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***The Hustle and Gig: Struggling and  
Surviving in the Sharing Economy,*  
Edited by **Alexandrea  
J. Ravenelle.**  
**A Review.****

Daniela Bellani <sup>1</sup>

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**1. Introductory Remarks**

For some, sharing-economy work represents a new opportunity for the masses in terms of empowerment of self-autonomy, personal responsibility and work-schedule flexibility. In *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*, Alexandra J. Ravenelle questions such a neoliberal narrative, revealing that the sharing economy also exacerbates issues related to inequality and discrimination –already present in the US labor market.

From a theoretical point of view, the author clearly defines the overall concept of the sharing economy. The definition she proposes of the sharing economy as “a collection of app-based technologies that focuses on the lending/renting of assets or services either for profit or for higher good” represents a clear step forward in comparison to previous attempts. She also convincingly dispels some common myths of the gig economy<sup>2</sup> – understood as a part of the sharing economy platforms. First, while a gig economy looks like a return to a higher level of connection and to the sense of community (by bringing people together), *Hustle and Gig* unveils that gig workers do not perceive these feelings, complaining about the

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of this book review, the notions of a ‘gig economy’ and a ‘share economy’ will be used interchangeably.

total absence of trust and lack of interaction with the app-users. Second, even if a gig economy promises to promote entrepreneurship, the author clearly explains that it actually increases the number of workers with low paid, marginal benefits and economic insecurity, all factors that lead to the increase of the casualization of work. Finally, although the supporters of gig economy state that service-platforms play the role of promoter of the principle of ‘opportunities for all’, *Hustle and Gig* depicts a different scenario, identifying the gig economy as a trigger of social inequalities. One example refers to the gentrification of cities due to the massive creation of Airbnb empires, but this is only an example of the many inequalities Ravenelle reports in the book.

From an empirical point of view, the author implements a well-organized ethnographic study. The author explores in depth the perspectives of about eighty workers involved in the gig economy in New York. She conducted qualitative interviews uncovering interviewees’ work experiences. The aim is to provide a real description of the promises and the reality of working in the gig economy in the US in the last few years. Ravenelle mainly focuses on workers of four gig platforms, (Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing) given that these services have lots of factors in common (such as the level of popularity) but at the same time each is distinctive, e.g. in terms of levels of individual intake of capital and skills. The respondents, all living in New York City, are diverse in terms of age, gender, race, level of education and income.

The main goal of the study is to shed light on three elements: the working conditions within the gig economy, the types of skills and capital they bring to their work and the status they confer themselves. Based on these characteristics, the author presents a typology of gig economy workers, that, in my opinion, represents the main novelty of *Hustle and Gig*. Such ideal types are labelled “Strugglers”, “Strivers” and “Success Stories”. The first type includes those that have been long-term unemployed or undocumented and that, even if they struggle to make ends meet, cannot escape from the condition of precariousness. These workers need money to survive and the sharing economy potentially represents an opportunity. However, even if they jump from one platform to the other, they cannot recover from a condition of low wages, extreme insecurity and instability. An example of a Struggler reported in the book is represented by Donald, a white middle-aged man who, during the Great Recession, was fired by the enterprise he worked as financial professional for. After the job loss, he did not find any full-time jobs and thus he started moving from one short-term contract to the next. When Donald discovered TaskRabbit, “he found a way to staunch the financial haemorrhage” (pg. 61). As such,



TaskRabbit represented, for him as a Struggler, a source of much needed cash even if it does not guarantee any contractual/economic stability, any real flexibility in time schedules or any autonomy in working.

The “Strivers” are those that have a stable job but use the sharing economy in order to have extra money and a more comfortable lifestyle, or to make a transition to a new business. An example of a striver, which the author reports in the book, is related to the story of Austin, a full-time engineer with a relatively high income who makes extra money working for TaskRabbit in the evenings or during the weekends.

The group of “Success Stories” is composed of those who have gained profitable conditions from the gig economy, such as autonomy, a flexible schedule and money. Ryan, one of the interviewed, age twenty-seven, fits well with this ideal type. When he moved to New York City after college, he started to rent out one of the bedrooms of his rented flat using the Airbnb app. Given the economic success of this activity, Ryan and his partner considerably increased their business, renting, at the time of the interview, six apartments – thus making significant money. Ravenelle makes the readers aware that it is important to consider there are a myriad of workers that are placed in the spectrum of the three ideal types.

In the second part of the book, the author attempts to provide some parallels between the working conditions in the gig economy, and those at the time of the early industrial age. Even if nowadays many workers benefit from the rights gained during the last centuries such as the minimum wage, the forty-hour work week, and the recognition of trade unions as representatives of workers, Ravenelle undoubtedly states that this is not the case for the majority of workers of the gig economy. In a nutshell, the author’s thesis is that “a quick historical review of labor shows that for all its focus on technology, the sharing economy is truly a throwback to earlier age.” The main proposition here is that most of the sharing economy platforms do not provide any workplace-safety protections because workers are classified as independent contractors. As such, they are outside the coverage of the National Labor Relations Act and the authority of other unions.

A key issue is when the author discusses the promises of the sharing economy as a new and idyllic form of work organization. She convincingly argues that the gig economy does not offer workers “a boss-free future where workers *control their incomes and hours*”, but instead weakens labor standards along with the assault to working conditions started at the end of the 1970s.

As regards time control, in the case of Uber drivers, it is true that they can set their own schedules; however, the monthly income guarantees

generally require that they accept about the 90% of rides. Freelance workers with Kitchensurfing have to respond to potential work within twenty-four hours. A similar situation is experienced by the Airbnb hosts who have to respond quickly to potential customers. TaskRabbit workers have only thirty minutes to reply to requests received between 8am to 8 pm – even if they are working. The algorithm of these platforms is designed to deactivate gig workers' accounts if they do not accomplish these standards.

The book explains that workers in the gig economy, even if they are told that they choose their own income, are in competition for a limited number of tasks with lots of competitors. Given that these platforms have a high number of contractors, it is obvious that this negatively affects the amount of money that workers can make. As reported in the book, “in 2014, an Uber blog post [...] noted that the median income on UberX is more than \$90,000/year/driver in New York [...]”. However, as reported in *Hustle and Gig*, tweets from the general manager of Uber in New York City, and statements from Uber's head of communications for the Americas, claim that drivers' income is between \$25 to \$25.79 an hour after Uber's commission. As such, in order to make \$90,000, Ravenelle reveals drivers should work 70 hours a week for 50 weeks a year! The explanation is that the Uber rate does not take into account that drivers have to bear the costs of gas, insurance and vehicle maintenance, and they have to account for depreciation, unemployment, health insurance, and paid time off. In fact, gig workers (about 3.4 million according to the American Bar Association in 2011), being classified by companies as independent contractors and not as employees, do not receive any unemployment benefits, paid vacation, compensation for work-related accidents, overtime, paid vacation, retirement, disability accommodation, family leave protection, protection for discrimination and the right to form unions.

Ravenelle reports that gig platforms seem to be aware of the workers' discontent. As reported in the book, when some have raised the issue of worker discontent, the Uber chief product officer declared to the Guardian “We're just going to replace them all with robots.” Nonetheless adverse conditions, some workers remain working for the gig platforms. The reasons identified by the author are different - the need for extra income, the stigma of long-term unemployment, middle age, lack of experience, need of a work schedule that is more flexible or also because gig workers have invested time, effort and resources.

The author recognizes that other models of the sharing economy that improve workers' conditions do exist. The first model is the one that



protects workers and recognizes them as employees. Munchery, a food delivery service, and MyClean, a cleaning service, are examples of gig platforms that follow the so-called human-relation perspective, hiring workers as employees and not as contractors. The second model is related to the experience of the group labelled as *Successful Workers* that, even if not covered by workplace protections, make a comfortable life in the gig economy. As the author explained, this is because *Successful Workers* are characterized by specialized skills and their own initial financial capital that enables them to have a good career. As reported in the text, “just as in the mainstream marketplace, the work that requires a higher level of capital and skill is more remunerative in terms of financial and physical rewards, but it also allows for a greater level of professionalization and creativity.” The author convincingly concludes that the sharing economy is “part of a larger trend toward reshaping the employer-employee social contract” and that this shift reshapes workers’ pay expectations. This is possible because sharing economy platforms are identified as technology companies or online marketplaces where the main component is technological business. The reality is that the economic growth of these platforms comes from people, not from algorithms and software. The main solution to the lack of rights of gig workers is called by the author *Time Rule*, which consists in a sort of legislative reclassification of gig worker, clearly determining if a worker is or not an independent contractor. Ravenelle explains that “if the hours/time of work are dictated by the employer or market, the worker is not independent”. As such, he/she must have the rights of an employee. Ravenelle’s book is well-written and is characterized by a good balance between the presentation of the typology of gig workers, as well as the description of respondents’ experiences and policy suggestions. As such, it represents an essential reading for scholars and students that want to deepen their knowledge of hidden consequences regarding workers’ conditions in the sharing economy.



**ADAPT** is a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 by Prof. Marco Biagi with the aim of promoting studies and research in the field of labour law and industrial relations from an international and comparative perspective. Our purpose is to encourage and implement a new approach to academic research, by establishing ongoing relationships with other universities and advanced studies institutes, and promoting academic and scientific exchange programmes with enterprises, institutions, foundations and associations. In collaboration with the Centre for International and Comparative Studies on Law, Economics, Environment and Work, (DEAL) the Marco Biagi Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, ADAPT set up the International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations, a centre of excellence which is accredited at an international level for research, study and postgraduate programmes in the area of industrial and labour relations. Further information at [www.adapt.it](http://www.adapt.it).

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