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Book Review: After the Gig

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***After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back*, by Juliet B. Schor (2020). Oakland: University of California Press.**

In *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back*, Juliet B. Schor and her collaborators interrogate the discourses behind the so-called sharing economy and the promises made by its venture-capitalist progenitors, who—the book argues—subsequently hijacked its potential for bringing about "a new way [to] work" (p. 148). Drawing on seven years of data collection via ethnographic observations and interviews conducted in and around the U.S. city of Boston, large national data sets from Airbnb, and surveys, Schor demystifies the before times, when the sharing economy was hailed as visionary, and our current moment, when this original vision lies in rubble. In doing so, she lays bare how Big Tech platforms extract large amounts of labor from gig workers through dependence, disempowerment, and inequality—in stark contrast to what was initially promised. The owners of and investors in widely used platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Postmates, and Airbnb make fortunes on the back of gig earners, many of whom are partially or totally dependent on these "platform parasites" (p. 71).

In Boston, where Schor's collaborators carried out this investigation, some gig drivers would work up to sixty hours per week and not break even with Uber. Postmates couriers reflected on the $2.50 they made per hour "against the millions and billions made by [the company's] owners and investors" (p. 10). Through these examples, platform work is shown to magnify independent contractors' precarity by several degrees: reproducing (as opposed to disrupting) entrenched inequality, precarious work, involuntary unpaid work, and structural discrimination. In a chapter entitled "Shared, but Unequal," Schor explores how the hashtag #AirBnBWhileBlack went viral after a Harvard study found that African Americans were 16 percent more likely than whites to be turned down by Airbnb hosts. Whatever the gig or platform, the sharing economy has seemed to reveal capitalism's relations of production at their worst.

Alongside these critiques of platforms set up for profit, though, Schor goes on to show how most nonprofit counterparts are also “homogenous and socially exclusionary” (p. 124). The architects of the nonprofit platform sector believed that they were offering no less than a humane form of capitalism through community-based initiatives that “emphasized nonmonetized exchanges: lending, bartering, gifting, helping, and the reuse of goods” (p. 123). Schor gives examples like the Northeastern Food Swap initiative, where enthusiasts of gastronomy prepared homemade food to trade with each other, or Skillshare, which promised access to high-quality online learning with an emphasis on the local context. A first wave of participants in these initiatives saw value in giving of their time, but eventually they gave up. Why? Schor argues that the nonprofit platform sector has not taken root due, in part, to the inability of its proponents to make good on their own objectives. For example, food swaps promised to empower and build community but eventually became hubs of “foodie judgmentalism and overt snobbery” (p. 124). More broadly, Schor details, nonprofit platforms failed to provide economic value such that membership dwindled in the absence of new “social technologies” (p. 174) for how to share, foster cooperation, and help others.

In the book’s final chapter, Schor offers the study’s most significant and provocative intervention: that the sharing economy has democratic possibilities to offer, and that its dream of offering a new way to work could become a reality. Schor calls for putting platforms into the hands of their users via platform cooperativism, a concept formulated by the scholar-activist Trebor Scholz (2016). Schor suggests that “if we swap out the owners and investors and give their shares to workers” (p. 148), then the promise of a new way to work can be realized as cooperatives “allow members to take control of their own work lives, with policy determined by democratic policies” (p. 169). Yet she acknowledges that this proposal will be difficult to carry out. In this vein, the sociologist Guillaume Compain and colleagues (Compain et al. 2019) have identified three major challenges for cooperativist platforms: finding long-lasting economic and financial models, uniting communities, and mobilizing supporters and partners.

Looking optimistically to the case of Stocksy (a platform owned by its photographer, artist, and filmmaker users), Schor does see a future for democratic sharing but also points to other options such as state regulation. On this basis, she asserts that a “reboot of the sector is both desirable and possible” (p. 162). But how feasible are such reforms when cooperativism, sharing, and collaboration are mostly voluntary activities? Moreover, how far can workers stretch their external incomes, savings, and

unemployment benefits to fund a cooperative endeavor, especially during a project's precarious developmental phase? The dependent platform earners in the pages of this book are, after all, barely managing to break even.

These limitations do not, in my view, bode well for platform cooperatives, given that such endeavors often have difficulty paying salaries and attracting contributors. Furthermore, a lack of political attention and innovation in this sector has indirectly ensured domination by Big Tech and its lobbyist allies; indeed, the Platform Cooperativism Consortium itself recently announced that it had received a $1 million grant from the Google Foundation. While this development may be seen as a vote of confidence in the cooperative moment, it could just as easily indicate the opposite: a lack of broad-based support for the movement, such that it must go against its very principles in accepting such donations. It is also entirely possible that a tech giant like Google could become the owner of such a platform.

Cooperative platforms face dominant for-profit actors, low user commitment, overworked project leaders, and limited political will for a robust social dialogue. In this context, a future sharing economy without actual sharing seems almost inevitable. If, however, public-facing institutions such as charities, foundations, service providers, and governments as well as social and solidarity economy organizations were to form structures to actively support developing projects, then we could see the existing model of platform capitalism reshaped into a legitimate and feasible model of cooperativism. This new version of the sharing economy would come far closer to democratic control for platform members than the current arrangements facilitated by Big Tech.

In the eyes of Schor and her colleagues, sharing platforms can build bridges and not only walls. Yet it is up to the people creating and using these technologies to imbue them with these values. "It's not the tool," one interviewee interjects, "it's the person that wields it, I promise" (p. 174). Schor situates this and other tensions of the sharing economy within the fields of economic sociology, the sociology of cooperation, and the anthropology of work, as well as studies of digital media, digital labor, and precarious employment. As for the future of the sharing economy, Schor believes that we need to reboot, reload, and start afresh.

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Author Bio

Julius-Cezar MacQuarie is an anthropologist trained at Central European University who is concerned with the invisibility of migrant nightshift workers in public debates. He created the NIGHTWORKSHOP project to research night work in global cities, and contributed to the Essential Labor forum at *Exertions* with his 2020 piece "While Others Sleep: The Essential Labor of Migrant Nightshift Workers."

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