

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

**Review by Ric Kolenda**

Juliet Schor's *After the Gig* is rather unique among the recent spate of literature on what has come to be known as the gig economy. As she points out in her introduction, most work in this area is either optimistically supportive or dystopian in its criticism of this new type of work (p. 12). In contrast, Schor offers a middle path including both critique and hope, rooted in years of carefully acquired empirical evidence, and concluding with some practical solutions for making the gig economy work for everyone.

Schor's work with the [Connected Consumption and Connected Economy Project](#) is the basis for both the theoretical framework and the empirical data for this text. Reflecting over a decade of research with this project, she and her team—Schor is very keen to make it clear that this is a team effort—lucidly and systematically lay out both the history of the gig economy and the arguments pro and con. The text is loaded with illustrative anecdotes and data, all compiled in a very straightforward style that comes off as more journalistic than academic (and I mean this in a positive way).

What really sets this book apart from many others is Schor's optimism about the *true* sharing economy, which she terms 'collaborative' or 'connected consumption.' She concludes with a chapter on specific ways that the initial promise of what began as the sharing economy might be fulfilled. This chapter, entitled 'Co-ops, Commons and Democratic Sharing,' describes a small but growing segment of gig work that Schor believes holds some promise for returning to the earlier vision.

## **The unfulfilled promise of the sharing economy**

Not unlike other texts on the subject, the core of this study looks at how the changes in the sharing economy have impacted workers and consumers, sometimes positively, but more often by reducing earnings, worker protections, and consumer protections, even as consumer prices have risen.

In her early chapters, Schor surveys the literature and explicates some key definitions, even including an appendix devoted solely to terminological issues. Capturing the nomenclature of this rapidly changing sector is a challenge, and this text does as good a job as I've seen in clarifying various terms and concepts. She does, however, take for granted the term *platform* itself, which is used in this context to describe any digital meeting place where transactions occur. One key distinction made is between *capital-based platforms* (e.g., Airbnb and Getaround) and *labor-based platforms* (e.g., PostMates, TaskRabbit and Uber). This distinction creates what Schor calls the 'platform hierarchy.' Another key distinction is based in the motivation of workers: those who use

platform work for some extra cash and those who are dependent on their earnings. Both of these distinctions contribute to that hierarchy, and as in other sectors, capital is privileged over labor. This leads to very different experiences for these groups of workers. This hierarchy is exacerbated by the modern version of scientific management using algorithms to replace human managers. These algorithms appear neutral, while typically reinforcing worker inequalities.

### **Regulation, cooperation, and sharing (again)**

The final chapter explores the future of the sharing economy and ways to address the inequalities and inefficiencies of ‘platform capitalism.’ Schor begins with a lengthy discussion about attempts to regulate platforms and the backlash by companies, who increasingly are wielding teams of lobbyists and public relations professionals to oppose attempts by (mostly local) government-imposed limits on their business practices. Regulation ultimately presents challenges, both because of the jurisdictional variations inherent in local regulation, and the varying impacts on different classes of workers. One example is the oft-proposed but seldom enacted proposal making freelance workers ‘employees,’ which while offering stability and benefits for many dependent, full-time workers, might negatively affect those who require the flexibility and independence of the current arrangement. With regulation, as with many things, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

One of the most interesting concepts to emerge from the platform economy is that of ‘platform cooperativism.’ Rooted in historical cooperative models as applied to modern technology platforms, activist academics like Trebor Scholz (see his Platform Cooperativism Consortium <https://platform.coop/>) have been working to advance worker-owned alternatives to the corporate models. One recent example includes the Drivers Cooperative, a worker-owned platform of ride-hail drivers in New York City.

Ultimately, Schor is interested in advancing the concept of *collaborative consumption* that was the early promise of this sector. She ends the chapter and the book by looking at models for ‘sharing cities,’ and ways to expand this sharing globally as a critical way to address climate change.

### **Some limitations**

There are some limitations to the research. First, all of the interviews were done in the Boston area. While Schor makes a compelling case for being representative of the larger U.S. phenomenon, I would like to have seen data that captures a larger range of experience of gig workers nationally. Boston may very well be more representative than New York or Los Angeles, but I wonder how similar it is to, for example, Lincoln, Nebraska or Tucson, Arizona.

The data here is also almost exclusively qualitative in nature, mostly based on open-ended interviews. There is one quantitative dataset from Airbnb, and though I know it is difficult to get even aggregated and anonymized data from the for-profit corporations in the sector (because I’ve tried myself), I do believe more could be done to quantitatively augment and analyze what was learned from the interviews with workers.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, Schor and her team of researchers have presented possibly the strongest and most accessible overview of the gig economy to date, especially when it comes to addressing the

downside issues. I strongly recommend this book for academics and researchers, and also for anyone with an interest or involvement in the broader sharing economy. The main text is relatively short (175 pages) and well-written, and there is plenty in the appendices for those who wish to delve a bit deeper.

**Reviewer Bio**

**Ric Kolenda** is a Clinical Assistant Professor in Public Administration at Pace University in New York, former Internet entrepreneur and gig worker. His research focuses on the future of work, especially around equity for gig workers and creative economies.