

Bartosz Mika¹

Satisfaction Despite Precarity. Applying the Concept of Flexibility to Understand Tricity Uber Drivers' Attitudes to Their Work

App-mediated work-on-demand is a socio-economic phenomenon which can be successfully analyzed using the concepts of borders and boundaries. In the article, a perspective from the sociology of work is implemented in connection with an international ride-hailing company in the Polish labor market. The boundaries that are present in the flexible/precarious work of Uber drivers will be examined. Based on twenty-one semi-structured interviews with Uber drivers conducted during the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Europe, this article analyzes answers given by drivers concerning their level of satisfaction with work co-existing with poor working conditions. Using the concept of flexibility, workers positions in the platform economy are characterized according to a typology proposed by Don Jonsson. In conclusion the flexibility/stability distinction is supplemented by the boundary between labor power and work as a process. The main observation resulting from the analysis points to the fact that Uber drivers praise flexibility not because they inadvertently understand their position but because they are under pressure from transformations taking place in the social division of labor. As a result of this, drivers and other on-demand workers are in a situation of variability to which the flexibility provided by the platform is – from their point of view – one of the few possible solutions.

Keywords: labor, on-demand, gig, Uber, precarity, flexibility

Introduction

In the article, the perspective of the sociology of work² will be applied in connection with the problem of internationalization. Considerations of borders will include the socio-economic intersection of a multinational corporation with a local,

¹ University of Gdańsk, bartosz.mika@ug.edu.pl.

² The author is a sociologist and one of the co-organisers of a cyclical, international conference under the title “Social Boundaries of Work”.

semi-peripheral labor market. To be more specific, the paper reports the results of a study conducted among Uber drivers in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot. Uber as a global company crosses international borders, but it also crosses social and economic borders interfering in supranational (i.e. the European Union), national (in the case presented here, Poland) and local businesses³ (the Pomeranian region of Poland). In doing so, Uber has changed the way the ride-hailing industry operates disrupting, among others, (self)employment patterns.

Uber's operation in Poland will be considered below as part of the platform economy or, more precisely, work-on-demand (WOD). In this article, according to the definition provided by De Stefano (2016), the latter is understood as a form of engagement in which the execution of traditional working activities such as personal transport, cleaning and running errands is channeled through apps managed by firms that also intervene in setting minimum quality standards of service and in the selection and management of the workforce. In relation to this, the management element of the phenomena of WOD is a point of special interest, while relations between the platform and worker are viewed from the perspective of the concept of flexibility.

Jan Ch. Karlsson (2007) points out that flexibility in the past, as with WOD today, was seen as beneficial for workers, employer, both groups, or neither of them. Moreover, WOD or gig work more broadly, can be analyzed directly through the lens of flexibility by applying Karlsson's (2007) question concerning which entity in the labor relation has flexibility and who is flexible? From the perspective of border studies, the use of the concept of flexibility has additional advantages. It can clearly indicate the moments of transgression, the crossing of borders and the disappearance of the boundaries of work (for example, work-life and the border between different forms of employment).

Based on the existing literature on WOD, it seems clear that workers experience flexibility directly connected with precarity and extensive algorithmic surveillance (Rosenblat 2018; Rosenblat, Stark 2016). On the other hand, it has been noted that gig workers in general and Uber drivers specifically, report strong satisfaction with the flexibility they gain by working through the platform (Harris, Krueger 2015; Hall, Krueger 2017; Polkowska 2019b; Schor et al. 2020). In the research presented in this article informants also expressed satisfaction. For example, Marcin aged 27 said that he worked for Uber because: "flexibility is the advantage".

Consequently, it remains unclear why WOD workers experiencing precarity (Aloisi 2015; Polkowska 2019a) remain satisfied with their position. Although applications, such as Uber, Bolt or Lift in the case of drivers, apparently make the work of gig workers precarious in many different ways, workers themselves see their

³ So called "incumbent" business.

position as suitable to their needs. Polkowska (2019b) proposes an explanation of this paradox pointing to the “illusory authority” of the WOD workers. It seems that the concept of “illusory authority” can be applicable to a single worker or an aggregate of workers, but it does not explain the structural mechanism behind the paradox (that is, poor working conditions connected with high satisfaction). Vili Lehdonvirta (2018) tries to find such structural constraints on worker-controlled flexibility showing that in some “online piecework” the platform’s autonomy on scheduling can result in a competitive zero-sum game where one worker’s flexibility is another’s structural constraint. Moreover, Lehdonvirta’s study confirms Alex J. Woods’ (2016) observation that with little bargaining power the formal flexibility of workers can easily turn into manager-controlled flexibility.

These are instructive insights but still the question can be asked: how should we understand flexibility and how does the definition of the phenomena influence the answer to the above paradox. Taking into consideration the above question, the purpose of this study is to re-examine the decade-old discussion on flexibility and to gain new perspectives on the “satisfaction paradox” in WOD based on the conditions reported by Uber drivers. Taking Schor’s (2020) summery of the literature on WOD and Dan Jonsson’s (2007a) distinction between flexibility and stability as points of departure, the concept will be developed further. In particular, it will be elaborated by adding the Marxist concept of the division of the labor force (or ability to work) and work as a process. The argument will be made that a proper answer to the above paradox of the WOD workers’ assessments of their own situation has to consider not only the question which party of the work contract gains from flexibility but how it influences work as a process and the worker as an owner of labor power (on the ownership of labor power see Tittenbrun 2018). In other words, I ask how flexibility as a concept crosses the boundary between unstable work and the precarious condition of selling labor power seen from a broad socio-economic perspective.

Flexibility and work-on-demand

In the past decade much research in the sociology of work has focused on the platform economy in general and WOD specifically. The American sociologist Juliet Schor (2020) enumerates three frameworks most often used to analyze the work on platforms: precarity, algorithmic control, and efficiency. The first highlights the precariousness of platform workers stressing long working hours, low wages, lack of social security and lack of employment contracts (for example: Aloisi 2015; Polkowska 2019a). The second perspective adds to the picture in terms of algorithmic control (Rosenblat 2018; Rosenblat, Stark, 2016), where it has been observed that

platforms rely heavily on algorithms to manage, control, and even manipulate contractors. The approach shows the inevitability of algorithmic management but has also recently revealed the ability of workers to resist and “play” with algorithms for their own purposes (Reid-Musson et al. 2020). The third framework for analyzing platform work sees workers as independent entities gaining freedom and autonomy from an advanced technological infrastructure (Sundararajan 2016; Hall, Krueger 2017).

Stewart et al. (2020) call the latter approach an **economic opportunity narrative** whereby WOD workers are described as proprietors of their own small businesses, claiming more autonomy and flexibility for themselves than they could achieve through traditional employment. In this approach, Uber’s way of organizing the ride-hailing business is simply more efficient than the incumbent system (i.e., Taxis, hence the label of efficiency). From the perspective shared by Sundararajan (2016) and Hall and Krueger (2017), algorithmic control is a new incarnation of a justifiable managerial prerogative and precarity is only another name for desirable flexibility.

Obviously, the perspectives discussed by Schor (2020) remain, at least in part, contradictory and mutually exclusive. Interestingly, this state of affairs resembles previous discussions around the issue of flexibility. The literature on flexibility in the platform economy is substantial but also divided. On the one hand, the narrative of economic opportunity describes gig workers as entities seizing the chance to use their own “idle” assets and turn them into a means of providing services (Schor, Attwood-Charles 2017). The entrepreneurial ideals behind this point of view are associated with worker autonomy and freedom, not only in task assignment and working schedule but also in equal relation with the platform and service recipient using it. In addition to this, the lack of formal constraints advertised to workers as a great advance over traditional forms of work (Stewart et al. 2020) connected with the content of casual, piece or *gig* work, creates a picture of a strong worker-controlled flexibility. Meanwhile, the features of work organization crucial for platforms are presented as characteristics which are beneficial for entities engaged in work on the platform.

On the other hand, the above narrative is rejected by scholars who point to the fact that work via such a platform provides a great deal of formal flexibility for workers but only in the sense that it provides solace in poor working conditions (Aloisi 2015). As Lehdonvirta (2018) stressed little is known about the structural constraints in this type of work, while the WOD platforms, especially Uber, are strongly criticized for enabling “casualization” or precarization of employment under the label of “flexibility”. In such a situation, the model of employment relation implemented by the platforms is described as ‘selling a pig in a poke.’ A Taylorist-like, fragmented work routine, lack of employment contract and digital surveillance are seen as the

true nature of such extensive work that is branded as including a bulk of tasks which allow the worker to experience freedom and entrepreneurship.

In other words, flexibility in WOD is described as ideological and business oriented – *Nihil novi sub sole*. Indeed, flexibility as a concept has been criticized as one-sided and ideological from the beginning. In the book *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, Furåker et al. described it as follows: “flexibility [is] an excellent basis for forming ideological and value-laden discourses on the new working life” (2007: 1). Other authors add to this idea when they write that “the flexibility concept has been well used, if not overused, in discussions of different staffing models, particularly since the late 1980s when ‘lean production’ concepts, such as ‘just-in-time,’ became popular” (Håkansson, Isidorsson 2007: 125). Furthermore, in many cases flexibility is treated as the inherent property of a particular company, branch, or even the economy. In the case of the platform economy, WOD included, the whole sector is treated as if it is based on flexibility.

For Karlsson (2007) flexibility is a historical idea related to changes that occurred in developed economies in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. It is connected with the intensification of competition, technological change, globalization and the growing demand for profit maximization on behalf of stockholders. These changes led to the search for a new model of work organization suitable to a dynamic and consumer dominated market. From this perspective, WOD is just another incarnation of the processes described by Karlsson. To be more specific, it is an answer to the challenge of increasing work productivity in the service sector. Aloisi (2015) correctly observed that the time workers spend working on the platform online is a key issue for their daily compensation. To earn a significant sum of money, not to mention a living wage, gig workers usually work more hours than employees on standard contracts – something which is also confirmed in the study presented in this article. In short, the main challenge for worker productivity in services is the time between particular acts of service. WOD platforms deal with this issue by establishing rules according to which the worker performs a service and gains income or stays idle without remuneration. Simply put; idle time has been eliminated. Usually in the market economy efficiency gains are achieved by tighter control of the work process. It is no different in the case of Uber (or WOD platforms in general). Greater efficiency is accomplished by workers “being flexible” i.e. being at the disposal of the platform⁴. This idea will be developed in the last section of the article.

The authors of *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life* elaborate on the concept of flexibility going beyond its ideological bias by building a distinction between

⁴ Efficiency gains should be understood here simply as savings for the company. The service itself usually does not change its content (see Hill 2015; Mika 2020).

flexibility and stability. In chapter two Karlsson (2007) tracks four discourses on flexibility and comes to the conclusion that whether or not flexibility is good, depends upon whom it is for. He recalls the distinction on being flexible and having flexibility he developed with Eriksson (Karlsson, Eriksson 2000) and states that flexibility is a double-edged concept. “If employers are to have flexibility, workers must be flexible (...). If, on the other hand, workers are to have flexibility, employers must be flexible: for example, if workers are to have flexibility in accumulating leave, management must be flexible in working time arrangements” (Karlsson 2007: 29). So having flexibility means enjoying benefits from it and to be flexible means submitting to the requirements of the other party. In the case of WOD platforms, as was mentioned above, this requires the elimination of idle time. Having flexibility is a desirable situation while being flexible is not desirable. Interestingly, later in this article, an interesting paradox that was observed among Uber drivers is presented: drivers enjoy being flexible as they perceive the situation in which they are flexible as one in which they have flexibility.

With regard to desirable and undesirable situations in relation to flexibility, Jonsson (2007a) proposes a slightly different approach to Karlsson’s. The author stresses that variability rather than flexibility is the thing that should be considered desirable or undesirable. If a situation is to be volatile, then flexibility and stability are the responses to it.

Table 1. Interrelations among the concepts of flexibility, stability, inflexibility and instability

Type of situation	Variability is desirable	Variability is undesirable
Situation with variability	Flexibility	Instability
Situation without variability	Inflexibility	Stability

Source: own elaboration on: (Jonsson 2007a: 34).

Jonsson’s (2007a) concept of flexibility is built on the boundary between stability and flexibility as a proper response to a situation (respectively) with and without variability. However, instability and inflexibility are inappropriate responses to the situation seen from the perspective of one side of the employment contract. Jonsson (2007a: 73) points out that his analysis allows a systematic typology of flexibility and stability. He enumerates five types of flexibility/stability: a) employment relation, b) working time, c) workplace, d) work (i.e. content and intensity) and e) remuneration. These types are used in the analysis below.

Following Jonsson’s (2007a) argumentation, Karlsson’s question can still be asked: for whom is the variability desirable? In the work-on-demand ride-hailing business variability from the perspective of the worker can be observed. Drivers perceive themselves as people who, objectively, are in a situation of volatility. In

that sense, comments on the false consciousness or misplaced ideas on their situation are inaccurate. Drivers recognize their variability and respond to it with the need for flexibility. As Reid-Musson et al. (2020) accurately point out, Uber drivers are waiting for independence and flexibility and act with resistance when the company does not meet their expectations.

Labor process and labor power

Below, both Karlsson's distinction (on being flexible and having flexibility) and Jonsson's typology will be used in an analysis of the behavior of Uber drivers in the Tricity urban area during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Nevertheless, the theoretical orientation accepted by Jonsson, Karlsson and other authors in *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, has a serious limitation. It does not make the distinction between labor power (or ability to work) and work as a process. For example, when Jonsson (2007a) distinguishes between flexibility/stability of working time (how long and how systematically a person works) and remuneration (stability of earnings) he treats those factors as separate types.

Applying the classical Marxist observation that in capitalism a worker's ability to work is treated as a commodity and is bought and sold on the market, questions can be asked about the properties of this commodity. Is a worker's labor power bought because of her/his ability to put this means of service in motion or because the worker has special skills and knowledge? In the words of Jacek Tittenbrun (2018): is the worker labor power Achievement-Based or Ascription-Based? If the latter is the case, the worker receives a salary irrespective of the amount of work actually done. For example, the physician performs a particular form of service i.e., health care but is remunerated no matter how many patients s/he examines. In this case the salary is Ascription-Based which results from the state's guarantee of a monopoly on the special education and power of the occupational association of doctors. Comparing the position of physicians with taxi or Uber drivers it is easy to see that the latter are remunerated only for the work actually done (Achievement-Based). It is worth mentioning that the employment status of taxi drivers does not differ significantly from those of Uber drivers. The Polish ride-hailing industry was "uberised" before the platform was introduced onto the market (and not only in Poland – see Tsoneva (2015) for the case of Bulgaria).

The example used here shows that remuneration could be closely related to employment flexibility/stability but is directly connected with the features of labor power (Tittenbrun used the concept of the ownership of labor power). In other words, labor power as an object of transaction has its own features separate from work as a process.

Table 2. Flexibility of labor power and work

Labor power (as an object of transaction)	Work (as a vector variable)	
–	Variability within a single work process (in tasks connected to a single position)	Variability in the relations between positions
Individual features (skills, knowledge, personal qualifications)	Flexibility as an adaptation to the requirements placed upon the position (i.e. work scheduling, daily routines deskilling, reskilling)	Flexibility as an adaptation to changes in the technical division of labor (promotion, degradation, spatio-temporal mobility)
Collective (or social) features (professional standards, craftsmanship)	Flexibility as an adaptation to the changes in the content of competences within the profession	Flexibility as an adaptation to changes in the social division of labor

Source: the author.

As shown in Table 2 flexibility should include not only the individual perspective of the single owner of the labor power but also the social relation within the technical and social division of labor. Accordingly, it should not lose sight of the collective dimension of the employment relationship. Taking the ride-hailing industry as an example of a WOD platform, it can be seen that drivers experience flexibility in two mutually connected senses: as an adaptation to the requirements of the position and as an adaptation to the changes of the social division of labor. This idea will be elaborated in the *Results of the study* section below.

Methodology of the study

The reported research on Uber drivers was based on a study conducted from April to June 2020 in the middle of the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Europe. Semi-structured interviews (forty to ninety minutes long) were used as the main tool of investigation. In total twenty-one phone interviews were carried out with Uber drivers from the Tricity urban area (the whole agglomeration numbers 800 000 inhabitants). The interview situation was similar to the CATI technique (computer-assisted telephone interviewing). Additionally, the initial research plan was different; it was to have included personal contacts between researcher and drivers. However, because of the lockdown and the public health threat posed by face-to-face meetings this was abandoned. Instead, the researcher decided to conduct the study based on interviews via phone with the questioner visible on the screen of the computer.

Drivers were selected using web-forums, social-media group pages and direct personal contact (during a ride). Elements of snowball sampling were also included. Every driver was asked if s/he knew other Uber drivers willing to participate in the study. In the sampling process the help of students was crucial as the personal contacts and the frequency of use of the Uber application of this group created an opportunity to recruit participants. The general sample included four women and seventeen men aged between twenty-one and sixty. Three of the study participants were migrant workers from Ukraine and Belarus (all of them male). For twelve drivers in the sample, app-mediated work was their main source of income and for six of them, work as an Uber driver was their only source of income.

The variety of professional situations is potentially important because it creates an opportunity to learn about the different responses to variability and thus potentially different forms of flexibility. Previous studies show, for example, important differences between platform-dependent drivers and others while, on the whole, differences are especially valid in respect of working conditions (Donavan et al. 2016; Piasna, Drahokoupil 2019; Schor et al. 2020). This research was also special because of the pandemic which created another circumstance of variability, or to be more specific, a situation of risk and hazard. In the period of the study five of the twenty-one interviewees temporarily suspended their app-based work fearing SARS-CoV-2 infection and two completely abandoned the activity.

The distinction between work and labor power was pivotal for the concept of the study and was figured into the questionnaire (Tittenbrun 2018). A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used so the coding procedure was one-stage. However, because of the size of the sample and extraordinary circumstances, the interview answers were usually long and comprehensive. Cross sectional coding was necessary to capture the central theoretical categories connected with stability/flexibility and the social dimension of the latter. The references to the categories that are important to the study and which are presented in this paper, include questions on reasons for working as an Uber driver, work scheduling and who is responsible for its preparation, level of control over the work process (for example, the number of rides, speed, route selection, music in the car, reputation system built into the app), subordination to management authority (coping with the algorithm), payment and remuneration (amount and frequency), level of platform dependency (additional source of income, the size of the household), and the amount of spare time at the driver's disposal.

Switching to the category level, the following research questions were asked: a) Do drivers appreciate the flexibility of working on the platform? b) Is flexibility beneficial to drivers (using Karlsson's categories – do they have flexibility or are they flexible)? and c) How is the flexibility of the drivers linked to the social division of labor? To answer these questions, first the Jonsson typology was used, then it was supplemented by the analysis which is summarized in Table 2.

Results of the study – a flexible and (not always) happy Uber driver

As has been pointed out above, Jonsson's (2007a) typology used here (marked in bold) starts with **employment relation**, which can be summarized with the question of whether a person is employed by a single employer. In the literature on WOD in general, and Uber in particular, there is an ongoing debate on the legal status of service providers (Alosi 2015; De Stefano 2016). The institutional regime itself has undergone change during the last decade making WOD workers in some countries employers and in others self-employed. In Poland, the so-called Uber-lex adopted in 2019, and brought into force on January 1st, 2021, obliges drivers to register their activity or work with someone who has made such a registration. The law makes no distinction between taxi and Uber drivers. Therefore, WOD drivers became formally equated with other personal drivers. Formally Uber drivers should be self-employed but in fact they often work with so-called **fleet partners**. Partners are intermediaries, usually former drivers, car dealers or employees in car-selling salons. They take on the cost of setting up a business and lease their legal umbrella to other drivers, usually also offering the lease of a car, accounting services, and legal support. In the study, for example, only three drivers were completely independent from the partner, while twelve of them leased their car from a fleet partner.

Fleet partners create a market environment with low entry barriers for newcomers. Drivers do not need any education certificate or work experience. Most respondents in the presented study started driving Uber as an additional source of income during collage (for instance, Olaf was 21 years old when he started) or after returning from emigration (Trojan aged 34, or Zbigniew aged 60). Some simply supplemented their income or changed their previous job for Uber.

I like driving a car. It is an easy job. Better, compared to being a construction worker and the money is the same [A.23].

I was looking for something else. I went to a DIY store (as a driver) and after 3 days I quit. I had an Uber offer up my sleeve. I got along with the fleet partner I knew [P.42].

The employment relation in which Uber drivers are involved, therefore, is usually more complicated than the standard description in the literature on the subject. They use the app tool and are subordinated to its algorithms but at the same time they work with partners, although it should be stressed that the arrangement with the partner looks different depending on the seniority and position of the

driver. Some of them work twelve-hour shifts while others can freely choose how much they work. The employment relation is still flexible, however, in the sense that both the partner and the driver do not expect loyalty or any social security benefits. Drivers are not formally the partner's employees. Interestingly the flexibility is mutual (Karlsson's (2007) win-win situation). The partner is able to get rid of the driver without any cost and the drivers are happy with the arrangement.

For example, Wiktoria (aged 22), a person that suspended her activity due to the pandemic, praises the fact that she receives a fueled and washed car directly from her partner (the driver using it during the previous shift). Meanwhile, others, especially immigrant workers, express their satisfaction because of the access they have to a leased car and accounting services. As Aleksiei (aged 37) put it:

it is easy to get into this job, without formalities, especially when you are an immigrant. At the beginning I was a member of a cooperative⁵. Next I rented a car from private people. Now I have my own car [A.37]⁶.

When discussing their beginnings in the ride-hailing sector none of the interviewees mentioned any selection or hiring procedure whatsoever. There were minimal expectations⁷ and they simply started to drive. This fact is significant because it indicates that the drivers do not need any formal education or special skill. They enter the employment relation as owners of diffuse labor power (Tittenbrun 2018) and are remunerated based on the amount of work they perform. The amount of income from the job is therefore strongly connected with the time devoted to work, so **remuneration** flexibility can be discussed here along with **working time** flexibility. Aloisi's (2015) observation above might usefully be recalled here: that to earn a significant sum of money, platform workers have to work more hours every day than an employee on a standard work contract. If the "standard contract" means eight hours a day, five days a week, then Aloisi's point is in line with the declaration of the interviewees presented in this research. An extreme case is Aleksandr (aged 23), who is of Ukrainian origin and lives in Gdynia. He declares with some hesitation:

I take a day off ... sometimes. Actually, I work every day [A.23].

⁵ After a short discussion it turned out that Aleksiei meant a fleet partner, whom the migrant drivers called "the cooperative".

⁶ The research was conducted in Polish. The selected quotations were then translated into English.

⁷ During the first years of Uber's presence in Poland, only a driving licence and the lack of a criminal record were necessary. In the years that followed, a special personal transport licence and the legal status of self-employed were also introduced. It is significant that many Uber drivers did not even have their own car. They used the one rented from a fleet partner.

He spends ten hours a day in the car driving passengers, delivering food and distributing packages. His schedule includes working hours from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., sometimes even to 8 a.m. His strategy is to drive when public transport is severely limited. As a consequence, he spends almost every night in the car (weekends included). Another experienced driver (using the Uber app since 2017), Paweł (aged 42), used to drive at night, but during the pandemic he shifted his activity to the daytime and supplemented it with food delivery.

My approach to remuneration is as follow: when I assume I want to earn I work 7 days a week. Sometimes for two months straight. After this time, I have a week off [P.42].

Maksym (aged 23), another migrant worker from Ukraine was, at the time of the interview, living in the car. He shares his duties with a girlfriend to the extent that both of them combined work almost without breaks. Maksym himself declared that he works fourteen hours a day, while most of the interviewees spend from eight to twelve hours in the car making, in that time, from fifteen to thirty rides.

The three drivers quoted above and several others in the sample, declare that they eagerly changed their previous jobs for the Uber app⁸. Additionally, others appreciate the opportunity to combine the work of a driver with other activities. For example, Ilona (aged 25) is a Judo instructor and pre-school teacher, Olaf (aged 21) is a shipyard worker, Aleksandra (aged 25) is a salesperson and Daniel (aged 22) works in a gas station. Again, it can be said that they have flexibility or using Jonsson's (2007a) approach, work for Uber gives them the variability they experience. The question open for discussion, however, is whether this form of variability is expected or actually wanted by the drivers. Regardless of the answers, it should be stressed that the interviewed drivers feel empowered to independently decide about their work schedule, even despite the very long and often exhausting working hours.

This situation leads to the last type of flexibility/stability enumerated by Jonsson (2007a), which applies to **work content** and **work intensity**⁹. Literally speaking, the content of a driver's work does not change. It is always a ride with a passenger or for a client, from one place to another. The intensity on the other hand is strongly related to worktime because of achievement based remuneration. Basically, an Uber driver can decide for how long s/he wants to work. However, as has been shown above, a driver's remuneration is directly linked with time spent on the app. So, the most important part of the work content can be reduced to the

⁸ Aleksiei and Maksym were construction workers, Paweł worked in a DIY store.

⁹ **Workplace** is the one type left, but work as a taxi driver is a paradigmatic example of the lack of a rigid workplace, therefore it will be omitted here.

issue of control over the work process. As has been mentioned, there is a great amount of literature on the forms of incentives, manipulations, and algorithmic management that exist (Rosenblat, Stark 2016; van Doorn 2017; Rosenblat 2018; Lehdonvirta 2018; Joyce, Stuart 2021) and most of it focusses on the control that Uber exerts. In the Polish case, however, the partners might be an important entity as well. Indeed, the intermediary sometimes actually acts as a boss. Four drivers admitted that they treated their partners as such but none of the interviewees felt subordinated to the partner in the managerial sense of the term.

In relation to the above, Reid-Musson et al. (2020: 14) point out that the “information vacuum” is embedded in Uber’s managerial approach. Uber’s strategy is based upon the exceptionally modest amount of information about how the algorithms evaluating and allocating rides work, something which the drivers participating in this study appear to confirm. They did not know how the algorithm works but almost all of them had their own ideas on the subject. Using their individual experience, most of them tried to find a way to earn more money in a given amount of time.

You have to have a way for Uber. You have to drive. Each driver has a different strategy because no one really knows how the algorithm works [B.24].

Aleksandra added:

There is no day off with a full-time job for Uber. Even if you don’t drive, you think: “I will check if there is a multiplier” or “what is happening in the city”, and what if I haven’t achieved my goal yet, should I continue driving? Or if you’ve achieved your goal, it may be worth continuing and earning more? [A.25]

Individual efficiency expressed in earnings was the main subject of interest for the drivers. Gamification of the algorithm allowed drivers to feel free and choose personal strategies for their behavior. Generally speaking, every driver wanted to outsmart the algorithm and gain extra money without additional effort but as has been shown above, it ended up with them having to do 10- to 12-hour shifts.

Another example of the efficiency of the Uber management strategy is the reputation system incorporated into the app. Again, every driver tried to minimize their personal effort connected with passenger satisfaction and was convinced that his or her behavior only resulted from personal culture. In accordance with this, they understood the motives and patterns of their action as internal and not controlled by an algorithm. With regard to this, the drivers’ opinions on the accuracy of the evaluation system were divided between: “it is great” (Ł.22) through to “I do not care” (B.24), to:

[It’s a] hard topic. People are different. I try to be nice, but I get negative ratings. I don’t like [the rating system], it’s not objective [A.37].

Ultimately, however, all the drivers tried to get high ratings and win the sympathy of passengers. Uber drivers, therefore, are flexible but the Uber algorithm is not. The promise of flexibility is incorporated in it but the algorithm itself is quite rigid. Indeed, the inflexibility of Uber in the situation described might be seen as an explanation for the “mismatch” between drivers’ expectations for independence and Uber’s rigid management (Reid-Musson et al. 2020). Furåker et al. (2007) note that increasing demands on workers for flexibility are often justified by increasing demands for flexibility in the supply of services for customers. Uber implements this attitude by using passenger opinions and needs as a tool to manage drivers. Jonsson (2007b) goes even further. Higher performance demands on employees create inflexibility and instability for them, contrary to the ‘flexibility rhetoric’: “If ‘flexibilization’ has created increased flexibility, it is probably mainly flexibility for employers that has been created” (Jonsson 2007b: 217). Uber in Poland is a good example of this situation. High performance demands on drivers are included in a rigid algorithm designed to create a sense of flexibility on the side of the worker.

Conclusions

The above discussion definitely shows the unproductive nature of the flexibility rhetoric, but does it explain why WOD workers feel they have flexibility when, in fact, it is they who are flexible? In some sense it does. Freedom of choice, although limited, translates into a greater sense of subjectivity (Polkowska 2019a). But it is not the whole story.

Returning to Jonsson’s division of flexibility, some of its aspects give the advantage to Uber while others give it to workers. Employment relation, time spent at work and by extension remuneration, were all in the hands of the driver. Especially in the time of COVID-19, drivers could feel that it is one of the last ways in which they could earn some money. In fact, during lockdown it was one of the very few ways that was open to them. But even if we consider this situation under ordinary circumstances, a driver can still choose if he or she wants to work with Uber (if s/he wants to enter into an “employment relation”). By extension, therefore, he or she also agrees to the “place” of work. In Poland and other CEE countries, thanks to fleet partners, a driver is even quite free to choose the car to use for work while, as has been shown, the app mediated “work place” is easily accessible. Additionally, drivers participating in the study presented above were able to decide how long they would be available for the app and how intense their work would be (for example, if they wanted to work at night or during the daytime). In the arrangement in which the remuneration was directly connected with the time spent online, this also meant that each driver could regulate how much they earned.

The observation shared above, sounds like the typical **economic opportunity narrative** (Stewart et al. 2020) of a platform offering flexibility. And, as has been mentioned above, the mantra has been rightly criticized by many authors (Aloisi 2015; Berg, Johnson 2019; Stewart et al. 2020). All this freedom could be considered secondary if the crucial aspect of the issue remained outside the control of the worker. However, it is the work process, work itself (according to Jonsson's typology) which has been under Uber's surveillance. And it is here where the distinction between labor process and labor power introduced earlier becomes valid (Table 2). The labor power of each driver is a commodity sold under certain conditions, in this case, as a diffuse, achievement-based labor power. Next it is used for providing services to app users. A transgression between labor power and work process is, therefore, the pivotal point here, because labor power has been sold as an achievement based on working time and remuneration which are viewed to be directly interconnected. If the condition of selling labor power leads directly to the circumstances of work as a process, then it is no wonder that the driver is convinced that s/he freely decides how long and how intensely s/he works. Drivers identify the freedom to sell labor power with freedom in the work process.

In support of this claim, Table 2 should be recalled. Four situations of flexibility are distinguished. Two of them are suitable to work-on-demand. First, flexibility as an adaptation to the requirements of the position. This type is connected with the individual features of labor power involved in the situation of variability within a work process. This is exactly the case of Uber drivers and other gig workers, who have to adapt their abilities to a single task (performing a service via an app). But the condition of WOD workers also fits to flexibility as an adaptation to changes in the social division of labor. This is connected to a decrease in the professional standards of the ride-hailing business (visible in the Lex-Uber bill implemented in Poland) and the variability in relations between positions in the social division of labor. In other words, it is connected with the broader social changes described by Aloisi (2015), Stewart et al. (2020) and many others. Uber drivers are objectively in a situation of volatility (even greater during the study because of the pandemic) and they perceive their position as such. As has been shown above, they work for long hours, try to cope with Uber's algorithms and sometimes combine their work via the platform with other sources of remuneration. They are also perfectly aware of the volatile situation they are in, therefore, comments about misplaced ideas on their part are inaccurate. Drivers correctly recognize their variability on the labor market and, furthermore, respond to it. Speaking metaphorically, the flexibility experienced by WOD workers is not to be questioned, it is, rather, the answer. Drivers, especially from disadvantaged groups (young people, immigrants), are already in the situation of a dynamically changing labor market and they are looking for a solution to the problem for themselves.

They find it in platform work and WOD, and that is why they praise the flexibility connected to it. A distinction between the condition of selling labor power and the resulting work process allows for this fact. Many platform workers, certainly Uber drivers in Poland, are in a precarious situation in the sense that their labor power is diffuse and as a commodity its value is limited to the individual features of the worker. Because of this, drivers are engaged in flexible work arrangements. They appreciate the flexibility not because they do not recognize their precarity, but because flexibility allows them to cope with their vulnerable position.

References

- Aloisi A., 2015, *Commoditized Workers. Case Study Research on Labour Law Issues Arising from a Set of 'On-demand/Gig Economy' Platforms*, "Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal", vol. 37, issue 3.
- Berg J., Johnson H., 2019, *Too Good to Be True? A Comment on Hall and Krueger's Analysis of the Labor Market for Uber's Driver-Partners*, "ILR Review", vol. 72, issue 1.
- De Stefano V., 2016, *The Rise of the 'Just-in-time Workforce': On-demand Work, Crowd Work and Labour Protection in the 'Gig-economy'*, Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Donavan A.S., Bradley D., Shimabukuro J., 2016, *What Does the Gig Economy Mean for Workers?*, CRS Report No. R44365, Washington: Congressional Research Service.
- Doorn N. van, 2017, *Platform Labor: On the Gendered and Racialized Exploitation of Low-Income Service Work in the 'On-demand' Economy*, "Information Communication & Society", vol. 20, issue 6.
- Furåker B., 2007, *Types of Employment Contract and Attitudes to Flexibility: An Analysis of Data from Three Swedish Surveys* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Furåker B., Håkansson K., Karlsson J.Ch., 2007, *Reclaiming the Concept of Flexibility* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Håkansson K., Isidorsson T., 2007, *Flexibility, Stability and Agency Work: A Comparison of the Use of Agency Work in Sweden and the UK* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall J., Krueger A., 2017, *An Analysis of the Labor Market for Uber's Driver-Partners in the United States*, "ILR Review", vol. 71, issue 3.
- Harris S., Krueger A., 2015, *A Proposal for Modernizing Labor Laws for Twenty-First-Century Work: 'The Independent Worker' (The Hamilton Project, Discussion Paper 2015-10, Dec. 2015)*, http://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/modernizing_labor_laws_for_twenty_first_century_work_krueger_harris.pdf (accessed: 24.03.2022).
- Hill S., 2015, *Raw Deal: How the 'Uber Economy' and Runaway Capitalism are Screwing American Workers*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Jonsson D., 2007a, *Flexibility, Stability and Related Concepts* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jonsson D., 2007b, *Time-related Flexibility and Stability for Employees* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Joyce S., Stuart M., 2021, *Digitalised Management, Control and Resistance in Platform Work: A Labour Process Analysis* [in:] J. Haidar, M. Keune (eds.), *Work and Labour Relations in Global Platform Capitalism*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Karlsson J.Ch., 2007, *For Whom Is Flexibility Good and Bad? An Overview* [in:] B. Furåker, K. Håkansson, J.Ch. Karlsson (eds.), *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karlsson J.Ch., Eriksson B., 2000, *Flexibla arbetsplatser och arbetsvillkor*, Lund: Arkiv.
- Lehdonvirta V., 2018, *Flexibility in the Gig Economy: Managing Time on Three Online Piecework Platforms*, "New Technology, Work and Employment", vol. 33, issue 1.
- Mika B., 2020, *Digital 'Putting-out System' – An Old New Method of Work in Platform Economy*, "Polish Sociological Review", vol. 211, issue 3.
- Piasna A., Drahokoupil J., 2019, *Digital Labour in Central and Eastern Europe: Evidence from the ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey*, "ETUI Working Paper", no. 12(2019), Brussels: European Trade Union Institute.
- Polkowska D., 2019a, *Does the App Contribute to the Precarization of Work? A Case of Uber Drivers in Poland*, "Partecipazione e Conflitto", vol. 12, issue 3.
- Polkowska D., 2019b, *Uber jako socjo-techniczna sieć. Zastosowanie teorii aktora-sieci do analizy pracy platformowej*, "Studia Socjologiczne", vol. 235, issue 4.
- Reid-Musson E., MacEachen E., Bartel E., 2020, *'Don't Take a Poo!': Worker Misbehaviour in On-demand Ride-Hail Carpooling*, "New Technology, Work and Employment", vol. 35, issue 2.
- Rosenblat A., 2018, *Uberland. How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Rosenblat A., Stark L., 2016, *Algorithmic Labor and Information Asymmetries: A Case Study of Uber's Drivers*, "International Journal of Communication", vol. 10.
- Schor J., Attwood-Charles W., 2017, *The 'Sharing' Economy: Labor, Inequality, and Social Connection on For-profit Platforms*, "Sociology Compass", vol. 11, issue 8.
- Schor J., Attwood-Charles W., Cansoy M., Ladegaard I., Wengronowitz R., 2020, *Dependence and Precarity in the Platform Economy*, "Theory and Society", vol. 49.
- Stewart P., Shanahan G., Smith M., 2020, *Individualism and Collectivism at Work in an Era of Deindustrialization: Work Narratives of Food Delivery Couriers in the Platform Economy*, "Frontiers in Sociology", vol. 5, issue 49.
- Sundararajan A., 2016, *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-based Capitalism*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Tittenbrun J., 2014, *Pogranicza a teoria społeczeństwa*, "Pogranicze. Polish Borderland Studies", vol. 2, issue 1.
- Tittenbrun J., 2018, *Theory of Ownership of Labour Power*, "Nowa Krytyka", vol. 40.
- Tsoneva J., 2015, *An Economy of Taste: The Case of Uber in Bulgaria*, "LeftEast", November 9, <https://lefteast.org/an-economy-of-taste-the-case-of-uber-in-bulgaria/> (accessed: 26.07.2022).
- Wood A.J., 2016, *Flexible Scheduling, Degradation of Job Quality and Barriers to Collective Voice*, "Human Relations", vol. 69, issue 10.