sense of community they were missing in the solitude of their jobs. Communication about positive and negative experiences on the job fostered an understanding of common problems and made them feel part of a shared struggle. Many collectively organised couriers genuinely enjoyed the job and wanted to keep doing it longer. Achieving improvements in working conditions that made the job difficult was therefore necessary to them on many levels, but also presented an essential commonality between them. The communities created through the temporary and institutionalised forms of collective action were vital in building solidarity, particularly between parts of the workforce that were unlikely to meet and communicate otherwise. The narrations about their work experiences and perception of their class position showed that this sense of community and solidarity was crucial in fostering their identities as workers or couriers.

In Chapter Six, I showed how Basti gained a sense of belonging to the union and a sense of shared problems and struggle, which he compared to the miners. Rather than just adopting the label of working class based on reflections on his social background and income, the solidarity between workers in manual jobs made him actively identify as a rider.

For Theo, another German courier, the union engagement helped him balance his loneliness on the job. It created a space that was needed to exchange ideas and deal with difficulties at work. Not having colleagues to talk to after a long shift and not having the chance to get out of one's head felt like the biggest challenge of the job to Theo. He described small daily frustrations with the app, customers, and other traffic participants, with which couriers were alone while constantly bombarded with requests and alerts from the app. Theo also talked about a feeling of App paranoia that he and others experienced after the first few months on the job. He described it as a permanent suspicion about the potential surveillance that couriers would start to focus on and obsess about when spending hours and hours interacting only with the App.

After such long shifts without proper conversation, Theo felt that catching up with other activists in a pub or at the union meeting was a way to get the needed socialising and let off steam.

The sense of community he gained through the union context was not the only reason Theo identified as a courier, but it played an important role. Part of the reason he did not identify as middle class despite coming from a well-off background and having a degree was his experience of downward mobility. He had given up on trying to build a career but had come to terms with the idea of permanently making a living as a courier. Thus, the community of colleagues was not a small temporary thing but a long-term prospect to be socially embedded in his workplace.

Theo saw the central conflict of modern class relations between people who work and people who manage, and he considered most people who do paid work, including himself, as some kind of worker. Nonetheless, he preferred the more concrete identification of “courier” and “rider” because they relate to the actual job, the specific problems they face, and the areas around which they organise. Theo did not consider himself an exploited worker since the platform companies he had worked for were not making profits, and the CEOs and everything else were paid from the acquisition of investments. Because of that, he did not see their status as workers defined through exploitation but through questions of power and control over the work process. He organises with others not only because he wants improvements for himself but because he thinks that those who do the work should have a say in how it is organised. Thus, for him, being part of the working class is about collective action to gain autonomy over their work, but it is also heavily about having a community to make the work bearable and a description of his sense of downward mobility. Biographic experience, perceptions of class conflict, view on permeability and call identity are closely intertwined.

This sense of belonging and community was also influential in most other cases of organised couriers. Through the organising structures, be it the informal, infrequent union meetings, the regular works council meetings, or the occasional protest actions of collectives, couriers like Theo, Tabea, Janneck, Basto, Malik and Tia, found a group of like-minded people to share experiences with, which strengthened their identification as couriers and as workers.

#### *7.2.2.4 Extended solidarities and purpose*

The analysis indicated two more aspects that may play into the relationship between labour resistance and working-class identification. For one, the interviews suggest that the more

profound engagement with workplace issues through collective engagement reshaped solidarities within the workforce. Moreover, the wider purpose that couriers gain through labour resistance may encourage or consolidate an identification with the courier job. Since a systematic analysis of them is outstanding, they are only briefly introduced here.

Most couriers involved in labour resistance developed a perspective on workplace issues that went beyond their own experience, interests, and priorities. Those couriers who were engaged in labour resistance grew aware of different levels of dependency and exploitation within the sector. They reflected on their knowledge, views, and motivations when they started to engage collectively and broaden their perspective. They developed awareness of problems in other parts of the workforce, and their actions became more solidaristic with those who were more severely affected by the precarity of the working conditions.

One theme that stood out in the narrations of organised couriers was their reflection on the ‘outsourced’ workers in the sector. Most involved in labour resistance knew that they represented only a small part of the workforce. Whilst fighting for better working conditions and pay for the main fleet, the activists were conscious that the more severe exploitation happened elsewhere. A larger part of the platforms’ income was made by couriers who were not part of the official and visible fleet but worked directly for the restaurants listed with the platforms. Although the activists could not directly improve the situation of these couriers, they wanted to raise awareness of their situation and point out that this kind of exploitation is part of the success of the business model. Activists pointed out the even higher share of migrants within this group of couriers, who often worked informally and at much lower wages. They spoke about this when reflecting on the broader sector or their experiences and approach towards activism.

Activists who had mainly personal motivations when engaging in labour resistance developed a more comprehensive understanding of problems and interests within the workforce and expanded their solidarity. Instead of a narrow understanding of a “we” or “us couriers” that only represented those with whom they were in close contact in works councils, collectives, and unions—often white male students—the activists who identified as workers made active choices to use their role to represent other groups of couriers. Solidarities did not only become more inclusive, but potentially also more enduring.

The second aspect that played a role was the additional purpose activists gained through labour resistance. Most interviewees who participated in collective action were inspired by the

prospect of bringing about broader societal change. While most of these couriers enjoyed the task itself but didn't consider the job meaningful for society or their personal growth and development, the engagement for better working conditions offered them a deeper purpose related to the job.

Particularly in the case of couriers engaged through mainstream unions and works councils, the involvement in labour resistance compensated for one of the major downsides many saw in the job - the lack of development and career opportunities. The chance to engage with business models, work and employment regulations, and learn new organising and media management skills was attractive to many organised couriers. Although this was not a main incentive, it kept some workers engaged in the courier sector who otherwise might have moved on to other jobs.

### 7.2.3 Summary of Participation in Labour Resistance

Equally for activists with working- and middle-class backgrounds, these different facets of labour resistance presented here encouraged or solidified their active identifications as couriers or workers in general. These identifications are more than simple descriptors of social background, education, or level or source of income. They are based on a sense of being on the same side, being a community, collective agency, occupational identity and political solidarity.

Participation in collective action promotes the formation of working-class identities because it affects various other elements of class consciousness which interact with class identification. As demonstrated above, by providing a space for couriers to learn, they understand issues at work as conflicts of interest and can thus position themselves in opposition to the employer. I have further shown that the joint engagement in unions, collectives and works councils lets couriers experience a sense of collective agency and the ability to work and progress towards shared goals through mutual help and joint coordinated action. Knowledge exchange and experience of agency clearly widened some couriers' perspectives on desirable and possible alternatives. Some expanded a wish to achieve individual compensation or improvement into ambitions for the area and even nationwide agreements with the platforms.

Since these data are from the German sample only, no comparative conclusions can be drawn. It is, however, reasonable to assume that even under different cultural and industrial relations contexts, activists in England, too, make similar experiences that shape their views, perceptions and identity. However, the fact that smaller unions and collectives mainly organise

the platform sector in England without works councils as additional institutionalised interest representation may make a difference.

Since works councils in the German context offer an easy, protected way of organising that provides workers with rights and tools, couriers can make step-by-step achievements in the form of small wins against the company. Without a similar structure and wide-reaching successes beyond momentary strikes, participation in collective labour resistance might not evoke the same optimism in couriers that change can be achieved. As activists in Germany reported, the high workforce turnover makes steady organising difficult too, which is partly balanced out through the works councils motivating some couriers to stay on longer and stabilise some communities of resistance. In the English context, these structures are not available to workers.

Besides the sample bias, another limitation must be mentioned. Participation in collective action is not the only relevant factor here; more general underlying political views must also be considered. While different political views of some couriers have been briefly indicated above, a more detailed and systematic analysis is needed to map the political views and their interrelation with class identity and other elements of class consciousness.

As indicated above, two couriers engaged in collective action did not identify as working class in any sense but saw themselves as middle class or disidentified. In Michael's case, this was mainly because of three reasons. He came from a secure middle-class background, lacked class language overall, and the job had only minimal meaning to him since he was aiming for a professional career. The other exception is Lars, who has much in common with the other activists. He, too, found community through the labour resistance, widened his perspective, formed solidarities for the most disadvantaged couriers, and felt empowered by the activism. Lars, however, was very much at the beginning of his political socialisation and had only started to think about concepts like class. The lack of class language and understanding of class as a moralising concept played a role in his deidentification. At the same time, strong postmaterialist attitudes were also relevant in his portrayal of his life as comfortable, happy and content with what he has.

Despite these exceptions, the data show convincingly that participation in collective action promotes working-class identities, and that the specific institution of the works councils with its stabilizing effects facilitates a sense of collective agency and hope for further achievements.

### 7.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented biographic and contextual factors that shape the class identities of the couriers in this sample. It showed that these workers are influenced by and negotiate several conditions and experiences when considering their position within society and identifying in terms of social class.

The chapter showed that the construction of a working-class identity was encouraged by, firstly, experiences of social constraints that challenged the belief that life was determined by individual agency; secondly, experiences of social downward mobility; and thirdly, experiences of migration; fourthly, perceptions of workplace conflicts that were fuelled by disappointed expectations towards the employer; and fifthly, by participation in labour resistance.

It also showed that experiences of upward social mobility and the relative improvement that came with it encouraged interviewees to identify as middle class even when their education, job, and income stood in contrast to their subjective self-positioning within society. The same is true for experiences of migration, which often went hand in hand with a sense of upward social mobility. Even experiences of racism and discrimination that reflected an outside perception as foreigners and lower class rarely challenged self-perceptions as part of the middle to a point at which interviewees overall reconsidered their identity as middle class. Furthermore, the self-employment of workers in the UK and their expectations as contractors rather than as employees provided less grounds to perceive conflicts between workers and the company, which could encourage couriers to position themselves on the side of workers. Rather, self-employment disconnected couriers from each other or fuelled feelings of competition between couriers. Conflicts were then perceived towards other colleagues rather than the company management.

The chapter has shown how these factors which shape class identity are linked to other elements of class consciousness—Whether couriers felt that inequalities and power imbalances were legitimate, played into their evaluation of the workplace issues and their views on social constraints that they've experienced. Their assessment of the level of inequality mediated how they saw their position within society before and after migration or other events that defined their social mobility.

The chapter carved out what chapter Six had already indicated: Middle-class positions are considered the norm and presumed, while working-class positions are deviations that need justification. To say, “I am a worker” or “I’m working class” has many preconditions and

requires active construction, while middle-class identities were easily upheld by interviewees even in the face of contradictory facts.

The factors presented here do not completely represent what shapes class identities in general, but a selection that stood out in this sample. They all evolve around the interviewee's evaluation of their current situation and the meaning they attribute to the courier job. These factors are based on the grounded analysis of courier's specific experiences of the job and their lives.

Based on these findings, I argue that working-class identifications are adopted when work experiences are linked to general biographic experiences of social downward mobility or a sense of having been disadvantaged or held back by structural social constraints. I further argue that working-class identifications are consolidated or may evolve based on participation in labour resistance, which brings about a better understanding of conflicts in the work context, experiences of collective agency, and a sense of belonging and community that supports a sense of occupational identity and a shared struggle. I lastly argue that different standards and expectations around employment in both national contexts make it more difficult for self-employed couriers in England to identify as workers.

Despite the sample bias, the analysis thus far suggests that there are overall more commonalities than differences between the couriers in England and Germany, as well as their experiences of work and society and their way of identifying in terms of social class.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

The overarching aim of this thesis is to enhance understanding of class identification among platform food couriers. By doing this, I conceptualised class identity as an element of a wider class consciousness that develops over one's life course and is based on the interplay of work and life experiences. The study has explored how workers locate themselves within their image of social inequality and how this shapes their class understanding. A comparative perspective allows for consideration of different contexts related to employment and self-employment.

The empirical chapters provided an in-depth analysis of a large set of integrated interviews that offered novel biographic data in the field of platform research. The main findings from this analysis are summarized in the first section of this chapter.

The following sections show how these findings relate to the literature on class and platform work and draw out the study's empirical and theoretical contributions.

The thesis contributes to class analysis by reviving a materialist perspective for the study of class identity. It explains misidentifications as middle class and disidentifications with class through the context of platform work and its meaning in the courier's life context. I argue that for parts of the workforce that have limited options in the labour market and have come to platform work to escape other exploitative, alienating and discriminatory workplaces, the precarity and low pay of platform work is negligible because they already had to come to terms with bad working conditions. These couriers experience the autonomy, flexibility and variable earning potential as significant improvement to former work contexts and therefore link their class identification to the comforts and agency they've gained through the courier job. I further argue that the working-class identifications are equally not only shaped by political ideologies, but are also shaped by the experience of the working conditions and in their experience of collective agency against the platforms.

This thesis further contributes to the emerging literature on platform work by offering two explanations for why a large part of the platform courier workforce may resign and put up with low payment and poor working conditions. It argues that couriers who identify as middle class do not frame potentially poor working conditions as matters of exploitation and conflicting interests. Rather, they consider them the result of lacking recognition or poor organization. The latter is linked to the view of platform companies as start-ups. Besides these non-antagonistic

framings, the biographic meaning that the job holds for different parts of the workforce means that individual coping is considered a more feasible strategy for many couriers than collective resistance.

## 8.1 Summary of findings

In the following presentation of the findings, I draw out commonalities across all workers and differences between them. I indicate throughout the chapter whether I make statements about all couriers or particular groups.

Various lines of comparison have been crucial in analysing the data and characterising and qualifying the findings and contributions. I distinguish between employed couriers in Germany and self-employed couriers in England. Some distinctions e.g. referring to levels of dependency and perspective in the job are not specific to a national context.

While protest and collective organizing are highly relevant in the food courier sectors in both contexts, the sample for this study has a considerable bias. Since activists are only present in the German sample of employed couriers, statements about participation in collective resistance only apply to this context. While this is not to say that similar findings could not be made for self-employed courier, this study is limited in the statements it can make about political attitudes and the organizing of self-employed couriers. Equally, findings and contributions affected by this lack of matched comparison are considered cautiously and are marked throughout the discussion.

### 8.1.1 Moving on, coming to terms, or fighting for a good enough deal

The first empirical chapter showed that despite the job being a reactive move rather than a proactive choice for many couriers, they enjoy the work and prefer it over the conditions in many other jobs. In very different ways, the job presents a good enough deal for most couriers in this study. It is temporarily convenient for those with a short-term perspective, who can accept or neglect the downsides because they may leave the job at any time they want. For those who depend on the job in the long term, the job presents not only a last resort but also an improvement over alternative labour market options. They come to terms with the negative sides because, in reaction to repeated negative experiences and in recognition of their limited options, they have lowered their expectations. For a smaller group of couriers that is dissatisfied with

aspects of the job but biographically invested enough to continue, it makes sense to complain and collectivize to improve the working conditions.

The study found that the heterogeneity of the workforce makes for very different job experiences and thus causes somewhat fragmented realities. Since the experiences of courier work are made and evaluated against the backdrop of prior work experiences, the dependency on the job, prospects, and available ideological narratives, they vary significantly across different parts of the workforce. They also vary across the German and UK samples, reflecting the role of the distinct business models and their working conditions.

While couriers in both countries negotiate the ambivalent experience of algorithmic management, employees in Germany found the lack of care and recognition by their employer problematic, and self-employed couriers in the UK treated this as a regular aspect of autonomous work. For the UK couriers, autonomy went hand in hand with self-responsibility, so they focused on their individual capacity to cope with risks or adjusted their way of working, even if this meant that they missed out on flexibility and profitable shifts. Among German couriers, individual coping was common, too, but expectations towards better employment standards prevailed even among those who were not politically organized.

The study has shown that many factors shape couriers' perception of the job and themselves; the misrecognition of the exploitative and oppressive aspects of the job is just one among many. The couriers' accounts of work experiences show a complex amalgamation of ideological beliefs, habituated approaches, awareness of their own situation and interests, as well as recognition of existing power relations and evaluations of their chances to achieve improvements. All these factors shape their way of looking at the courier work. The naturalization of the market logic, the need for profit and a belief in self-responsibility, especially in the UK, let some workers legitimize low pay, and the competitiveness of the self-employment system revealed presumptions and racist views about migrant workers. Ideological narratives played an undeniable role in obscuring conflicts around pay and other working conditions. When pay was problematised, this was not usually framed as a matter of exploitation or conflicting interests. Instead, it was brought up as a question of recognition, as a market force, or as a matter of disorganization in start-up companies. Few couriers actively framed low pay as exploitation and missing payments as wage theft.

However, the structural conditions under which workers lived and worked were equally relevant in shaping their experiences and views on the job. Various aspects of the labour process, like the variable pay based on the gamified incentive system, the absence of direct supervision, and the flexibility to log in at any time in the UK, created a sense of autonomy over work and pay. Against the backdrop of prior work experiences and couriers' biographic context, the job gave many of them a sense of agency that they were missing or felt they would not find in other jobs. Despite this agency presenting an illusion since pay and flexibility were factually limited, this was enough for many couriers with a long-term perspective on the job to make up for the downsides of the job and keep them hopeful.

The couriers in both countries also showed an awareness of their labour market position and prospects—in some cases, it is consciously reflected; in others, it is expressed habitually. While those with a short-term perspective knew they were transitioning into different types of work or careers and temporarily tolerated the downsides of the job, others knew they were somewhat stuck with the job and consequently came to terms with their situation.

Based on these experiences and perceptions and an evaluation of their situation, the couriers in both countries made calculated judgements on whether collectivisation to improve working conditions in the food courier sector was relevant to them and likely to pay off. For some, individual ways of coping or exiting from the job simply made more sense in the face of their biographic perspective, perceived power imbalances and difficulties around unionization.

#### 8.1.2 Belonging to a class versus. aspiring individually

The second empirical chapter, which explored the courier's class identifications, showed that about half of all interviewees thought of themselves as middle class. In contrast, 11 interviewees self-identified as workers, couriers, or part of the working class, and six saw themselves entirely outside the class structures or questioned their relevance or overall existence. The analysis of the identifications and their meaning shows that workers found different ways to talk about their own situation within society in a way that constructed and maintained dignity.

The chapter showed that working- and middle-class identifications are not in the same way as categories to locate oneself within the social hierarchy but are qualitatively different. While both categories are used as descriptors of socio-economic differences, middle-class identifications are overall labels for an individual situation, while working-class identifications are not simple descriptors of oneself but of a shared situation. This does not always translate into

a more profound sense of belonging but indicates some form of community. The crucial difference between a mere descriptor and the construction of a community is whether couriers felt a sense of injustice about the inequalities at work or in society.

The chapter showed that middle-class identifications express aspirations for improvement, a sense of individual agency and either an identification with the entrepreneurial aspects of the courier job or with entirely different professional career prospects. Middle-class identifications were in some ways aspirational or in the making. Working class identifications had a different foundation. They pointed out the need to work for a living, a shared struggle and a sense of connection to the job and the social work context. Some of those from middle-class backgrounds had prospects for other careers but still identified as workers, and they did not draw substantial distinctions between working and middle class. They acknowledged the different standards of living that put them in a more comfortable situation – recognizing differences within a group with shared characteristics rather than primarily engaging in boundary drawing. The fact that so few UK couriers identified as working class suggests the higher degree of autonomy as self-employees may play a role. Some, in similar situations, reject working-class and lower-class labels and identify with the middle to pre-empt stigma or to avoid having to construct a narration of failure against their own internalized meritocratic beliefs. This is very similar to disidentifications with class. It is mostly those in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged situations in the sample who reject the idea of class or refuse to position themselves within social hierarchies. The work context facilitates disidentification and identification as middle class because the autonomy and flexibility allow the workers to see themselves as independent from bosses and other workers. Couriers in disadvantageous situations who have little choice in the labour market don't want to identify as working or lower class but rather emphasize their agency in shaping their own lives, which also relates to their overall improvement in job experience compared to former work contexts.

The chapter further found that middle-class positions - even when not reproduced economically and educationally - still stick while working-class positions were presumed to be overcome easily.

The chapter observed difficulty in class identification in the face of prolonged phases of adolescence and multiplied/increased periods of transitions. At the same time, the sample overall

expressed a sense of generational downward mobility, with more than half of the sample feeling like they are financially worse off than their parent's generation.

Lastly, it showed that the experiences of participation in collective resistance allow those in working-class positions to adopt the label of workers or couriers as an empowering identity.

### 8.1.3 Biographic experiences of social inequality pre-empt and shape experiences at work

This third empirical chapter showed in more detail how the experience of hierarchies and exploitation in the workplace are pre-empted and accompanied by views that are developed during educational trajectories and in other meaningful interactions in their broader life context.

Three biographic factors were introduced that encourage the construction of working-class identities: 1. experiences of social constraints, 2. downward mobility, and 3. disappointed expectations in the process of migration.

Experiences of social constraints challenge the courier's belief that their life was determined by individual agency. Recognizing factors outside their scope of action and their evaluation as unfair or unjust went hand in hand with people locating themselves in the working class. Most relevant here were the negative experiences in the educational system, difficulties in accessing welfare support, institutional racism and discrimination. Most of this addressed the state as an actor, and only one person framed the low pay in many companies and sectors as social constraints, thus pointing directly to businesses and companies. Factors that were experienced as unequal but not as unjust or unfair were the family background and disparities in IQ, which were perceived as obstacles. However, since they were naturalized, they did not hinder the construction of a middle-class identity.

Secondly, the chapter found that experiences of social downward mobility also fostered a working-class identity. The experience of a clear status incongruence, mainly present among those from middle-class backgrounds and or with higher education who did not reproduce a matching financial/material status, led them to identify as working class rather than trying to uphold an identification as part of the middle. This perception of status incongruence was relevant regardless of the reasons people saw for their downward mobility, whether they considered it the result of external factors or their own actions and responsibility.

Thirdly, the chapter shows that while migration mostly goes hand in hand with an experience of social upward mobility and a middle-class identification, disappointed expectations for those migrants who came from middle-class backgrounds in their countries of

origin lead them to question their self-conception as part of the middle because it was undermined by the outside perception as a poor, uneducated foreigner.

Overall, the chapter shows how broader biographical experiences and the sense of agency they convey to the individuals are just as crucial in developing their ideas about class as their work experiences. Interviewees who experienced and recognised limitations or barriers through structural constraints in their biographies had to negotiate the legitimacy of the social order and, in many cases, perceived a sense of unfairness and injustice. These perceptions provide a crucial ground for questioning fairness in the workplace.

#### 8.1.4 National differences in culture and industrial relations matter

The fourth and last empirical chapter introduced two comparative national factors that play into the development of class identities of platform food couriers: expectations towards work and employment standards and institutionalization of collective action.

The research found a crucial difference in how the courier's expectations towards their working conditions shaped their perceptions of conflicts in the workplace. These different perceptions of conflicts have been identified as mediating factors for both countries' working- and middle-class identifications. Couriers in Germany generally voiced clear expectations towards the platforms as decent employers, demanding care, recognition and respect for their employment rights. These expectations also addressed the state as regulator, and even when addressing the companies, only a minority saw a clear conflict between labour and capital. Only when conflicting interests were identified between couriers and platforms did couriers identify as workers. In other cases, couriers held up middle-class identifications, often despite dependency on the precarious courier job. Couriers in the UK, who saw conflicts mainly around pay and transparency, did not express broader expectations towards the platforms and saw some workplace issues as a conflict between different groups of workers rather than the responsibilities of the state or company.

Overall, lower standards were normalized in the UK data, thus providing fewer grounds for complaints. Additionally, the degree of autonomy and flexibility in the self-employed courier work in the UK obscured the perceptions of conflicts and, for most couriers, did not align with the idea of being a worker. This is not to say that the conflict around pay is not severe for UK couriers. After all, the level of protest shows that there is outrage (Trappmann et al., 2020). The finding is that expectations are lower and the range of complaints narrower, while the status as

self-employed may also direct the perception of conflicts away from the company and towards other workers. Since the sample bias does not allow a balanced comparison, the limitations of these findings are discussed further below.

The chapter further showed that the format of works councils in the German industrial relations context aids the development of working-class identities in three ways: it provides access to information and a space for collective learning to couriers. How this facilitates education about political and legal matters has been shown to empower couriers. The works council structure has further helped to build and stabilize small communities of couriers with a long-term orientation, which supports the development of an occupational community and identity. Further, the resources and powers couriers gain through the works councils enable the continuous coordination and organising of effective individual (mainly legal) and collective action. The structure is crucial to move from moments of collective action to long-term collectivization and repeated experiences of collective agency. While the works councils do not promote radical political working-class identities per se, they present an essential anchor for a precarious and heterogeneous workforce with a low degree of organization by mainstream unions. Since this finding rests entirely on the German data, and no statements can be made for the UK context, limitations and suggestions for further research are discussed below.

*To summarize*, this thesis finds that just under a third of the sample had a working-class identity that reflected a deeper sense of belonging and political solidarity. The majority chose middle class as a label or disidentified with class. In many cases, the subjective class identification did not match the interviewee's social background, education and career prospects, but workers constructed narratives and identities that preserved their dignity and sense of agency.

The thesis finds that class identification generally depends on a person's life and work context. Class identity is only partially linked to work experience and work's technical and managerial specificities. The flexibility and autonomy of the job played an important role here.

Since the local dispersion and the high workforce turnover make forming a work-related community difficult, communities that conveyed a sense of collective identity evolved on a small scale around ethnic or migrant status and political organising. Whether the job is relevant for constructing class identity in the first place is closely linked to tenure and dependency, but the meaning that the job holds in people's lives is not fully defined just by those. Life experiences that pre-empt and accompany the transition from school into work play at least an equally

important role in shaping people's views of their own position in society because they shape their perception of their own social mobility, agency and exposure to social constraints.

The different working conditions in both countries play a role in shaping the idea of these platform workers as true entrepreneurs or in strengthening their expectations as employees. The national context is also important because it shapes the conditions for workers' collective resistance and thus allows communities of resistance to institutionalize, letting activists experience momentary collective agency and anticipation of further improvements.

## 8.2 Key Contributions

By emphasising the role of biographic experiences and concrete working and living conditions of couriers, this study makes two contributions to the field of class analysis: It shows that the middle-class bias and class ambiguity (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001; Irwin, 2015) are not only the result of ideological misrecognition but also rooted in the material living and working conditions of modern workforces. The thesis offers an explanation of these phenomena through the specific and ambivalent conditions in platform work. I argue that ambivalence, disidentification and middle-class bias reflect the novelty and benefit that the absence of a direct boss presents for workers tied to an increasingly precarised low wage sector and even for low paid white-collar workers. The thesis further contributes to explanations of these phenomena by highlighting material aspects in the wider life context that shape class identification. I argue that the fragmentation of work and life trajectories and the prolonged transition into adulthood complicate identification with class, and that experiences of disadvantage and experiences of social mobility shape class identification.

Lastly, the thesis contributes to the literature on platform research, debating the relevance of different types of control shaping the labour process, working conditions and protest in platform work (Galière, 2020; Veen et al., 2020; Woodcock, 2020; Joyce and Stuart, 2021; Morales and Stecher, 2023). Leaning on Chibbers' materialist lens presented in chapter two (Chibber, 2022), it is argued here that couriers who do not join collective action do not necessarily misrecognise their class position and interests and, therefore, consent to the downsides of the job but choose individual approaches out of resignation.

### 8.2.1 No boss, no worker

First, the thesis adds to debates about the new manifestations of class in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Flemmen et al., 2019), and the conditions that shape them. By arguing that structural changes in the world of work have a role to play in explaining the observed class ambiguity, disidentification and middling tendencies (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001; Irwin, 2015), the thesis partially challenges and complements explanatory efforts from the cultural class approaches.

Studies on class identity in the past decades found that despite working in blue-collar jobs and having comparably low incomes, people consider themselves in the middle of society. Middle-class identifications have gone up considerably in Germany, while the increase was much more moderate, nonetheless notable, in England (Heath et al., 2009, p. 28). At the same time, the research observed a tendency to be defensive about class and to disidentify with it (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001; Payne & Grew, 2005). An ambiguity was found in the way people recognised increasing levels of inequality (Irwin, 2015; Irwin, 2018; Manstead, 2018) but rejected class labels to define their position in society (Savage et al., 2001).

These phenomena have been explained mainly due to shifting discourses about class and internalised stigma and moralisation of lower-class positions. Besides the wider effects of individualisation in shifting responsibility for one's socio-economic position towards the individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the hegemonic idea of merit-based justice is considered to explain these phenomena. These ideas lead to an overestimation of the extent of social mobility and have refigured identity as something to be owned and articulated as a property of a person (Skeggs, 2004, p. 59). These shifts are considered to mainly benefit middle-class positions (ibid; Curran, 2018, p. 36) since they appear as the result of good decision-making and individual efforts. With class having become a heavily loaded moral signifier (Bauman, 1987; Savage, 1987; Skeggs, 1997), being middle class is somewhat of "a moral claim" (Irwin, 2018, p. 218). Since belonging to anything other than the middle class indicates individual failure in this current ideological frame, there is now a stronger tendency to identify as middle class. It's been shown that moralised discourses have created more and less legitimate social positions, which leaves particularly those in lower- and working-class positions to deal with devaluation and stigma (Neckel, 1991; Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2001; van Eijk, 2013).

The effectiveness of these hegemonic ideologies has long been demonstrated in Germany and its strong middle-class narratives (Shelsky, 1965; Kadritzke, 2016). That these discourses deeply affect people and hinder class identification below the middle has been demonstrated by research that revealed the internalised stigma (Neckel, 1991) and shame associated with lower and working-class positions and their yearning for respectability (Skeggs, 1997), and dignity (Lamont, 2001).

Those in precarious positions show defensiveness through economic, cultural and moral boundary drawing towards others by emphasising who they are not and through complicated notions of “belonging” (Savage et al. 2015, p. 352; Trappmann, Seehaus, et al., 2021). The class discourses also reflect in people being apologetic when talking about people below themselves or decoupling class and worthiness to deny, invert or flatten hierarchies (van Eijk, 2013, p. 533).

Within the dominant paradigm, individualisation, demand for self-responsibility, and the myth of meritocracy inhibit positive identifications for those in working- and lower-class positions. Consequently, identification with the middle class can be seen as an attempt to pick a legitimate or neutral position by those who would otherwise give in to stigma, or to signal an effort to avoid judgment and flatten hierarchies (van Eijk, 2013).

These observations are widely echoed in the data of this study, and the findings do not fundamentally disagree with these established explanations. Indeed, despite having researched a group of potentially precarious, blue-collar workers in a low-paid job, most of the couriers identified as middle class and five couriers rejected the idea of class. While some of them came from middle-class backgrounds, were doing the job besides their studies and aimed for professional careers, for many of those who identified as middle class, the job provided their primary income and was their perspective for at least a couple more years. The bias towards the middle is clear even in this small sample. As I have shown, the attempt to pre-empt outside and self-perceptions as part of a stigmatised group or as failure played an important role in disidentifications and middle-class identifications. This is especially true for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Further, couriers who disidentified with class or identified as middle class did, in many cases, recognise social inequality, perceived workplace conflicts, and experienced or showed awareness of discrimination and unfairness. In line with the wider observation of class ambivalence, the courier in this study had fewer difficulties and hesitations when talking about

inequality and class-related problems. What was important to them in their interviews and specifically in their narratives about their class was to protect their personal sense of achievement and agency. The findings here resonate with the suggestion that part of the explanation may be a general uncertainty about class, which would make middle-class identities more of an attempt to reclaim individuality and resist being seen as a mere cypher (Savage et al., 2001; Payne and Grew, 2005). The findings from this study on food couriers emphasise that disidentifications draw attention to the association of lower social positions, including workers, with a denial of agency. Thus, disidentification can be understood here as a result of the misalignment of class discourses and ideas about agency. While many couriers with working-class identities in this study were evidently able to adopt these as empowering narratives, others could not. They neither had the education and abstract political perspectives that allow others to hegemonic ideologies and free themselves from moral connotations of class and preserve their sense of individual agency nor did they have positive collective experience in the sense of a workplace community or a community of resistance, which could foster a sense of collective agency. Instead, they had core biographic experiences that were formative for their identities but did not align with class narratives familiar to them. A critical class narrative that recognises the injustice of hierarchies but does not offer prospects for change that are considered attainable is difficult to align with a positive self-image. Accepting that unfair social constraints shape the world and one's life without believing in the ability to change this puts people in a fundamentally passive position and presents a disempowering narrative.

Overall, the shift in discourses and the structural transformation together have created a misalignment between subjective experiences of improvement and common associations with the meaning of the working class. In this misalignment, workers attempt to uphold a positive narrative of themselves as self-efficacious agents and precarious but comparably autonomous jobs cause some middle-class identification.

Further, the findings from this study might expand the understanding of the character of the middle-class positioning. By distinguishing the different characteristics of working and middle-class identification in this study, the thesis has demonstrated the political character of both identifications. It indicated that these class identifications have consequences for questions of solidarity and worker mobilisation. With middle-class identifications ultimately signalling an emphasis on the individual rather than referring to shared experiences and a sense of community,

the positioning in the middle is not neutral. This adds to findings made by cultural class analysis that have captured people's attempt to avoid articulating moral judgement towards others by emphasising their ordinariness (Savage et al., 2001; Payne and Grew, 2005). This is not so much about not judging others but about not wanting to engage with or admit to the moral judgements implied in class labels when not contextualised by a critical explanation of existing class inequalities. Especially echoing interpretations of middle-class identifications as moral claims (Irwin, 2018, p. 218) and attempts to deny, invert or flatten hierarchies (van Eijk, 2013, p. 533), this thesis argues that middle-class identifications, whether consciously or not, carry a relativisation and justification of class inequality.

While this study's findings support explanations via moralised discourses, they also show that there is more to it than internalised ideological narratives about inequality. In line with an integrated approach to class analysis (Wright, 2009) with a revised materialist lens (Haubner, 2017; Chibber, 2022), the study has focussed on the question of how the labour process and the control mechanisms that couriers are subjected to (Gandini, 2019; Woodcock, 2020; Joyce and Stuart, 2021; Franke and Pulignano, 2023; Morales and Stecher, 2023) are experienced and evaluated. The research further explored the role of the work context in the couriers' accounts of their class identity. It can thus show that, for one, the particular conditions of platform work and their contextualisation through the courier's prior labour market experiences and prospects lead them to identify as middle class or disidentify with class.

The autonomy of courier work and the absence of an in-person supervisor presented an improvement in the work trajectories of some couriers. Overall, the couriers in this study experienced the work for the platforms, particularly the algorithmic management, as ambivalent. In their accounts of their work experiences, couriers evaluated their job experiences against their prior experiences and prospects. The autonomy and flexibility given to workers, albeit controlled and limited and paired with low pay and potential precarity, presented a factual improvement to workers with few or no prospects of overcoming the minimum wage segment. They had some control over the times and pace at which they worked, and they did not feel controlled by how they carried out the deliveries, even if they were aware of the digital process monitoring. Workers could also take longer breaks for their health, childcare, and leisure time and align the job with other work or education. While couriers in Germany could take paid sick days, workers in England would take unpaid time off, but they still valued flexibility more than former jobs.

Workers in this study saw platform work as a chance to avoid the abusive and oppressive behaviour of supervisors and co-workers. While the job meant hard physical work for the cyclists, they were often motivated to cycle and saw it as a benefit. The same is true for car drivers who do not physically work and thus have autonomy without facing the same risk exposure as cyclists.

Thus far, although low-skilled and lowly paid, the job does not have quite the same connotation of hard physical work that many traditional industrial blue-collar jobs had. Instead, it indeed provided workers with some perks that would usually be reserved for professional white-collar jobs.

These specificities of the courier job and the algorithmic management mean that these workers factually share some work characteristics and experiences with people in higher-skilled middle-class jobs. Considering that some have little perspective to leave the low-wage sector and others only need the job temporarily as a side income, for a large part of the workforce, the job resembles the advantages of skilled white-collar work while not fundamentally violating their already lowered expectations towards pay. I argue, therefore, that the identification as middle class, in some cases, may be guided by the attempt to avoid the associated stigma and moral connotations of being working-class (Savage et al., 2001; Sayer, 2005), but it also reflects that these workers have been experiencing the job as an improvement to former employment and have gained freedoms that are not typically associated with working-class jobs. Not having a direct boss plays a vital role here, especially in the English context, where the degree of autonomy is higher. This allowed couriers a positive narrative of themselves and their agency in shaping their position in society.

The findings also echo the role of dependency in explaining varying experiences with the job and different levels of satisfaction with the work and pay (Schor et al., 2020). The type of work and the labour process were less critical to part-time and temporary couriers with alternative career paths. However, the novel experience of flexibility and autonomy facilitated disidentification and identification as middle class for those who settled in the job for longer. The fact that couriers with a long-term dependency on the job rarely fundamentally criticised the downsides of the job reflects their recognition of their labour market chances and their scepticism that further improvements could be achieved for themselves, especially considering the power imbalance towards the companies. This reflects a perception of the structural

conditions under which they live and work just as much as it reflects internalised narratives of self-responsibility, skills, meritocracy, and market logic (Skeggs, 1997; Lessenich, 2009).

While the absence of adequate class language and positive working-class narratives is a question of culture and ideology, having experienced improvements through a job that combines work characteristics and conditions typically associated with working- and middle-class jobs reflects structural changes in the world of work that are ambivalent and thus challenging to evaluate in relation to class and class identity.

Another aspect relevant to why many couriers identified as middle class concerns the share of overqualified workers who expressed a sense of status incongruence. While this could be understood as a biographic factor that influences class identity, it is here treated as work-related since it reflects a characteristic of the workforce and wider trends of increases in overqualified workers and the ongoing precarisation (Kalleberg, 2009; International Labour Organization, 2018). This group of workers who have come from other types of skilled jobs into courier work present a smaller part of the workforce but a potentially relevant one. One or two generations back, the educational attainments of some of these couriers would have been likely to translate into middle-class jobs, salaries, and lifestyles. That these couriers have difficulties defining whether this leaves them in a working- or middle-class position is also a reflection of changes like educational inflation and highly competitive and flexibilised labour markets. It could, therefore, be argued that the share of overqualified workers in platform jobs like food delivery and various other forms of precarious employment in and outside the platform sector adds to class ambivalence.

The thesis overall demonstrated how ideological beliefs and structural changes both influence how the courier workers experience and evaluate their own position in terms of class. Ideological and material influences may be intertwined and their intertangled role is reflected in habitual forms of classed behaviour. Rather than one being more important than the other, it seems to be their interplay that is effective in shaping identities. One observation in the data illustrates this well.

I described the sense of competition between workers that was only present in the English data but not in the German sample. A couple of self-employed couriers pointed out the rule-bending behaviour on the job that they had observed on some couriers with migrant backgrounds. This boundary drawing towards other couriers that stood in contrast to narratives

of others that have emphasised unity and solidarity was here interpreted as a diversion of the conflicts of interests that are, in fact, with the platform companies. Without being able to draw a strong conclusion from the few numbers of cases in the biased sample, I indicated that there is potentially a point to be made about the different employment. The data indicate that the status of independent contractors in England puts couriers in competition with each other and thus makes it more difficult for unions and collectives to forge solidarities, and the models in both countries have different consequences in terms of forging solidarities.

What needs further exploration is how the internalisation of meritocratic ideas and the material situation and experience of competing against others interact. In those interviews in which couriers felt strongly about being disadvantaged by other couriers' approaches to work, the competition wasn't actually real. The incentive system in the English platform model pushes the couriers to work harder and get more deliveries done to make a good income per hour. However, neither way in which other couriers broke or bent the rules – saving road tax by keeping their Learner-Plates, using manipulated E-bikes, or even falsely registering their motorbikes as bicycles and getting cycling delivery distances done faster, had a direct impact on other courier's earnings. These cases show that besides actual experiences of competition, the anticipation of competition was enough to evoke boundary drawing. Regardless of whether couriers actually are in competition, the self-employment arrangement and piece rate pay seem to promote a more individualist perspective and action that effectively blocks solidarity. At the same time, this was intertwined with at least one courier expressing a strong ideological commitment to the fairness of competition as an organising principle. Since this type of boundary drawing was directed at migrant workers, it cannot be precluded that racist stereotypes (although strenuously denied) played a role in this, too.

The couriers brought up this issue around rule-bending, which revealed insights into their work experiences, perceptions of fellow workers, and reflections on conflicts and fairness. This is only one example that indicates how material conditions and ideological beliefs intertwine and encourage either an emphasis on unity and solidarity or moral boundary-drawing against others.

The thesis argues that the literature has overemphasised the role of moralized discourses for self-identification with class. It thereby downplayed or neglected other factors relevant to how workers in modern capitalist societies identify in class terms. The cultural perspective on class that highlights the use of middle-class identifications as a neutral place to avoid and pre-

empt stigma and devaluation has further diverted attention from fundamental differences between working and middle-class identifications. The different ways of relating to social inequalities and hierarchies have consequences for questions of solidarity and worker mobilization. The thesis argues that class identifications always have a political character, which matters as part of a broader sense of injustice and inequality and presents an important moderator between individualist and communal perspectives. While class identifications are, therefore, never neutral, they are in an ongoing development process and, with changed experiences and views on inequalities and their origins, may be renegotiated.

Bringing in workers' biographic perspectives and evaluations of structural conditions at work adds to debates about class ambiguity and middling tendencies in modern capitalism (Savage et al. 2001, Skeggs 2015) and has the potential to enrich class analysis in its further development.

### 8.2.2 Class identity before, beyond and in between work

The thesis contributes to debates about the role of wider class experiences outside of work (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2005; Crean, 2018). In particular, it adds to the understanding of the role of social mobility in class identification (Irwin, 2018). It argues that, first, the ongoing fragmentation of work and life trajectories complicates the identification of markers for one's own class position. Second, it argues that political working-class identities may develop based on experiences of disadvantage and status incongruence, which sensitise to social inequalities and can evoke a sense of injustice. This thesis emphasises the importance of the biographic development of class identity as an ongoing process, implying a need for a conceptualisation of temporality in class analysis.

#### *8.2.2.1 Markers of Class Identities in Fragmented work and life trajectories*

This section argues that with the loss of traditional markers of class identity through work and occupation, income and living standards are difficult to grasp for many couriers. Being in transition in various areas of their lives, presents a challenge to defining where they stand in society.

I first engage with the literature on the role of occupational identities in shaping class identities and explain how the platform work context undermines forming such identities. I then explain why the wider life context and biographic development process of class identity is

relevant. It is argued here that in precarious low-skilled employment, the content of work becomes less important, and specific work characteristics are relevant only evaluated against the backdrop of workers' expectations, which are linked to the biographic context in which they do the job. The thesis thereby adds to the literature on class identity by suggesting that the increase of temporary, flexible and precarious employment shifts the focus away from the content of a job or occupation towards the role of a job within a person's life course and their wider experiences of inequality.

Lastly, I add to the literature on the link between class identity and collective action. Based on the findings on how the German context facilitated working-class identities through continuous resistance, the thesis makes the point that in the absence of other clear markers of class identity and belonging, communities of resistance play an even more important role in evoking class-related identities.

A biographic perspective is generally helpful for studying class and class identity, but it has become even more critical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century since trajectories work increasingly fragmented and temporary and self-employment are increasing. People change jobs more frequently, and the ties through a standard employment relationship are slowly but noticeably getting fewer and weaker. Although work is still a crucial determinant of people's socioeconomic position, the role of work as a marker for identity is likely changing (Heath et al., 2009, p. 34) Research findings on the role of occupational identities and communities in shaping class identities were ambivalent. For this group of workers, a sense of occupational identity was rare, which is not surprising considering the characteristics and turnover of the workforce. However, when there was such a sense of occupational identity, it mostly went in hand with working-class identification.

Since the courier is not pursued proactively when entering the labour market but taken on reactively at various stages across life, it is somewhat of a convenient gap filler during long educational paths, phases of reorientation, or an alternative after failed career attempts and disappointed expectations in the labour market. The platform courier work didn't present an occupation for most workers, and only some class identifications were related to the actual content of the job. When they did, this was done critically, framing oneself as a servant and eventually linking this to a working-class identity or to cycling as an activity rather than the actual service of delivering food. The strong focus on flexibility and autonomy that make up the

positive part of the working conditions emphasised the independence from supervisors and co-workers and thus went against the idea of occupational identity. Together with the temporary perspective and limited dependency for many couriers, it can be added here that for long-term dependent couriers, the job might still create a sense of shared experiences and similarities boundary drawing towards others (Jenkins, 1996; MacKenzie et al., 2006, p. 836). Mackenzie et al. 2006, p. 836), this was, for example, indicated in the boundary drawing by some couriers towards the office workers or towards customers. Overall, the analysis of the different class identifications showed that for those who consider themselves middle class, this was often because they identified with the professions they were primarily training for when they were not working as couriers. For those who identified as workers, this was less linked to the content of the job but the need to make a living through work. Thus, the findings here resonate with the arguments made by Savage and colleagues that class identification, rather than being linked to the employment contexts or collective experiences of work, relates to the necessity to work and is more closely linked to social upbringing and other factors (Savage et al., 2001).

This does not mean that algorithmically managed platform work generally does not produce occupational identities, which can build a bridge to class identifications. However, in this particular work context, the algorithmic management, the local dispersion of the workers, and the fact that the job is picked up reactively because of the low requirements and flexibility rather than because of its content and purpose means that it does not facilitate occupational identities. What created community was how the platforms undermined standards and expectations around pay, transparency, and general recognition of workers. Algorithmic management and its lack of transparency were also relevant since the difficulties they caused brought workers together to learn about the processes and solve their problems.

They stumbled into jobs that made them a living, but these jobs did not necessarily have a deeper purpose for them and thus did not serve as a source for their identity in general, nor in terms of class. The fragmentation of work trajectories and the precarity and many transitions of flexible employment mean that especially the more disadvantaged workers in this study often did not focus on the content of the job they did at the time but on the question of whether they were able to make a living and felt in control of their work. This adds important details to the literature debating links between the work context and class identity. The physical character of the work and the low pay could be interpreted as making it a precarious working-class job, while for

others, the autonomy was interpreted as a marker of a middle-class job. Especially in the context of a heterogeneous workforce with different levels of education and different prospects in the job, it rings true that class identification cannot simply be assumed to be in line with specific characteristics of the job, but extrinsic characteristics like job security, patterns of supervision and working conditions may evoke conflict and potential working-class identifications when they go against workers' expectations (Vallas 1987). This creates a complex situation considering a number of highly precarious workers with lowered expectations and often educated temporary couriers with alternative carrier prospects. While platform courier workers are subjected to the same working conditions (if in the same model), these working conditions are evaluated against wider material conditions in their lives and consequently meet different expectations. The role of the wider life course is further discussed in the next section.

I have laid out that the precarisation of work and the shift towards more fragmented work trajectories means that jobs like courier work by themselves can explain moments of the forming of class identities, but they are not necessarily the most important class experience in people's lives. With the biographic lens applied in this study, the thesis makes the point that the changes in wider living conditions and their effect on people's overall experience should be considered more in the analysis of class identity. Not only is work becoming more of an ambivalent marker for class identities, but prolonged transitions into adulthood, educational inflation, and experiences of migration make it difficult for people today to define their class position.

This draws attention to the role that prolonged transitions into adulthood (Wiezorek and Stark, 2011) may have for the identification with class. It requires examining more closely the formative role of educational institutions for class identity and to pay attention to how the vulnerability of younger workers the prolonged periods of probation in the labour market (Cote and Bynner, 2008; Cote, 2014; France and Threadgold, 2016) may obstruct class identification.

Given that many couriers in their 20s and even early 30s had not settled in a job or career and saw the courier job as a transitional phase, the job did not present a marker for their identity. But more so, since the interviewees had come from different types of low and high-skilled jobs and were not sure where they would go afterwards, how much they would earn, and how they would live, it was difficult for them to grasp their position within society. Regardless of the job, many couriers here were not embedded in stable communities or political contexts. There were a

few exceptions of politically socialised couriers and some older couriers with families that referred to other communities and markers when defining their class position.

Consequently, class identification draws on social background and anticipates what the future will be. While anticipation and prospects always had a role in class identification, they have become more relevant in the face of prolonged and delayed transitions into the labour market, with the devaluation of educational degrees and changes between jobs and between work and further education and re-training. As has been shown in this sample, many workers face the difficulty of navigating status incongruence since their educational degrees did not translate into well-paid jobs.

Considering this loss of traditional markers of working-class identity, the active building of communities is crucial. This research contributes to the study of class identity by suggesting that communities of resistance, when stabilised through union support or institutionalisation as works councils, facilitate identifications as couriers and potentially as workers and the working class in a wider sense. The case of food couriers is somewhat extreme because it has such a heterogeneous workforce and quick turnover. However, it shows the critical role that communities of resistance have when traditional markers of working-class identities related to the job and one's living situation and life experiences are lost. Despite being a heterogeneous, precarised workforce in a dispersed workplace, carrying out individualised tasks, the dynamic of resistance in the workplace and its wins were relevant for couriers to form connections, build an understanding of shared situations and interests and initiate collective experiences. This is expressed in the working-class identifications of activists in the sample.

While this community of resistance formed around the job, resistance around other topics and the experience of collective action could equally encourage the formation of a collective identity. This may be neighbourhood communities, or, as was closely interlinked with courier protests in England, it could be communities resisting migration policies and discrimination of refugees. What's relevant is that when similarity and shared experiences cannot be taken for granted anymore, the active creation of identity through community building and shared action becomes more important.

#### *8.2.2.2 Disadvantaged lives and social mobility*

The findings of this study speak to prior observations on the lasting legacy of the social background (Bourdieu and Steinrücke, 1997) and the assumption that these may only slowly

reduce throughout the life course (Heath et al., 2009, p. 23). Statistical data suggests that social mobility only manifests in one's class identification with some delay. The 33 interviews with couriers carried out for this study can hardly fundamentally challenge the bigger picture provided by a representative sample. However, the in-depth analysis can draw attention to two issues.

First, it indicates that there could be a difference between the legacies of working and middle-class backgrounds. I sowed those middle-class positions stuck with the interviewees - even when they neither reproduced financially nor status vice. Couriers still identified as middle-class based on education or the safety net provided by their parents. Working-class positions, on the contrary, were presumed to be overcome easily. Minor improvements in education, living standards, or working conditions were enough for interviewees to consider themselves above the working class. This strongly resonates with Bloodworth's comment that people do not feel proud of but are keen to escape from the working class and working-class jobs (Bloodworth, 2019). It also confirms findings about young precarious workers who identified as middle class based on their social background, and regardless of being in low-paid, fixed-term jobs (Trappmann, Seehaus, et al., 2021). Since the sample had many young couriers, it is possible that such an effect, if it were a broader phenomenon, would not yet be visible in Social Survey Data.

Second, the study draws attention to the potential role of prolonged transitions into adulthood for young workers' identification with their parents' class background. Since the reference to childhood comforts and parents as a safety net was mainly made by those from middle-class backgrounds, this, too, may explain why middle-class identifications stick. The dependence of workers in their twenties and early thirties on their parents could be seen as a sign of downward social mobility, but instead, it was interpreted by many as being in a good position. This is potentially linked to the generational sense of class downward mobility expressed in the sample. There was a general observation among couriers that they were worse off than their parent's generation and would have a harder time reproducing the same living comforts. It is also linked to a general shift of prolonged times in education and later and more fragmented transitions into the labour market (Furlong et al., 2006; Wiezorek and Stark, 2011). While this partly reflects a cultural shift and increasing role of knowledge and education, it may also be described as a result of precarisation and structural disadvantages younger workers face in the labour market due to their exploitability (Cote and Bynner, 2008; Cote, 2014).

By showing the relevance of experiences of social mobility for couriers' class identification, this thesis adds to research drawing attention to the role of the wider life context (Haraway, 1995; Irwin, 2015; Irwin, 2018) and wider capitalist relations beyond paid labour (Haubner, 2017)

The above-presented findings echo Irwin's observation that people read the structural context, its continuities and changes, through their biographical experiences (Irwin, 2018). Equally, this thesis confirms her findings on the role of social mobility, in either direction, in shaping people's class identity (Irwin, 2018). Some couriers, when identifying as middle class or disidentifying with class, emphasised how they had authored success and achieved social upward mobility through migration and by getting into a job without a boss. At the same time, others described themselves as lower and working class, reflecting their challenges with constraints and their inability to achieve what they wanted.

The thesis makes a distinct point about the sense of being disadvantaged, expressed in relation to experiences of social downward mobility and, in all cases, went hand in hand with identification as working class. Similarly, it highlights the experience of being discriminated against, which resulted in a sense of status incongruence and made couriers question their middle-class status. The contribution here lies in the study's emphasis that wider life experiences beyond the work context matter for forming class identities. More specifically, it contributes to theoretical debates about the conceptualisation of class. This research was guided by Haubner's definition of exploitation rooted in a feminist Marxist perspective, which, beyond economic processes, sees exploitation facilitated through processes and positions of exclusion and social vulnerability (2017, p. 205). Such a refined understanding of exploitation is sensitised to the role of practices of discrimination that are based on power imbalances.

Accordingly, *class content* as a signifier for class identification (Wright, 2009) was purposely understood in a wider sense, going beyond a narrow economic concept of exploitation and integrating the relevance of inequalities relating to gender and migrant status and racism, but also simply forms of exclusion beyond the work context.

This study has demonstrated that a wider understanding of the underlying processes of class society also opens the understanding of wider conditions, mechanisms, and experiences that are formative of class identity. Opening the perspective on class in this way has proven fruitful since it showed how experiences of disadvantage and discrimination in the wider life context, shaped

by structural and ideological conditions, can evoke a sense of injustice in people that may sensitise them to a perception of conflicts at work.

Experiences of racism, albeit introduced by couriers through minor comments, were highly relevant for workers' appreciation of the autonomy and the absence of direct supervisors in the courier job. The biographic contextualisation of the narratives about work and class showed that the migrant workers limited labour market choices due to the level of their language skills, and devalued educational and training certificates facilitated the exploitability of workers with migrant backgrounds, especially if they were dependent on the job. At the same time, the move into courier work was by many of these couriers with migrant backgrounds framed as an improvement, and being their own bosses encouraged them to identify as middle class.

Narratives about the educational systems in both countries articulated a similarly disciplining effect. Several couriers had struggled in their first attempts to complete GCSEs and A-levels or could not successfully transition from their bachelor studies into career jobs. Because they experienced difficulties getting back into education and improving their labour market prospects, they either criticised the systematic disadvantage that this meant for them or told stories of personal failure, which they balanced by emphasising their agency and success in other moments.

While the experience of migration as social upward mobility made some long-term couriers identify as middle class, the experience of migration and the confrontation with racial stigma had the opposite effect on migrant workers who came from middle-class backgrounds. Some of the international students from well-off families struggled to get decent side jobs because of their lack of language skills and felt racial stigma and outside perceptions as foreigners, which made them question the middle-class identities that they had constructed based on their upbringing in their country of origin and their educational and professional attainments. The outside perception as a foreigner, as well as experiences of structural racism, left some of them with few other choices besides courier work despite their professional qualifications, which led them to experience status incongruence. The outside perceptions of their social class position made them consciously aware of social hierarchies. While an improvement of their own situation led most to relativise the role of hierarchies and social class, the experience of being downgraded resulted in more awareness of social inequalities and a questioning of their legitimacy.

Having carved out how experiences of social mobility and status incongruence, as well as experiences of racism and migrant status, play into class identifications, the thesis has made the point that workers' subjective biographic experiences of their lives must be taken seriously in explaining the increasing trend towards middle-class identifications. These aspects add a critical temporal perspective to the understanding of class identity as something that can not only be conceptualised through current work context and income but must consider prior trajectories and prospects.

Focusing only on the work context would not allow for an in-depth understanding of people's perceptions and evaluation of their own situation in society and their ways of constructing their class identities. The thesis has indicated how work and life experiences are intertwined, and it has been argued that this is a relevant link to explore for further class research. It has further demonstrated the value of an integrated approach to class analysis and a revised materialist angle in making the study receptive to phenomena and explanations that a one-sided or narrow approach to class might miss.

### 8.2.3 Resignation and Consent

The thesis contributes to the growing research on platform work. Adding to mainly ethnographic and quantitative studies on platform workers' experiences, working conditions, and protests, this research adds a perspective from in-depth biographical data.

This study has explored who gets into courier work, why they choose the job, and how they experience the working conditions. It also investigated how couriers see their own class position in society and how this is related to the courier job. Based on the findings, this thesis can help explain why workers may individually cope with working conditions or try to improve them through collective action.

It thereby more generally adds to class analysis by debating the role of culture and structure in keeping workers from resisting their exploitation and thus contributing to the reproduction of class society. It does so by drawing conclusions about whether the couriers in this study misrecognise their class position and consent to their exploitation or whether resignation as a reflection of the structural conditions explains the abstinence from protest.

More specifically, the research adds to the literature in platform research debating the relevance of different types of control shaping the labour process, working conditions and protest in platform work (Galière, 2020; Veen et al., 2020; Woodcock, 2020; Morales and Stecher,

2023). Based on the findings of this study, this thesis echoes contributions criticising the overemphasis on technological control through algorithmic management (Moore and Joyce, 2020; Joyce et al., 2023), by showing that even couriers who were not participating in collective action and considered themselves in the middle of society rarely fully bought into the narratives about autonomy and flexibility. It is argued here that biographic context and awareness of power relations towards the platforms play into the question of why couriers stay on the job but stick with individual strategies to deal with its downsides.

Typical characteristics of platform food courier work like information asymmetry, one-sided flexibility, safety risks, low social and employment protections, and unpaid labour (Rosenblat and Stark 2016, Gregory 2021, Forde et al. 2017, Pulignano et al 2023) are indeed problematised by many workers in this study. Besides the national differences, couriers in both countries had a critical perspective on pay and the lack of transparency. Even if they did not complain about the pay, workers observed and expressed issues like decreasing fees, missing pay, and hidden costs not covered by fees and salaries. Nonetheless, many of them identified as middle class despite working in a job with these conditions, and apart from nine couriers in Germany, the majority were not involved in collective action despite being active actors and frequent protest events in both countries.

While the general advantages and downsides of the job are sufficiently known (Ivanova et al., 2018; Heiland, 2021; Cini, 2023; Mendonça et al., 2023; Umney et al., 2024) This thesis has been able to contextualise them within the workers' life and work trajectories and their views and expectations. It can, therefore, add an understanding of what the job benefits and downsides subjectively mean to workers in different situations and how this leads them to evaluate the working conditions themselves and ways of dealing with them.

The findings of this study do not contradict research that demonstrates the role of socio-ideological or normative control in motivating couriers on the job and disguising conflict (Galière, 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023), few couriers in this study can be considered to have been fully blinded by the illusion of freedom, autonomy and flexibility. Similarly, few couriers considered the level of pay absolutely justified. Instead, many of the accounts of self-identified middle-class couriers gave evidence of a more complex evaluation process of ideological and structural factors which, understood against their biographic context, lead them to tolerate the situation, downplay the problems while emphasising the positives, and choose individual coping

strategies instead of collective action. By picking up on Vivek Chibbers' revived structural perspective on the reproduction of class society, I argue that resignation, too, has a role to play in why some couriers neither leave the job nor join protests.

The following sections explain these points – the interplay of ideological and structural factors for why couriers adjust to the work process and its conditions rather than resisting it collectively. Subsequently, I briefly engage with the role of pay in all this since pay has been a fundamental driver for couriers' protest (Joyce and Stuart, 2021; Joyce et al., 2023) and has suggested to present a potential tipping point in types of platform work that are reduced to the cash nexus (Joyce, 2020). Based on the biographic insights of this research, I ask which parts of the workforce this might apply to.

Vivek Chibber suggested that class identity and class struggle are not merely questions of whether workers recognise or misrecognise their class position and identify with it. Beyond whether cultural and ideological factors legitimise social inequality and obscure workers' recognition of their position and interests, he accounts for whether workers think they can successfully represent and fight for their interests. By drawing attention to the structural conditions that define workers' resources and chances to achieve change individually or collectively, this perspective allows us to consider abstinence from protest as a sign of resignation – a reflection of structural rather than ideological conditions (Chibber, 2022).

Following this line of thought, I argue that the accounts of many couriers in this study, who are not taking collective action and identified as middle-class, are characterised by both moments of misrecognition and resignation.

Particularly, the English sample contains several cases of older couriers who rejected class labels or identified as middle-class because their lives had improved compared to their past. Being self-employed and working widely autonomously and flexibly played an important role in their perception of themselves as their own bosses. In their accounts on the job and their class position, they emphasised the freedom they had gained through the courier job.

Their narrations clearly reflect moments of misrecognition that are linked to how platforms mobilise values like autonomy and flexibility (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Shibata, 2020; Morales and Stecher, 2023) and appeal to meritocratic ideals of justice (Galière, 2020). The actual experience of working without direct supervision and rigid shift patterns was important to the couriers, as well as the idea of themselves as independent contractors. Controlling how and

when to work is an efficacious narrative that aligns the couriers' values and interests with the business procedures. Working as a free subject is an ideal that would appeal to most people in any work context, with or without intentional normative control and mobilisation by management. For many couriers in this study, autonomy and flexibility, however limited they ultimately are in platform courier work, were not mere narratives, even the experience of controlled autonomy and flexibility presented a real improvement to the employment context workers had been in before. Neither the ideal nor the factual experience were sufficient to convince most couriers that the working conditions were fair and that their and the companies' interests were aligned.

That control is never complete (Joyce and Stuart, 2021) has been emphasised at the beginning of the thesis, and whether any aspect of the algorithmic management - even combining rational and normative moments of control - actually creates consent across vast parts of the workforce is questioned here. This might be true for some cases in which the risks and precarity of the platform work are fully neglected, and a neoliberal ethos has been deeply internalised. The case of Avi, who immigrated from Columbia, fits such an idea of consent well. More than most did, he insisted that hard work and good performance could achieve anyone anything. However, even Avi's views on the working conditions were not that simple. After expressing a clearly positive view on the pay and justifying it, when prompted on whether the company could pay more, Avi considered that they probably could and that he would like that, but didn't think they would ever do that.

Most couriers observably perceived some aspects of the job as unfair and problematic and expressed some reflection on whether change is likely or possible at all. Many narrations foregrounded the experience of freedom and the ability to afford a decent life through the job; however, these narrations did so by contrasting experiences of worse working conditions and long-term experiences of low-paid jobs, problematic supervisors, alienating work and rigid shifts. As demonstrated throughout the prior chapters, many workers saw the courier job as an escape from the downsides of former work and employment arrangements. I pointed this out by concluding that the job presented a "good enough deal" for a fair share of the interviewed couriers.

While the interviews reflect moments of misrecognition when couriers describe themselves as their own bosses and identify as middle class despite lacking formal education and

training and working for low pay, these couriers' accounts also reflect a sense of lowered expectations and a deep sense of awareness of their limited chances in the labour market. Rather than fully misrecognising their situation, they have come to terms with much of it. The emphasis on their own agency within the courier job is not necessarily or only an expression of internalised neoliberal ideologies. It must also be understood as an attempt to uphold a positive image and story about themselves.

To stick with the reflection on pay: When couriers considered the pay justified, they referred to the limited skills required to do the job and the fact that the work was relatively easy. Some also emphasised that it covered their costs. However, the same couriers expressed doubts that the companies would pay more. These doubts were not in focus. They were primarily mere side comments, but relevant ones. While showing apparent acceptance of the low pay and (in the English cases) emphasising the autonomy over their earning, couriers simultaneously expressed a clear awareness of power imbalances that meant they had little influence on the fees or the hourly pay. Most of those who were not collectively organised were not fundamentally opposed to unions but had either scepticism because of negative experiences, weren't very familiar with unions or had doubts that union could effectively represent their interests, particularly in the case of self-employed couriers.

Some did consider the businesses' need to make money, and some couriers had clearly come to terms with low pay, since they never worked outside of the low wage sector and had little perspective to ever do so. This echoes what has been found for other precarious workers that uncertainty and suboptimal conditions are normalised and often considered inevitable after repeated exposure to precarious work contexts (Trappmann et al., 2023).

It is important to note that none of the couriers, who were working full-time and with a long-term perspective, spoke about having a financially comfortable life. Overall, few couriers said straight-out that they considered the pay fair or justified. Most couriers have presented complex evaluations of the adequacy of the pay level on food delivery platforms. Not only did they consider multiple criteria to define whether the pay was good, but these evaluations were also clearly situated in their life context and work trajectories.

Based on these findings, it can be argued that couriers, along with low pay and other precarious aspects of the job, should not necessarily and solely be considered the result of misrecognition, enabled through effective normative control via algorithmic management. Most

couriers did not buy fully into the illusion of autonomy and flexibility. These aspects motivated them to do the job and stay in the job and enjoy the job because they present a relative improvement to former employment and a better deal than anticipated alternatives. Thus far, the experience of relative improvement, the coming to terms with things, and the evaluations of the possibility and likeliness of achieving better pay are relevant here and reflect not only socio-ideological control but a sense of resignation based on their experience with and their perception of the conditions around them.

Another reason couriers might not express dissatisfaction or protest the platforms is the limited dependency on the job. It has already been discussed that dependency is crucial in understanding the variety of experiences with platform work (Schor et al., 2020).

As this study has demonstrated, many couriers are not financially dependent on the job, do not identify with it, and only have a temporary prospect, eventually aiming for professional careers or other jobs. Couriers in the sample who were in such positions and identified as working class or middle class but did not participate in protests still criticised the working conditions. As I have shown, some of the students were planning to leave the job and find other ways to make a side income, they did not consent in the sense that they were not conscious of their own situation and interests vis-a-vis the company, but they simply coped with the conditions because they would exit the situation in the foreseeable future.

The downsides of the job are simply not relevant enough in many platform workers' lives to worry about, let alone putting time and energy into collective attempts to change them. Considering their different situations, individual exit, coping, or forms of misbehaviour, as well as circumventing and avoiding control, are more suitable for some platform workers than collective action. Whether this is consent might be debated, but it is not necessarily a reflection of workers misrecognising their position or their interests. It might instead be understood as a prioritisation of short-term over long-term interests, which, considering the psychological and normative effect of precarisation – the short-termism (Kraemer, 2008), and the increasing fragility of moral reciprocities (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Hauser, 2008; Standing, 2009, p. 37f.).

This thesis has, thus, added to the debate a structural perspective explaining why most couriers do not engage in collective action. Future research may further explore how misrecognition and resignation intertwine and what role key biographic experiences, public

discourses, shifting material conditions, and socio-ideological control as intentional management tools play in keeping workers from protesting or swaying them towards collective action.

Considering these structural and ideological explanations together, it can be asked how this links to the fact that pay has been a strong motif for protest in the courier sector in various countries across the globe. Clearly, couriers are outraged about the pay level and have decided to take collective action against it. It has been shown through the analysis of protest events that even in countries like Germany, where working conditions also present an essential driver for protest, pay is still highly relevant in motivating couriers' collective action (Trappmann et al., 2020; Neumann, 2023). This somewhat proves the theoretical assumption right that the cash nexus can fuel resistance as a result of small changes in conditions (Joyce, 2020).

Based on the above findings and discussion thus far, it must be assumed that this tipping towards resistance would remain limited to a small part of the workforce. I showed that a minority of workers are invested in the job but have not lowered their expectations, are outraged, and are willing to pursue collective resistance. The interviews also showed that many workers consider the job a good enough deal and will not easily be outraged by a further pay decrease. The job is still good enough or simply not relevant enough to them. If anything, they are more likely to leave platform courier work and find another side job. Couriers for whom the job is important mainly had mixed views on pay, even when they emphasised that they appreciated the autonomy over their earnings. The interviews with dependent couriers have shown that they were already nearly exhausting their individual capacities to maintain their income in times of decreasing fees despite their smart ways of working or rule-bending. Since most of them also had limited access to other types of work, exit was not an option for them.

These are the workers for whom the cash nexus could function as a crucial tipping point. Their expectations were indeed limited to pay and transparency, and while not being hopeful about unions, they were not fundamentally supposed to them either. Further changes by the platforms that could lower their income may agonise these workers despite their lowered expectations and their sense of agency and improvement through the flexibility and autonomy of the job. Considering that inequality and complaints about working conditions and pay are easily associated with passivity and a lack of agency over one's life, it seems to be crucial for unions and collectives to mobilise the right counter-narratives and increase confidence in the effectiveness of collective action to win these couriers over.

Due to the workforce characteristics and the sense of resignation, even a decrease in pay may only mobilise some workers. However, this is not to say that a small number of workers cannot organise successful resistance. In an industrial relations context like England, where couriers have little institutional means and rely heavily on mobilising strikes, broader parts of the workforce may be needed to organise impactful action.

The study cannot contribute substantially to understanding the comparative national contexts for class identifications because of the sample bias and the uneven distribution of activist couriers in both countries. Nonetheless, two things can be indicated based on the findings and the reflections on the limitations. Apparent differences in class language did not stick out in the analysis. Ideological narratives around self-responsibility, market logic and skills present in the interviews of couriers in both countries. Differences were notable regarding the levels of employment standards. In England and Germany, they present different templates for workers to evaluate their working conditions and recognise the antagonistic relationship between them and the platform companies. It cannot be said that the employment status and the potent ideal of the standard employment relationship in Germany lead to an overall more critical perspective. It did raise a wider variety of points of conflict for couriers who, compared to the English workers, had more expectations regarding equipment costs, health and safety support and participation in decision-making. While these kept fuelling small battles and legal action between couriers and companies, they did not lead to radical demands and perspectives but aimed at normalising the situation in platform work and adjusting it to the existing standard. Apart from some exceptional cases, the centre of expressed conflicts in the interviews was not exploitation but a lack of recognition and a wish that the company would take better care of their workers. The institutional context, however, made it easier for couriers in Germany to stabilise their resistance and thus gain access to resources and the ability to create spaces to further their knowledge and conflict understanding and to make effective wins against the platforms.

In the English context, on the other hand, pay and the lack of transparency were criticised, and many couriers actively rejected expectations relating to wider employment rights and equipment costs. The points of conflict were fewer, but with the relationship being reduced to the instrumental interest in making a living, the conflict between couriers and the company could have been much clearer. The standards and expectations of couriers in England were lower,

and the interviews showed no signs that antagonism would be disguised by any further expectations or hopes for a relationship providing care and recognition.

In England, the platforms' role as mere mediators is more accepted due to the legal status of self-employment and potentially because of the more wide-reaching normalisation of precarious working conditions.

Whether this observation is skewed because of the sample bias will be explored in further research. Considering the context of industrial relations, it is reasonable to assume that it would be difficult for politically active couriers in England to raise the expectations towards pay, safety, and potentially even employment status through their political work. Without stable formats like works councils and support from mainstream unions with broader reach and resources, much more pressure is on collectives and grassroots unions to do persistent organising work. While this organising from the ground has included more migrant workers in the resistance than is the case in Germany, and while it is likely beneficial to the forming of working-class identities, it comes with crucial challenges. Part of keeping workers motivated to choose collective action over individual strategies to deal with issues at work is participating in collective action, experiencing a sense of community, and seeing their collective agency manifest in wins. Achieving actual improvements in working conditions is more difficult for couriers in England.

It could be argued that when working-class identities under these conditions are formed, these are potentially deeper and more radical than the ones of a majority of works councils in Germany. Research has already started to distinguish the different patterns of resistance in the platform food courier sector, suggesting that different industrial relations regimes result in variation regarding the labour actors, grievances and different resources that shape couriers' resistance (Visser, 2009; Stuart et al., 2024) Further research on how these differences affect organising strategies and outcomes and which role different class identifications might play in the process will be of interest.

### 8.3 Conclusion

The thesis asked whether class is still relevant to the understanding, organisation, and representation of workers' interests. Based on the findings, I argue that class can facilitate a critical understanding of inequality and help to mobilise workers' interests but has lost much of

its defining and empowering effect for important parts of the workforce in Western Capitalist Societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The entanglement of changing structural and ideological conditions shown here in the case of platform food couriers likely make it difficult for many workers to identify conflicts in the workplace and society and to define where they stand. Moralised discourses and hegemonic principles of meritocracy and individualism paired with technological transformations, the precarisation of jobs, and weekend structures of workers' interest representation present a challenge for workers when identifying whom they stand with and whether it is worth it to choose collective approaches to improve their situation.

The case of these food couriers has shown that it is difficult to know where they stand within the social hierarchies. They have fewer clear markers available to them that can define their position. Class narratives struggle to catch up with the reality of the new world of work and its conditions. Traditional class language lacks associative links to the experiences and observations workers today make. Autonomy and flexibility that used to be associated with middle-class jobs are now shaping the work experience of low-skilled platform work, while at the same time, many blue- and white-collar jobs are lowly paid, and the increasing inequality of incomes do not reflect differences in occupations in the same way it used to.

In countries like Germany, the template of standard employment and its benefits and protections is still strong despite ongoing precarisation and holds up expectations about working conditions. However, the effect of structural transformations and cultural changes has clearly been impactful, and for workers who have come to terms with bad working conditions, are only transitioning, or have lowered expectations due to migration, the autonomy and flexibility in platform work present a good enough deal to not be disappointed or outraged.

Former studies on class identities used the football team analogy to determine if workers recognised their antagonistic interests towards capital and their shared interests with other workers by asking whether they thought they and management were in the same teams (Goldthorpe, 1969). Although this has been criticised (Beynon, 1973), it can be a good question not only for national comparative purposes but also to prompt complex reflections. For food couriers and other workers today, defining whom they have opposing or shared interests with is even more challenging for structural and ideological reasons. Platform couriers do not necessarily share similar experiences and living situations, let alone cultural and political

preferences. Some couriers had rarely talked to other riders, and their work, even when in employment, was entirely independent from colleagues. Bicycle couriers may see other riders across town, and some notice more differences than commonalities because the workforce is so heterogeneous and the perspectives on the job vary vastly.

With part of the management functions being carried out through the App, it is not easy to know if there are any teams in these companies in the first place. Couriers rarely have contact with office workers, let alone with middle-management positions. As the study has shown, many couriers are happy about that because they only ever had bad experiences with supervisors and happily take to the idea of being their own bosses despite being aware of algorithmic control and factual restrictions to their autonomy and flexibility.

Having shown the different characteristics of middle-class identities and working-class identities here, some couriers found or envisioned a form of team or community. Others who defined themselves as middle class did not and ultimately saw themselves standing alone. Not necessarily because they did not notice inequality or were deeply convinced by meritocratic discourses, but because they experienced a considerable improvement and gain in agency that they could not align with the idea of the working class.

The discussion about consent and resignation has indicated that the hopelessness vis-à-vis power imbalances may make collective resistance appear unattractive, and without the hope for change, a class narrative leaves those at the bottom positions disempowered. It is not easy for precarised platform workers in weakened industrial relations context to show confidence in collective voice representation.

The thesis's core arguments extend beyond platform food courier work. They point toward wider social trends and phenomena. They speak to the wider fragmentation of work trajectories, increasingly precarious conditions in many sectors and crucial shifts in working and living conditions for recent generations of workers. They likely apply to other precarious workforces with similar characteristics, like hospitality, domestic care and sex workers.

Despite the visible ambivalence around class expressed by many couriers, the findings of this study also indicate the potential for shifts in perceptions, experiences and identities relating to class. Most importantly, it emphasised that not only misrecognition but also a sense of resignation is why workers hesitate to adopt class narratives and consider collective action. The

waves of resistance in platform food courier work are, therefore, crucial events that have potential to create and restore confidence in the possibility and success of collective action.

The accounts of those couriers who identified as working class reflect and emphasise the critical role that collective action plays in developing political class identities in the above-described context. While some of them were already politicised when they started to organise as couriers, for all couriers who participated in collective resistance, it shaped their sense of collective agency, added to their understanding of conflicts, and expanded their solidarities, ultimately strengthening their identifications as workers. With critical class discourses slowly returning to public and academic debates, counterhegemonic narratives may also be slowly strengthened and promote shifts in the interplay of misrecognition, resignation, and resistance.

While the above discussion has already indicated areas and questions for further research, the following section emphasises the need for future investigation in three main areas.

First, the thesis finds a need for future research to systematically conceptualise the temporal dimensions of class to further explore the interplay of work and life context. To understand class identity under conditions of modern capitalism, researchers must explore experiences of work and their role within individuals' life trajectories.

Second, research on the mobilisation of platform workers may conduct more detailed examinations of the role of algorithmic management and variable pay as mechanisms of control or tipping points for antagonism. Considering the role that flexibility and autonomy play in enabling middle-class identities, it needs to be asked at which point decreasing fees and the intensified precarity for many full-time couriers outweigh these benefits and shift their evaluation of the job and their own position towards the company and within society. This is not only of interest for the context of courier work but also for other types of platform work. Research should further explore how far algorithmic management, and the mobilised narrative of autonomy create consent or whether a sense of resignation is responsible for workers' abstinence from protest and individual coping strategies.

Third, the thesis finds a need for future research to investigate the link between class identity and other elements of class consciousness. Since the thesis has shown how relevant perceptions of class conflict, legitimacy of social inequalities, and possibilities of social mobility are for couriers' identification, further research may investigate how these aspects of class consciousness relate to class identity more systematically and in detail.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Conceptualization of Class Consciousness

The concept of class consciousness applied here to study class identity is based on a model developed based on classic conceptualisations of class consciousness and group consciousness. At the core of the model is the conceptualisation of Michael Mann (1973), who identified four elements of class consciousness: First, *class totality* or the question of the perception of class has a structuring effect on social life; second, *class opposition* or the perception that class interests are fundamentally opposed, third, *class identity* as the identification with a class group and fourth the extent to which people *envision alternative* (classless) forms of social organisation. Other researchers have op on this work and expanded and refined these elements (Zingraff and Schulman 1984; Wright 1985; Keefer et al. 2015) or complemented them with similar elements for group consciousness (Gurin 1995). These different conceptualisations address five dimensions of class consciousness: structural, intergroup, personal, ideological dimension and action. Across these dimensions, seven elements of class consciousness can are defined: (I) awareness of social class/ perception of social structure, (II) perception of class conflict, (III) beliefs about legitimacy of inequalities and permeability of class groups, (IV) personal identification with one's class group,(V) personal experiences of class/ being treated as a member of class, (VI) attitudes toward egalitarian change/ Envisioning alternatives, and (VII) attitudes towards class action.

There are some noticeable differences between these conceptualisations. Gurin (1995), for example, specifies the intergroup dimension. Instead of broadly considering class *opposition* or conflict, she differentiates between *power discontent* and *withdrawal of legitimacy* while adding *collectivist orientation* as another aspect. At the same time, her definition that is fit for group consciousness in general rather than class consciousness in particular does not pay attention to how people perceive social structure. While this element of *structural awareness* was brought back in by Keefer et al. (2015), who also added *class experiences*, they no longer included *visions of alternatives* (Mann 1974) or attitudes toward egalitarian change (Zingraff and Schulman 1984). The most recent model by Keefer and colleagues (2015) is valuable because of its three dimensions. However, if class consciousness is conceptualised from a perspective of

social change, the question of *envisioning alternatives* or *possible* and *desirable alternatives* might be too important to be left out.

Dimension Author	Structural	Personal	Intergroup	Utopian		Action
Mann 1974	Class Totality	Class Identity	Class Oppos.	Envisioning Alternatives		X
Zingraff/S chulman 1984	X	Class Identity	Class Conflict Verbalisation	Attitudes towards egalitarian change		Attitudes towards class action
Wright 1985/2015	Perceptions and Observations (with class content)			Theories of Consequences <i>(what is possible)</i>	Evaluation of Consequences <i>(desirable outcome)</i>	X
Gurin 1995	X	Identification	<i>(Power)</i> Discontent	X		X
	Withdrawal of Legitimacy					
	Collectivist Orientation					
Keefer et al. 2015	Perception of Social Structure <i>(Structural Awareness)</i>	Personal Experience of Class	Perception of Class Conflict	X		X
		Identification with class	Perception of Class Relations <i>(permeability and Legitimacy)</i>			

## Appendix B: Interview questions skeleton guide

### **Stimulus**

I want to start by getting a sense of your life history. // I would like to ask you to tell me your life story. How did you become the person that you are today?

### **Immanent Questions**

Example phrases:

You have mentioned that ... Do you remember how you experienced it?

How do you remember the moment you decided to do so?

You recalled that in 20XX, you started your work in ... . How do you remember that time?

Let's think back to when ..... (you graduated// moved to....)

Tell me how you ... (found your first job// moved to?)

### **External Questions**

#### **Transition from school to work**

How was it at the end of your school time?

Please walk me through the steps you took when deciding what to do after graduation.

#### **General work experiences**

Could you please tell me more about your experiences in the jobs you have had so far?

#### **Becoming a platform food courier**

How did you come to work as a courier? // Walk me through the time when you decided to work as a rider.

#### **Experiences of platform courier work**

How about this job at [company name]? How are you feeling about the job?

Walk me through a typical shift or a typical week at work/?

What are the relationships like with your co-workers? Do you talk much with other couriers?

How would you describe contacts with area managers/shift managers?

What has been your experience working with the app?

Are there times when your work feels rewarding? How about challenging?

When it was cold in winter, and there was snow for a few days, did you work around that time? How did you experience working under these extreme conditions?

What about insurance policies and pension schemes? Being self-employed, do you have to take care of these things individually? [for UK]

Deliveroo is very popular for takeaway service but has faced criticism and even protests from workers and unions. Have you been following up on this?

What do you think about the criticism?

Did you consider joining the protests/meetings/ the union?

Could there be a way for the company to pay couriers better or improve the working conditions?

At platforms in Germany, workers get employment contracts that cover part of their health insurance, etc. Do you think Deliveroo should work like that, too?

### **Good work**

What is good work for you?

### **Good Life**

What is a good life for you?

### **Political interests and views**

How do you feel about politics?

Do you discuss politics with people around you?

Do you engage socially or politically in any way?

Generally, how would you describe your political views?

Could you tell me how you have voted in the last few elections?

### **The perception of class structure and class identifications**

Some people say that our society is divided into various conflicted groups. What do you think, what is the most crucial division in (British) society?

Some people talk about there being different classes - What do you think?

**There has been some debate about whether Britain is becoming a classless society.**

**What do you think about this?**

*Discussion should elaborate on the following:*

Extent of social inequality

Main lines of class division (how would you describe the main class divisions?)

the composition of class (who belongs to these classes?)

the determinants of the class positions of individuals and groups (prompt: security?/stable income?) (In your view, what is it that makes someone working class, or upper class etc.?)

subjective class identification

the extent and channels of social mobility

the causes of the phenomenon of class in general

### **Subjective Class identity**

What social class do you think you belong to? // **How would you describe yourself: do you belong to a specific group, class or strata?** // Where would you locate/position yourself? // Sometimes people divide society into classes, for example working class, middle class and upper class. If you were asked yourself in such a scheme, where would you place yourself? (*clarify that this is not meant in a moral sense!*)

*or*

What social class would you put yourself in?

**Can you walk me through a time, when you felt like social class mattered in your life?**

**How salient is social class in your daily life?**

How do you see yourself in comparison to your parents? (Economically, socially etc.). What were their lives like when they were your age? // **How do you see yourself in comparison with other people** (of your age)?

Comparing yourself to other people, would you say that you have done better than they have, worse, or about the same?

Who is it that you are thinking of, when you say that you have done better/worse

Do you think there might be such a thing as a new working class, (different from the factory and construction workers of the 60s)?

### **Images of economic/social order// envisioning alternatives**

Try a daydream: if you had the power to change three things in this country/this society what would you change? Why?

### **Future plans**

How does your life look like in ten years from now? How would you want it to look like?

## Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire

### ***Questionnaire***

*For interview participants*

Dear Participant,

I want to thank you for your time and effort, with which you supported my work during this interview.

Concluding, I would like to ask you, to give me a few more minutes to fill out the following questionnaire. Of course, this information will be used in an anonymized as well.

Some of the questions will address topics, that you have already talked about during the interview, please excuse the doubling. These more standardized information serves different analytic purposes.

Thank you again for your time and cooperation!

**Gender:** ..... **Place of birth:** .....

**Year of birth:** ..... **Nationality:** .....

**We start with a couple of questions regarding your education and occupation:**

1. What educational degrees do you hold? Please mark *all* the applicable and also fill in your age at the time of the degree:

at the age of:

*Secondary school degree*

Lower secondary school .....

Intermediate secondary school degree .....

Upper secondary school degree .....

Advanced college entrance qualification .....

other degree: ..... .....

No degree .....

*Occupational degree*

Vocational educational training .....

School-based vocational training .....

Other degree: ..... .....

No occupational degree .....

*Tertiary educational degree*

Bachelor .....

Master .....

Diploma/Magister .....

Other tertiary degree, which is ..... .....

I studied, but didn't graduate .....

Number of studied semesters .....

2. Did you receive financial support during training/studying?  
(Please mark the applicable and also note the number of months you received support)

duration in months

Federal aid for tertiary students (50% grant, 50% credit) .....

Federal aid for vocational training students (see above) .....

Grant/scholarship (full grant) .....

Support through parents/family .....

Partly supported, partly worked .....

No support, worked a lot .....

No support, lived by own savings/credit .....

Not applicable .....

**Some more questions about you:**

3. Do you have a partner? (please note the applicable)

- yes  
 no

4. I currently live:  
 (please mark the applicable)

- in common law marriage/marriage  
 with my partner  
 at my parent's  
 alone  
 alone with my child/children  
 in a shared house/flat  
 other: .....

5. Please indicate the type of housing you live in (underline the applicable):

- private/council rented house/apartment/room  
 own house/apartment  
 property (house/apartment) owned by a family member

**Some questions about your parents and brothers/sisters:**

8. What is/was your parent's occupation?

	Education in	Job performed
Mother		
Father		

9. What is your parent's origin in terms of country/region/place (city/town/village)?

Mother: .....  
 Father: .....

10. Do you have any brothers and sisters? (please mark the applicable)

- yes (how many and what age are they?)  
 no

**And a few questions on your financial situation (voluntary answer of course):**

12. How many people are there in your household, including yourself? (if applicable, please indicate children that are younger than 14 years old) ?

.....  
*(Household is defined as a group of people living together and contributing to a common budget)*

13. Could you approximately state, in what range your monthly netto household-income is; so how much money does your household have to spend a months after tax and social insurances? (please note the applicable or fill in the absolute number)

My average household net income is .....

- |                                       |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> below £700   | <input type="checkbox"/> £2550 - 3399 | <input type="checkbox"/> more than £6800 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> £700 - 999   | <input type="checkbox"/> £3400 - 4249 |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> £1000 - 1699 | <input type="checkbox"/> £4250 - 5099 |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> £1700 - 2549 | <input type="checkbox"/> £5100- 6799  |  |

14. How much of your income goes into your rent or mortgage?

.....

15. How much of your income goes into standing bills?

.....

17. Do you currently have any savings/securities (squirrel fund for rainy-days, life-insurance, building loan contract etc. )?

- yes .....
- no

16. Do you currently have outstanding debts (including/excluding student loan)?

If yes, please describe the kind of debt/to whom you owe and the approximate amount.

- no  
 yes: .....

18. Do you currently receive any kind of financial/material support from relatives, friends, state, local or other institutions of organisations?

If yes, please describe which kind of support it is

- no  
 yes: .....  
 .....  
 .....

**And two last questions**

19. Often people seem to surround themselves with people very much like themselves. I'm interested in how far this is true for people who work as riders. Think of the five people you spend most of your time with (perhaps family, friends, colleagues, neighbours). What are their jobs/occupations.

- .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

20. What do you do for leisure?

- .....  
 .....  
 .....

***Thank you very much for your support!***

## Appendix D: Transcription Conventions

The conventions for transcription in the table below present a modified version of conventions for conversation analysis (Selting et al. 1998, Selting et al. 2009) that, adopted for my research interest. The GAT (“Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem”) and GAT2 follow the Jefferson-style transcription system closely but have been adopted for German language context. The GAT is easily accessible, especially when applying the minimalist system for transcript (Selting et al 2011). Noticeable verbal peculiarities of the interviewee are documented in a note prepending the interview transcript. Gap fillers such as “I mean,” and “erm” type words are transcribed when potentially meaningful but reduced or fully omitted when impacting the reading flow.

<b>INT/I</b>	Interviewer
<b>PER/P</b>	Interviewee/ Participant
(.)	Short break (up to two seconds)
(5.0)	Pause of two seconds or more
//	Overlap in Conversation
LOVE	Emphasis/very loud expression/raised voice: single words or (parts of) whole sentence
<u>wor-</u>	Discontinuation of a word, then new word/sentence or attempt to correct the word or sentence
( <u>wiejum</u> )	Uncertain transcription. Guessing/assuming the word or expression if it can't be understood for sure
(            )	Incomprehensible (if longer passage: include length in seconds)
((hesitates))	Description ((laughs/cries/hesitates))
(( (    ) ))	Any comment by transcribing person, e.g. about interruptions (((baby cries/sirens outside/phone rings/etc.))). Noises from outside are only included if they are commented on by interview participants, interrupt or influence the conversation or are relevant in any other way
(TC: 00:00:00)	Time code, set approximately on every 5 <sup>th</sup> page.

## Appendix E: Request to participate

### Social media - Facebook

Hello [NAME], I'm writing to you because I saw that you are working for Deliveroo. I'm a researcher at the University of Leeds studying food couriers in Germany and in the UK. I would like to interview you for my research. I'm interested in how people come to work as food couriers and what their experience is and their view of the company, as well as their views on society and politics. So just personal views and experiences. You wouldn't need to prepare anything. Happy to give you more details. I can't pay, but I offer a £20 high street voucher to reimburse you for your time. Here is my official profile (I don't usually use Facebook for work, it's just this time to find research participants.)

<https://business.leeds.ac.uk/faculty/pgr/974/alexandra-seehaus>

### Social Media – Twitter to IWGB

Hi there, I know you are quite busy, so I don't mean to steal much of your time. I'm looking to speak to food couriers in the UK and in Germany for my research on class consciousness of platform workers. I've talked to quite a few riders in Berlin, Cologne etc. but now hoping to interview more people in the UK. I'm a researcher at the University of Leeds studying work and employment conditions, and also class and class relations in today's society (here is my profile if you want to have a look what I'm up to: <https://business.leeds.ac.uk/faculty/pgr/974/alexandra-seehaus...>). I was hoping that I could get in contact with some food couriers through the union. Or perhaps you could spread the word through your mailing lists, if that would be appropriate. I've attached a leaflet about the search for interviewees (happy to send this one and information sheet per mail if that is better). I'm mainly interested in how people happen to work as food couriers, what their experience of the work is and what their thoughts on politics and inequality are. I can't compensate much, but every person who does an interview with me, gets a high street voucher worth £20. Would be much appreciated if you could help me out by sending this around or perhaps even putting me in contact with people. I'm happy to explain more and provide more information of course.

Kind regards,

Alexandra Seehaus

## Social Media – WhatsApp- Correspondence

Hi [NAME],

The interviews are part of my PhD research in which I'm investigating the class consciousness of precarious workers. Prior to my PhD I've done similar research in that field, but for the PhD I am now specifically interested in food couriers in Germany and the UK.

In the Interviews I basically ask people to tell me their life story and their experience with work in general and work as Rider in particular. Afterwards the interview continues with me asking some questions on people's thoughts on inequality, politics and society. Always depends on the person and how much they want to talk, but I like to give people a general warning that an interview can easily take 2-3 hours, some take longer :) As we would be doing an online interview via Zoom or Skype or Microsoft team, we can also easily stop if we run out of time and continue another day. I record the audio so that I can transcribe the interviews later for analysis. But everything is stored safely and whenever I use information or quotes from interviews for publications or presentations, these will be strictly anonymised.

## Appendix F: Participant information Sheet

### **Information Sheet on Interview Participation**

Dear participant,

I intend to interview you as part of the research project "**Class consciousness of precarious workers – A comparative study of food couriers in the UK and Germany**".

The project aims to understand how workers in the food delivery sector make sense of inequality in the workplace and in everyday life. It investigates in how far workers think about society in terms of class and whether they form collective identities. For this purpose, 40 in-depth interviews are carried out with delivery riders in the UK and Germany.

The Interviews are part of a PhD research project at the Work and Employment Relations Department of **Leeds University Business School**. With the help of the interviews, I want to reach a deeper understanding of how riders experience their work and if this shapes their understanding of the world, and in particular the world of work and their views on social inequality.

For the course of the analysis, assuming you agree, it is important that I record the interview. I will then transcribe and analyze the interview. **I assure you anonymity**: I will anonymize all personal information to ensure that no conclusions can be drawn for you or for persons whom you speak about.

The **interview is used for non-commercial, exclusively scientific purposes**. This may include direct quotes at conferences or in articles, again: without being identifiable as a person.

Information about you will not be disclosed to third parties.

I would like to thank you for your participation in the interview. Your participation will contribute to an improved understanding of the experiences of food delivery riders and their views.

Your participation in the research project through the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview anytime, you have the right to interrupt the interview, to answer questions or not to speak about topics if you find it uncomfortable. At request, I will send you the transcript of the interview and at this stage you can decide again if you are happy for me to use quotes from it in an anonymized version.

For any further information feel free to look at my profile or contact me:

<https://business.leeds.ac.uk/faculty/pgr/974/alexandra-seehaus>

Alexandra Seehaus  
Leeds University Business School  
Work and Employment Relations Department  
bnase@leeds.ac.uk

---

Place and date of issue

---

Interviewer

## Appendix G: Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Class consciousness of precarious workers – A comparative study of food delivery riders in the UK and Germany

Name of Researcher: Alexandra Seehaus

Please Tick

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. I was informed about the context and procedure of the interview.
2. I hereby give my consent to the interview, under the mentioned conditions (audio recording of the interview, transcription, anonymization).
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. This includes the ability to withdraw quotations at any point.
4. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly anonymous. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymized responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or publication that result from the research.
5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research
- 6 I agree to take part in the above research project.
7. I agree to be contacted again by a member of the research team.
8. I agree to be contacted again to be invited to a joint discussion of preliminary interpretations and findings from the interviews.

---

Name of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

## Appendix H: Sample Table

		<b>ENGLAND</b>	<b>GERMANY</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>AGE</b>	18 - 30	8	9	17
	31-65	8	8	15
<b>GENDER</b>	Female	1	2	3
	Male	15	15	30
<b>MIGRATION</b>	Experience	9	8	17
	Background	-	3	3
<b>EDUCATION*</b>	Lower	2	-	2
	Medium	10	6	16
	Bachelor	-	7	7
	Master +	4	4	8
<b>CLASS</b>	WORK	11	4	15
<b>BACKGROUND**</b>	MIDDLE	5	13	18
<b>CLASS</b>	Work	2 (+3)	10	12 (15)
<b>IDENTITY***</b>	Middle	11	5	15
	Disidentification	3 (+3)	2	5 (8)
<b>POLITICALLY</b>	YES	-	9	9
<b>ACTIVE</b>	NO	16	8	24
<b>DEPENDENT ON</b>	YES	8	14	22
<b>INCOME</b>	NO	8	3	11

*\*Specifications and definitions of sampling*

*\*Education*

Lower = no school certificate or only primary school

Medium = secondary school degree, A-levels, completed apprenticeships, enrolled in apprenticeships or undergraduate degree programs

Bachelor = degree completed

Master = degree completed

*\*\*Class Background*

= here defined by parent's occupation

*\*\*\* Class Identity*

Values in brackets indicate the ambivalent identifications of those who described themselves as working class and middle class

## Appendix I: Table Class Identifications

TOTAL	MIGRANT	EDUCATION	CLASS BCKGR	CLASS IDENTIFICATION	POLIT. ACTIVE	DEPENDENCY	
00M_GENO	Migrant	Medium	WORKING	Working/Refusal	No	Yes	
01M_TOM	-	Medium	WORKING	Refusal	No	Yes	
02M_JAMES	<b>Migrant</b>	Lower	WORKING	Refusal	No	Yes	
03M_JIMMY	-	Medium	MIDDLE	Worker-Middle	No	-	
04M_THIAGO	Migrant	Medium	WORKING	Worker-Middle	No	-	
05M_BRIAN	-	Medium	MIDDLE	Middle	No	-	
06M_MATEO	Migrant	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle	No	-	
07M_AVI	<b>Migrant</b>	Medium	WORKING	Refusal	No	Yes	
08M_MEBRATU	<b>Migrant</b>	Lower	WORKING	Middle	No	Yes	
09M_HENRY	-	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle	No	-	
10M_DYLAN	-	Higher	MIDDLE	Working-Middle	No	-	
11M_LIAM	Migrant	Higher	WORKING	Middle	No	(Yes)	
12M_BILLY	-	Medium	WORKING	Working	No	Yes	
13M_RAAIB	<b>Migrant</b>	Medium	WORKING	Middle/Refusal	No	Yes	
14M_TOBIAS	<b>Migrant</b>	Medium	WORKING	Middle	No	Yes	
15W_SAMANTHA	-	Medium	WORKING	Middle/Refusal	No	-	
16	9 Mig. Exp.	2L, 10M, 4H	11 W, 5 M	2(+3)W, 11M, 3(+3)R	0	9	
	<b>MIGRANT</b>	<b>EDUCATION</b>	<b>CLASS BCKGR</b>	<b>CLASS IDENTIFICATION</b>	<b>POLIT. ACTIVE</b>	<b>DEPEN- DENCY</b>	
00M_LARS	-	Medium	MIDDLE	Refusal	Yes	Yes	
01M_JANNECK	-	Medium	WORKING	Worker	Yes	Yes	
02M_BASTI	-	Higher	WORKING	Worker	Yes	(Yes)	
03M_MIRO	Migrant	Higher	MIDDLE	Worker	No	Yes	
04M_FABRICIO	Background	Medium	WORKING	Worker	Yes	Yes	
05M_THEO	Background	Higher	MIDDLE	Worker	Yes	Yes	
06M_NICK	Migrant	Medium	MIDDLE	Middle	No	Yes	
07W_TIA	Migrant	Higher	MIDDLE	Worker/Middle	Yes	Yes	
08W_TABEA		Medium	MIDDLE	Worker/ Middle	Yes	Yes	
09M_DAVID	<b>Migrant</b>	Higher	MIDDLE	Worker	No	Yes	
10M_MALIK	Background	Higher	WORKING	Worker	Yes	Yes	
11M_SEBASTIAN	-	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle	No	Yes	
12M_AFIK	<b>Migrant</b>	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle	No	(Yes)	
13M_JOSH	Migrant	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle	No	Yes	
14M_DHAVAL	<b>Migrant</b>	Higher	MIDDLE	Middle/Worker	No	Yes	
15M_SATVIK	<b>Migrant</b>	Higher	MIDDLE?	Refusal	No	Yes	
16M_MICHAEL	-	Medium	MIDDLE	Middle/Refusal	Yes	-	
17	3 Bck, 8 Exp	6M, 11H.	4 W, 13 M	10W, 5M, 2R/D	8	16	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>3 Bck, 17 Exp</b>	<b>2L, 16M, 15H</b>	<b>15 W, 18 M</b>	<b>12(15) W, 15M, 5(8) R/D</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>25</b>

\*Migrant Background – The interviewee’s family had immigrated to the UK or Germany: second generation migrant

\*Migrant/ Migrant experience – The interview partner has immigrated to Germany or the UK: first generation migrant

\*Dependency – dependency on income for food courier income to get by/make a living.

\*Class Background defined by parent’s occupation

\*Level of education defined as in general sample overview; see Appendix XXX

The names of couriers who were in higher education at the point of the interview are marked in grey instead of black.

\*Refusal is equivalent to disidentification or rejection of class labels to describe the own position