

Review of Juliet Schor (2020). *After the gig: How the sharing economy got hijacked and how to win it back*. University of California Press.

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Juliet Schor is a public sociologist and economist who has authored several influential books on work and consumption in the United States. Her latest book could have been titled "Before the Gig", as it reconstructs that moment in early 2010s when gig apps and rental websites self-identified as "sharing" platforms and journalists, for a moment, bought it.

The book is co-produced with Schor's team of sociology PhD candidates: William Attwood-Charles, Mehmet Cansoy, Lindsey Carfagna, Samantha Eddy, Connon Fitzmaurice, Isak Ladegaard, and Robert Wengronowitz. From 2011 to 2017, the team undertook participant observation and interviewed platform users around Boston, Massachusetts. The observations and interviews are complemented with a wealth of literature and statistics. Most of the platforms covered in the book are digital transaction platforms that operate in cities: Uber and Lyft (rides), Postmates and Favor (delivery), TaskRabbit (manual labour), Airbnb (apartment rental), and Turo (car rental).

The result is surely the definitive account of the "sharing economy" as a historical social and economic phenomenon in the United States. It compares favourably with earlier accounts published in the heat of the moment, such as *The Sharing Economy: The end of employment and the rise of crowd-based capitalism* (Sundararajan, 2016). It has similarities to other books that give a voice to people working in the gig economy (e.g., Kessler, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018), but Schor has a broader scope and utilizes more theory and statistics. *After the Gig* is U.S.-focused, but the dynamics it identifies will be familiar and interesting to researchers in Europe also.

The first chapter after the introduction briefly traces the ideological roots of the sharing economy from 1960s counterculture through the New Communalists to Silicon Valley. The subsequent chapters then evaluate the realities of the sharing economy against its chief promises: earnings, equality, community, and sustainability. The story is told from the perspective of the people who work and provide rental services through the platforms. The analysis is especially good at highlighting the many ways in which social class is implicated. For instance, platform companies with their marketing skills managed to make manual labour palatable to college-educated middle-class youth.

One of Schor's main arguments is that different people obtain very different outcomes from platforms, and that accounts that centre on algorithmic management and precarization are unable to explain this variation. Schor argues that the variation is instead explained by how dependent the participants are on platform income. Those who use platforms to earn supplementary income can afford to pick and choose their engagements; those who depend on platforms for their living must accept whatever is offered (I have argued that the same dynamic explains how much temporal flexibility gig workers enjoy; Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Evaluating the sharing economy against its impossibly lofty ideals inevitably results in a report that is largely, though not wholly, negative. Schor concludes that "ride-hailing... has

not *completely* eliminated [racial] bias" (my emphasis), though it is "acknowledged to be less discriminatory than taxi service" (p. 87). It would have been interesting to read more about platforms in the historical context of their particular industries, including the taxi industry. Many Johnny-come-latelys such as myself only developed an interest low-wage work once it came to be mediated by digital platforms, and thus are liable to attribute all its ills to Silicon Valley. But Schor has studied *The Overworked American* (Schor, 1992) for decades now. The book's "sharing economy" framing slightly divorces the platforms from their specific industry contexts, which I suppose is one reason why tech companies developed the framing in the first place.

Critical takes on the corporate sharing economy sometimes end with an abstract call for people to return to more communal, non-market forms of sharing perceived as more authentic and egalitarian. *After the Gig* is refreshing in that its penultimate chapter consists of actual longitudinal case studies of such non-market sharing communities: a time bank, a makerspace, an open learning community, and a food swap group. Much like historical communities, they quickly devolve into hierarchy, patronage, and exclusion. Schor provides a Bourdieusian analysis, but I am reminded of Simmel: the money economy has many dubious consequences, but the alternative from which it extricates us is no Eden either.

The book's title notwithstanding, *After the Gig* places relatively less emphasis on discussing what should happen next. In the final chapter Schor argues that "regulation is justified and necessary" (p. 161) in the United States, and briefly outlines how various European countries have regulated Uber and Airbnb. However, Schor explains that for various political economic reasons it is not a given that U.S. regulators will actually succeed in curbing platform firms' abuses. Indeed, since the book went to press, Californian voters passed a ballot initiative to exempt gig platforms from classifying their workers as employees.

The final pages briefly introduce platform cooperativism and "sharing cities" as alternative approaches to addressing the problems. Compared to how strong the earlier chapters were, this part is based on somewhat less research.

Platform cooperativism refers to worker-owned and worker-governed platforms. Following activists such as Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider (2017), Schor recites the benefits of this model as well as some of the challenges that platform co-ops have in practice run into. I am not left convinced that digital technologies are now allowing co-ops to "scale" more than they have in previous eras (p. 170). Schor argues that a "big chunk of revenue" could be distributed to workers if owners were taken out of the loop (p. 169), but at least Uber's owners have so far only subsidized the sector (Olivier, 2019). Platform co-ops that have successfully boosted some workers' earnings appear to have done so more by restricting worker entry. *After the Gig* reveals that most of the earnings from Stocksy, a frequently cited platform co-op success story, went to just eighty-seven members out of a thousand.

The book finishes with examples of various city-level policies for promoting more equitable sharing, though notably not the notion of public platform ownership, which perhaps in the U.S. remains beyond the pale.

Most researchers no longer invoke the conceit of "sharing" when discussing gig apps and rental platforms. But Schor argues that we must recall that idea and what was good about it, and this time make it work -- for the sake of our planet.

References

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