

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

---

Volume 9  
Issue 1 *We Are the Crisis*

Article 9

---

2020

## Speculations on Solidarity: From Fordism to the Gig Economy

Kendra Roedl

*Macalester College*, kroedl@macalester.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries>

---

### Recommended Citation

Roedl, Kendra (2020) "Speculations on Solidarity: From Fordism to the Gig Economy," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol9/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

## Speculations on Solidarity: From Fordism to the Gig Economy

Kendra Roedl

**Abstract:** *In this paper, Roedl traces the decline of worker solidarity starting with labor's heyday in the 1930s and beforehand through an analysis of Fordism, post-Fordism, and ending on the recent phase of the gig economy. She employs Marxian theory on the base and superstructure to explain how economic phases have always been used to push free-market ideology, but differences in power workers leverage particularly between New Deal Fordism and the hyper specialized, hyper individualized gig economy have reinforced liberal and neoliberal ideology, and prevented unity and solidarity among workers of today.*

**Keywords:** *Labor Studies, Postmodernism, Fordism, Gig Economy, Solidarity, Liberalism, Neoliberalism*

**Area of Study:** *American Studies*

### A Fable For Tomorrow<sup>1</sup>

There once was a city in America where all workers lived in solidarity and held corporations to high standards. The city lay in a midst of industries, where when coalyard workers and truck drivers struck, everyone else stood behind them. When nonunion trucks tried to enter the city, strikers and sympathizers held pickets at fifty roads blocking their entrance. When a union was not recognized, women and those not a part of the trade banded together to hand out leaflets and ran a kitchen supporting strikers and sympathizers. When automobiles were needed to get to pickets, mechanics serviced them. When strikers or sympathizers got sick, the strike hospital took care of them.

Along the streets, strikers engaging with the unemployed to reduce the availability of scabs delighted the workers eye. Even though it was winter, 35,000 workers of other trades

---

<sup>1</sup> Houghton Mifflin Company and Carson, *Silent Spring*. This section is inspired by and written in the style of the first chapter of *Silent Spring*.

started a sympathy strike. The strike was so organized it effectively shut down the city until demands were met, as non-striker support was in the tens of thousands.<sup>2</sup>

Then a strange disease spread across the area and everything started to change. Where the coalyard stood was a shiny highrise. Everything was unrecognizable and people were sparse. Two friends who were workers at the coalyard suddenly did not recognize each other as though they had dementia, or was it the bags under their eyes and light blue on their face they got from looking down that distorted them?

There was an unsettling emptiness. Public space, for example, where had it gone? People only spoke of it negatively; of crime, pollution, and homelessness. One of the once-friends received an automated phone call notifying the man he had been laid off. The other man has no reaction despite being able to over hear what just took place. The now unemployed man is unphased as well, as he presses a button and his outfit and hairstyle change completely. Who is controlling these men?

In a more crowded area a woman trips and falls, cursing out the imperfection in the concrete. She holds her bloody knee on the ground as no passerbys blink an eye, as if they were robots.

No foreign or extra terrestrial outsider had taken over the U.S. The people had done it themselves.

## **Introduction**

---

<sup>2</sup> Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*. 20-21

This city in America does in fact exist and the tale at the beginning portrays the 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis. The end of this story, though it is entirely fictional, is meant to bring reflection upon to the parts of our society that isn't far from this. In many ways I find the 1934 strike harder to picture due to the fall of solidarity that has come with the changing demands required of workers in today's economy. Though this was a particularly lauded strike due to the unprecedented levels of solidarity that formed, throughout the country during the 1930s the belief that "an injury to one is an injury to all" was widespread, and "when one union's picket lines were attacked by police, all unions in a given locality threatened general strike."<sup>3</sup> The belief of individualism as anything besides natural, is perhaps the hardest part of picturing this strike, and more importantly this society, but what has brought me to this topic. As a scholar with an interest in the labor movement I had heard about the strike, but as a worker in Minneapolis, I would be none the wiser to this type of coordinated action between workers and the employer. This drastic ideological difference we see between then and now, even within the same city, begs the question that scholars and activists have already been asking, that is, what happened? I, however, am interested in taking this a step further into the present and asking what is happening, and what changes mean for the future of worker solidarity, if there is any.

In this paper, I start by identifying the worker successes in Fordism, where they came from, and most importantly, the effects of Henry Ford and his business model had on society, going into the cultural and social realms. I trace this by starting at the beginning of the 20th Century, when the first plant opened, to the Depression, the New Deal and the unrivaled strength of solidarity in the 1930s, and the peak of of Fordism and union membership in the 1950s. I use

---

<sup>3</sup> Boyer, *Labor's Untold Story*. 282

Marx's theory of the base and the superstructure to understand the many levels that all economic phases through today operate on that influence all facets of our society, that in turn maintain or disrupt the labor relations. I start analyzing our current condition with the fall of Fordism and entrance of postmodernism, writing on the effects of ideologies both on economic policy, but also the psyche, that have pushed us away from collectivity toward individualism. I then apply all of these logics to one of the most individualizing sectors of our economy today: gig workers. In each of the following sections I question or explain my main concern, which is how economic changes in the past century have impacted society beyond the level of economics, affecting culture, family structure, social relations, and our attitudes toward work and common interests/solidarity. I see liberalism as having worked alongside Fordism and post-Fordism to inform our postmodern state which has perpetuated in itself a disoriented understanding of power exacerbated under neoliberalism. My approach for this project identifies that the ideological shift happening throughout the country spans much further than the few decades I discuss, and is more extreme than someone my age could gather from lived experiences. Due to the confines of this project, I do not seek to discuss in detail every change to our economy, culture, and workforce spanning as far back as the 1930s, but explain major economic phases and attitudes that our current condition has either stemmed from or deviated from.

### **Fordism and Corporate Paternalism**

The post-Depression, post-WWII New Deal economy in the 1950s saw the largest union membership in the country, at 35% of all private-sector workers, not to be rivaled since.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Greenhouse, "Union Membership in U.S. Fell to 70-Year Low Last Year"; Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor*. 72

Fordism, following many methods of “scientific management” a part of Taylorism, revolutionized factory work, from assembly line production to managing employees’ personal health and social lives in order to boost and maintain productivity. The latter took the form of things like expecting sobriety and attention to the family of employees, who were men, as well as offering a social wage, also known as benefits. In a booming economy, with New Deal policies still in effect bolstering unions, and providing social welfare programs where employers wouldn’t, as well as nearly full-employment and other companies following suit of Henry Ford by offering competitive wages and company benefits, and high-consumption crucial to the profitability of Fordism, “labor was able to exert a historically unparalleled level of countervailing pressure on both the governments and corporations” according to Jeremy Gilbert, based off of the fact that it was difficult to replace workers who were less complacent<sup>5</sup>. This perpetuated in itself higher standards of employers, as companies were in competition for fewer and fewer workers, having to continuously offer higher wages and better benefits to appeal to these workers, contrary to today where workers compete for fewer and fewer good jobs, forcing them to accept lower wages and no benefits. The robust middle class that New Deal policies and industrialism brought to the 1950s was largely impacted culturally and ideologically by Henry Ford’s business plan starting with the first Ford plant in 1913 affecting American values, family structures, economy, and the role of the individual, among other things, exemplifying Marx’s theory on the base and the superstructure, that is evident today, but has evolved based off of a changing labor-relations within the base.

---

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, *Common Ground*. 10

I seek to analyze Henry Ford, not as an exception, but as someone of supreme influence to ideas both instilled into and already held by other capitalists and entrepreneurs of his time. Similar to Frederick Winslow Taylor, Ford boosted production through a systematized and scientific level of management, which dealt with what workers did on their time off as well as their time at work. Additionally, Ford sought to curtail undesirable or deviant behavior through the factory floor by their contracts of employment, in a highly paternalistic fashion. By promising a more-than-competitive wage for its time known as the Five Dollar Day, Ford instilled a set of values in his workers through rules and practices, which had a great impact the country then and today.

The Ford Motor Company had a “sociological department” who assessed auto workers determine their eligibility for the high wage. This team, conducted investigations to detailing the workers’ marital status, dependents, nationality, religion, home ownership status, amount of mortgage or rent, debt, remittances, amount of savings and life insurance, family diet, health, recreation, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Ford’s intentions, as the questions of this investigation might not suggest, were not to discriminate based off of certain criteria of these interviews, but to determine the character of the man and his willingness to conform to Ford’s rules that he claims came first to benefit the worker and not the company such as sobriety and attention to the duties of fatherhood and being a husband.<sup>7</sup> In fact, these interviews were often conducted with interpreters, as Ford hired immigrants, eager to instill “improved moral and social conditions”<sup>8</sup> of the U.S. into a rapidly growing sector of the workforce. This included teaching English in which case the company set up english-learning school within it. For the most part, Ford hired rather

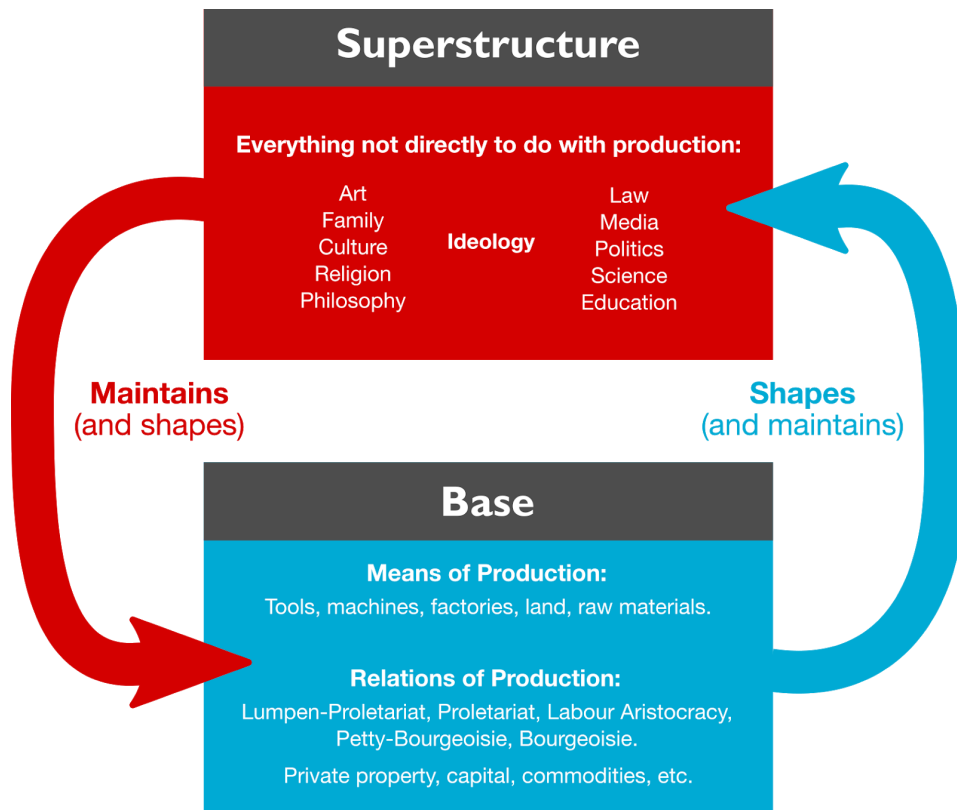
---

<sup>6</sup> Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*. 28

<sup>7</sup> Relations, *Industrial Relations*. 7627-31

<sup>8</sup> Relations. 29

indiscriminately, employing immigrants, ex-convicts, people with disabilities, and African-Americans, sparking much of the Great Migration from the South, to Detroit in particular to work at his plant. This was both an execution of his moral agenda, which was used to financially benefit his company, whether or not one thinks it was the primary effect, and also to attract workers least likely to unionize and provide them an alternative.



**This moves in a spiral pattern.  
The base is generally dominant.**

9

To employ Marx's idea of the base and superstructure, we can look at the widespread effects on culture and society from Ford's company's policies and procedures. As the capitalist,

<sup>9</sup> Alyxr, *English*.



Ford is both a relation of production, as does he have control over much of the means of production, those being the factories, tools, the land to an extent, and the raw materials once they reach his hands. The way he manages these things, and his employees as described, has had many effects on things not directly related to production, the base. Through a gendered division of work, Ford's model helped to both create and maintain certain gender roles in the workplace, and at home, as he idealized through his plan that a man could support his family by working full-time for his company assuming the role of the wife to take care of the home and children. Ford imposed personal and religious beliefs regarding drinking which worked to subvert the act through his rhetoric of "prevent[ing]... human frailty from falling into habits or practices detrimental to substantial progress in life"<sup>10</sup> which were also largely xenophobic<sup>11</sup>.

Geo-spatially, Ford's hiring of African-Americans altered the U.S. population distribution, creating a long chain of effects within the superstructure like politics and culture. Through paternalism and corporate welfarism Ford was vehemently anti-union which brings us to the ways that the superstructure in turn maintains the base. Ford's business plan that included very high wages and competitive benefits was one way he worked to prevent unions from being formed at his plants. Hiring workers that might have a difficult time getting a job somewhere else, like Blacks, the disabled, and ex-cons, was his "insurance".<sup>12</sup> The list of effects onto the superstructure that maintain Ford's idealized economy could go on, and lest we forget the effects workers a part of the base had on the superstructure. Ford's belief that government should play a minimal role in the market, i.e. laissez-faire capitalism, undoubtedly was impacted and had an

---

<sup>10</sup> Relations, *Industrial Relations*. 7627

<sup>11</sup> Ford cites heavy drinking to be characteristic of Poles, and notes that since his employment of them, drinking has gone down. (Relations. 7628)

<sup>12</sup> Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*. 43.

impact on American economics. Companies like Ford and others spanning before it that provided benefits primarily to retain works who would not unionize sparked a movement at the beginning of the 20th Century known as welfare capitalism. “By pursuing welfare capitalism, they endowed the movement with an aura of technological inevitability. Thus, despite its shortcomings—coverage was limited and benefits meager—welfare capitalism came to be seen as America’s future”<sup>13</sup> This burst, however, became halted and declined with the Depression as some companies did not succeed it, and additionally New Deal policies bolstered unions and implemented social welfare diminishing its presence in corporations.<sup>14</sup> Important to understand however, in both the duration of Fordism and especially in understanding how we have reached our current condition, where welfare is hard to come by from either your job or the state, is the dynamism of this theoretical model. As Raymond Williams puts it, “we have to revalue ‘the base’ away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Disorienting Effects of Post-Fordism and Liberalism**

As consumption slowed down and production started being exported abroad, capitalists responded with flexible accumulation, entering an era known as post-Fordism. Rather than having a plant produce an entire product, niche markets began forming, and factories began outsourcing a specialized product. This mode allowed for more changes in market demands of products, and “just-in-time” production that produced only to meet demand and not on a mass

---

<sup>13</sup> Jacoby, “The Coming of Welfare Capitalism.” 20

<sup>14</sup> Jacoby; Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor*.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.” 6.

level to cut costs. One of the largest social and cultural impacts of this shift was that the workforce became much more fragmented, as jobs became more and more specialized, contrary to the “democratic moment” Fordism saw with a robust middle class who were nearly all a part of some type of manufacturing job along with thousands of others doing the same job, suggesting large-scale common interest.<sup>16</sup> During post-Fordism, jobs became more and more involved in service and retail and less in manufacturing, due partially to the time-space compression happening with the rise of technology<sup>17</sup> which discouraged investors pouring money into production, which can take years to turn a profit on and instead into bank bonds which they can buy in the morning and sell at night. Just-in-time production meant that workers labored more precisely to demand, perhaps averaging a forty hour work week over the year, but working beyond that during periods of peak demand, and not working as much in the off time. As production got subcontracted and specialized, becoming able to accommodate quickly changing consumer demands, that were in turn becoming specialized to create new demand and appeal to niche markets, and as we saw the base continuously influence the superstructure in order to increase productivity and maximize profit, the postmodern society that gave way to our current condition was born, and not only fragmented the workforce, but culture as a whole.

The widening of surplus labor due to market recessions and the capacity for flexible specialization meant employers could draw from a wider pool of labor with higher expectations of the employees as they were in greater competition for full-time full-benefits jobs as these jobs decreased with the use of subcontracting, short-term, or part-time employment. From the proliferation of the Protestant work ethic, to Taylorism influencing playground design structure

---

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert, *Common Ground*. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

at the start of the 20th Century so that play and exercise is regimented, a society largely structured around being good workers was not born during the post-Fordist age.<sup>18</sup> However, it was during this era that there was a push by students, parents, corporations, government, and media for schooling to value employability above all else at the level of production of knowledge, going beyond simply teaching students order and obedience.<sup>19</sup> This marks an effect on ideology surrounding the value of education from labor relations. Concurrent to this shift now identified as part of postmodernism, was another aspect of it that came both from the lack of a shared worker identity as was the effect of the base on creating new markets and therefore products at the level of demand and desire through the targeting of different identity groups and creation of niche interests. As David Harvey puts it "The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodifications of cultural forms."<sup>20</sup>

It is commonly held that identity politics emerged with the demise of class politics following Fordism, during which there was not a common class interest given the higher mobility of capital and higher competitiveness of jobs that became more and more specialized and of varying quality allowed of them by excess labor, leading to the increased identification with other sites of political identity. Wendy Brown enters this discussion not to dispute this, but to refigure the understanding of the emergence of identity politics as "partly dependent upon the demise of a critique of capitalism and of bourgeois cultural and economic values."<sup>21</sup> In other

---

<sup>18</sup> Fisher, *Urban Green*. 26

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert, *Common Ground*. 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. 156

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*. 59.

words, she is suggesting a type of assimilation taking place of “African American, feminist, queer, or Native American ‘values’ and cultural styles” to be less counterhegemonic to capitalism, as well as a diminishing leftist tradition. The connection between the emergence of identity politics and the understanding of declining solidarity I wish to present has to do with individuation present in identity politics which reveals the mechanisms of this assimilation and declining critique of capitalism: liberalism. Liberal discourse, Brown writes, “recolonizes political identity as political interest,”<sup>22</sup> which has been used as a mechanism of disorientation of power, or the postmodern effect of systems of power being decentralized and lying within many other systems and relations, but in itself the pillars of liberalism are capitalistic, and thus I identify the emergence of identity politics as both a tool and effect of liberal ideology, and seek to understand how else this ideology came to dominate.

It is important to first understand that modern liberalism has been a dominant ideology since the Civil War, and has been used, in the faction of Progressive liberals, to incentivise small businesses and protect workers, as it was thanks to Progressives we saw responses to things like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.<sup>23</sup> Advocating for improved working conditions, and for the protection of minority workers, however, is in no way opposed to the free-market capitalist pillars of liberalism. Stanley Aronowitz explains the psychology of liberalism to be steeped in reformism, and cites the belief that capitalism could be reformed to have some validity during the peak of worker power during mass unionism in the 1930s but that the little material change to come in years following proved otherwise. Reformist ideology has prevailed in mainstream

---

<sup>22</sup> Brown. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor*. 55

liberal and left-liberal politics, but with postmodernity, fragmentation of power, and the rise of identity politics, and as I will discuss, neoliberalism, solidarity has nearly disappeared.

The deterritorialization of production that has taken place since post-Fordism and has been increasing since the expansion of free trade agreements in conjunction with postmodernist tendencies towards specialization and individualization at the governmental, corporate, and consumer level, have fragmented power, disorienting us from an understanding of who we are, why we are, how we are, and where we are. As the relationship between the base and the superstructure becomes more complicated with the two often existing geographically disparately, the liberal subject is seen not as an effect of power (socialized a certain way from existing power) but in themselves powerful as an individual.<sup>24</sup> Frederic Jameson remarks on the reconfiguring of power and production geospatially as giving rise to the creation of a “global multinational culture which is decentered and cannot be visualized, a culture in which one cannot position oneself.”<sup>25</sup> This is exacerbated under neoliberalism but born under liberalism.

One mechanism we see of fragmentation and disorientation under liberalism beyond the deterritorialization of production and therefore power are the bureaucratization of fulfilling the tenets of liberalism, those being securing individual liberties while maintaining the free-market, that we see through the creation of positions of power that are unelected. Another schema of the disorienting effects of liberalism is the naturalization of the civil society, that is conceiving of the civil society, like the family, to be of human nature, and less malleable than the state.<sup>26</sup> This distracts from the many ways the civil society exercises power in ways parallel to or in opposition to state or capital power. The last mechanism of disorientation and fragmentation

---

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*. 145

<sup>25</sup> Stephanson, “Regarding Postmodernism. A Conversation with Fredric Jameson.” 33.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*. 180.

under liberalism I wish to discuss, though I do not want to limit the list to just these, is the fragmentation of the working class discussed prior due to specialization and flexible accumulation. Post-Fordism saw a more and more separated workforce of workers doing increasingly diverse jobs demanding different needs of workers and paying varying wages fragmenting their commitment to what felt like common issues. Additionally, even during the height of Fordism in the 1950s which had the most union membership, liberal reformism had made no significant strides since the New Deal in the 1930s until the passing of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, and the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, which was not passed by labor groups but by the black freedom movement. So while we should actually consider the 1930s to be the heyday of labor, it was in the 1960s and 70s that even the potential for labor reform left due to its inefficacy, and bringing with it and also bringing it down, the decline of worker solidarity. Taking its place: identity politics.

The rise of identity politics can largely be seen as a response to the disorienting effects of postmodernism. The specialization in flexible accumulation prohibits a common worker identity, and further, the outsourcing of industrial labor offshores and transformation to a retail, service, and information-lead economy, along with the other causes and effects of disorientation disconnects the worker from their sense of place.<sup>27</sup> The postmodern subject must then situate themselves, in which case the move has been to do amongst a common identity of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or nationality. While the proponents of identity politics may argue its potential to radically mobilize a group of people, its proximity to liberalism in protecting individual liberties, and the lack of “temporal or spatial mapping”<sup>28</sup> in the formation of an

---

<sup>27</sup> Ross and Social Text Collective., *Universal Abandon?* 48.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*. 35.

identity group, leads for a wide range of interests preventing organized solidarity within the group, let alone across identity affiliations that hold common interests.

### **The Logic of Getting By**

*“Work is no longer significant in the formation of the self...[yet] work remained the Western cultural ideal”<sup>29</sup>*

Our current condition, now several decades in the making, demands we work around the clock, whether that be to simply make ends meet, to one day break out from a precarious position, or to advance our social capital which is very much linked to our job prospects. We are now faced with the paradox that our self-identification is no longer contingent upon our labor, while the societal obsession with production has grown. A number of factors explain this paradox, several of which I have already discussed in relation to post-Fordism. In this next section, however, I will explain some more recent contributors of a society so obsessed with work we cannot distinguish it as self-identifier but a facet of every part of ourselves.

Starting most sharply in the late 1980s, job cuts, particularly following the 1987 recession and 1989 expansion of a free trade economy, but even before that in the 1970s, no longer lead to an “industrial reserve army” of the unemployed awaiting the next economic boom and instead became much more permanent. A new knowledge based economy widened the pay gap between few technologically complex jobs and many service, retail, and manual jobs that have become “deskilled.” For the first time in U.S. economic crises, quality, full-time jobs did not return after the recession, and corporate trends to downsize continued to take hold resulting in massive

---

<sup>29</sup> Aronowitz and DiFazio, *The Jobless Future*. 16.



layoffs of even layoff resistant jobs at the clerical, technical, and managerial level.<sup>30</sup> While jobs had been shifting to be more part-time, contractual, and short-term, the layoffs and lack of bounce back in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s marks the end of any widespread corporate welfare or paternalism leftover since Fordism. Companies like General Motors that helped pioneer Fordism were laying off workers in the tens of thousands. While many surely recognized the abysmal job market entering the 1990s as a failure of laissez-faire capitalism and neoliberalism, the end of securable, middle class jobs with benefits with protection against lay-offs led many in the nation to internalize a different belief.

In “A Company of One” Carrie Lane studies this shift in employment and the massive layoffs that occurred then and in the 2008 recession from an anthropological perspective, and interviews formerly white-collar workers who were laid off. What she finds is not despair at their condition, but rather assurance in the free-market, even when it is shipping their jobs off shores. The workers she interviews for the most part are not angry with their company—they do not see their lay off as personal. They are not angry when they come to terms with the fact that they cannot rely on their loyalty to a company to provide for them—their faith in individual agency is strengthened. Lane aligns these beliefs with neoliberalism permeating the country, and also as a survival mechanism—that maintaining these neoliberal ideologies and seeing and marketing yourself not to be a part of a company, but to perform a service or provide a good for one, or as she describes, seeing yourself as “a company of one”, is crucial to getting by.<sup>31</sup> This belief is also crucial to the companies profits. It isolates workers, putting them in competition with each other just for the possibility of getting by, making solidarity difficult under a

---

<sup>30</sup> Aronowitz and DiFazio, *The Jobless Future*. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, *A Company of One*.

(neo)liberal state that gives an undeserving amount of power to the individual. This is a parallel contrast to Fordism that worked also to prevent workers from organizing, but by doing so through controlling their lives in a paternalistic manner, providing for them solid wages and benefits. While her book is focused on white-collar un- and under-employment from the 1980s until 2011, when the book was published, much of it explains the logic of work today, and the attitudes of Millennials, many of whom were entering the job market during the 2008 financial crisis.

Not only is the lack of an economic boom following the 1987 and 2008 recession unique, but so is the crisis of underemployment, often overlooked by metrics of employment. Such has been the case under more precarious, short-term or part-time employment that has taken the place of full-time jobs. Amidst the Great Recession, in 2009 the unemployment rate stood at 10%, with the underemployment rate was nearly twice that 17%, both the high for the decade before and after, as well as a high in comparison to the unemployment rate that usually sits 3-5 percentage points lower than that of underemployment. While both of these levels eventually returned to pre-recession levels around 2016, the high levels in underemployment helped to normalize part-time, freelance, short-term, contractual, or otherwise “not-enough” work as a means of getting by, as was necessary, similar to the neoliberal mindset Lane discusses her informants had to adopt, that were laid off from companies they had been at for potentially decades. Alongside this rising crisis of underemployment was the rise of smartphone technology, allowing for everything we could ever desire to be at the touch of a button creating an entirely new gig economy.

## **From Just-in-Time to On-Demand: The Gig Economy**

People have been doing gigs since we started trading for goods and services, but only in the past several decades have we seen this type of freelance work explode to make up over a third of all workers.<sup>32</sup> The gig economy, also known as the side-hustle economy, is the result of the fact that it has become increasingly impossible to get by on a main hustle, that is a quality full-time job with benefits. Those entering a job market that had not bounced back since the 2008 financial crisis, let alone the 1987 recession, namely Millennials, were competing for fewer and fewer jobs despite having higher and higher degrees. While unemployment has been relatively low, underemployment remains several percentage points higher, and people are having to work several part-time jobs or gigs to make ends meet. Amongst changing many parts of our society and how we work, the proliferation of smartphone technology has allowed post-Fordist, just-in-time production to be taken a step further with on-demand goods and services of just about everything from cab rides, to groceries, to consulting, to cleaning services, to movies, to one-hour delivery of any product. App-based services like Uber have become the model for a vast variety of services, constituting much of the gig economy and becoming a source of income for millions of Americans.<sup>33</sup> This has resulted in changes to our society and are shifting how we conceive of work in more than one understanding of the word.

The manifestation of the gig economy today through app-based goods and services has had large impacts on both production and consumption. The accessibility of these things—the ease of access (pressing buttons on an app), convenience (the on-demand feature) and price— all

---

<sup>32</sup> “Intuit: Gig Economy Is 34% of US Workforce.”

<sup>33</sup> Frazer, “How The Gig Economy Is Reshaping Careers For The Next Generation.”

work to keep costs low for the consumer and corporation who can cut 30% on labor costs through going the independent contract route of not providing benefits, compensation and insurance.<sup>34</sup> These cut costs, however, have not been necessarily passed onto the worker, as overall, the traditional workers income is still higher.<sup>35</sup> The speed at which we saw app-based transactions proliferate and become popular in the U.S. economy and culture indicates not just the quick expansion of technology, but the malleability of desire to the market. Although this is not to say that the rise of these types of goods and services appeared out of thin air, because the gig economy is, at the consumer level, a technocratic and market-based solution to the problems of neoliberalism, such as insufficient public transportation, and for the worker, an opportunity to make money flexible enough to accommodate keeping up with the demands of our society today, which more and more frequently means working several part time jobs and paying for insurance outside of the job.

A quick google search of “gig economy” and specific aspects of it yields a response in news sites, blogs, and even the companies themselves that, unsurprisingly, is quite partial to this freelance work. At the top of the benefits of being a gig worker is usually the ability “to be your own boss” and the flexibility that brings. These values reflect less the unique and benevolent qualities of the gig economy, but liberal and neoliberal values and the problems with traditional work. In a fragmented, disoriented society with decisions being made about us by unknown powers constantly, and millions of consumer options marketed towards us, we struggle for control over anything in our lives. Liberalism, that tells us that before culture, we are essential independent beings, capable of power rather than effects of power,<sup>36</sup> and neoliberalism, which

---

<sup>34</sup> Hunt and Samman, “Gender and the Gig Economy.” 10.

<sup>35</sup> “The Rise of the Gig Economy | Dollars & Sense.”

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*. 145.

tells us, also falsely, that as individuals we can and should decide our own independent fate, obscures systems that control us and make our choices for us, further contributing to the disorienting effects of late capitalism. This is not to diminish the need for or belittle the desire for flexible jobs or agency in the job. Being able to choose when to work allows the contractors to take care of their family which may coincide with normal work hours, work another job, or simply work odd hours that the contractor prefers, and in any job it is important to have responsibility and to be able to make decisions. This is to say that power functions at the level of desire, and also that the appeal of gig work shows just how disoriented we have become and the efficacy of liberal and neoliberal discourse in lauding individual liberty at the expense of better benefits and compensation, and often just getting basic needs met. To reiterate, it is not because of ignorant or misguided workers that the gig economy exists and thrives, but rather a lack of quality full time jobs, inflexibility within those that do exist, and a society that pushes individualism and individual liberty, in addition to the self sustaining effects of the gig economy on society.

A big shift we have seen with app-based on demand goods and services and changing work culture is that many services previously only afforded by the upper class, like house cleaning, are now accessible and utilized by the middle classes. Even poor and working-class people use apps like Uber. This sounds eerily similar to Henry Ford's belief that his workers should be able to afford the product they make. The difference? For one, these are benefits on the side of the consumer not the worker, and secondly, even if we ignored that important fact, app-users are not using the extra time for leisure but to work more.<sup>37</sup> The availability of

---

<sup>37</sup> Smiley, "The Shut-In Economy."

on-demand goods and services thus creates a reliance that sustains itself. Poor and working-class people are forced to use apps like Uber that they likely cannot afford, in order to get to a job or job interview in an area they have been priced out of to which there is no reliable public transit. Despite what the company says, this inevitably puts them in competition with public transportation services.<sup>38</sup> As for young urban professionals that in the past could not have afforded being waited on hand and foot, the on demand economy recognizes the around-the-clock work necessary for economic security in our new day and age and is marketed as a means to be more productive, and so that we feel we have entire control on how we manage every aspect of our lives, all aspects of which are being commodified under neoliberalism. This has lead to a change in social and family structure and women's roles as well.

One of neoliberalisms mechanisms and effects is to treat every interaction as a market trade, including the most intimate of human activities like finding a partner or raising a family. Fortunately, we have apps like Tinder that make calculating a cost-benefit analysis of potential mates much easier. Although this requires meticulous work and branding on the individual's part, as other swipers on the app will also be making these judgements and calculations. Life experiences and relationships become assets. This kind of self-branding and marketing has become the norm and required for advancement socially and economically in a highly specialized economy. Again, instead of pushback, we see a response of workers that are soothed by a perceived level of control and self-actualization—even if it means being passed over by an employer or university for not stressing your time abroad in influencing your multicultural beliefs like the other contender did, or being swiped left on because you did not have enough

---

<sup>38</sup> LeBlanc, "Studies Are Increasingly Clear."

solo pictures of yourself. While these things may be frustrating, they do not represent the fallacy of neoliberalism that requires us to be our own brand to this faction of workers, but rather the failure of the individual to effectively market oneself. So instead we turn to those who have mastered it for advice, who create the discourse that sustains it. It is things like Ivanka Trump's book "Women Who Work" that scholar Catherine Rottenberg argues is exemplary of the focus of neoliberal feminism on self-improvement and work-life balance. In it, Trump takes an almost Taylorist approach to managing time in which she carves out part of her schedule to "making memories" with her children.<sup>39</sup> The fact that women constitute a larger and larger part of the workforce yet still are expected to perform most domestic tasks, suggested by lack of any ideation of work-life balance for men, is an increasingly important part of understanding the gig economy for both the worker and the consumer.

While women may still be in charge of managing the household and domestic work of cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and doing laundry, it has become easier and cheaper than ever for her to outsource these tasks to on-demand gig workers. She now has more time to dedicate to work, or other aspects of her life she considers investments. Her children may or may not see more of her, but they too will not be burdened by dishes or laundry, and instead focus on things that will lead to self-improvement. This situation is becoming true for more and more families, but still requires at least a middle class earning. What can be said about the workers who service them? For one, that domestic work is still largely done by women, just by women outside of the family that are paid. The outsourcing of domestic tasks has created demand for this labor, which has unsurprisingly been carried out largely by women.<sup>40</sup> In

---

<sup>39</sup> Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism."

<sup>40</sup> Smiley, "The Shut-In Economy"; Hunt and Samman, "Gender and the Gig Economy."

studying this gendered work, we must also consider the ways in which sectors dominated by women often have the poorest working conditions<sup>41</sup> and how that might translate to the gig economy. The direction we are turning to is one in which our lives are structured very differently depending on whether or not we can afford to have someone do our chores.

On-demand labor has created a new phase in our society which has been called the “shut in economy.” In the shut in economy, those being served have little need to ever leave their house. In a deterritorialized economy, this often means not even having to leave for work. Groceries and restaurant meals are delivered at any time, errands are run by someone else, movies are watched, and calculated relationships are formed online, all via the phone. The effects of this include the transformation of the public sphere, while extreme sounding, to be mainly constituted by the workers serving the shut ins. The shut ins no longer have to spend their time doing the basic tasks demanded of citizens, and instead can focus their time on things that will improve their station, or often more importantly, their brand. They are no longer subjected to the once equalizing arenas such as the deli counter in which their order depends on the number they pulled and not their social or economic capital, or the post-office line whose strict wooden rails service citizens in the exact order they came in. The servicer, on the other hand is, regardless of whether or not it is for an order. Perhaps this worker does only this job, perhaps others, but either way it is likely they are not earning enough to cover bills, insurance, and save for retirement. Unlike the client they are servicing, the worker does not have the time to be constantly working on self-improvement to better market themselves to employers, since they not only have to clean the client’s apartment, but their own as well. While on-demand labor has

---

<sup>41</sup> Hunt and Samman, “Gender and the Gig Economy.” 11.



expanded the availability and use of certain services from the upper class to the middle class as well, it has also created a significant and more visible disparity between the middle and upper class clients of the on demand gig economy and the lower-middle and working class who service them. These workers, isolated, contingent upon a gig, and increasingly unable to compete with a worker who is not burdened by the necessary tasks of taking care of themselves, are in no easy place to organize, though there is certainly the potential for solidarity to be formed as a response to the servant/serviced disparity that has formed. For the serviced middle and upper class workers, isolation is both a roadblock and a potential tool for building solidarity, as less-extreme cases of shut-ins experience feelings of alienation and isolation that could lead to workers banding together. This group, however would have to especially work to unlearn the logic of their worth being tied to their productivity, and their success to their own self determination.

## **Conclusion**

The dystopia depicted at the start of this paper is not a prediction but a possibility. While we have seen class solidarity become nearly dormant in the U.S., that does not mean it cannot be brought back with proper consciousness raising and an adequate understanding of how it diminished. The disorienting effects of the fragmentation of power that is a tenet of both liberalism and neoliberalism makes studying the ways in which power is exercised difficult. Along with other discourses of liberalism and neoliberalism, the inability to accurately identify power and locate one's self within a deterritorialized, postmodern state has lent a greater perceived autonomy and power in the individual, which is used as a justification for the free-market economy. The falsity of these beliefs along with no political positioning of the self

during post-Fordism, birthed identity politics, along with several different era-specific mindsets that were adopted as a means of survival within the economy that was providing less and less for workers. These mindsets that influenced behavior, worked also to reproduce the hyperindividualism and the free-market since post-Fordism. While factory workers could leverage much more power during Fordism than the current workers of our gig economy can, and treatment of and benefits to workers looked very different between these two scenes, they both depict how capitalists, and ideological discourse and policy affects the most public and most intimate part of our lives.

*Kendra Roedl is a senior American Studies major at Macalester College with minors in Political Science and Urban Studies, from Minneapolis. Outside of school, Kendra organizes with fellow restaurant workers to build solidarity and power within the industry.*

## Bibliography

- Alyxr. *English: Diagram Explaining the Marxist Base-Superstructure Dialectic. The Image Only Mentions the Means of Production without Taking into Account the Other Category of Productive Forces, Which Is Labor Power.* August 8, 2014. Own work.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Base-superstructure\\_Dialectic.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Base-superstructure_Dialectic.png).
- Aronowitz, Stanley. *The Death and Life of American Labor : Toward a New Worker's Movement.* London ; Verso, 2014.
- Aronowitz, Stanley., and William. DiFazio. *The Jobless Future.* 2nd ed. 1 online resource (xxxv, 410 pages) vols. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.  
<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=635537>.
- Bates, Beth Tompkins. *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford.* Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Boyer, Richard Owen. *Labor's Untold Story.* New York : United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, 1975.
- Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/prin031/94024068.html>.
- Fantasia, Rick. *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers.* 1 online resource (317 pages) vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.33181>.
- Fisher, Colin. *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago.* UNC Press Books, 2015.
- Frazer, John. "How The Gig Economy Is Reshaping Careers For The Next Generation,"

February 15, 2019.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnfrazier1/2019/02/15/how-the-gig-economy-is-reshaping-careers-for-the-next-generation/>.

Gilbert, Jeremy. *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*. 1 online resource (273 pages) vols. London: Pluto Press, 2014.  
<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10804925>.

Greenhouse, Steven. "Union Membership in U.S. Fell to 70-Year Low Last Year." *The New York Times*, January 21, 2011, sec. Business Day.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/business/22union.html>.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity : An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford [England] ; Blackwell, 1989.

Houghton Mifflin Company, Rachel, and Carson. *Silent Spring*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company ;, 1962.

Hunt, Abigail, and Emma Samman. "Gender and the Gig Economy," n.d., 48.

"Intuit: Gig Economy Is 34% of US Workforce." Accessed December 16, 2019.

<https://money.cnn.com/2017/05/24/news/economy/gig-economy-intuit/index.html>.

Jacoby, Sanford M. "The Coming of Welfare Capitalism." In *Modern Manors*, 11–34. Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal. Princeton University Press, 1997.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7sb1n.6>.

Lane, Carrie M. *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment*. 1 online resource (xvi, 194 pages) : illustrations vols. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2011. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10467982>.

LeBlanc, Steve. "Studies Are Increasingly Clear: Uber and Lyft Congest Cities."

chicagotribune.com. Accessed December 16, 2019.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/blue-sky/ct-uber-lyft-congestion-20180225-story.html>.

Relations, United States Commission on Industrial. *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*. D.C. Gov. Print. Office, 1916.

Ross, Andrew, and Social Text Collective. *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism*. Cultural Politics ; [v. 1]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Rottenberg, Catherine. "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism." Macalester College, November 7, 2019.

Smiley, Lauren. "The Shut-In Economy." Medium, February 18, 2016.

<https://medium.com/matter/the-shut-in-economy-ec3ec1294816>.

Stephanson, Anders. "Regarding Postmodernism. A Conversation with Fredric Jameson." *Social Text*, no. 17 (1987): 29–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466477>.

"The Rise of the Gig Economy | Dollars & Sense." Accessed December 17, 2019.

<http://dollarsandsense.org/archives/2014/0314friedman.html>.

Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," n.d., 14.