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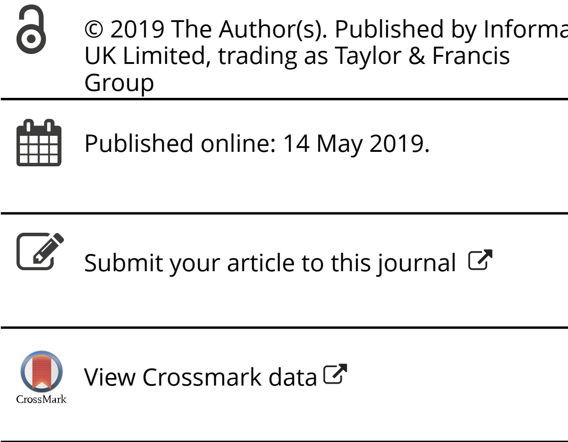

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Gig Work and the Discourse of Autonomy: Fictitious Freedom in Japan's Digital Economy

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ABSTRACT
The introduction of 'gig work' has been accompanied by an official discourse which highlights the benefits for 'gig workers', especially as arises from the more autonomous nature of this particular type of employment. In contrast, this paper draws upon the cultural political economy approach to argue that the move towards gig work is more accurately conceptualised as an attempt to legitimate the further flexibilisation of labour markets within advanced industrial democracies, seeking to construct economic imaginaries that are best described as a form of 'fictitious freedom'. In drawing on the cultural political economy approach, the paper explores the interaction between the structural, discursive and technological selectivities which have generated these outcomes. This is done through a discussion of the case of Japan, which is selected as a key case that highlights the tensions and pressures leading to the introduction of gig work in this way across the advanced industrial democracies. The article shows how gig work sees new digital technologies used in an attempt to increase productivity and thereby further growth, locking gig workers into low-skilled and low-paid super-fragmented tasks, whilst at the same time heralding the benefits that gig work can provide for a range of contemporary problems.

KEYWORDS
Digital labour; gig economy; platform; gig work; Japanese economy; cultural political economy

The emergence of the digital economy has generated considerable scholarly discussion (McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2011, 2014, 2017, Huws 2014, Ford 2015). This includes a consideration of the type of work associated with digital technology (Huws 2014, Ford 2015, Srnicek 2017), the impact that digital work has had upon employment opportunities and the experience of the workplace (Frey and Osborne 2013, Holtgrewe 2014, Huws 2014, Ford 2015, Moore and Robinson 2015, Beer 2016, Elder-Vass 2016, Schwab 2016, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016), the opportunities that digital technologies create for both the disciplining of (Beer 2016, Sundararajan 2016), and resistance by workers (Moore 2018), and a series of challenges that policymakers face in the digital age (McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2014, Sundararajan 2016, Srnicek 2017). One of the key concerns raised within these broad discussions on the digital economy has been that of the potentially detrimental impact that 'gig work' (sometimes called crowd work, platform work, or click work), has upon the bargaining position of both collective and individual workers (Huws 2014, Beer 2016, Moore 2018). Despite these concerns, we also see an 'official discourse' which heralds the autonomy to be gained through embracing the opportunities that gig work has the potential to offer. This, the paper claims, is a promise that amounts to a form of 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017), in which a *de facto* heightening of the

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mechanisms of control exerted over workers is at the same time depicted as a process granting increased autonomy. Whilst criticisms of the detrimental impact that gig work might have upon working conditions have been voiced by a number of commentators, nevertheless we remain without a concrete discussion of the pressures producing the moves toward gig work and the 'official discourse' of 'fictitious freedom' which has tended to accompany it. This paper addresses this omission by employing a cultural political economy approach in order to highlight the structural, discursive and technological pressures that have resulted in the specific way in which gig work has been introduced in the concrete case of Japan's changing model of capitalism. As a result, the paper enables us to understand both the concrete-specific way in which gig work is being introduced in the case of Japan, but also consider some of the more general pressures for change that are being exerted upon advanced capitalist democracies.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the paper highlights the 'official discourse' which has accompanied the introduction of gig work, drawing particular attention to the fictitious nature of the claims around autonomy that such a discourse has tended to proclaim. Whereas existing contributions to the literature have echoed similar critiques, they have also tended to lack concrete explanations for the development of such a discourse. Second, the paper then moves to make the case for a cultural political economy approach, through which to understand and explain the emergence of gig work and its accompanying discourse of 'fictitious freedom', in the particular case of Japan. Japan is selected as a case study because it is particularly susceptible to the structural and technological pressures of interest in the present paper, and therefore provides an important case through which to explore the development of gig work and its accompanying 'official discourse', in order to identify both specific and general trends, each with the capacity to prompt further avenues of enquiry. Finally, the paper then provides an empirical overview of the key structural, discursive and technological selectivities that have combined to generate a particular form of gig work, and an accompanying 'official discourse' that supports its introduction, in the case of Japan. As we shall see, these trends are both specific to Japan but also highlight potential trends, processes and selectivities that we can expect to observe in other socio-economic contexts, albeit in those cases also taking national-specific forms which deserve our attention in the form of further research.

Gig Work and the Emergence of a New 'Official Discourse' of Autonomy

Gig work is often defined as a form of labour which 'gives organisations or individuals access via online platforms to large numbers of workers willing to carry out paid tasks' (Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, p. 38). This normally takes the form of fragmented micro-tasks provided through platforms that connect online-based workers with hiring firms (Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, p. 38). A platform is a business which creates interactions between producers and consumers, and provides an open participative infrastructure that facilitates the exchange of goods and services (Parker *et al.* 2016, p. 3). As such, it can be considered an online labor-brokerage that acts to 'cybercoordinate the market of a service worker and a requester of work for a defined task or project' (Collier *et al.* 2017, p. 2). Gig-working is therefore a process that enables large numbers of workers to engage in paid tasks which are made available through online platforms rather than 'from traditional employees' (Degryse 2016, p. 36).

It is feared that gig work has the potential to lead to an erosion of established collective bargaining outcomes, to sharpen the pressure upon workers to compete with the labour market, and therefore to undermine both existing wages and working conditions and result in a lowering of standards of living for significant proportions of national populations (Huws 2014, Ford 2015, McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2017, Moore 2018).

These concerns contrast sharply with what we might consider to be an 'official discourse' that has been developed to accompany and support the introduction of gig work within advanced industrial democracies. This is a view, typically articulated by both governments and firms, which considers 'gig work' to offer a number of important advantages for those who take up this form of employment. Gig

work, it is claimed, can provide workers with an opportunity to achieve an enhanced degree of autonomy in terms of choosing what tasks to do, where to work and when to work. Indeed, it is this appeal to 'autonomy' that perhaps is central to this official discourse that heralds and identifies the key advantages of the new forms of 'gig' work that are central aspects of the new digital economy. This includes: an appeal to the heightened inclusivity and accessibility that gig work provides, in particular by offering opportunities to 'a broader range of people, including those whose mobility or availability prevents them from working regular hours' (Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, p. 32); the claim that gig work is able to resolve geographical challenges for workers, enabling a better match between the supply and demand of skills (Kittur *et al*. 2013, p. 24, Howe 2006); and the possibility that gig work can '"democratize" idea generation' (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014, p. 215).

This official discourse has obviously developed in different forms in different international and national contexts. But nevertheless it is striking how consistently it has been deployed across the advanced industrial democracies, by both governments and firms alike. Indeed, we can select a number of statements on the topic made by international and national firms, as well as governments and international organisations, each of which point towards a common underlying theme. Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a major digital firm which mediates the outsourcing of data-processing micro-tasks to a global workforce of anonymous workers, claims that digital work enables its employees to 'find something that fits your skills and interests' in order to 'make money in your spare time' (MTurk 2017). Similarly, McKinsey, the global consulting firm, claims that 68 million freelancers (gig workers) in the US 'do it by choice', and, 'report being happier' having moved away from a traditional 9 to 5 workstyle (Gillespie 2017). Major gig firms also advocate the benefits of gig work. For instance, the CEO of CrowdFlower, one of the major global gig firms, articulated the benefit of gig work for employers as follows:

> Before the Internet, it would be really difficult to find someone, sit them down for ten *minutes and get them to work for you, and then fire them after those ten minutes. But with technology, you can actually find them, pay them the tiny amount of money, and then get rid of* them when you don't need them anymore.
>
> (quoted by Marvit 2014 , cited in De Stefano 2016, p. 4),

Professional associations have also used similar language. As Chris Bryce, Chief Executive of the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed, put it in a recent statement on gig working: 'The gig economy is a new and exciting part of the labour market. It provides freedom, flexibility and work opportunities to many people who might otherwise not have them'.[1]

Governments have also been keen to promote the potential benefits of gig work, albeit often in more nuanced terms. For instance, in the UK, the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices portrayed gig work in terms of being capable of 'addressing the needs of people actively choosing to work outside of the traditional employment model' (Taylor *et al.* 2017, p. 28). British Prime Minister, Theresa May, supporting this view, claimed that government needed to avoid 'overbearing regulation', in order to ensure that the UK remains 'a home to innovation, new ideas and new business models' (quoted in Odell 2017).[2] Additional examples can be seen across a range of governments and international institutions. As Graham *et al.* (2017) describe, the Malaysian government's *Digital Malaysia* strategy seeks to promote a shift by the bottom 40% of income earners, to become microworkers or online freelancers in order to sustain their living, with digital work, or gig work, becoming a priority. Similarly, Nigeria's Ministry of Communications Technology, backed by the World Bank, launched the initiative 'Micro- work for Job Creation – Naijacloud' in the spring of 2013 in an attempt to 'reduce unemployment and create wealth through Microwork and Elancing' (Graham *et al.* 2017). Likewise, the European Commission, in its communication, *A European agenda for the collaborative economy*, describes how the 'collaborative economy', including platform-based recruitment, or gig work,

> generates new employment opportunities, generating revenues beyond traditional linear employment relationships, and it enables people to work according to flexible arrangements. This makes it possible for them to

> become economically active where more traditional forms of employment are not suitable or available to them. (European Commission 2016, p. 11)

A recent World Bank report also welcomed gig work, or what it terms 'online outsourcing', arguing that, 'For workers, this form of outsourcing has created new opportunities to access and compete in global job markets, from anywhere at any time, as long as they have computer and Internet access' (p.1). Further, it was considered that this type of gig work, 'provides opportunities for on-the-job learning and skills development' for youth unemployment (p. 4), and at the same time, 'can create a mechanism to provide equal opportunities for newly entered workers' (p.16) (Kuek *et al.* 2015). Governments have also themselves begun to hire using gig work arrangements, with 20% of state and local government survey respondents in a recent US-based survey reporting that they used gig workers to fill office and administrative support positions (Centre for State and Local Government Excellence 2018).

Despite the positive nature of this official discourse articulated by firms and public authorities, there are nevertheless a number of reasons to be sceptical regarding the effect of gig work, and the discourse employed by those seeking to promote it (Brophy and de Peuter 2007, Kapur 2007, cited in Moore and Robinson 2015, p. 5). Gig work has been associated with a number of concerning trends, including: heightened uncertainty and instability within the labour market (Howe 2006, 2008, Irani 2015, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, p. 38, Srnicek 2017); a fragmentation and decomposition of work tasks, which can subsequently be rendered homogenous, thereby de-skilling and driving down wages (Kittur *et al.* 2013, p. 24, Huws 2014, p. 87, Kenny and Zysman 2016, pp. 66–67); heightened precarity as a result of the 'lean' status of the gig economy (2017, p. 79); and a process of 'breaking down the job, or the production process, into tiny simple and repetitive tasks' that will be offered to online-based gig-workers (Valsamis 2015, cited in Degryse 2016, p. 36–37). In legal terms, gig workers are usually considered contractors, rather than employees, and are therefore without entitlements to training, benefits, overtime pay or paid holidays (Srnicek 2017, p. 76).

According to its critics, therefore, gig work generates flexible, cheap, and on-demand workers, undermining their rights and contributing to the creation of more precarious workers. This ranges from relatively simple, low-skill work such as speech transcription and copyediting, to more complex and expert tasks such as product design and translation, each of which is increasingly performed by gig workers (Kittur *et al*. 2013, p. 24). The fragmentation of working practices through crowdsourcing has also strengthened the invisible and exchangeable nature of workers as a result of their reduced visibility (Kittur *et al*. 2013, p. 23), thereby heightening competition between workers (Holtgrewe 2014, p. 20). As such, whereas gig work may arguably have created job opportunities, super-fragmented repetitive tasks nevertheless result in a decline in workers' skills and an exacerbation of the alienation of workers (Kittur *et al*. 2013, p. 25). This, in turn, enables gig firms to evade their responsibilities as employers, as gig workers become flexible, invisible and exchangeable tools, often working under 'zero hour' contracts. As Valenduc and Vendramin (2016) put it, gig work is a 'continuous employment relationship without continuous work' (p. 34). As a result, this makes the practice of non-standard and unpredictable work scheduling increasingly common and disrupts work schedules and private life as gig workers need to be continuously available (Morsy and Rothstein 2015, Degryse 2016, p. 44, Valenduc and Vendramin 2016, p. 35, cited in Degryse 2016, p. 44). Gig work therefore represents a shift in the forms of domination and control imposed upon labour, from a direct, physical, and on-the-site type, to the increased use of indirect mechanisms of domination as a result of intensifying competition, rendering workers less visible, and in turn suppressing wages and working conditions.

The notion, present within the 'official discourse', that gig work represents a new form of autonomous employment, in which workers are freed up to pursue a much greater selection of employment opportunities, is therefore questionable. It is in this sense that we might more adequately conceptualise official pro-gig work discourse as being built upon a notion of 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017). That is, pro-gig work discourse draws upon, in a one-sided way, the

opportunities for greater autonomy that gig work might provide, whilst concealing or neglecting the substantial constraints that exist and which act to prevent the exercise of that purported autonomy. For Klein (2017), such a notion of freedom, or 'autonomy', is 'fictitious'. It presents the market as a neutral mechanism through which economic actors can acquire greater freedom as a result of the opportunities to enter into acts of exchange which the market offers. Yet, the imposition of the market itself reflects underlying political struggles that cannot be considered neutral or outside of the scope of (unequal) power relations. As Klein puts it, drawing on Polanyi, 'economic processes can never be separated from political struggle between competing social groups' (Klein 2017, p. 859). Promoting the market as the means through which to ensure heightened 'freedom' therefore reflects underlying power relations which themselves are marked by imbalances and relationships of domination and subordination. The 'gig work as autonomy' discourse, therefore, reflects power relations, which themselves require explanation. This has similarities with Lukes' third face of power, in which the interests and options available to actors are themselves subjected to an imbalance of power and therefore create indirect, and sometimes unobservable, forms of domination (Lukes 1974). The present paper therefore seeks to conceptualise the underlying power relations which have accompanied this process, and especially the way in which these have informed the articulation of the 'official' pro-gig work discourse that appears to be prevalent.

In seeking to explain the way in which gig work has been introduced, critical contributions to the existing literature have tended to identify some of the problems outlined above, but nevertheless have oftentimes lacked a clear explanation for *why, and in what way,* such trends have been witnessed. This stems in part from the relatively general nature of existing accounts, with little consideration for the nationally-specific way in which gig work has been introduced. For instance, Srnicek (2017) has produced one of the most compelling critiques of the so-called platform economy, but at the same time shows little consideration for the different way in which these developments have varied according to national context. Similarly, Huws *et al.* (2018) identify trends in terms of workers' attitudes towards gig work across Europe, without at the same time mapping the broader national contexts within which these attitudes emerged. In contrast, whilst Graham *et al.* (2017) highlight the impact of the introduction of the gig economy on workers in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, nevertheless their account omits a consideration of the role and motive of government actors in supporting these (apparently detrimental) developments. Likewise, whilst Kittur *et al.* (2013) critically evaluate gig work, at the same time they lack an explanation for the broader pressures that have led to the particular form of gig work that we have seen in recent years. We need, in short, an account of gig work which takes account of the structural pressures that have contributed to its development, including the discursive apparatus through which it has been advanced and interpreted; and in order to do this we need to be aware of, and offer an explanation for, the concrete-specific way in which such trends manifest themselves within particular (national) socio-economic contexts. In order to provide such an account, we turn now to consider cultural political economy as an approach through which to account for the emergence of gig work and its accompanying 'official discourse'.

A Cultural Political Economy of Gig Work

In order to explore the particular way in which gig work is being advanced within contemporary economies, and specifically the case of Japan's changing model of capitalism, the present paper adopts the cultural political economy (CPE) approach developed by Jessop and Sum (2006, Sum and Jessop 2013). This combines an appreciation of material pressures arising from the reproduction of capitalism with the discursive processes that constitute this materiality. As such, it is extremely well suited to the study of processes of capitalist restructuring, where we are keen to understand the way in which this interacts with the ideas, narratives and discourses that accompany that restructuring; as is the case in the present paper.

The CPE approach provides an answer to a number of questions which are otherwise unresponded to by alternative political economy approaches. Thus, constructivist approaches tend to focus on ideas and identities and their role within socio-economic processes (Blyth 2013, Ban 2016, Widmaier 2016). This contrasts with more 'materialist' approaches, which consider pressures generated by socio-economic structures (especially capitalism) and the way in which these generate particular socio-economic trends (and crises) (Harvey 2005, Kliman 2012). Transcending this dichotomy, the cultural political economy approach aims to reconcile both ideational and material concerns.

Further, rather than considering structural, material or socio-economic pressures as *causing* particular outcomes to occur, the CPE approach instead considers pressures to have a tendency to favour (or select) particular outcomes, whilst nevertheless understanding that societal outcomes are ultimately contingent, contested, and therefore *un*determined. In doing so, it seeks to understand the role of ideas and discourse, as part of wider structures of capital accumulation. As such, it offers a framework through which to consider the discourse that tends to accompany socio-economic developments, such as (in this case) the introduction of gig work in advanced industrial democracies.

The CPE approach is therefore concerned especially with the relationship between structural pressures and the ideas which develop alongside and as a part of them. In doing so, it points to four 'selectivities' (structural, discursive, technological and agential), referring to the way in which asymmetrical power relations create a greater potential for the adoption, privileging, favouring, or 'selection', of certain agents, strategies, actions or ideas (without determining such outcomes) (Sum and Jessop 2013). *Structural selectivity* is the term used to describe the different (asymmetrical) sets of constraints and opportunities available to different social groups, and therefore corresponds most closely to what we might consider to be the concern of the more 'materialist' approaches within political economy. Similarly, *discursive selectivity* refers to the way in which different discourses and enunciations face particular constraints and opportunities, thereby favouring certain arguments (and forms of argumentation) over others, as well as favouring the voice of certain advocates of those arguments over others. As Sum and Jessop (2013) put it, *discursive selectivity* makes 'it more or less easy to develop specific appeals, arguments, recontextualisations, claims, legitimations and so on than others by virtue of their filtering effects' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 215). *Technological selectivity* refers to both the broad notion of technology (such as the current development of machinery and other inputs into physical production), and a narrower (Foucauldian) sense of the technology of 'governmentalization', according to which particular technologies are used to constitute (and discipline) subjects. Finally, *agential selectivity* refers to the qualities of the individual which allow her to act within the three other selectivities (structural, discursive and technological) and is therefore also, in part, a (non-determined) product of those other three selectivities. In this sense, agential selectivity refers to the qualities specific to each individual (Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 214–7). Whereas structural, technological and discursive selectivities exist as patterns of constraints facing actors, therefore, agential selectivities refers to the capacity of actors to respond to those constraints. Thus, given that we are most concerned in the present paper with broader patterns of socio-economic and discursive pressures, the focus herein is on the structural, discursive and technological selectivities that have faced key actors in the context of Japan's political economy. As such, the present paper does not focus on agential selectivities.

Pro-gig Work Discourse and Japan's Newly Liberalised Model of Capitalism

What follows is an attempt to explore the development of a pro-gig economy discourse through the cultural political economy approach outlined above. This discussion focuses specifically on the case of Japan. As we shall see, Japan's accumulation model has experienced a number of significant problems over the past two decades, resulting in a process of transformation introducing heightened economic liberalisation. This has therefore seen considerable change to the prior 'coordinated' Japanese growth model, which was characterised especially by highly stable employment relations, low

levels of social conflict, and an export-led growth model built around incremental improvements in advanced technology (Shibata 2016). As a result of these changes, Japan represents an important case within which to consider the introduction of gig work. The challenges that moves towards the introduction of gig work pose are especially visible in the case of Japan, given the longstanding reliance of the Japanese model upon both technology (which renders the Japanese economy especially amenable to the introduction of gig work) and labour market security (which is particularly affected by the introduction of gig work). Table 1 demonstrates a list of the pressures arising from each selectivity in the case of the introduction of the gig economy in Japan.

Structural Selectivity: Japan's Regime of Accumulation and the Demand for New Working Practices

Japan has been widely noted for the sluggish growth it experienced since the 1991 bursting of the bubble that built up during the period of rapid growth of the 1980s. The so-called 'lost two (or three) decades' have, in turn, generated a number of structural pressures, or structural selectivities. Four (interconnected) structural pressures, in particular, have exerted themselves within Japan's political economy: stagnant growth; a growing labour shortage problem; rising worker disaffection arising from an ongoing move towards liberalisation; and a shift in power between social forces that has seen the ascendance of a new, entrepreneurial, fraction of capital, empowered by the ongoing low levels of growth within Japan's political economy, and a concomitant decline in the power of established trade unions faced with a decline in their core group of 'regular workers'. The result of each of these pressures, moreover, has been to generate growing pressure for, and the facilitation of, the flexibilisation of labour relations, and the introduction of gig work as one of the key means by which to resolve some of the problems faced within the Japanese regime of accumulation.

One of the key structural pressures that has accompanied the period of sluggish growth within Japan has been the pressure to identify new opportunities for productivity and competitiveness, including especially attempts to liberalise the labour market so that the pre-1990 practice of widespread 'jobs for life' has increasingly been replaced with the introduction of so-called 'non-regular workers' employed on fixed term contracts or through temporary agencies (Keizer 2010, Yun 2016, Shibata 2017, pp. 401–4). Japanese employment relations have experienced consistent pressure to move towards what is now commonly considered to be a dual or more diversified labour market in Japan. This represents a move away from what was for much of the post-war period a class compromise geared around worker diligence and loyalty in exchange for exceptionally high levels of job security (Ōhki 1998, Dohse *et al.* 1985, p. 138). We have witnessed an increased flexibilisation of employment, and a significant increase in the proportion of the workforce of so-called 'non-regular workers'. This represents a shift away from the lifelong employment practices that are typically considered to be a central element of the post-war economic model in Japan, towards the

Table 1. Formation of fictitious freedom for the gig economy in Japan.

Structural selectivity	Discursive selectivity	Technological selectivity
Stagnating economy since the 1990s	Consensus on need to reduce working hours	Home Workers Web
Pressure to identify new opportunities for productivity and competitiveness	Perceived need to address the division existent between regular and non-regular workers	Seminars for better gig work
Flexibilised labour market	Agenda of inclusivity in the labour market for the elderly, women, and the youth	Gig worker evaluation system
Increased level of discontent against flexible forms of work	Principle of equal pay for equal work	Online time cards
Labour shortages	Promotion of the benefits of autonomous work	
Illiberal migration policy	Common espousal of the importance of work-life balance	
	Highlighting gig firms' contribution to the economy	

use of temporary, fixed term, and agency workers ('dispatch workers'). This is a process that has been driven by both government (including through important legislation, such as the Dispatch Workers Law) and changes to firms' hiring practices (Keizer 2010, Yun 2016, on the more general transformation of Japan's model of capitalism, see Shibata 2017, pp. 401–4). As Watanabe has identified, this includes the diversification of forms of employment, including the creation of a new layer of 'semi-regular' workers (2017). In addition, temporary workers face significant levels of economic insecurity, including especially those on zero-hour contracts and/or those employed through temporary agencies, a large proportion of whom are women (Ogoshi 2006, p. 475).

Alongside this process of labour market liberalisation we have seen a parallel labour shortage, resulting in part from declining fertility rates and an illiberal migration policy. These developments have had a contradictory impact upon capital-labour relations. Established trade unions have declined in influence as a result of the reduction in 'regular workers' who have tended historically to form the core of their power base. 'Non-regular workers', in contrast, have thus far been largely unable to form substantial institutions able to exert influence or develop substantial power resources within Japan's political economy (Watanabe 2017). This has not prevented, however, increasing expressions of disaffection and (non-institutionalised) forms of dissent, as a result of their experience of casualised employment (Shibata 2016). A labour shortage and increased levels of disaffection among non-regular workers have each created new levels of pressure upon the state and firms to identify and introduce new forms of work which are flexible but prompt lower levels of resentment by workers.

One of the more recent developments in this process of labour market liberalisation, facilitated by the emergence of the digital economy, has been the introduction of 'gig work' (sometimes referred to as platform work or crowd work in Japan), which has grown significantly over the last five years. The volume of wages paid by temp agencies in the crowdsource sector reached roughly around 125 billion yen (827.4 million GBP) in 2015, an increase of 39.1 per cent compared with 2014, with an expectation that it will grow to 350 billion yen (2.36 billion GBP) by 2019 (Yano Research Institute 2016). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) predicts that as gig-based jobs increase, a growing number of workers will not belong to any firm, instead working for whichever firm recruits them on an 'on-demand' basis for short-term jobs or tasks (2016, p. 228).

Each of these pressures have combined within the context of Japan's political economy to produce concrete structural pressures, or structural selectivities, encouraging both the Japanese state, and Japanese firms, to identify new patterns of working, in an attempt to address both sluggish growth and rising popular discontent. It is in this context, with the structural selectivities that are generated as a result, that gig work has become an increasingly attractive option for both Japanese state actors and firms. As we shall see below, this has in turn combined with prevalent discourses within Japan to produce a concrete official 'pro-gig work discourse' to accompany and promote the move towards gig working.

Discursive Selectivities: Building Economic Imaginaries of Fictitious Freedom

In the case of Japan, we see a clear development and articulation of an official pro-gig work discourse under the current Abe-led government. This has seen workers encouraged to interpret the digital economy as a development which generates a number of important opportunities, particularly by offering more autonomous forms of work, as part of a strategy aimed at constructing positive attitudes amongst those workers - especially female and elderly – moving into gig work. As part of this introduction and expansion of gig work within the Japanese labour market, both the Japanese state and leading firms within the Japanese economy have espoused the type of 'official' pro-gig work discourse introduced in the discussion above, in particular drawing attention to the opportunities for autonomous working provided by the new gig economy. This represents an attempt to reconcile the structural pressures discussed above, with a number of discursive conventions present within the Japanese context. In this sense, we see the complex combination of both structural

and discursive selectivities, which interact to produce the specific efforts at legitimating discourse that accompanies the introduction of gig work within the Japanese context.

Three discursive themes prevalent within Japan's political economy are of particular importance in considering the introduction of gig work: the much-perceived need for Japanese policymakers to find new avenues through which to facilitate productivity gains within Japan's low growth economy; the unfavourable working conditions experienced by both non-regular and regular workers, and the discursive articulation of associated grievances; and the widely remarked need to address a number of obstacles that currently prevent labour market participation, especially for women and young workers. Overcoming these challenges have become particularly crucial for the current Abe government to realise the economic goals of Abenomics, which is a set of comprehensive economic policies that has been presented as a programme to revitalise the Japanese economy. This discourse includes a strong focus by the Japanese government on highlighting the important way in which gig work represents an attempt to address each of these concerns, promoting gig work as a new form of work which guarantees choice and freedom.

In addressing the concerns of non-regular workers, the pro-gig work discourse articulated has sought to highlight the way in which the autonomous nature of gig work would enable the government to address widespread concerns regarding working hours more generally within Japan's labour market. Japan is widely considered to suffer from a problem of long working hours and related deaths and suicide (*karoshi*). As such, a moral panic has emerged across much of Japan, generating pressure upon Japanese firms to seek ways in which to resolve the poor work-life balance of Japanese workers. The introduction of gig working, therefore, represents a (somewhat superficial) means by which to appear to be tackling the problem of excessive working hours, in a way that is without costs (and indeed has a number of benefits) for employing firms. Some instances are detailed below.

The government has sought to show how gig work can create a work-life balance which benefits employees. In doing so, it has sought to emphasise the (fictitious) freedom that gig work makes available to its employees. For instance, in a recent report, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) claims that gig work 'creates opportunities for workers to choose where to work and when to work, increase family and leisure time … and improve work-life balance' and 'prevents workers from leaving their work due to family care and elderly care' (MIC 2015, p. 216, author's translation). MIC also emphasises how gig work will 'reduce workers' stress, and fatigue from commuting, and increase employment opportunities in rural economies' (MIC 2015, p. 216, author's translation). Further, *Lancers*, one of the major gig firms in Japan, claims that

> You can work whenever and wherever you want as long as you have online access. You can work full time every day or use your available time for side business. You choose your own working time in your own way (Lancers 2018, author's translation).

As part of these efforts, *Lancers* promotes gig work by organising seminars for mothers, with titles such as 'Mothers with childcare duties can shine: Work-Life Balance Seminar' (Ishikari city council 2018). This is announced with the claim that, 'we organise a program to match your needs for people who had to leave their work but still want to work or have anxiety in terms of working whilst having childcare duties' (Ishikari city council 2018, author's translation). The state and business elites therefore rearticulate gig work as a new form of work with which workers can achieve a better work-life balance and create opportunities in rural economies.

The discourse that has accompanied the introduction of gig work has also been articulated in terms which have sought to highlight efforts to address a widely held concern that non-regular workers increasingly faced unfair or unwelcome working conditions. Thus, in announcing a series of liberalising labour market reforms, the Abe administration pointed to the way in which these would reduce the division between regular and non-regular workers, achieving an improved work-life balance, including by tackling the convention of long-working hours, and extending the range of work forms available for different individuals at different life stages (Prime Minister's Office 2017, p. 2). Specifically, the Work-style Reform Committee attached to the Prime Minister's Office

advocated more flexible forms of work as 'the current division between regular or non-regular employment will not motivate non-regular workers and individual workers will feel more appropriately evaluated if the unequal division of work is reduced' (Prime Minister's Office 2017, p. 2, author's translation). By articulating the potential opportunity provided by a more flexible work-style and presenting itself as addressing the current problematic division that exists between regular and non-regular workers, the Abe Administration promoted new forms of flexible work such as gig work.

In addition, a further type of discourse has been articulated which seeks to highlight the way in which gig work provides an opportunity to address a widely perceived problem of inaccessibility to the labour market for particular groups within Japanese society, especially women. For instance, the government in its 'Work-style Reform' emphasises how female workers have been prevented from working due to the gendered nature of family caring duties, and also pointing to the way in which long-working hours in the waged sector act as a further barrier to female participation in the labour market (Prime Minister's Office 2016a). Yet, this was also flagged as a form of work that was not sufficiently adopted by business, and therefore, the government. In particular, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry was identified as the means by which the government would promote this new form of work (Prime Minister's Office 2016b, p. 20). Similarly, gig firm, *shufti*, which was established in 2007, and focuses on advertising tasks for housewives, encouraged housewives to take on low-skill tasks by claiming that 'we provide administrative tasks such as writing articles, data input and collecting information' (shufti 2018 author's translation). *Shufu* in Japanese means 'housewife', and by using this term in the company name, *shufti* clearly encourages housewives to consider working as gig workers. In its homepage, therefore, *shufti* claims that 'you can work between your childcare duties or in the evening', or 'depending on your life-style' (shufti 2018, author's translation). In doing so, it presents comments made by housewives with children on how simple tasks are well-suited work for housewives. As such, the government and gig firms have sought, through their articulation of a pro-gig work discourse, to construct an image of themselves that emphasises their efforts to improve inequality within the labour market, promoting new forms of work which are both accessible and rewarded according to merit.

Further, gig firms select particular discourses to advocate gig work not only to female workers but also to a wider range of potential workers. For instance, *CrowdWorks* has promoted gig work for elderly people, in cooperation with TV Tokyo, for whom elderly people are key viewers of their programme (CrowdWorks 2013). By using media, *CrowdWorks* has sought to portray gig work as a means by which the elderly can find work outside of traditional employment relations, becoming the first gig business which specifically focuses on providing gig work for the elderly. Gig firms therefore promote alternative forms of work, problematising traditional work practices of long hours and poor work-life balance, creating a pro-gig environment for people who tend to be excluded from the labour market. At the same time, the integration of elderly workers is also claimed to contribute to the alleviation of the problem of a labour shortage.

Similarly, *Realworld*, a crowdsourcing company, advertises on its home page, 'Typing one letter with your smartphone is work', and showing a series of photos of young people who appear to be NEET (not in education, employment or training), as well as the elderly, and a young person with an injury (Realworld 2018). This seeks to highlight the image of gig work as being capable of providing new, straightforward and convenient job options for people who have been excluded from the traditional job market. *Realworld* proclaims 'Love the unexpected' and 'the world is full of unexpected realities and imagine the unimaginable future'. This, despite gig work only paying an average of between £1 and £3 pounds per hour (CrowdWorks 2015, Lancers Unofficial Site 2018), compared with a minimum wage in Tokyo of £7. As one of the executive officers of *Realworld* commented: 'it is too difficult to increase hourly wages for gig workers since it is a price competition with overseas companies such as Vietnam and China' (Yoshida and Arao 2016). Gig businesses therefore seek to legitimate their model with a particular focus on excluded people, idealising new forms of gig work, even though gig workers' wages remain low.

Firms across Japan have been keen to highlight the benefits of gig work. This includes the claim that young workers and students view gig work as a means by which to achieve greater autonomy over working practices and skill development. In the words of Thomas Pouplin, co-founder of the Japanese gig firm, *ikkai*, 'Students in Japan are getting bored with traditional part-time jobs; they work crazy hours so they can't go out or even study and they do the same thing over and over again, unable to skill up' (quoted in British Chamber of Commerce in Japan 2017). It is in this context that gig work is presented as attractive, as young workers and students, 'want more experience and, after graduation, they want to join a company with some skills they can use' (quoted in British Chamber of Commerce in Japan, 2017). In highlighting the attraction of gig work, gig firms relay the words of gig workers themselves. Gig firm, *Job-Hub*, for instance, presents gig workers themselves highlighting, in their own words, the autonomy that such work offers: 'I can decide which types of work I want to do, I can decide all by myself. I can choose types of work that I am good at rather than those that I am not' (Job-Hub 2018, author's translation). This pro-gig discourse contributes to the creation of an image of gig work as a choice that is an alternative to long working hours.

The attempt to use pro-gig work discourse as part of a broader effort to construct a progressive identity for the government can also be seen in the discourse of the Prime Minister's Office. For instance, the Government's *Plan to Realize the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens* highlights how tele-working (a key element of gig work) creates an opportunity through which to reduce working hours and prevent harassment in the workplace (Prime Minister's Office 2016c, p. 9, 13). Prime Minister Abe himself has commented on the benefits of tele-working on a number of occasions, claiming that work-reform (*hataraki kata kaikaku*) provides important advantages for people with children and the elderly, thereby creating flexible job opportunities (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 25 January 2017). In October 2014, at the Work-style Reform, Prime Minister Abe claimed tele-working and side jobs were 'extremely important to promote' (Sankei News, 24 October 2016), and later claimed employment laws were necessary, 'in order to realise a society where people never retire and pursue lifelong careers' (quoted in Barber and Harding 2018).

In terms of the much-perceived need for Japanese policymakers to find new avenues through which to facilitate productivity gains within Japan's low growth economy, much of the Japanese government's discourse accompanying the introduction of gig work has sought to create an image of gig work as an opportunity to reduce costs and avoid some of the burdensome responsibilities that business might otherwise experience. Gig workers receive no welfare benefits, and employers can also avoid providing legal welfare benefits, whereas it is an expectation that such benefits will be paid to other (non-gig) non-regular workers. This was supported by Japanese business, with *Keidanren*, the national business association, emphasising especially the need to avoid over-regulation of gig work (Keidanren 2017, pp. 2–3). As *Keidanren* comments in its own report:

> it is important to revise the government's guidelines on tele-work in a way that they will not impose strict working conditions upon gig workers. … The current guidelines appear to require the provision of employment relations, even though gig work is based on contractual relations. It is important therefore to clarify the difference between firm-employed tele-work and self-employed tele-work (gig work). We will recommend the amendment of the current guidelines to reflect this difference. (Keidanren 2017, p. 2, author's translation)

In this sense, *Keidanren* sought to ensure that gig work remains on a contract basis, rather than moving towards an employment relationship. In doing so, *Keidanren* clearly articulates the benefits of gig work for the implementation of flexible work as well as the productivity increase for their member firms.

Similar discursive articulations have also been performed by key gig firms. For instance, the major gig firms, *Lancers* and *CrowdWorks*, have each emphasised the ability of gig work to reduce staff costs, especially those associated with providing office space, equipment, workers' benefits or insurance, and thereby contribute to growth (MIC 2016, p. 311). The pursuit of reduced staff costs is one of the most important motives driving the increase in gig work amongst hiring firms, with 36.3 per cent of potential employers viewing reduced costs as a reason for gig work (MIC 2015, p. 224).

This was a process that was also welcomed by the Japanese government, witnessing for instance both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) recognising *CrowdWorks* and *Lancers* for their contribution to the economy. This formed part of a wider award system introduced to enable the government and Japan Tele Work Association, to reward gig businesses for contributing to the promotion of new forms of flexible work which are not constrained by location or conventions regarding the timing of the working week (Japan Telework Association 2018).

In sum, Japanese policymakers and firms have consistently articulated a pro-gig work discourse, heralding the opportunities gig work creates for current non-regular workers, women, young and elderly workers, seeking to create an image of gig work as flexible, autonomous, and rewarded appropriately depending on individual tasks. Discursive selectivities have played a crucial role in terms of both framing the types of discourse that have accompanied the introduction of gig work, and the specific type of gig work itself that has been introduced in the case of Japan.

Technological Selectivities

Technological selectivity, according to Sum and Jessop, includes assemblages of knowledge, disciplinary and governmental rationalities, and the mechanisms of interventions to transform and govern social relations (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 218). Technologies therefore work as processes which selectively define what and how objects are created, and the subject positions that tend to emerge across particular societies. Technologies can shape our choices and have capacities to discipline and control our acts (Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 216–219). In more detail, technological selectivity refers to strategic tools, social technologies, toolkits, mechanisms, and logics that selectively limit our conduct, choice, thoughts, possibilities, opposition, and the scope for change and alternatives (2013, pp. 216–17).

We therefore need to pay attention to how workers' choices and opportunities have been shaped, limited, or controlled in Japan from the point of technological selectivity. As we have seen, workers in Japan have experienced a process of flexibilisation of employment relations since the late 1980s onwards. In seeking to advance this process through the more recent promotion of gig work, the Japanese government has sought to encourage the development of technologies that represent a greater degree of workplace control. As this section shows, therefore, the Japanese government has sought to advance the dissemination of technologies that facilitate gig work, which has in turn enabled firms to employ technologies that heighten the degree of economic competition and work surveillance.

As we have seen, in seeking to establish and promote gig work, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Wealth (MHLW) has undertaken a number of initiatives designed to make gig work both more accessible and attractive. This includes initiatives such as the 'Home Workers Web', which provides guidelines for gig workers so that they can make the most of their work practices, and organises seminars which advertise the benefits of autonomous working that gig work can provide (MHLW 2018, author's translation).[3]

Those undertaking gig work are subject to a number of important technological pressures which act to heighten the degree of (indirect) control imposed by the process of competition and the way in which this governs their working practices. This sees a highly visible process of ranking on a job-by-job basis, whereby gig workers are routinely evaluated and then easily compared with their peers through the platforms within which they are hired. Thus, both *Lancers* and *CrowdWorks* have an evaluation system in which employers give evaluation scores to gig workers, enabling employers to identify workers on the basis of their evaluation scores. In the case of *Lancers* this includes a certifying system for those with a record of higher evaluations and a monthly ranking of gig workers (Lancers 2017). In the case of *CrowdWorks*, workers' portfolio pages include similarly-skilled gig workers, enabling employers to surf through workers' pages in order to compare those with similar skill sets, thereby creating heightened competition.

Platforms such as *CrowdWorks* rank gig workers who are looking to be hired, according to a range of ratings received on previous jobs, including skill, quality, communication and cooperativeness. Also visible to those seeking to hire gig workers is the number of 'thanks' that they received from previous jobs, the number of gigs that they have been hired for, and the comments that they have received in the past. In addition, *CrowdWorks* creates a category of 'pro workers', who have to meet a number of criteria: to have 90% of job completion rate over the last year; to have an average evaluation score over 4.8 out of 5; for monthly remuneration needs to be within the top 200; to be recruited for tasks which are not made available on the platform by clients more than 5 times over the last year; for 'communication' skills to be over 4.8 out of 5; and for their profile and self-promotion need to be publicly available. In addition, gig workers are subjected to a strict deadline system, in which an online time-card system is used by gig businesses to log workers' status. This allows employers to check who is working and available, and on what projects, and requires gig workers to make visible the times that they are offline and online, thereby creating considerable pressure to be continuously available (Rengo 2016, p. 8). This therefore represents a highly sophisticated system of monitoring and person-to-person comparison that significantly increases the pressure upon gig workers to compete in order that they are able to be re-hired.

Conclusion

Advocates of gig work – both firms and the government – claim that it provides opportunities for workers to exercise greater autonomy, enabling those such as women and the elderly who would otherwise be excluded from the labour market to find employment. They do so by promoting an official discourse built upon advocating what this paper terms, 'fictitious freedom' (Klein 2017). This seeks to portray gig work as a new form of work able to provide increased autonomy and fairness in the digital age. By adopting a cultural political economy approach, this paper analyses the introduction and development of the gig economy, and the introduction of gig work, in the case of Japan. This has highlighted the structural, discursive and technological selectivities that have combined in the case of Japan to generate efforts to portray gig work as a means by which to address a number of socio-economic concerns that have become prevalent within the Japanese national public debate. Through an examination of the concrete-specific case of Japan, the paper goes beyond the general critiques of gig work which have begun to prevail within the existing literature, and identifies the broader structural, discursive and technological selectivities that have combined to generate specific outcomes in the case of Japan. In doing so, moreover, it highlights the types of pressures and selectivities that we might observe, or which might take on modified or nationally-mediated forms, in other (national) socio-economic contexts; all of which must be the subject for further research. This includes, especially, the drive for economic growth, the importance of a flexible labour supply, and social concerns around the ageing society, female labour market participation, and the new technologies of competition within the labour market. Indeed, whilst the paper focuses on the case of Japan, as these are widely experienced challenges we are likely to witness similar developments across the advanced industrial democracies.

The adoption of an official 'pro-gig work' discourse within the Japanese context has been generated by pressures placed upon both state managers and firms, to identify new working practices that will contribute to the efforts to raise productivity and to address problems associated with the exclusion of women and elderly from the labour market, long working hours, and the difficulties faced by non-regular workers. The move to present gig work as an opportunity for workers to achieve greater autonomy in their working lives can be understood in terms of these pressures. In doing so, moreover, we have seen how gig work develops particular technologies that heighten the degree of economic control imposed upon workers through a process of competition and surveillance that is central to the process of gig work recruitment through online platforms. Gig work, narrated through a discourse of autonomy, and deployed through a technology of competition and surveillance, therefore presents an opportunity to both the state and to firms to meet the competing pressures which they

face in contemporary capitalism. In adopting a cultural political economy approach through which to explore these developments, moreover, the paper has been able to highlight the interconnected nature of the pressures underpinning these changes. Finally, in doing so, the 'fictitious' nature of the 'fictitious freedom' discourse also contains the potential to generate new forms of social tension, opposition and strain, which should therefore also form the subject of future empirical enquiry.

Notes

1. See the full statement here: https://www.ipse.co.uk/our/news-listing/statutory-definition-gig-economy-confusion.html
2. Although it should be noted that one of the key reasons that the Taylor Review was initiated was due to a self-declared attempt by the Conservative Government to address any perceived problems with contemporary working practices, especially in response to concerns about zero-hour contracts and other forms of insecure employment. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for highlighting this.
3. http://homeworkers.mhlw.go.jp

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