Alex Rosenblat, **Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work**, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018, 271 pp., $26.95 (hardcover), $19.95 (paperback).

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Digital labor platforms have thrived in recent years with promises of flexible jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for workers struggling with job insecurity and economic uncertainty. Some call the process of adopting the organizational paradigm of Uber as "uberization" because of the economic "success" of this American company founded in 2009. In her first book, *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, Canadian ethnographer Alex Rosenblat, a researcher at the Data & Society Research Institute in New York City, presents a robust empirical study on the problematic relationship between the platform Uber and its drivers. The author focuses on the Canadian and American contexts and bases her research on 125 formal interviews with drivers, as well as numerous informal conversations with several stakeholders (including Uber executives) and hours of participant observation on numerous online forums.
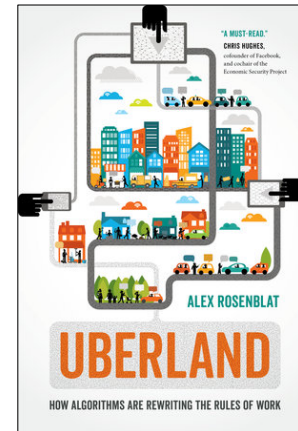
The main idea of the book is that Uber's technology, from the mobile application to its algorithms, heavily influences the drivers' behavior in favor of the company's interests. This observation conflicts with the platform's efforts to portray its business as purely technological, stating that Uber provides services to entrepreneurs instead of employing them. From this central idea, Rosenblat's book explores the conflicts, benefits, and downsides of the exploitative relationship between the company, the clients, the drivers, and the wider society. The author not only focuses on the daily lives of the drivers but also presents a general reflection of the company's actions and the consequences of uberization in the social and political landscape of Canada and, especially, the United States.

In the first part of the book, Rosenblat focuses on the social and economic context that allowed the development of "Uberland." She argues that platform-based firms cemented their value by developing and advertising three myths: their economic value, the idea of technological exceptionalism, and the glamorization of millennial labor. According to Rosenblat, the shift in the value of being a worker aims at circumventing labor law by the use of a lexicon that "hides power relations." In reality, this advertised "glamorous labor" covers a new unequal and challenging relationship between the platform-employer and its workers.

The author also explores the different situations of drivers depending on their commitment to the platform, observing three categories of drivers with different motivations. The "hobbyists" are mainly white-collar professionals or retired individuals who do not depend financially on the platform. The "part-timers" can be looking for a flexible job, transitioning between jobs, or needing a "good bad job," especially those with a criminal record, disabilities, or a lack of education. Finally, "full-timers" are the typical type of drivers in cities with onerous regulations and high entry costs, such as in New York City.

Rosenblat's attention then focuses on the entrepreneurship promises of Uber and the observed experience of the drivers. The platform markets this experience as a flexible entrepreneurial venture, but instead, it depends heavily on algorithmic control. The platform exerts coercion on different areas of the driving experience, such as the prices, the acceptance rate, and the time shifts. Thus, Rosenblat observes that the platform prevents workers from taking "responsible actions," instead of allowing them to be free entrepreneurs, by withholding information on how the algorithms work.

By questioning the place of Uber as an intermediary, Rosenblat affirms that its algorithms comply with corporate rules that end up benefiting the company; for instance, by misleading drivers through price surge or by taking monetary advantage from its users and workers. All of this with a lack of accountability behind the idea that Uber's algorithms are neutral.

Subsequently, Rosenblat explores how Uber manages to rule through algorithms. The platform evaluates—and tracks—its workers through telematics and the rating system, while creating tensions between passengers and drivers. Uber usually prefers not to be involved in any disputes that could arise between these parties. An example of this is its automated and outsourced inquiry service and "unmatching drivers and passengers" as the favored solution to address disputes, an action that, according to many drivers, does not address the problem in reality.

At the end of the book, the author describes the place of Uber in the Silicon Valley ecosystem and its repercussions at the macrosocial and political level. Rosenblat identifies three main trends with Uber. First, the use of the consumer—and not the citizen—rhetoric to gain political leverage. Second, the attempt to shift its identity to find and exploit cracks in existing legal systems. And third, to play its stakeholders (i.e., drivers, passengers, and engineers) against each other to reduce the risk of any collective action.

Uberland provides an ethnographic observation that refutes many of the assumptions on which the "platform economy" has thrived, many of them summarized in the so-called Californian ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). First is the idea that technology is the solution for many of the societal problems and a reason for positive cultural development. The consideration that technology, as a consequence of scientific endeavor, is always objective and thus "neutral" at the social level serves as a base for this technological determinism. According to Rosenblat, Uber capitalizes on this idea by convincing policy makers and consumers that innovation depends on deregulation (p. 171). Since some policy makers and analysts relate innovation with economic growth, the primary objective in a capitalist economy, welfare and workers' well-being become unimportant, as opposed to Uber's needs.

Another of the assumptions of "gig economy" platforms that Rosenblat addresses is the status of its workers. Often platforms do not confer workers with a permanent status, a situation that denies them many of the protections that are often tied in employment relations. Furthermore, Rosenblat argues that Uber also benefits from a model that creates frictions between the members of this "disaggregated driver force," since the existence of part-timers "reduces pressure on employers to create more sustainable earning opportunities" (p. 54). These conflicts aim to prevent any collective action between the different stakeholders in Uber's multisided market. Moreover, in the political level, the author points to the idea that automation is inevitable and that many jobs will be displaced has become one of Uber's excuses to leverage

for the deregulation of employment law in favor of seasonal jobs (p. 179), which would be mainly beneficial for the company.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book is how it presents American socioeconomic inequality as the context that has propitiated the rise of gig economy platforms. For instance, in the first part of the book, the author points at the 2008 financial crisis and its higher unemployment and inequality rates, increasing connectivity, and low levels of social mobility as the basis for the success of Uber and other platforms in the "sharing economy." The author argues how these technology companies can be above the law and do little to address social biases. She argues that Uber uses a "shock doctrine" to get away with local regulation, namely by manufacturing crises with local regulators and by appealing to state legislators for relief (p. 176). However, unsurprisingly, Rosenblat also points out that when the political entities and the firms disenfranchised from workers' problems, and even facing opposition from the platform, the workers of the platform eventually organize and even mobilize, mostly through online forums but also through unionization and other forms of collective action.

Unfortunately, because of the limits of carrying research on a platform of such scale as Uber by a single scholar, many of the observations made by Rosenblat in the Canadian and American contexts could not be applied elsewhere. The author briefly mentioned the legislative fights in the European Union, mainly in the United Kingdom, but the situation of drivers in Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia remains insufficiently studied. It could be that the same exploitative relationship between Uber and its workers—and other end users of the platform—exists. However, the diverse social and political contexts of each nation and region can point to different understandings of what entrepreneurship, innovation, technology determinism, and other tenants of the Californian ideology mean, as well as different cases of worker organization and mobilization. Moreover, the colonial relationship between platforms and developing countries (Casilli, 2017) can also be a point of observation in such contexts for future research on the area of digital labor.

That said, Rosenblat gives a compelling account of the drivers' situation and the company's actions in the English-speaking North American context, paying attention not only to the drivers' accounts but also to the political and legal situation surrounding Uber. *Uberland* presents an empirical counterargument to many of the assumptions on which Uber, and many other platforms of the gig economy, base their operations and business models. More importantly, even though the book presents the discouraging observation on how the idea of entrepreneurship masks the algorithmic control of the firm, it leaves the promising account of how cooperation—in this case, among drivers—can emerge even when the social and technical system in place prevents it.

References

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