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Book Review: Hustle and Gig

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***Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*, by Alexandra J. Ravenelle (2019). Oakland: University of California Press.**

In *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*, sociologist Alexandra Ravenelle calls out the contradiction between the lofty promises made by proponents of the gig economy and the grim reality of gig and app-based work. Ravenelle puts forward two main arguments: first, that the gig economy is a throwback to an earlier age of labor, in which individuals performed dangerous and degrading tasks without support from trade unions or labor laws; and second, that the gig economy can entrench structural conditions of poverty and increase social inequality by reinforcing cycles of debt, isolating workers from each other and from their communities as well as enacting punitive measures that limit workers' earning potential. Drawing on some eighty in-depth, in-person interviews conducted in New York City between March and November 2015, *Hustle and Gig* focuses on gig worker experiences with four companies: Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and the now-defunct Kitchensurfing.

Ravenelle's observation about the contradiction between the promises made by tech giants and the realities of gig and app-based work should not come as a surprise to scholars in labor studies. For centuries, critics of capitalism have pointed out the enormous divides—experiential, social, political, and economic—between the owners of the means of production and laborers. Contemporary scholarship on the gig economy has demonstrated how technology companies have effectively evaded even the most basic equalizing protections for workers, thus creating and cementing an underclass of workers (e.g., Rosenblat 2018). Moreover, critiques of the so-called sharing and gig economies abound in journalism, media, and film (such as Ken Loach's 2019 feature [*Sorry We Missed You*](#)). Ravenelle's book builds on robust findings from both social science research and journalism, including writing by Steven Greenhouse, Arne Kalleberg, and Juliet Schor. While Ravenelle's take on the gig economy is not new or groundbreaking, the strength of *Hustle and Gig* is the breadth of her interview sample, represented amply through direct quotations interspersed throughout the book. The exact phrasing of workers' experiences by the workers themselves is impactful and, at times, surprising.

Early in the book, Ravenelle organizes the trajectory of gig laborers into three categories: Strugglers, Strivers, and Success Stories. In doing so, she points out that the exploitative conditions well documented in the scholarly literature on gig work are not distributed evenly across the population. Ravenelle's main argument, however,

does not depend on those categories, and the book itself is not organized according to them. The distinction she emphasizes most is between strugglers and success stories, meaning those who are unable to earn (enough) money and those who generate a significant income by working as independent contractors. According to Ravenelle, people between the ages of forty and sixty and those who work for Uber and Taskrabbit are more likely to be strugglers, while those utilizing the Airbnb and Kitchensurfing platforms have the most success stories. The reason behind this, she argues, is that Uber and Taskrabbit promote low-skill work, while Airbnb and Kitchensurfing benefit those with existing assets and higher skill levels. By leveraging the existing assets and privileges of some, while failing to build on the skills and capabilities of others, the sharing economy may further entrench social and economic inequality. However, because Ravenelle does not fully flesh out her classification scheme, we never learn what factors determine who is placed into which category, how her sample is distributed among these categories, or what the trajectories are for individuals placed within each category.

The main criticism that Ravenelle has of the gig economy is that companies designate workers as “independent contractors” rather than employees, which effectively cuts them off from benefits such as workers’ compensation, overtime, and disability accommodations. This designation enables companies to transfer the risks inherent in the jobs these laborers perform onto the workers themselves. But, as Ravenelle points out, not all workers experience the risks of the gig economy in the same way. For those who enter into the gig economy with significant assets, risk can be experienced positively. She references multiple Airbnb “mega-hosts,” many of whom hold well-paying day jobs and rent multiple units across Manhattan (a location in which Airbnb is illegal), who characterize using Airbnb as an exciting game akin to being in the Mob. For workers who are already poor or struggling, the risks of gig labor increase their exposure to injuries and harassment, and can even leave them open to being unwittingly used for criminal ends. Detailed descriptions of less well-off gig economy workers’ harrowing experiences—including physical injuries, high-risk situations, and uncomfortable encounters—comprise much of the middle four chapters of the book. For example, TaskRabbit workers waded into slimy ponds without protective equipment, and Uber drivers unwittingly drive for a drug deal.

Ravenelle ultimately concludes that there is little new about the gig economy, which for her represents a rollback to an earlier era of industrial labor without state protections. The lives and experiences of gig workers, Ravenelle says, are akin to the cotton weavers, coal miners, and domestic servants in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. For gig workers with low levels of social capital, few assets, and limited skills, “the gig economy simply takes already low-level work, adds an app, and increases the precarity factor” (p. 172). This conclusion is disappointingly thin, especially given the rich interview data that Ravenelle presents. For example, she misses the opportunity to address the vital role of apps in shaping worker experiences. The gig economy workers in her sample are all tethered to mobile devices, web-based platforms, and company-controlled algorithms. The book could have included a chapter on how workers interact with these interfaces—including app features such as scheduling prompts and behavioral nudges, as well as email help desks—all of which, according to Ravenelle’s data, generate feelings of helplessness and frustration among workers.

While *Hustle and Gig* was initially written as Ravenelle’s dissertation and builds on some of the scholarly literature on the history of labor and the gig economy, it is packaged as a more mass-market take on workers’ experiences in the gig economy. Ravenelle intends for her book to be an accessible and eye-opening experience for those who might be unaware of the everyday exploitation of service workers around the globe and within their own communities. Sections of *Hustle and Gig* might be useful for an introductory undergraduate course in sociology or at a business school. For example, Chapter Four, “Workplace Troubles,” and the book’s conclusion provide a summary of some of the relevant economic and socio-historical context of the gig economy, as well as more human-centered descriptions of the impacts of app-based gig work.

Author Bio

Emily Wilson is a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on experimental volunteer programs in Northern England that have arisen in response to budget cuts to state welfare programs and social care services.

Reference

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