Book Review: The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction by Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham

In **The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction***,* **Jamie Woodcock** *and* **Mark Graham** *unpack the 'how' of the gig economy through quantative datasets and ethnographic vignettes from countries including the UK, Ghana, South Africa and India. As the study doubles up as a manifesto for the gig economy's reconstruction, this is an important contribution to the existing literature that provides an excellent summary of existing research and builds on it using extensive fieldwork, writes* **Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi***.*

The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction. **Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham. Polity. 2019.**

Centring the Human

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into stark relief the role that 'essential workers' play in the everyday sustenance of the global economy. Warehouse workers, delivery personnel and taxi drivers, who were until a few months ago often perceived as doing nothing more than *just another low-skilled job*, have now been reclassified as 'essential', highlighting the importance of what they do to keep our lives going. Under the ambit of the 'gig economy', firms classify this workforce as 'freelancers', 'independent contractors' or 'temporary workers' and hire them on short-term contracts and at low pay.

Published perhaps fittingly just as the COVID-19 crisis is believed to have begun in November 2019, Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham's *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction* unpacks the *how* of the gig economy, and doubles up as a manifesto for its reconstruction. Earlier scholarship heralded this shift in employment and the structure of firms as the rise of the sharing economy, and offered blueprints for how individuals can take advantage of this digital platform-based market. Recent work has pushed back against techno-determinism-driven claims: Alex Rosenblat's *UberLand*, Callum Cant's *Riding for Deliveroo* and Alexandrea J. Ravenelle's *Hustle and Gig* show the precarious nature of this work in the US and the UK. Woodcock and Graham make an important contribution by providing an excellent summary of existing research, and build on it using their own extensive fieldwork. Taking a mixed methods approach, they use quantitative datasets and ethnographic vignettes from across the UK, Ghana, South Africa, India and other countries in the Global South, to provide a global story of workers in the gig economy.
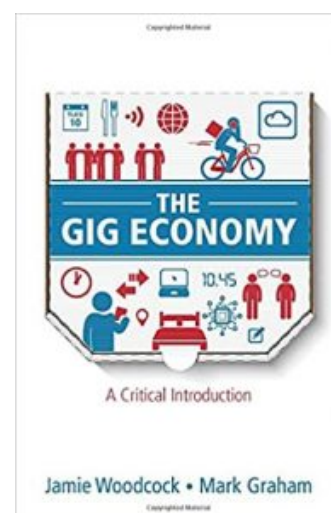
In Chapter One, 'Where did the gig economy come from?', the authors identify the factors that led to the emergence of the gig economy. Digital infrastructures like widespread internet access and GPS have allowed firms to build their two-sided marketplaces. Socially, consumer preference for on-demand services has increased. On the political economy front, neoliberal government regulation has successively favoured corporations over workers' rights, and a steady decline in worker power and protections around the world. These conditions have enabled the emergence of large corporations like Uber, which ostensibly provides cab services without owning cars or employing drivers.

Chapter Two, 'How does the gig economy work?', focuses on the two kinds of work enabled by platform companies. The first is cloud work: work that can be done from anywhere as long as one has access to an internet-enabled device. Transcription, product cataloguing and website design offered by Amazon mTurk and Fiverr are examples of cloud work. The second is geographically-tethered work, where information is received typically through a phone interface but needs to be completed in a fixed place: for instance, ride hailing, food delivery and home services through Uber and Deliveroo.

For work located in specific places, workers have no idea if a particular ride or delivery task they undertake will be profitable. A customer on a cloudwork platform like Fiverr can post a task from London, and a group of workers from around the world bid against each other. This ultimately drives prices down on the platform, often below minimum wage in the countries in which workers are located. In both cases:

> the platform has therefore become a new organizational form, stepping in as an intermediary in increasingly broader kinds of work, collecting both data and a cut of the payments made for services.

The strongest chapters of the book bring to the fore stories of workers, and the strategies they have used so far in resisting the control the platforms exercise over them. The reality of working on these platforms is a far cry from the success stories and aggregate numbers that are put out by the public relations wings of companies. Workers do value aspects of flexibility, and are willing to work because having *any* job is better than having no job, but the conditions under which they work are opaque, heavily skewed in favour of customers and with very few routes to effective redress.

Complaints are plenty about online workers not getting their pay because of customer dissatisfaction, or platforms unilaterally changing the payment and incentive structures. In each of these cases, the 'independent contractor' status means that collectivising, such as by forming unions, is often difficult, and in some countries, even illegal. Unlike the factory or the dock, where a physical picket line was the place of solidarity, the dispersed (across the world, or even within a city) nature of the gig economy means that resisting together remains a challenge.

> When workers become numbers that are graphed or plotted, their agency – whether collective or individual – fades into the background. The gig economy thereby risks being understood as something that is done to workers, rather than something they engage with, create and produce, in different ways.

However, the authors see hope in the acts of resistance displayed by workers. Large Facebook and WhatsApp groups to talk about work strategies and even share frustrated memes, discussions outside restaurants as they wait to pick up their orders, mass co-ordinated log-offs and large-scale strikes in cities show that the scope and sites for solidarity and action do exist. The authors cite Turkopticon, a platform where Amazon mTurkers can review and rate their experiences with particular job requesters, as a means for workers to gain greater say over how their work is shaped.

The book concludes with an imagination of a better future for gig workers. Through a combination of regulatory interventions, consumer pressure and better worker representation, the authors propose four key pathways for improving the gig economy. The first is increased transparency in the workings of algorithmic and financial practices. The second is accountability, by acknowledging that these firms do not just connect customers and workers but also control the working days and nights of their 'independent' workforce; as a result, there is an imperative to improve working conditions. The third is enhancing the power of workers by creating access to unions and enabling workers to bargain collectively. Finally, the gig economy needs to encourage collectively-owned and run platform cooperatives.

The global scope of the book means that nuances of individual countries' trajectories are not prioritised. In its focus on the commonalities of gig workers' experiences and struggles across ten countries, however, the book serves as an important starting point for readers interested in debates around the future of work and types of workers. As a number of countries continue to be under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, gig worker-powered ecommerce and food delivery firms have seen a rise in demand for their services. Yet, it is the workers who are benefitting the least from this – continuing to earn low wages while risking exposure to the virus.

In response to COVID-19, several firms have announced relief funds, temporary loan provisions and insurance measures to protect the gig workers they engage through their platforms. However, past experience shows us that trusting these firms will do the right thing by their workers is naivety. With increased surveillance measures on workers and contactless deliveries being marketed as the safest option for customers, it is crucial that we put empathy first and start a 'movement that help[s] users, consumers, clients and platforms perceive the moral responsibility that they have for the livelihoods of workers'.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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