9. Gigs of their own: reinventing worker cooperativism in the platform economy and its implications for collective action

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MAIN SOCIAL PROBLEM: THE PUZZLE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

The recent rise of gig platforms brings together longer trends of work flexibilisation, digital technology and changing consumer preferences to act as intermediaries between local on-demand via app workers or remote crowdworkers and their respective customers (De Stefano 2015; Woodcock and Graham 2020). On the one hand, gig platforms may generate flexible job opportunities and new ways to make a living (Martin 2016). Their low entry barrier, and for crowdwork access to global labour markets, makes them particularly attractive to disadvantaged groups that lack access to standard employment (Graham et al. 2017). On the other hand, gig platforms have become associated with algorithmic surveillance, poorer working conditions that come with on-demand work (that is, employment uncertainty, irregular earnings and unstable working hours), and fewer social rights and voice for workers (Scholz 2017). According to this perspective, many platforms exploit disadvantaged groups by expanding informalized precarious work (Van Doorn 2017; Webster 2016).

In an effort to uphold the benefits and mitigate the risks of gig platforms, discussions about the future of work are on the rise. This chapter builds on insights from sociology and social history to examine how gig workers themselves might strive for more decent work.¹ Since labour market flexibi-

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¹ 'Decent work' is a concept introduced by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999, later also adopted in the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations in 2015, which emphasizes the creation of jobs of acceptable quality (Ghai 2003).

lisation is typically associated with individualisation (Jansen and Akkerman 2014), and platform-mediated work is highly flexible, individual attempts at improving work conditions would be expected on gig platforms. Gig workers are indeed atomised, by competition for short-term jobs and by geographical and social separation from co-workers, which would render them ineffective in taking joint action owing to a lack of solidarity and places to self-organise (Lehdonvirta 2016). In addition, since unionising and collective bargaining are closely tied to the standard employment relationship (Breman and Van der Linden 2014), gig workers are excluded from this collectivism.

Against the odds, empirical observations suggest that various forms of workers' collective action are employed in the platform economy, ranging from street protests against Uber to online community groups by MTurk workers (Graham and Shaw 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Vandaele 2018). Even though collective action by gig workers seems unlikely in theory (Alkhatib et al. 2017), it does occur in practice. This chapter takes that puzzle as its starting point by exploring how collective action in the platform economy differs from more traditional forms of collective action so that expectations on future chances can be derived. I zoom in on a specific type of collective action in the platform economy: worker-owned gig platforms. While most gig platforms are owned by venture capital investors and managed on their behalf, the platform cooperativism movement claims that, together, gig workers can own and govern entirely alternative platforms (Scholz and Schneider 2016). Worker-owned gig platforms are therefore considered an extreme case of collective action, where gig workers control an entirely different arrangement outside of investor-owned platforms that grants them access to working conditions and shared benefits they would otherwise not have.

This chapter makes at least three contributions to the existing literature. First, a brief review of the literature and examples from the field are used to distinguish worker-owned gig platforms from closely related forms of collective action. It thereby tackles conceptual confusion. Second, I place the recent emergence of worker-owned gig platforms in a historical perspective of worker cooperativism. Why do we observe a rediscovery of worker cooperatives now, and why specifically in the platform economy? Third, a comparison between worker-owned gig platforms and traditional worker cooperatives is used to draw out theoretical insights on the opportunities and pitfalls of collective action in the platform economy. Finally, the chapter presents two approaches to collective action in the platform economy and reflects on directions for future research.

MAIN SCIENTIFIC PROBLEM: VARIETIES OF COOPERATIVISM IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

In situations where people would be better off collaborating, they must deal with conflicting individual interests that might keep them from doing so. Otherwise the outcome will be suboptimal for both group and individual. For example, food delivery cyclists involved in protests for better working conditions might get banned from the platform and be replaced by more disadvantaged workers for whom accepting such conditions is still a rational decision (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). Sociologists describe these situations as collective action problems or social dilemmas (Olson 1971). In order to solve them, people may turn to government regulation or private ownership, but they could also opt for community self-organisation to structure interaction between members of the group (Ostrom 1990). Decent work as a collective good is usually governed by a combination between the three solutions; tripartism between state, employers and labour unions (Berend 2006). This is less evident in the platform economy where non-standard employment and multinational operation restricts the role of states and unions, while most gig workers are also unable to exercise full control over their work as true self-employed.

Since it is unclear how workers' collective action in the platform economy functions exactly, this chapter takes worker-owned gig platforms as a far-reaching example of community self-organisation. We would expect collective action problems to feature heavily in this case, not least because the associated costs of starting or participating in a gig platform that is run by its workers make free-riding behaviour highly attractive. For instance, a member who brings in fewer transaction fees to a worker-owned gig platform may still enjoy better working conditions while the more productive members contribute disproportionately, thus incentivising the latter to prefer investor-owned platforms. To fully understand their collective action problems, an unambiguous definition of worker-owned gig platforms is first required. As there is none, a working definition is derived from literature review and field examples.

The origin of worker-owned gig platforms can be traced to the platform cooperativism movement. Platform cooperatives combine the democratic member-owned-and-governed organisational form of a cooperative (Scholz 2017) with the digital technology and business model of a platform to mediate social and economic interaction (Kenney and Zysman 2016). Various authors have reflected on the possible meanings, designs and preconditions of platform cooperativism (Scholz and Schneider 2016). Although scientific studies are still scarce, the idea of platform cooperativism has been well received in a body of literature that critiques the current state of the platform economy and reverts back to its original associations with sharing and collaborating

(Acquier et al. 2017; Gruszka 2017; Sarina and Riley 2018; Schor 2014). Frenken (2017) suggests that platform cooperatives could leverage knowledge and (legal) recognition from the two centuries long history of cooperativism, for instance, by merging this history with the new cooperative developments in the platform economy.

Two theoretical studies discuss worker-owned gig platforms in more detail. Belloc (2018) applies mathematical modelling to compare the per-capita earnings of a worker-owned gig platform to an investor-owned platform under various hypothetical conditions. He concludes that investor-owned platforms remain more attractive to workers up to a particular threshold of overhead costs they have to pay to the platform owner on each transaction. Nonetheless, per-capita earnings may not be the only factor that workers take into consideration when choosing between an investor-owned and a worker-owned gig platform (if they are able to make a choice between these alternatives in the first place). Arets and Frenken (2019) predict that the cooperative model will be more feasible for some sectors of platform-mediated service provision than for others. In particular, social care and cleaning services, as these are local markets, require simple platform functionalities, feature recurrent interactions with customers, provide main incomes and there are existing cooperatives in these sectors (at least in the Netherlands). Both studies have in common that worker-owned gig platforms are discussed as alternatives to investor-owned gig platforms.

In contrast, there are also instances in which worker cooperatives collaborate with investor-owned platforms. Drahokoupil and Piasna (2019) carried out a case study on the arrangement between food delivery platform Deliveroo and worker cooperative Smart in Belgium between 2016 and 2018. Before this arrangement was ultimately abandoned by Deliveroo, workers could gain employment status and associated social rights through the cooperative while effectively still working for the investor-owned platform. Although the researchers state that Smart could be criticised for normalising precarious work, most riders in their survey preferred working through Smart and experienced a loss of autonomy when they returned to the status quo of self-employment after Deliveroo had abandoned the arrangement. The benefits of these arrangements have been noted by legal scholars as well (Van Slooten and Holscher 2019), for instance, by collective pooling of equipment, insurance and training, though they fail to classify as worker-owned gig platforms because the platform itself is not worker owned and governed.²

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² Smart also provides a job board platform itself, but this was not used by the riders.

Other distinctions could be made as well. Como et al. (2016) distinguish digital innovation for the internal organisation of cooperatives (for example, to facilitate members' participation in decision-making) from actual platform cooperatives that use digital innovation for their business model (for studies on the former, see Jackson and Kuehn 2016; Mannan 2018). In addition, we could distinguish worker-owned gig platforms as being software-based from worker cooperatives that produce digital hardware (Schneider 2018). Building on Como et al. (2016, p. 9), worker-owned gig platforms can be established through three processes that demand different levels of effort from workers' collective action:

1. Creation – a new worker-owned gig platform is built and organised from scratch (for example, Pwiiic, which was founded in 2017).
2. Conversion – an existing platform is mutualised by its workers (no known examples).³
3. Coding – an existing worker cooperative adopts a platform (for example, Auckland Co-Op Taxis, which had existed since 1947 before adopting an application (app) similar to Uber's in 2013).

Both platforms and cooperatives come in many different shapes. Following Eum (2017, p. 31), it is possible to distinguish four meta-types of cooperatives based on who their members are; that is, user, producer, worker and multi-stakeholder. Users, often consumers, set up cooperatives to benefit from economies of scale in the collective procurement of goods and services that they otherwise find difficult to obtain. User cooperatives are not directly related to jobs or production. Various types of producer-members (for example, farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs) set up cooperatives to collectively acquire shared services directly related to production, such as joint storage, marketing and distributing. Workers use a cooperative for access to employment, control over work conditions and sharing in profit. Multi-stakeholder or hybrid cooperatives involve a mix of member classes to strike a balance between different interests. However, theoretically multi-stakeholder cooperatives should face more stringent collective action problems owing to their size and heterogeneous interests (Olson 1971).

It should be noted, however, that distinctions between consumer, producer and worker can become fuzzy in the platform economy. For instance, Facebook users simultaneously consume the platform's social networking services while producing content on which advertising revenue is gained (that is, prosump-

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³ Mutualisation here means (re)organising an enterprise so that it is owned and democratically governed by its workers. Inversely, demutualisation implies a shift to investor ownership.

Table 9.1 *Examples of platform cooperatives used in classification*

Name	Year of launch*	Member classes	Country/region	Business model
Modo	2002	Individual and business car users	Vancouver, BC	Sharing a fleet of cars
Fairmondo	2013	Sellers; consumers; platform staff	Germany; the United Kingdom	Sale of ethical goods and artistic products
Stocksy United	2013	Artists; platform staff; advisors	Canada; worldwide	Sale of stock photography and cinematography
Loconomics	2016	Freelance service professionals; platform staff; worker cooperatives; non-profit organisations; licensing partners that wish to use the platform technology	San Francisco, CA	Service provision (from web design to dog-walking)
Resonate	2017	Artists; music labels; listeners; platform staff	Germany; worldwide	Music streaming service
RidyGo	2017	Users; platform staff	Cote d'Azur, France	Carpooling, especially for unemployed jobseekers
CoopCycle	2018	Cooperatives of deliverers (majority share); restaurant/shop-owners; platform staff; public partners; private partners	France; Spain; Belgium; Germany	Bicycle food delivery/courier services
Fairbnb	2019	Hosts; guests; local business owners; neighbours	Italy; Spain; the Netherlands	Short-term vacation rentals

Note: * Founding dates (in year of launch column) of these platform cooperatives are typically earlier than the launch date. For example, Modo operated from 1997 using trip-logbooks before adopting an online platform.

tion). Moreover, the services provided on gig platforms are not executed by its employed technical and managerial staff, but by workers who are commonly self-employed (Schneider 2018). This is why most existing platform cooperatives involve multiple member classes (see Table 9.1) and previous literature on platform cooperativism has made little effort to distinguish between different types of cooperatives (for an exception, see Borkin 2019).

I argue, instead, that it is not useful to lump all forms of platform cooperativism together. Different types of cooperatives have different functions underlying their existence and, without classification, it becomes impossible

to make meaningful comparisons (Zamagni 2012). Following Borkin (2019), I argue that platforms can be more or less labour intensive. For instance, a platform that facilitates short-term vacation rentals is not as labour intensive as a platform for home cleaning. So, even when most platform cooperatives are open to multiple member classes, particular platform categories are a better match with worker cooperativism than others. Therefore, only platform cooperatives that facilitate a labour exchange between service providers and customers as their core business may be qualified as worker-owned gig platforms (Loconomics and CoopCycle in Table 9.1). Although some scholars have questioned the ability of platform cooperatives to move beyond the trade in ethical goods and artistic products (Belloc 2018), the examples in Table 9.1 illustrate a larger diversity and opportunities for worker-owned gig platforms specifically. Note that, following the International Labour Organization's (2016) definition for non-standard employment, the term 'worker' here is based more on their dependency on the platform than their status of employee versus self-employed.

Based on the above literature review and classification of field examples, I write of a worker-owned gig platform when: (1) the fulfilment of worker-specific needs is a central aim of the cooperative, (2) the platform is primarily worker owned and governed, and (3) the platform intermediates paid labour exchange. The first criterion relates to the purpose of worker cooperatives, both historically and legally (Zamagni 2012). The second criterion distinguishes worker-owned gig platforms from arrangements between worker cooperatives and investor-owned platforms (Van Slooten and Holscher 2019). The third criterion distinguishes worker-owned gig platforms from other types of platform cooperatives that might even include a worker member class, but do not use platform technologies to intermediate service provision by workers to clients (Borkin 2019).

CAUSES OF THE REDISCOVERY OF WORKER COOPERATIVES

Interest in worker cooperatives increases with the recent popularity of social entrepreneurship and flattened organisations in management discourse, the 2008 economic crisis and the United Nations declaring 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives (Cheney et al. 2014). The history of worker cooperativism, however, dates back to at least the nineteenth century. This section places worker-owned gig platforms in a historical perspective of worker cooperativism. Why do we observe a rediscovery of worker cooperatives now, and why specifically in the platform economy?

Table 9.2 *Historical phases of worker cooperativism*

	Phase 1: Early industrial period	Phase 2: Later industrial period	Phase 3: Post-industrial period
Dominant political-economic system	Pre-Fordism/liberal capitalism	Fordism/organised capitalism	Post-Fordism/disorganised capitalism
New goal of worker cooperatives	Uplift the working class to a decent standard of life	Counteract deskilling and increase workplace democratic participation	Combine individual autonomy with the security of a workers' collective
Emblematic case	Hebden Bridge Fustian Manufacturing Society	Mondragón Cooperative Corporation	Smart

Although a detailed historical treatise on worker cooperatives is beyond the scope of this chapter,⁴ I distinguish three phases of worker cooperativism over the past two centuries (see Table 9.2). By examining the changing macro-level circumstances that affect individual considerations to start or participate in workers' collective action, it becomes apparent for each phase how the (re)discovery of worker cooperatives is associated with needs that are unsatisfied by the private and public sector (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005).

The first phase of worker cooperativism manifests itself especially in the second half of the nineteenth century as a reaction against poverty and exploitation during the Industrial Revolution (Rothschild 2009), but also amid the power vacuum between the dawn of guilds and the rise of states as economic actors (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005). That is, there was both demand and opportunity for collective action. It is first and foremost an experimental phase in which worker cooperatives lacked legal recognition. Manufacturing jobs attracted people to cities, but worker protections and social rights were still very limited under liberal capitalism (Goldkind and McNutt 2019). Inspired by the cooperative communities of utopian socialists⁵ and the famous Rochdale

⁴ Bear in mind that this is an analytical typology, so phases may overlap and vary locally in practice. Moreover, the typology has a European focus and does not include proto-cooperatives. Worker cooperatives in socialist states are also beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁵ These cooperative communities are different from modern cooperatives. They typically had ownership and most governance ascribed to a patron-founder (for example, Robert Owen in the example of New Harmony), and aimed to establish settlements that combine cooperative work and consumption.

Principles in 1844,⁶ the characteristics of worker cooperativism started to crystallise.

An example here is Hebden Bridge Fustian Manufacturing Society in the United Kingdom, which was just as pioneering to worker cooperativism as the Rochdale Pioneers were to consumer cooperativism (Bibby 2015). It produced heavy cloth and clothing in its own Nutclough Mill, employed 300 women and men at its peak, and ran profitably from its start in 1871 until it was taken over by the Co-operative Wholesale Society in 1918.⁷ In the words of its founder, the ultimate purpose of the Fustian Manufacturing Society was ‘redemption of the working people’ (Bibby 2015, p. 191). This included better wages and a share of the surplus value, co-ownership and a vote in general meetings through shareholding, safer workplace conditions, and education opportunities for workers. Similar to most worker cooperatives in the first phase, however, workers’ collective ownership and democratic self-management were not yet applied.

The second phase of worker cooperativism, mostly after World War II, takes place in a Fordist economic context of deskilling and scientific management control, while the Great Depression and pressure from labour movements ushered in a state-regulated capitalism (Lash and Urry 1987). It is a phase during which worker cooperatives formalised and gained legal recognition, but also during which many of their social functions were taken over by the nation state (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005). The standard employment relationship and a more extensive social welfare system were established in many countries. Standard employment refers to a full-time job with one employer over a long time span, guaranteeing regular hours and income for wage earners, but also access to social rights and classical workers’ collective action based on unionising and collective bargaining (Bremman and Van der Linden 2014). Standardisation in Fordist production processes required less skilled labour, while being more capital intensive. These circumstances resulted in some researchers describing the twentieth century as ‘no place for [worker] cooperatives’ (Zamagni 2012, p. 31). The opportunities for this specific form of collective action decreased because much of the demand was already fulfilled by states and labour unions. Nonetheless, it was also during this period that

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⁶ The seven principles of the Rochdale pioneers have since become a guideline to all cooperatives, as agreed by the International Co-operative Alliance (n.d.): (1) voluntary and open membership; (2) democratic member control; (3) member economic participation; (4) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; and (7) concern for community.

⁷ A wider dispute is noted during this time between worker and consumer cooperativism as separate strategies to improve living conditions for the working class (Webb 1904).

state support allowed new worker cooperatives to start and some of the largest worker cooperatives of all time started up (Rothschild 2009).

Other considerations for starting or joining a worker cooperative became important during the second phase. The Mondragón Cooperative Corporation from the Basque province of Spain, founded in 1956, is a well-known example (Whyte and Whyte 1991). As a federation of worker cooperatives, it still exists and includes over 100 organisations in manufacturing, finance, retail and knowledge. The prominent role of education in Mondragón contrasts with the deskilling of workers common to Fordist production. In addition, worker cooperatives of the second phase provided a vehicle for political expression (Baskaran 2015). Reflecting the wider cultural shifts and social movements of the 1960s, empowerment through workers' collective ownership and democratic self-management became increasingly central to worker cooperativism (Gupta 2014). This aimed to replace the increasing bureaucracy of that time with workplace democracy (Rothschild and Russell 1986).

The third phase of worker cooperativism, starting near the end of the twentieth century, can be seen as a response to the retreating welfare state and the transition towards a post-industrial economy (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005). It is a phase during which worker cooperatives re-emerge as a form of collective action (Baskaran 2015; Cheney et al. 2014). Especially in times of economic crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the demand for worker cooperatives arises from needs that are unfulfilled by a retreating welfare state and declining unionism (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005). Globalisation and the rise of service sectors triggered a fall of the standard employment relationship in favour of non-standard employment (Stanford 2017). However, non-standard employment also tends to exclude workers from labour protections and social rights precisely because the classic model of collective action is so strongly connected to standard employment (Goldkind and McNutt 2019). It should be noted, however, that what is termed 'standard' and 'classic' here is now often reinterpreted by social historians as an exceptional period in the twentieth century that especially served male breadwinners in Western countries (Bremner and Van der Linden 2014). New considerations for starting or participating in, a worker cooperative involve the desire to unite a secure livelihood with the flexibility and individual autonomy of non-standard employment (Schneider 2018). This is reflected in worker-owned gig platforms, but not exclusively so. For instance, social cooperatives help unemployed people to reintegrate into the labour market through entrepreneurial activities (Borzaga 1996).

An example of this third phase is the previously discussed worker cooperative, Smart. Founded in Belgium to provide administrative services to artists in 1998, but converted to a formal cooperative structure in 2016, Smart now has

over 80 000 members in eight European countries and is open to all types of non-standard work (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019).

It invoices contractors on behalf of its [...] members and, after deducting a fee and the respective taxes and contributions, pays salary to its members. It thus offers administrative, accounting, and financial services to its members, who otherwise face a complex regulatory environment, and allows them to access social security through the employment contract. (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019, p. 7)

Whether these new initiatives still qualify as worker cooperatives in the narrow sense is a point of discussion. Smart is sometimes also described as a business and employment cooperative, which provides freelancers the position of salaried employee including social protections but also the independence of self-employment.

CONSEQUENCES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION BY GIG WORKERS

In order to understand the implications for collective action problems in the platform economy, I compare traditional worker cooperatives as they have existed historically with the recently emerging worker-owned gig platforms (see Table 9.3). A comparison is made along three dimensions of institutions for collective action: members, resource, and institution (De Moor 2015).

Table 9.3   *Comparison between traditional worker cooperatives and worker-owned gig platforms to derive opportunities (+) and pitfalls (–) for collective action in the platform economy*

	Traditional worker cooperatives	Worker-owned gig platforms	Implications for collective action in the platform economy
Members	Mostly small group size, socially homogenous and geographically local	Potentially large group size, socially heterogeneous and geographically dispersed	+ Scaling – Fragmentation
Resource	Standard employment, relatively more often manufacturing jobs, team production	Non-standard employment, relatively more often service jobs, solo production	+ Capital conundrum – Competition
Institution	Coordination by elected managers	Coordination by elected algorithms	+ Self-governance – Digital divides

First, if we look at the members of these collective actions, the workers, a few implications can be derived. Apart from some exceptions, members of traditional worker cooperatives are often (by design) small in number, socially homogenous and part of the same local communities (Benham and Keefer 1991; Gupta, 2014). Even though research shows this is not so different for most capitalist firms (Pérotin 2013), it has a different meaning for worker cooperatives where trust and reciprocity are indispensable without the presence of clear hierarchy. Worker-owned gig platforms have potential for larger size, social heterogeneity and geographical dispersion. This is mainly because Internet technologies reduce the cost of communicating over long distances and with many people (Lupia and Sin 2003). Some types of platform-mediated work can even be performed remotely from behind a computer anywhere in the world (De Stefano 2015) and the diversity of services provided on some gig platforms increases workers' social heterogeneity as well (for example, education, experience and skills).

On the one hand, this implies an upscaling from collective action by very exclusive worker communities to inclusive collective action for decent work as a common good. With a larger number and more diverse group of workers, it is relatively easy to achieve economies of scale that can cover collective costs (Oliver and Marwell 1988). This holds especially true for worker-owned gig platforms, as indirect network externalities make a platform more attractive to customers as the number of service providers increases (Frenken et al. 2017). On the other hand, there may be higher costs associated with the fragmentation that comes with a larger group size, social heterogeneity and geographical dispersion. This is because social control and solidarity are harder to establish when individual behaviour is not visibly monitorable or there are diverging interests among workers, such as between those that are dependent on the platform for their main income and those that only supplement their income (Frenken 2017). Building a shared identity and social control is not ruled out entirely, but the costs of exercising it become higher, especially for crowdwork.

Second, labour as a central resource to both forms of collective action differs considerably. Traditionally, worker cooperatives provide full-time jobs to their members by means of a standard employment contract (Eum 2017). This also makes worker-members eligible for various social rights in welfare states. Labour tasks are typically performed together with co-workers and shared means of production, that is, team production (Dow 2003). Worker-owned gig platforms almost exclusively provide service jobs to their members and employment can be non-standard in multiple ways (Eum 2017), such as part-time with a contract or self-employment. Labour tasks of gig workers are typically performed alone and with personally owned means of production, that is, solo production (De Stefano 2015).

On the plus side, these characteristics enable collective action in the platform economy to overcome the capital conundrum more easily than was historically possible. One reason for this is that service jobs are less capital intensive, thus requiring fewer large investments (Zamagni 2012). Also, despite of research showing worker cooperatives to be no less capital intensive than capitalist firms (Pérotin 2013), the people who undertake collective action in the platform economy may be less wealthy than those who start an investor-owned platform. In addition, the flexibility of non-standard employment and personally owned means of production lower the cost of creating jobs (Breman and Van der Linden 2014); though it should be noted that there is a trade-off between lowering these costs and the benefits that workers pool together, which makes collective action attractive in the first place. Looking at pitfalls, the shift towards solo production, and in some cases self-employment, allows for productivity differences and competition between workers (Schor et al. 2020). In turn, this can create social dilemmas where individuals benefit from selfish behaviour while others still contribute. Such a perverse incentive makes it less likely that collective action by gig workers will provide benefits such as knowledge or risk-sharing, unless measures are taken to obligate particular behaviours (for example, monthly fees and boycott of working for investor-owned platforms). Competition between members also raises the question of whether worker-owned gig platforms qualify as new types of worker cooperatives at all. If members are self-employed and mainly use the cooperative for shared services, such as work-finding, the organisation starts to resemble a producer cooperative (Eum 2017). When self-employed gig workers organise to gain access to shared services and make rules to discourage free-riding, tensions with competition law and, in particular, horizontal anti-trust legislation arise (Arets and Frenken 2019). There are exemptions for some producer cooperative types (Grillo 2013), such as in agriculture, but currently it is unclear whether these will hold too for worker-owned gig platforms.

Finally, some differences can be observed when comparing the institutional rules and decision-making between traditional worker cooperatives and worker-owned gig platforms. As democratic member organisations, traditional worker cooperatives usually have a delegated management that is elected by worker-members, with one vote each, to coordinate the organisation (Vieta et al. 2016). Fundamental rules about governance are also laid out in by-laws, a type of constitution for the cooperative, although, at the same time, worker-members could be entitled to vote on major decisions in a general assembly, participate in committees and/or run for management themselves. Worker-owned gig platforms may still have all of this, but also integrate by-laws and other decisions into their algorithms and platform design (Martin et al. 2017). They employ digital tools for governing the organisation on a daily basis as well, ranging from simple message boards to smart contracts

that could replace the need for delegated management altogether (Mannan 2018).

Implications for collective action in the platform economy include new opportunities for digital self-governance, but also digital divides between information technology technicians and ordinary people without transparency or control over important algorithms (Schradié 2018). Involvement of all members, not just leaders, in decision-making has always been a challenge for collective action. Classic sociologists such as Max Weber and Robert Michels have theorised that even democratic organisations tend towards hierarchies and power concentration (Rothschild and Whitt 1989). Information technologies potentially enable more direct democratic participation, often described as digital democracy, by making participation in decision-making on larger scales more efficient (Dahlberg 2011). However, there is also the danger that new hierarchies and power concentration will emerge based on technology shrewdness (Eum 2017). Crowdwork platform Daemo, for instance, aimed but ultimately failed to become democratically self-governed because its technical staff from Stanford University held most control (Social Contract CR 2017).

SOLUTIONS TO THE PLATFORM ECONOMY'S COLLECTIVE ACTION PUZZLE

There is a broad range of strategies for gig workers to undertake collective action (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018), going far beyond the worker-owned gig platforms that are central this chapter. Some examples include street protests, new forms of unionising and online worker forums. However, based on the implications derived in the previous section it becomes possible to predict that all gig workers' strategies for collective action will fall into either of two approaches (see Figure 9.1). Making this distinction also provides some practical insight into the future chances of solving collective action problems around decent work in the platform economy.

The soft approach starts with groups of gig workers who are willingly self-employed and/or more geographically and socially fragmented (Lenaerts et al. 2018). Limitations posed by competition law and international legal differences, but also the undesirability for many freelancers of social control infringing on their own autonomy will incentivise these workers to set only a few rules to structure their collective action; that is, a relatively lower level of institutionalisation. However, the social dilemma of conflicting individual and group interests then becomes more pressing (Olson 1971). Free-riding on the effort of other gig workers in collective action is more attractive when there are few rules to be monitored and enforced. For example, street protests by Foodora delivery cyclists did not result in the company meeting their core demands and, while protesters' accounts were deactivated, a large pool of labour easily

Figure 9.1 Two main approaches to gig workers' collective action in the platform economy

replaced them with new workers (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017). To evade collective action problems, it is expected that the soft approach will keep individual costs of participating low and have little obligations for members. The utility of this approach should not be underestimated though. Studies on online community groups of gig workers show that, even without sharing much collectively, just information and social connections, can increase gig workers' protection (Irani and Silberman 2013; Salehi et al. 2015; Wood et al. 2018); for instance, by building alternative reputation systems on good and bad clients or through creating social capital with other workers.

In contrast, the strong approach starts with groups of gig workers who already have some type of employment contract or who want a contract, and are less fragmented owing to geographical or social distance between them (Lenaerts et al. 2018). These workers face fewer legal restrictions to organising together, setting up rules and making agreements. They may also experience more of a common identity and thus be willing to accept social control by the collective (Lehdonvirta 2016). Levels of institutionalisation are then relatively higher (Ostrom 1990). Since opportunistic behaviour by individual gig workers is less likely with rules that are monitored and enforced, workers are incentivised to raise the stakes of collective action. Therefore, it is expected that the second approach addresses collective action problems head-on instead of merely evading them. Studies on traditional and new labour unions that engage with gig workers show results in minimum pay, discounted insurance, safety guidelines and dispute settlement (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Minter 2017). Worker-owned gig platforms are also likely to follow this

second approach, but might opt for the first if they minimise what is organised collectively for work-finding, information exchange and social connection through their platform, for which they pay only maintenance costs.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter presented the puzzle of gig workers' collective action, which is a phenomenon that should theoretically be unlikely to occur but is still observed in practice (Alkhatib et al. 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). A comparison of worker-owned gig platforms with traditional worker cooperatives was used to derive insights on how collective action problems may be solved in the platform economy through community self-organisation. This section presents an agenda for future research.

First, it should be emphasised that worker-owned gig platforms are not isolated phenomena. Community self-organising is just one of the three main solutions to collective action problems. Future studies should therefore assess how community self-organisation by gig workers is affected by the state and market that surrounds it. Collective goods are often produced in a context of institutional diversity (Ostrom 1990), which is no different for decent work in the platform economy. Variation in laws and policies between countries could influence both individual gig workers' demand for collective action as well as the opportunities and pitfalls for collective action in the platform economy. The same holds for variation by industry or type of work. Sociologists are well equipped to examine these issues through cross-country comparisons and by comparing different groups of gig workers.

Second, while focusing on worker-owned gig platforms as an extreme case of collective action in the platform economy helped to bring out its central problems, it also probably coloured the implications that are drawn about gig workers' collective action. Further research should therefore study different instances in a similar manner, for example, by comparing independent worker unions directed at gig workers with traditional labour unions (Lenaerts et al. 2018) or 'crowd guilds' with historical craft guilds (Whiting et al. 2017). Another approach would be to look at how a particular occupational group has organised itself over time and does so currently in the platform economy. Social history is rich with collective action by workers, and platform economy researchers underutilise the potential of learning from the past by analysing both similarities and differences.

Finally, without downplaying the importance of theoretical work, there is still a lack of empirical research on collective action in the platform economy. Some pioneering explorative studies show that demand for collective action is probably clustered among particular subsets of gig workers (Fellmoser 2018; Newlands et al. 2018) and that a variety of collective actions is cur-

rently undertaken (Graham and Shaw 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Vandaele 2018). However, future studies should direct attention to the viability of gig workers' collective action by analysing questions of scaling, fragmentation, capital conundrum, competition, self-governance and digital divides. Expectations can then be tested from the soft and strong approaches, as described in the previous section, to gain an understanding of how gig workers overcome (or fail to overcome) collective action problems.

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