
Review

Digital working lives: worker autonomy and the gig-economy

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How does the gig-economy shape the lives of its workers? In *Digital Working Lives* Tim Christiaens argues that it has severe consequences for their autonomy. His analysis of this problem is both diagnostic and ameliorative. In its diagnostic mode, it explains both how the gig-economy damages autonomy, and why existing attempts to understand this problem in political theory have failed. In particular, he argues that existing conceptions of autonomy do not provide adequate grounds for improving gig-work. Christiaens' analysis is ameliorative as he seeks to mend the broken working conditions of the gig-economy.

In its diagnostic capacity, *Digital Working Lives* is a success. It provides a sympathetic but important critique of post-workerism, and a clear account of problems with the gig-economy useful to the reader unfamiliar with it. Workerist thought, developed in the mid-twentieth century, understands capital through the experience of workers and claims that changes to the organisation of capital are motivated primarily by the need to respond to techniques of refusal and resistance exhibited by employees. Post-workerism, most often associated with the work of Negri, Hardt, and Lazzarato, applied this perspective to new forms of immaterial and service labour enabled by digital and information technologies. It is in Christiaens' claim—that his alternative, 'convivial autonomy', overcomes the shortcomings of post-workerism—that I find problems. I turn to this issue at the end, with the caveat that his argument provides an important provocation that will inspire further work on autonomy in gig-work.

The first half of *Digital Working Lives* provides an account of the problems with gig-work which draws heavily on post-workerist thought. Chapter 1 explains the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist work at the origins of the gig-economy, thereby setting out the framework which grounds the analysis found in the rest of the book. Christiaens adopts a post-workerist perspective not only because gig-work is enabled by these changes, but also because it is perhaps the most commonly deployed framework in analyses of the gig-economy. The following three



chapters explore along broadly post-workerist lines how the gig-economy degrades autonomy by exploiting, alienating, and exhausting its workers. Gig-workers are exploited on this account as platforms facilitate the subsumption of what is usually considered as unproductive activity by capital (pp. 45–47). Use of platforms is encouraged in order to capture ever greater amounts of data that are leveraged to extract rent, typically through advertising, and to create an enclave in which the platform becomes the only viable way to perform a particular activity.

This extraction of data leads to a particular form of alienation. Workers are alienated from autonomous conduct insofar as information drawn from their social interactions is used to nudge human behaviour in directions that are preferable to platform owners (p. 61). Ratings systems, for example, alienate workers by providing incentives to act in accordance with decisions generated from their own activity that are not necessarily in their interests. Gig-workers are alienated, not from a species being, but from the opportunity to act autonomously on the basis of social cooperation. Both exploitation and alienation in these forms lead to exhaustion. Algorithmic management, enabled by data collection through platforms, is designed to be ruthlessly efficient. Large-scale analysis of data is used to incentivise intensive patterns of work, making use of a large reserve army of precarious labour when these standards are not met (pp. 75–77). Gig-workers are reliant on punishing work that is increasingly indistinguishable from leisure time due to the ubiquity of platform labour, pressurising their ability to balance productive and socially reproductive activities (pp. 86–89).

These three problems form a broadly post-workerist picture of the loss of autonomy. One might question some of these examples on the grounds that relationships to distributions of property and wealth are somewhat underrecognized in the analysis. Whether alienation experienced through ratings systems by Airbnb hosts, who are property owners by definition, is equivalent to those of Uber drivers, who are less likely to own property, is dubious. However, the overriding logic holds. Labourers in the gig-economy are exploited by the use of data on their activity for the extraction of rent, they are alienated by the incentivisation of particular choices based on systems of social cooperation, and they are exhausted by the precarious nature of their labour.

While post-workerism underpins the analysis of the first half of the book, the second sets out criticisms of its conception of autonomy and develops an alternative, convivial autonomy. For post-workerists, autonomy entails self-determination without the overdetermination of the capacity to actualise one's potential by capital, facilitated by the taking control of tools of capital accumulation. For Christiaens, this view fails to recognise that capitalist imperatives are embedded in technologies to be appropriated in the name of autonomy; it articulates a form of autonomy with little content beyond not being determined by capital; and it neglects the fact that autonomy is enabled by networks of care that support meaningful lives (pp. 102–109). According to this



critique, workable conceptions of autonomy which respond to the problems of the gig-economy must meet three desiderata: they need to account for the values embedded in technology, provide meaningful reasons for the pursuit of autonomy beyond being opposed to capital, and consider the role that care plays in enabling autonomous activity.

Christiaens argues that convivial autonomy, which he takes from Illich (1972), meets this challenge. Illich is critical of the motives underpinning capitalist technological development, namely, those associated with growth. From this perspective, one should be sceptical of the possibility for repurposing platforms that structure the gig-economy for the goal of autonomy. Illich proposes that convivial autonomy engages in the design of tools that support vernacular culture, or activity determined by perspectives and desires that are not subordinate to the imperative for growth (p. 120). Conviviality of this form has three conditions: independence, that is, tools which allow us to use our own reason and that are not subject to radical monopolies; self-determination, which means that these same tools should allow communities to exercise collective decision-making; and finally, resonance, which requires that these tools should also facilitate and support intimate relations that underpin social reproduction (pp. 128–130). In contrast to a conception of autonomy that is simply untethered from capital, convivial autonomy has the goal of supporting and constructing vernacular culture through the design of appropriate technological and social tools for its realisation.

In the final chapter of the book, Christiaens deploys this conception of autonomy within a reconsideration of critiques of platform cooperativism (pp. 138–140). He claims that a model of guild socialism would allow groups of workers to debate their values and reject capitalist forms of valorisation, establish hierarchies that are justified insofar as they support collective self-determination, and develop practices of work that enable resonance between work and other aspects of human flourishing. Convivial autonomy, then, might provide the basis of a cooperative model of autonomy that is not opposed to the technological structuring of gig-work, as one might expect of an approach born of degrowth. For this reason, *Digital Working Lives* provides a rich and original vision of how we might respond to the problems of gig-work, in addition to a clear diagnosis of the problems posed by the gig-economy that will be of interest to those unfamiliar with the political theory that addresses it.

I close on a critical problem that engages with the spirit of this argument. The claim that post-workerist conceptions of autonomy are not substantive enough beyond the distinction from capitalist forms of valorisation forms the primary ground of Christiaens' critique. This is a fair and well-articulated position. However, it is unclear whether convivial autonomy resolves this issue, due to a tension between two problems, one explicit and another implied. The explicit problem is that, on Christiaens' own account, Illich is reserved about what autonomy means: he 'does not demarcate a clear definition of the constituent values



of convivial autonomy' (p. 127). This turn to Illich is intended to strike a balance between substantive and pluralist conceptions of autonomy, but here it seems that the pluralist strand of the argument evacuates any substantive content from what vernacular culture might refer to in practice. Would a cooperative guild that comes down on the side of capitalist forms of valorisation be truly autonomous, for example? Here we see the implicit problem rear its head; degrowth often provides a perfectionist account of human autonomy.

Alternative models of living oblige us to restructure our desires and activities in order to see through the kind of radical transformation required for economies structured by principles other than growth. It is hard to see where the kind of localism implied by concepts like vernacular culture fit into a model of cooperative guild socialism, in which food delivery platforms still find a place as opposed to, say, local and small-scale community forms of production. Christiaens wavers between a model of autonomy that is not so empty that it repeats the problems of post-workerism nor so substantive that it works against the aim of autonomy as self-determination. A more convincing case for convivial autonomy would have perhaps unearthed and worked through these tensions that arise from a use of degrowth philosophy as a foundation for a political theory of autonomy. However, this does not detract from the work presented here so much as indicate that it has opened a rich seam for rethinking the workings of the gig-economy and the political theory of work more widely.

Data availability No data used in the this review.

Reference

Illich, I. (1972) *Tools for conviviality*. Marion Boyars.

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