I. Gershon, *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

A.J. Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*, Oakland. CA: University of California Press, 2019.

A. Rosenblat, *Uberland: How Algorithms are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, Oakland. CA: University of California Press, 2019.

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It's the time of 'stay-at-home' orders in the UK, April 2020, and we are all trying to keep Covid-19 at bay. Complying with government guidance I'm rarely outside, only to get groceries. People are dispersed, as required, but around the market square and in front of the last Chinese restaurant that remained open, small groups of people are waiting; two clusters of cars and bikes waiting for a 'ping' on their smartphones from the black Uber U or the mint-green Deliveroo kangaroo. Food delivery and taxis are among the only casual service jobs still available during the Covid lockdown. These are workers still racing through cities worldwide to get people and food from A to B – all for very little money, constantly endangered by the spread of the virus and on top of all that tracked and checked up on by companies that pretend to not employ them.¹

These are the conditions – even prior to the additional threat posed by Covid – that a number of recent monographs vividly explore. The volumes – Gershon's *Down and Out in the New Economy*, Ravenelle's *Hustle and Gig* and Rosenblat's *Uberland* – are focused on how work is organized and experienced today in the new economy, enabled through digital communication via apps and smartphones. They portray both blue-collar (Ravenelle, Rosenblat) and white-collar office (Gershon) workers, often as part of the so-called gig economy.²

In *Uberland*, Alex Rosenblat digs deep into the practices of the most widely used ride-hailing app, Uber. After the financial crash of 2008, Uber was lauded – partly by the company itself but also by commentators – as a way out of unemployment, to make unused resources (your car) useful in the sharing economy. What has unfolded

since Uber's inception in 2009 is not only marked by numerous scandals (concerning, for instance, the sexist work culture for Uber employees), but also, for most Uber drivers, the increasing realization that the platform provides unstable and challenging work at best, and algorithmically surveilled precarity at worst. This is ultimately not Uber's problem or fault because its drivers are not employees, or so the company claims. In fact, the language used by gig economy companies is deliberately designed to forge what is often called 'tech exceptionalism': Deliveroo jackets are not work wear, they are 'branded clothing'; contracts are 'supplier agreements'; and shifts are never scheduled, drivers just 'indicate availability' (Rosenblat, p. 159). In other words: Deliveroo and Uber workers are *not* considered employees.

This is connected to a bigger narrative that tech companies like ride-hailer Uber, food-delivery apps such as Deliveroo, but also Facebook and Google are pushing: they are platforms. In fact, this is not simply a question of language but of legal status and worker protection. By claiming to be a neutral in-between platform or marketplace, gig economy companies (as well as social media behemoths like Facebook) push away any responsibility for what happens to those using them and with it any duty of care for the people that find work *through* them. The algorithms that govern the platform are far from neutral, however, and, as Rosenblat's analysis shows in detail for Uber, they are not merely connecting two groups.

Uber controls its drivers and incentivizes them to its own advantage (Rosenblat, p. 165), using supposedly neutral algorithms, the workings of which are not transparent for its workers and users. Surge pricing promises higher earnings, for instance, but really is designed to bring more drivers on the road, which in fact often leads to a drop in surge earnings due to the increased supply. Threats of 'account cancellation' (it is not called layoff, obviously) based on inactivity make the supposedly flexible work in many cases a myth. In fact, drivers are surveilled (via GPS) and their work controlled in many ways that most 'traditional' employers are not able to access. Still, Uber sticks to the narrative: its drivers are independent contractors – or even better: entrepreneurs. While many drivers value even the idea of being self-defined in relation to, for instance, their working hours, for only a few of them has Uber really become an 'entrepreneurship' opportunity or, as Ravenelle calls it, a 'success story'.

While Rosenblat writes mainly about Uber, Ravenelle's *Hustle and Gig* investigates four different gig economy platforms: AirBnB, TaskRabbit, Uber and the already defunct Kitchensurfing. Where Rosenblat is very strong on the almost invisible inequalities built into the algorithms of Uber's platform, Ravenelle provides much more detail on the concrete everyday struggles for the gig workers. She tells us stories about pain and injuries at work (and not getting help with medical bills), about having to pee in cups while driving; she unearths problems with sexual approaches from clients and involvement of workers in illegal activities, such as drug runs. Most of the time, the gig worker feels compelled to continue, to not say anything, to get the task done. Ravenelle shows how, in an account which reiterates Rosenblat's findings, workers' fears of losing money through the algorithm

punishing them ensures they keep on working, even where terms and rewards are not optimal and add considerable personal cost.

Both Ravenelle's and Rosenblat's accounts of gig workers in the US are ultimately debunking the idea of the sharing economy by means of the sustained long-term engagement only ethnography can deliver. Rosenblat shows us how wage theft, surveilled labour and tracking are what drivers are faced with; Ravenelle argues convincingly that gig workers today are as badly protected as workers in the early industrial age, contextualizing her analysis historically (p. 111ff). Both make it very clear that the idea of the gig worker as an autonomous, flexible entrepreneur is at best the exception, and usually reserved for people with higher qualifications (e.g. trained chefs) or more capital (e.g. access to several AirBnB apartments).

The idea of the entrepreneur as the quintessential type of 'worker' in the new economy is where Gershon's 2017 monograph (*Down and Out in the New Economy*), on finding work today, connects with the two analyses above. With her, the focus switches mostly to white-collar workers, people with college degrees who are *also* struggling to find work and make ends meet, positioning themselves in the professional job market. Gershon starts with an observation that is true also for Uber drivers and TaskRabbits: the self has to be a business now (the self as entrepreneur) that needs branding, just like any other 'product'. Being a linguistic anthropologist, she goes on to analyse the different 'genres' used in this self-branding exercise on the stony path to a job. How do you use LinkedIn? What role does a network play in finding a job?

The big tension for Gershon, across the different registers, remains: 'how can someone always be willing and able to transform and yet remain a cohesive self' (p. 35)? How can you be consistent throughout all forms of media but flexible enough to use each medium correctly? More generally even, assuming that most people now are not loyally working their way up within one company but between companies: how are they able to be flexible (and unique) enough for different contexts but still a consistent brand? The flip side of this concrete struggle with self-coordination takes us back to the Uber drivers, too: stable employment is not secure at all any more. So, people now settle on something else they (are forced to) look for in a job: 'passion and enhance[ing] themselves' (Gershon, p. 243).

All three monographs are highly critical of the often digitally driven developments that the new economy brings to wide strata of the labour market. The focus in all three accounts is on the tension between the promise of providing stability (of income), connected to freedom and flexibility whenever needed, versus the actual atomization of the labour-force. The widening of the promise of the holy grail of entrepreneurship turns 'workers' into individual competitors in a marketplace, preventing solidarity (Gershon, p. 249). What Ravenelle, Rosenblat and Gershon bring to their analyses of the gig economy is a much clearer, everyday view from the bottom up, from the workers' perspective. They provide details about the everyday struggles of these people, debunking the idea that flexibility and 'entrepreneurship' are really what *all* workers aspire to today, and help

us to think in a more nuanced way about the impact these platforms have on people's lives.

These real-world concrete narratives of critique become even more pressing now, during times of sky-rocketing unemployment driven by Covid-19; many more people might in fact soon jump on the gig-work train, that promises them at least the possibility to make some money quickly and easily. From these people's point of view, they can't afford to put any pressure on Uber and Co. Gig work might not even have to promise autonomy and entrepreneurship any more. Just making some money might be good enough. The use of data to the workers' disadvantage might become even more evident; surveillance could become even more strict. And all under the banner of public health to begin with – working towards the 'new normal'.

The incentives in the labour system might end up being so misaligned with workers' rights that the government is the only hope. Now, more than ever, the call for more regulation and, as such, worker protection, that all of the above authors share, becomes the only imaginable way forward. The first positive signs, in fact, appeared on the horizon in late 2019: California passed a bill supposed to make gig workers employees – with all the associated benefits (but it looks like this bill just got voted down in the recent election). There is a first lawsuit against Uber and Lyft pending but it seems this is a first step in protecting workers in unstable employment.

But this takes us to some of the gaps in the three ethnographies where I see ethnography as becoming a powerful tool for understanding better. If the gig economy in its current form doesn't work, are there alternatives to it? While Ravenelle gives us some answers – MyClean and Hello Alfred are 'employing' their workers for instance – the focus so far in the literature is not on finding a possibly productive solution. We could do with a proper insider view into companies more generally proposing alternative ideas for 'the future of work'. Similarly, we need to learn more about the *collective* struggles that gig and tech workers have begun, rather than the atomised accounts of mostly individuals provided, particularly by Ravenelle and Rosenblat. Rosenblat refers occasionally to forums and worker collectives, but how are they unionizing and organising bottom-up (e.g. in the Freelancers Union)? As a discipline, we are good at understanding such processes of collective action and resistance (see Sian Lazar's [2017] edited volume on unions in Latin America for instance) and could turn our analytical power to gig worker struggles, too. Lastly, anthropology's intricate tracing of connections and networks could be employed to understand what role regulators and the law already play and could develop further in the future. Just as a whole new chapter in the Theranos story is currently unfolding in court, understanding the role of judges, lawyers and regulatory institutions can help us to grasp better how gig companies work. This could also help us to provide a better understanding of how overall incentive structures for companies can be influenced or 'ordered' to change from the top down. What we are truly missing, given the geographical focus of these

ethnographies on the US, is a widening of our scope with regard to all three of the above questions – there can't be an anthropology of 'new work' that is limited to the West.

So, overall, these ethnographies – the first of their kind focusing on the new (labour) economy as far as I am aware – are a crucial starting point. They complement the widespread media critique of Uber, AirBnB and Co. with a large variety of detailed accounts grounding the analysis and the (positive) change it could drive on a much more solid basis. Following their trail further and deeper into the world of new work seems like a more than worthwhile undertaking for our discipline.

Notes

1. The status of 'platform workers' such as Uber drivers and TaskRabbit gig workers is legally disputed but for now they remain independent contractors (i.e. not employees) in most jurisdictions (the exception of California is discussed later in the article).
2. While the terms 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar' have certainly changed (we are not just talking about the difference between office versus factory floor), they still have meaning and are widely used in the description of the gig economy (including by some of the authors reviewed here).

Reference

Lazar S (ed.) (2017) *Where Are the Unions? Workers and Social Movements in Latin America, the Middle East and Europe*. London: Zed.