

Platforms and Inequality - Gig work

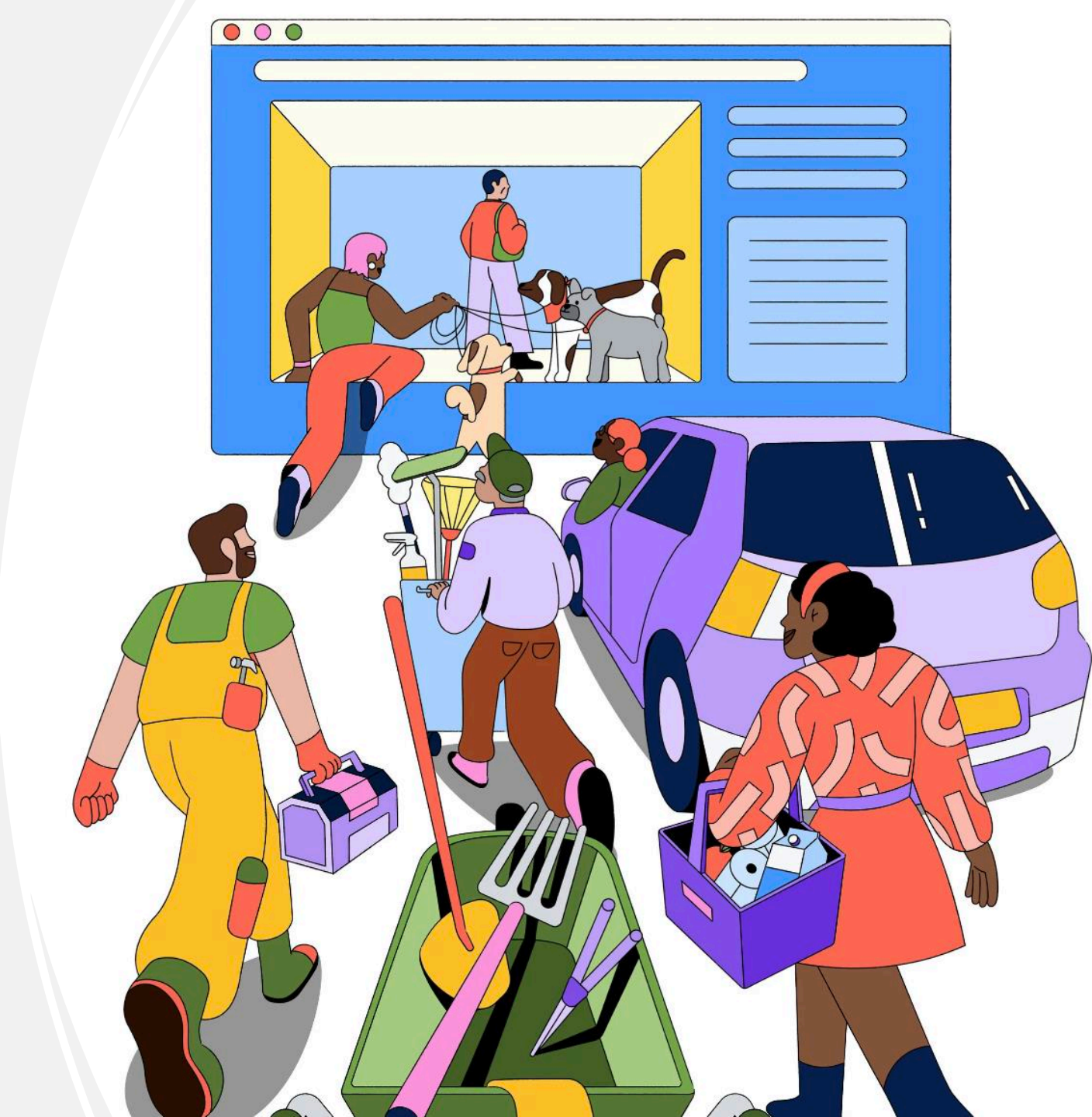
“There something vaguely familiar here...But seems excellent! I pay 7 billion.”

(Ville Ranta. Helsingin Sanomat. 12.11.2021)



Agenda

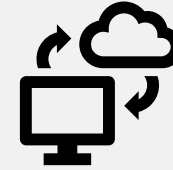
- What is gig work
 - Crowdwork and On-demand work
- Gig's Up discussion
- How succesful you would be as Uber driver? – Uber Game
- Documentary 'IN THE BELLY OF AI'
- Group work – taking stock



From Sharing economy to Gig economy

- **Origins (2005-2010):** Sharing economy born from ideals of collaborative consumption and sustainability. Was accelerated by 2008 financial crisis creating need for supplemental income.
- **The Pivot:** What began as peer-to-peer asset sharing (spare rooms, occasional rides) transformed into commercial, professionalised service provision
- **Technology as Enabler:** Smartphones, GPS, payment systems, and algorithms enabled real-time matching, dynamic pricing, and scalable coordination
- **Labor Transformation:** Workers reclassified as independent contractors rather than employees, shifting risks and costs onto individuals while platforms control access and pricing
- Airbnb (2008), Uber (2009), TaskRabbit (2008), Deliveroo (2013) - each representing the shift from sharing assets to providing on-demand labor
- "Platform economy" more accurate than "sharing economy" - characterized by algorithmic management, precarious work, and concentrated platform power

GIG WORK



The gig economy is a labor market characterized by algorithmically managed piecework mediated by online platforms.

Gig work sets itself apart from traditional piecework in two ways:

- Firstly, the work is algorithmically managed. Algorithmic management provides several benefits such as:
 - The elimination of human error
 - Increased labor coordination and data collection capabilities
 - The opportunity for rapid geographical expansion
- Secondly, it involves a labor supply that is mediated through online platforms

The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction: By Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.

Gawer and Srnicek (2021) Online platforms: Economic and societal effects

GIG WORK



- Two types: **On-Demand Work** and **Crowdwork**
- Both are **short-term work** organised via digital platforms, including apps and websites.
- While organised digitally, **on-demand work** requires **offline labour** involving tasks such as cleaning, ride sharing, delivering, caring, maintenance, etc. that must be physically carried out in geographically specified locations.
- **Crowdworkers** use platforms to find clients who require their **services**, which are then **provided virtually** rather than in-person

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Crowdwork – professionalised and microwork

- The vast majority of gig work is **crowdwork**, which is typically being paid less than on-demand work.
- A handful of workers do manage to make a significant amount, but the overall distribution is vastly unequal as most struggle to make much.
- **Professionalised** crowdwork is performed by professionals and technical workers.
- **Professionalised** crowdwork can often provide a decent income
- **Microwork** involves tasks that companies have broken up into minute pieces that are then outsourced through platforms.
- Tasks such as data entry, image labelling, content moderation, and copywriting are listed on platforms like Upwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and TaskRabbit where **workers from around the world can bid to do the tasks**.
- A polarization of work may occur, between relatively **high-wage, high-skill**, information-centric set of occupations **and low-wage, low-skill**, service-centric set of occupations – those most commonly associated with the 'gig economy'

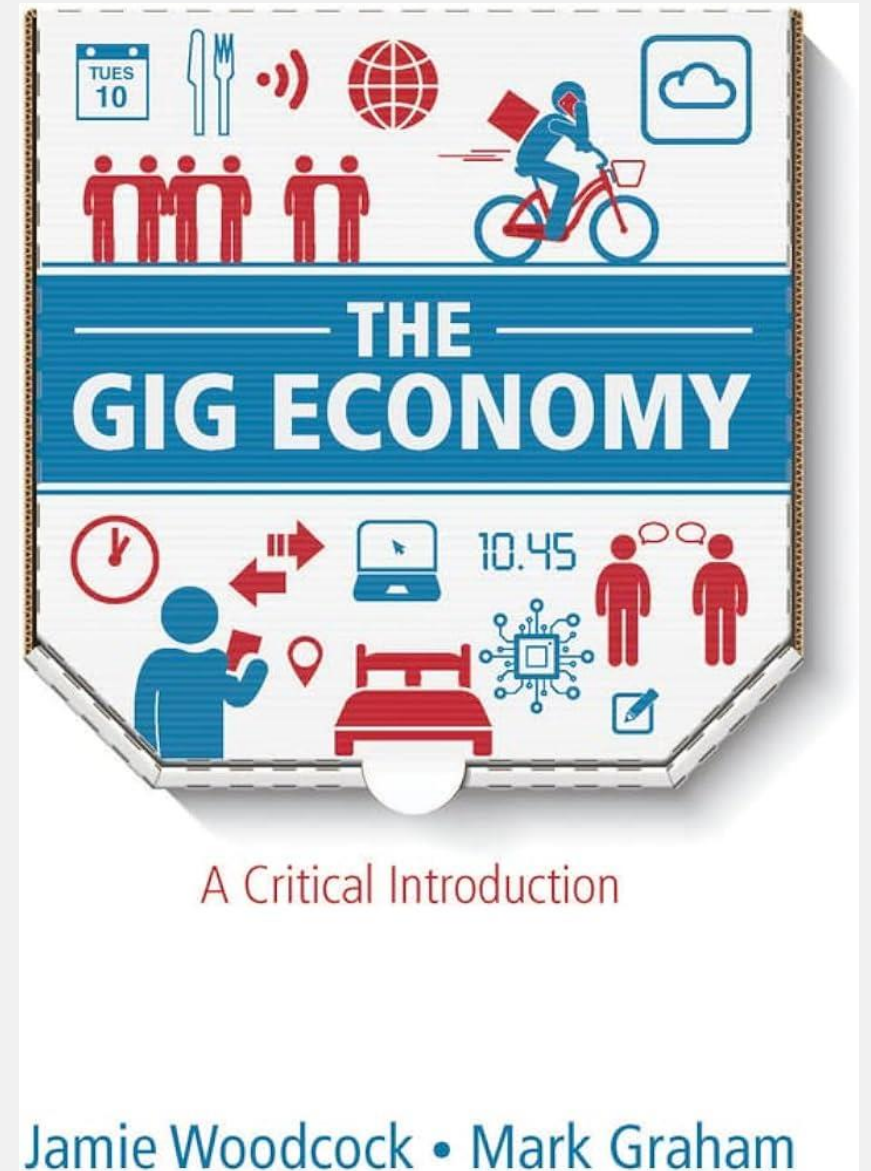
Microwork

“... I did this shit for hours. It’s addictive! [...] I found it alarmingly easy to slip into a Turking daze. Each strange task leaves you with a brief glimpse of some larger whole, and it’s easy to find yourself looking for just one More” (Woodcock and Graham, 2020)

- Microwork platforms leverage the ‘gamification’ that is a feature of many forms of work today (Woodcock and Johnson, 2018) in order to encourage people to work for an amount that may not hit minimum wage.
- Microwork tends to be traded in small chunks, with workers given a take-it-or-leave-it offer
- Workers are rarely told why they are asked to do what they do
- Work and workers are treated as entirely interchangeable, and disembedded from local laws and norms

“Microwork is severely lacking in humanity and attention to human dignity. Microwork, in its present state, offers a bleak look into a world of commodified jobs that are sliced up, and shipped off to a microwork platform, with little attention or care to the individuals carrying them out.”

James, A. (2021). The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction: By Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.



Pros and Cons of Gigwork – Flexibility and Insecurity

- Allows many people who would otherwise struggle to find jobs to find one.
- Potential for avoiding social biases
- Ability to work from home
- Ability to accommodate other responsibilities, e.g. caring responsibilities
- Flexible working time
- Low barriers to entry
- Ability to skip unpaid training
- Low wages
- Fear of being fired without reason
- Being subject to consumer demand and management whims
- Fierce competition
- Control over work diminishes when having to compete globally (pressure to lower wages and increase working hours)
- Risks like getting injured or other long-term health risks

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Independent contractors

- Much platform work relies on contracts where workers are not defined as employees, but instead as 'independent contractors'
- These contracts are **flexible, temporary**, or otherwise **casual**
- Many countries legally recognise a **binary idea of work**: either employed or self-employed
- For contractors the normal **employee rights** are largely or entirely **absent**.
- In many contexts, **workers cannot join a trade union** organize a legal strike.
- Benefits to employers: cut labour costs, maximise the flexibility of the workforce, and minimise any responsibilities they might have for the workers.
- Companies report **saving 20-30% on costs** by relying on this employment contract.

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Unionisation

Another key feature of this work is that it is often difficult to organise workers into collective organisations such as trade unions.

Workers are often incentivised and coerced into direct competition with each other – further hindering any sort of collective action.

Workers have been experimenting and learning new ways to organise and effectively voice their interests.

In some European countries court has ordered that giggers for example for Uber, Glovo and Wolt are in fact employees

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