



## Digital Working Lives: Worker Autonomy and the Gig Economy

By Tim Christiaens, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 152pp., £81.00,  
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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Digital Working Lives: Worker Autonomy and the Gig Economy**, By Tim Christiaens, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 152pp., £81.00, ISBN:9781538173732

The film *Sorry We've Missed You* by Ken Loach portrays the struggles of an indebted family, whose father works as a delivery driver and mother as a subcontracted care worker; they turn to the gig economy in anticipation of entrepreneurial success. However, they are plagued by the instability of income, prolonged hours of labor, and exhaustion resulting from overworking. The narrative of this family presents a glimpse into the exploitation of numerous self-employed gig workers who have fallen prey to the neo-liberalization of Internet technology. In *Digital Working Lives*, Tim Christiaens details the fragmented working conditions of workers in the gig economy and their compromised autonomy under pervasive digital surveillance. By critically reviewing post-workerist philosophy espoused by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, as well as the philosophy of technology by Ivan Illich, Christiaens vividly illustrates how our everyday digital platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, and Deliveroo 're-enslave' workers through algorithms and technology. The use of commonly recognized cases within the book ensures that it is easily comprehensible, and its theoretical underpinnings and illustrative examples render it both informative and captivating.

With a sympathetic and insightful focus on the marginalized workers who rely on digital platforms for their daily sustenance, the author sheds light on how the algorithmic management of labor in the digital gig economy creates new barriers to autonomy in work. But rather than succumbing to the inclination of techno-pessimism, Christiaens expands upon Illich's conception of convivial tools (Illich, 1973) and further elaborates on the concept of convivial autonomy as an alternative approach to address the limitations of post-workerism in the context of the contemporary digital gig economy. The proposed notion is presented in a critical, progressive, and hopeful manner, with the aim of exploring alternative approaches for restructuring labor power relations.

The book is well structured, and its primary content can be divided into two sections. The first half of the book (Chapters 2 to 5) builds on a critical review of post-workerist literature and illustrates the obstacles human autonomy encounters in the digital gig economy. Firstly, Chapter 2 of the text provides an in-depth analysis of the operational principles of the digital gig economy. This analysis is situated within the broader context of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. It highlights how the platform renders information, affect, and knowledge immaterial, which are then appropriated by capital to shape and direct individual consumption patterns. Workers are transformed into 'streams of data' (p.35) in the digital realm, where they are monitored and regulated by algorithms and traffic in an automatic and unconscious manner. This leads to a diminished ability to control the labor process and a heightened sense of work precarity.

Secondly, the following three chapters in *Digital Working Lives* detail three main predicaments encountered by laborers in the gig economy, namely exploitation, alienation, and fatigue, to illustrate their loss of autonomy. The author provides an accurate depiction of Uber's profit model — acquiring enclave rent through user data and financial rent through attracting advertisements via rentier position (p.47) — in order to argue a novel exploitation paradigm in which users' surplus value is derived from unproductive immaterial labor on the platform (Chapter 3). The practice of extracting private data from users, according to

Christiaens, results in a specific type of alienation. He points out that the digitalization of rating systems extends and deepens the control and surveillance over workers (Chapter 4). The phenomenon of emotional labor and the disclosure of personal information are being scrutinized to generate profit, leading individuals to be confined within a self-imposed digital panopticon (p.72). In spite of the current hostile working conditions, individuals are suffering from new manifestations of excessive workload and exhaustion. The unsustainability of the labor force caused by the algorithm ignoring the physical limit and the blurring of working time and free time ignoring the importance of reproduction have become the main reasons for the fatigue of workers (Chapter 5). It is particularly apparent in the context of crisis, for example, amidst Covid-19 and in developing countries, wherein platform workers face a precarious situation as they are compelled to either continue working in unsafe situations or risk losing their jobs, while middle and upper socioeconomic strata experience a greater degree of security in terms of their (im) mobility (p.76).

While the first part comprehensively exposes the contemporary challenges of autonomy in the digital gig economy through the lens of post-workerism, the second section of *Digital Working Lives* delves into the philosophy of technology and examines the significance of convivial autonomy in the evolution of digital labor platforms. According to Antonio Negri, the concept of worker autonomy involves the process of collective self-valorization, whereby workers can replace the dominance of capital by seizing the technical apparatus of production and can engage in collective self-determination (p.109). The author points out the flaws in this view in three distinct facets. Firstly, capitalist imperatives are ontologically inherent in the design of technology. Secondly, worker autonomy lacks a clear direction and purpose beyond expressing opposition to capital. Lastly, Negri's optimistic estimation of the 'feminine reappropriation' of new domestic technologies overlooks the important social dynamics of care. To improve these concerns, Christiaens adopts Illich's notion of convivial autonomy and underscores the significance of the vernacular culture that should be embedded in the politics of autonomy. According to Illich, vernacular culture is rooted in the everyday practices of human beings and shapes our social interactions. The concept of convivial autonomy acknowledges the interconnected relationship between autonomy and human interdependence by emphasizing vernacular culture. To be more specific, it involves independence from tools, self-determination in the environment, and resonance in vernacular culture (pp. 127–130). This approach imbues autonomy with a sense of purpose beyond itself and provides a definitive trajectory for its elaboration, enabling individuals to deal with platform design, engage in vernacular relations, and strengthen the ability to care for each other in vernacular interactions.

Built on the thorough definition of convivial autonomy, Christiaens situates in the digital gig economy and presents institutional proposals for the realization of the concept through criticism of platform cooperativism in the final chapter. Platform cooperatives can be considered viable alternatives for privately owned platforms, fostering a shared artisanal identity among workers and serving as a foundation for workplace coordination. Drawing upon the aforementioned criteria of autonomy, namely independence, self-determination, and resonance, the author proffers that platform cooperatives could be the model for an improved working environment within the digital gig economy. It aims to facilitate the ownership of platforms by workers, allowing them to democratically access algorithms and data, establish standards for their labor, govern their labor process, as well as foster community solidarity and collective empowerment. The integration of platform cooperativism beyond the employee/independent contractor dichotomy (Fredman et al., 2021) is innovative, visionary, and thought-provoking from both political and economic perspectives. However, platform


cooperatives function as commercial entities, and the challenge lies in devising strategies to navigate the competitive market environment while prioritizing the welfare of workers. Moreover, while the importance of vernacular culture in the design of local platform cooperatives is underscored by the author, the proposal still fails to account for intersectional considerations, such as race, gender, religion, migration, and educational backgrounds between workers, which could reproduce new forms of discrimination and inequality in practice (Schor, 2016).

As *Sorry We've Missed You* vividly demonstrates, the interdependence of work and care is engaged in platform work. The book's critical social reproductive perspective is noteworthy for its emphasis on the platformization of reproduction, an issue that is often underestimated and disregarded. Christiaens highlights the stratification of housework in post-Fodist capitalism resulting in new forms of precaritization in feminized and racialized genealogies of production and reproduction. The workers situated at the lower echelons of the labor market exhibit a state of exhaustion that hinders their ability to effectively replenish their labor-power. In the long run, this phenomenon may result in sleep deprivation and social isolation that depletes the workforce. The author further argues that care should be added to the concept of worker's convivial autonomy, as the implementation of new technologies does not emancipate women from the essentialism of being a caregiver and necessitates a politics that specifically targets the societal roles of gender (p.108). This perspective enables us to re-understand reproduction labor as a field of exploitation and resistance against dominant gendered norms, with prospective implications for reorienting the gender politics of platform workers.

Overall, *Digital Working Lives* is a refreshing contribution to the plethora of publications scrutinizing the contemporary economic predicaments of digital platforms. The concept of worker autonomy serves as the foundation for this proposal, which utilizes both theoretical frameworks and practical illustrations to present a compelling model for platform cooperativism. This vision opens up possibilities of new societal imagination during a time when the gig economy is fraught with problems. Scarce are academic publications of this nature, which not only provide a detailed understanding of the gig economy for the general public, but also offer theoretical references and profound insights for scholars in the fields of platform studies, labor studies, feminist studies, and media studies.

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