

Gig Economy: Construction vs Reality

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Looking at the dominant labour processes of a society can reveal a lot more than just an insight into the world of work, it can often tell us about the values and ideologies of that society. After the crisis of Fordism we saw a transition to a post-Fordist approach to work which incorporated features such as flexible specialization (Piore & Sable, 1984), incorporation of new technology and ICTs and re-demand for skilled workers and as a result it was seen as best fit for an increasingly consumer society. However, these processes are not just confined to work they are an ideology, post-Fordism is an ideology that is influenced by neoliberal capitalist principles in the sense that it is presented to us as beneficial for society in its entirety when in reality it is beneficial to those at the top.



In this short essay, my aim is to present the idea that the rising 'gig economy' has become a byproduct of post-Fordism in the sense that it has all the principles of the production process but is not a solution for the failings of Fordism, it is instead a way to implement neoliberal ideologies into daily lives by constructing it as a positive entrepreneurial experience distracting attention away from the reality. This will be achieved by applying a critique of the following themes; post-Fordism, risk, the rise of new technologies and a link to neoliberalism.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, there was a move towards a mass production process of homogenised goods through the management of scientific principles and what we know as Fordism. Its aim was to make the division of labor more efficient and cost effective to increase profits, it saw the development of the assembly line, fragmentation of work and standardisation of tasks to achieve this. However, Fordism according to Gramsci (1971) was a new way of life that affected not just the work environment, but every aspect of workers lives.

It came to be seen as a way of regulating society and came to be in crisis through 'the alienating conditions associated with such a production method, took a heavy toll on employee moral' (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 259). Workers no longer had a

connection to the goods they were producing which became counterproductive and the increase in more sophisticated consumers meant that Fordism was too inflexible to cope with the fluctuations in demand. The long term solution for this came in the form of post-Fordism, the aim being 'to do away with the assembly line, to increase the skill levels and flexibility of the workforce' (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 260) and with such a clear shift to a consumer centered society post-Fordism was seen as the right fit as it puts the consumer at the centre of production.

This new production process remains a new way of life just as Fordism was however the difference is that it's flaws are not so visible as it is beneficial to some to keep it this way. post-Fordism is concealing hidden regulation for a specific group of workers that we have come to know as the gig economy, by deconstructing the principles applied to the gig economy they are similar to that of post-Fordism however instead of being the solution it promised this new trend of work is becoming toxic (Aloisi, 2016). This exploration is unquestioned because the discourse surrounding it idealises creative workers which has become a tool for imposing precocity or concealing labor exploitation (Moore, 2015) and as a result the gig economy has become the underbelly of post-Fordism.

Statistical data on the gig economy is lacking as it is a recent trend that is on the rise, however, a picture is being painted around the challenges that gig workers face and this



should no longer be overlooked (Stewart, 2017). It should also not be dismissed in terms of its connection to the broader phenomena of the casualisation of work (Stefano, 2015) and the growing use of new technologies. Both principles are clear characterisations of the post-Fordist era so therefore the gig economy and post-Fordism should not be discussed separately.

The gig economy is enabled largely using ICTs in order to be able to handle the demand and supply of services at efficient and high speeds, it uses humans-as-a-service (Irani and Silberman, 2013) to cope with the fluctuation of demand from consumers which is one of the main principles of post-Fordism. This on demand labor comes hand in hand with flexible working hours and is thus presented

as one of the benefits of working in the gig economy, as we are told it can fit in alongside other forms of employment as and when it is convenient.

However, in reality, virtual is starting to be synonymous with exploitable (Aloisi, 2016) as the implementation of ICTs is only beneficial to the consumer and the companies because these online platforms and digital transfers isolate workers and allow the regulation of their work (Stewart, 2017). Beck calls this transformation 'Digitalisation' (Beck, 2000) whereby those working with new technologies 'are simultaneously at work and at home, isolated yet working with and for others' (Beck, 1999: 74) which suggests that this type of work affects all aspects of their lives whilst feeling isolated and unsure of their rights.

Providing the workers with apps allows companies like Uber to deflect its status of being an 'employer' as according to Uber they are 'simply providing them with information and payments technology' (Stewart, 2017: 424) and it is the drivers who are providing the transportation service. By disregarding themselves as employers they do not have to meet the obligations set out by the Fair Work Act 2009 as these only apply to employees, it includes provisions around limits of work, minimum wage and protection of unfair dismissal which gig workers all feel the brunt of.

The way in which we label this trend is important, as it is these labels that influence policies and strategies and this new digital economy has been given a variety of names to imply positive attributes (Kenny & Zysman, 2015) and as a result has allowed company profits to soar because this increasing use of new technologies is allowing them to cut

protection costs by outsourcing and offshoring the workforce (Aloisi, 2016).

This deregulation comes full circle to principles related to neoliberalism which is an individualising ideology that creates the view that what you achieve in life is often down to the individual and not any cultural or social factors. As a result of its individualising nature, deregulation and austerity often go unquestioned, these principles again cannot be separated from the gig economy as workers are individualised through their precarious work which is being ignored by labelling them 'independent contractors' to give the illusion it is a positive experience.

Neoliberal capitalism is about profit for those at the top. By presenting post-Fordism as a solution, it has allowed the gig economy to rise and become a justification of increasing profits by cutting labor and social protection expenses whilst still holding an elevated level of control over the workers, causing Moore (2015: 2782) to argue that 'neoliberalism in its most advanced form because a society of control'.

The exploitation of the labor in the gig economy starts with this illusion of freedom and work empowerment, those in the gig economy are seen as having the privilege of independence and are often described as 'self-employed' or 'independent contractors' which is used as a rose-tinted euphemism to make this type of work seem exciting and autonomous (Stewart, 2017). However, in reality, the only autonomy workers may have is the decision of when to log into the app because, arguably, once they are plugged in, it becomes hard to unplug and the workers are subject to hidden exploitation and regulation as 'time spent on the platform is a key issue for their daily compensation or the purpose of the internal ranking' (Aloisi, 2016: 662).

It is constructed as a flexible job where you can log in for an hour on your way home and potentially earn some extra money, however, it is often the case that workers have to put in more hours every day than a standard form of employment; they are traced through GPS, they are limited to a certain age make and model of vehicle, their music played during journeys is dictated and tracked through the use of ICTs and if ratings drop below 4.6 out of 5 their account can be deactivated (Sanders & Pattison, 2016). This contradicts the idea that they have freedom and empowerment and it also puts workers in a constant feeling of

probation which can result in feelings of instability and precariousness (Aloisi, 2016).

Having workers on these casual contracts and being labelled 'independent contractors' is

beneficial to businesses like Uber as it means the worker bears the majority of the risk as they provide all of the necessary equipment, usually monetise what they already own, have to deal with platform issues during service, have to face unstable income and fear the deactivation of the service which heightens this vulnerability they face (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

In conclusion, this reflection has tried to demonstrate how we are not living in a utopian state of low unemployment, recorded at 4.2% in July 2017, but a dystopia of sham self-employment and disguised inequality (Kenny & Zysman, 2015) justified by the solution of post-Fordism. The construction that the rising gig economy is full of entrepreneurs who treasure their casual work schedules is conflicted with the reality that they are extremely precarious workers repackaged as self-employed to shift the risk and responsibility away from companies.



It has become a race to the bottom where the tools we used to fix one crisis are turning on us which governments and corporations do not want us to know. Classifying workers as self-employed is becoming a favoured business practice (Stefano, 2015) as it increases their profits whilst avoiding criticism. post-Fordism has become another way to implement neoliberal policies into daily lives, constructed to us as a new flood of entrepreneurial opportunities it is hiding the truth that these disruptions are destroying the security of employment and that the gig economy has become the dark side of post-Fordism which has allowed neoliberal capitalism to break down another barrier in its way of control.

These ideologies are powerful forces and are hard to resist however it is important that the veil of positivity is lifted on this topic (Aloisi, 2016) as neoliberalism aims to have "a mirage of a smoothed-over, stable life under perfect control" (Rolnik, 2011: 28) and the gig economy is an example of this. post-Fordism and its principles, the gig economy and neoliberalism cannot be separated from each other despite those at the top wanting us to think they are.

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