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Research Article

# Digital Postcolonialism in Africa and Class Debates: Protoproletariat or Pooriat?

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**Abstract:** This study explores the concept of digital postcolonialism, analyzing how digital economies perpetuate colonial dynamics and deepen global inequalities. Digital colonialism, much like historical colonialism, exerts control over developing regions through monopolistic ownership of digital infrastructure, data, and platforms by tech giants primarily located in the global North. By examining the labour conditions of digital workers, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, this study highlights the emergence of a "digital blue-collar" workforce facing precarious, low-wage conditions dictated by platform algorithms. Through the introduction of the concept "pooriat," the study underscores the severe poverty and dependency that characterize this workforce, reflecting a new form of economic subjugation in the digital age. These conditions reinforce a digital hierarchy, where peripheral regions provide labour and data without fair compensation or control, paralleling colonial resource extraction. The study also discusses the potential of alternative frameworks, such as platform socialism, to challenge these power imbalances by democratizing control over digital infrastructures. This research contributes to the discourse on global inequality, digital dependency, and socio-economic restructuring, emphasizing the need for a more equitable digital economy.

**Keywords:** Digital Postcolonialism, Digital Colonialism, Global Inequality, Precarious Labor, Data Exploitation

## 1. Introduction

In examining the complex intersections of digital colonialism and class dynamics, this study delves into how digital postcolonialism shapes global power structures and perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities. The concept of digital colonialism provides a framework for understanding the ways in which powerful technology companies, based in developed nations, exert economic and cultural control over developing regions. Through monopolistic control over digital infrastructure, software, and platforms, these companies create a semi-imperial system, mirroring the historical patterns of land seizure and resource exploitation. By controlling data, digital spaces, and user behaviours, digital colonialism effectively transforms the global South into a new kind of periphery, reliant on technologies and policies dictated by the global North.

This phenomenon reconfigures traditional notions of dependency and hegemony, introducing new forms of cultural and economic control through digital infrastructure. In this study, we apply the concept of digital postcolonialism, extending it to a class-based analysis to highlight the unequal power relations embedded in the digital economy. By exploring the "proto-proletariat" and the emergence of a "digital blue-collar" workforce, we reveal how digital colonialism stratifies labour and reinforces global hierarchies. Particularly in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, where freelance digital workers face precarious conditions, low wages, and algorithmic oversight, digital colonialism introduces new forms of exploitation that sustain and intensify existing inequalities.

In this context, digital postcolonialism emerges as a powerful lens through which to examine how technology-driven economies reshape class structures, labour conditions, and social relations, particularly in marginalized regions. As we explore these dynamics, this study underscores the need for alternative frameworks, like platform socialism, that might democratize digital infrastructures and challenge the inequalities maintained by digital capitalism. This research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of digital postcolonialism and its impact on class formation, precarious work, and self-

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exploitation in the digital age, focusing on the African continent and its unique labour challenges. Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to the discourse on global inequality, digital dependency, and the socio-economic reconfiguration of labour in the postcolonial world.

The study uses a case study as a method. The approach is critical political economy. The Critical Political Economy of Communication is an approach that analyses the intersection of communication systems, power, and economic factors, focusing on how media and communication technologies reinforce or challenge social structures, class relations, and political control. It examines the influence of ownership, advertising, and government policies on media behaviour and content, emphasizing how economic factors shape political and social relations. The approach draws from thinkers like Karl Marx, Harold Innis, and Dallas Smythe, addressing the commodification of media and the role of communication in shaping values and ideologies within capitalist societies. By scrutinizing both economic and cultural dimensions, Critical Political Economy of Communication seeks to uncover the underlying power dynamics that drive media practices and impact public consciousness (Graham, 2007, pp. 227-228).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Before discussing what digital postcolonialism is, it is necessary to discuss what is understood by the concept of digital colonialism. Digital colonialism, much like historical colonialism's seizure of land and forced labour, relies on the exploitation of the digital economic cycle from start to finish. Just as with traditional colonialism, digital colonialism operates on the logic of dispossession. Dominant technology companies, often headquartered in developed nations, exert political influence over other regions and manipulate their internet traffic. This phenomenon can be viewed as a semi-imperial force deployed over large populations, manifesting in rules, designs, languages, cultures, and belief systems. Western companies, U.S.-based, dominate digital services in developing countries, from messaging and social media to search engines, music, storage, hosting, and domain names. These digital practices serve to proliferate neoliberal governance, racialized thinking, and patriarchal ideologies, all while operating in highly profitable markets. Digital technology firms function as natural monopolies; for example, Google possesses the financial power to acquire any company that might challenge its dominance. Control of the digital ecosystem rests on three fundamental pillars: software, hardware, and network infrastructure—concentrated power that endows the U.S. with significant political, economic, and social leverage (Yılmaz, 2024, p. 186).

Digital colonialism perpetuates inequality between individuals, nations, and global regions within the digital realm. Ownership and control lie with advanced economies, which dictate the regulatory landscape, infrastructure, and R&D investments. High digital product costs visibly exemplify exclusionary practices, while English as the primary language of the digital world establishes a form of cultural hegemony. Control over technology is limited; software is licensed, meaning users cannot read, modify, or share the source code, restricting their understanding and control over how their devices function. U.S.-based technology firms wield influence globally and increasingly target emerging markets as their home markets become saturated. Rules established by these companies become embedded norms, creating a privatized regulatory framework that affects all users. Social media giants use algorithms to censor content, shape news feeds, and influence the formation of activist groups, thereby acting as a global governance tool. Platforms within digital capitalism extract profit from both fixed and variable capital processes. For example, examining freelance workers in Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates the mechanisms of digital colonialism. These workers earn significantly less than their counterparts in developed countries, functioning as cheap labour for multinational corporations to amass capital. In this way, digital colonialism reconfigures the relationship between core and peripheral regions, allowing core countries to reproduce dependencies among peripheral countries. The concept of digital colonialism thus suggests that colonialism continues today, albeit through new mechanisms—extending

beyond traditional plantation slavery to a more complex interaction between people and technology (Yılmaz, 2024, p. 187).

Digital postcolonialism mirrors traditional colonial frameworks by adapting the dynamics of historical colonization to the digital domain. In the same way early colonizers arrived in new lands with goods and technology that seemed impressive to Indigenous people, digital postcolonialism replicates this initial period of exchange through the integration of digital tools and systems into societies around the world. Initially, digital technology was adopted on equal terms, seen as tools for productivity and development. However, as the digital world evolved, it began to reshape societal structures and methods of labour, slowly displacing traditional practices and knowledge systems. As digital technologies permeated everyday life and commerce, they established a “settler economy” in the digital domain, where global corporations took control over fundamental aspects of digital infrastructure and labour. This transformation mirrors the economic shifts in colonial contexts, where vast lands and resources were reorganized for plantations and manufacturing. Just as indigenous systems of governance and community structures were overshadowed by the systems imposed by colonial settlers, so too are pre-digital professions and knowledge traditions being marginalized in a digital economy driven by technology giants. Digital postcolonialism reveals the profound power imbalance between the global North and South in the digital sphere. Wealthy countries continue to control digital infrastructure, legal standards, and technological development, while the global South is often relegated to adopting imported technologies and following externally imposed digital norms. This reflects a modern version of economic dependence and cultural hegemony, where the global South relies on foreign digital technologies, infrastructure, and policies. This framework of digital postcolonialism also emphasizes the ideological control exerted through digital tools. Where colonial missionaries once spread religious ideologies to 'civilize' the colonized, digital technology is now embedded with neoliberal values and cultural assumptions that shape global perceptions and social structures. Information and communication technologies serve as a new ideological vehicle, driving economic, social, and political systems that reflect the priorities and perspectives of dominant global powers. The technology itself, through structures like proprietary software and surveillance algorithms, reinforces a form of dependency by limiting local agency and control. Digital postcolonialism seeks to analyse these structures, drawing parallels with historical colonialism to explore the modern-day consequences of technology-driven global power dynamics. This perspective opens new avenues for understanding the impact of digital technologies, not only in terms of economic and political control but also in terms of cultural and ideological influence. The digital age thus represents a new phase of colonial dynamics, where control is wielded less through physical occupation and more through the pervasive influence of digital platforms and data-driven economies (Jandrić & Kuzmanić, 2015, pp. 45-48).

Digital postcolonialism also delves into how digital technologies contribute to a reconfiguration of knowledge hierarchies and the persistence of the "digital divide." This divide perpetuates global inequalities by restricting access to the internet and technological resources for large segments of the population, particularly in the global South. While the internet has the potential to democratize knowledge, access to digital education and technology remains disproportionately limited to wealthier regions, creating barriers to participation for underrepresented communities. This lack of access can hinder economic development, social mobility, and the potential for local cultural expression in digital spaces, entrenching existing global inequalities. Moreover, digital postcolonialism examines the processes of digital commodification and data extraction as forms of modern exploitation. In many cases, corporations from the global North extract vast amounts of data from users in the global South without adequate compensation or representation in data governance structures. This data extraction model mirrors historical resource extraction, with data becoming a key commodity in the information economy. Data colonialism emphasizes the ongoing commodification of individuals' digital identities, often without their informed consent, placing their personal information under the control of

corporations that benefit financially while leaving users with limited autonomy over their data. Another significant aspect explored by digital postcolonialism is cultural representation within digital media. Online platforms frequently prioritize content and perspectives that align with Western or neoliberal ideologies, marginalizing non-Western voices. Algorithms often amplify mainstream narratives and privilege dominant cultural values, leading to the cultural erasure of less-represented regions and communities. This phenomenon echoes colonial patterns where dominant powers historically suppressed local traditions and languages, as today's digital spaces similarly favour content aligned with Western-centric ideals. Digital postcolonialism thus critically analyses how these platforms could be restructured to support diverse cultural expressions and foster authentic representation. Lastly, digital postcolonialism addresses the influence of surveillance technologies on marginalized communities. Digital surveillance, often deployed under the guise of security or economic development, can impose forms of control reminiscent of colonial surveillance methods. In countries with less stringent privacy laws, these technologies are used to monitor, restrict, and sometimes silence dissenting voices, limiting freedom of expression. This replicates colonial-era tactics where colonizers enforced control through observation and suppression of local populations. The field calls for a rethinking of digital practices and policies to protect individual autonomy and prevent the reinforcement of hegemonic structures through technological control (Abu Enein, 2023, pp. 267-270).

In this study, digital postcolonialism is discussed in the context of class dynamics. In this context, the concept of proto-proletariat is used. The concept of the proto-proletariat refers to the initial phase in the development of a working class or proletariat in societies undergoing early capitalist transformation. Proto-proletarians are individuals who have begun to shift from traditional, non-wage-based forms of subsistence (such as peasant agriculture, tribal systems, or pre-capitalist economies) into wage-earning roles, but without being fully integrated into an industrial or urban proletarian labour structure. This phase of proletarianization reflects an incomplete transition where individuals may still rely partly on self-employment, family labour, or low-productivity occupations, often within the service sector or informal economy. This early proletarian status lacks the stability, organization, and complete wage-dependency that characterize a fully developed proletariat in advanced capitalist societies (McGee, 1985, pp. 297-298).

The concept of the proto-proletariat refers to a segment of the workforce that exists within a dual economic structure, particularly prominent in urban environments of the developing world. This group operates primarily within what has been termed the "informal sector," often characterized by self-employment, family labour, and low-capital enterprises. The proto-proletariat's activities are distinct from those of the formal, wage-earning proletariat found in the developed capitalist sectors of the economy. Statistical systems traditionally fail to capture the contributions of the proto-proletariat accurately, as these systems typically focus on formal employment categories and recognized enterprises. Consequently, proto-proletarian activities—often found in household-based agricultural and non-agricultural settings—are systematically underrepresented, if not entirely ignored, in economic data. This omission underscores the inadequacy of conventional labour enumeration techniques, particularly in Third World contexts where informal work structures prevail. The proto-proletariat is part of an urban labour force that is absorbed into low-productivity activities due to limited employment opportunities in capital-intensive industries. This sectoral division is highlighted in the dual economic model proposed by scholars like Geertz and Santos, who distinguish between a formal, firm-centred economy and a bazaar-like economy driven by ad hoc exchanges and non-capital-intensive work. This dualism often results in "urban involution," where growing populations are constrained to low-productivity occupations due to the inability of the formal sector to absorb them. Recognizing the proto-proletariat is essential for understanding labour dynamics in developing regions, particularly as demographic pressures and rapid urbanization push more individuals into informal, subsistence-based occupations. The persistence of the proto-proletariat signals an ongoing challenge to

achieving widespread proletarianization in contexts where industrial employment growth is insufficient, reinforcing the need for new employment strategies and further research on this workforce (McGee, 1974, pp. 262-263).

The concept of digital postcolonialism, when juxtaposed with the notion of the proto-proletariat, reveals a unique parallel in the way digital spaces, much like traditional colonial and proto-capitalist spaces, stratify labour and perpetuate economic disparities. Digital postcolonialism critiques the way digital infrastructures and platforms, primarily controlled by corporations from the Global North, exert influence over economically vulnerable populations in developing regions. These communities, often excluded from traditional avenues of digital power and resources, occupy a role akin to the proto-proletariat within digital economies, functioning within informal, low-capital digital spaces with limited access to formal, wage-based employment and opportunities for social mobility. Much like the proto-proletariat's role in physical urban economies, individuals in the Global South participate in the digital economy through piecemeal, often underpaid work that is digitally mediated but lacks formal recognition or adequate labour protections. These activities—ranging from content moderation, data annotation, to gig economy tasks—are essential to the operation of digital platforms yet are characterized by low wages, minimal security, and lack of benefits. This informal digital labour market operates in the shadow of a highly capitalized, formal sector dominated by tech giants who control both the means and the terms of digital engagement. In this sense, the proto-proletariat of the digital age occupies a space of semi-inclusion within global digital economies, similar to their counterparts in traditional, informal urban sectors.

Digital postcolonialism also underscores how digital infrastructures maintain and exacerbate socio-economic divides, placing countries in the Global South at a disadvantage in terms of access to technology, legal protections, and ownership of digital assets. These conditions echo the limited mobility and systemic constraints faced by the proto-proletariat in underdeveloped regions. In both scenarios, there exists a structural dependency on dominant, capital-intensive entities from wealthier regions. For instance, much like how proto-proletariat labour in physical economies remains subordinate to formal capitalist sectors, digital labour from the Global South is similarly absorbed into low-productivity roles that reinforce dependency and limit economic autonomy. Moreover, digital postcolonialism highlights the ways digital technologies have become tools of "knowledge extraction" in a manner akin to how proto-proletarian labour is overlooked in formal economic metrics. The data generated by users and digital labourers in the Global South serves as a resource for profit-making by tech conglomerates, often without fair compensation or visibility for the individuals generating this digital "value." Just as the proto-proletariat's contributions to the economy are frequently undocumented, the contributions of marginalized digital labourers remain underappreciated and poorly documented within digital value chains.

In this context, digital postcolonialism and the proto-proletariat framework converge in their critique of how economic structures—both traditional and digital—relegate large segments of the workforce to peripheral roles. These roles, while essential, lack equitable access to the capital and resources that define formal, capital-intensive sectors, thereby reinforcing cycles of inequality that mirror the historical patterns of colonial exploitation and economic stratification. To elaborate on this study, in which the concept of proto-proletariat is discussed in the context of digital postcolonialism, current class discussions in the African context are discussed.

### 3. Contemporary Working Class in Africa

Class is understood here as an active, evolving process shaped by ongoing political struggles, rather than a fixed set of criteria marked by indicators like employment or housing status. It emerges from historical developments that saw the bourgeoisie form itself into a distinct "class for itself" by differentiating itself from both the aristocracy and the poor—who would eventually come to be defined as "the working

class." This view situates class as a relational and fluid construct, continuously formed and reformed through societal and economic forces, rather than a static label assigned to individuals based on specific socioeconomic markers (Lawler, 2005, p. 430).

E. P. Thompson conceptualizes class as an ongoing, dynamic process shaped through historical experiences and political struggles, rather than as a predetermined structure awaiting occupation based on indicators like employment or housing. Thompson argues that class is not a "thing" but rather a relationship that is continuously shaped by economic, social, and political factors. He describes how the English working class did not emerge fully formed but was "made" through historical conditions, struggles, and shared experiences that gave it a distinct identity, or as Thompson puts it, "class consciousness" (Thompson, 1963, p. 9). This perspective underscores that the working class defined itself in opposition to other classes, notably the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, and that its identity was forged not simply by economic status but by collective experiences and resistance (Thompson, 1963, pp. 9-10).

After defining class in this way, it is necessary to touch on some current class discussions. Although these discussions are plentiful, at this point concepts such as working for algorithms, precariat and self-exploitation are touched upon. Contemporary work settings increasingly rely on customer reviews, particularly those found on online platforms such as eBay, Amazon, Uber, Airbnb, and Yelp. These environments introduce unique power configurations marked by several key features. Unlike traditional dyadic exchanges, customer reviews create triadic relationships among platform operators, buyers, and sellers, leading to complex accountability structures. These relationships are governed by algorithmic evaluation mechanisms that assess seller performance based on both quantitative metrics and qualitative written feedback. Additionally, the evaluations made by anonymous customers form part of an invisible "crowd," impacting each seller's reputation through publicly accessible reviews (Curchod et al., 2020, p. 3).

All these processes are associated with algorithms. Algorithms, as recent technological advancements have shown, are now capable of learning from data to perform tasks that once required human judgment. This progression in algorithmic capability marks a potentially transformative development in the landscape of work and organizing, comparable in impact to the early days of the digital age. Traditionally, algorithms were defined as fixed sequences of instructions executed to solve specific problems; today, they process and interpret restructured, formatted data with increasing sophistication and efficacy. Enhanced by programming innovations and the exponential growth in computational power described by Moore's law, algorithms are reaching new levels of performance and ubiquity, profoundly affecting sectors from journalism and legal processes to automotive engineering and electoral politics. In particular, algorithms have reshaped the dynamics of newsroom decision-making by quantifying readership metrics to promote content that is likely to attract more views. In legal contexts, they introduce statistical crime prediction models that may influence judicial decision-making and procedural fairness. Algorithms have also impacted the automotive industry, with cases such as emissions evaluate manipulation by car manufacturers or avoidance of regulatory inspections in ride-hailing services. In the political arena, algorithms drive campaign strategies by delivering targeted, customized messages to individual citizens based on comprehensive analyses of their digital footprints, an approach that raises complex questions regarding influence and democracy. While some scholars see algorithms as an extension of past digital innovations like the Internet and Web 2.0, they recognize that the shift brought about by learning algorithms may be deeper. These technologies support digital platforms that drive the gig economy, potentially creating short-term employment structures, increasing economic output, and enhancing corporate profitability through precision-targeting and productivity gains. However, predictions of their long-term impact are varied. Some analysts warn that algorithms could fundamentally disrupt the knowledge economy, potentially leading to significant job displacement in the coming decades. As algorithms become embedded across various sectors,

understanding their implications for work and society becomes increasingly critical, sparking debates on the extent to which these technologies may replace or redefine human roles in the workforce (Faraj, Pachidi & Sayegh, 2018, p. 62).

Algorithmic work involves the delegation of both operational and managerial tasks to algorithms, which in turn manage various aspects of labour traditionally overseen by human supervisors. Operationally, algorithms schedule tasks, assign work, and monitor task completion, creating a layer of supervision that resembles traditional managerial roles. This structure is commonly seen in gig economy platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (M-Turk), where algorithms allocate tasks like image recognition to human workers. Algorithmic managerial roles extend to evaluating performance, setting benchmarks, and delivering consequences such as rewards, penalties, or motivational nudges. For instance, platforms like Deliveroo use algorithms to measure drivers' delivery times, using these assessments to calculate payment or performance metrics, which subsequently influence drivers' operational behaviours. In ridesharing, algorithms monitor various driver actions, issuing alerts or recommendations based on real-time data, thereby acting as both manager and co-worker. Human-algorithm interactions form the core of algorithmic work, facilitated through digital interfaces like apps. These interfaces serve as points of communication where algorithms request human actions, evaluate performance, and provide subsequent instructions. Unlike traditional automation, which conducts predefined physical tasks in controlled environments, algorithmic work engages human workers in real-time decision-making processes. In this setup, humans respond to algorithmically generated instructions, receive evaluations, and even experience algorithmic feedback as they would from a human supervisor, integrating algorithms as functional co-workers. These relational dynamic positions algorithm as influential actors within organizations, directing human activity in ways traditionally associated with managerial roles (Tarafdar, Page & Marabelli, 2023, pp. 237-241). At this point, it can be said that working for the algorithm corresponds to an insecure process.

"Precarity" refers to a condition shaped by employment systems that lack stability, social protections, and the capacity for individuals to plan for the future. It emerges in labour markets that are deregulated, where risks and responsibilities are often shifted onto workers by employers. This setup results in job insecurity, ambiguous employment relationships, low pay, and significant barriers to unionization. Precarity impacts individuals globally, leading to a sense of life being provisional, marked by instability and a constant search for work, as described by Bourdieu in the context of French colonial Algeria (Walsh, 2019, pp. 459-462).

The concept of precarity refers to the condition of living and working in uncertain, unstable, and insecure circumstances, emerging as a response to labour market deregulation, reductions in welfare provisions, and the spread of neoliberal policies. Unlike the traditional informal economy, which characterized labour systems outside formal, regulated structures, precarity describes a more pervasive and widespread vulnerability within labour markets where stable, long-term jobs with benefits have become rare. In Europe, especially since the 1980s, precarity has taken on particular importance in labour reforms and social movements, and it has been highlighted by scholars and activists addressing the shift from stable Fordist employment to flexible, networked forms of labour. This shift is marked by a loss of the social mobility and security previously afforded by stable jobs, creating what is sometimes referred to as a "precariat"—a class of workers characterized by insecurity and lack of agency within the workforce. Furthermore, precarity encompasses both economic instability and a more profound social vulnerability, as explored by scholars like Judith Butler. Butler conceptualizes precarity as a social condition wherein access to resources, security, and recognition is unequally distributed, leading to a stratification of lives as "grievable" or "ungrievable." This perspective not only highlights economic insecurity but also examines the ethical and political implications of social arrangements that marginalize certain populations, often rendering their lives and suffering invisible or inconsequential in broader social structures. Precarity, therefore, signals a complex interplay of labour instability, social

dispossession, and the uneven distribution of dignity and life opportunities across different populations under contemporary neoliberalism (Han, 2018, pp. 335-338). Therefore, precariousness and precariousness do not only refer to the relationship between an employer and an employee, but also to the exploitation of individuals themselves.

Self-exploitation refers to a socioeconomic strategy where workers, driven by the need to remain competitive in the labour market, compromise their own labour power and well-being. This can manifest in various ways: accepting wages that fall below the minimum standard for their field, increasing their work pace at the risk of adverse health impacts, extending their working hours beyond what is compensated without additional pay or under harmful conditions, or willingly subjecting themselves to unsafe or degrading work environments. Additionally, self-exploitation may involve workers using personal savings or taking out loans to either compensate for unsustainably low earnings or to fund necessary tools and resources for their profession (Vieira, 2023, p. 495).

Self-exploitation and precariousness are closely related, especially in today's labour landscape where flexible and insecure work arrangements are increasingly common. Self-exploitation refers to the willingness of individuals to take on excessive work hours, low wages, or substandard conditions in order to remain competitive or sustain their employment. This phenomenon often arises in work settings where formal protections, such as stable wages, benefits, or job security, are minimal or absent. Consequently, self-exploitation can be understood as a strategy for workers to maintain their place in the labour market, but one that requires personal sacrifices, often leading to burnout, health risks, and financial instability. Precariousness, on the other hand, characterizes the instability and lack of predictability in employment conditions, which is typical in gig economies, freelance roles, and other forms of flexible labour. This precarious nature of work has emerged alongside the decline of traditional, long-term employment models, where workers previously benefitted from job security, predictable income, and social protections. Precarious workers today often experience irregular work hours, lack of benefits, and little control over their employment terms. This insecurity not only affects their economic stability but also creates a constant need to prove their productivity and adaptability, further embedding them in cycles of self-exploitation. Precarious work environments create conditions that encourage or even necessitate self-exploitation. Without security or collective protections, workers in precarious settings may overextend themselves to secure short-term income or to maintain employability in competitive labour markets. This link between precariousness and self-exploitation reflects the broader socio-economic shifts that have reduced collective bargaining power, eroded welfare provisions, and normalized flexible but insecure work arrangements. Addressing this relationship requires a focus on policies that provide protections and stability for precarious workers to reduce their reliance on self-exploitation as a survival mechanism in the labour market (Schmiz, 2013, p. 59).

Digital postcolonialism reveals how digital economies replicate colonial power dynamics, where central tech hubs dominate peripheral regions through data and labour exploitation. In this context, concepts like class-making, precarity, and self-exploitation become crucial to understanding the new forms of economic and social organization shaped by digital platforms. Class-making in the digital era, following E.P. Thompson's notion, involves more than static roles; it reflects a dynamic process where digital platforms reshape labour relationships and power hierarchies. Precarity defines the insecure, temporary conditions that many workers face within this structure, lacking the stability traditionally associated with class-based labour systems. Precarious workers—particularly within the "precariat"—endure insecure, low-paid work with little chance for upward mobility. Self-exploitation emerges as workers, especially in gig and platform settings, push themselves to meet the high demands of algorithms, often working excessive hours, accepting low wages, and absorbing risks without traditional protections. Thus, digital postcolonialism, by intertwining with class, precarity, and self-exploitation, frames how power is maintained and extended in digital labour markets, particularly affecting marginalized and peripheral groups. These concepts can be concretized in the context of the African

continent. In the context of digital postcolonialism, class-making, precarity, and self-exploitation intersect powerfully, especially in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa. Digital capitalism creates a modern form of colonial dependency, positioning the region as both a source of raw materials and a market for digital products. Unlike earlier colonial economies based on territorial control, digital postcolonialism exploits labour and resources through the dominance of data, platforms, and digital infrastructure. Class-making in the digital landscape, particularly among freelance workers in Sub-Saharan Africa, is marked by the emergence of a "digital blue-collar" class facing unique challenges, such as high platform fees, lack of regulatory protections, and a work environment that demands constant availability. Freelance digital labour on platforms like Upwork and Fiverr exposes workers to a volatile and precarious income structure, preventing them from achieving the traditional markers of class stability. Precarity is a defining feature of this labour structure, as workers must continuously adapt to insecure, task-based jobs without the benefits or protections of traditional employment. Due to limited alternative employment options, many freelancers in Sub-Saharan Africa view this precarious work as a necessary means of survival rather than an empowering choice. This insecurity reinforces a sense of dependency similar to colonial subjugation, where the workers' agency is restricted by the controlling platform algorithms. Self-exploitation becomes a coping mechanism within this digital colonial framework. Freelancers are pressured to work long hours for low wages, often intensifying their efforts to meet the demands of competitive pricing set by global standards, where African workers are frequently offered the lowest rates. To meet basic income needs, they accept exploitative conditions, such as long hours and low pay, and often resort to personal resources to sustain their work. This dynamic suggests that digital postcolonialism not only perpetuates but exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities by embedding new forms of labour exploitation and class stratification. Alternative solutions, like platform socialism, could theoretically counter these inequalities by democratizing control over digital platforms. However, without significant structural changes, digital capitalism continues to reinforce a global hierarchy where peripheral regions like Sub-Saharan Africa remain subordinated within the global digital economy (Yılmaz, 2024, pp. 208-211).

After these discussions on digitalization and class debates in Africa, it is time to look at the current manifestations of these class debates. With this discussion, current class discussions will be examined in the context of digital postcolonialism and an approach that brings together area studies and class studies will be demonstrated. At this point, Africa means Sub-Saharan Africa.

## 4. Digitalization and Class in Africa

Digitalization has reshaped social, economic, and political landscapes globally, yet its transformative potential is deeply intertwined with existing inequalities, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. As the digital divide becomes a defining feature of modern society, access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) emerges not merely as a matter of connectivity but as a critical axis of class differentiation. Within capitalist systems, digital exclusion disproportionately affects those with lower socioeconomic positions, reinforcing existing class hierarchies and creating new vulnerabilities. This exclusion is not simply a result of a lack of individual skills or resources; rather, it is a structural phenomenon rooted in systemic disparities that mirror broader social inequalities tied to class, race, gender, and geography. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where a significant proportion of the population lacks access to stable digital infrastructure, these dynamics are amplified. The region's digital divide reflects and perpetuates a stratified social order, where the economically privileged gain enhanced opportunities for participation in the digital economy, while marginalized groups face further exclusion from education, employment, and political engagement. Understanding digital inequality through the lens of class not only illuminates the unequal distribution of digital resources but also underscores the need to address the structural conditions that sustain these disparities. This chapter examines the intersections of digitalization and class in Sub-Saharan Africa, exploring how digital exclusion exacerbates socioeconomic inequities and hinders inclusive development (Goedhart, Verdonk &

Dedding, 2022, pp. 825-827). A closer examination of this issue reveals how the digital divide serves as both a mirror and a magnifier of pre-existing socio-economic inequalities.

The digital transformation in Africa represents a complex and uneven journey shaped by infrastructure gaps, skill shortages, and the high costs of technology adoption. While digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and mobile solutions offer transformative potential, their uptake across African businesses remains inconsistent. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalization as businesses sought to adapt and survive during lockdowns, highlighting the continent's growing awareness of digital transformation benefits, including enhanced efficiency, cost reduction, and improved customer experiences. However, challenges such as limited internet access—affecting only about one-third of the population compared to the global average of over half—hinder the full adoption of these technologies. Additionally, the prohibitive costs of deploying and maintaining digital systems and a persistent shortage of digital talent further stall progress (Chibo-Christopher, 2023, p. 6). The digital transformation in Africa represents a complex and uneven journey shaped by infrastructure gaps, skill shortages, and the high costs of technology adoption. These factors underscore the need to analyze how digital inequalities vary across different social groups and geographic areas within Sub-Saharan Africa.

The expansion of digital technologies and mobile broadband coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has brought both opportunities and challenges, revealing significant inequalities in access and usage. Despite substantial improvements in infrastructure, the gap between mobile internet coverage and usage widened from 2014 to 2019, highlighting that increased availability does not automatically translate into higher adoption rates. This divide is especially pronounced among rural populations, women, and poor groups, with the rural-urban gap reaching 60% and the gender gap standing at 37%, far exceeding the averages for other low- and middle-income countries. While countries like Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Zambia made significant progress in mobile internet penetration, affordability and digital literacy remain persistent barriers. The gender divide is particularly stark, as many women, especially in rural areas, are unaware of their ability to access the internet via mobile devices or lack the financial means to do so. Even in relatively affordable markets like Nigeria, extreme poverty forces women to prioritize basic necessities over digital connectivity. Furthermore, digitalization has had mixed socio-economic impacts. On the one hand, it has facilitated access to financial services, modernized urban transport, and introduced innovative business models such as pay-as-you-go systems for energy access. On the other hand, it has deepened socio-economic stratification and exposed ethical concerns, such as the use of surveillance technologies by autocratic governments to suppress dissent. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored these complexities, as reliance on digital tools during lockdowns accelerated the spread of misinformation while widening existing inequalities, particularly for rural women. These developments highlight the dual nature of digitalization in SSA: while it offers pathways for socio-economic inclusion and transformation, it also risks reinforcing structural inequalities and creating new forms of exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments in digital literacy, inclusive policies that prioritize affordability, and robust ethical frameworks to ensure equitable access and mitigate the negative externalities of digital expansion (Kohnert, 2021, pp. 4-8).

The expansion of digital technologies and mobile broadband coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has brought both opportunities and challenges, revealing significant inequalities in access and usage. These disparities are further evident when considering the socio-economic and political implications of digitalization in the region.

The challenges faced by African workers in the digital economy highlight the persistent inequalities and systemic barriers shaping their participation in the global digital labour market. Gender disparities remain a significant issue, with lower digital literacy rates among women and limited access to STEM

education contributing to their underrepresentation in digital employment. Additionally, cultural norms and gender stereotyping further exacerbate income disparities, often favouring male workers. Beyond gender, the region struggles with a shortage of highly skilled labour, essential for engaging with the increasingly specialized demands of the digital economy. This skills gap is further worsened by the emigration of skilled professionals and limited opportunities for advanced technical training within the region. The emergence of the gig economy offers some promise, but precarious working conditions, algorithmic control, and the absence of robust labour protections undermine its potential to serve as a reliable source of income. Many workers face wage theft, delayed payments, and exploitative working conditions, which are often in violation of international labour standards. Moreover, technological, and infrastructural barriers, including limited internet penetration, unreliable power supplies, and the high costs of essential digital tools, create further obstacles for African workers. Mobile payment systems like M-Pesa in Kenya have demonstrated some success in addressing these challenges locally but remain insufficient for broader, cross-border participation in global digital markets. These issues are compounded by a lack of comprehensive policy frameworks addressing digital labour rights, social protections, and equitable access to digital infrastructure. Without targeted interventions and evidence-based policies, the digital economy risks perpetuating and even deepening structural inequalities, limiting its potential as a transformative force for inclusive growth and economic development in Africa (Onuoho, 2022, pp. 47-48). The challenges faced by African workers in the digital economy highlight the persistent inequalities and systemic barriers shaping their participation in the global digital labour market. Addressing these dynamics requires an in-depth exploration of how intersecting factors like class and gender perpetuate digital exclusion, forming complex layers of disadvantage.

Class dynamics within the context of the digital divide in Africa reflect the intersection of socio-economic disparities and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). The unequal distribution of digital resources exacerbates existing class inequalities by creating distinct categories of digital inclusion and exclusion. At the top of this hierarchy are individuals with high levels of education, income, and access to ICTs, who can leverage these tools to enhance their socio-economic status. In contrast, the lower classes, often constrained by limited access to education, income, and digital infrastructure, are excluded from the benefits of digital connectivity. This exclusion is further compounded by structural barriers such as inadequate internet penetration, which remains below 40% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and limited access to affordable devices and reliable electricity. The emergence of digital labour platforms has reshaped class relations by introducing new forms of precarious work, particularly for the middle and lower classes. While these platforms offer opportunities for income generation, they often perpetuate exploitative practices such as low wages, lack of job security, and minimal labour protections. Workers in the digital economy, particularly those in Africa, frequently find themselves classified as independent contractors, circumventing national labour regulations, and undermining their bargaining power. This scenario aligns with the logic of algorithmic capitalism, where labour is commodified, and surplus value is extracted through intensified production and reduced costs. The lower classes, often engaged in manual and repetitive digital tasks, face limited opportunities for skill development and upward mobility, reinforcing their marginalization. Additionally, the digital divide reflects broader systemic inequalities, such as gender disparities, with women disproportionately excluded from digital participation due to lower levels of digital literacy and access to ICTs. These inequalities are not only a reflection of economic disparities but also a manifestation of cultural and political systems that prioritize the interests of the dominant classes. Addressing the digital divide in Africa thus requires a multidimensional approach that considers the interrelations of class, education, and infrastructure. Policies aimed at bridging the divide must go beyond increasing access to ICTs, focusing instead on developing digital skills, ensuring fair labour practices, and fostering equitable digital ecosystems. Without such interventions, the digital divide will continue to entrench existing class hierarchies, limiting the transformative potential of digitalization for inclusive economic development

in Africa (Karar, 2019, pp. 521-523). The analysis of class dynamics within Africa's digital divide underscores how digital platforms not only reshape labour relations but also deepen vulnerabilities, highlighting the urgent need for equitable policies and systemic reforms.

Digital labour in Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits distinct characteristics shaped by the region's socio-economic conditions and its integration into the global digital economy. A defining feature is the precarious and informal nature of work, where labourers often operate without stable contracts, social protections, or consistent income. This is especially evident in gig economies, such as ride-hailing, domestic services, and remote digital tasks. Many workers earn minimal wages, frequently below regional or global standards, as their labour is commodified into small, underpaid tasks. This dynamic leaves workers economically vulnerable and dependent on platforms for their livelihoods. Algorithmic management further intensifies worker exploitation by closely monitoring, rating, and disciplining them, eroding their autonomy, and bargaining power. This control is exacerbated by racialized and gendered labour practices, with black working-class women disproportionately employed in low-paying and labour-intensive jobs such as domestic work. These women often face systemic vulnerabilities, including exploitative working conditions and heightened exposure to discrimination. At the same time, opportunities for skill development are limited, as automation and algorithmic processes frequently deskill workers instead of upskilling them, reinforcing economic stagnation. The heavy reliance on digital platforms like Uber, Bolt, and SweepSouth is another key characteristic. These platforms position themselves as intermediaries rather than employers, allowing them to bypass accountability for worker rights while maintaining significant control over labour processes. Geographical and infrastructural challenges, such as low internet penetration rates and high costs for connectivity, devices, and transportation, further marginalize workers, particularly those in rural or poor areas. Despite these challenges, workers have shown resilience by developing new forms of mobilization. Tools like WhatsApp groups enable workers to share information, coordinate actions, and organize collective protests against exploitative practices. However, these efforts are often constrained by the systemic barriers entrenched within the digital labour market. Digital work in Sub-Saharan Africa also reflects a broader trend of economic and social marginalization. While the region's labour markets are increasingly integrated into global supply chains, particularly in remote tasks such as AI training and data tagging, the economic benefits disproportionately favour multinational corporations, leaving local workers with minimal gains (Kenny, 2025, pp. 136-141). The distinctive characteristics of digital labour in Sub-Saharan Africa underscore the complex interplay between socio-economic conditions and the structural constraints of the global digital economy, calling for a deeper examination of how workers navigate these challenges through emerging forms of collective action.

The rise of digital labour in Africa highlights significant intersections of class, precarious work, and digital postcolonialism, posing critical questions for socio-economic analysis. While the continent has increasingly been integrated into global digital capitalism through activities like business process outsourcing (BPO) and gig economy platforms, this integration is deeply uneven and marked by structural inequalities. African digital workers often operate under conditions of "digital Taylorism," where algorithmic management enforces high levels of control and commodification, reflecting patterns of exploitation akin to earlier forms of industrial capitalism. These conditions exacerbate vulnerabilities tied to socio-economic class, with digital work offering limited upward mobility due to low wages, job insecurity, and lack of social protections. Furthermore, the ideological framing of digitalization as a developmental "silver bullet" masks the entrenchment of global inequalities, often relegating African workers to roles that reinforce dependency and marginalization. This landscape invites a reconsideration of proto-proletariat and pooriat frameworks, emphasizing the need to address systemic dispossession and the generation of surplus populations through digital economies (Anwar & Graham, 2022, pp. 115, 137-139, 144-146, 182). The rise of digital labour in Africa underscores the urgent need

to interrogate how global digital capitalism perpetuates structural inequities, compelling a re-evaluation of class dynamics and their socio-economic implications in a postcolonial context.

The digital labour landscape in Africa is shaped by both opportunities and significant challenges, influenced by local and continental initiatives aimed at integrating the workforce into the digital economy. Programs like Rockefeller Foundation's "Digital Jobs Africa," IBM's large-scale digital skills training initiative, and Kenya's Ajira platform illustrate diverse efforts to equip youth with necessary skills and connect them to online work opportunities. However, barriers such as limited internet access, high data costs, inadequate technological infrastructure, and unreliable electricity hinder broader participation. Digital workers often face challenges like intense competition, precarious incomes, and discriminatory practices on platforms that undermine their economic potential. Payment systems also pose a critical issue, with limited access to international payment mechanisms further complicating participation. While crowdsourcing and micro-tasking offer potential avenues for employment, they frequently provide low wages and limited job security, perpetuating vulnerability rather than addressing systemic inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires multifaceted policy interventions and infrastructural investments to ensure equitable access to digital opportunities across the continent (van Belle & Mudavanhu, 2018, pp. 7-17). The digital labour landscape in Africa illustrates a complex interplay of opportunities and systemic challenges, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that bridge infrastructural gaps and prioritize the rights and protections of digital workers.

The digital transformation in Africa highlights stark class divisions, where the benefits of digitalization disproportionately favour industry and service sectors while exacerbating vulnerabilities in the agricultural workforce. As studies reveal, digital developments like internet access and digitally delivered services have contributed to employment growth in high-skilled sectors, yet they have led to significant job losses in agriculture, a sector dominated by low-income, unskilled workers, and disproportionately by women. This dynamic aligns with broader class-based inequalities, as digitally literate workers in urban centres increasingly benefit from access to technology and opportunities, while rural, subsistence-level farmers face displacement and exclusion. The uneven distribution of digital gains reflects and intensifies structural disparities, suggesting a reconfiguration of the proto-proletariat or pooriat class, where a growing underclass of digitally excluded workers is created. These findings underscore the necessity of addressing systemic barriers to equitable digital access, particularly in sectors like agriculture, to ensure that digitalization becomes an inclusive force for economic and social development rather than a divisive one (Parry & Viviers, 2023). The digital transformation in Africa reveals entrenched class inequalities, prompting a critical reassessment of how digitalization can be harnessed to bridge divides and support equitable growth, particularly for marginalized agricultural workers.

Digital platforms such as Uber and Airbnb are transforming the African economy by providing informal entrepreneurs with opportunities to increase productivity and gradually formalize their businesses. While the pervasive informality in African economies stems from the perception that formalization offers limited benefits, digitalization is altering this dynamic by reducing the costs and enhancing the advantages of formalizing, including better market access and improved contract enforcement. Mobile payment systems have boosted financial inclusion, enabling entrepreneurs to expand their reach and governments to streamline tax collection. However, challenges such as the lack of systematic empirical evidence on the socio-economic impacts of platforms and the limited benefits perceived by firms hinder broader formalization. Despite these barriers, digital platforms present significant potential for formalizing economies and fostering economic growth, provided that policies balance innovation incentives with regulatory requirements to ensure equitable and sustainable development (Lakemann & Lay, 2019). Digital platforms such as Uber and Airbnb are transforming the African economy by providing informal entrepreneurs with opportunities to increase productivity and gradually formalize

their businesses. These examples illustrate the potential for digital platforms to contribute to broader economic formalization if supported by balanced regulatory frameworks.

At this point, when looking at class developments in Africa, it becomes evident that the concept of the proto-proletariat, while valuable for understanding the transitional phase of labour in early capitalist contexts, falls short of capturing the unique dynamics of digital labour in Sub-Saharan Africa. The proto-proletariat traditionally refers to workers engaged in informal or low-capital activities, often straddling traditional subsistence economies and emerging capitalist structures. However, the contemporary realities of digital labour necessitate a reconceptualization. Digital workers in Africa, while resembling blue-collar workers in their role as producers within a global digital economy, face distinct challenges shaped by algorithmic control, global market competition, and the absence of formal labour protections. These dynamics are compounded by structural inequalities, precarious working conditions, and the pervasive nature of self-exploitation within digital platforms. In light of these conditions, the concept of the "pooriat" is proposed as a more nuanced framework to describe the socio-economic realities of African digital workers. The term "pooriat" integrates the notions of poverty and proletariat, reflecting the chronic deprivation and systemic marginalization that characterize the lives of these workers. Unlike the proto-proletariat, who may exist in transitional phases of industrialization, the pooriat is firmly entrenched within the mechanisms of global digital capitalism. This class is marked not only by economic precarity but also by the pervasive experience of deprivation across multiple dimensions of life, including access to education, healthcare, and basic digital infrastructure.

The pooriat operates in a digital economy that commodifies their labour while offering minimal opportunities for upward mobility. Task-based platforms such as Upwork and Fiverr epitomize this dynamic, where African workers perform low-paid, repetitive digital tasks for a global clientele. These platforms, while providing access to international markets, enforce a hierarchical structure that prioritizes profit extraction over worker welfare. Algorithmic management further exacerbates these inequities by dictating work conditions, determining pay rates, and perpetuating surveillance, leaving workers with little control or bargaining power. This constant pressure to compete in global markets often leads to self-exploitation, where workers extend their hours or sacrifice their well-being to meet the demands of algorithms and retain their positions. The pooriat concept also emphasizes the intersection of economic exploitation and systemic neglect, highlighting how digital workers remain excluded from formal protections such as labour rights, social security, or union representation. Their dependency on global platforms mirrors the structural dependency observed in colonial economies, where peripheral regions served as sources of cheap labour and raw materials for the benefit of core nations. In this sense, the pooriat represents not merely a class but a manifestation of digital postcolonialism, where economic and cultural subjugation persists through new mechanisms of digital dependency. By introducing the concept of the pooriat, this discussion aims to expand the theoretical framework for understanding class dynamics in the digital age. It underscores the urgent need to address the systemic inequalities embedded within global digital labour markets and to advocate for policies and practices that promote equitable participation, labour protections, and structural transformation. Only by recognizing and addressing these realities can the digital economy evolve into an inclusive and sustainable model that transcends the exploitative patterns of its colonial and capitalist predecessors.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how digital postcolonialism extends colonial power dynamics into the digital age, perpetuating global inequalities through the dominance of data, platforms, and digital infrastructures. Centralized control by tech companies, predominantly headquartered in the global North, creates a modern dependency where the global South is systematically marginalized. Data has emerged as the new resource extracted from peripheral regions to fuel economic growth in core nations,

replicating patterns of exploitation and economic asymmetry reminiscent of historical colonialism. This digital dependency underscores the structural inequities embedded within the global digital economy.

The intersection of digital postcolonialism with class dynamics reveals the precarious conditions faced by Sub-Saharan Africa's digital labour force. Workers often operate under proto-proletarian conditions, performing low-wage, task-based jobs dictated by algorithms without the protections of formal employment. These precarious arrangements reinforce socio-economic hierarchies, limiting opportunities for upward mobility and deepening economic stratification. Concepts such as "digital blue-collar" labour and the newly proposed "pooriat" illuminate the pervasive poverty and exploitation that characterize this workforce, exposing the systemic challenges they endure within a global framework of digital capitalism.

Digital platforms further complicate this landscape, functioning as both enablers of economic participation and agents of inequality. While offering access to global markets, these platforms impose significant barriers, including high fees, algorithmic control, and inadequate labour protections. African workers often find themselves caught in a cycle of self-exploitation, working excessive hours to meet platform demands while absorbing risks and costs. This dual role of platforms underscores the urgent need for policy interventions that address their exploitative tendencies while maximizing their potential for inclusive development.

Moreover, the study highlights the broader implications of digital postcolonialism, including the commodification of labour and the erosion of local agency in global digital economies. The dominance of tech companies extends beyond economic control to influence cultural norms and labour practices, embedding neoliberal ideologies that marginalize diverse voices and knowledge systems. This systemic subjugation calls for transformative approaches that challenge the monopolistic structures of digital capitalism and prioritize equity, representation, and labour rights.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges of digital postcolonialism requires a comprehensive rethinking of global digital economies. Alternative frameworks like platform socialism offer potential pathways by advocating for the democratization of digital infrastructures and fair redistribution of resources. By bridging digital postcolonialism with class analysis, this study contributes to understanding how digital economies reinforce global hierarchies and labour inequalities. Moving forward, interdisciplinary, and collaborative strategies must be developed to dismantle these systemic inequities and foster a digital future rooted in inclusivity, justice, and sustainable development.

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