

Platform Work and Inequality in the United States

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University of California, Berkeley

Sociology 190
Spring 2024

Seminar

Wednesdays, 4:10-6:00pm
Dwinelle 87

Office Hours

Wednes. 2:00-3:30pm – contact for more availability
Caffe Strada or over Zoom

COURSE OVERVIEW

Uber. Doordash. Amazon Mechanical Turk. Maybe you have worked, or are working on a digital labor platform to pay bills, or to make a little extra money. In 2021, 16% of Americans reported having done some platform work. Or perhaps you have received some value from being a customer by taking an Uber instead of a taxi, or getting food delivered one late night to your dorm room. The platform economy is happening *right now*. Platforms are at the intersection of our historical moment *and* our personal lives, and this course invites us to reflect *critically* and *creatively* on the world that we are living in and our own role in it. In the process, you will be contributing your perspective, and listening to the perspective of others, as part of a *community* inside the classroom.

Platforms themselves claim to be changing the world for the better by creating new jobs for people who want to work hard, and work when and how they want. Many are optimistic about the potential for digital platforms to create innovation, and to challenge big bureaucracies, centralized power, and offer alternatives to capitalism. Scholars have been investigating these claims by studying many different kinds of platforms. Where do platforms come from, and are these jobs actually different from older forms of work? Do workers find meaning in this style of work, or is it just about making money? Are these good or bad jobs? What are the consequences of platforms for existing inequalities (class, gender, race)? The evidence that academics have gathered and presented regarding these questions is useful to policy makers and the government, who are struggling with how to regulate platforms.

There is a lot of debate about these questions. So instead of looking for *answers*, in this course we will be exploring *perspectives* on these questions and trying to make sense of how they can co-exist. Understanding these perspectives will require us to build on core sociological concepts like capitalism, control, precarity and economic citizenship. These concepts are important in the sociology of work, the sociology of economic and status inequalities, and the sociology of technology. We will explore scholarship that use both quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, interviews, and ethnography.

This course aims to:

- expose students to sociological theories that help to explain the rise of platforms and platform work in the United States context

- foster collaborative student learning through classroom discussions and group presentations
- teach students how to read sociological prose and to give students practice with these critical reading skills throughout the semester
- provide students with the opportunity to identify and explore questions that emerge from their readings
- provide students with the opportunity to engage in analysis and (for those who are interested) original research

COURSE OUTLINE

PART 1: GETTING ORIENTED

Week 1: January 17 – Welcome, introductions

By end-of-class: send me a brief introduction describing who you are. Some questions that you can address include: What brought you to sociology? What piqued your interest in this class? Do you have any goals or plans post-graduation? What experiences (academic, non-academic) are important for me to know about you?

Week 2: January 24 – How are labor platforms a part of our lives?

- Ropek, Lucas. “ChatGPT Is Powered by Human Contractors Getting Paid \$15 Per Hour.” <https://gizmodo.com/chatgpt-openai-ai-contractors-15-dollars-per-hour-1850415474>. *Gizmodo.com*. May, 8, 2023.
- Magridal, Alexis. “The Servant Economy.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/what-happened-uber-x-companies/584236/>. *The Atlantic Magazine*. March 6, 2019.
- Dunn, Gaby. “Get Rich or Die Vlogging: The Sad Economics of Internet Fame” <https://splinternews.com/get-rich-or-die-vlogging-the-sad-economics-of-internet-1793853578>. December 14, 2015.

Hint for office hours: come and introduction yourself!

Week 3: January 31 – Where do platforms come from? What kinds of platforms exist and why do they matter?

- Kenney, M. and Zysman, J., 2016. The rise of the platform economy. *Issues in science and technology*, 32(3), p.61-69.
- Kenney, M. and Zysman, J., 2019. Work and value creation in the platform economy. In *Work and labor in the digital age* (Vol. 33, pp. 13-41). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Hint for office hours: come and discuss your proposal!

Week 4: February 7 – What are the main ways that scholars study work on platforms?

- Vallas, S. and Schor, J.B., 2020. What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, pp.273-294.

- Read one article mentioned in Vallas and Schor 2020's article that you think might be useful for your final paper proposal (write to me if you need help accessing)
- Proposal for the final paper is due

In class: Ann Glusker, librarian for sociology, will join us to discuss research resources.

Week 5: February 14 – How do different research methods offer different views of platforms?

- Surveys: Anderson, M., McClain, C., Faverio, M. and Gelles-Watnick, R. 2021. 'The State of Gig Work in 2021', *Pew Research*, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/12/08/the-state-of-gig-work-in-2021/> on March 27, 2023.
- Digital observation: Alvarez De La Vega, Juan, Cecchinato, Marta and Rooksby, John (2021) "Why lose control?" A Study of Freelancers' Experiences with Gig Economy Platforms. In: CHI '21: Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. ACM, New York, p. 455-469.
- Interviews: Ravenelle, A.J., 2017. Sharing economy workers: selling, not sharing. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), pp.281-295.

Hint for office hours: come and discuss which method you might want to explore this semester!

PART 2: QUALITIES OF PLATFORM JOBS

Week 6: February 21 – Are platform workers Uber happy?

- Hall, J.V. and Krueger, A.B., 2018. An analysis of the labor market for Uber's driver-partners in the United States. *ILR Review*, 71(3), pp.705-732.
- Dubal, V.B., 2020. An Uber Ambivalence. *Beyond the Algorithm: Qualitative Insights for Gig Work Regulation*, 47(969), p.33-63.

Hint for office hours: come and discuss your introduction!

Week 7: February 28 – What do control and flexibility mean?

- Griesbach, K., Reich, A., Elliott-Negri, L. and Milkman, R., 2019. Algorithmic control in platform food delivery work. *Socius*, 5, p.1-15.
- Edwards, R. Contested Terrain. 1977. Chapter 7 "Technical Control: An All Around Adjustor and Equalizer." p. 111-129.
- Introduction for the final paper is due at 2pm

Week 8: March 6 – How does work on platforms turn into a game, and who wins?

- Cameron, L.D., 2022. "Making out" while driving: Relational and efficiency games in the gig economy. *Organization Science*, 33(1), pp.231-252.
- Sallaz, J.J., 2015. Permanent pedagogy: How post-Fordist firms generate effort but not consent. *Work and Occupations*, 42(1), pp.3-34.

Time in class for mid-semester reflections

Week 9: March 13 – How do platform workers identify with their job, outside of an office?

- Anicich, E.M., 2022. Flexing and floundering in the on-demand economy: Narrative identity construction under algorithmic management. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 169, p.1-15.
- Lehdonvirta, V., 2016. Algorithms that divide and unite: delocalisation, identity and collective action in ‘microwork’. *Space, place and global digital work*, pp.53-80.

PART 3: CONTEXTS AND INEQUALITIES OF PLATFORM WORK

Week 10: March 20 – Why do platforms attract such different kinds of workers?

- Schor, J.B., 2017. Does the sharing economy increase inequality within the eighty percent?: findings from a qualitative study of platform providers. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), pp.263-279.
- Schor, J.B., Attwood-Charles, W., Cansoy, M., Ladegaard, I. and Wengronowitz, R., 2020. Dependence and precarity in the platform economy. *Theory and Society*, 49, pp.833-861.

Week 11: March 27 – Spring break

Week 12: April 3 – How can platforms be a site for racial inequality?

- McMillan Cottom, T., 2020. Where platform capitalism and racial capitalism meet: The sociology of race and racism in the digital society. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(4), pp.441-449.
- Forrest Stuart, *Ballad of the Bullet*, introduction (p.1-16) and chapter 4 (p.102-125)

Hint for office hours: come and discuss your literature review!

Week 13: April 10 – How can platforms be a site for gender inequality?

- Gerber, Christine. 2022. ‘Gender and precarity in platform work: old inequalities in the new world of work’, *New Technology, Work and Employment* 37(2): 206–230.
- Duffy, (Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media and Aspirational Work chapter 7 (216-230)
- Literature review for the final paper is due at 2pm

Week 14: April 17 – Platform work and the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Ravenelle, A.J. 2023. The side hustle safety net. Chapter 2 (p.43-81) and Chapter 5 (p.136-173)

Hint for office hours: come and practice your presentation!

Week 15: April 24 – Presentations of final projects, part 1

Week 16: May 1 – RRR week – Presentations of final projects, part 2

May 11 – final paper is due at 4pm

Course structure

The seminar will meet once a week for two hours. All students are expected to come to class having done all the required readings assigned for the week. Each class will consist of a wide array of activities, including but not limited to weekly student presentations, in-depth discussions, debates, and guest lectures. Every week, a group of students will lead the facilitation of a portion of the class by first opening up with a presentation of the assigned readings, followed by an organized class discussion (total time should not exceed 40 minutes). The students in charge of facilitating that week's class will have the opportunity to plan the time allotted in a way they believe will lead to the most constructive discussion of the materials as long as they adhere to the theme of the topic.

Required texts

All required texts will be accessible via bCourses.

GRADING AND EVALUATION

Your final grade will reflect the course aims, and is broken down as such:

- Research paper (60%)
- Class participation (30%)
- Group presentation (10%)

1) Research paper (60%)

You will complete a seminar paper (15-20 pages double spaced) due on May 11th. You may choose from any of the topics that we are covering during the semester to look at in greater depth. In this paper, you will attempt to explore multiple perspectives on a significant sociological question about platform work. If you want to conduct original research in the form of ethnographic observation, interviews, or data analysis, please write to me early to discuss.

Don't worry, the research paper will be broken into smaller components...! This should help to mitigate the dangers of procrastination while allowing you to receive written feedback from me and from your colleagues in periodic in-class writing workshops. These components will include:

A) Proposal, due February 7 by 2pm. This 1-3 page, double-spaced document should suggest some question, some relevant articles and books, and how you might study the subject. At this early stage in the game, it's important to cultivate your curiosity and not worry too much about being right or wrong. (5%)

B) Introduction, due February 28 by 2pm. Based on my comments and some subsequent work on your part, the goal is to produce a draft of your paper's introduction (2-4 pages double spaced). The introduction should broadly situate the paper, expand on the relevant articles and books that you mentioned in your proposal, and describe the issue at stake. The introduction you write will be the basis for the paper that follows. (10%)

C) Literature review, due April 10 at 2pm. After your proposal and introduction, you will have a better idea of what you are doing, including feedback from me. It's time to produce a rough draft of the literature review. A good literature review begins with the question you want to study. It looks at the relevant approaches to the question and summarizes what is known. (15%)

D) Final paper, due May 8 at 4pm. It's time to put all of the pieces that you've been working on together! This will require substantial re-writing of your previous assignments, because you have read and thought more about the issues at stake. The final paper should have a title page (1 page), a one paragraph abstract describing the paper, an introduction (~2-4 double-spaced pages), a review of the literature (~10-14 double-spaced pages), and a conclusion (~1-3 pages). (30%)

2) Class participation and attendance (30%)

Some students will already feel comfortable speaking in class. For others, it will require courage.

I will provide a range of ways for you to participate, including small groups, short in-class assignments, and reading responses. Coming to speak with me in office hours counts as participation, too.

It won't be possible for you to actively participate if you aren't in class. Your first two unexcused absences will not impact your grade. For any subsequent unexcused absence, your final participation grade will decrease by 10 percent. In order for an absence to be considered excused,

I require notification of your absence and a clear explanation as to why you are/were not able to attend class. If you anticipate any scheduling conflicts that may affect your attendance, please discuss these with me at the beginning of the semester.

3) Group presentation (10%)

You will sign up for presentations in groups of 2 or 3 for one slot at the beginning of the semester. The group presentations will draw focus from the assigned readings for that week. The presenters' main objective is to add value to the readings by providing additional insight into the theoretical and empirical contributions of the papers. The presenters are free to choose their style of presentation, incorporating media content as they please. At the end of the day, the goal of the presentation is to generate discussion and create a comfortable space to test out ideas. The presenters can critique, revise, or extend the scope of knowledge as they deem fit. The presentations should last approximately 20 minutes, with 20 minutes for discussion.

RESOURCES

Academic Integrity

Any test, paper, report, or homework submitted under your name is presumed to be your own original work that has not previously been submitted for credit in another course. All words and ideas written by other people or generative AI systems must be properly attributed—fully identified as to the source and the extent of your use of their work. Cheating, plagiarism, and other academic misconduct will result in a failing grade on the assignment, paper, quiz, or exam

in question and will be reported to The Center for Student Conduct. Please be sure to review UC Berkeley's rules on Academic Integrity and email me if you have any questions:
<https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/design/academic-integrity>.

Disabled Students Program and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a documented need for special accommodations in class or on assignments, I will be happy to work out these arrangements with you. If this applies to you, please have your DSP specialist send me a letter as soon as possible. Student athletes, parents, and others whose commitments might affect their ability to attend class or complete assignments on time should also speak with me at the beginning of the semester about potential conflicts.

Writing Resources

The UC Berkeley Department of Sociology has published a writing guide to promote sociologically informed college writing. It includes useful tips for composing strong and effective analytic papers and for improving your general writing skills. A free online version is available at:

http://sociology.berkeley.edu/documents/student_services/Writing%20for%20Sociology%20Guide%20Second%20Edition.pdf.

Student Learning Center (SLC)

The Student Learning Center (SLC) Writing Program operates under the assumption that all writers, regardless of their experience and abilities, benefit from informed, individualized, and personal feedback on their writing. The program's professional staff and trained peer tutors work with writers engaged in any stage of the writing process—from brainstorming paper topics, to formulating and organizing arguments, to developing editing skills. While tutors will not proofread students' papers, they will help students learn to address issues of style, syntax, grammar, and usage in their writing. Tutors are trained to work with non-native speakers of English and with writers from a variety of disciplines. For more information call (510) 642-7332 or visit <http://slc.berkeley.edu/writing>.