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# *The individual in the gig society: is the gig economy exploitative of the informal economy, or a means of empowerment?*

This article argues that the gig economy is an exploitative extension of the informal economy. With its decentralised promise of individual entrepreneurship, I will argue that it places undue burdens on the worker as an 'independent contractor' that would otherwise be upheld by the employer. I will do so by applying a Marcusean analysis of the gig economy, highlighting two primary concerns. First, Marcuse's critique of 'industrial rationality' explains how industrial rationality creates the framework for – and justification of – exploitation within the gig economy. Second, as Wendy Brown notes, following Marcuse, the gig economy promotes the neoliberal notion of 'self-care' as a means of absolving corporations from any duty towards their employees. More specifically, 'self-care' within the gig economy forms part of the exploitation of workers within the informal economy which is often viewed as a buffer to absorb the unemployed within a neoliberal society. Building on this critique, I refer to the work of Byung-Chul Han and his concept of 'self-exploitation,' arguing that the gig economy should be considered an extension of an informal economy, in which workers are left in a perpetual state of servitude.

**Keywords:** gig economy, neoliberal 'self-care', entrepreneurship, informal economy, Herbert Marcuse, Wendy Brown

## Introduction

In contemporary neoliberal society, more and more companies are expanding their businesses to include on-demand services for goods, housing, and so forth. With this expansion comes the need for a workforce that is willing and able to drive consumers to their destination, deliver their goods, and even make people share their living space for a fee. The gig economy, in short, has developed corporate pitches that you can 'be your own boss', 'work your own hours', or you can become a 'self-employed entrepreneur'. As this paper will show, these promises not only ring hollow and do not deliver on their claims of upward economic mobility, but the gig economy is nothing but an extension of the existent informal economy. As such, it not only carries the same problems as within the informal economy, but it also perpetuates the unending exploitation of an economic class of people.

This paper provides a critique of the 'gig economy' using a Marcusean critical theoretical methodology which is a combination of Hegelian dialectics and psychoanalysis. The paper first will demonstrate how the gig economy is merely an extension of the informal economy. To do this, I refer to South Africa as a case study that shows the dangers of a country that is too reliant on 'self-entrepreneurship' to solve extensive socio-economic problems. Both the informal economy in South Africa and the 'gig economy' promote self-entrepreneurship as a solution to systemic problems. South Africa becomes the canary in the coal mine that sounds the alarm for other countries to consider the greater consequences of exploitation in the gig economy. Thus, the paper shows that Herbert Marcuse's critique of 'industrial rationality' is still applicable within contemporary neoliberal society and, more specifically, within the gig economy's promotion of efficiency and entrepreneurship.

After setting this foundation, I will then argue that the gig economy encourages entrepreneurship as a form of neoliberal self-care in the gig economy. From there, I move to Byung-Chul Han who argues that within the gig economy self-care has evolved into voluntary self-exploitation within a neoliberal society. Han's notion of voluntary self-exploitation becomes the foundation for understanding exploitation within the gig economy as is the case in the South African informal sector. Essentially, we can see how self-exploration that is disguised as self-entrepreneurship functions as the neoliberal solution to systemic problems.

## A South African case study: the gig economy is the informal economy

In South Africa, the informal economic sector is often referred to as “an employment shock absorber during economic crises” (Khambule 2020: 92). South Africa’s informal economy is made up of various economic activities such as food vendors, waste collectors, traders, and domestic workers (Khambule 2020: 97). The function of the informal economy has always been to absorb and provide opportunities for low-skilled or semi-skilled workers and is often regarded as insulated from economic downturns due to the constant demand for cheap, available labour (Khambule 2020: 97). Many champion the informal economy as a lifeline for impoverished people that provides the opportunity for upward, economic mobility (Hunt and Samman 2020: 102). Furthermore, The World Bank has promoted entrepreneurship and innovation within the informal economy as a suitable solution that ensures a sustainable livelihood for vulnerable people in society (World Bank 2015).

Therefore, we see that the ‘shock absorber’ approach to the informal sector is not limited to economic crises, such as those brought on by the 2008 global recession, the Covid-19 pandemic, etc. Instead, the informal economy has become more than a ‘shock-absorber’; rather than being a buffer during economic crises or a temporary measure, it has transformed into a championed form of entrepreneurship through which people’s resilient and innovative economic endeavours uphold the majority of a country’s economy; it is no longer a stop-gap measure, it is economic policy – and a bad one at that. Concerning the larger structural problems within the South African economy – which include escalating inequality, unemployment, and poverty many businesses and governmental economic policies rely on the informal economy rather than directly addressing the systemic policy issues that plague South Africa.

Gibson uses the example of empowering the poor in South Africa. He critiques the neoliberal approach to attending to the needs of the poor and notes that the poor are encouraged to pursue entrepreneurship and become “responsible for their self-exploitation as human capital” (Gibson 2001: 64). He refers to three basic forms of empowerment suggested by global financial institutions, NGOs and the government:

First, the form supported by the World Bank and the NGOs loosely allied with it, namely encouraging micro-loans and encouraging self-entrepreneurship through financing programmes and saving schemes. Second, more pragmatic empowerment (often part of an NGO’s mission), is based on training people to understand policy and how to engage with it. And third, an essentially left perspective that encourages a critique of neoliberalism through political education (Gibson 2006: 35).

In sum, the poor are often left to fend for themselves and encouraged to focus on self-entrepreneurship, taught how to navigate economic policies instead of changing them, or to become more politically aware and informed, which does nothing to actively engage with the betterment of the lives of the most vulnerable members of society.

For those who are unable to obtain formal employment, governments, and global financial institutions such as the World Bank, encourage them to pursue entrepreneurship within the informal economy (World Bank 2020). Support programmes from global financial institutions together with local government in South Africa explicitly promote entrepreneurship within the informal economy and label it as the foundation for “indigenous development” (Gibson 2011: 31). The promotion of self-entrepreneurship shifts the responsibility of government to provide social support on to the individual. Moreover, entrepreneurship is used as a band-aid to cover up the greater structural problems in South African society. As Gibson notes, “collecting cardboard, plastic or metal from the stinking dump, or even gardening and cleaning for residents on the Clare Estate, doesn’t provide many ‘opportunities’” (Gibson 2011: 146).

There are significant problems and knock-on effects to this overreliance on an informal economy to “pick up the slack”, as it were, where other economic policies and interventions fail to deliver. It was estimated that 44% of people who had moved from the formal economy to the informal economy would fall into poverty due to the socioeconomic crisis brought on by Covid-19 (United Nations Development Programme 2020: 10-11). Those dependent on the informal economy were left exposed when policies and legislation during the Covid-19 pandemic threatened their income and livelihoods (Khambule 2020: 96). For example, most of the job losses during the lockdown period were among people who worked in the informal sector (United Nations Development Programme 2020: 20). Then the gig economy seemed to be a solution to the problems that the South African informal sector was facing after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The development of technology (the online platform) lies at the core of the gig economy and has completely disrupted the traditional understanding of employment. Essentially, the gig economy is a form of on-demand employment for ‘gig-workers’ who provide their skills, services, or labour on a short-term basis using digital platform technologies (Lobel 2017: 51). This is a new type of organisation developed based on an ‘on-demand economy’ or ‘sharing economy’. The gig economy’s digital platform is dedicated to “connecting customers directly with individual service providers” (Todolí-Signes 2017: 194-197). This new type of self-employment aims to make “employees – as subordinate workers – less necessary” (Todolí-Signes 2017: 194-197). The gig economy’s digital platform

allows companies, such as Uber, Airbnb, etc. to “conduct their core business completely through workers classified as self-employed” (Todolí-Signes 2017: 194-197). The corporate middleman is removed, allowing more freedom or autonomy for employees and consumers within the marketplace. By removing the corporate middleman, workers might become more empowered and could minimise the reach of quasi-monopolies, which would allow for fair competition in the marketplace (Lobel 2017: 53). According to Lobel, the digital platform could increase economic efficiency, minimise idleness, encourage entrepreneurship, and increase capital investment (Lobel 2017: 53). Thus, the gig economy in theory has the potential to democratise the marketplace while protecting semi-skilled workers from economic downturns and other potential unforeseen shifts in the economy (Lobel 2017: 52).

In South Africa, this type of employment would seem to give individuals the support and opportunity for sustainable self-employment without too many of the business or financial risks. However, I argue that the gig economy does not address the problems faced within the South African economy at large or more specifically the exploitation experienced within the informal sector of the economy. Instead, the gig economy encourages the exploitation of individuals under the guise of self-employment or entrepreneurship. This type of exploitation, focused on self-employment and entrepreneurship, is similar to the exploitation within the informal sector of the economy.

## Marcuse’s critique of industrial rationality

Marcuse’s critique of industrial rationality gives us an insight into the evolution of exploitation from late industrial society to the self-exploitation in the neoliberal society. Marcuse (2009: 153) specifically associates industrial rationality with advanced industrial (or capitalist) society. He describes industrial rationality as a rationality that “organizes and controls things and men, factory and bureaucracy, work and leisure” (Marcuse 2009: 154). Therefore, for Marcuse, industrial rationality is an all-encompassing rationality that determines our behaviours, values, and development. From Marcuse’s description of industrial rationality, we can understand that people voluntarily subject themselves to exploitation. Industrial rationality dictates our understanding and experience of the world. This means that industrial rationality also determines our approach to solving systemic economic problems such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment. In a neoliberal society, the gig economy is perceived as the solution to economic problems because no other alternatives are developed outside of the prevailing industrial rationality.

Marcuse (2009: 154) goes on to say that industrial rationality functions with the purpose of increasing efficiency. Marcuse (2009: 154) specifically refers to this purpose of increased efficiency as a “calculable efficiency”. He describes the concept of calculable efficiency as a universal objective that makes “the domination of all particular cases and relations” possible (Marcuse 2009: 154). Essentially, people become obsessed with everything, all aspects of life, functioning at optimal efficiency. The way we determine how optimally or efficiently something is functioning is through measurable outcomes. Industrial rationality has created the basis of a society that aims to become as efficient as possible. Consequently, this influences how we engage with and understand labour. The quality of labour is not determined by the value or the joy we find in it. Instead, the quality of labour is determined by measurable outcomes. Marcuse (2020: 203) argues that, in an advanced industrial society, efficient labour has become a universal objective of humankind and labour has become our existential activity (*Daseinsformen, Existenzbestimmungen*). In other words, according to Marcuse, efficient labour becomes our purpose for existing and most of our existence is centred around optimising the efficiency of our labour. This, for example, can be seen within the gig economy where the digital platform keeps track of all the tasks performed and allows for a rating of the consumer’s experience.

Returning to Marcuse, he argues that the concept of calculable efficiency is the objective of industrial rationality. Calculable efficiency is the precondition of formulating a notion of existence that justifies exploitation, particularly within advanced industrial societies (Marcuse 2009: 154). Marcuse argues that “reason involves universality”, where rationality – however construed – strives towards an ultimate objective or *telos* within a structured society (Marcuse 2020: 187-188). Societies, in general, have a particular *telos*, whether it is the well-being of the community or a religious apotheosis. However, according to Marcuse, reason’s universal objective within late industrial society is efficiency, and everything must bend toward increasing productivity – typically for the sake of profit, sometimes even for simply the sake of productivity in and of itself (Marcuse 2020: 187-188).

Marcuse’s analysis of the relationship between the development of reason, technology, nature, and freedom can help us disentangle the gig economy’s exploitation of labour. Marcuse (1972: 59) argues that the exploitation of nature is similar to the exploitation experienced by individuals in late industrial capitalist society, showing us how it is not just land or nature which become ‘natural resources’, but also people who become ‘human capital’ (or, in its most deceptive descriptor, ‘human resources’). Marcuse states that “man encounters nature as transformed by society, subjected to a specific rationality which has become, to an ever-increasing extent, technological, instrumentalist rationality, bent to the requirements of capitalism” (Marcuse 1972: 59-60). Marcuse argues

that capitalism becomes irrational “because higher productivity, domination of nature, and social wealth become destructive forces” (Marcuse 2009: 155). Marcuse, in short, identifies capitalism as the source of exploitation and argues that technological, instrumentalist rationality is used as a tool that accelerates exploitation. Specifically, the exploitation of human labour “must be intensified more and more if increased accumulation is to be possible” (Marcuse 2009: 155). Technology not only accelerates this exploitation, but justifies it through this instrumental rationality: it is not exploitation if it is ‘progress’ or ‘development’. As we shall see, the gig economy does a similar re-composition of its exploitation through branding and marketing.

For Marcuse, reason moves from the abstract to the concrete where the domination of nature and its resources is a “requisite of the new process of production that strove to transform the world into a huge commodity market” (Marcuse 2020: 188). In other words, universal efficiency as the goal of industrial rationality is specifically aimed towards commodity production within capitalist society. Marcuse notes that industrial rationality is reliant on continual technological progress. It is the continual technological progress that allows for the “production and transformation of material (things and men) through the methodological-scientific apparatus” (Marcuse 2009: 154). It is this apparatus that has been developed specifically intending to calculate efficiency. Marcuse (2011: 56) argues that industrial rationality encourages the domination of nature which “intensifies the domination of man by man”. What Marcuse is describing makes exploitation within the gig economy possible. The same drive to develop technology that allows us to dominate and control nature has also made it possible to dominate and control people. For example, in the gig economy, the digital platform makes it possible for us to measure the labour and the efficiency of labour more accurately than ever before. We can put gig economy workers under surveillance via an online app that provides us with a location when checking in on the delivery of our food.

Marcuse also provides some insight into the concept of ‘self-entrepreneurship’ within the gig economy. Marcuse (2009: 154) argues that calculable efficiency within advanced industrial society is specifically associated with economic gains. Economic gains as profits are easily measurable and thus epitomise the goal of industrial rationality. The success of private enterprises and individual entrepreneurs is judged based on profit margins (Marcuse 2009: 154). Marcuse notes that the dependence on the capitalist enterprise to satisfy needs is embodied “in the ‘free’ labor that is the disposal of the entrepreneur” (Marcuse 2009: 154). He goes on to state that “the entrepreneur is a free person, responsible by and to himself for his calculations and their risks” (Marcuse 2009: 155). Consequently, the value of an employee is determined by how much profit they make for their

industry or their CEO (the entrepreneur). Within the gig economy the employee, or gig worker, is also the entrepreneur since they regulate their own work hours, etc. The gig economy is sold as self-entrepreneurship, emphasising the notion of autonomy and freedom within this work environment. However, the blatant lie of the gig worker as an entrepreneur becomes exposed when we consider who profits from the labour of gig workers. Gig workers are effectively reliant on tips from consumers while the company receives most of the profits. Thus, gig workers are essentially free labour for the gig economy industries who take minimal responsibility for the workers and their working conditions.

Marcuse focuses specifically on the influence of technology as a tool that encourages this industrial capitalist rationality. Marcuse (1972: 60) argues that advanced industrial society aggressively steers society towards a calculated efficiency and this aggressive steering is also transferred into the technological devices we develop. Marcuse's point of critique becomes extremely important since the concept of control is exercised through the mechanisms of the capitalist system, and this becomes more efficient with technology. Therefore, technology merely reflects the objectives and values that operate within the prevailing industrial rationality (Feenberg 1992: 8). Therefore, the individual has become a quantified self in which every aspect of our lives becomes a measurable outcome to increase our efficiency. Han (2017: 60) argues that this self-quantification is something that "governs the digital age as a whole" (Han 2017: 60). Within the gig economy the unique online platform becomes an instrument that encourages industrial rationality that is used to exercise effective control over gig workers. This effective control is aimed at increasing the productivity and efficiency of the self-employed employee where every action is monitored via online platforms.

## Entrepreneurship as neoliberal self-care

As Marcuse has shown us, calculated efficiency – especially in neoliberalism, its current, most calculated form – is so adaptable in its exploitation that it can 'rebrand' itself as the cure to the disease which it actually created. In our current times, Wendy Brown highlights how this rebranding comes in the form of 'self-care', which gives the illusion of control to the worker through the guise of self-entrepreneurship when, in fact, they are merely contracted labourers who lack any true agency.

As we will see with Byung-Chul Han in the next section, this mutated form of capitalism "transforms workers into entrepreneurs" which is a unique feature of the gig economy (Han 2017: 5) For now, Brown's insights into 'self-care' will emphasise how the gig economy's exploitation is sold as self-empowerment. And, from this, we can then better grasp Han's notion of how all this self-exploitation leads to a burnout society.



Brown (2015: 120) notes that Marcuse's analysis of industrial rationality as something that "saturated society and secured capitalism" went beyond what traditional Marxism could imagine. Brown develops the notion of a neoliberal political governmentality from Marcuse's notion that industrial rationality is an all-encompassing rationality. Marcuse's critique of late industrial capitalist society focuses on the concept of quantification of the individual and their existence. This quantification is coupled with a notion of individual freedom to increase the efficiency of labour and productivity. However, these radical forms of quantification and individual freedom become increasingly irrational within a society of poverty and inequality whose main purpose is affluence (Marcuse 2007: 5). Marcuse's critique of the irrationality of the late industrial capitalism is especially prominent within a neoliberal context which markets unemployment and poverty as an opportunity for entrepreneurial empowerment.

Brown's description and critique of neoliberal rationality develops from Marcuse's critique of industrial rationality. She specifically defines neoliberalism as submitting every action and policy to a rational entrepreneurial action which is "conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality" (Brown 2005: 41). Brown specifically argues that neoliberalism portrays free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as normative (Brown 2006: 694). Neoliberalism actively develops and encourages a global order that is universalised through a global marketplace which knows no boundaries (Brown 2006: 699). The neoliberal objective is normalised to the extent that it is proclaimed in law and expressed within social, political, and economic policies. Thus, neoliberalism re-enforces a normative perception rather than an adversarial one, because it simply rejects the notion of any alternatives. Brown notes that by reinforcing and normalising entrepreneurial rationality neoliberalism creates people who make decisions according to a "market rationale" (Brown 2005: 41). Moreover, this market rationale is used to make decisions in all spheres of life (Brown 2005: 41). Brown (2005: 41) claims that neoliberalism is a "constructivist project". It is a constructivist project because people within neoliberal society actively participate in its construction. Brown notes that "neoliberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life" (Brown 2005: 42). Brown argues that neoliberal states produce citizens who are "individual entrepreneurs and consumers" (Brown 2006: 695).

Brown's description of neoliberal society with normative entrepreneurial rationality at its centre supports my critique of the gig economy. The normalisation of entrepreneurial rationality creates an environment where no alternative measures are developed. Instead, entrepreneurship is presented as the cure for

all economic ills. Moreover, entrepreneurial rationality becomes ingrained and re-enforced within society through policies, education, etc. This entrepreneurial spirit becomes reinforced by praising and rewarding those who encourage it. The active participation and construction of neoliberal entrepreneurial rationality open the doors for the self-exploitation that we see within the gig economy. The normalisation of entrepreneurial rationality has persuaded gig workers that their self-exploitation is a rational pursuit.

The individual within a neoliberal society is a rational, calculating creature. The neoliberal subject views 'self-care' as the ultimate expression of morality (Brown 2005: 42). Brown defines self-care as someone who has "the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (Brown 2005: 42). The neoliberal subject becomes "fully responsible for her- or himself" (Brown 2005: 42). From this notion of self-care Brown argues that neoliberalism likens moral responsibility to rational action (Brown 2005: 42). Morality within neoliberalism becomes a "rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences" (Brown 2005: 42). In other words, the responsibility of care is wholly placed on the individual and is not considered a shared responsibility of all members in society. Neoliberal citizenship is reduced to self-care which eradicates and undermines shared or collective interests (Brown 2006: 696). Instead, self-care promotes radical self-interest that is pursued irrespective of the consequences to others in society. Furthermore, emphasising individual action and freedom as a morality of 'self-care' is very strategic. Placing greater emphasis on the individual as an entrepreneur limits the possibility and impacts of mass revolutionary movements in society. A person who is continuously occupied with increased effectiveness and self-achievement will be less likely to participate in revolutionary movements that call for structural change. This becomes a major concern within the gig economy which deliberately limits "a revolutionary imagination in the minds of gig workers, who are often fragmented and individualized" (Anwar and Graham 2020: 1273). Moreover, gig workers' employment is continuously under threat due to the nature of their on-demand employment. If there is no demand, then there is no income for gig workers. Also, keep in mind that the main selling point of the gig economy is to minimise the regulation of labour since the gig worker is an 'entrepreneur'. This volatile market within the gig economy coupled with the deregulation of labour could lead to the dismantling of unions and creates an environment ripe for exploitation and alienation (Anwar and Graham 2020: 1273).

Marcuse argues that to escape this capitalist environment of exploitation and alienation would require an individual who is "qualitatively different" (Marcuse 2007: 7). A qualitative shift within society would require individuals to think differently about their needs, goals and attitudes. However, he also notes this is unlikely to develop within a society of surplus repression (Marcuse 2007: 7).

Brown furthers Marcuse's critique and argues that within neoliberalism freedom becomes a tool for repression. Specifically, she notes that "neoliberal subjects are controlled through their freedom" (Brown 2005: 44). She specifically refers to the freedom or autonomy encouraged through the notion of entrepreneurial self-care. This has the consequence that the responsibility shifts from the state to the individual where the individual becomes "wholly responsible for their well-being and citizenship is reduced to success in this entrepreneurship" (Brown 2005: 44).

The notion of self-care promotes the concept that vulnerable members of society are responsible for their own circumstances. Furthermore, self-care reinforces the notion that it is their responsibility to solve and overcome their unfortunate circumstances. From this understanding of self-care entrepreneurship becomes the solution to greater systemic problems. It creates the perception that people are responsible for their own misfortune and undermines the development of radical change in society. Within the neoliberal gig economy, the autonomy of entrepreneurship simply shifts the responsibility of greater systemic economic problems on to the individual. And the individual, due to industrial rationality, is willing to take on this responsibility. This is an important shift where the individual becomes an active participant in the exploitation of neoliberalism. Within the context of a gig economy, the entrepreneur's productivity is continuously monitored, calculated, and quantified on an online platform. This entrepreneurial action becomes a moral action of self-care where morality is equated to efficiency. Han (2017: 61) specifically refers to this monitoring of efficiency as productivity in neoliberalism. He also notes that technology monitors this productivity stating that "dataism's self-tracking is devoid of all ethics and truth; it amounts simply to a technology for self-monitoring" (Han 2017: 61).

## Self-care or self-exploitation?

Byung-Chul Han introduces the notion of voluntary self-exploitation within the neoliberal society. He describes individuals within neoliberal society as entrepreneurs who self-practice "self-exploitation" (Han 2017: 61). According to Han (2017: 28), self-exploitation is the willing and passionate exploitation that has become normalised to the extent that this exploitation is automatic. Self-exploitation is unique to neoliberal society and the new digital age that encourages optimal efficiency. The neoliberal subject is so dedicated to optimal efficiency that Han describes them as an "achievement-subject" (Han 2017: 28). Within the gig economy, the achievement-subject functions independently and autonomously, actively engaging in self-exploitation within a digital platform (Han 2015b: 48). Furthermore, the achievement-subject does not adhere to external forces of domination, but instead as an entrepreneur and master of the self, is both the

exploited and the exploiter (Han 2015a: 48). Han describes this behaviour of the auto-exploiting subject as someone who “carries around its own labor camp” (Han 2017: 61). The neoliberal subject as an entrepreneur is both the “perpetrator and victim” (Han 2017: 61). Essentially, within neoliberalism the individual is actively developing and engaging in their own exploitation and domination under the guise of entrepreneurship and self-care.

Within the gig economy, the digital platform plays a significant role in exercising effective control and promoting calculated efficiency. The continuous development of technology, specifically surveillance technology, creates the opportunity for a “transparent society” (Han 2015b: 47). Essentially, the transparent society refers to the digital platforms within neoliberalism that create a system where people willingly participate and engage in their effective control. This type of exploitation is not only found in the gig economy. However, self-exploitation also becomes part of our leisure and entertainment. Social media and other communication technology create the illusion of complete transparency where people upload a multitude of personal information and share their experiences. This information is shared with the idea of allowing a greater sense of community and engagement. However, it has become very clear how these platforms use personal information and threaten personal safety, privacy, and even democracy. Han states the following concerning social media technologies and platforms:

The digital society of control makes intensive use of freedom. It is only possible thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure. It exploits freedom. The digital society of control makes intensive use of freedom. The society of control achieves perfection when its inhabitants do not communicate because of external constraint but out of inner need—that is when the fear of giving up a private and intimate sphere yields to the need to put oneself on display shamelessly (Han 2015b: viii).

Neoliberalism exploits the notion of freedom and autonomy since these activities of self-exploitation are entered into willingly under the guise of exercising individual freedom, specifically, freedom of expression. Similarly, within the gig economy, the digital platform is used to self-regulate labour and the efficiency of that labour. This self-regulation is done under the guise of voluntary and independent participation.

It is interesting to note that Marcuse warned against the use of technology to advance the surplus repression and domination within advanced industrial societies. He states that power is transferred from the individual to the

“technological or bureaucratic apparatus” (Marcuse 2007: 8). One finds that industrial rationality is still applied with militant aggression and manifests itself as productivity.

Building on this critique of Marcuse, Han argues that these new forms of technology allow for an extreme form of transparency. This extreme form of transparency is used to ensure effective control and domination of people in a neoliberal society. He notes that “technology of power takes on a subtle form” and “does not lay hold of individuals directly” (Han 2017: 28). Instead, the subtle power within these technologies ensures that people internalise the power relations, “then interpreted as freedom” (Han 2017: 28). Within neoliberalism these technologies and digital platforms are pivoted towards the universal objective of calculated efficiency. These technologies promote the notion of continual self-optimisation and become a highly effective form of domination. He notes that the growing anxiety that individuals experience in neoliberalism “is at the heart of the capitalist entrepreneur’s frantic activity” (Han 2017: 44). For Han (2017: 28), the neoliberal subject as an entrepreneur does not distinguish between “self-optimization and submission, freedom and exploitation”. Instead, freedom and exploitation, self-optimisation and submission all become the same. The entrepreneurial rationality within neoliberalism has created a human being that is the “object of exploitation” (Han 2017: 29). I argue that the entrepreneur within the gig economy, as well as in the informal sector, is self-optimising and aims all activity at promoting the functioning of the economic system. In the gig economy, the self-entrepreneur is compelled to be self-optimising. This compulsion is presented as freedom and becomes extremely efficient. Self-exploitation also renders a much higher return on investment than traditional exploitation.

Han refers to the neoliberal society as ‘the Burnout society’ where burnout is the consequence of voluntary self-exploitation. As Han (2015a: 46) describes the entrepreneurial subject is a subject that “exploits itself until it burns out”. This process of burnout develops an auto-aggression “that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction” (Han 2015b: 46 -47). The self-optimisation “turns out to be a projectile that the achievement-subject is aiming at itself” (Han 2015b: 46-47). Although the gig economy represents itself as autonomous self-employment it forms part of this voluntary self-exploitation that is characteristic of neoliberal rationality which develops from industrial rationality. In the gig economy, I argue that industrial rationality becomes irrational in its destructive forces. These destructive forces are especially prominent in the neoliberal subject that willingly engages in their own exploitation and domination.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I specifically refer to Herbert Marcuse's critique of industrial rationality where he argues that the main objective of industrial rationality is for individuals to become calculating and life to become quantified, which escalates through technology as a tool for monitoring efficiency. Marcuse's critique of industrial rationality I have shown specifically addresses the entrepreneurial rationality that we experience within neoliberal society. His critique forms the basis of understanding how industrial rationality functions in the exploitation and alienation that one sees within the informal economy and the gig economy. Specifically, Marcuse's exploration of the relationship between technology, society, and freedom becomes extremely relevant for the critique of digital platforms and their relentless progression of calculated efficiency. Marcuse's critique also highlighted the inherent irrationality within the gig economy's main selling point of the worker as an entrepreneur and increased autonomy. Surplus labour and production within the gig economy become destructive forces which undermine freedom and fair participation in the digital work environment. Furthermore, the perception of decreased external regulation over labour in a 'peer-to-peer' environment limits the protection of workers through labour unions. Essentially, the same exploitation and alienation that is prevalent within the informal sector become clear causes for concern within the gig economy.

Secondly, I explored the concept of neoliberal self-care which intensifies the notion of individuals as entrepreneurs. Brown highlights how neoliberalism becomes a normative and carefully constructed system that incorporates its values within laws, policies, and institutions. Brown especially emphasises the importance of self-care as a moral imperative that promotes entrepreneurial rationality which is then rewarded. Brown's notion of neoliberal self-care as a moral imperative is embodied within the gig economy. The concept of neoliberal self-care is especially prominent in the gig economy's focus on the gig worker as an entrepreneur. Moreover, neoliberal self-care promotes the notion that individuals are responsible for their successes and failures irrespective of the insurmountable structural challenges within society. However, neoliberal laws, policies, and incentives only promote a universal objective of calculable efficiency within the global marketplace while ignoring the social responsibilities within the greater society and community.

Finally, Han's theories on neoliberal society expand and extend Marcuse's critique of late industrial society. Han focuses especially on the effects that new technologies, such as digital platforms, have on individuals and the development of society. Han also expands upon Brown's notion of neoliberal self-care as a moral imperative that one finds within the promotion of the entrepreneurial spirit. Han's

concept of the neoliberal subject as an 'achievement subject' mirrors Marcuse's concept of calculable efficiency that focuses specifically on the individual. The concept of an achievement subject provides an understanding of the continual exploitation and alienation within neoliberal society. The industrial rationality that promotes a universal notion of calculable efficiency also encourages self-exploitation. This form of self-exploitation is specifically possible with the digital platform which is used in the gig economy. Essentially, the informal economy has moved to a digital platform. In conclusion, I argue that the gig economy is just a repackaging of the notion of self-care as entrepreneurship that one finds in the informal sector. This shift of responsibility to the individual as an entrepreneur, instead of adequately addressing the structural problems in South Africa's economy, is not viable and will increase exploitation within the informal sector of the economy.

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