

Territory and Digitalization: the Action of iFood in Campos dos Goytacazes Municipality, Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil

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Territorio y digitalización: la acción de iFood en el municipio de Campos dos Goytacazes, estado de Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Territoire et numérisation : l'action d'iFood à Campos dos Goytacazes, Rio de Janeiro, Brésil

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms make use of technologies and neoliberal rationality to expand their actions. This is about the exacerbation of the technical-scientific-informational environment. The question is, how do digital platforms reshape the urban fabric of cities? The goal here is to show how the expansion of the iFood app has taken place, with an analytical focus on the geographical situation of the municipality of Campos dos Goytacazes, Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil (2020-2022). The methodology used was a bibliographic survey; data collection on its website and app and information platforms associated with it; analysis of the company's Instagram profile; interviews with couriers and registered establishments; systematization and analysis of data. In Campos dos Goytacazes, iFood reinforces the inequalities between the city center and the periphery. Additionally, the platform intensifies information flows to expand its activities in places and reaffirms the centralities of the urban network in Brazil. Furthermore, we highlight that digital platforms become corporations that extract income from places on a global scale.

KEYWORDS: iFood; digital platforms; centralities.

RESUMO

As plataformas digitais se valem das tecnologias e da racionalidade neoliberal para ampliar suas ações. Trata-se da agudização do meio técnico-científico-informacional. Assim, questionamos: Como a plataformização renova o tecido urbano das cidades? Nosso objetivo é demonstrar como ocorreu a expansão do iFood, tendo o recorte analítico da situação geográfica de Campos dos Goytacazes (2020-2022). A metodologia aplicada incluiu: levantamento bibliográfico; coleta de dados no site e aplicativo do iFood e das corporações associadas a ele; análise do conteúdo do Instagram da empresa; entrevistas com entregadores e estabelecimentos cadastrados; além da sistematização e análise dos dados. Destacamos como resultado que o iFood em Campos dos Goytacazes reforça as desigualdades entre o centro e a periferia. Outrossim, essa plataforma intensifica os fluxos de informações para ampliar sua ação nos lugares e reafirma as centralidades da rede urbana no Brasil. Além disso, destacamos que as plataformas digitais se tornam corporações extratoras de renda dos lugares em escala global.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: iFood; plataformas digitais; centralidades.

RESUMEN

Las plataformas digitales utilizan la tecnología y la racionalidad neoliberal para expandir sus acciones. He aquí la agudización del ambiente técnico-científico-informacional. Por ello nos preguntamos cómo las plataformas digitales están renovando el tejido urbano de las ciudades. Nuestro objetivo es demostrar como la expansión de la aplicación iFood ha tenido lugar, analizando la situación geográfica del municipio de Campos dos Goytacazes, en el estado de Río de Janeiro, Brasil (2020-2022). La metodología aplicada incluyó: estudio bibliográfico; recopilación de datos en el sitio web y la app de iFood y de las empresas a él asociadas; análisis del contenido del Instagram de la empresa; entrevistas con entregadores y establecimientos registrados; además de la sistematización y el análisis de los datos. Como resultado, se constata que iFood en Campos dos Goytacazes refuerza las desigualdades entre el centro y la periferia. Además, la plataforma intensifica los flujos de información para ampliar su acción en los lugares y reafirma las centralidades de la red urbana en Brasil. Además, destacamos que las plataformas digitales se convierten en corporaciones que extraen ingresos de lugares a escala global.

PALABRAS CLAVE: iFood; plataformas digitales; centralidades.

RÉSUMÉ

Les plateformes numériques recourent aux technologies et à la rationalité néolibérale pour amplifier leur portée. Il s'agit de l'intensification du moyen technico-scientifique-informationnel. Aussi posons-nous cette question : comment la plateforme renouvelle-t-elle le tissu urbain des villes ? Notre objectif est de démontrer la manière dont s'est réalisée l'expansion d'iFood, en adoptant une approche analytique de la situation géographique de Campos dos Goytacazes (2020-2022). La méthodologie appliquée a inclus : le recensement bibliographique ; la collecte de données sur le site et l'application du site de iFood et des corporations lui étant associées ; l'analyse du contenu de l'Instagram de l'entreprise ; des entretiens avec des livreurs et des établissements enregistrés ; et de plus, la systématisation et l'analyse des données. Nous relevons comme résultat que l'iFood à Campos dos Goytacazes renforce les inégalités entre le centre et la périphérie. De cette façon, la plateforme intensifie les flux d'informations pour amplifier sa portée locale et réaffirme les centralités du réseau urbain au Brésil. En outre, nous soulignons que les plateformes numériques deviennent des entreprises qui extraient des revenus des locaux à l'échelle mondiale.

MOTS-CLÉS : iFood ; plateformes numériques ; centralités.

INTRODUCTION

The digitalization process expresses the radicalization of the technical-scientific-informational environment, with the covid-19 pandemic as a catalytic *event*¹ (CATAIA, 2020). Digital platforms refer to applications, websites and mechanisms for intermediating everyday actions (purchases, contracting services, payments, etc.) carried out through digital means, with Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft (GAFAM) gaining prominence. They allow hegemonic agents to act in the territory, intensifying information flows and adapting local behaviors to global interests, whose rationality is indifferent to the reality of individuals. It is important to highlight that the phenomenon of digitalization inserts a new element in the circuit of value production (labor theory of value) of Marx (2008 [1859]). In other words, digital platforms become agents that capture income in the most diverse spatial circuits of production (BARRIOS, 1978, ROFMAN, 2016 [1978]), SANTOS, 1986, MORAES, 1989, CASTILLO and FREDERICO, 2010).

The iFood application is inserted in the urban economy, and expresses this phenomenon concretely. Therefore, we ask: How do digital platforms reshape the urban fabric of cities? Our aim was to understand the expansion of iFood in Brazil, between 2020 and 2022, taking as a reference the geographical situation (SILVEIRA, 1999) of *Campos dos Goytacazes*. The geographic situation is understood as the profusion of events that characterize a historical construction, requiring the selection of these according to a hierarchy to understand places. As this,

The situation is the result of the impact of a series of events on a place and contains material and organizational existences. Technical innovations and new actions by companies of different strengths, from various segments of the state, groups and corporations spread across a part of the planet, modifying the pre-existing dynamism and creating a new organization of variables (SILVEIRA, 1999, p. 5).

In this sense, we start from the understanding that the technical-scientific-informational environment expresses globalization. That is, science, techniques and information are at the very basis of the production, use and functioning of geographic space, which is updated through digitalization. The union between technique and science will take place through the market

¹ An event is defined as an action that has extension, whose area of occurrence depends on time (SANTOS, 2017 [1996]). The Covid-19 Pandemic was an event that gained global extension in a few months and produced effects beyond the illness and deaths of infected people.

with its main energy being information. Thanks to this junction, the market became global (SANTOS, 2017 [1996], p. 238-239).

However, digitalization would not be possible without building a system of social values. Therefore, the psychosphere, “kingdom of ideas, beliefs, passions and place for the production of meaning”, provides rules for rationality and stimulates the imagination and “consolidates the social basis of technique and behavioral adequacy” (SANTOS, 2017 [1996], p. 256). It supports, accompanies and can precede the expansion of the technical-scientific-informational environment. As part of this same process, we contemplate the technosphere, which comprises the set of technical objects resulting from the increasing artificialization of space. The system of social values associated with the era of digitalization has a strong component of neoliberal rationality (Dardot and Laval, 2016). In other words, it is hegemonically governed by the principles of meritocracy, widespread competition and entrepreneurship.

Neoliberal rationality has been the governing norm of the digitalization process. According to Dardot and Laval (2019, p.17-19), neoliberalism constitutes a global political rationality imposed on governments, the economy, society and the state itself. The logic of capital becomes a normative subjectivity that hegemonically regulates human existence, and its main principle is the institution of commercial competition for all social spheres. The neoliberal psychosphere is a constitutive part of the expansion process of global digital companies. It enables transformations by creating needs and inducing behaviors. From our perspective, digital platforms are agents of digitalization and neoliberalization. Therefore, they cannot be understood in isolation from value systems. Therefore, the psychosphere is part of the analysis.

In order to analyze the presence of iFood in *Campos dos Goytacazes*, in addition to surveying and reading bibliographies on the subject, our methodology, at first, was the collection of secondary data on its website and on those of Prosus, Movile, Amazon Web Services (AWS), WOBA and Naspers, with the aim of understanding the connections and associations between them. Secondly, we carried out a qualitative analysis of the content of the profile of the aforementioned app on Instagram in 2020 and 2021, which was the most acute period of the pandemic. This allowed us to capture how iFood acts in the manufacture of discourses and production of imaginaries in order to act. Then, we systematized and analyzed the data and discussed the results with reference to the literature. In order to identify registered establishments, we used the information available in the iFood application itself. This procedu-

re was carried out by capturing cell phone screens in the commercial area. Then, all the names of the establishments that appear as options for the consumer were typed into Excel and complemented with the addresses acquired through these same queries. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with the establishments on *Avenida Pelinca*. Finally, maps were created for analysis and theoretical discussion.

We present the research in three sections. In the first, we present iFood as an active agent in the process of digitalization in Brazil and the way in which the company has expanded and participated in global circuits for extracting income from places. Next, we demonstrate the platform's strategies for forming consensus using the psychosphere in the digital environment, in order to attract consumers and restaurants. Finally, we analyze how it operates in *Campos dos Goytacazes*, revealing how platform companies have become relevant agents in the cities' dynamic, while renewing socio-spatial and work inequalities.

DIGITALIZATION OF THE TERRITORY: THE EXPANSION OF IFOOD

Digitalization is understood as the radicalization of the technical-scientific-hyper informational environment marked by the emergence of the technosphere and digital psychosphere (SILVA, 2021, 2022, 2023). In addition to technical macrosystems, the current geographic environment incorporates applications, websites, social and communication media networks in its operation. In these virtual spaces, the digital psychosphere is disseminated, in order to capture information from individuals and to expand the powers of hegemonic agents through the algorithmization of subjectivities (SILVA, 2021, p. 294-295). Israel (2020, p. 89) shows the creation of virtual verticalities and geodigital traces, revealing the actions of individuals and allowing companies to use this data. In this way, the territory is converted into information.

The digital era is characterized by having information as its main source of energy. It constitutes the current geographic environment. Because of this, corporations compete with an advantage when they have it. The dispute is imposed on the space itself, and places become more or less attractive due to the informational density.

Platform companies are territorial platforms that use information as a productive factor in the corporate and algorithmic management of the national territory (TOZI, 2020, p. 491). They promote changes in the regulation and

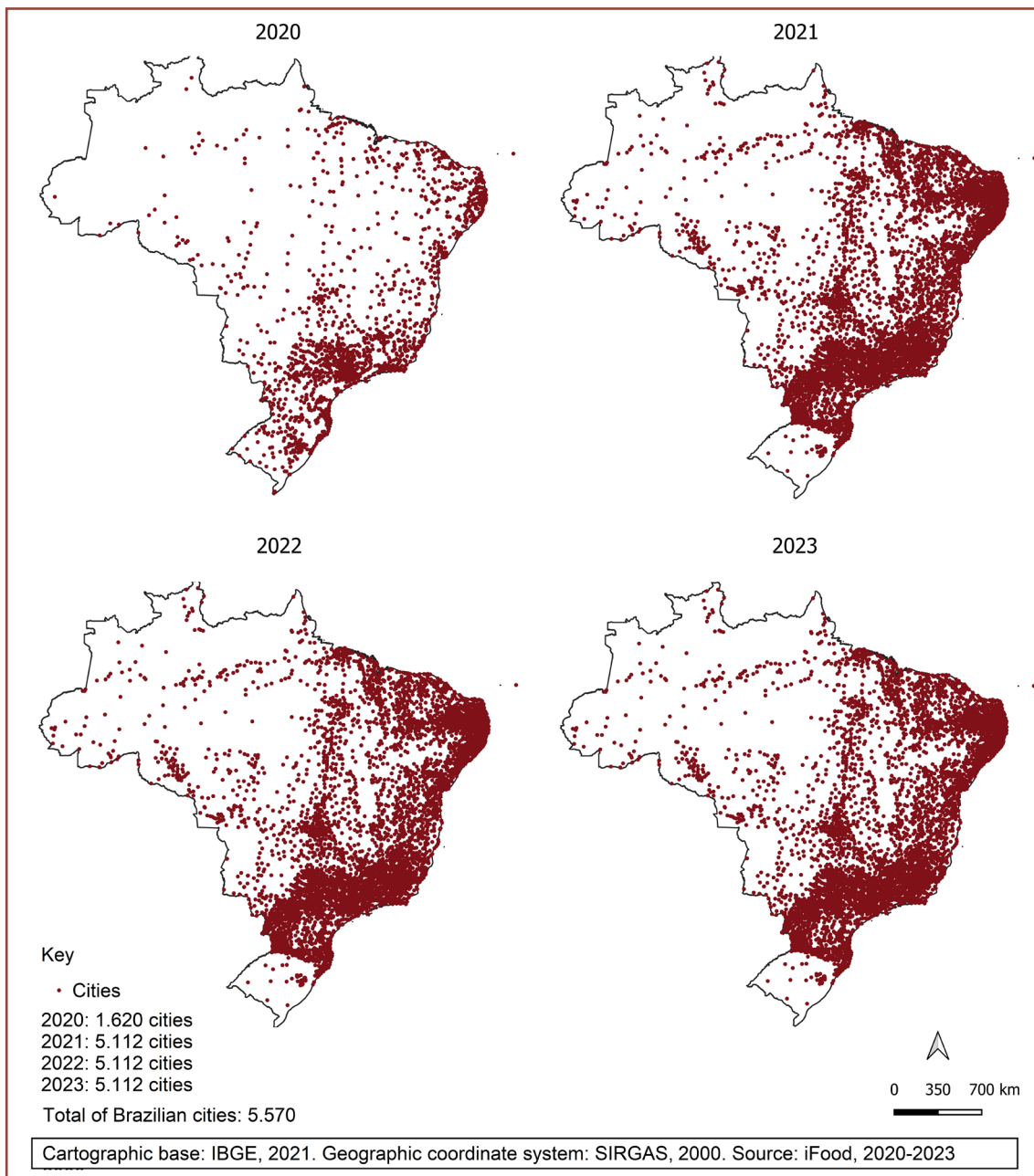
use of territory, establishing a new territorial division of labor; furthermore, they drain money – previously from local circulation – to the corporations' command centers (TOZI, 2018, p. 4). Although the latter have enormous flexibility to activate and deactivate the places of their action, they depend on the territory and economy of the cities (TOZI, 2019, p. 8-9). The platforms are implemented in places according to this informational density and the urban network.

In other words, the stages of the value production circuit (labor value and use value), theorized by Marx (2008 [1859]) – the production, circulation, distribution and consumption of commodity that transforms into surplus value for the owners of the means of production – now have the intermediation of digital platforms. However, they are not producers of goods but rather extract these incomes mainly through action in the circulation stage². Furthermore, it is important to point out that digital platforms become extractors of user data and are associated with the dominance of Big Tech in the information age (MOROZOV, 2018). This means that “datafication” itself has turned into a large industry in which corporations such as Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft, known by the acronym GAFAM and called root platforms by Moraes (2020), form global oligopolies of proportions never before seen, whose users' information is the raw material for extracting wealth³.

In fact, the topology of these corporations is linked above all by the virtualities of places, that is, by the existence of the technical layer that allows their action, such as transport, energy and telecommunications networks and, in particular, the internet. The popularization of smartphones contributed to the population's adoption of services linked to digital platforms such as food delivery platforms like iFood. The lack of state regulation is also a relevant factor in their success in Brazil. Therefore, iFood is an active agent in the country's digitalization process, and its expansion was accelerated with the covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, the company operated in approximately 1,620 (29%) Brazilian cities; in 2021, it increased to 5,112 (93%), out of a total of 5570 cities in Brazil. In 2022 and 2023, there was no growth in the number of cities served, maintaining the number of 2021 (Figure 1).

2 On the importance of digital platforms as instruments for extracting income from places, see Moraes (2020).

3 The study of the phenomenon of digital platforms and digitalization already has an accumulation of contributions, of which we cite, without intending to exhaust them, Langley and Leyshow (2016), Morozov (2018), Sadin (2015, 2018 [2013]), Abílio et al. (2021), Abílio (2022) and Tozi et al. (2023).

Figure 1 – Evolution of iFood's operations in Brazilian territory (2020 to 2023)

Source: Elaborated by Nágila da Silva Ferreira Souza, 2023.

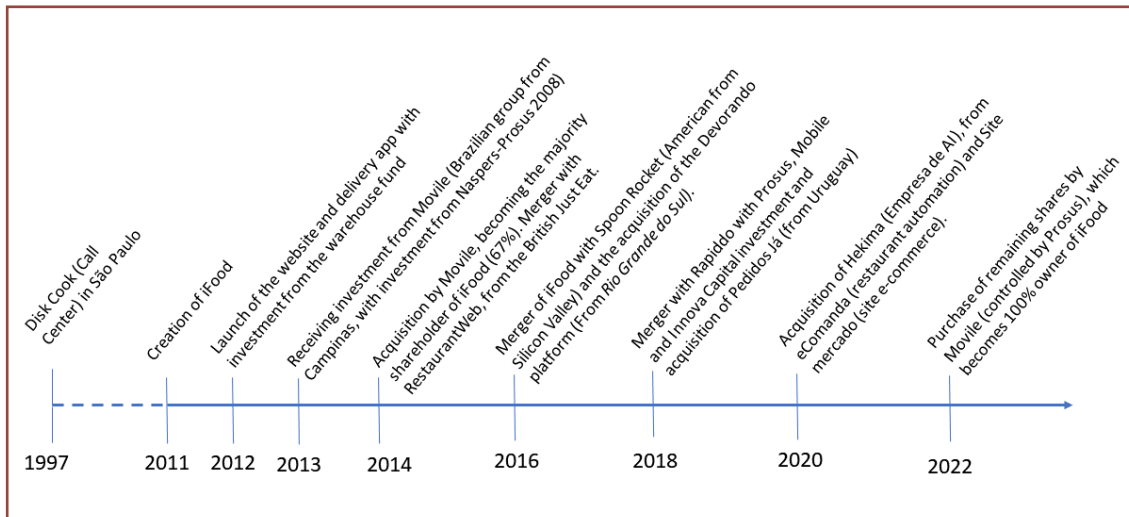
The company dominates the food delivery platform market in Brazil with the strategy of buying regional operations, as was the case with *Plataforma Devorando*, from *Rio Grande do Sul*, one of its acquisitions (Cf. STARTUP..., 2016).

iFood is a Brazilian platform for intermediation between businesses – mostly restaurants – and consumers. It is a platform offering various delivery services. It receives registrations from couriers and offers the services of iFood Shop (making suppliers available for establishments on the website), iFood Company, iFood Digital Meal and iFood Card. In 2022 alone, it received 750

million orders (PROSUS, 2023a). It has more than 330,000 registered establishments, 250,000 couriers, 43 million consumers and 5,000 office workers (IFOOD, 2024). The company has a history of acquisitions, mergers and investment from global capital organizations. Today Movile (controlled by the Dutch company Prosus) owns 100% of iFood's shares.

The corporation began providing customer service in 2011 with Disk Cook in São Paulo, outside the digital world, but received investments from Warehouse – a platform developed by Google and acquired by the North American company Trimble –, launching, in 2012, the application and website. In 2014, it received investment from Movile⁴ after purchasing Warehouse shares. In the same year as Movile's investment, iFood merged with Restaurante Web, from the British group Just Eat. In 2016 and 2018, it carried out more mergers, now with SpoonRocket and Rapiddo, respectively. It acquired Hekima in 2020. Today, Prosus controls 100% of iFood through Movile (Cf. The group..., 2022). Therefore, currently, iFood belongs to Movile, a subsidiary of the Dutch Prosus, whose command and investment center is located in Amsterdam. This, in turn, belongs to the Naspers group⁵.

Figure 2 – The trajectory of iFood with the main events of its expansion

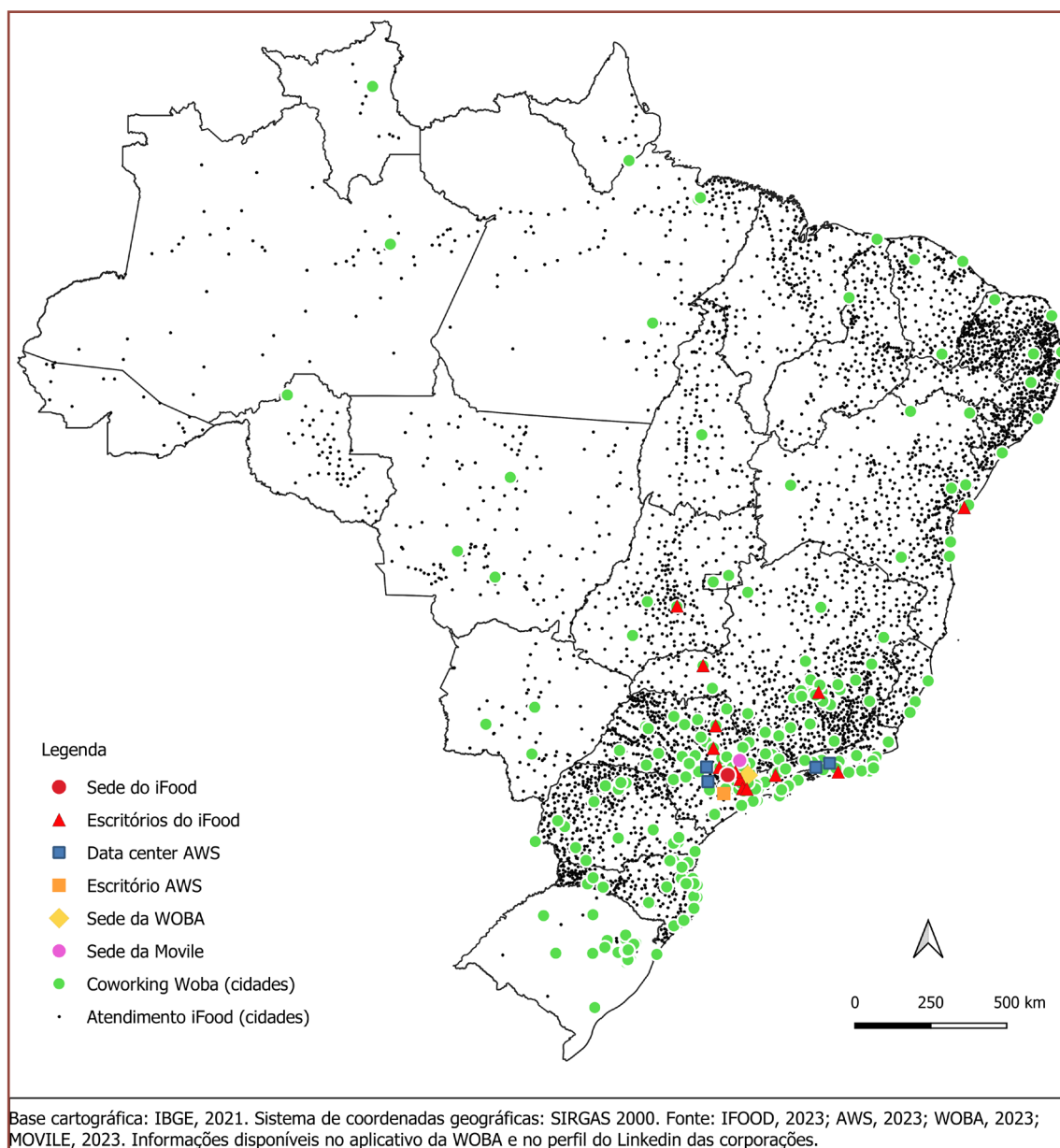


Source: Elaborated by Silvana Cristina da Silva from iFood data, 2024 (Cf. Unicórnios brasileiros..., 2023).

- 4 Movile is also of Brazilian origin (Campinas/SP) and is a group that invests and develops technology businesses in Latin American countries. It was created in 1998 by students at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) with public incentives (MOVILE, 2021). In 2008 it received investment from Naspers.
- 5 Naspers is a global company. One of the largest technology investors based in Cape Town, South Africa. It was founded in Stellenbosch, South Africa, and is listed on the Johannesburg and United States stock exchanges.

Figure 2 presents a summary of the main events in the expansion of iFood. We highlight the complexity of identifying who currently controls iFood, as, throughout the company's history, there have been many mergers, acquisitions and much investment. Such contributions reveal changes in the company's shareholding control, which are not always revealed to the public. Although iFood presents itself as being Brazilian, it is currently controlled by the Dutch group Prosus. This defines itself as a "global technology investor and operator", with global dominance by controlling the companies iFood, Delivery Hero, Swiggy, Flink, Foodics, Oda and Sharebite.

Figure 3 - iFood operations network in Brazilian territory

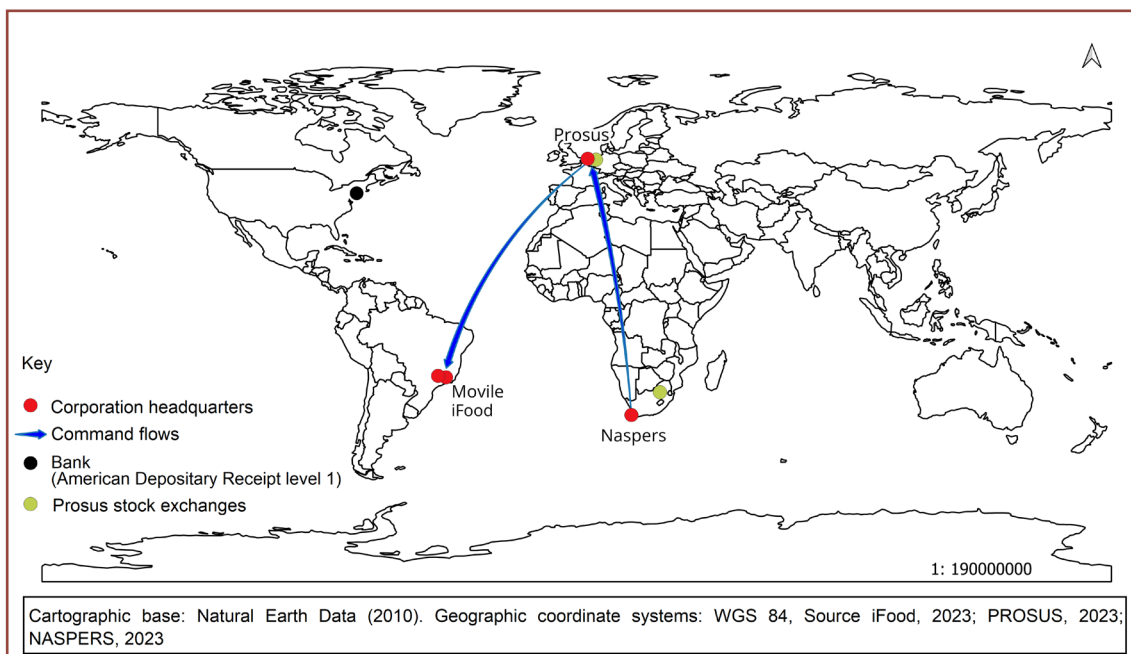


Source: Design: Authors; Elaboration: Nágila da Silva Ferreira Souza, 2023.

iFood's organizational structure reveals the agents involved and how places are mobilized to meet the company's demands and the interests of global investors. Thus, the corporation's operations involve offices of Naspers, Prosus and Movile, the offices of iFood, the AWS data center (Amazon's cloud computing services), businesses and services in urban space, offices registered with WOBA and at the base of this system the couriers. In addition, the company operates on social media networks (digital technosphere).

In Brazil, iFood has offices located in *Osasco* (corporate headquarters), *Belo Horizonte*, *Jundiaí*, *Ribeirão Preto*, *São Carlos*, *Uberlândia*, *Campinas*, *Rio de Janeiro*, *São Paulo*, *Goiânia*, *Piracicaba*, *Salvador* and *Taubaté* (Figure 3). The company entered into partnerships with Woba to use coworking spaces, with the aim of serving office employees. It joined the large corporation in the circuit of production of digital information using AWS services, in order to carry out its operations (Cf. ESTUDO..., 2018). iFood offices are mainly located in the Southeast Region. *São Paulo* has a large part of the fixed offices and is the iFood management center. Movile's corporate headquarters are located in the city of *São Paulo*. AWS data centers are in the states of *São Paulo* and *Rio de Janeiro*, but serve potential customers throughout Latin America.

Figure 4 - Origin of commands for iFood operations in Brazil



Source: Design: Authors; Elaboration: Nágila da Silva Ferreira Souza, 2023.

The organizational structure of iFood reveals its interaction with other global organizations of the information era and uses the national and global urban

network to carry out its operations (Figure 4). The offices mark the existence of platform companies. It is in these spaces that intentional planning occurs and global commands come out, controlling local orders. Through corporate headquarters and a presence on stock exchanges, we observe the strategic actions of iFood's controlling companies. Through these fixed locations and their actions, we identify the *geography of power* in the era of digitalization.

As indicated on the map in Figure 4, iFood's command and investment center is located in Amsterdam, the location of Prosus' headquarters and from where command and investment flows to Brazil – where the iFood company operates and the location of Movable headquarters (São Paulo). Prosus is a publicly traded internet and technology corporation on the Euronext stock exchange in Amsterdam and Johannesburg in South Africa, with a shareholder base in the USA (PROSUS, 2023b). It buys shares and invests in companies covering online consumer services involving businesses in the online classifieds, food delivery, payments and fintech and educational technology sectors, totaling 80 institutions. The corporation is present in almost 100 countries on five continents. It is interesting to note that in some segments of activity, Prosus has started to command local groups in countries such as Brazil, India, Romania, Poland and South Africa (Cf. THE..., 2023). Naspers is its majority owner, although the shareholding composition and financial flows between companies are opaque to the general public, being an increasingly striking feature of the financialization process.

Digitalization is connected to the process of financialization and economic concentration, which takes place on a global scale. Financial funds, digital platform managers, startup investors and technology companies are behind the acceleration of digitalization processes, enhancing oligopolization to levels unidentified in other segments (MORAES, 2020). However, it is important to remember that the *technical phenomenon* (Ellul, 1968 [1954]) is not new, but has gained other dimensions with the possibilities arising from the internet and the popularization of computers and smartphones in the last two decades (SADIN, 2015 [2013]) and the algorithmization of everyday life, due to the exploitation, on an industrial scale, of a mass of data, a kind of “continuous and expansive nuclear fission”, in which all kinds of information can be translated into monetary value (SADIN, 2015 [2013], 2018).

iFood is a platform company that enables the digitalization of delivery services with relationships based on the hyper-exploitation of labor. It introduced a new way of managing establishments made possible by the use of

an application. It promoted a new way of consumption that requires more territorial fluidity. Thus, we can say that this company composes and uses the technical-scientific-informational environment, as it uses the digital technosphere to produce a psychosphere that facilitates the extraction of data relating to consumers, as well as to capture establishments and adapt behaviors to their standards. It is linked to the economic interests of global agents and central countries, complexifying territorial relations beyond their action in Brazil. One of its acquisitions involved a company that became the largest in the field of artificial intelligence in Latin America, Hekima. It works with artificial intelligence, software development and big data combining machine learning techniques and behavioral sciences, and intends to master the understanding of “communication between technical objects and automation of processes” and “understanding of human psychology” for subscribing to iFood services (NOBRE et al., 2023, p. 203).

Thus, at the same time that iFood expanded its operations, it consolidated itself as an active agent in the process of digitalization in Brazil, with standards based on neoliberal rationality, globalizing itself through investment in global technology companies and investment funds. This was possible due to his direct action in the construction of the psychosphere of acceptance of this novelty.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE CREATION OF CONSENSUS: IFOOD AND NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITY

iFood expanded its operations in the country through the production of consensus on a demand produced by the pandemic, but also through insistent advertising and the conviction that deliveries via app would be the solution. Therefore, the psychosphere is an element that integrates the diffusion of digitalization.

During the period of the covid-19 pandemic, social relationships were intensely established in the digital environment. iFood used social media, the company’s website and app as corporate resources, in order to circulate its discourse to attract couriers, establishments and consumers and to educate all individuals within the digitalization process. Therefore, the marketing and advertising languages produced by the delivery platform are part of Brazil’s digital modernization.

In the era of digitalization, digital marketing emerges. Now, persuasion and convincing do not only occur through magazines, newspapers, television, radio,

but also through the digital psychosphere, which involves the entire apparatus of the social media network. Advertising platforms play an important role, as the more users they have, the greater the power of persuasion in digital media and, consequently, the greater the power of influence in the territory. Thus, the psychosphere is part of social reality that precisely facilitates and legitimizes the exploitation and domination of iFood, making products and foods appear accessible to everyone. However, this sphere ends up facilitating the action of platforms, privileging areas where the dominant classes are located. Furthermore, the psychosphere manages the rhythm of our lives and interferes in the dynamics of places, intended to accelerate the corporation's surplus value.

The discourse produced by iFood is constructed from the neoliberal rationality present in the company's own internal management policy. We identified that it disseminates neoliberal principles among office workers. The central idea used is intrapreneurship. This concept presents itself as a possibility of starting a career without owning the business (PAPO SOBREMESA, 2021⁶). The intrapreneurship communicates with what Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 149) call a *neoliberal subject*, "where the individual learns to conduct himself", as an *entrepreneur of the self*.

In terms of marketing, iFood's intention during the pandemic period (2020-2022) was to expand into the intra-urban space, attracting establishments and, above all, consumers. The delivery platform promised visibility to commercial locations, but all investment in marketing was aimed at promoting the corporation itself, that is, through advertisements it promoted its own platform, and not the registered restaurants. Thus, instead of purchasing directly at the point of sale, customers did so through the app, infiltrating the relationships of the local urban economy. There were several advertisements to attract establishments and consumers. The website's content aimed at businesses and services was made up of marketing based on promises, such as obtaining new customers, expanding the delivery area and increasing sales. With the urgency of physical distancing, because of the pandemic, platform companies emerged as saviors, fueling the hegemonization of the psychosphere of digital modernization.

In 2020, when the pandemic began, iFood used persuasion techniques with the aim of presenting itself as the only option in the face of physical

6 Papo Sobremesa is an iFood podcast that approaches topics such as technology, career and business by its employees to address the company's own operations.

isolation. The corporation used this event as a justification for consumers to join the delivery platform, establishing trust in this interaction using the rapport technique⁷ adapted for the digital environment. We observed that the objectives of its discourse were to establish trust with consumers, with the aim of making purchases through the app without worrying about the spread of the pandemic virus, SARS-CoV-2. Furthermore, the intention was to show concern for its delivery drivers, masking the highly tense relationships between the company and workers, who in 2020, organized several strikes to seek better working conditions. But the psychosphere is produced to be effective. That year the number of orders was 48 million, much higher than the previous year's 20 million. On the company's website, there was a page reserved just to talk about protection measures, but such information, in fact, was only intended to expand its operations in the territory and increase income extraction. There were few measures that were actually aimed at protecting delivery people and consumers⁸.

During the pandemic, iFood also used the theme "living" in advertisements. It used phrases like "shopping for groceries is this now"; "living is eating and ordering iFood"; "living is delivering". Furthermore, the company maintained its focus on physical distancing with the following themes: "the market comes to you", or "contactless delivery", or "with delivery, without contact", making the consumer disregard the risk of contamination caused by the delivery method. With this discourse, we realized that, in addition to encouraging individuals to consume, they intended to educate them on the process of digitizing urban life. We observed the company using the phrase "living is learning" in one of the promotional images, with the caption reproducing the idea of the iFood-customer connection, thus reinforcing consumption through the application.

In this way, the active role of iFood in the digitalization process is evident through the creation of a transformative consensus on the urban way of life. However, the impact of digitalization involves the production of a covert psychosphere that masks the relations of income extraction and hyper-exploitation of the courier's labor, seduced by the neoliberal psychosphere; the data

⁷ Rapport is a sales technique in which the salesperson creates a relationship of empathy, closeness and connection in communication to persuade the customer.

⁸ Information available at <https://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/entregadores-com-covid-19-enfrentam-abandono-de-apps-29062022/>.

collected on a large scale in the digital environment for greater influence over individuals; and above all, the prolonging and deepening of inequalities, materialized in the urban fabric. On the one hand, the hyper-precarious courier is convinced that he is not an employee of the platform and that it is up to him to achieve better earnings by being more “proactive” in deliveries. On the other hand, the application (the iFood platform) is a sophisticated system for capturing data from workers, consumers and establishments, which feeds the database managed by algorithms and artificial intelligence, programmed to expand the process of extracting income from the courier and places. Therefore, hyper-precariousness under the modern phenomenon of digitalization are not contradictory movements but rather part of the circuit of value production, now mediated by service platforms and root platforms. However, the action of digital platforms in places does not occur in an abstract way, nor are actions of modernization and creation of true job opportunities, according to the discourse. Below we analyze the concrete action of iFood in a city marked by socio-spatial inequalities, with the intention of highlighting that behind the algorithms and financial funds, there is the workforce that supports the system and a precarious urban space.

IFOOD IN CAMPOS DOS GOYTACAZES: DIGITALIZATION AND THE RENEWAL OF INEQUALITIES

Campos dos Goytacazes has a population of 483,551 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022) and can be considered a medium-sized city (SPOSITO, 2010), due to its regional influence and its intermediation function in the urban network between small and metropolitan cities (*Rio de Janeiro* and *Vitória*). It is located in the northern region of the state of *Rio de Janeiro*. It was founded in 1885 and its history is based on sugarcane activity and slavery related to sugarcane production.

At the end of the 19th century, the physical growth of the city was concentrated in the central area of *Campos*, while in the area comprising *Guarus* this growth dynamic was not observed (FARIA; VIEIRA, 2005, p. 13). Urban plans contributed to the structuring of unequal urban space (FARIA, 1998). Central areas had – and still have – priority in public interventions, while other neighborhoods belonging to the less affluent classes were not reached by services and infrastructure. Until the 1950s, the center was the only neighborhood with a concentration of shops and services in the city and, in the following years, restructuring occurred with the emergence of the *Pelinca* centralities, the *Jardim Carioca* neighborhood and the *Goytacazes* subdistrict. This structuring remains today (FÉRES, 2017, p. 26).

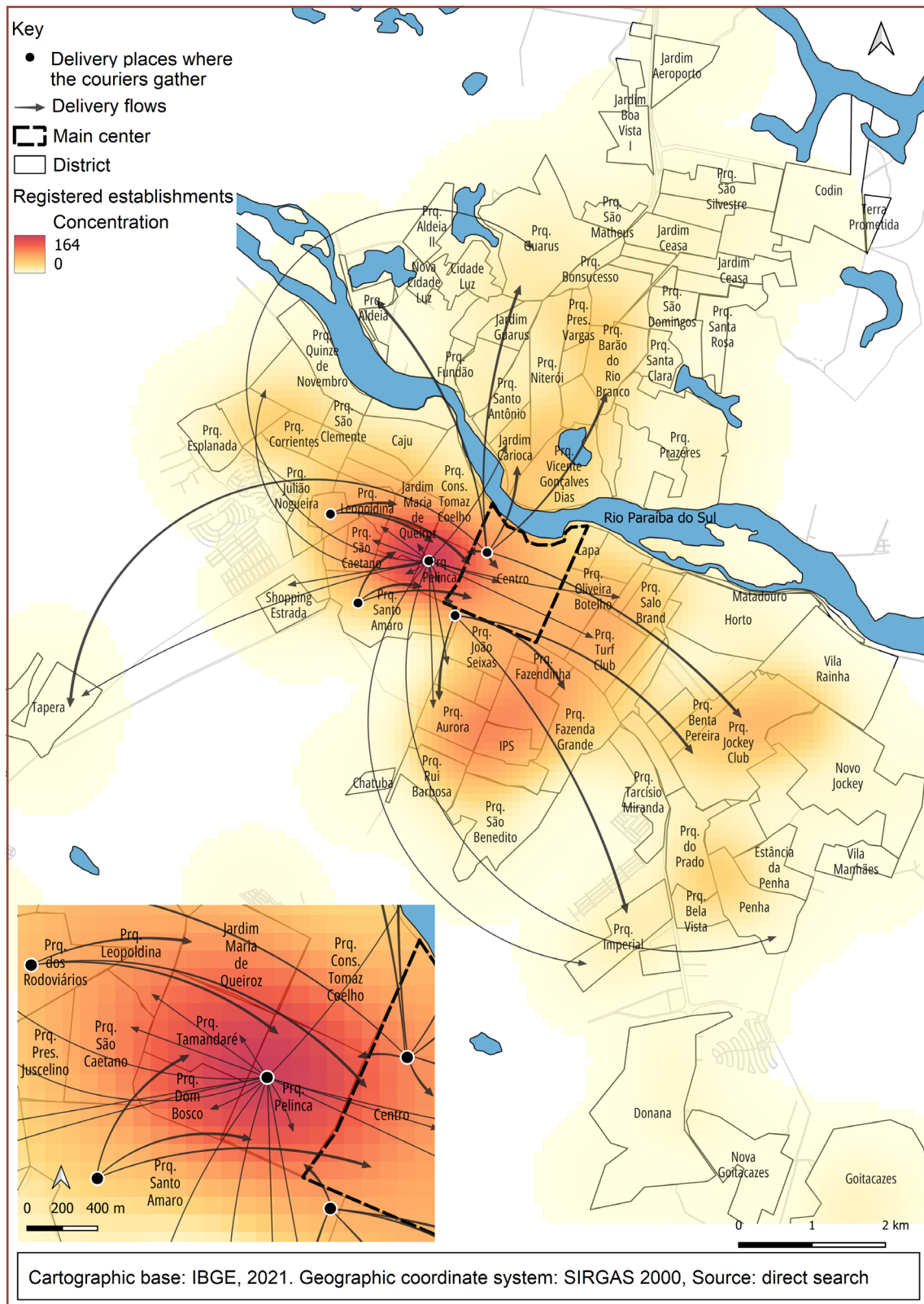
According to Sposito (1991, p. 5-6), centralities arise from the social division of space, characterized as a place of agglomeration of commerce and services that generate flows, in general, linked to different social levels and results in the structuring of cities (in a constant process of (re)structuring). In *Campos dos Goytacazes*, we identified 1,867 establishments that joined the delivery platform (in October 2022), and there is a logic of concentration corresponding to pre-existing centralities.

The municipality of *Campos* is made up of 14 districts. Its urban headquarters are located in the central district also known as *Campos dos Goytacazes*. It has four sub-districts, although our spatial outline only includes the center, *Guarus* and *Goytacazes* sub-districts, which comprise most of the urban area. In the center subdistrict, the highest incomes are concentrated in the neighborhoods *Parque Avenida Pelinca*, *Parque Tamandaré*, *Parque Conselheiro Tomás Coelho*, *Jardim Maria de Queiroz*, *Parque Dom Bosco* and *Flamboyant*, where the classes with the greatest purchasing power reside. In the *Guarus* subdistrict, there are neighborhoods with lower incomes. Only the *Santo Antônio* and *Jardim Carioca* neighborhoods have higher incomes. All of them are served by businesses and services from the center and the subcentralities of *Parque Avenida Pelinca*, *Jardim Carioca* and the *Goytacazes* subdistrict.

The historic center is the main center of the city and offers a wide range of businesses and services to cater mainly for the working classes. The *Jardim Carioca* and *Goytacazes* neighborhoods have shops and services also aimed at classes with lower purchasing power, but the former caters in particular to residents in the *Guarus* subdistrict, and the latter, residents of the neighborhoods of *Goytacazes*, *Tocos* and *Donana*. The businesses and services in *Parque Avenida Pelinca* are made up in particular of establishments aimed at high and medium income classes, mainly serving consumers who live in the neighborhoods close to it. It is in this structuring of the urban fabric that iFood acts most strongly (Figure 5).

According to the data analyzed, the first establishment in *Campos dos Goytacazes* registered on the platform was in 2017. Registration was not restricted to those located in the main center and sub-centers, but entered commercial points and residences in the neighborhoods. We observed the concentration of memberships in the *Pelinca* region, but some peripheral neighborhoods of low-income classes, such as *Penha*, *Jockey Club*, *Turf Club*, *Nova Brasília*, *Parque Aurora*, had a greater number of registered places of commercial activities and services compared to the rest of the neighborhoods. The only areas that

Figure 6 – Concentration of registered establishments with iFood in Campos dos Goytacazes – 2022



Source: Design: Authors; Elaboration: Nágila da Silva Ferreira Souza, 2023.

In the *Guarus* subdistrict, the concentration of the platform's businesses and services is located in the *Jardim Carioca*, *Parque Barão do Rio Branco*, *Parque Vicente Gonçalves Dias*, *Parque Presidente Vargas* and *Parque Alvorada* neighborhoods, where we find businesses and services along *Avenida Senador José Carlos Pereira Pinto*. This concentration loses its intensity further away from *Jardim Carioca* (Figure 6). The peripheral neighborhoods where the low-income classes reside do not have establishments registered in their subdistrict.

Although the registered establishments are distributed across several neighborhoods in the city's urban fabric, couriers are gathered in five areas: Center; *Parque Avenida Pelinca*; Shopping Boulevard, close to McDonald's; and the Carrefour hypermarket, that is, all close to the central neighborhoods where the highest concentration of income is found.

The situation of hyper-precarious delivery drivers experienced throughout the country is present in *Campos dos Goytacazes*. Workers find themselves in terrible working conditions and experience an urban way of life marked by scarcity, spending much of the day and night waiting to be called by the app – this waiting time is not counted as working hours. Furthermore, they are left waiting to receive delivery orders without a physical structure that takes a person's basic needs into account. Based on these conditions, workers move around the city, mainly for consumers living in central neighborhoods to benefit from their services.

Couriers' waiting points indicate the urban space used by them. These points indicate where there are stores registered with the *iFood Delivery Plan* and which neighborhoods use these services on the app. In this way, they are available to businesses in the historic center and the central areas of the *Parque Avenida Pelinca* neighborhoods; *Parque Tamandaré*; and *Parque dos Rodoviários*, where Boulevard Shopping is located. Under this plan, higher fees are charged to the establishments that use the services provided by couriers. Therefore, the sub centers of *Parque Jardim Carioca*, *Goytacazes* and other centralities in peripheral neighborhoods do not adhere to the plan – which offers deliveries made by workers registered on the application as an option. This occurs because these sales locations in peripheral neighborhoods serve a lower income segment. Using the plan would result in this service becoming more expensive for businesses and consumers in these areas.

Thus, we observe the selective way in which *iFood* delivery services are consumed, revealing segregation and inequality in the urban space. This fact occurs because this delivery platform causes and allows differentiated ac-

cess to these centralities in *Campos dos Goytacazes*. People who buy products or services do not receive the same form of treatment as registered commercial establishments, especially the population residing in the *Guarus* subdistrict, who do not have access to certain types of delivery services, such as the iFood Delivery Plan, that increases the price of products.

The high-income classes are served by all those who are registered and have couriers close to their homes. Urban fragmentation is thus revealed, highlighting the urban segregation produced by the technical-scientific-hyperinformational environment through the differentiated access to the city promoted by digital platforms.

Although the company makes it possible, through the application, to purchase products and food in different neighborhoods – expanding the radius of action of the shops –, the spatial configuration of its operations indicates that the poor in the outskirts do not take advantage of all of the platform's services. Therefore, each consumer is satisfied by a specific layer of establishments; in other words, according to the centralities and social layers it serves, we can see that segregation and social inequalities and access to the city itself – which already exist – are reinforced by digitalization.

When analyzing the movement of workers, we can observe that the majority of deliveries made by them are in the center, *Parque Tamandaré* and *Parque Avenida Pelinca* neighborhoods. The few retail purchases in *Parque Avenida Pelinca* made by less affluent consumers – who live in more distant neighborhoods – involve more affordable products.

The delivery route originating in *Parque Avenida Pelinca* shows greater movement towards the neighborhoods of the central subdistrict, while, towards the *Guarus* subdistrict, only towards the *Jardim Carioca* and *Parque Guarus* neighborhoods. The *Goytacazes* subdistrict does not have a flow of delivery people for products purchased at *Parque Avenida Pelinca* establishments through the app. Thus, the sequence of information and delivery people not associated with iFood is concentrated only among businesses and services in this area and the neighborhoods they serve. We can say that, in the digital era, delivery platforms operate according to pre-existing centralities. In other words, access to the city's businesses and services is differentiated by the platform's action, reaffirming the fragmentation, segregation and inequalities of urban space.

In this way, the company enables new flows of information throughout the urban fabric, due to the unprecedented form of consumption and management of establishments provided by the algorithmic management of urban

space. This is the corporate and algorithmic management of the territory implemented in cities as addressed by Tozi (2021) . However, we emphasize that the algorithm is not neutral, the flows corresponding to the interests of the highest income and most powerful classes in cities. The intermediation of circulation in the city is based on the collection of information from the platform itself, such as a sensor that identifies places with potential income (consumer profile) and the availability of establishments, according to the identified demand. Based on this information, the algorithm connects couriers and guides to the fastest and most profitable routes.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

iFood is a corporation that actively participates in the digitalization process in Brazil and reveals how value production circuits currently tend to be global and mediated by platforms managed by financial funds. This implies the voracious extraction of income from cities.

The covid-19 pandemic was the accelerating event for digitalization. Therefore, we ask: How do digital platforms renew the urban fabric of cities? Our objective was to understand the expansion of this platform in Brazil in the period from 2020 to 2022, taking as a reference the geographical situation of *Campos dos Goytacazes*. Based on the research carried out, we can make some conclusions.

iFood – by introducing a new way of consumption and management of establishments through the use of its application, especially during the pandemic – is an active agent in the digitalization process in Brazil, promoting the digital intermediation of delivery services and the urban economy. This action took place and continues to take place through the use of digital marketing as an instrument for creating consensus. In other words, it acted and still acts in the formation of a psychosphere in tune with neoliberal rationality, aimed at workers as well as city dwellers, in order to absorb the new way of accessing food business in cities. It is this system of values that supports the process of capital accumulation. It authorizes platformization without limits and without regulations to protect workers. A worker who understands himself as an entrepreneur and a more than perfect consumer, united by an application that provides food, produced by other workers, where each of these agents transfers income to global investors, that are increasingly difficult to identify, is due in part to the promoting of a perverse logic that highlights the benefits of digitalization and hides exploitative relationships. In this sense, the psychosphere is relevant to illuminate this process.

This delivery platform is linked to the economic interests of global agents, allowing the intensification of capital transfer to the company's strategic centers: the United States, the Netherlands and South Africa. In this way, the management nodes constitute action networks of actors hegemonic entities that adapt local behaviors of digitalization. In view of this, the State becomes extremely important in the digital era by regulating the actions of platforms at all scales. Information and financial flows are averse to regulations that prevent them from entering places, but at the same time they demand regulations favorable to these flows. Labor deregulations, regulations on the actions of workers and the erosion of municipal laws are some aspects of the need for the state to be in tune with large digital platforms.

Furthermore, we noted the importance of some cities on a global scale in the management of iFood (its controllers Prosus and Naspers), as well as the southeast region of Brazil where the companies' corporate offices are located, especially in São Paulo. Therefore, despite digitalization, its performance depends on the urban hierarchy for action and management. In this way, centralities are maintained even in the face of the imposition of global orders.

Information flows are intensified in urban space in the digital era, but they make use of the pre-existing urban fabric without changing the territorial structure. We identified that iFood operates in the city of *Campos dos Goytacazes* in accordance with historically materialized centralities. These, in turn, reveal urban social stratification and inequalities in access to goods and services in the city. We found that *Guarus* is underprivileged in relation to the service offered by the platform. Therefore, digitalization renews inequalities, even with a convincing discourse about its benefits.

Therefore, we did not observe structural changes in the urban fabric in *Campos dos Goytacazes* regarding its functions. There was the insertion and intensification of information flows through iFood. However, historically materialized centralities were renewed, as well as spatial inequalities. In this article we present some aspects of the phenomenon of the expansion of digital platforms. However, we recognize the need for further theoretical and empirical studies. ●

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