

Gig Work as Migrant Work

The Platformization of Migration

Infrastructure

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There is an urgent need to center migrant experiences and the role of migrant labor in gig economy research.

- *What makes migrants try their luck on gig platforms, despite the well-documented precarity of gig work?*
- *How do they incorporate these platforms into their everyday lives and migration trajectories?*
- *To what extent & in what ways are platform companies emerging as new actors in the political economy of migration – and with what consequences?*

The Study

- Cross-national comparative study of gig economies in Amsterdam, Berlin & NYC
- 8 months of ethnographic fieldwork in each city
- Focus on app-based domestic cleaning and food delivery
- 151 semi-structured interviews
 - Amsterdam: 12 cleaners, 28 couriers (32 migrants)
 - Berlin: 25 cleaners, 30 couriers (48 migrants)
 - NYC: 22 cleaners, 34 couriers (6 migrants → language limitations)

Two critical approaches frame our analysis:

- ***Autonomy of migration***: centering migrant agency; focus on global flows of labor & capital/transformations of capitalism
- ***Migration infrastructure***: focusing on the “middle space of migration”; the intermediaries that shape migrant mobility

Gig platforms are now part of a “multitude of ‘platforms of arrival and take-off’ within, against, and beyond the infrastructures of the state.”

(Meeus et al., 2019: 2).

What happens when platforms, with their particular accumulative/extractive logics driven by investment capital and datafication, come to function as extensions of – or provide alternatives to – existing infrastructures mediating migrant labor?

Natalia (39, Brazilian in Berlin)

[W]ithin myself I was feeling horrible to be cleaning someone else's foyer [...] I was a spoilt white woman from Brazil cleaning other people's, like I saw like the tables in all the office stables and I was like 'I should be sitting there'.

It was a switch in the middle of like, I was studying about women all the time and we are like so patronising, talking about poor women, you know poor women they have to do this, you know, like they should be saved you know... It was so white privilege you know, and then I realised I'm not white. I have no privilege, and I can't find a job in my area. So yeah that's what I have to do.

And then I realized I never did it properly, because I thought that you could file online. I really thought, I really honestly thought that it was, everything like here in Germany right, like things should be online because even in Brazil you can do that kind of stuff online. And I sent them [Helping] like the document that I filled, and they said, okay you're good to go.

There are always Brazilians on the Facebook group saying, 'oh, I'm looking for a job, I accept anything, I can be a cleaner, I can do babysitting, I can do this and that' [...] I think that happens a lot in London. But I found it really interesting to see that when someone puts up, oh, this app, JOB TODAY, people will go like nuts.

Concluding/speculative reflections (1)

- Gig companies accelerate the “multiplication of labor” (Mezzadra and Nielson, 2013) and deploy new strategies for its valorization.
- This multiplication of labor simultaneously results in its renewed segmentation, through what we identify as an emerging ***app-based migrant division of labor***.
- Gig platforms are increasingly taking on an important macro-economic role as absorbers of migrant labor.

Concluding/speculative reflections (2)

- Furthermore, as investment vehicles for capital looking for potentially high returns, gig platforms likewise absorb global flows of finance capital.
- The platformization of migration infrastructure results in the ***financialization*** and ***assetization*** of migrant labor.
- As an asset class, migrant labor may have financial value. But as a workforce it is composed merely of “disposable objects”.

Thanks for your attention!