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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# DOES THE APP CONTRIBUTE TO THE PRECARIZATION OF WORK?

## The Case of Uber Drivers in Poland

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**ABSTRACT:** As new forms of employment like the work in the gig economy become a norm around the world, it becomes necessary to study the nature of this employment and its impact on workers. The aim of this article is to describe the individual experiences of Uber drivers in the context of precarious work, and to examine the impact of this online platform on their work. It is based on individual in-depth interviews conducted among Uber drivers in Poland in 2018<sup>1</sup>. The results of the study show that the work they perform can be characterized as precarious: they work long hours (also at night and on holidays), they have low income (especially in relation to the number of working hours) and lack social or trade union protection; they also often work without employment contracts. On the other hand, however, they have a positive view of their working situation using the app.

**KEYWORDS:** individual in-depth interview, precariat, precarious work, platform work, Uber

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## 1. Introduction

The development of platform-based business models which rely on the sharing economy, such as BlaBlaCar and AirBnB (Forde et al. 2017), has influenced the relationships between employers and employees (Degryse 2017; Gillespie 2010; McKee 2017; Srnicek 2017). As it is today, labour market is characterized by almost unlimited flexibility and hyper-competitiveness on the one hand, and limited social protection and difficult access to collective protection (e.g. by trade unions) on the other (Drache, LeMesurier, and Noiseux 2015). In this context, the rise of the so-called sharing economy can be viewed as the ultimate “ideal” of flexibility, which, however, may lead to the precarization of working conditions. Of course, it needs to be noted that both the emergence of the precariat (Standing 2011) and the growing number of the working poor (Shipler 2005) had been the case also prior to the advent of the modern version of the sharing economy.

Changes in labour relations stemming from the expansion of platforms involve such elements as remote provision of services, the development of flexible forms of employment (Drahokoupil and Fabo 2016), the increase in global labour supply and demand, and changes in work organization (task work, network structures) (Hua and Ray 2018). Under certain conditions, they may lead to precarious work (Adriaanse 2016).

As new forms of employment like platform work become a norm around the world, it becomes necessary to study the nature of the employment being created and its impact on the economic and social lives of workers (Surie and Koduganti 2016). The impact of the platform economy on the labour market in different countries has been widely investigated (Armano and Murgia 2017; Chen and Sheldon 2016; Codagnone, Biagi, and Abadie 2016; Hall and Krueger 2017; Gierten 2016; Berg et al. 2018).

Eric Tucker (2017) observes that “technological utopians celebrate the transformation of traditional workers into micro-entrepreneurs, free to work whenever and for as long as they want in proportion to their preferences for income and leisure”. One unquestionable pioneer in the field of platform work is Uber. As it offers the benefit of flexibility and self-employment, Uber is a self-proclaimed saviour of the working class from the constraints of the standard labour model in general, and from control of the employer in particular (Srnicek, 2017, 82). Critics, on the other hand, stress a degradation of the status of employee, increasing precariousness and a general deterioration of employment stability in the labour market as such. Considering its apparent inclusivity, does it mean that the Uber business model contributes to the empowerment of drivers?

The aim of this article is to describe the individual experiences of Uber drivers in Poland in the context of precarious work, and to examine the impact of this online platform on their work. Part two is devoted to theoretical considerations involved in the issues under investigation, and part three offers characteristics of Uber as a case of sharing economy platform business model. The next sections describe the methodology and findings of the study, followed by their discussion and conclusions.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In the period of late capitalism and austerity, new areas of work are emerging outside the current system of regulations (Sundararajan 2016). In the new world of work, the opposition between standard and non-standard work arrangements, and between employment and self-employment is increasingly blurred. Emiliana Armano and Annalisa Murgia (2017) claim that a renewed interpretation of work is also needed in order to rethink the concepts of inequality and precariousness as they emerge from subjective experiences. Indeed, the emerging areas of work are no longer – or at least not only – mere containers of the growing forms of “non- standard” employment.

Iain Campbell and Robin Price (2016) have designed a clear conceptualization of precarity issues that separates five analytical levels: precariousness in employment, precarious work, precarious workers individually and as an emerging class, and precarity as a general condition of social life. Most researchers tend to focus on precarious work (Campbell and Price 2016; Burrows 2013) or precarious workers individually (Marino et al. 2018; Pulignano, Ortíz Gervasi, and de Franceschi 2016). While some scholars go a step further and view them as a class-in-the-making (Standing 2011; Savage et al. 2013), others oppose this standpoint (Wright 2016; Hardy 2015).

Among many different and often contradictory definitions of precarity and precarious work (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989; Dörre, Kraemer, and Speidel 2006; Butler 2006; Barbier, Brygoo, and Viguier 2002; Vosko 2006; Standing 2011), one proposal which deserves attention is that made by Arne Kalleberg (Kalleberg 2014; Hewison and Kalleberg 2013; Kalleberg 2009). He defines precarious work as insecure (high risk of losing it, irregular working time), unstable (limited social and financial privileges) and uncertain (low prospects of promotion to better jobs). Some scholars (Murgia and Selmi 2012) consider precariousness as a subjectively perceived situation rather than an objectively measurable condition.

Isabel Lorey (2006) draws attention to the phenomenon of “self precarization”, observed particularly among people working in the so-called creative professions, such as artists. She observes that many of them choose to live a life of precarity and would be worried about the prospect of adapting to what is considered “normal”, particularly with regard to working life. Klaus Dorre (2014), on the other hand, concludes that people doing precarious work fall below standard levels of social protection and integration as defined in welfare states. At the level of subjective experience, precarious work and employment induce a sense of meaninglessness and perceived disdain from others.

Performing work which depends on online platforms can be interpreted in terms of precariousness as existential condition (Lorey 2015): life is precarious, dependent and never completely protectable, and thus people are inevitably exposed to unforeseen circumstances. The precarious nature of such work has been the focus of a number of studies (Coyle 2017; Muntaner 2018; Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski 2018), with Uber drivers as one of the most often analysed cases of work precarization (Adriaanse 2016; Dubal 2017; Hua and Ray 2018; Malin and Chandler 2017; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, and Ravishankar 2018).

New technologies allow traditional jobs to be divided into discrete tasks that are widely distributed across workers and dynamically priced given prevailing supply and demand conditions. This “sharing” economy represents a shift away from fixed employment contracts to a more flexible work system, and is most common in two-sided markets in which a company acts as a platform to connect service providers and consumers (Chen and Sheldon 2016).

However, there is a need for a more precise framework of sharing economy. According to Belk (2007: 127), “sharing is an alternative to the private ownership that is emphasized in both marketplace exchange and gift-giving. In sharing, two or more people may enjoy the benefits (or costs) that flow from possessing a thing. Rather than distinguishing what is mine and yours, sharing defines something as ours”. However, it should be noted that not all examples of sharing economy are in fact “true sharing”. Companies like Uber or AirBnB are for-profit “sharing” services and do not build strong bonds or feelings of commonality (Belk 2017), which is why they are sometimes called “pseudo-sharing” (Belk 2014).

Following Huws et al. (2016), platform work can be defined as both platform-mediated work, performed (or at least delivered) online (e.g. Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork, Clickworker), and offline work where a platform only serves the purpose of matching clients with service providers (e.g. Uber, TaskRabbit). Other classifications include one proposed by Fabo et al. (2017), where the classic division into offline and

online services is supplemented with the third category: transport platforms. Codagnone et al. (2016), in turn, identify the following four types of platforms: (1) peer-to-peer assets-intensive provision of goods and services; (2) peer-to-peer manual labour-intensive unskilled provision of personal and home services; (3) peer-to-business cognitive labour-intensive unskilled provision of services to businesses; (4) peer-to-business cognitive labour-intensive skilled provision of services to businesses. In view of the multitude of conceptualizations and classifications of the notion of sharing, we have to agree with Arcidiacono et al.'s (2018) conclusion that we should consider thinking within the framework of the "varieties of the sharing economy" and accept the plurality of this ecosystem.

No matter what classification and definition of platform work we adopt, it is apparent that the number of employees involved in such working patterns is growing. A recent survey of UK adults by Ursula Huws, Neil H. Spencer and Simon Joyce (2016) found that as many as 11% had successfully earned income through work platforms, while 3% said they were doing so at least weekly. A study of the European Commission (2018) shows that 23% of the respondents have used services offered via work/collaborative platforms. Among them, over a half have accessed services in the accommodation (57%) and transport (51%) sectors.

The emergence of platform work has the potential to boost employment and increase flexibility for workers. However, platforms also facilitate flexible work arrangements, which could lead to an increase in poorer quality jobs, with poor career prospects, and contribute to the growth of precarious work (Mira d'Ercole and MacDonald, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, I adopted the definition of precarious work as one characterized by: a subjective sense of uncertainty (as perceived by the employee), lack of job security, long working hours, low income and lack of employee rights (social care and trade union protection) (Bosmans et al. 2016; Lorey 2015). This issue is discussed in more detail in the methodology section further below.

### **3. Uber and its characteristics**

Austin Zwick (2018) observes that the competitive pressures of neoliberal economies have compelled employers to devolve responsibilities to contractors and subcontractors. The rise of platform-based business models has significantly accelerated this trend, and the most important pioneer here is Uber.

Like other companies active in this sector, Uber views its own role as that of an intermediary (Kashyap and Bhatia 2018),<sup>2</sup> whose task is only to facilitate access to underutilized and undervalued goods and services (Lobel 2016). As such, then, it is not a transport company but a technology provider charging 25% commission for each ride.

As in late 2018, Uber is active in 737 cities in 84 countries around the globe and is constantly expanding its operations. Apart from a ride-sharing platform, the company also operates a food delivery network (Uber Eats) and has become involved in haulage and medical transport services (Uber Freight and Uber Health). As can be seen, then, the technology start-up is expanding the range of activity and sets new trends followed by other players in the market.

This business model is characterized by high inclusivity, as requirements for Uber drivers are not particularly demanding: it is enough to make sure that the car one plans to use to provide services complies with Uber specifications, register online, download the application and add required documentation (e.g. driving licence).

The activity of Uber has been the subject of interest among researchers for some time. Their studies most often concern the operation of the company in particular countries, from the United States (Hall and Krueger 2017) and Canada (Jamil and Noiseux 2018), through India (Surie and Koduganti 2016; Kashyap and Bhatia 2018), to South Africa (Huang, Majid, and Daku 2019). Some authors focus on technological aspects of the venture (Chen and Sheldon 2016; Rosenblat and Stark 2016) or analyse to what extent Uber can be considered an employer or a commissioner (Prassl and Risak 2015). Others discuss the role of the company in the development of passenger transport (Cramer and Krueger 2016; Tucker 2017) and the gig economy as such (Berger et al. 2018; De Stefano 2015). Another study area is different barriers (mainly legal regulations) which hinder operations of the company (Crespo 2016) and confine many Uber drivers to grey economy.

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<sup>2</sup> However, the Court of Justice of the European Union (20 December 2017, Case C-434/15) ruled that the service provided by Uber, a peer-to-peer ridesharing, food delivery and transportation network company, must be classified as a transport service. Therefore, Member States must regulate the conditions under which the service is provided in conformity with the general rules of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Carpagnano 2018). For court judgements in other EU countries, see Martins 2019.

#### 4. Empirical data, time frame and research methods

In the CEE countries the idea of platform work is only emerging, and the regulatory framework of such activity has not yet been developed. Therefore, the aim of this article is to describe the individual experiences of Uber drivers in Poland in the context of precarious work, and to examine the impact of this online platform on their work. The research problem under investigation is *whether the organization of work determined by the app is related to the subjective feeling of precarious work among the drivers*. For the purposes of this study, the main research question was formulated as follows: *How do Uber drivers assess the impact of the platform on their work in the context of precariousness?*

In order to answer this research question, I conducted a qualitative study among ten Uber drivers in one of the Polish cities. The study relied on the use of in-depth interviews (IDI) and was carried out in November 2018. In the case of all informants this work was their basic source of income. All the informants were male. The interview scenario concerned four dimensions of work precarization: uncertainty, security, pay, working time, employee rights, and the impact of the online platform. One factor at play here was the small size of the sample: the study had been planned as preliminary research aiming to collect information about the nature of the job in the context of precarious work with a particular focus on the role of the app in the work process. Basing on the findings presented below, the following study will attempt to measure the intensity of precarity factors among workers relying on various online platform business models.

All data was stored and analysed using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (RQDA), which facilitated assigning codes to particular parts of the informants' statements and categorizing groups of codes. The adopted multi-stage coding procedure (largely based on the grounded theory) consisted of several rounds: the first round (open coding) was based on the researcher's intuition, the second (focused coding) involved classification of codes into categories that emerged during the analysis, and the third one aimed to identify the core analytical category. In the next stage, categories were classified into topics, which enabled analysis of the respondents' work in terms of the dimensions of precarious work (legal and regulatory, organizational and economic), and the role of the app. Temporariness was identified as the core analytical category (Strauss, Glaser 2017).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the most important peculiarities of the Polish labour market. According to the data provided by Statistics Poland (2019), recent years have seen the intensification of positive trends in the Polish labour market: low

unemployment rate (4.5%) and increasing number of employees in 2017. On the other hand, at the same time we have to deal with a very high rate of temporary employment (25% of all working population), a high number of civil-law contracts – 6.9% of all employed (which is particularly unfavourable from employees' point of view, as such contracts do not offer them full social protection), and finally very high estimates of undeclared work rate – 5.4% of all working population.

## **5. Temporariness in precarious work via app: research findings**

The study aimed to establish whether working as an Uber driver can be characterized as precarious work (both in objective and subjective terms) and to identify the role of the app in this process. The most general, overall category that can be used to sharpen and clarify the concept of precarity applied in this article is temporariness. Interviews with the informants concerned different aspects of the principal dimensions of precarious work: legal and regulatory dimension, organizational dimension and economic dimension. What characterizes all these aspects is temporariness (core category).

### **(a) legal and regulatory dimension**

Considering the legal and regulatory dimension, the interviews with Uber drivers concerned formal issues related to work and employment (contracts and agreements), the question of their legal status as regards transport regulations (mainly the issue of passenger transport licence) and the attendant consequences.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this dimension includes also the issue of collective bargaining, trade union membership and social rights.

The key point to note is intermediaries between Uber and the drivers. Known as fleet partners, these business entities comply with the requirements for Uber partners (which individual drivers are often unable to meet) and enable drivers to work using the app at the lowest possible cost. In fact, most Uber drivers rely on fleet partners and

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<sup>3</sup> The new legislation, which will come into force on 1 January 2020, introduces the same rights and obligations for all entities providing commercial passenger transport services. In practical terms, both taxi and Uber drivers will have to meet the same formal requirements, and in this way the work of the latter will become fully legal. The question about economic consequences of the so-called *lex Uber* remains unanswered. It is estimated that the interest in working for Uber will significantly decrease (due to formal requirements, which will be higher than today), which may result in higher prices and thus bring a decline in demand for the service. This, in turn, may lead to Uber's withdrawal from Poland due to low profitability.



are charged weekly commission for their services (such as legal and managerial) on top of the 25% Uber service fee. As a result, the sum they receive for their work every week (bank transfer or cash) is substantially lower than the actual fares.

It must be noted that as it is in Poland Uber's business model created opportunities for intermediaries between the company and the drivers – they register business entities and subcontract individuals who are not entrepreneurs themselves. It seems that, apart from Uber, it is the middlemen who benefit the most from the system, which, as it were, sanctioned their operations. In fact, then, the only connection between the drivers and Uber is the app. The money earned in the application goes to drivers only through recommended Uber fleet partners.

As regards contractual arrangements, only two informants were registered as self-employed; most others had a bailment agreement (also known as lending for use agreement) or driver account management agreement with the fleet partner. One of them had a verbal agreement, and another a contract of mandate for the national minimum wage, with the remainder paid cash in hand.

In the absence of any contractual agreement between the driver and Uber, the types of contract/agreement between the driver and the fleet partner amount to walking a fine line between legal and illegal. Although their relations resemble B2B arrangements, the drivers in fact do not conduct business activity – they are employees and should have employment contracts. In the case of verbal agreements, claiming any rights or benefits is practically impossible.

What is more, none of the informants had a full grasp of the system of calculations. They knew about the 25% commission for Uber, but they did not know the exact role of the fleet partner in the process: what its commission was for and whether it made payments towards their taxes or insurance. Neither were they fully aware of the kind of contract/agreement they were bound by, or who the other party was:

*-Most people work on those junk contracts, some sort of cooperation agreements; but really, I'm an employee and I don't get anything. (U2: 20 years old, first job, secondary education)  
-I signed something, but I don't remember what it was. (U9: 40 years old, next job, vocational education)*

This may stem from the attitude of the drivers to their work for Uber. None of those interviewed saw themselves doing it in a few years' time. They insisted that although it was their basic source of income at the moment, they treated it as merely temporary occupation; working for Uber was definitely not what they wanted to do in life:

*The more you drive, the more money you get; but it isn't really something I want to do in life, to be an Uber driver, I mean. (U9)*

*You shouldn't treat it as an ultimate job, a full-time thing, or something you do for a long time; I think it's a very good job as a casual thing, for someone looking for a job or someone between jobs. (U6: 48 years old, next job, higher education)*

This attitude serves as an excuse for their ignorance of legal and formal issues concerning their status: if this occupation were “something [they] want to do in life”, they would get interested. In their approach, the short-term nature of their work fully explains their lack of knowledge or even interest in formalities. This may also explain why the principles of Uber's operations in Poland are not fully transparent: if the drivers only work on a short-term basis, it does not matter much whether what they do is legal or not.

*I tell you, I don't see myself in this job for the rest of my life. It's just something I do at the moment. (U9)*

In general, the informants were not familiar even with those regulations which concerned them specifically. They fully relied on fleet partners in all formal and legal matters and they did not run their own checks. It could be said that their blind trust was based on the assumption that if so many drivers worked for fleet partners it was just impossible that all of them would be cheated.

They also mostly had no knowledge of the legal status of Uber's business operations in Poland, and trusted their fleet partners that they complied with the rules. As of mid-2018 Uber requires its partners to have a valid passenger transport licence. While fleet partners comply, they insist that their drivers do not need to, which is not entirely true. One thing beyond doubt is that the regulatory framework in Poland is behind the technological change, and that app-based work does not fit into the existing categories.

Other aspects of the legal and regulatory dimension are the degree of certainty that employment will continue over a longer period of time, the continuity of employment as such, and job security and stability. As regards continuity of employment, the interviewed drivers did not see their future with Uber. As mentioned above, they stressed the temporary nature of their work; this was the case even among those who had been with Uber for a few years. On the other hand, all of them were convinced that their job was stable and secure, even though they did not know how long they would be allowed to continue, as they were aware of the controversy over Uber's operations in Poland and the problems concerning legal regulations it faced. In other words, they saw their jobs as secure unless Uber was banned.

Other issues within this dimension mainly concern collective protection of workers (trade union protection) and protection of their social rights. Considering the former, all the informants stated that Uber drivers had no collective protection of any kind, including collective agreements (none of the respondents has ever heard about them). In addition, most of them declared they would not be interested in joining trade unions or receiving their protection even if they had such an opportunity.

*I haven't been that interested to get to know what positive things there might be, so I'm not really sure. (U13: 20 years, first job, student)*

In general, it could be said that they are not interested in any activity which goes beyond their work itself. This attitude may be attributed to two major factors. Firstly, as discussed above, they perceive their work for Uber as temporary, hence they are unwilling to engage in anything that would amount to stronger association with the company. Secondly, there is also their attitude to trade unions as such: they view them as a relic of the pre-Internet era on the one hand, and share the general attitude of Poles towards such organizations on the other. According to the CBOS Public Opinion Research Centre, Poles do not believe that trade unions may improve the working conditions of employees, and do not treat them as a trustworthy partner in social dialogue (CBOS 2017).

Considering the social rights, in turn, it appears that while all those interviewed would want to be protected, they were not ready to make financial contributions. Informants stressed that although they had no such protection it did not put them off their work. What is more, some of them were aware of how the system works in Poland and did not want to support it. Rather, they were happy about (at least theoretical) freedom offered by Uber:

*Paid sick leave, and who's supposed to pay for it? You can pay ZUS [Social Security Institution] to get insured (...) and get sick pay when you're ill, but you don't have to do it. It's not about employees' rights; it's about employees taking advantage of the rest of society – it's other people who pay for their sick leave and they often take advantage of it. (U6)*

On the other hand, they realized certain problems stemming from the fact that their status was not formally regulated. One of them was insurance:

*There should be some kind of insurance. It's obvious that there are accidents, there are different situations; in general, it isn't exactly very safe to drive around, so this thing about insurance should be regulated somehow. I'm always worried about it and customers*

*sometimes ask me how it works – if we had an accident just now, if something happened to me, who would take responsibility? (U12)*

Considering the legal and regulatory dimension, then, it can be concluded that the work of Uber drivers is precarious. This largely stems from the fact that they have no employment contracts (or even contracts of mandate), as it is not possible to have workers' rights without a proper contract in place. The informants did not feel the need to get organized or receive protection by trade unions. Although most of them reported similar problems and collective response to unfavourable practices would certainly make their work easier, such a move seems highly unlikely: they do not have a sense of common interest and do not identify with their occupation, which makes any kind of fight for collective rights practically impossible.

On the other hand, they fully realized the nature of their job and did not view their own situation as unfavourable. All of them stressed that it was very easy (or even too easy) to become an Uber driver. As a result, they could not expect any particularly favourable working conditions or even standard workers' rights.

As regards the stability and security of employment (at least when measured by the type of the contract/agreement), the work of Uber drivers is also precarious: they work on the basis of licencing regulations which are not entirely clear, and have no employment contract with Uber or its fleet partner (which would give them a sense of security). However, this objective assessment does not coincide with their own perception. In their view, the measure of stability is the number of hours they work – the more they drive, the more stability and security they get. Not only do they have no knowledge about the formal side of their activity, but also they are not interested in it at all. Since they treat their work as something they only do for a while, they think it is not worth going into the formal details involved (even though this “while” has sometimes been as long as three years).

One issue that needs to be mentioned here is the strongly negative attitude of those surveyed to foreigners working for Uber in Poland. According to most of them, foreign drivers spoil the reputation of the company among the customers: they do not have an adequate command of Polish and do not know the city where they work. This has a direct negative impact on the informants, as they have less work than they could. A relatively large number of foreigners in this occupation also means that it is practically impossible to talk about any community of interests among Uber drivers in Poland.

### **(b) organizational dimension**

The analysis of the organizational dimension focused on working hours (and the opportunities to determine/choose daily work schedule), working time and autonomy at work. Although it may seem that the drivers determine their working hours themselves, this in fact is not the case. All the informants stressed that they had most clients on weekday mornings (before ten o'clock), afternoons, from four o'clock until late at night, and on weekend nights. This means that in fact it is the market demand (i.e. the customers) that has an impact on when they work and earn the most. Moreover, those who drive fleet partner cars rather than their own ones are under pressure to work as long as possible. Most of them do twelve-hour shifts, which they have to arrange with the fleet manager and/or other drivers using the same car. As can be seen, then, opportunities to freely determine their daily work schedule are rather limited.

When it comes to working time, all the informants said they drove even ten hours a day (with a break in the middle of the day), including weekends. This system means that they work much longer than the standard forty hours. What is more, the fact that they spend mornings and afternoons working tends to affect their family life.

*Sometimes I drive from six to ten, and then I drive from four to eight and that's eight hours. And sometimes I drive from seven to seven on Friday, that's twelve hours, then all night, and then the same on Saturday again. (U18: 26 years old, next job, vocational education)*

As regards their autonomy at work, in turn, they all stressed they were their own bosses and could log off the app and do their own things whenever they wanted. Is their autonomy really unlimited? Since they are aware that their app-based work is their main source of income, they most often spend long hours in their cars trying to maximize their profit.

Although they are seemingly fully autonomous and theoretically can go back home to have dinner, they prefer to eat fast food and return to the streets as soon as possible. This does not seem to come as a sign of full autonomy. Alex Rosenblat (2018: 82) writes that "while Uber hires rarefied artificial-intelligence experts internationally to spearhead self-driving car initiatives, its drivers are still struggling to find places to pee".

Considering the organizational dimension, then, it can be concluded that in objective terms work of Uber drivers is best described as precarious: it involves long working hours (longer than those standard), split shifts, working at night and at weekends. From the point of view of the drivers, however, all these features are positive. In their

view, the fact that they can decide when and how long they want to work makes them their own bosses. This outweighs the long hours they have to work if they want to make a sufficient income. They see the idea that, at least in theory, they can take a break and go home any time as the greatest advantage. On the other hand, such organization of work means that working as an Uber driver is difficult for women, as they most often have to combine their professional and family responsibilities.

### **(c) economic dimension**

The last dimension of precarious work analysed here concerns such issues as pay and financial stability. The informants also talked about surge pricing, the system of payment for services and the transparency of transactions with Uber and its fleet partners.

When talking about their pay, all those interviewed stressed that their income was low and that they would not be able to support themselves without working more than the standard forty hours a week. This means that they can reach financial stability only if they work up to twelve hours a day and/or at weekends. According to the informants, high rotation of drivers working for Uber resulted from poor pay (as compared to the situation three or four years before). Another factor at play was that a high number of drivers (mostly foreigners) meant a lower number of available rides. As a result, none of the respondents saw driving for Uber as a permanent job.

*This system is becoming less and less profitable for the driver. (U6)*

Uber company applies a system of surge pricing which aims to motivate the drivers to move to areas where there is more demand for their services. Surge pricing means that requesting a ride in a particular area is more expensive due to higher demand and limited supply; the price is calculated using a special algorithm. At least in theory, the system enables drivers to gain higher profit.

However, none of the informants saw it as a sufficient incentive. Firstly, the system does not always work properly (it happens that higher fares are not charged even though they theoretically should). Secondly, before they have driven across the city to such an area the price surge would most likely no longer apply. Although they are certainly very happy to benefit from surge pricing, they do not see it worth driving from where they are to designated areas at all.

On the other hand, all those interviewed had a very positive opinion on the system of payments, in which a user's account is charged when a trip is completed. Some of

them stressed that the system improves their security: they do not need to have any cash and thus are not a potential target for robbery. In their view, cash payments would unnecessarily complicate the system and make it resemble the one applied in taxi companies.

When it comes to the system of calculations, they were aware of the 25% Uber commission on the fares. They also knew that the amount they would finally receive depended on the applicable charges for fleet partner services.

Considering the economic dimension, then, in terms of objective criteria the work of Uber drivers can be classified as precarious. Most of those interviewed stressed that their pay was low and that they faced a considerable competition from other drivers (particularly foreigners). As a result, when compared to the situation three or four years before, they were unable to earn the same pay in the same amount of time. They also observed that low income was the most frequent reason why drivers left Uber.

Under the circumstances, the informants developed a strategy which enabled them to compensate for lower fares and protect their income – they simply worked more. This comes as a typical case of precarization of working conditions: sufficient income can only be earned by working longer hours.

#### **(d) the role of the app**

The final part attempts to provide answers to the question whether the app contributes to the precarization of work. In general terms, all the informants considered the application to be the best element of their work. In their view, it is easy to operate, can be used intuitively and does not require advanced IT knowledge. Although they sometimes complained about updates and new features (e.g. the layout), those comments reflected their attachment to older versions rather than negative opinion about the new ones. Regardless of their age, all the drivers found it easy to use and had no major complaints about it.

When compared to traditional taxi companies, one important advantage of working for Uber is that the drivers using the app can reject the rides they are offered or cancel them once accepted. They do this for a number of reasons, mainly the distance to pick-up point without information on the destination. This means they have a say about where and for how much they drive. Although most of the respondents declared they did not overuse these opportunities, the fact that they could refuse trips they did not want to make had a considerable impact on their positive opinion on their work and gave them a sense of independence.

In view of these findings, taking, again, only the subjective perspective of informants, it can be concluded that the application as such does not have an immediate impact on the precarization of drivers' work.

On the other hand, looking at this issue in a broader perspective and referring to the role of technology and its impact on the individual, it can be concluded that the app conceals from the drivers the existing networks of exploitation and inequality on the labour market. They must comply with the rules imposed by Uber, which pursues its profit-driven activity under the guise of free service and unlimited availability. To some extent, then, those "independent" drivers are subject to algorithmization, for example when they are offered incentives for achieving results (such as a bonus for completing twenty rides in four hours). This means that the app takes over managing people and, under the guise of a "bonus" for the driver, essentially aims to multiply the profit it makes. Therefore, it is driven not so much by the idea of using underutilized resources ("true sharing"), as by simple calculation based on the balance of profits and losses ("pseudo-sharing"). This means that the autonomy and flexibility it offers are only apparent (Rosenblat, Stark 2016).

This is particularly evident in the case of the driver rating system. Uber's business model is constructed in such a way that drivers are considered "independent partners", who are not controlled by the company and act without interference on its part. It is the passenger who plays the role of superior and evaluates the quality of work performed by the driver using the rating system. To some extent, then, he/she decides about the driver's future career in Uber. How is this possible? Drivers whose average rating is too low may have their account suspended or even deactivated. As Alex Rosenblat (2018) writes, for fear of being removed from the platform on account of low rating, the drivers are ready to endure more comments, insults and complaints from passengers, and at the same time have no tools to protect themselves against them.

## **6. Discussion**

As it turns out, then, answering the question whether the app leads to the precarization of work is not as straightforward as it would seem. The issue involves the entire system of platform-based work rather than the use of application as such (in terms of software installed on the phone).

As presented above, considering generally accepted indicators (Kalleberg 2009, 2014) and the (operational) definition adopted by the researcher, the work of Uber



drivers displays features of precarious work in nearly all analysed dimensions: it is insecure (no employment contracts), unstable (the formal situation of Uber and its drivers is not regulated), low-paid, involves long working hours and does not offer social protection.

Only one element of the definition of precarious work adopted in this study is difficult to assess unequivocally – the subjective sense of uncertainty (as defined by the workers themselves). Indeed, none of the informants complained about uncertainty. Moreover, all of them stressed that they were able to reach stability (of work and pay) by working longer hours. In their personal view, then, app-based work for Uber does not involve uncertainty or risk.

On the other hand, they do not seem to be aware of the fact that the app imposes a working style, rules, standards and norms, and in return offers an apparent “freedom” of working when they like and how much they like. This can be described as “illusive authority” of the driver: although the analysed tool apparently simplifies his/her work in every respect, on closer examination it changes the rules so that most of the benefits are on Uber's side.

The question is how to interpret this view. If the work of Uber drivers meets all generally accepted objective criteria of precarious work, why do the drivers themselves think otherwise? One possible answer here is the attitude of most informants: they treat their work for Uber as temporary. None of them see themselves working there in five or ten years' time. Quite on the contrary, most stated they either had already made a move towards a different job (they attended some required courses) or intended to do it sooner rather than later. As they adopt a short-term perspective, then, they are relatively happy about their work and have no reason to complain. Stability does not come as an issue: for the time being they earn money (if they think they do not make enough they can always work more) and they will not care about “that whole Uber thing” in the future anyway. Their point of reference is not Uber but their work “after Uber”, which they tend to idealize.

The concept of temporariness could also be used to close the gap between the “objective” and the “subjective” conception of precarity. The fact that Uber drivers do not view themselves as people doing precarious work, and that at the same time they have accepted its objective conditions (no contracts, excessive working hours, no social security or representation of interests), could be interpreted from the Foucauldian perspective as an expression of the “entrepreneurial of himself” (Foucault 2008). Entrepreneurs of themselves are thus “competence machines”, who produce a flow of income; they want to be cautiously developed, carefully guarded and continually adjusted to the demands of the market. To be an “enterprising self” also means to

learn to continually inspect one's investments, and if necessary, to revise. The enterprising self, then, is someone who unceasingly makes decisions (Bröckling 2005). Like the classic "homo economicus", Uber drivers have to consider profitability and effectiveness on a daily basis. They somehow have to combine individuality, autonomy and freedom of choice in a framework determined by market economy.

Another factor at play is that working for Uber is one of very few highly inclusive professions: anyone holding a valid driving licence can join and start to earn money driving people around. This inclusivity on the one hand, and the fact that drivers can leave any time on the other, can have an impact on their positive view of their work. Although (in theory) Uber account can be deactivated (e.g. if a driver's rating falls below 4.6 out of 5 or the number of trips he/she rejects is high), this does not happen very often. In addition, a suspended account can be easily reactivated practically without any negative consequences.

Some drivers interviewed in the study had worked for Uber a few years before and returned later. This indicates that workers can perceive platform-based work with its high inclusiveness as an antidote to unemployment and lack of stable employment. Whenever they are between jobs, they can maintain their income level by driving for Uber.

This means that platform-based work plays a very important role on the labour market as it is today. The above study conducted among Uber drivers in Poland makes it possible to see both its negative and positive aspects. On the one hand, it is unstable and uncertain and thus can be described as precarious. What also confirms this assessment is lack of employment security (sometimes workers have no contracts at all), long working hours (also at night and on holidays), absence of social or trade union protection and, last but not least, low pay. On the other hand, however, it is easy both to start doing it and to leave, and to do it only when one needs to, e.g. between jobs or when different (and more stable) employment is not available. As a result, most people doing platform- or app-based work view it in positive terms.

Such work is particularly important for those who so far have had no other choice than to do precarious work – particularly young people and migrants, whose position on the global labour market is difficult. The case of Uber indicates that platform-based work, with its essential element of flexibility, can improve the situation of young people and enable some of them to enter the labour market and earn their first pay. Although this does not mean that their transition to other forms of employment is easy, work experience they gain doing platform-based work improves their prospects for better jobs in the future.

To some extent, analogical mechanism operates in the case of migrants. The informants observed that Uber provides a perfect opportunity for those who have no other chance to enter the labour market. However, they also concluded that in Poland the process unfortunately involved malpractice and negatively affected the image of the company: foreign drivers often do not speak Polish and cannot communicate with customers; some of them are prone to reckless driving, which is largely attributed to different practices in their native countries. As a result, increasingly more customers switch to traditional taxis: although they are more expensive, they are driven by Poles.

## **7. Conclusions**

Studies conducted among Uber drivers indicate that the future of work belongs to online platforms and mobile applications. Technological change, which also has an impact on the labour market, simply cannot be stopped. On the other hand, we should closely examine the conditions and quality of platform- and app-based work. Analysing the work of drivers who rely on Uber rides as their basic source of income, we can notice that it is characterized by typical features of precarious work.

It can therefore be concluded that app-based work leads to precarization. At the same time, however, it needs to be stressed that it is not the app as such that is the source of the problem. Rather, the key factor at play here is the entire system of work behind it. Such conclusions are also confirmed by studies conducted by other researchers (e.g. Owczarek 2018).

Positive aspects of platform-based work cannot overshadow the risk of precarity which it carries. On the one hand, it is easily available and provides opportunities for certain categories of people who so far have found it difficult to enter the labour market and have often been confined to unemployment. On the other hand, transition from such work to standard, better-paid employment which gives a sense of security is very difficult.

One empowering mechanism of Uber is its capacity to overcome formal and informal barriers to entering the labour market for vulnerable categories of workers like migrants or women. We may see this fact as result of platformization of work.

In the case of the study presented in this article, the greatest attention should be devoted to the temporariness of precarious work (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989). There is no formal agreement between the Uber company and its drivers – the only connection between them is the application. The drivers sign a civil law contract (e.g. a contract of mandate, never an employment contract) with Uber's fleet partners, companies which

lend them formal support in return for a weekly fee, but are not their employer or principal. The most interesting issue, then, is the unexplored role of those partners. All the respondents work for an intermediary who acts like an employer but is not one. On the one hand, the partner's requirements towards drivers are typical of an employer, on the other – it offers them the so-called junk contracts or even allows them to work without any contract at all, which makes their situation very precarious.

To sum up, the objectively poor working conditions are accepted by workers and even legitimized by their attitude. What is more, the drivers also accept the rules dictated by the app and they do not view a combination of control and autonomy as pure illusion. They accept the inequality of positions and roles when it comes to work which is often their main source of income. This may be explained by our immersion in modern technology and our admiration of the apparent freedom it offers. The more we immerse in the word of technology, the less we notice the consequences this brings.

The question whether Uber and fleet partners operate within the law or in the shadow economy remains unanswered, mainly because there is no clear-cut regulatory framework in place. As neither Polish nor European legislation keeps up with technological changes, the entire sphere of app- and platform-based work tests the limits of the law.

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