

Youth, enterprise, and precarity: or, what is, and what is wrong with, the ‘gig economy’?

Introduction

Enterprise is about making things happen... *the willingness and ability of people to be self-determining and flexible... taking control over their own lives* (Enterprise Agency, Teesside, UK, 1989¹)

Just a few years ago ...a proper job meant ...a fixed monthly salary; fixed hours, paid holidays, sick pay, a pension scheme... But *the gig economy has changed all that*. We've seen *the rise of the everyday entrepreneur*. People now own their time and control who receives their services... They can pick and mix their employers, their hours, their offices, their holiday patterns. This is one of the most significant developments in the labour market. *The potential is huge, and the change is exciting* (Damian Green, then UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 2016²).

In a previous special issue of this Journal, MacDonald (2011) argued that the youth phase provides a special vantage point from which to study processes of social change and continuity and to ask questions of wide social-scientific significance. Researching young adult's increasing engagement with the short-term, non-standard work of the 'gig economy' is a perfect example. It is valuable empirically for comprehending the flux of youth transitions - but at least as important is the way that such research can reveal the way the economy itself is changing, with wide implications for all of us, not just young adults in transition.

Narrowly conceived, the 'gig economy' refers to a process wherein short-term tasks are advertised by companies through on-line platforms with workers bidding a (wage) price to undertake the job as an independent contractor, working on a series of discrete 'gigs' (see

¹ See MacDonald and Coffield (1991).

² The Independent (2016) 'Jobs of the future may not have stable hours... DWP secretary says', 16 November. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/dwp-gig-economy-damian-green-speech-holiday-minimum-wage-sick-pay-hours-a7421071.html>

Stewart and Stanford, 2017; and the introduction to this Special Issue). Some, however, use the term to encompass a wider set of insecure working arrangements. The first argument of our paper is that it is necessary to understand the 'gig economy' as a specific example of a wider, more general experience and process of precarity.

The second argument is that although the 'gig economy' excites attention now we can see continuities with earlier forms of entrepreneurial work. Following this introduction, we reflect on research MacDonald undertook thirty years ago, in North East England. At the time, *Risky Business?* (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991) was possibly the only detailed, sociological critique of the realities for young adults involved in 'enterprise culture' under Thatcherism. We still have a dearth of qualitative studies that *get behind* what is claimed by politicians or policy makers about these 'everyday entrepreneurs', to use the phrase of the UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. By taking even just a short historical perspective, parallels in experiences of precarious work - labelled as 'the enterprise culture' then, 'the gig economy' now - can be sketched out.

In the third part of the paper, drawing on our own and others' research, and on reports and analyses by government, charities and Trade Unions, we turn our attention to the current period and the growing insecurity of working life for young adults in the UK. The examples we highlight here are: 'the low-pay, no-pay cycle'; 'zero-hours contracts'; self-employment (including 'bogus self-employment'); and, finally, the 'gig economy'. These examples confirm that the latter can be understood as a crystallisation of a more general process of precarity. They also support our third argument. There is clear need for more research, but existing studies tend to show that young adults' encounters with the new 'gig economy', and other aspects of the contemporary labour market, are typified by worsened conditions when compared with the jobs, opportunities and careers enjoyed by earlier generations. We pick out ten themes that seem to characterise these contemporary conditions and highlight how they stands at odds with more celebratory proclamations about the 'gig economy', as voiced by government Ministers and others.

‘Self-employed survival’: the ‘enterprise culture’ of the 1980s

Youth enterprise is back in fashion. Once again – just like in the 1980s, under the Thatcher government - politicians, pundits and educators urge young people to ‘raise their aspirations’ and grasp the challenge of ‘enterprise’ (see Morrin, 2018). Richard Branson is back at it, calling for ‘a nation of young entrepreneurs’ to rise from the masses of young unemployed (2011). The government’s 2011 *New Enterprise Allowance Scheme* (NEAS) reprises the original *Enterprise Allowance Scheme* (EAS) of the Thatcher years (DWP, 2017). With this, the previously unemployed participants receive business mentoring, £49 per week over 26 weeks and the possibility of applying for a business loan. By 2017, 188,000 individuals have started on NEAS but as yet there is no official evaluation of the scheme.

This is very familiar. Thirty years ago (1989-1990), MacDonald interviewed 100 young women and men (aged 16 to 30 years) from Teesside, North East England about their experiences of self-employment and the EAS. This was published as *Risky Business? Youth and the Enterprise Culture* (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991). Later, the project was extended to understand other non-standard forms of work: voluntary work (MacDonald, 1996b), ‘fiddly work’ (illicit work whilst unemployed; MacDonald, 1994); social enterprise (MacDonald, 1995) and, again, self-employment (including follow up interviews from the *Risky Business* study and new, older self-employed interviewees) (MacDonald, 1996a).

Risky Business? was probably the first serious, qualitative interrogation of young people’s encounters with ‘the enterprise culture’. Then as now there was very little official appetite for critical appraisal of enterprise initiatives via rigorous assessments of their efficacy. The popular insistence that youth ‘enterprise’, sitting alongside the apple-pie words of ‘aspiration’ and ‘self-reliance’, is axiomatically a ‘good thing’ means that these schemes are ‘doomed to success’. The study took place at the high-water mark of a Thatcherite ideology that pitted ‘the enterprise culture’ against the drag of ‘dependency culture’. Benefits were cut, the jobless were cajoled to get on their bikes and, if no jobs were to be had, the young unemployed were told to create their own. Just as then, contemporary youth enterprise initiatives are not simply technical labour market initiatives to increase self-employment. As well as an economic theory, they are part of ‘a social model which insists that we are the

authors of our own lives and the architects of our own destinies' (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). It is difficult to think of a purer instance of the 'neo-liberal project of the self' than 'becoming your own boss'.

The young people in the study were, however, far from being neo-liberal zealots for entrepreneurial self-reliance, nor even particularly aware of the ideological entreaties that circulated 'above them'. Entrepreneurial 'role models' were rarely cited. If pushed, Richard Branson was sometimes mentioned. They were ushered into self-employment by a mushrooming local 'enterprise industry' of fifty-plus agencies, comfortably funded with many millions of pounds of public money. For instance, one agency - 'Problem Solvers' - 'won' over £2 million from government to aid youth enterprise but, after much pressing, acknowledged working with only around fifty 'clients' (some of whom were also counted as 'the success stories' of neighbouring agencies). The EAS was open to benefit-claimants and provided business advice and a weekly allowance of £40 for a year (more, in real terms, than paid now by the NEAS). Businesses were typically service sector 'micro-firms' that traded on informal skills or hobbies (e.g. knit-wear production, bicycle repairs). What were their motivations, if not a personal drive towards Thatcherite philosophy? Some expressed the vague attraction of 'being your own boss' but mostly starting up in self-employment was perceived to be the only option in the face of repeated personal unemployment (and poor job opportunities).

A handful of the hundred interviewees were the '*runners*'. Family, social, cultural and financial capital seemed helpful in making these businesses successful. At least one of these – a designer clothes retail-business – is still trading today, thirty years on. 'Runners' were celebrated in the local press as the antithesis of the (alleged) 'welfare dependency' and anti-social behaviour of working-class youth (see Giazitzoglu, 2014). These were (sometimes literally) 'the poster boys' for youth enterprise; they *proved* people can 'make it' if they 'aim high' and 'became their own boss'.

In contrast, most interviewees were '*plodding along*' (their phrase), committed to businesses that were drastically under-capitalised, unprofitable and precarious. They *hoped* for success but *lived* precarity. Lillian (aged 22) said: 'I see it as just keeping my head above water'. This was 'survival self-employment' (MacDonald, 1996a). The lack of alternatives

and an opposition to being 'on the dole' pushed them to open businesses as a way of getting by and their experience of running them became one of 'just about surviving'. Success was defined modestly: 'regular work', being able to 'pay the bills' and 'some security'. 'Plodders' survived as long as they did by undercutting the prices of other firms and by extreme self-exploitation: working very long hours for no or very low pay (subsidised by free 'bed and board' from parents and by limited EAS funding).

Most of the 'plodders' seemed likely to become '*fallers*'. Indeed, fewer than one in five of those followed up were still trading two to three years later (MacDonald, 1996a). Businesses closed because of mounting debts (and sometimes bankruptcy), sheer exhaustion and a growing realisation that there really was never much chance of success. After all, just how many mobile beauticians can a local economy support? The costs of failure could be severe, emotionally and financially, and warn us that 'entrepreneurial ambitions' are *not* 'unequivocally good' (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). The *precarity* of youth enterprise is well shown by Cath's story. Interviewed in 1989, she had then been making and selling clothes from an Enterprise Start-Up Centre. Interviewed again in 1993, her business had failed, and she was unemployed, living with her boyfriend and baby, and £6,000 in debt (paying off £6 per week from her benefit money):

The Enterprise Centre said they were behind me. I won competitions: 'Best Young Entrepreneur'. I suppose it's good advertising for the government. I was led to believe I could do [it]... I was working there overnight - but it still didn't work. The prices were too low for the money and the work that I was putting in. I was working over, and over, and over again - for nothing! It was doing me in. Crying all the time. It was awful. I left it bitter.

‘Flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading’: non-standard work in the UK

There is debate about measures, trends and definitions vis-à-vis non-standard work in late capitalist, developed economies like the UK (see the introduction to this Special Issue; MacDonald, 2017) but most commentators now agree that the standard employment model ‘is less and less dominant’ (ILO, 2015; quoted in Herod and Lambert, 2016: 1) and, importantly for this discussion, this trend is most prominent amongst younger workers (Cam et al, 2003; Fenton and Dermott, 2006).

In this section we move from ‘youth enterprise’ in the 1980s to different forms of insecure, non-standard work in the current period particularly as they are encountered by young adults. We focus on: ‘the low-pay, no-pay cycle’; under-employment and the idea of the Precariat; ‘zero-hours contracts’; self-employment; and ‘the gig economy’.

The trend towards non-standard work is not always visible in UK political and policy debate. Challenged on their economic record (most recently on BBC TV news 11th December 2018), the UK Conservative government points to historically very *high* levels of employment and historically *low* levels of unemployment³. These are not obvious signals of a struggling labour market - but the UK government counts as employed anyone who does at least *one hour per week* paid-work. This *minimalist* definition also *stretches* the notion of employment to include the self-employed, training scheme participants and people doing ‘family work’⁴ (ONS, 2018a). As we will see, record high levels of ‘employment’ are to a large extent explained by soaring levels of ‘self-employment’. There are also problems with a snapshot, binary categorisation of employed-unemployed. A *dynamic* view of working lives calls into question government claims about the health of the UK labour market, as we show next.

³ In September 2018 this was 75.5% of the working age population with unemployment at 4.1% (ONS, 2018b).

⁴ The meaning of this is unclear from government documents.

The 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle

Recent research by MacDonald and colleagues has championed a dynamic view of labour market experiences. Based on long-term and longitudinal research, *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-Pay No-Pay Britain* (Shildrick et al, 2012), argued that the working lives of many working-class people are now typified by exactly that – poverty and insecurity. For young adults, a strong, 'traditional' work ethic and a preference not to claim benefits drove an enduring search for jobs in a heavily deindustrialised labour market. Lazy theories about an idle 'underclass' (e.g. Murray, 1990) had no basis in fact, but as Giazitzoglu (2014) has also shown, discursive devices that preserve class-based respectability by deflecting stigma on to 'Others' can be popular in high unemployment, working-class communities.

Those in the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' were not *excluded* from the economy but needed by it as a source of cheap labour willing to do casualised 'poor work' (Byrne, 1999). Just like the majority of the 'young entrepreneurs' in *Risky Business?*, ambitions were not excessive - regular, secure work that allowed one to pay the bills - but people churned between unemployment, poor-quality training courses and low-paid, low-skilled jobs. This was a lasting condition for people into their twenties and thirties, rather than a youthful phase. People usually exited jobs for reasons other than personal choice but, importantly for estimations of employment insecurity, many participants did not know whether they had temporary or permanent contracts and struggled to explain whether they had been dismissed, made redundant or finished a temporary contract. The vagaries of casualised work were expressed in common-sense language - 'there wasn't any work anymore' – and illegal and exploitative practices were taken-for-granted. Regardless of its formal status, work was *experienced* as insecure. This might help explain why qualitative studies give higher estimates of insecure working than reached by quantitative surveys of the employed workforce (MacDonald, 2017).

Underemployment across the classes: the rise of the Precariat?

Insecurity is not solely the stuff of working-class lives. Indeed, Beck's *Risk Society* (1992: 142) warned that 'flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading'. As we suggested

earlier, one of the strengths of Youth Studies is its ability to reveal the significance or advent of wider social trends. Roberts' (2009: 4) authoritative, long-term research on youth transitions in Europe reaches the striking conclusion that 'underemployment is the 21st century global normality for youth in the labour market'. There are various forms of underemployment. People working less than they might wish to and employment in jobs for which they are over-qualified are two obvious examples, but we can add the sort of insecure 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle described above. All are indicative of an economy that is unable to provide a sufficient *quantity* and *quality* of employment to meet the needs and wants of workers.

Gardiner (2014) estimated that 2.5 million (or two in five) young people are underemployed in the UK labour market. He counted: temporary workers who wanted permanent jobs; the economically inactive who wanted a job; people who wanted to work more hours than currently; those on training schemes; and those 'over-qualified' for the work they were doing. Gardiner concluded that underemployment was more prevalent for young people than adults and had risen substantially since the recession of 2008. Arguably, the underemployment of graduates signals a fundamental misalignment of the economy and a crisis in youth transitions (MacDonald, 2018). In 2018, the OECD reported that one quarter of England and Northern Ireland graduates were employed in jobs at just school-leaver level (Weale, 2018). Lodovici and Semenza (2012) found the same in their European Commission research. For young highly skilled workers temporary jobs were the norm and in Southern Europe they had rates of precarious employment and unemployment that were *higher* than those of the less skilled.

It is not just that skilled workers and graduates cannot find their way into appropriate jobs. Middle-class professional employment also risks 'precariatisation', again most keenly revealed amongst new employees or those aspiring to join professions. One example involves the increasing insecurity of academic careers⁵. In the UK, an over-supply of very well-qualified applicants outstrips the available 'junior' lecturer or post-doctoral researcher positions. This is coupled with universities' neo-liberal employment practices and

⁵ This is an international phenomenon; see, for example, Zieler (2017) on Denmark, Kobova (2014) on Slovakia, Atkins et al (2018) on the USA, and Hartung et al (2017) on Australia.

performance management metrics that impose ever greater ‘productivity’ and ‘flexibility’. Some universities rely on casualised, hourly-paid staff to deliver around 50 per cent of their teaching UCU (2018) and around one-third of university staff are on fixed-term contracts (Loveday, 2018). Universities have become ‘toxic’ (Smyth, 2017) and ‘suffused with anxiety’ (Loveday, 2018: 1). As chances of entry to the Academy diminish even after substantial personal financial and emotional investment, fierce individual competition increases. Projects of self-promotion, market positioning and CV enhancement are now standard, creating and deepening inequalities amongst PhD students and post-doctoral ‘early career academics’, who cobble together bits of part-time teaching and research assistant work, in the hope of accruing enough academic capital, and the good fortune, to land a job (which is likely to be fixed term). Ivancheva (2015: 39) has described all this as the rise of ‘the academic precariat’⁶; ‘a reserve army of workers with ever shorter, lower paid, hyper-flexible contracts and ever more temporally fragmented and geographically displaced hyper-mobile lives’.

So, in evidencing underemployment for young adults in the UK labour market, we can point to working-class young adults stuck in ‘the low-pay, no-pay cycle’ at one pole and, at the other, well qualified, young academics denied a career or trapped in casualised, exploitative conditions. This is suggestive of Guy Standing’s (2011) thesis about a new global Precariat class diverse in membership but unified by insecure work, with young people at its core.

The model flexible worker: ‘Zero-hours’ Contracts

A totemic example of precarious working in the UK can be found in the proliferation of ‘zero-hours’ contracts which give no guaranteed hours or income (there might be zero-hours in a given period). The employer offers work and the employee, in principle, can decline this (but if so, the employer is under no obligation to offer work again). Clearly, the benefits are strongly stacked in favour of the employer (Harvey et al, 2017).

In 2017 there were 1.8 million ‘zero-hour’ contracts in the UK accounting for 6 per cent of all employment (ONS, 2018c); a massive increase over the previous decade. There were around 166,000 ‘zero-hour’ contracts in 2007. Today, around 900,000 people count a ‘zero-hours’

⁶ See also ‘The Academic Precariat’ twitter site @acaprecariat

contract as their main job, with over a quarter wanting to work more hours (compared to 7 per cent of people in other forms of employment). Employment for young adults is now dominated by these contracts (ONS, 2018c). If you are young and in employment in the UK, you are far more likely to be on a 'zero-hours contract' than another form of employment contract. Indeed, Purcell and colleagues (2017) found that opportunities for young job-seekers were almost completely restricted to low-paid, 'zero-hours' positions.

A key question here is about choice. Employers say that they need employment flexibility to meet short-term needs but TUC research (2018) shows that many use 'zero-hours' contracts as a long-term strategy, with most being on them for over a year. Employers insist that workers want this same 'flexibility' but two-thirds of 'zero-hours' workers would prefer a fixed-hours contract. Many did these sorts of jobs because of lack of alternatives (TUC, 2018). Nearly three-quarters of 'zero-hours' workers have been asked to work, and over half had had shifts cancelled, with less than 24 hours' notice. Employer demands for flexibility are often enforced with threats of not being given shifts in future (Wood, 2017).

The low pay of 'zero-hours' contracts is betrayed by the fact that the State (i.e. tax-payers) must top up this pay through benefit payments to workers, amounting to £11bn per year (Purcell, 2018). Not only are 'zero-hours' workers low paid they are the most likely category to suffer wage insecurity, and it is younger workers who are most affected (see Tomlinson, 2018). A staggering three-quarters of UK workers cannot count on a fixed monthly wage, with 'zero-hours' contracts being the key driver of this instability.

'Forced entrepreneurship' and 'bogus self-employment'

One future trend is clear. For a majority of people... their basic existence and life world will be marked by endemic insecurity. More and more people are encouraged to be 'Me & Co', selling themselves on the market (Beck, 2000: 3).

Our penultimate example of the spread of non-standard, insecure work is the growth self-employment in the UK. This cannot be explained without reference to the neo-liberal pursuit of 'flexibility' by governments and companies since the 1970s. Businesses cut costs by

creating a secondary labour market of out-sourced, sub-contracted work available, for instance, to self-employed, small businesses. Thus, UK self-employment has grown rapidly from 3.3 million people (12.0 per cent of the labour force) in 2001 to 4.8 million (15.1 per cent) in 2017 (ONS, 2018d). Two-thirds of the growth in overall employment since the 2008 crash is via self-employment (ONS, 2014). Most trade as micro-businesses with no employees. Middle-aged people are the group most likely to be self-employed but the number of 16 to 24-year-olds in self-employment has risen strongly (from 104,000 in 2001 to 181,000 in 2016).

The TUC sees this expansion of self-employment as a 'key factor in the UK's shift towards low paid work' (Jones, 2014); there has been a 22 per cent fall in the real pay of self-employed people since 2008 who, on average, earn close to half of the pay of employees (ONS, 2018d). Of course, some *will* achieve celebrated, idealised forms of hegemonic 'entrepreneurial identity' (see Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017; Giazitzoglu, 2017) but, for most, self-employment is less glamorous and profitable. Entrepreneurship fits perfectly with neo-liberal agendas but there is evidence that at least some of this rise in self-employment is not completely freely-chosen.

Storey and Strange (1992) explained rising self-employment in the 1990s as 'forced entrepreneurship' resulting from limited alternatives. This is likely to be true again – and some recent self-employment has been exposed as 'bogus'. Employers recruit workers as independent, self-employed contractors to forego paying for the normal pay, rights and protections afforded to employees (Taylor, 2017). For example, investigative journalism has exposed the stressful and degraded work conditions of Amazon delivery drivers recruited as 'self-employed' contractors, via private employment agencies (Warburton, 2017). Drivers faced intense pressure to meet delivery schedules: breaking speed limits and legal shift times, snatching meals on the run, urinating into plastic bottles rather than stopping. Long hours and unrealistic schedules meant they barely made the national minimum wage.

Lambert and Herod (2016) analyse how 'contracting out' to private employment agencies has become a global strategy for profit maximisation by multi-national companies. World-wide there are around 46 million people working for over 175 private employment agencies

some of which, like Manpower and Randstad, are amongst the largest global companies. In the UK, there are 950,000 agency workers – similar to the numbers on ‘zero-hours’ contracts - and, again, many of these are younger workers (Judge, 2018). Even with identical qualifications and doing exactly the same job, they lose out substantially to permanent employees (e.g. through worse pay, deducted uniform and travel costs etc). Unpaid holiday pay alone amounts to £500m per year. According to Judge (2018) lack of choice is critical in the growth of agency work; the ability of workers to avoid it or challenge poor practices is ‘largely contingent on the strength of the local labour market’.

Much of the UK political and policy debate about the ‘gig economy’ has been about exactly these issues; the extent of choice and whether employees are being mis-classified as ‘self-employed gig workers’ (Taylor, 2017). High profile cases of ‘bogus self-employment’ have implicated the multi-nationals Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon. A government inquiry (DWP, 2017: 1) found that ‘some companies are using self-employed workforces as cheap labour’ and ‘evading responsibility for workers’ well-being’ in order to ‘increase their profits’. Following a recent legal case, Uber were instructed to treat their drivers as workers with associated rights rather than self-employed ‘gig workers’⁷. The RSA report *Good Gigs* (2017: 38) acknowledges this as a ‘landmark decision’ but warns that it is not definitive because of the multiple forms of employer-worker relationships that exist within an evolving ‘gig economy’.

The Gig Economy: ‘labour contracts that are as temporary as is possible for them to be’.

Friedman (2014: 173) argues that labour market deregulation, declining Trade Union power and rising unemployment were the conditions necessary for “gig work” to emerge in the USA. For him, it represents a major power-shift towards employers to lower labour costs through increased ‘numerical’ and ‘wage flexibility’. In the past labour contracts were premised on bilateral loyalty between employer and employee, whereas “gig work” is predicated on ‘labour contracts that are as temporary as is possible for them to be’ (Webster, 2016: 60). The RSA warns that the ‘surge in ‘gig work’ has the potential to

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/10/uber-loses-appeal-employment-rights-workers>

‘undermine the foundation of social and economic security’ provided by traditional employment (2017: 34).

It is difficult to know the size of the ‘gig economy’ partly because of its novelty (and there is a general lack of serious research) and partly because of problems of definition, particularly where ‘platform-based’ ‘gig work’ is conflated with the wider trend towards self-employment. For instance, the Chief Executive of Intuit has argued that the ‘gig economy’ in the US accounts for 34 per cent of the workforce (CNN, 2017). This strikingly high figure includes, however, all self-employed/free-lance workers (including occupations where this has been common, such as electricians and joiners) not just those using on-line platforms. Nevertheless, a useful report and survey by the RSA (2017: 13) estimates that there are ‘around 1.1 million in Britain’s gig economy’ which is nearly as many as employed by the National Health Service (NHS) in England. Most commentators agree that the ‘gig economy’ is likely to grow (RSA, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

The RSA study (2017: 18) generated interesting findings: over half a million young people (16-30 years) had tried some form of ‘gig work’; they were more positive about ‘gig working’ in the future than older age groups; and when contrasted with the rest of the labour market, the ‘gig economy is youthful; ‘gig workers’ are more likely to be between the ages of 16-30 (34 per cent) than employees (26 per cent) or other self-employed workers (11 per cent)’. As the RSA (2017: 18) put it, ‘‘gig work’ might be an entry point into self-employment for young people’. For instance, over 60 per cent of Deliveroo’s food couriers are under the age of 25 years (and are mostly young men) (ibid.). Even though around 44 per cent possess a university degree, ‘gig workers’ overall seem to be low paid (implying underemployment vis-à-vis skill level). Over 60 per cent earn less than the taxable threshold/personal allowance of £11,500 and roughly a third earn less than £4,500 from ‘gig work’. It would seem likely that for many, ‘gig work’ ‘topped up’ or was ‘topped up’ by other income. As well as the likelihood of low pay, ‘gig workers’ often must provide the ‘means of production’ for their employer such as a ‘bicycle for food delivery’ or their ‘own place of work: at home, in their car or elsewhere’ (Stewart and Stanford, 2017: 421). Nevertheless, the RSA survey hints at the variability of experience in ‘gig work’, a point echoed by Friedman (2014: 178): ‘some middle-aged and well-educated independent contractors have high earnings ... [but]

most 'gig workers' earn less than their equally educated counterparts on traditional contracts, and younger workers do much worse'.

There is variation, too, in the motivations for doing 'gig work'. Interestingly, greater proportions of young people (32 per cent) than middle aged people (14 per cent) explained their participation in the 'gig economy' in terms of the lack of alternative jobs, which the RSA spins as follows: 'gig work plays an important role in helping young people break into the labour market' (2017: 24). Young adults were also most likely to agree that 'gig work' affords them more freedom and control but, as the RSA warns, this could reflect their already greater experience (than older groups) of work with very limited control such as with 'zero-hour' contracts. For young adults, 'gig work' *may not* be exemplary vis-à-vis worker empowerment, but it *may* be a relative improvement on other forms of contemporary working.

This is just one example of how the RSA survey is suggestive of questions it cannot answer. Another concerns the skills levels of 'gig work'. *If* the 'gig economy' continues to expand (at the expense of more standard forms of employment) by offering lower-skilled work - which is relatively more accessible to young adults than higher skilled, professional work 'gigs' - then it *could* more obviously become another driver of casualised work trapping young adults in a series of low-paid, insecure, dead-end jobs.

The few qualitative, sociological studies available currently offer further insights. Against some of the limited suggestions from survey data that 'gig workers' might appreciate the choice and flexibility of it, other research highlights lack of choice, exploitation and alienation. Wood's ethnographic research (2017) on 'gig workers' in the retail sector reveals the impact of the 'flexible scheduling' that defines their labour lives. Managers had the power to punish 'gig workers' who failed to demonstrate the requisite 'flexibility' (i.e. the willingness to be exploited). Supposedly there are legal protections against this, but 'gig workers' are likely to have their usual schedules altered, reduced or terminated altogether, if they decline employer demands. This informal disciplining by managers causes 'significant distress' to workers (Wood, 2017: 14); from the point of view of these workers, 'flexibility' was a euphemism for exploitation. Harvey and colleagues' (2017) ethnographic research

about personal trainers 'employed' on 'hyper-flexible' contracts in UK gyms compared this to mediaeval feudal 'villeiny'. Personal trainers are 'bound' to their employers (the gyms) and pay them 'rent' in the hope of work, i.e. that gym users will hire them as trainers. Of course, there is no guarantee of this and they are also expected to perform extensive unpaid labour (such as tidying up the gym). Harvey et al (2017: 31) suggest that this 'neo-villeiny' is not exclusive to the fitness industry and provides a 'dubious blueprint for management' across service industries, offering them 'considerable and unequivocal benefits' such as 'reduced labour costs and increased managerial discretion', high levels of commitment and effort, and 'high calibre emotional labour' from these 'gig workers'.

Webster (2016) sums some of this up, arguing that the 'gig economy' alienates people in three ways. Firstly, it 'decisively isolates workers from each other' (2016: 59) and, in fact, places 'gig workers' in direct competition with each other. Similarly, Friedman (2014: 185) notes how the 'gig economy' 'can create a class of isolated individuals living from job to job, without lasting financial or social connections to workplaces or to other workers'. This is detrimental, he argues, not only for the well-being of workers but for social cohesion and stability in general. Secondly, Webster argues, 'gig work' generates a lived experience of alienated precarity because it is irregular, short-lived, often low paid and sometimes not paid for, meaning that 'gig workers' struggle to make a meaningful life. Thirdly, seeking to maximise their income and 'out-do' other 'gig workers, he or she must be prepared to exploit themselves, especially in relation to the blurred boundaries between their work and non-work lives, i.e. 'be on-call and with their smartphones always at hand ... permanently logged on' (Webster, 2016: 60) and 'drive down' the price of their labour in an attempt to secure work in an over-saturated, competitive market place.

Conclusion

Young people are heavily involved in the shift towards non-standard work and the rise of the 'gig economy'. For them, underemployment has become a new normality (Roberts, 2009) and they are said to be the core of a Precariat defined by insecure work (Standing, 2011; 66). 'Zero-hour' contracts dominate youth employment in the UK, 'wage insecurity' is most prevalent amongst young adults who at the same time are over-represented in rising

rates of self-employment and temporary agency work. All in all, as the RSA puts it, the 'gig economy is youthful' (2017: 18). These empirical findings help us understand changing youth transitions, but they also have much wider sociological significance; they are suggestive of the future. Changing youth transitions stand as a bellwether of the new and coming, in this case of where the world of work is heading.

And one key finding is not just that insecure work is growing. It is also spreading across social classes. As we noted, even young adults who are heavily loaded with educational capital (to PhD level), and who occupy the heights of successful youth transitions, are not protected from precarious, casualised work. This is not an argument for the idea of a generational experience clean of class inequalities. Even within the relatively privileged category of aspiring young academics, a socially stratified university system bestows greater chances of success on those who already carry the most social, cultural and financial capital. As Furlong and Cartmel (1997) pointed out, one of the strengths of Youth Studies is that it can show how old inequalities are reproduced in new ways and, with this example, in new contexts.

Direct research on young adults and the 'gig economy' remains limited. Outstanding questions are numerous, but we will restrict ourselves to two examples. Better *quantitative* descriptions of trends in non-standard work would help debates enormously and this, in turn, would be helped by clearer definitions of the agreed *terms* of these debates (e.g. 'underemployment', 'self-employment', 'the gig economy'). We need to ensure that we are talking about the same things *and* have a reliable quantitative mapping of these things. Our second example would benefit more from the sort of *qualitative* research at which Youth Studies scholars tend to excel. This is about how choice and agency for young adults is felt, understood, expressed and *conditioned* by the structure of opportunities that prevails in an increasingly precarious labour market. For instance, an intriguing suggestion from the RSA 'gig work' study (2017) was that young adults *feel* more 'freedom and control', than older workers, because they are conditioned by their more extensive encounters of the even worse circumstances of 'zero-hour contracts'.

Questions remain but, nevertheless, we have learned several things from the research and evidence gathered in this paper. Firstly, we are confident in our argument that it is best to

see 'the gig economy' as just one manifestation of non-standard work; albeit in a pure, crystallised form. As Wood put it (2016: 60), these are 'labour contracts that are as temporary as is possible for them to be'. Secondly, this new 'gig economy' has much in common with earlier forms of entrepreneurial work from the 1980s and '90s. At that time, MacDonald (1996a: 445) wrote: 'survival self-employment is part of a growing culture of new, informal and risky ways of making a living'. We think the 'gig economy' is exactly that; just one element of a wider trend towards precarity that has been in train in neo-liberal, late capitalist societies for several decades. Thirdly, there are some hints at different experiences of non-standard work in the UK; reminiscent, perhaps, of Standing's (2011) 'groaners and grinners' of the Precariat. Some may prosper in the 'gig economy', others may not. Nonetheless, most of the evidence about young adults presents a grim picture, especially compared with the employment conditions, careers and opportunities of earlier generations.

Across the examples of insecure work presented in this paper, we can identify ten, related features that were typical of young adults' lives: i) *modest aspirations* (for instance, with people trapped in the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' denied the simple ambition of regular work and being able to pay the bills); ii) *lack of choice and control* (was prominent and critical, for example, to understanding 'forced entrepreneurship'); iii) *disempowerment* (versus, for example, employers now armed with disciplinary discretion to withhold future work offers); iv) *insecurity of work* (this defined all the examples discussed); v) *insecurity of income* (e.g. which is now typical for younger 'zero-hours' workers); vi) *low pay* (e.g. for the new self-employed, and *very* low in respect of 'gig workers'); vii) *debt* (e.g. which could be substantial for young people with failed businesses); viii) *exploitation* (exemplified by the degraded, stressful work conditions of 'bogus self-employed' agency workers); ix) *self-exploitation* (e.g. wherein 'gig workers' compete against each other on price, driving down their own wages); and x) *anxiety* (shown in the 'significant distress' of workers worried whether future shifts or 'gigs' will come, and the 'crying all the time' of 'young entrepreneurs' committed to doomed businesses).

One of the duties of a critical social science is to question fashionable tropes and dominant ideology; to be 'a solvent of doxa' (Wacquant, 2001). We should be particularly alert when

comfortably placed, middle-aged politicians exhort younger people to 'take up opportunities' that they themselves would never dream of going near. Would a UK government minister be quite so 'excited' about the 'gig economy' if it meant that *he* surrendered his 'fixed salary', 'paid holidays', and 'pension scheme' in favour, perhaps, of the 'bogus self-employment' of delivering for Amazon on a daily schedule so gruelling that the minimum wage cannot be earned and toilet stops are impossible? So, reviewing what we have learned about young adults' encounters with 'the gig economy' and wider forms of non-standard work, we conclude that what we see is *proliferating insecurity* that is 'discursively sweetened' with the rhetoric of entrepreneurial individualism (Beck, 2000). The proliferation of insecurity in different forms masks inequality and, at root, is driven by a Capitalist 'flexible' business model that relies on exploiting atomised, individuated workers who have 'nothing to sell but their labour', by cutting their pay and stripping them of their rights as workers, in order to maintain profits.

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