Article title: Gig work and the discourse of autonomy: fictitious freedom in Japan's platform economy

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Abstract

The introduction of the so-called 'gig economy' has been accompanied by an official discourse which highlights the benefits to be gained by 'gig workers' from the more autonomous nature of this type of employment. In contrast, this paper draws upon the cultural political economy approach (Sum and Jessop 2013) to argue that the move towards gig work is more accurately conceptualised as an attempt to legitimate the further flexibilisation of labour markets within advanced industrial democracies, in particular by seeking to construct economic imaginaries that are best described as a form of 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017). The paper explores these developments with a specific focus on the case of Japan, chosen to highlight the concrete pressures facing a struggling coordinated market economy, and the way in which it integrates new digital technologies in an effort to increase productivity and thereby further growth, locking gig workers into low-skilled and low-paid super-fragmented tasks. As the paper shows, the attempt to construct disciplined digital workers has nevertheless faced obstacles arising from the dissatisfying and fictional nature of the 'freedom' narrative which has accompanied, and sought to legitimate, the introduction of 'gig work'.

Keywords
digital labour, gig economy, platform, crowdsource, Japanese economy, cultural political economy

The emergence of the so-called digital economy has generated considerable scholarly discussion (Ford 2015, Huws 2014, McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2011, 2014, 2017). In particular, this has included a consideration of the type of work associated with these new technologies (Huws 2014, Srnicek 2017, Ford 2015), the impact that digital work has had upon employment opportunities and the experience of the workplace (Huws 2014, Moore and Robinson 2015, Beer 2016, Schwab 2016, Ford 2015, Frey and Osborne 2013, Elder-Vass 2016, Holtgrewe 2014, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, Went *et al*. 2015), the opportunities that digital technologies create for both the disciplining of (Beer 2016, Sundararajan 2016), and resistance by workers (Moore 2018), and a series of challenges that policymakers face in the so-called digital age (Sundararajan 2016, Srnicek 2017, McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2014). One of the key concerns raised within these broad discussions has been that of the potentially detrimental impact that digital work, or 'gig work' (sometimes called crowd work, platform work, or click work), has upon the bargaining position of both collective and individual workers (Moore 2018, Beer 2016, Huws 2014, Went *et al*. 2015). Gig work is often defined as a form of labour which 'gives

organisations or individuals access via online platforms to large numbers of workers willing to carry out paid tasks' (Valenduc and Vendramin 2016:38). This is work provided through platforms (Valenduc and Vendramin 2016:38), in a way that provide fragmented micro-tasks, connecting online-based workers. A platform is a business which creates interactions between producers and consumers, and provides an open participative infrastructure that facilitates the exchange of goods and services (Parker *et al*. 2016:3). Gig-working is therefore a process that enables large numbers of workers to engage in paid tasks which are made available through online platforms rather than 'from traditional employees' (Degryse 2016:36). It is feared that gig work has the potential to lead to an erosion of established collective bargaining outcomes, to sharpen the pressure upon workers to compete with the labour market, and therefore to undermine both existing wages and working conditions and result in a lowering of standards of living for significant proportions of national populations (Huws 2014, Moore 2018, Ford 2016, McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2017).

These concerns contrast sharply with what we might consider to be an 'official discourse' that has been developed to accompany and support the introduction of gig work within advanced industrial democracies. This is a view, typically articulated by both governments and firms, which considers 'gig work' to offer a number of important advantages for those who take up this form of employment. Gig work, it is claimed, can provide workers with an opportunity to achieve an enhanced degree of autonomy in terms of choosing what tasks to do, where to work and when to work. Indeed, it is this appeal to 'autonomy' that perhaps is central to this official discourse that heralds and identifies the key advantages of the new forms of 'platform' or 'gig' work that are central aspects of the new digital economy. This includes: an appeal to the heightened inclusivity and accessibility that gig work provides, in particular by offering opportunities to 'a broader range of people, including those whose mobility or availability prevents them from working regular hours (Valenduct and Vendramin 2016:32); the claim that gig work is able to resolve geographical challenges for workers, enabling a better match

between the supply and demand of skills (Kittur *et al*. 2013:24, Howe 2006); and the possibility that gig work can "democratize" idea generation' (e.g. Jeppesen and Lakhani, 2010, Afuah and Tucci, 2012, cited in Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014: 215).

It is striking how consistently this 'official discourse' has been deployed across the advanced industrial democracies, by both governments and firms alike. Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a major digital firm which mediates the outsourcing of data-processing micro-tasks to a global workforce of anonymous workers, claims that digital work enables its employees to 'find something that fits your skills and interests' in order to 'make money in your spare time' (MTurk 2017) Similarly, McKinsey, the global consulting firm, claims that among 68 million freelancers (gig workers) in the US 'do it by choice', and, 'report being happier' having moved away from a traditional 9-5 workstyle (Gillespie 2017). Further, in the UK, the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices portrayed gig work in terms of being capable of 'addressing the needs of people actively choosing to work outside of the traditional employment model' (Taylor *et al*. 2017:28). British Prime Minister, Theresa May, supporting this view, argues that government needed to avoid 'overbearing regulation', thereby ensuring that the UK remains 'a home to innovation, new ideas and new business models' (quoted in Odell 2017).

There are, however, a number of reasons to be sceptical regarding the discourse that has tended to accompany the introduction of gig work (Brophy and de Peuter 2007, Kapur 2007, cited in Moore and Robinson 2015:5). Gig work has a tendency to result in a number of concerning trends, including: heightened uncertainty and instability within the labour market (Srnicek 2017, Howe 2006, 2008, Irani 2015, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016:38); a fragmentation and decomposition of work tasks, which can subsequently be rendered homogenous, thereby de-skilling and driving down wages (Huws 2014: 87, Kittur *et al*. 2013: 24, Kenny and Zysman 2016: 66-67); heightened precarity as a result of the 'lean' status of the platform economy (2017: 79); and a process of 'breaking down the job, or the production process, into tiny simple

and repetitive tasks' that will be offered to online-based gig-workers (Valsamis 2015, cited in Degryse 2016:36-37). In legal terms, gig workers are usually considered contractors, rather than employees, and are therefore without entitlements to training, benefits, overtime pay or paid holidays (Srnicek 2017:76).

According to its critics, therefore, crowdsourcing generates flexible, cheap, and on-demand workers, undermining their rights and contributing to the creation of more precarious workers. This ranges from relatively simple, low-skill work such as speech transcription and copyediting, to more complex and expert tasks such as product design and translation, each of which is increasingly performed by gig workers (Kittur *et al.* 2013:24). The fragmentation of working practices through crowdsourcing has also strengthened the invisible and exchangeable nature of workers as a result of their reduced visibility (Kittur *et al*. 2013:23), thereby heightening competition between workers (Holtgrewe 2014:20). As such, whereas crowdsourcing may arguably have created job opportunities, super-fragmented repetitive tasks nevertheless result in a decline in workers' skills and an exacerbation of the alienation of workers (Kittur *et al.* 2013:25). This, in turn, enables platform businesses to evade their responsibilities as employers, as gig workers become flexible, invisible and exchangeable tools, often working under 'zero hour' contracts. As Valenduc and Vendramin (2016) put it, platform-based work is a 'continuous employment relationship without continuous work' (p. 34). As a result, this makes the practice of non-standard and unpredictable work scheduling increasingly common and disrupts work schedules and private life as gig workers need to be continuously available (Degryse 2016:44, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016: 35, Morsy and Rothstein 2015, cited in Degryse 2016:44). We have therefore been witnessing a shift in the forms of domination and control imposed upon labour, from a direct, physical, and on-the-site type, to the increased use of indirect mechanisms of domination as a result of intensifying competition, rendering workers less visible, and in turn suppressing wages and working conditions.

The notion, present within the 'official discourse', that gig work represents a new form of autonomous employment, in which workers are freed up to pursue a much greater selection of employment opportunities, is therefore questionable. It is in this sense that we might more adequately conceptualise official pro-gig work discourse as built upon a notion of 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017). That is, pro-gig work discourse draws upon, in a one-sided way, the opportunities for greater autonomy that gig work might provide, whilst concealing or neglecting the substantial constraints that exist and which act to prevent the exercise of that purported autonomy. As Klein (2017) argues, such a notion of freedom, or 'autonomy', is therefore fictitious. It presents the market as a neutral mechanism through which economic actors can acquire greater freedom as a result of the opportunities to enter into acts of exchange which the market offers. Yet, the imposition of the market itself reflects underlying political struggles that cannot be considered neutral or outside of the scope of (unequal) power relations. As Klein puts it, drawing on Polanyi, 'economic processes can never be separated from political struggle between competing social groups' (Klein 2017: 859). Promoting the market as the means through which to ensure heightened 'freedom' therefore reflects underlying power relations which themselves are marked by imbalances and relationships of domination and subordination. The 'gig work as autonomy' discourse, therefore, reflects power relations, which themselves require explanation. This has similarities with Lukes' third face of power, in which the interests and options available to actors are themselves subjected to an imbalance of power and therefore create indirect, and sometimes unobservable, forms of domination (Lukes 1974). As we have seen, a number of critics have highlighted the detrimental consequences of the introduction of gig work. The present paper therefore seeks to conceptualise the underlying power relations which have accompanied this process, and especially the way in which these have informed the articulation of the 'official' pro-gig work discourse that appears to be prevalent. In order to do so, it draws on the cultural political economy framework, developed especially by Jessop and Sum (2006) and Sum and Jessop (2013), as part of an attempt to

consider the causal relationship between underlying power relations and predominant discursive articulations.

A cultural political economy of gig work

Sum and Jessop's (2013) cultural political economy attempts to bridge the divide between constructivist and materialist approaches, which are often considered to form a dichotomy within political economy. Constructivist approaches tend to focus on ideas and identities and their role within socio-economic processes (Ban 2016, Blyth 2013, Widmaier 2016). This contrasts with more 'materialist' approaches, which consider pressures generated by socio-economic structures (especially capitalism) and the way in which these generate particular socio-economic trends (and crises) (Bieler and Morton 2018, Harvey 2005). This dichotomy of approaches is often considered dissatisfying. Whilst it is difficult to deny the importance of ideas, it is also unlikely that socio-economic structures play no role in determining which actors (and their ideas) are influential, and the reasons why. The cultural political economy approach therefore aims to reconcile both ideational and material concerns. In doing so, it seeks to understand the role of ideas and discourse, as part of wider structures of capital accumulation. As such, it offers a framework through which to consider the discourse that tends to accompany socio-economic developments, such as (in this case) the introduction of gig work in advanced industrial democracies.

In considering the relationship between ideas, structures, and agents, the cultural political economy approach identifies four 'selectivities' (structural, discursive, technological and agential) (Sum and Jessop 2013). The notion of 'selectivity' refers to the way in which asymmetrical power relations create a greater likelihood of, or potential for, the adoption, privileging, favouring, or 'selection', of certain agents, strategies, actions or ideas (without

determining such outcomes). We can speak, therefore, of these asymmetrical power relations in terms of them being associated with particular 'selectivities'. *Structural selectivity* is the term used to describe the different (asymmetrical) sets of constraints and opportunities available to different social groups, and therefore corresponds most closely to what we might consider to be the concern of the more 'materialist' approaches within political economy. Similarly, *discursive selectivity* refers to the way in which different discourses and enunciations face particular constraints and opportunities, thereby favouring certain arguments (and forms of argumentation) over others, as well as favouring the voice of certain advocates of those arguments over others. As Sum and Jessop (2013) put it, *discursive selectivity* makes 'it more or less easy to develop specific appeals, arguments, recontextualisations, claims, legitimations and so on that others by virtue of their filtering effects' (Sum and Jessop 2013: 215). *Technological selectivity* refers to both the broad notion of technology (such as the current development of machinery and other inputs into physical production), and a narrower (Foucauldian) sense of the technology of 'governmentalization', according to which particular technologies are used to constitute (and discipline) subjects. Finally, *agential selectivity* refers to the qualities of the individual which allow her to act within the three other selectivities (structural, discursive and technological) and is therefore also, in part, a (non-determined) product of those other three selectivities (Sum and Jessop 2013: 214-7). Given the concerns of the present paper, we focus our attention here on two of these selectivities - structural and discursive.

Pro-gig work discourse and Japan's new liberalised model of capitalism

What follows is an attempt to explore the development of a pro-gig economy discourse through the cultural political economy approach outlined above, focusing in particular on the role of discourse within the wider regime of accumulation within which it emerges. This discussion focuses specifically on the case of Japan. As we shall see, Japan's accumulation model has experienced a number of significant problems over the past two decades, resulting in a process

of transformation introducing heightened economic liberalization. This has therefore seen considerable change to the prior 'coordinated' Japanese growth model, which was characterised especially by highly stable employment relations, low levels of social conflict, and an export-led growth model built around incremental improvements in advanced technology (Shibata 2016). As a result of these changes, Japan represents an important case within which to consider the introduction of gig work. The challenges that moves towards the introduction of gig work pose are especially visible, given the longstanding reliance of the Japanese model upon both technology (which renders the Japanese economy especially amenable to the introduction of platform-based firms) and labour market security (which is particularly affected by the introduction of gig work).

The Japanese economy has witnessed the introduction of a series of labour market reforms during the past three decades. This includes both an increased flexibilisation of employment, and a significant increase in the proportion of the workforce of so-called 'non-regular workers'. This represents a shift away from the lifelong employment practices that are typically considered to be a central element to the post-war economic model in Japan, towards the use of temporary, fixed term, and agency workers ('dispatch workers'). This is a process that has been driven by both government (including through important legislation, such as the Dispatch Workers Law) and changes to firms' hiring practices (Keizer 2010, Watanabe 2017, on the more general transformation of Japan's model of capitalism, see Shibata 2017: 401-4). One of the more recent developments in this process of labour market liberalisation, facilitated by the emergence of the digital economy, has been the introduction of 'gig work' or 'platform work', meaning the introduction of employment practices that are mediated by online recruitment and hiring.

Gig work in Japan has been growing significantly over the last five years. The volume of wages paid by temp agencies in the crowdsource sector reached roughly about 125 billion yen (827.4

million GBP) in 2015, an increase of 39.1 per cent compared with 2014, with an expectation that it will grow to 350 billion yen (2.36 billion GBP) by 2019 (Yano Research Institute 2016). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) predicts that as platform-based jobs increase, a growing number of workers will not belong to any firm, instead working for whichever firm recruits them on an 'on-demand' basis for short-term jobs or tasks (2016:228). Two of the largest players in the gig work economy have been *Lancers* and *CrowdWorks*. *Lancers* is the largest crowdsourcing company in Japan, which was set up in 2008, and at the time of 2014, 300,000 people are registered. *CrowdWorks* was established in March 2012, and at the time of April 2014, it has registered 150,000 people (MIC 2014: 212).

As part of this introduction and expansion of gig work within the Japanese labour market, both the Japanese state and leading firms within the Japanese economy have espoused the type of pro-gig work discourse introduced in the discussion above, in particular drawing attention to the opportunities for autonomous working provided by the new gig economy. For instance, in a recent report, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) claims that gig work 'creates opportunities for workers to choose where to work and when to work, increase family and leisure time … and improve work-life balance' and 'prevents workers from leaving their work due to family care and elderly care' (MIC 2015:216, author's translation). MIC also emphasises how gig work will 'reduce workers' stress, and fatigue from commuting, and increase employment opportunities in rural economies' (MIC 2015:216, author's translation).

Firms based within Japan have also been keen to highlight the benefits of gig work. This includes the claim that young workers and students view gig work as a means by which to achieve greater autonomy over working practices and skill development. In the words of Thomas Pouplin, co-founder of the Japanese crowdsourcing work platform, *ikkai*, 'Students in Japan are getting bored with traditional part-time jobs; they work crazy hours so they can't go out or even study and they do the same thing over and over again, unable to skill up' (quoted in

British Chamber of Commerce in Japan 2017). It is in this context that gig work is attractive, as young workers and students, 'want more experience and, after graduation, they want to join a company with some skills they can use' (quoted in British Chamber of Commerce in Japan, 2017). In highlighting the attraction of gig work, crowdsourcing firms relay the words of gig workers themselves. Crowdsourcing firm, *Job-Hub*, for instance, presents gig workers themselves highlighting, in their own words, the autonomy that such work offers: 'I can decide which types of work I want to do, I can decide all by myself. I can choose types of work that I am good at rather than those that I am not' (Job-Hub 2018, author's translation).

Structural selectivity: Japan's regime of accumulation and the demand for new working practices

Japan has been widely noted for the sluggish growth it experienced since the 1991 bursting of the bubble that built up during the period of rapid growth of the 1980s. The so-called 'lost two (or three) decades' have, in turn, generated a number of structural pressures that have produced particular structural selectivities. Four (interconnected) structural pressures, in particular, have exerted themselves within Japan's political economy: stagnant growth; a growing labour shortage problem; rising worker disaffection arising from an ongoing move towards liberalisation; and a shift in power between social forces that has seen the ascendance of a new, entrepreneurial, fraction of capital, empowered by the ongoing low levels of growth within Japan's political economy, and a concomitant decline in the power of established trade unions faced with a decline in their core group of 'regular workers'. The result of each of these pressures, moreover, has been to generate growing pressure for, and the facilitation of, the flexibilisation of labour relations, and the introduction of gig work as a key means by which to resolve some of the problems faced within the Japanese regime of accumulation.

One of the key structural pressures that accompanied the period of sluggish growth within Japan has been the pressure to identify new opportunities for productivity and competitiveness,

including especially through attempts to liberalise the labour market so that the pre-1990 practice of widespread 'jobs for life' has increasingly been replaced with the introduction of so-called 'non-regular workers' employed on fixed term contracts or through temporary agencies (Keizer 2010, Yun 2016, Shibata 2017: 401-4). Japanese employment relations have experienced consistent pressure to move towards what is now commonly considered to be a dual labour market in Japan. This represents a move away from what was for much of the post-war period a class compromise geared around worker diligence and loyalty, in exchange for exceptionally high levels of job security (Ōhki 1998, Dohse *et al*. 1985:138). Temporary workers, face significant levels of economic insecurity, including those on zero-hour contracts and/or employed through temporary agencies, a large proportion of whom are women (Ogoshi 2006:475). Alongside this process of labour market liberalisation we have seen a parallel labour shortage, resulting in part from declining fertility rates and an illiberal migration policy. These developments have had a contradictory impact upon capital-labour relations. Established trade unions have declined in influence as a result of the reduction in 'regular workers' who have tended historically to form the core of their power base. 'Non-regular workers', in contrast, have thus far been largely unable to form substantial institutions able to exert influence of mobilise a power resource within Japan's political economy (Watanabe 2017). This has not prevented, however, increasing expressions of disaffection and (non-institutionalised) forms of dissent, as a result of their experience of casualised employment (Shibata 2016).

Each of these pressures have combined within the context of Japan's political economy to produce concrete structural pressures, or structural selectivities, encouraging both the Japanese state, and Japanese firms, to identify new patterns of working, in an attempt to address both sluggish growth and rising popular discontent. It is in this context, with the structural selectivities that are generated as a result, that gig work has become an increasingly attractive option for both Japanese state actors and firms. As we shall see, below, this has in turn

combined with prevalent discourses within Japan to produce a concrete official 'pro-gig work discourse' to accompany and promote the move towards gig working.

Discursive selectivity: building economic imaginaries of fictitious freedom

In the case of Japan, we see a clear development and articulation of an official pro-gig work discourse. This has seen workers encouraged to interpret the digital economy as a development which generates a number of important opportunities, particularly by offering more autonomous forms of work, as part of a strategy aimed at constructing positive attitudes amongst those workers - especially female and elderly - moving into gig work. This represents an attempt to reconcile the structural pressures discussed above, with a number of discursive conventions present within the Japanese context. In this sense, we see the complex combination of both structural and discursive selectivities, which interact to produce the specific efforts at legitimating discourse that accompanies the introduction of gig work within the Japanese context.

Three discursive themes prevalent within Japan's political economy are of particular importance in considering the introduction of gig work: the much-perceived need for Japanese policymakers to find new avenues through which to facilitate productivity gains within Japan's low growth economy; the unfavourable working conditions experienced by both non-regular and regular workers, and the discursive articulation of associated grievances; and the widely remarked need to address a number of obstacles that currently prevent labour market participation, especially for women. The discourse adopted by both the Japanese government, and key gig work firms, highlights the important way in which gig work represents an attempt to address each of these concerns that have become common themes within popular discourse in Japan, as we shall see below.

In addressing the concerns of non-regular workers, the pro-gig work discourse articulated sought to highlight the way in which the autonomous nature of gig work would enable the government to address widespread concerns regarding working hours more generally within Japan's labour market. Japan is widely considered to suffer from a problem of long working hours and related deaths and suicide (*karoshi*). As such, a moral panic has emerged across much of Japan, generating pressure upon Japanese firms to seek ways in which to resolve the poor work-life balance of Japanese workers. The introduction of gig working, therefore, represents a (somewhat superficial) means by which to appear to be tackling the problem of excessive working hours, in a way that is without costs (and indeed has a number of benefits) for employing firms. In highlighting the results of its own survey, the government shows how gig businesses and users of gig services, are eager to create an image of work-life balance which benefits employees, and in doing so seek to emphasise the (fictitious) freedom available to its employees. For instance, *Lancers*, one of the major gig firms in Japan, claims that 'You can work whenever you want and wherever you want as long as you have online access. You can work full time every day or use your available time for side business. You choose your own working time in your own way' (Lancers 2018a, author's translation). As part of these efforts, *Lancers* promote gig work, organising seminars for mothers, with titles such as 'Mothers with childcare duties can shine: Work-Life Balance Seminar' (Ishikari city council 2018). This is announced with the claim that, 'we organise a program to match your needs for people who had to leave their work but still want to work or have anxiety in terms of working whilst having childcare duties' (Ishikari city council 2018, author's translation).

In order to advocate and promote gig work, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Wealth (MHLW) also established the 'HOME WORKERS WEB'. This provides guidelines for gig workers so that they can make the most of their work practices. HOME WORKERS WEB not only provides information online but also holds a series of seminars with titles such as 'Autonomous Workstyle Discovery Seminar' across Japan, in which the opportunities for autonomy that gig

work generates for a wide range of the population are advertised (MHLW 2018, author's translation). MHLW also articulates the potentially high income and high skills available for those choosing skilled tasks, highlighting that 'some types of gig work require high skills, and if you choose these types of work, you may be able to improve your skill, or by combining these high-skill required tasks, you can obtain higher remuneration' (MHLW 2018, author's translation). Local government authorities have also been active in promoting and facilitating the staging of similar seminars. For instance, Ishikari City authority, in Hokkaido, held a seminar promoting gig work for mothers with childcare and those with elderly care duties.

The discourse that accompanied the introduction of gig work was also articulated in terms which sought to highlight efforts to address a widely held concern that non-regular workers increasingly faced unfair or unwelcome working conditions. Thus, in announcing a series of liberalising labour market reforms, the Abe administration pointed to the way in which these would reduce the division between regular and non-regular workers, achieving an improved work-life balance, including by tackling the convention of long-working hours, and extending the range of work forms available for different individuals at different life stages (Prime Minister's Office 2017:2). Specifically, the Work-style Reform Committee attached to the Prime Minister's Office advocated more flexible forms of work as 'the current division between regular or non-regular employment will not motivate non-regular workers and individual worker will feel more appropriately evaluated if the unequal division is reduced' (Prime Minister's Office 2017:2, author's translation). By articulating the potential opportunity provided by a more flexible work-style and presenting itself as addressing the current problematic division existent between regular and non-regular workers, the government sought to establish a new route through which to promote new form of flexible work such as gig work.

In addition, discourse has been articulated which seeks to highlight the way in which gig work provides an opportunity to address a widely perceived problem of inaccessibility to the labour

market for particular groups within Japanese society, especially women. For instance, the government in its 'Work-style Reform' emphasizes how female workers have been prevented from working due to the gendered nature of family caring duties, and also pointing to the way in which long-working hours in the waged sector act as a further barrier to female participation in the labour market (Prime Minister's Office 2016a). At one meeting on 'Work-style Reform' in October 2016, Prime Minister Abe remarked that tele-work and gig work are a useful way of working to balance work and family care duties. Yet, this was also flagged as a form work that was not sufficiently adopted by business, and therefore, the government, particularly, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, was identified as the means by which the government would promote this new form of work (Prime Minister's Office 2016b:20). Similarly, gig firm, *shufti*, which was established in 2007, and focuses on advertising tasks for housewives. The firm encourages housewives to take on low-skill tasks by claiming that 'we provide administrative tasks such as writing articles, data input and collecting information' (shufti 2018 author's translation). *Shufu* in Japanese means 'housewife', and by using this term in the company name, *shufti* clearly encourages housewives to consider working as gig workers. In its homepage, therefore, *shufti* claims that 'you can work between your childcare duties or in the evening', 'depending on your life-style' (shufti 2018, author's translation). In doing so, it presents comments made by housewives with children on how simple tasks are well-suited work for housewives. As such, the government and gig firms have sought, through their articulation of a pro-gig work discourse, to construct an image of themselves that emphasises their efforts to improve inequality within the labour market, promoting new forms of work which are both accessible and rewarded according to merit.

Further, gig firms select particular discourses to enhance their gig work not only to female workers but also to a wider range of potential workers. For instance, *CrowdWorks* has promoted gig work for the elderly people, in cooperation with TV Tokyo, for whom elderly people are key viewers of their program (CrowdWorks 2013). By using media, *CrowdWorks* has sought to

portray gig work as a means by which the elderly to find work outside of traditional employment relations. *CrowdWorks* became the first platform which specifically focused on providing gig work for the elderly. The government and gig business therefore promote alternative forms of work, problematizing traditional work practices of long hours and poor work-life balance, creating a pro-gig environment for people who tend to be excluded from the labour market. Similarly, REALWORLD, a crowdsourcing company, advertises on its home page, 'Typing one letter with your smartphone is work', and showing a series of photos of young people who appear to be NEET (not in education, employment or training), as well as the elderly, and a young person with an injury (REALWORLD 2018). The discourse tries to highlight the image of gig work as capable of providing new, straightforward and convenient job options for people who have been excluded from the traditional job market. *REALWORLD* proclaims 'Love the unexpected' and 'the world is full of unexpected realities and imagine the unimaginable future'. This is despite gig work only providing 1.5 to 2 pounds of hourly wage at REALWORLD, and according to one of the executive office of REALWORLD: 'it is too difficult to increase hourly wages for gig workers since it is a price competition with overseas companies such as Vietnam and China' (Yoshida and Arao 2016). Gig businesses therefore seek to legitimate their model with a particular focus on excluded people, idealising new forms of gig work.

This attempt to use pro-gig work discourse as part of a broader effort to construct a progressive identity for the government can also be seen in the discourse of the Prime Minister's Office. For instance, the Government's *Plan to Realize the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens* (Prime Minister's Office 2016c), highlights how tele-working (a key element of gig work) creates an opportunity through which to reduce working hours and prevent harassment in the workplace (Prime Minister's Office 2016c:9, 13). Prime Minister Abe himself commented on the benefits of tele-working on a few occasions, claiming that work-reform (*hataraki kata kaikaku*) provides important advantages for people with children and the elderly, thereby creating flexible job

opportunities (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 25 January 2017). For instance, in October 2014, at the Work-style Reform, Prime Minister Abe remarked on tele-working and side jobs as 'extremely important to promote' (Sankei News, 24 October 2016).

In terms of the much-perceived need for Japanese policymakers to find new avenues through which to facilitate productivity gains within Japan's low growth economy, much of the Japanese government's discourse which accompanied the introduction of gig work sought to create an image of gig work as an opportunity to reduce costs and avoid some of the burdensome responsibilities that business might otherwise accrue. Gig workers receive no welfare benefits, and employers can avoid providing legal welfare benefits to those, whereas it is an expectation that such benefits will be paid to other (non-gig) non-regular workers. This was supported by Japanese business, with *Keidanren*, the national business association, emphasising especially the need to avoid over-regulation of gig work (Keidanren 2017:2-3). As *Keidanren* comments in its own report: 'it is important to revise the government's guidelines on tele-work in a way that they will not impose strict working conditions upon gig workers. …The current guidelines appear to require the provision of employment relations, even though gig work is based on contractual relations. It is important therefore to clarify the difference between firm-employed tele-work and self-employed tele-work (gig work). We will recommend the amendment of the current guidelines to reflect this difference' (Keidanren 2017:2, author's translation). In this sense, *Keidanren* sought to ensure that gig work remains on a contract basis, rather than moving towards an employment relationship. In doing so, *Keidanren* clearly articulates the benefits of gig work for the implementation of flexible work as well as the productivity increase for their member firms.

Similar discursive articulations have also been performed by key Japanese firms within the gig economy. For instance, both *Lancers* and *CrowdWorks* have emphasised the ability of crowdsourcing to reduce staff costs, especially those associated with providing office space,

equipment, workers' benefits or insurance, and thereby contribute to growth (MIC 2016:311). The pursuit of reduced staff costs is one of the most important motives driving the increase in crowdsourcing amongst hiring firms, with 36.3 per cent of potential employers viewing reduced costs as a reason for crowdsourcing (MIC 2015:224). This was a process that was also welcomed by the Japanese government, witnessing for instance both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) recognising *CrowdWorks* and Lancers for their contribution to the economy. This formed part of a wider system introduced to enable the government to award gig businesses on the basis of their contribution to national growth (Japan Tele Work Association 2018).

In sum, Japanese policymakers and firms have consistently articulated a pro-gig work discourse in terms of the opportunities gig work creates for current non-regular workers, women and elderly workers, seeking to create an image of gig work as flexible, autonomous, and rewarded appropriately depending on individual tasks. As we have seen, this reflects the structural and discursive selectivities of cultural political economy.

Tensions in the 'fictitious freedom' discourse

In terms of the success of the discursive strategy adopted to accompany the introduction of gig work, it is undeniably the case that women and elderly workers have sought to take advantage of the opportunity created by gig work in order to enter the labour market, with women especially using gig work as a means by which to continue working during maternity leave (CrowdWorks 2016, MIC 2014: 213, see also Prime Minister's Office 2015: 4). Despite low levels of pay, moreover, a majority of gig workers (51.6 per cent) are satisfied with the level of remuneration that they receive (*Rengo* 2016:6). Although this level of satisfaction is especially high for those doing computer system developing and programming, whereas it is much lower

for those conducting simple tasks, reflecting a divergence between skilled and unskilled gig workers (Syu 2006, cited in METI 2016:9).

Despite the apparent willingness of Japanese workers to embrace the move towards gig work, this should not be considered a straightforward process of 'hegemony production'. Indeed, the attempt to promote gig work as a way of enhancing autonomy in the workplace has prompted the emergence of a range of new tensions and grievances. Whilst this has tended not to lead to instances of outright protest or expressions of explicit dissent, it has resulted in what Ybema and Horvers (2017) refer to as, 'backstage resistance', meaning 'a benign appearance of carefully staged compliant behaviour' by those who nevertheless recognise and consider disfavourably their experience of subordination. Over 90 per cent of gig workers have some concern about their position as gig workers (a rate which is higher than for both regular and more standard non-regular workers) (*Rengo* 2016:8, Syu 2006, cited in MIC 2016:8). Roughly 53 per cent of people surveyed experienced problems with pay-related matters, including delayed payment (20 per cent), unpaid remuneration or underpayment (17 per cent) or unreasonably low payment (16 per cent) (*Rengo* 2016:9). Nearly 50 per cent of project-based gig workers (who perform more high-skilled tasks), and 22 per cent of gig workers who engage in (lower skill) task-based work, experiencing delayed payment, and roughly 15 per cent of gig workers who take task-based work having either no payment or underpayment (Rengo 2016:9). Gig workers have also expressed concerns regarding the availability of work. 51.8 per cent of surveyed gig workers are worried about whether they will continue to have regular work (*Rengo* 2016:8). This is particularly notable amongst unskilled workers who engage in fragmented tasks and are viewed as easily replaceable. Further, over 20 per cent of gig workers expressed concerns over whether client employers will honour contracts or gig workers will receive payment (a concern that especially faces unskilled workers). This includes the cancellation of work by hiring firms. Whilst cancellation accrues a penalty for the hiring firm, the crowdsourcing firm nevertheless retains a significant amount of this penalty, ensuring that

workers often lose out when work is cancelled. Indeed, this is one of the main ways in which gig workers suffer non-payment or underpayment. Employers of gig workers also avoid providing long-term contracts and worker's benefits or social insurance, representing a re-emergence of day labour-style employment.

The task-based model of crowd work tends to include smaller, often lower skill, tasks, including administrative works, designing simple websites, writing short advertising articles, data input and clicking website links (*Lancers* 2017). The fragmented way in which these tasks are distributed, and the scale of competition over the attempt to secure each task, has served to pressure gig workers to reduce their own cost estimates in giving quotes for work (Uluru 2015: 2). This is a problem that is exacerbated by the fact that platform work is not regulated by the minimum wage system.

Perhaps the most frequent grievance expressed by gig work is that of low pay. *CrowdWorks* advertises gig work pay of around 1,000 yen per hour. Yet, many tasks advertised have extremely low rates remuneration per piece of work. For instance, remuneration for the task of 5-minute interpretation or translation is only 1 GBP (150 yen), and sometimes lower (*Lancer* 2017, Yamada, 2016). This leads to a high level of dissatisfaction in terms of the remuneration that gig workers receive. 48.4 per cent of gig workers surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with their payment (*Rengo* 2016:6).

The gender pay gap is another concern. Nearly 30 per cent of female gig workers surveyed engage in task-based work which requires low skills including data input, simple administrative tasks and organising pay slips, whereas only 19 per cent of male workers engage in this type of low skilled work (Rengo 2016:3). This has therefore led to a gender pay gap amongst gig workers, and a subsequent higher level of dissatisfaction over payment among female gig workers. For instance, 53.6 per cent of male gig workers expressed that they are satisfied with

remuneration, whereas 48.1 per cent of female gig workers that are surveyed are satisfied with remuneration (Rengo 2016:6). The 'opportunity' advocated by gig business may rather consolidate the gender pay gap further.

Finally, one of the most common concerns reported is that of whether deadlines will be met or not (Rengo 2016:8). This further calls into question the notion that gig work is an autonomous form of work. A time-card system adopted by gig businesses logs workers' status and allows employers to check who is working and available, and on what projects. Gig workers are supposed to provide their profiles on online platforms for gig firms, in which the last logged time is presented, indicating which gig workers are online. This therefore creates pressure on gig workers to be continuously available. As Fuchs points out, 'any control of labour time (its start and end) is forcefully removed from workers' decision-power' (2017:15), with such a level of monitoring enabled by online-platform further putting paid to the notion that gig workers are autonomous. In contrast to the 'official discourse', therefore, the reality of gig work is that workers are increasingly 'unfree', or suffer from a form of 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017), in that they are silently compelled to work harder, cheaper and efficiently in order to win contracts. In sum, gig workers typically report high levels of anxiety regarding job security, availability of work, the performance of tasks, and task deadlines.

Conclusion

Advocates of gig work – both firms and the government - claim that it provides opportunities for workers to exercise greater autonomy, enabling those such as women and the elderly who would otherwise be excluded from the labour market to find employment. They do so by promoting an official discourse built upon advocating what this paper terms, 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017). This seeks to portray gig work as a new form of work able to provide increased autonomy and fairness in the digital age. By adopting a cultural political economy approach, this

paper analyses the introduction and development of the gig economy, and especially gig work, in Japan. This has highlighted especially the structural selectivity created by Japan's low-growth, liberalising economy, and the discursive selectivity generated by a number of the prominent problems encountered and politicised within Japan's discursive terrain. The adoption of an official 'pro-gig work' discourse within the Japanese context has been generated by pressures placed upon both state managers and firms, to identify new working practices that will contribute to the efforts to raise productivity and to address problems associated with the exclusion of women and elderly from the labour market, long working hours, and the difficulties faced by non-regular workers. The move to present gig work as an opportunity for workers to achieve greater autonomy in their working lives can be understood in terms of these pressures. The paper has sought to highlight the fictitious nature of these claims, which as we have seen has also resulted in further strains emerging in Japan's economic model, especially around the experience of gig workers who are faced with a more competitive and less reliable employment model. Given that these are widely experienced challenges, this therefore represents a cultural political economy of new working practices - gig work - that is likely to be of growing importance across the advanced industrial democracies.

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