My Boss is an App

An Auto-ethnography on App-based Gig-economy

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> "Mio fratello è figlio unico perchè non ha mai vinto un premio aziendale
> [...] Mio fratello è figlio unico: sfruttato, deriso, calpestato, odiato."
> *My brother is an only child because he never got a company award*
> [...] *My brother is an only child: exploited, laughed at, stepped on, hated.*
> Rino Gaetano, *Mio fratello è figlio unico* (1976)

The day starts when you want it to. Really. You just press a button and you're online, ready to pick up some rides.

Yet, I soon found myself checking the apps multiple times a day, earlier and earlier in the morning. I figured out that the best time is either before 6am or before 7am. Before 6am you have more opportunities to pick up multiple rides: people going to work, realizing they are late, and needing a ride asap, no matter the cost. That's why early mornings can be worth the effort: there are often big "surges", rides costing up to 3x the usual price. That means that I can make $12.36 per ride instead of $4.12, the normal pay for the shortest rides.

I am talking, of course, about the Uber and the Lyft apps. I am a driver for both.

Last year I moved to Pittsburgh, where my partner got an academic job. I myself have a Doctorate, but I couldn't really find a job in the academic environment when we moved. I started "ubering" as a way to have time and energy to pursue some kind of academic position, and because it allowed me to take some time off during the summer to visit my family in Europe, where I am from.

At first, I found it fascinating. A legal-sociologist by training, I was intrigued by the idea of the gamification of labour. To uber (I use the verbal form here, since I found myself saying to my partner "I'm ubering tonight" as a short way to say "I'm going to drive and I don't know neither when I will come home, nor where I am going to find myself at a certain time") is a bit like playing Grand Theft Auto. When you steal a taxi in the game, you can pick up rides and bring people to their destination for money. Of course, when you uber you don't kill pedestrians or jump on sidewalks, yet the

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experience feels strangely very similar. A light and a loud noise go off, you accept the ride, the app prompts you with directions toward the rider, you pick up the rider, then the app prompts you with directions toward the destination, you arrive at the destination and let the rider off, and then you see how much you made. So simple that language is almost not required: everything in the app is pretty much visual and very easy to follow. Now Lyft has even sent me a bright, multi-coloured LED light to put on my dashboard that changes colour when the rider gets close to the car, so I can easily be spotted by the rider (and vice versa) so, really, language is necessary only if you want to talk to riders, but not for the completion of the job.

It was definitely interesting from the intellectual perspective. But it was also a decent way to make some money without sacrificing my aspirations of an academic job. My goal became then to maximize my time on the road, to reach fast my goal (X amount of money), so then I can spend the rest of the time focusing on my academic dreams. I soon realized three things, though: first, if you double your availability, your chances of getting a ride increase; second, not all the times of the day are equal; third, the fastest way to make money quick is, of course, to catch a surge.

The first realization brought me to sign up also for Lyft. I checked with Uber one day, after waiting at the airport for almost four hours for a ride. "We don't care if you drive for Lyft as well" they told me. So I also signed up for Lyft and got a phone with a split screen feature, so I can run both apps at the same time, and turn one off when I have a ride with the other. (So much for differentiating the business model! At the end of the story, Uber and Lyft are basically the same thing: they both rely on the free labour of their contractors. Think of that next time you boycott one just to end up using the other.)

The second realization made me focus on those times of the day when people need a ride the most. That's why I wake up early in the morning. Even though I know that weekend nights are the most profitable, when I started I decided that I was not going to do nights. I've got a partner, a dog, two cats. Evenings are for us, and eventually to catch up with some reading or other fun activities, and cleaning up after drunk riders who throw up in my car is not one of those. That's why I wake up early in the morning, to see how much need there might be. This "need" is measured by the third realization: that a surge ride (or "prime time", as Lyft calls it) is the one you want. Surge pricing happens when there are more riders than drivers in a specific area. This drives up the price of the ride so that "those who really need a ride can get one", in Uber jargon. We know what that means – of course, those who can *afford* a ride will get one, while the others will arrive late to work on public transportation. Yet from my seat – the Uber/Lyft driver's seat – those are the rides you want: to be paid more for the same number of miles and same amount of time. This increase can be dramatic: I gave rides that were 400 % more than the usual price, giving me a wide smile for the entire duration of the ride. These rides happen rarely: in Pittsburgh it's usually after games, during a heavy thunderstorm or snowstorm, on Saint Patrick's Day – ironically, after

the Women's March. Due to the nature of the surge, these are temporary, requiring the driver to be at the right place at the right time. That's why I wake up early in the morning: if it is rainy or snowy, you can be assured that 15 minutes before 7am or 8am there will be a surge: people realize they are late, that the weather is gross, the buses might be stuck in traffic or may never even come, and that they need to be at work soon. Price goes up (traffic as well) and drivers are happy. Sort of.

Because when you are in a surge, you know it won't last for long, so you need to bring your rider to the destination, and hope that the destination is also in a surge area (surge pricing is different in different parts of the city, of course). When I pick someone up at a 70 % surge I'm happy as a clam until I realise that the person needs to go way out in the suburbs. Great ride, good pay and all, but then I am stuck 20 miles from the surge, and I have to suck up the gas, traffic, and time to go back to pick up the next ride, which can well be 5-10 miles away. Because – here's the trick – I'm being paid for the mileage and time that the rider is in the car. Before and after that, I'm on my own, and I have to pay for my time and my gas.

I am not complaining, don't get me wrong. After all, I am lucky compared to many, many other Uber and Lyft drivers, both in Pittsburgh and in other cities: our family is financially stable; the car I am using has been paid in full already; we don't have kids to juggle around and to save for; and I have a 4WD, which means I can go out when the weather sucks and pick up expensive rides while other drivers are stuck in their driveway.

But this job – with all its perks, such as the luxury of signing on and off whenever the hell I want – is wearing on me.

I remember describing – in 2014 – the concept of precarity to my American students visiting Italy for a study abroad program. They looked puzzled, and at a certain point they said: "that's what it has always have been in the US: it's being stuck in a temp job".

That definition troubled me. The use of "being stuck", for instance, subtends a fault of the worker – you're stuck in a series of menial jobs because you either don't apply yourself enough, or because you don't focus on what you want to do/become. But also, the use of the term "temp job" is misleading: a temp job is possible when either there is a proper job that needs to be temporarily covered (someone is sick, a pregnancy, etc.), or when there is more demand for jobs that have a temporary nature (Christmas shopping, summer resorts, etc.). This mix of temporality and lack of drive did not sit well with me.

The main issue is that precarity is not just "jumping from a job to another" and not having the possibility or capacity to hold a steady job. It is more about the artificial creation of a scarcity of steady jobs that pushes everybody to jockey for the desirable ones. And which forces the rest of us into positions of precarity.

To hire a precarious worker is cheaper than hiring a normal one. And when there are many people looking for jobs, it becomes a race to the bottom – to those who are more

desperate, and thus willing to accept a job for less and less money, with fewer and fewer benefits.

Now, especially in academia, the idea of merit always guided the discussion: those with merit will rise to the top, while the others will find different employment. But in reality, the very idea of merit is full of pitfalls. We love to think that we actually deserve our jobs – that our research is top of the line, that we worked hard, that we are experts in our fields. And still I meet plenty of people with menial jobs who *did* work hard; their research *is* top of the line; they *are* experts. Yet, they are scraping by.

The problem is that we let even academic jobs to be subjected to the logic of the market, as any other job. Sometimes your skills are precisely the ones that a specific position requires. Sometimes you don't have kids – or your kids are already grown up, or your parents or family can take care of them for free – so to accept a labour-intensive position that might be relevant for future growth is possible. Sometimes you are citizen of the right country, making it possible to accept a job that otherwise would have been unacceptable for bureaucratic reasons. Sometimes you connected to the right person at the bar after the conference. Sometimes your teaching or research is not seen as a threat to your students (Marx? You teach Marx to students? Are you a communist? Should we be worried? This actually happened to a friend of mine). Sometimes you see a notification from the right Facebook friend mentioning a position you would not have found otherwise. Perhaps you were hired at a time when they were hiring a professor every month, and when publishing one article every year or two was plenty. Perhaps you are the son or daughter of doctors or professors (I know, this sounds like the classical complain of the Italian PhD student, but lots of places are becoming like Italy: we Italians hoped that Berlusconi was an Italian anomaly, and instead you get the USA of Trump and you start wondering if Italy is actually a window into a dystopian future rather than one into the stagnating past). Sometimes you have gone to excellent schools since you were a toddler. Sometimes your skin is the right colour. Sometimes your family was not even interested in buying a newspaper – let alone a book – because "who needs to read if you have a TV". Sometimes you speak the right language as a native. Sometimes you could spend all your teenage years traveling abroad rather than flipping burgers and serving ice cream. Sometimes your merit counts enough not to embarrass those who decided to hire you instead of someone else.

What I'm trying to say is that merit counts for sure. But it is not all merit. Dumb luck, as they say in Italy, sometimes *is* a great substitute for a well-planned plan.

But there are other, specific reasons that this particular job is wearing on me.

First of all, there is the semi-constant humiliation of the comments like "you've a Ph.D. and you're driving an Uber?" as if this was a sign of failure, a clear statement about my incapacity to get a "better" job. Sometimes the humiliation is so great that I lie. I say things like "yes, I drive for Uber, because I am thinking of writing a piece on precarity: this is a good fieldwork" (and here it is, an article! The proof that I was not just ubering!). The reality is that, to be honest, I wish I had an academic job that pays

also for the summer, when I would love to visit my 85-year-old dad and my 73-year-old mom who cannot travel that easily anymore and are stuck 7000 miles away. I wish I had a job that allows me to study, and do research, and teach, and advise students, and go to conferences, and meet with colleagues for research partnerships, and go to talks in the middle of the afternoon. I wish I could write emails with an .edu appendix, showing all those people who thought I was smart, but not *that* smart, that I worked hard and I got where I wanted. I wish.

Instead I got a series of adjunct positions that brought me very little money, and less time to do any of those other things. I got interest from a publisher who disappeared as soon as its editor read a sample of my writing (was it that bad? Can you tell me what's wrong with it, sir? No answer. Just ghosting). I got beaten down by not being clearly in one discipline, especially in those institutions that boast on their homepages words like "multidisciplinarity" and "multicultural". I got offered, and accepted, adjunct positions for $2,000 a term per course, with a cap of three courses per year in that institution.

And you can say that this is the life of many people with a Ph.D. Nothing new there. And I understand and agree, although that does not make me any less angry at the (academic) world.

Instead, we should be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in precarious positions in academia. To be precarious is not necessarily all the fault of the precarious person. And to be fully employed – maybe tenured! – is not all the merit of the fully employed person either. We should stop thinking of ourselves as *fabri fortunae suae*. If part of our life is determined by our actions, not all of it is – as the guy hit by a meteorite once said. We should stop acting as if our jobs and careers are entirely defined by us. And, conversely, that the lack of job or tenure is all the fault of those who didn't get it.

I know this is a delicate topic that might irritate many. But it is also at the core of a sense of solidarity that is, right now, mainly missing. As in the song by Italian singer, Rino Gaetano quoted above, "my brother is an only child" because I cannot really imagine it is not completely and entirely his responsibility if he finds himself in such situation. The narrative of merit has permeated us all so intimately that we cannot really think that "we" – employed and maybe tenured – are fundamentally the same as those adjuncts or baristas. We thought class was a thing of the past – something for old school Marxists. Yet we in academia are still in a class-based society, created and perpetuated by our feelings of deserving the job that we got (good or bad); that merit counts, and that, at the end of the story, those without a job "it's a little bit his/her fault".

Don't get me wrong: I am not saying that all precarious workers are saints, all without sins, all victims of an unjust world. What I am saying is that those with a solid job do not necessarily develop a feeling of solidarity because we are taught to distrust our brothers and sisters rather than the system. It is easier to say that the person who doesn't want to take a job that demands 20 hours/week of teaching/prepping/grading for $200/week and no benefits with just the vague possibility of a better job in the future is a snobby brat who doesn't want to pay their dues, who is not willing to make

sacrifices now for a better future. It is easier to say that they did not focus enough on their career, and on publishing, that they are not motivated enough. It is easier, in substance, to blame individuals for lack of effort rather than a system of privilege that rewards some because it can count on the low-cost labour of many. The fact is: we need broken people. They are the ones taking on the costs of the dream – the dream of hard work that pays off: an office, research money, time for research, teaching any course that I can dream up, having T.As, having a sabbatical for Pete's sake! As in many other fields, the underpaid hard work of the many makes possible the narrative of hard-work-that-pays-off of some.

We all believe in a dream that rests on the ashes of thousands of broken dreams.

Here's what one of those broken dreams sounds like.

Since I came back from Europe last September, I realised that Lyft introduced what they call "power zones". Those are areas that, at certain time of the day, guarantee a higher paying ride if you are in them. While surge (and prime) pricing depends on the location of the rider, the "power zones" depend on the location of the driver. If you are in a specific area of the city, let's say, at 8am, you are going to have a ride that Lyft guarantees to pay 60 % more, no matter where the rider is located. These areas are known in advance – there is a weekly plan about them – so drivers can know where to go, and when to go there, if they want higher paying rides. This is, of course, a positive thing for drivers: I can decide in advance when to work, so I don't need to stare at my cell phone screen hoping for a surge – or be disappointed that I am home with a beer when a surge occurs. I can plan my life a little more predictably. But this also creates a very strange type of feeling: I get antsy if I decide to stay home when there is a "power zone" active. While at the beginning I was being very careful about stopping at my monetary goal each week, I am now much more susceptible to those temptations of higher output for the same amount of input. My car had to be repaired for several thousand dollars (the hidden cost of bad roads and a lot of driving – more than 1500 miles a month), and this triggered the, perversely logical, desire to drive *more* to pay for those repairs, and to make more money every week.

In addition to the "power zones", Lyft also introduced a lot of other tricks to keep their drivers on the road. The worst one is what they call a "streak" bonus. Since most Lyft drivers drive also for Uber, Lyft randomly offers a bonus if you complete three, four, five rides in a row, without going offline (which translates into: if you don't drive for Uber between rides). Those bonuses seem to happen randomly, as I mentioned, even though they are more likely to happen when a surge is predicted (Saturday nights, especially after a game, etc.). You receive an sms – you may or may not be online, meaning that you might be out with friends and you receive a text telling you that there is a "streak" bonus happening – and you have to pick up the first ride by the time set by Lyft.

Here's an example: "Get a $15 streak bonus by completing 3 Lyft rides in a row. Accept or pick up the first ride between 6pm-7pm to cash in."

This means that, if you pick up the first ride between 6pm and 7pm and then you keep driving for at least two more rides you will get $15 extra. That's $5 per ride more, if you consider the average. *Caveat*: if you break the streak, though, you don't get the bonus.

Therefore, what actually happens is that the last ride, and only the last ride, is worth $15 more. Which means that you will stay online, and accept *any* ride, until you get your bonus. I got requests for rides that were 16 miles away – 45 minutes in the middle of a 10-inch snowstorm – to pick someone up for an extra $15. If I refuse that ride, the streak is broken, so I won't have any extra money if I do not accept.

Now, I did study logic at university, and I know that this reasoning is full of pitfalls (not unlike Pittsburgh's roads). But it is also psychologically extremely convincing. It is hard to say "no" to an *extra* when it is right there. It is easy to forget that you have a partner waiting home for dinner and to call her to say "I've got this last ride, honey, and it is half an hour away" or, worse, "I am one ride short for the bonus, and nobody is calling: I don't know when I will be home, because now it's 8pm, and people are out eating and drinking, maybe at around 9pm things will get going again". It's difficult to say no, not so much because you really need that money, but because you have been taught your whole life that opportunity knocks, and you need to be there answering, like a good neoliberal subject.

When the "ride request" noise goes off, you just tap "accept", no matter how far the rider is. It might be anti-economical, but I will get those extra $15, dammit. I will catch that opportunity.

Post Scriptum: I wrote this piece a few months before getting offered a temporary position at the University of Pittsburgh, where I am a Visiting Lecturer in Urban Studies, starting in the Fall of 2018. I internally debated what I should do about this specific piece for some time: after all, I can still think of myself as a precarious worker, even though not as precarious as a few months ago. But I have a position now: what legitimacy do I have if I speak from a position of (relative) privilege? Here's my answer: I opted for the publication nonetheless. Because I don't want to forget the struggles I, myself, experienced, and the effects that everyday decisions have on my colleagues. Now it is all out there, and I will be also publicly responsible for decisions that I might have to make in the future, concerning the hiring of other (more) precarious brother and sisters. So check my behaviour around this topic: it takes a village.