

From technological disruption to political mobilization: an approach to social protest on lean platforms

De la disrupción tecnológica a la movilización política: una aproximación a la protesta social frente a las plataformas austeras

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ABSTRACT

In order to carry out a first approach to the dynamics of political mobilization associated with the arrival and consolidation of digital platforms in national contexts, this article seeks to characterize the field of protest against lean platforms, in terms of the repertoires, demands and modalities of collective action, this from the construction of a database for the case of Costa Rica under the methodology of Protest Event Analysis (PEA) and Political Claims Analysis (PCA). The results of the descriptive statistical analysis allow us to observe that the contentious dynamics has gone from being totally dominated by the traditional taxi driver sector, to showing the entry of new actors such as platform workers and some civil society groups that have come to complicate the panorama of action for the Costa Rican government in terms of regulation and, therefore, to incorporate new demands and decision arenas within the political-social field.

Keywords

Platform capitalism;
sharing economy;
lean platforms; social
protest; Uber

RESUMEN

Con el propósito de llevar a cabo un primer acercamiento sobre la dinámica de la movilización política asociada a la llegada y la consolidación de las plataformas digitales en los contextos nacionales, este artículo busca caracterizar el campo de la protesta frente a las plataformas austeras, en términos de los repertorios, demandas y modalidades de la acción colectiva; esto, a partir de la construcción de una base de datos para el caso de Costa Rica, bajo la metodología del análisis de eventos de protesta (AEP) y el análisis de demandas políticas (ADP). En los resultados del análisis estadístico descriptivo se observa que la dinámica contenciosa ha pasado de estar totalmente dominada por el sector tradicional de taxistas a evidenciar la entrada de nuevos actores, como los trabajadores de plataformas y grupos de la sociedad civil, los cuales han complicado el panorama de acción para el gobierno costarricense en términos de regulación y, por tanto, a incorporar nuevas demandas y arenas decisorias dentro del campo político-social.

Palabras clave

Capitalismo de
plataformas; economía
colaborativa;
plataformas austeras;
protesta social; Uber

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Introduction

The approaches that have studied the impact and new social configurations in the face of the entry of digital platforms in different countries fall within a broad interdisciplinary field that fosters dialogue with diverse frames of reference, such as studies focused on the paradigm of the collaborative economy (sharing economy), the gig economy, the sociology of work, the culture of connectivity and social inequalities, among others (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017).

Consequently, Van Dijck, Poell & Waal (2018) indicate that the study of social connectivity associated with digital platforms requires an open and comprehensive look that recognizes as an integral part of society the new and varied phenomena that these generate, so they would be part of the disputes of interest around value systems that relate to public goods. It is understood that platforms are not neutral technological constructs, but imply logics and normative architectures that can directly compete with the formal or informal institutions in force in societies.

Following this analytical shift, in recent years the initial optimism generated by the introduction of digital platforms, in its broad sense, has given way to skepticism following the realization of the less positive impacts of digitization on societies. Among the wide range of possibilities, after the first decade of the 21st century, emphasis has been placed on the understanding of the corporate and business transformation of Web 2.0, which aimed, in general terms, to generate communities of users governed by the disinterested and horizontal exchange of cultural and economic services (Van Dijck, 2013).

For this reason, much of the current debate has tended to focus on the potential dangers to coexistence and democratic deliberation identified as a result of the platforming of economies and social interactions (Trice & Jones, 2020). Under this framework, the collaborative economy approach has recently given rise to the publication of studies that, as a counterpart, draw attention to the lack of certainty in the positive effects expected from this new “crowd-based capitalism”, both in the economy –at a general level– and in the regulatory frameworks, in the labor field and in the social fabric of countries (Sundararajan, 2016).

In these terms, a questioning of the idealistic “neo-language” of innovation has developed, on which a critical discourse of “collaborative utopia” is built (Pruchnic & Ceraso, 2020). After two decades of digital colonization, an interpretative field has emerged inclined towards the establishment of a series of diagnoses on the impact of the collaborative economy on issues as broad as deregulation, labor precarization and exploitation, social security, urban mobility, racial discrimination, public health, sexual harassment, migrations, and the effects of digital surveillance on the organization of platform workers (now turned into “collaborators”), among others (Chandler & Fuchs, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Ravenelle, 2019; Schor *et al.*, 2020).

A large part of the adverse impacts of the collaborative economy mentioned above can be observed in the specificity of work in the austere platforms of the gig economy dedicated to passenger transportation and the delivery of objects and food. This is because most of them have generated a more visible and “disruptive” impact on the technological transformation of urban mobility ecosystems: the space of cities as the material face of the digitization process of autonomous and informal work (Meyer & Shaheen, 2017). Thus, one of the effects of the introduction of austere platforms –both in the industrialized powers and in the regions of the Global South– has been the emergence of demands in civil society associated mainly with changes in the labor, productive and consumption fields in the countries.

Although platform capitalism constitutes the expression of the deepening of the neoliberal model, the articulation of these new “contentious moments” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) in the digital era does not necessarily define a continuity with the “technopolitical” social movements of the Internet, which were articulated in various latitudes during the first decade of the 21st century and formed an important part in the fall of authoritarian regimes, as well as in the questioning of economic globalization projects (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015; Sierra & Gravante, 2018).

According to Srnicek and Williams (2016), political mobilization in the face of the entry of the “new digital economy” inaugurated a new pattern of protest, which should be understood as collateral damage of the 2008 economic crisis on the situation of employment deregulation worldwide.

In order to know the details of the political mobilization associated with the entry and consolidation of the platforms (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015), this paper aims to conduct an exploratory and descriptive analysis of social protest, in order to propitiate an approach to the origin, evolution and detail of this new contentious dynamic. In other words, it seeks to characterize the broad and multi-organizational field of protest against austere platforms, in terms of repertoires, demands and modalities of collective action.

At a general level, this is an exercise that has not been carried out systematically to date. Although it is recognized that the entry of austere platforms has raised conflicts of public interest around the globe, these have not been studied in detail in terms of contentious politics, insofar as they present a focus centered on regulatory frameworks (Borowiak & Ji, 2019; Seidl, 2020; Serafin, 2019; Wyman, 2017). For this reason, in the interest of advancing on this gap here we position political mobilization at the center of the analysis.

Based on the particular review of the Costa Rican case, this paper aims to promote a line of study for the Latin American region that considers the mobilization of all sectors of civil society involved in the protest against the platforms. Likewise, the study represents a unique opportunity to support the mapping of the contentious dynamics generated by the

platforms with systematic data, based on an empirical monitoring of the mobilization associated with this issue.

With this objective, the analysis proceeds in the following order: first, an introduction of the background analytical framework for the study of the modalities of platform capitalism is provided, the concept of uberization of the economy is introduced and the dissonances of this with the particularities of digital labor are explored; in a second moment, the methodological approach based on the analysis of protest events (AEP, by its acronym in Spanish) and the analysis of political demands (ADP, by its acronym in Spanish) is detailed, and the descriptive analysis of the results is carried out. In the last section, the most important findings regarding this first approach are taken up again.

Analytical framework: between platform capitalism, the uberization of the economy and digital labor

The delimitation of the type of platform to be analyzed is a nodal point in any analysis that falls under the sphere in question, due to the diversity of companies that have taken part in the so-called fourth industrial revolution. This notion has been driven and popularized by Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum. Schwab (2016) starts from the consideration that a revolutionary transformation of technology and digitalization is currently taking place, which will affect everyone and will be inevitable. After the publication of this text, there has been an explosion of numerous impact researches that consider the fourth industrial revolution as the starting point of their analysis (Marr, 2020; Nicoletti, 2020).

This concept is closely related to that of Industry 4.0, presented at the Hannover Fair in 2011 and coined by the German Federal Government (Schroeder, 2017). The main point of contact comes from the fact that both theoretical approaches stem from an entrepreneurial view of economic transformations. This largely positive and linear view of technological development will be challenged by new critical currents, which emphasize the lack of study of the multiple contradictions triggered by digital acceleration, as well as the problems that this new shift entails.

These business representations of the incorporation of digital technology into social relations have received the support of various ministerial bodies that have denied the existence of unfair competition, as denounced by sectors of cab drivers. This has been the case of Spain's National Commission for Markets and Competition (2015), which has coined the term collaborative transport. The central argument of these organizations is that the platforms of the so-called collaborative economy contain novel elements and that, therefore, competition should not be regulated or restricted.

The phenomenon of digital platforms is a recent phenomenon, with little development in academic terms, much less in terms of critical theory. To this effect, in Platform Capitalism (2017), Nick Srnicek presents a development of great relevance for the aforementioned purpose. His fundamental thesis lies in understanding the explosion of platforms during the second decade of the 21st century as a phenomenon that is the product of a long historical process, which presented its first glimpses since the phenomena of financial deregulation and labor outsourcing initiated in the course of 1980; a decade that has been plagued by contradictions and has had its expression in severe global economic crises.

Srnicek (2017) contributes to ordering the ecosystem of digital platforms by making a classification of ideal types with respect to the various forms taken by companies linked to the recent expansion of platform capitalism. This taxonomy, in pragmatic terms, allows considering the particularity of platforms according to the business model that is primarily carried out (table 1). This, because Amazon is a good example of a “multipurpose platform”, and has interleaved its functions as it has grown and absorbed markets, which implies that platform capitalism companies are constantly changing.

Table 1. Platform capitalism ecosystem

	Industrial platforms	Product platforms	Advertising platforms	Cloud platforms	Austere platforms
Description	Produce hardware and software	Use other platforms to convert a traditional good into a service, as well as charge for it	Extract information, analyze it and monetize it by selling advertising space	Hardware and software owners. Rent it to other businesses	Minimize assets and generate profit by lowering costs
Decade of appearance	1970-1980, with the rise of the industrial internet	1990, in the area of manufactured goods	1990-2000, with the fall of the “.com bubble”	1990-2000, with the rise of e-commerce	2010, with a return to the “growth first, profit later” model
Paradigmatic cases	General Electric, Siemens, Xerox	Rolls Royce	Google, Facebook	Amazon Web Services, Salesforce	Uber, Cabify, Glovo (PedidosYa), Rappi, Airbnb, among other platforms

Source: developed by the author with data from Srnicek (2017).

In particular, the platforms that are of interest to this article are those that are characterized as austere platforms. Although they prioritize growth over profits (a fundamental characteristic of companies during the 1990s), their defining feature is based on

their apparent lack of assets: the main assets are the software that allows the processing and analysis of data generated by users and workers through the use of their applications.

The main source of financing for austere platforms comes from surplus capital which, in a context of falling interest rates, goes in search of higher rates of return; in other words, they are financed by investment groups that have had to look for new destinations to place their capital. Likewise, the profitability of these platforms is closely linked to the transfer of costs to users and workers (or as they prefer to call them, “collaborating partners”), as well as to decreasing salaries and benefits, hence their classification as “austere” (Srniczek, 2017).

Among the most common services provided by transnational ride-hailing platforms are personal transportation (such as Uber, Didi and Cabify), food and object delivery (such as Glovo, Rappi and UberEats) and peer-to-peer¹ accommodation (such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing).

Clearly, Uber Technologies Inc. is one of the companies that is the most representative face of this type of platform. This American company, in contrast to the example of Amazon explained above, has the particularity that it is developed entirely as an austere platform, which is the paradigmatic case, although not the only one, of the so-called shared mobility wave, which has been booming over the last decade. The impact of the entry of this company in several countries has been so great that the term Uber Economy (uberization of the economy) has been coined to describe the “disruptive” phenomenon of the platform in multiple areas related to the labor, regulatory and fiscal fields, among others.

According to Davis (2016), uberization refers to a process of economic shift towards on-demand labor, whereby work is seen as a chore. The means of production, including the labor force, are rented rather than purchased, while physical companies are replaced by websites, which require fewer employees every day. This, as has been pointed out, may lead to “a new dark age” in labor issues (Bridle, 2018); in this, among other things, there is a disregard for the traditional worker-employer relationship, given the conditions of the now studied digital work (Fuchs, 2014). The relevance of an adequate conceptualization of the latter phenomenon is vital to understand its link with the repertoires of collective action (Jungherr, Rivero & Gayo-Avello, 2020).

In the framework of this uberization process, Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) delve in a good way into the relationship between the form of work and digital platforms, which starts from the realization that there is a cultural work that is physical, without which there could not be a cultural work of information. In other words, platforms do not escape the need for labor and physiological expenditure, which belies the repeated idea of the “end of work” (Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs & Fisher, 2015).

Instead, Srnicek (2017) emphasizes on the “labor hyper-outsourcing” that the workforce concerning the last step of the productive process of austere platforms has undergone. There is a formal degradation of labor regulation that once seemed indisputable: that which is common denominator of these platforms, and which reinforces the notion of austerity, is the outsourcing of labor.

In addition to the above, this phenomenon is loaded with other negative components, among them: algorithmic control systems via reputation, pay per task, the transfer of labor costs to the worker, and the lack of any kind of social guarantee (Sadin, 2018, 2020). These seem to be the causes of the high profitability of these platforms for companies, which contribute to form a general picture within which the first glimpses of political mobilization by their workers begin to gestate (Couldry & Mejías, 2019).

In this concatenation involving the work of digital platforms, competition with “old” forms of work is not exempt. Consequently, within the field of passenger transportation, the traditional cab industry has seen its labor logic directly affected: currently, the generic appellation “Taxis versus Uber”² has had its expression in multiple countries –both in the global south and north–, where new and old industries dispute the quotas for the exercise of passenger transportation before governments.

Although much of the literature reviewed assumes that the phenomenon of the “uberization of the economy” has brought about drastic change for the traditional cab industry, the dimension of social conflict produced by these technologies has not been sufficiently studied and, in some cases, has even been deliberately left on the back burner: “Uber has generated a great deal of political controversy, but the challenge for governments and regulators is to harness the benefits of the disruptive innovator, while adopting an approach that takes into account the full range of impacts” (Dudley, Banister & Schwanen, 2017, p. 492).³

Thus, although in some countries progress is already beginning on the dynamics of discontent and mobilization following the introduction and performance of austere platforms, the general trend found in the literature follows the direction of the regulatory or business approach. This opens an opportunity for the application of methodologies that help to account for the forms and expressions of political and social unrest about platforms in the Latin American region.

Methodological approach

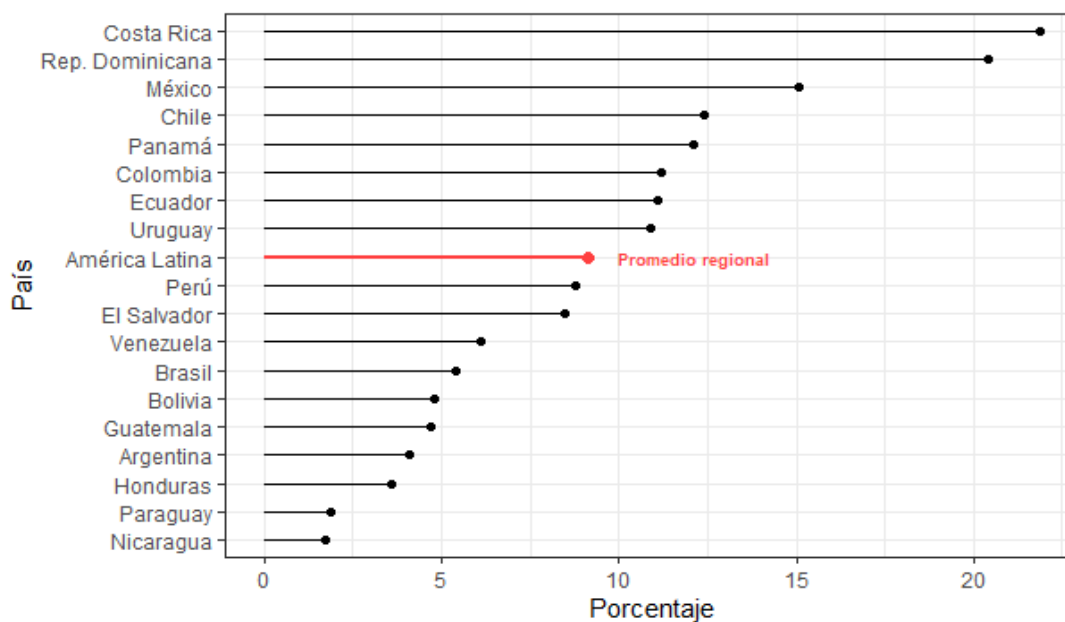
This paper aims to advance in the study of political mobilization, in terms of collective protest actions against austerity, transportation and delivery platforms, based on the analysis of a Latin American case: Costa Rica. The study has an exploratory and descriptive scope from a quantitative methodological approach.

The limited availability of comparable data –both academic and business– on the use of platforms in the Latin American region makes it inevitable to advance on the study of the phenomenon from a perspective focused on singular national cases. According to Gerring (2006), the importance of a country-focused design makes it possible to capture the complexity of a political and social problem, as well as to identify issues, coalitions and results that may subsequently lead to the generation of inputs for future studies with a broader scope and explanatory pretensions.

In addition to the above, the most recognized public opinion surveys in the region are just beginning to consider platforms in their questionnaires, so currently only the most recent data published in the latest survey of the *Corporación Latinobarómetro* (2018) are available.

As shown in figure 1, for 2018, Costa Rica appears as the Latin American country with the highest use of austere platforms, with a percentage higher than 20% of people who respond having used an austere platform to generate money.

Figure 1. Use of digital platforms as a way to generate money in Latin America



N = 20.204.

Note: graphical representation of the positive responses to the question “Have you used any digital platform to generate income? For example, Uber or Cabify”.

Source: developed by the autor with data from Corporación Latinobarómetro (2018).

Thus, and according to Snow (2013), the research strategy proposed for this case study can provide inputs on the dynamics of the conflict associated with austere platforms, which has permeated the countries of the region at different levels.

To this end, a mapping of the field of political demands through collective action related to austerity platforms was carried out using the methodology of the analysis of protest events (APE) (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002; Rucht & Neidhardt, 1998), in complement to the analysis of political demands (APD) (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). It is assumed that the combination of both approaches allows a macro-level understanding of the modalities of collective action from a multi-organizational and strategic perspective of civil society actors (CSA), without ignoring the contextual factor under which the discursive dimension of the protest associated with an issue or political element of dispute (APD) can be studied.

Although both techniques are based on the review of data extracted from secondary sources –mostly journalistic and police sources–, both the quantitative processing and the analysis of both have their particularities. First, the APE is a widely consolidated approach in the measurement of social mobilization, which takes as its starting point the “protest event” as the fundamental unit of analysis.

In this sense, and according to the development of Hutter (2014), the AEP can be summarized under the following terms: it is a particular type of content analysis that seeks the quantification of collective action through coding, in addition to allowing the mapping of the characteristics of the field of collective mobilization with attachment to geographic-spatial, temporal, organizational and thematic dimensions of the protest. On this last point, the ADP would be an extension of the first approach, although focused on the codification of the discursive frames of the actors immersed in a contentious conjuncture. This makes it possible to take into account the mobilizing role of ideas and strategies used by protest actors to position –or failing that, to conceal– specific aspects of a particular political issue (Lindekilde, 2014).

Although working with data from protest events is a methodology that has gained greater significance since the 1980s –mainly in the United States and Western European countries– (Hutter, 2019), in Latin America there is evidence of initiatives that follow this line at least twenty years ago (Almeida, 2020).⁴

In Costa Rica, Protestas is a database of collective actions in charge of the daily monitoring of social protest in the country.⁵ Currently, this database makes available a longitudinal and continuous record of contentious mobilization in the country since 2013, which is carried out through the systematic processing of protest events from the digital versions of four newspapers of national circulation.⁶

In this task, the empirical dimension of collective action is delimited as “any form of social protest through which a given collective actor (or a group of them) expresses in an organized or non-organized manner a demand related to issues of different nature, whether political-economic or cultural” (Alvarado, 2016, p. 569).

Like any AEP base, *Protestas* aims to cover broad and varied dimensions of the field of collective action –such as geographic-spatial and temporal–; however, the most commonly used categories correspond to: 1) the identification of the types of demanding collective actors, 2) the types of collective actions or protest repertoires, and 3) the types of demands (Alvarado, 2016, pp. 566-567). This paper will focus on the former, and will incorporate the category of respondent entities or actors into the analysis (see table 2).

Table 2. Categories of AEP of the base *Protestas* incorporated into the analysis

AEP category	Description
Type of collective actor	The set of groups, organizations or movements that mobilize to demand a response to needs of different kinds.
Type of class action	The set of expressions or repertoires, conventional and non-conventional, varied for the channeling of demands in social protest. Among the conventional ones are included, for example, all those manifestations that take place through the mechanisms of formal institutionality, while the non-conventional ones correspond to the so-called “violent” repertoires, or material and immaterial-symbolic “taking” of the public spaces, redefined as confrontational terrain.
Type of demand	The set of claims that are reasons for the mobilization of collective actors. The base includes a wide variety of demands corresponding to general categories of the union organization, defense of health, education and the functioning of the State or public management.
Type of entity sued	The set of actors towards whom the demands of the collective mobilization are directed. Its categories include public powers and institutions (national and subnational), as well as private entities.

Source: developed by the autor with data from Alvarado (2016) and *Protestas* (2019).

To the extent that the *Protestas* database is created with the objective of mapping the general panorama of political mobilization in Costa Rica, some questions must be rethought in order to complement the analysis in the direction of ADP. As Koopmans and Statham (1999, p. 219) state, this technique is more viable as long as it is directed towards a specific political-content field of protest.

For this purpose, it is possible to establish a specific follow-up to the collective mobilization generated by the entry of austerity platforms in the country for the period 2015-2020. After delimiting the universe of social protest to this particular field, between

July 2015 and December 2020 a total of N=164 protest events associated with this object are counted.

In order to deepen the scope of the AEP, we proceeded to build an unpublished database, in accordance with the specific objective of this work,⁷ where new classifications are made and dimensions are incorporated for the analysis regarding: 1) sector of the demanding actors (specifically, the original types contained in the Protests database were grouped to focus the analysis on: traditional cab sector, austere platform sector and other sectors); 2) identification of specific organizations; 3) framing of the demands; and 4) position regarding a specific issue of the political-contentious field.); 2) identification of specific organizations; 3) framing of demands; and 4) position with respect to a specific issue in the political-content field.

While the first two new groupings aim at a better identification of those who exercise collective action, the remaining ones seek to capture the discursive and strategic-positional spectrum of mobilization (see table 3).

Table 3. ADP categories (issues) for framing the mobilization against austere platforms

ADP category (<i>issue</i>)	Description
Competition/regulation	Corresponds to the set of expressions of resistance by previously established companies that fight against the entry of new platforms with the argument that the practices they imply constitute unfair competition, which requires regulation on the matter
Employment and working condition	It concerns the axis of the new labor relations brought about by the austere platforms. Here is framed in particular the debate around the consideration, or not, of employees as contracted or self-employed
Fiscal policy	It refers to the activation of issues related to the capacity of the State to control the income of service providers and collect taxes on this income
Worker safety	This framework varies between the guarantees given to the worker for access to medical care and their overexposure to possible robberies, assaults and kidnappings, among others

Source: developed by the autor with data from Thelen (2018).

The typology of frames to be used follows, in general terms, the one proposed by Thelen (2018), who has proven its usefulness for various national contexts.

Brief contextualization of the case: the legal issues of austere platforms and the difficulty of regulating them in Costa Rica

The issue of labor legislation is vital for the present and future of absentee platforms. In international terms, there is progress regarding the legislation of the platforms, in particular on the existence of a potential labor relationship between companies and the so-called “collaborating partners” or “self-entrepreneurs”.

A long list of court rulings has also been filed. Among them, Uber France stands out, a company that would be accused of exercising a decisive type of influence on the form of transportation provision in its dispute with the Elite Taxi Professional Association and Uber France (Uber France SAS, 2018). Two years later, the judgment of another relevant case was made, in Spain, where the Supreme Court of Justice considered delivery drivers as salaried employees. The ruling specifically addresses the company Glovo, which was considered as only an intermediary in the contracting of services. Here, the Fourth Chamber of the Supreme Court ratified that the company is the one who owns the essential assets for the activity and sets the conditions for the work to be carried out (Glovoapp23 SL, 2020).

Finally, at the beginning of 2021, it highlighted the ruling in the United Kingdom, where a judgment of the Supreme Court was obtained indicating that there is a relationship of dependence, since the Uber company does not work for the driver, but the opposite. After providing a long analysis in this regard, a recount of thirteen reasons why the Uber company is the one that provides the conditions under which the work is performed, so drivers should have the rights enshrined in the labor legislation of this nation (Uber BV v Aslam, 2018).

Despite this background, in Costa Rica digital platforms are still in a labor gray area, as it implies that there is no clarity regarding the type of regulation that should be applied. This has sparked a broad debate due to the lack of regulations governing the activity of platforms in Costa Rica. Since their entry in 2015, austere platform companies have operated in convenience of their own criteria, with no possibility of complaint by workers or third parties that may be affected (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2019).

Law No. 8955 is crucial to these issues, as it is in charge of regulating the cab activity, and states that all paid transportation of persons shall be considered a public service. Hence the central reason for the illegality of Uber; the main reason why several cycles of political mobilization have been activated around the existence of unfair competition, as a result of Uber's lack of compliance with the requirements of the transportation of people in Costa Rica. In order to operate legally in Costa Rica, an administrative concession is required, in addition to complying with the guidelines established in Law No. 8955 to operate as a transportation company. The Public Transportation Council (CTP, by its acronym in Spanish)⁸ is the entity in charge of issuing permits.

Despite the above, there are currently several active bills related to the regulation of digital platforms and related issues. In this line, the bill No. 21567 –presented by the deputy of the ruling Citizen Action Party (PAC), Paola Vega–, initially implied a labor regulation of workers of digital platforms, and adds a new chapter to the labor code, which would allow a well-stipulated labor regulation that would have the possibility of stopping a significant part of the problems mentioned above; this, through the concept of labor hyper-outsourcing. However, in a later substitute text, it is proposed that companies must register workers as self-employed, an action that contradicts the first bill and may express the lobbying work carried out by companies within the regulatory process.

Additionally, Bill No. 21587 concerns passenger transportation services under the modality of digital platforms. The objective of this law –besides legally regulating digital platforms– seeks to generate fair competition and curb the aforementioned problems. In this way, it claims to be positioned in a middle ground between the statist projects (21228) and those seeking free trade (20951, 20518); however, the project focuses on the users and consumers of the application, and not on the “collaborating” persons.

Congresswoman Paola Vega Rodríguez has another bill in process that, although it has not had the same public relevance as the first one, it is imperative to advance in a better control of the economic sector. Bill No. 22142 seeks to regulate the commissions obtained by digital delivery platforms. Currently, delivery platform companies charge a commission on sales to restaurants, which in many cases is over 30%.

So far, none of these bills has real citizen participation in its development, and are stuck in a legislature saturated by the context of social, economic and political crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has imposed an agenda order focused on other aspects.

Thus, Costa Rica reaches 2021 without an approved regulation for the austere platform sector. Six years after the entry of Uber (as the first company of this type operating in the country), Didi and similar platforms are still illegal for the legal framework, despite the fact that at the beginning of 2020 it was admitted to have around 28,000 active drivers and 971,000 users (Avendaño, 2020).

This lack of definition, as has been argued in the recent study by Artavia *et al.* (2020) on the Costa Rican case, entails risks in terms of social gaps in line with the increase in labor informality, lack of health insurance or contributions to the public health system and increased social conflict, among other aspects.

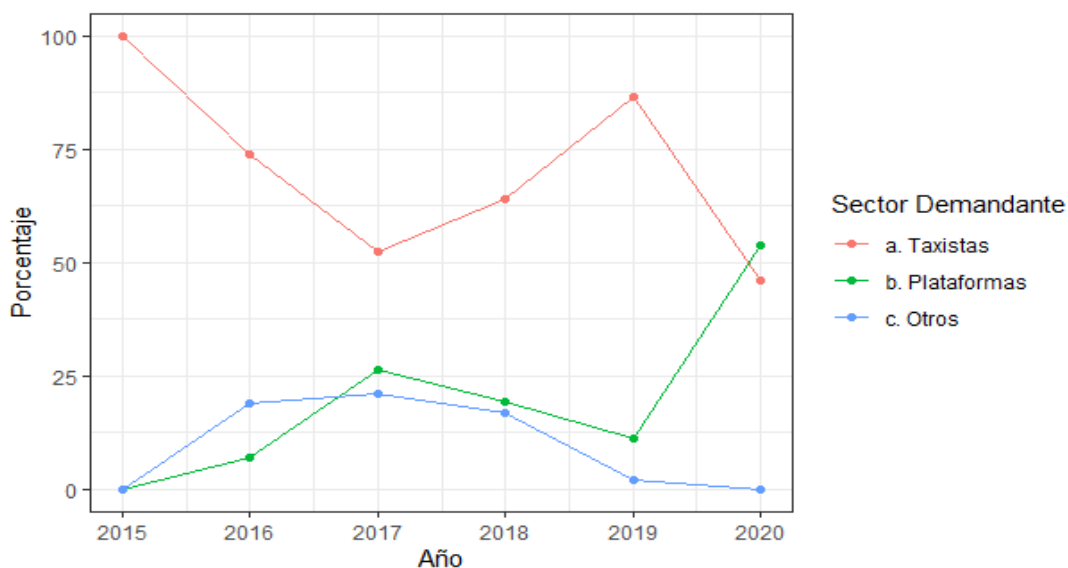
Results and analysis: demonstration trends against austerity platforms in Costa Rica (2015-2020)

In Costa Rica, the conflict between platforms and the cab drivers' union has led to multiple collective actions; the analysis goes back to 2015, the year of Uber's arrival in the country. The new competition that occurred from the introduction of the application implied the beginning of clashes between the cab guild and the Uber company. Therefore, for the analysis of the protest, both the workforce belonging to the austere platforms and the cab drivers, key actors, must be considered.

The trend of protest events shows that the peak in the cab drivers' union demonstrations occurred in 2015, and after that the number of protest events went down (see chart 2). The opposite case is that of the platform sector, whose trend has been increasing over time, something to be expected due to the lack of initial organization of newly hired employees, and the exponential growth in the number of employees with the arrival of new platforms.

The boom in the mobilizations of the austere platform sector coincides with the decline of protests in the cab sector. While by the beginning of 2019 the number of cab driver protests was overwhelmingly higher than that of digital platforms, during 2020 an opposite picture emerges, with the platform sector taking the lead.

Figure 2. Evolution of the protest against the austere platforms according to the demanding sector, 2015-2020



Source: developed by the author with data from Sáenz & Sánchez (2020).

One of the reasons for the exponential growth of protests between 2019 and 2020 in the austere platform sector can be related to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, added to the vitality that delivery platforms took to respect social isolation, so they became essential sectors; also, unemployment levels in Costa Rica increased, as it reached a historic 24%, which displaced a large labor mass towards the “collaborative economy” (State of the Nation Program, 2020).

Sharing has allowed people considered at-risk population to make their usual purchases –beyond food–, without having to leave home. As a result, international strikes began to take place, involving delivery workers from Costa Rica and other countries, such as Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Guatemala and Spain (Koringfield, 2020).

As for demonstrations by the cab drivers' union, there has been a clear drop in quantitative terms. In addition, there has also been a decrease in the amount of academic research, as a result of the decline in the “cabs versus Uber” conflict over time, which remains in a “political impasse” after the discussion of several projects for its regularization in the Legislative Branch.

Despite the above, the demonstrations have not completely ceased. The reason for the continuity of the protests is linked to the inclusion of new digital platforms for the same work of the cab sector (the so-called “OMNITaxi”), which has generated a response from the CTP, which clarifies that it “has not given any endorsement or authorization, nor has it been requested, for private technological platforms to be used by cab concessionaires as a tool to facilitate communication between users and cab drivers regarding the request for trips” (Córdoba, 2020).

The conflict is crucial, in view of the fact that the OMNITaxi application has around 6,000 cab drivers that have joined its platform, who charge lower fares than those established. These drivers may be sanctioned for using the platform, and could lose their concession contract as cab drivers. In view of this conflict, and the protests of cab drivers demanding its resolution, the CTP stated that it is developing a plan for cab drivers to have better technological tools.

The collective actors belonging to the digital platform sector do not have a long history of struggle or knowledge of the institutional dynamics of protest, while the cab drivers' union does (in terms of collective actions); this, while the sector has been an important part of the most critical junctures in the recent political history of Costa Rica (Hernández, 2013).

This is reflected in the data in table 4, which shows a low incidence of “institutional” collective actions, such as meetings with authorities by the platform sector (3.7%), and a predominance of “street” repertoires, such as marches and rallies, which together account for 62.9% of the mobilization of this sector.

In contrast, the cab driver sector presents a broad repertoire that, although it contains a predominance of direct actions, is more varied compared to the platform sector. Among the recurrent actions –in addition to street actions– are assemblies, public statements, complaints to entities and meetings with authorities. There are no cases of cyber-actions, which could be explained by the seniority of the union and the preference for more traditional protest resources.

Finally, in the “others” sector there is a diverse constellation of plaintiff actors ranging from consumer associations and business chambers to organized civil society groups and workers' unions. Despite the diversity, these organizations have chosen to take action, above all, through public statements in the media (52.6%).

Table 4. Repertoires of collective action in the protest against the austere platforms, according to the plaintiff sector

Repertoire	Demanding sector					
	Taxi drivers		Platforms		Others	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Assembly	5,9	7	3,7	1	5,3	1
Blocking	12,7	15	3,7	1	5,3	1
Cyberactions	0	0	0	0	10,5	2
Concentration	20,3	24	25,9	7	5,3	1
Public statement	17,8	21	14,8	4	52,6	10
Complaint before entities	7,6	9	7,4	2	10,5	2
Hunger strike	0	0	3,7	1	0,0	0
March	22,9	27	37,0	10	5,3	1
Meeting with authorities	12,7	15	3,7	1	0,0	0
Others	0	0	0	0	5,3	1
Total	100	118	100	27	100	19

Source: developed by the author with data from Sáenz & Sánchez (2020).

As for the demands (see table 5), those of the platform sector show a tendency to be strictly linked to their economic conditions at the time; that is, they are purely circumstantial demands, and even reactive to the escalation of the conflict at certain times. The main demand of this sector is linked to the defense of labor and working conditions (59.3%).

This may respond to a lack of political background regarding the importance of legislation, or to government intervention for economic work in terms of regulating activity. To this line of interpretation can be added the fact that the platform workforce is considered as a transit workforce, in which their work is not necessarily seen in the long term, unlike the cab sector, where their work has been institutionalized as a trade.

There is a clear contrast with the cab driver sector, whose claims directed at the institutional level outnumber those related to working conditions (28.8%). Here, demands for positioning in favor or against laws, regulations, plans or decrees predominate (33.9%), which have mainly referred to pronouncements regarding the various attempts of the Executive Branch to establish regulatory frameworks for the operation of platforms in the country. The number of requests for government intervention (16.9%) is noteworthy, together with the demand for oversight of the public function and accountability (15.3%), which follows the line of opposition to the regulation of platforms, albeit by different means.

Table 5. Main demands in the protest against the austere platforms, according to the demanding sector

AEP demand	Demanding sector					
	Taxi drivers		Platforms		Others	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Defense of work and working conditions	28,8	34	59,3	16	5,3	1
For or against laws, regulations, plans or decrees	33,9	40	3,7	1	31,6	6
Oversight of the public function and accountability	15,3	18	29,6	8	26,3	5
Government intervention	16,9	20	0	0	5,3	1
Improvement or defense in access, quality and cost of public services	1,7	2	0	0	21,1	4
Others	3,4	4	7,4	2	10,5	2
Total	100	118	100	27	100	19

Fuente: developed by the author with data from Sáenz & Sánchez (2020).

In addition to the above, the diversification of cab drivers' protest dynamics in relation to platform workers is clearly visible when it comes to the entities being sued. The cab driver sector has extensive knowledge regarding the various ways to exert pressure, so they direct their discontent to various entities that go beyond governments and companies; this is the case of the platform sector (see Table 6). Thus, most of their protests are concentrated on appealing to the central government (33.9%); however, it should be noted that they have also sought to exert pressure on the Legislative Branch (19.5%), the Judiciary (13.6%), and even directly on the figure of the Presidency of the Republic (11.9%).

Table 6. Entities sued in the protest against the austere platforms, according to the plaintiff sector

Defendant entity	Demanding sector					
	Taxi drivers		Platforms		Others	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
General government	33,9	40	55,6	15	47,4	9
Private businesses	0,8	1	33,3	9	0,0	0
Regulatory institutions	6,8	8	0,0	0	5,3	1
Ministries	8,5	10	0,0	0	10,5	2
Judiciary power	13,6	16	3,7	1	15,8	3
Legislative power	19,5	23	0,0	0	0,0	0
Presidency of the Republic	11,9	14	3,7	1	10,5	2
Others	5,1	6	3,7	1	10,5	2
Total	100	118	100	27	100	19

Fuente: developed by the author with data from Sáenz & Sánchez (2020).

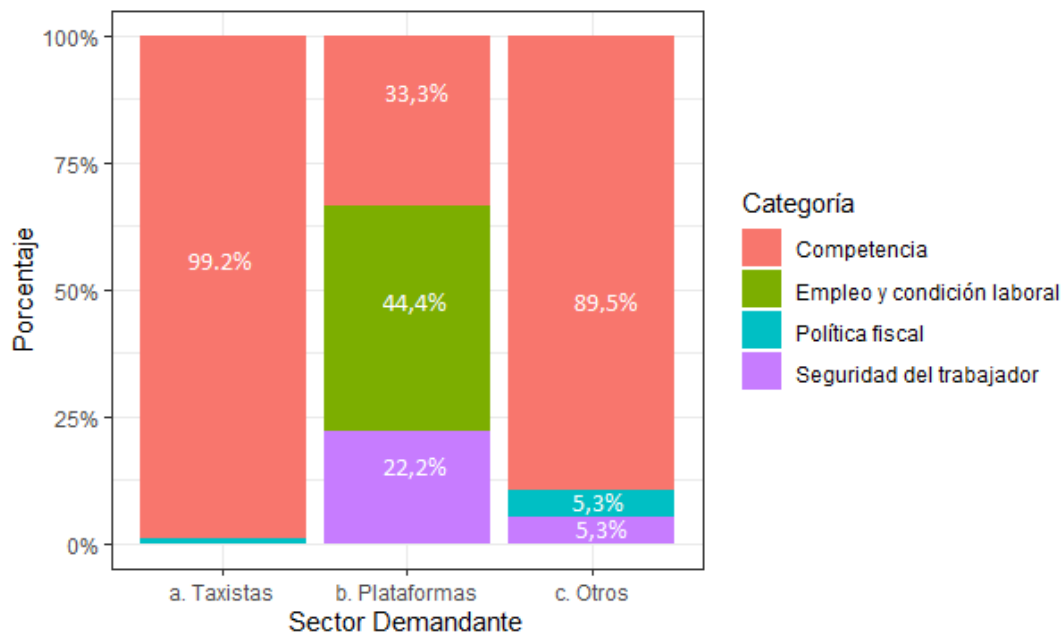
On the other hand, protests from the platform sector have been directed at the Uber company (33.3%), which has managed to reach more than 900 thousand users in Costa Rica, 28 000 drivers, and more than 200 million trips, which constitutes a true monopoly (Avendaño, 2020). In an official statement, Uber stated that Costa Rica is a country that provides good conditions for its activity, and is perceived as a guarantor of work and security at a time when the country exceeds 20% unemployment, which positions it as a fundamental company for the economic recovery of the country (Uber Costa Rica, 2020).

Despite the fact that Uber's monopoly has not been ended, as of 2018 alternative people transportation platforms have been incorporated, such as InDriver and Beego. Likewise, in 2019 the Chinese company Didi Chuxing Technology Co. arrived in Costa Rica, Uber's main competitor in the global transportation platform market. This entry of new platforms into the country has the potential to transform the market into an oligopoly; however, the impact this has on protest repertoires remains to be seen. According to the above, foreign companies have ended up displacing austere platforms of national origin (such as Go Pato) or regional (such as the Central American Hugo).

Finally, in terms of discourse, the ADP applied (see figure 3) shows that in the cab drivers' sector, all of their demands have been framed around the issue of competition (99.2%). In general terms, the union claims the existence of unfair competition and positions itself against the legalization of transportation platforms. This claim has managed to co-opt practically all the claims of the cab sector, thus displacing some frameworks that had more

seniority, such as those linked to the cessation of irregular cab drivers, known as “portadores”, as a result of a strong conflict during 2012 (Gómez & Cerdas, 2019).

Figure 3. Discursive frameworks of the demands in the protest against the austere platforms, according to the demanding sector



N=164

Fuente: developed by the author with data from Sáenz & Sánchez (2020).

The institutional route and specific pressures have been part of an agenda to dismantle the operation of companies such as Uber in the country. The appeal to the “judicialization of the conflict” has been a strategy followed by this sector in various latitudes (Thelen, 2018).

Regarding the platform sector, although there is a diversification in the framing of the demands, the results show a clear emphasis on the criticism of the new labor relations, which stem from the uncertainty of insertion in digital work (44.4%). In second place are the demands directed at competition issues (33.3%), and in third place are those that correspond to issues of the safety of digital workers (22.2%). The notable relevance of this last demand in relation to the cab drivers' guild is not surprising, due –among other things– to the physical escalation of the conflict with cab drivers, in addition to outsourcing and the absence of social guarantees. In addition, the accelerated pace of oversupply during the Covid-19 pandemic has led to increased concern about health risks (Koringfield, 2020).

Finally, since the “other actors” sector is dominated by the demands of consumer associations, the large percentage framed around the competition axis (89.5%) responds in part to the alignment of these groups with the interests of platform companies under the allegation of the autonomy of will and the freedom to decide for the consumer.

Conclusions

The objective of this paper has been to offer a first theoretical and empirical approach to social protest as a result of the entry of austere digital platforms, with specific reference to the case of Costa Rica between 2015 and 2020. Based on the methodological proposal that combines the AEP and the ADP, a mapping of this new contentious dynamic has been established, which opens new analytical and methodological possibilities for future work.

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis make it possible to trace patterns of political mobilization with respect to the claimant actors, the repertoires of collective action, the direction of the claims and the frames of the demands, with clear differences between the different sectors that have been part of this field of dispute.

Among the main findings, it is worth highlighting the changes observed in the protest against austere platforms in Costa Rica over time, since the entry into operation of the Uber company in the country; This, inasmuch as the contentious dynamics has gone from being totally dominated by the traditional cab driver sector to evidence the entry of new actors (such as platform workers and some civil society groups), which have made the action panorama more complex for the Costa Rican government in terms of regulation and, therefore, to incorporate new demands and decision-making arenas within the political system.

In this context, the cab drivers' union –a relevant actor in Costa Rica's critical political junctures, at least during the last thirty years– has followed a broad political strategy that includes a variety of mobilization repertoires, diversity in the focus of pressure (Executive Branch, Legislative Branch, Judicial Branch, Ministries, among others) and centrality in the axis of competition in the passenger transportation market.

Within the period under study, the austere platforms sector shows a process of institutional, organizational and trade union learning that, although it has resulted in a smaller range of types of collective action, respondent entities and claims, presents greater complexity in the framing of the demands, which transcend the competition axis and introduce issues to the public debate, namely those related to the employment regime, working conditions and safety of the workers of these platforms.

This work has been intended as a first incentive to encourage reflection on the impacts of the so-called “fourth industrial revolution” and the sharing economy, through a classic methodology within protest studies. It is hoped that in the future this exercise can contribute to the dialogue and comparative examination in the Latin American region.

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¹ P2P (peer-to-peer) economies go back a long way. In the beginning, they operated without an Internet connection and allowed transactions between peers without the need for a third party; they usually paid a fee to the intermediary. Today, the advent of technology and social networks has paved the way for the creation of p2p-type markets, in which the platforms, in principle, function as intermediaries. Therefore, the difference between an austere and an austere p2p platform lies in the role given to the company: between mere intermediary or central participant (Cheng, 2014). Some research includes within the term p2p applications such as Uber (Bravo, 2018; Vieira *et al.*, 2018),

given that many companies, such as those transporting people, food and objects, seek to present themselves as p2p platforms to treat their employees as “collaborating partners”, and thus avoid legal responsibilities.

² There is a Wikipedia page dedicated to reconstructing this conflict in several countries from journalistic sources. In this regard, see: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflicto_entre_Uber_y_los_taxistas

³ Translation is my own.

⁴ For details of the multiple databases in the Latin American region that have been constructed in correspondence with the AEP methodology, see Almeida (2020, pp. 79-80).

⁵ The database is part of the *Protestas* project, affiliated with the Institute of Social Research of the University of Costa Rica. It is available for public consultation at the following link: <https://protestas.iis.ucr.ac.cr>

⁶ For more detail regarding source selection and coding strategies, see *Protestas* (2019).

⁷ In order to promote transparency in social research, the database used in this work (Replication Data) has been made available in the Harvard Dataverse repository. It can be consulted free of charge at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EBKVAR>

⁸ Body with maximum decentralization which regulates and controls paid transportation of persons in the cab modality across national territory.