

The promises of the sharing economy and the dark side of platform capitalism

Challenges and opportunities for workers' representation

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Juliet Schor, *After the Gig: How the Sharing economy Got Hijacked and how to Win it Back*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2021.

Julieta Haidar, Maarten Keune (Eds.), *Work and Labour Relations in Global Platform Capitalism*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021.

Antony Forsyth, *The Future of Unions and Worker Representation: The Digital Picket Line*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

1. Introduction

The term «platform economy» refers to a variegated set of businesses that provide digital operational basis for other companies, to deliver services, sell products or connect individuals both online and offline. It includes global corporations such as Amazon, Alibaba, Airbnb, Alphabet, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, Uber, Deliveroo. Their disruptive innovation has been of such a magnitude that several authors speak of «platform capitalism» (see Armano *et al.* 2017; Srnicek 2017; Vallas 2019; van Doorn 2018) to indicate a renewed global capitalism based on casual or neglected work through digital platforms, in an almost total absence of rights. One of the core activities of platform capitalism is the collection, processing and valorisation of massive amounts of data through digital infrastructures. The logics of value extraction in this context have structural repercussions on territories and people, as well as on the organisation of work and the distribution of wealth, posing relevant challenges for collective actors representing platform workers (Arcidiacono *et al.* 2019).

This critical note considers three books, very different in approach and structure, which look at platform economy and digital environment from complementary perspectives, drawing historical trajectories and considering the variety of actors involved in the platform economy.

Taken together, the three volumes explore the changing landscape of platform economy, drill down to reveal its ideological and material roots and outline possible actions to shape it, at least partially, in the future.

2. *Exploring the Landscape: Past, Present, and Future of the platform economy from the ashes of the sharing culture*

Through an effective and accessible writing, *After the gig* allows readers to retrace the parable of the sharing economy from its origins to present, imagining a possible future able of redeeming the broken promises.

The volume, based on a study conducted in the Boston area, combines semi-structured interviews, ethnography, demographic surveys, producing a wide range of data (collected from 2011 to 2017) able to shed light on the multifaceted and fast-evolving context of platform economy. The value of a multi-methodological approach is coupled with the equally relevant choice to consider both profit (lodging, car rental, errands, delivery, and ride-hailing) and non-profit platforms (time bank, food swap and open learning) with different purposes and business models. This provides an articulated view of the intrinsic variety of the platform economy as an original proposal to change the rules of the capitalist game and partially counterbalance it. In particular, Schor emphasises how – from the very beginning – the sharing economy has developed on the idea of being more than a new way of doing business by claiming the aim of bringing the human being back at the centre of the economic model. Numerous interview excerpts quoted suggest the entrenchment and spread of such humanising expectations, combined with increasingly refined user strategies to optimise incomes and maintain a decent lifestyle. These factors observed at micro level show the roots of the sharing economy in both the cyberutopian counterculture (Turner 2021) and the neo-liberal and technocratic Californian ideology (Barbrook, Cameron 1996; Uluorta, Quill 2022). The long wave of such ideologies and, more importantly, their entanglement provided fertile ground for the emergence of service platforms in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis. While the perspective of the other two books here considered leaves no doubt as to the extractive nature of platform capitalism, Schor's book dwells on the betrayed emancipatory potential of the sharing economy.

This volume has the merit of overcoming simplifying dichotomies such as good or bad jobs, by refining the analysis of working conditions in different platforms and the variety of experiences shared by interviewees in the same platform over time. One of the most relevant findings pertains how power relations between platforms and workers take shape according to the degree of economic dependence of platform

workers. When workers are not economically dependent because of other sources of income, they instead have an actual capacity to assess when and how much to work. In fact, they are more likely to decide to change platform if earnings are not in line with their expectations or tasks do not fit their skills. This is the experience of Juan Romero (MA in accounting) - quoted in the book - who started with low-skilled jobs on the platform Taskrabbit after the 2008 global financial crash, then switched to other online tasks (such as accounting, virtual assistant work, translation, stenography), hiring also a virtual assistant in the Philippines for the most boring and repetitive ones. This and other examples show platform workers' individual strategies based on the ideology of an entrepreneurial self, also treated by Haidar and Keune's book here discussed. In contrast, worse working conditions and remuneration characterise the experience of those who are economically dependent on platform work.

After the Gig shows how the original intentions of the sharing economy (empowering individuals in self-employment, building social relations through exchange) have gradually vanished. Most of the non-profit platforms for community sharing (e.g.: time banks, social eating apps, land sharing, and food swapping apps) have disappeared, while still leaving an important sign of what the sharing economy could potentially become in the future. This is the main message of the author, who, however, argues that pure utilitarianism has overcome the social dimension of the origins by reproducing – as described in the case of Air B&B and Taskrabbit – discriminatory factors against ethnic minorities owners and customers. The book's concluding question – how can we revive the original tension of the sharing economy for a paradigm shift in capitalism? – seems to find its answer in three forces that can shape the platforms' environment overcoming its techno-deterministic and ultra-capitalistic version: state regulation, democratic sharing, and platform cooperativism.

Regulatory attempts have certainly emerged, albeit with great delay, in several countries, particularly in the European area. A tangible sign is the European directive on platform work recently promoted (see De Stefano 2022). Specific platforms, such as Uber, generated significant resistance from national taxi organisations, national and local governments, and public opinion. Despite this, the resilience of platforms, able to circumvent obstacles of national and local regulation also through aggressive lobbying, has clearly come to light, confirming the state of exception (ratified by the Telecommunications Act 1996) that allowed platforms to grow without an effective regulative framework in the US. The second driver of change mentioned – which in current times seems more a desire than a trend – is a strong development of the democratic sharing through renewed cyberutopianism in view of long-term sustainability centred on social relations. Finally, the third force

discussed is the so-called platform cooperativism (Scholz 2016), based on democratic principles, redistribution of profits, open-source software, and sustainable strategies for all actors involved. Schor presents many examples in specific contexts, which show vitality and inventiveness: Up and Go for housecleaners (New York City), Green Taxi (Denver), Shift for couriers (Vancouver), NursesCan (California), Fora do Eixo for Brazilian artists. The potential for replicability is certainly there and, as the author argues, issues of scale are easier to address than in traditional cooperatives. However, there are several dilemmas that platform cooperativism has to face. One of these, for instance, is the competition in attracting consumers who, if not motivated by ethical reasons, look at the market considering purely individual advantages. Another issue is the competition with players in dominant market positions, therefore with greater possibilities and strategic capabilities.

More generally, according to Schor, alternative developments of the platform economy are possible, ranging from the most reformist to the most radical ones, including digital commons as a way to democratize digitalisation processes through open-source options. The still unanswered question is how to implement, in Schor's words, the «collaborative revolution» that was at the origins of the sharing economy but has been lost along its evolution, and more concretely, how to foster strong emancipatory impulses independently from mere logics of social distinction in consumption.

3. *Core drilling the landscape: dynamics, power relations, promises and exploitation*

If Schor's book outlines an ever-changing landscape shaped by digital platforms lingering on original emancipatory potential of the sharing economy, Haidar and Keune's edited book delves into platforms' ideological roots and the exploiting materiality they generate by shaping subjects and the society at large. The book unveils the roots of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) in a timely and well-argued manner and analyses its pervasiveness. Divided in three parts, it first tackles the challenges of platform capitalism, conceived as the shaping force that commodify labour and extract value from big data. Second, the book explores the effects that labour platforms generate on territories, considering in particular the reproduction of the gap between the Global North and the Global South, exacerbating the commodification of labour. Third, it analyses power dynamics and forms of resistance shaped by collective subjects in a context that still needs effective regulation on a global scale.

The starting point from which the book moves goes straight to the heart of the debate on platforms by proposing a quite different

understanding compared to the one suggested by Schor. Platforms emerge as the new frontier, the vanguard of what we can define the updated version of the New Spirit of Capitalism (Boltanski, Chiapello 1999), and the volume has the ability to analyse the main innovations while at the same time highlighting the continuities with traditional forms of capitalism.

Srnicek (Chap. 1) and Zukerfeld (Chap. 2), from different and complementary perspectives, renovate the debate on the process of value appropriation (mainly through rents) and exploitation-based value creation in the platform economy (Fuchs 2014; van Doorn, Badger 2020), taking advantage, in both cases, of a grey area where regulation is weak, or does not exist at all. This seems the logical evolution of new economic actors, who suddenly become monopolists or aspire to become so.

The emergence of digital platforms is also described as the result of trends toward the financialisation of the economy, which accelerated after the global crisis in 2008. Indeed, digital platforms have benefited from a deregulation process that favoured investments in companies with high earning potential. In this respect, corporations that govern digital platforms, with their lightweight structure and their ability to settle, adapt and relocate to different countries all over the world, quickly became an attractive investment for future earnings. Even today, however, the dilemma concerns the real productivity of the huge flows of money invested in platforms. Several authors, including Srnicek in this volume, point out that the emergence of platforms in the so-called Global North has not resulted into increased economic growth. It is not so clear and evident whether this will be the case in the near future or whether, on the contrary, the huge investments in digital platforms will drain resources from the production system, thus curbing growth.

Moving beyond the technocratic narrative that describes digital platforms as meritocratic and democratic because they offer access to work even in territories with few opportunities, the second part of the volume focuses on the effects that platform work generates in both Global North and Global South (Berg and Rani – chap. 4; Lehdon-virta, Hjorth, Barnard and Graham – chap. 5; Leung, D’Cruz and Noronha – chap. 6). Evidence shows how digital platforms reproduce and accentuate the imbalance of power relations between rich and poor countries; the latter having only the possibility to respond, with their own workforce, to the needs of the dominant countries. This situation evokes dynamics of a digital colonialism as a promising new frontier for future research on the global division of labour. In the platform economy, the competition between workers become global and the logic of a real-time reaction to job offers results in work organisation and time schedules tailored to the needs of clients in the Global North.

In addition, platform workers in the Global South, compared to their colleagues in the Global North, are more dependent on platform-mediated job offers and this, as also demonstrated by Schor in *After the Gig*, results in a lower bargaining power. While this situation nevertheless generates job opportunities in contexts where alternatives are less attractive or even absent, at the same time earnings converted into purchasing power parity – as Berg and Rani discuss (chap. 4) – are lower than those of platform workers in the Global North. This aspect, as Haidar and Keune point out in the introduction, is combined with the marked tendency of platforms to circumvent labour regulations, increasing unprotected and untaxed informal labour, especially in the Global South. Moreover, structural characteristics of digital platforms foster processes of commodification of labour (Marčeta, chap. 3) further weakening the welfare system of the Global North, already severely undermined by the neoliberal policies initiated in the 1980s.

Another key aspect of the volume edited by Haidar and Keune concerns the subjectivising power that platforms wield over workers. The introduction of the book offers a wide and detailed overview of the ideological pervasiveness of the autonomous entrepreneurial self (Foucault 2008, ed. or. 1979) in platform work. It reproduces docile performance-oriented bodies willing to assume the business risk that should burden on platforms. Such a Foucauldian «dispositif» legitimise the labour process and create significant obstacles to collective approaches to platform work. As Leung and colleagues (chap. 6) show, the entrepreneurial self, which underlies the motivational aspects of platform workers, embraced especially by middle-class young people, pervades the approach to platform work in China and India. This change introduces a culture of exploitation and individualism borrowed from the West, shifting – in the case of India – from workplaces based on a feudalist ethos to workplaces soaked in a neoliberal spirit of self-realisation and entrepreneurialism.

The last central issue, also strictly connected with Forsyth's book here considered, concerns possible forms of resistance to platform despotism. The chapters devoted to this topic mobilise different theoretical perspectives. Joyce and Stuart (chap. 7), in the wake of labour process theory, frame three levels of resistance to the pervasive control system of digital platforms. The first is at the micro level and concerns individual resistance; the second is related to informal collective actions; the third one pertains instead structured actions organised by unions and/or other workers' organisations. Unions and different repertoires of actions are the focus of Arias' chapter too (chap. 8), while Vandaele (chap. 9) approaches platform workers' representation from a power resource theory perspective. In particular, he shows how collective representation is shaped by two opposite and complementary logics: the logic-of-membership, focused on worker organisation, and the

logic-of-influence, if responses are rooted in the institutional logic of national industrial relations systems. These analytical perspectives are in dialogue with Anthony Forsyth's volume, presented and discussed below.

4. *Shaping the landscape of the future: trade unions and other collective actors facing new challenges*

The shifting landscape of platforms, fuelled by deterministic and technocratic ideologies in the wake of the most extreme neoliberalism, is the symbolic and real frontier of collective organisations aiming at representing workers. *The Future of Unions and Worker Representation: The Digital Picket Line*, tracing the last forty years, effectively reconstructs dynamics and reasons of trade unions decline in the US, Australia, the UK, and Italy, while exploring what is new in and around trade unions in the face of the sudden changes in labour experience. On the one hand, the book focuses on how young people, migrants, and more in general precarious workers are addressed by unions and included as target of their campaigns, direct actions, and representation strategies. On the other hand, the book illustrates the role that labour reforms have played in trade unions' renewal strategies.

From a methodological point of view, the choice of considering three countries – the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom – which are similar in terms of culture and industrial relation tradition (firm level collective bargaining, single channel approach to workers' representation, thus not linked to institutions such as work councils) allows the author to assess the responses of trade unions in comparable contexts with similar trends. In particular, first, the neoliberal attack on the role of trade unions and workers' rights, and second, the emergence of similar strategies adopted by trade unions to regain collective power by promoting different forms of collective organising since the early 1990s. The fourth case, Italy, becomes an interesting term of comparison because the situation of trade unions is different in many respects. In particular, the membership is significantly higher in Italy than in the other countries considered, the rate of collective agreements reaches 80% differently from the extremely lower rates in the other countries. Moreover, there is a greater recognition of the role of trade unions in the national social partnership and an easier strike action in comparison with the stricter rules in force in the other countries considered.

Through an accurate analysis of trade union representation trends in the four countries, Forsyth presents what he considers the key elements for a possible strengthening of trade union action. The first element concerns a strong experimentation with new technologies which, as shown in the case studies presented, have proved effective in pro-

tecting those groups of workers – young people, migrants, precarious workers – more difficult to unionise. This is the case of Hospo Voice, a digital union launched by the Australian United Union with the aim to involve young workers of the hospitality sector offering tools to deal with relevant problems experienced in the everyday working life in cafes, restaurant, and bars. Digital tools are conceived as a way to empower young workers, rising awareness and having effective evidence to counter underpayments, checking in real time their employment rights, fostering participation in union rallies and meetings. The digital picket line is therefore both a metaphor and a real possible direction toward a renewal of unions' practices and services. It is an invitation to explore and take advantage of the digital dimension in which society has long been immersed, to recover the collective approach to work. It is also an encouragement to make the most of the digital environment, which requires time and experimentation to be fully interpreted in its potential. The second important element to empower the unions' action concerns alliances with social movements. The author brings significant evidence in support of this imperative; one of the examples Forsyth mention is the American trade unions' campaign to raise the minimum hourly wage to \$ 15, in which the racial justice movement played an important role. The third element discussed by the author is the re-conceptualisation of membership. Indeed, it is evident that excessive rigidity in conceiving union membership does not take into account how work, as well as the contexts in which it takes place, have profoundly changed. Even factories, the place par excellence of unionised work in the 20th century, are now more porous, diffuse, networked contexts where the 'inside' and the 'outside' are blurred. Similarly, an updated idea of the membership should consider aspects such as job precarity (Han 2018; Choonara *et al.* 2022), the non-linearity of professional careers (Lichtenstein and Mendenhall 2002), the phenomenon of contingent and slash workers (Pais 2019; Soru, Zanni 2020), as well the structural change that participation has undergone through new communication tools and lifestyles. A fourth transversal element concerns the urgency of providing workers with tools and interpretative frameworks that can restore a collective idea of work also considering what has happened in the four countries in the past four decades. This is the main and most complex challenge underlying any possibility of action.

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning two elements that negatively affected the renewal of trade unions in the four countries analysed. The first one concerns the limited effects of the strategic organising model borrowed from the United States and replicated in the United Kingdom and Australia. It certainly contributed to revitalising trade unions but failed to reverse the decline in membership. The second element is the limited capacity of trade unions in the UK, US and Australia to

influence the labour reform processes, and the more favourable position of the Italian trade unions – taken as a virtuous example – which can enjoy better legal protections that support their action. These two key points in Forsyth's reflections, which have the great merit of bringing them to the fore, are equally important to imagine the future. Organising platform workers and regulating platform work are indeed two core challenges for trade unions, political representatives, and collective actors focused on alternative work arrangements, such as the platform cooperativist movement.

5. *Conclusions*

After the gig (Schor 2021) and *Work and Labour Relations in Global Platform Capitalism* (Haidar, Keune 2021) brilliantly explore and make a core drill of the platform economy landscape, of its origins and developments, scrutinizing the role of individual and collective actors involved, and showing the shaping power of the underlying ideology. Retrospectively, we can interpret the promises of the sharing economy described by Schor, as a necessary illusion fostered by platform capitalism to mobilise the enthusiasm of well-intentioned pioneers, soon cannibalised by the rough logic of profit. Forsyth's *The Future of Unions and Worker Representation: The Digital Picket Line* (2022) frames instead the big issue of gig economy as one of the great challenges for trade unions and other collective actors. Taken together, the three books recognise a relevant role – at least potentially – for those forces in charge of reshaping platform economy: consumers, (well-established and independent) trade unions, grassroots groups, platform cooperativism. Regulating platform work is possible beyond the powerful interests at stake and the ruthless lobbying exerted by platforms, as the recent proposal of a European directive testify.

The three volumes here considered, in different and complementary ways, stimulate hypotheses on the evolution of platform economy and on most effective strategies (or combination of strategies) to counteract the shaping forces of platform capitalism. In particular Forsyth (2022) identifies a plurality of actors (well-established and independent trade unions, as well as grassroots groups) engaged in both the representation of platform workers and other precarious workforces (in logistics, tourism, fast food chains, bars, restaurants). The need to experiment with new collective actions and new strategies of representation is extremely pressing due to the highly individualised and precarious work that is a standard in platform work and beyond. In many cases, such as the United Kingdom and Italy (Marrone 2021; Tassinari, Maccarrone 2020; Woodcock, Cant 2022), independent trade unions and grassroots groups played a pioneering role in organising and protecting platform

workers when well-established trade unions were not yet involved. In other contexts, such as in France, in some cases trade unions and grassroots groups collaborated since the very beginning (see Borghi *et al.* 2021), while in other cases tensions between unions and grassroots groups emerged (Joyce, Stuart 2021). Platform work is therefore one of the contexts in which, more clearly than elsewhere, Hyman's «variable geometries of resistance» (Hyman, Gumbrell-McCormick 2017) take place. In other words, a context in which a plurality of actors intersects, combines, or pursues actions and strategies in parallel, but differently in different territories. All the actions, taken together, support workers' claims and improve workers' rights.

In this frame, alliances between different collective actors play a key role. Beyond the alliances between trade unions and social movements (Forsyth 2022), the potential for structural alliances between independent trade unions, grassroots groups, and well-established trade unions acting in the same territory is quite interesting to explore. Another hypothesis to explore concerns the possibility of transnational alliances (Lévesque, Murray 2010; Brookes 2013) able to consider the perspective of the different actors involved at local and national level, in order to develop coordinated actions in different countries. A third scenario concerns the alliances that go beyond the fence of production and labour by actively involving platforms' consumers, similar to what happened in the recent past in the retail sector (Frank 2003).

These are only some of the reflections arising from the stimulating reading of the three texts here considered, which differ in style and approach. Like all inspiring texts, they share thorough analyses and generate more questions than those already existing at the outset. What possibilities and potential for self-regulation really exist in the platform economy where extreme competition is the standard and monopoly seems to be the natural evolution? What space for a sustainable and alternative platform economy can really exist? What role will the conflict play in influencing policy makers in charge of regulating platform economy? How counteracting discrimination trends and an increasing gap between Global North and Global South? Is there room for coordinated actions at both local and transnational level for the workers' movement in the near future? These are all open questions in relation to which the three volumes considered in this critical note provide important coordinates for the ongoing debate.

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