

The Parable of the Gig Economy

Peter Heslam compares the gig economy to the parable of the vineyard workers.

Originally, a gig was a spear for catching fish. Then it was a boat, then a horse-drawn carriage, then a punishment, and then a rock concert, then a unit of digital information.

Now it's a taxi ride, a meal delivery, a handyman task, or the provision of overnight accommodation. Mobile technology, particularly the smartphone app, is facilitating the rapid growth of a new service market – the gig economy – epitomised by such firms as Uber, Deliveroo, TaskRabbit and Airbnb.

The rise of such companies is meteoric. Estimates vary but as many as five million people work in the UK's gig economy. London, famous for its black cabs, has over 30,000 Uber drivers. In the USA, independent contractors will soon comprise 40 percent of the workforce.

The pros and cons of the gig economy are, however, fuelling fierce debate. Many of its workers, or 'gigsters',


report excellent job satisfaction. They value being their own boss, and flexible hours. Those in areas of high unemployment find their locality poses little barrier to finding work. Instant customer ratings allow gig providers to identify suitable individuals for specific tasks.

But the easy availability of gigs can stimulate overwork, as they are used to subsidise low-paid jobs. By regarding their workers as self-employed, gig companies are not obliged to provide them with benefits like insurance or sickness pay, whereas they do expect them to cover expenses such as the running of their own vehicles.

Fresh legislation is being developed but the issues cannot be reduced to legal ones about what counts as 'self-employed'. The rise of the gig economy – and its discontents – is a modern morality tale. It demonstrates that if the freedoms of innovation and enterprise are

enjoyed without their inherent responsibilities, the penalty is regulation.

A more ancient parable of the gigsters is the parable of the vineyard workers (Matthew 20:1-16). Its landowner, who goes several times to the market-place to find casual labourers, is not unlike gig company directors who repeatedly check their screens to see which couriers are available for which new gigs.

But what about that parable's outrageous ending, in which those who had worked only one hour are paid the same as those who had worked all day? That also speaks to company directors today about the need to value, and be generous towards, the most vulnerable of suitable workers. For as the parable's strapline warns, 'the last shall be first, and the first shall be last'. 

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