

Stepping stone or dead end? The ambiguities of platform-mediated domestic work under conditions of austerity urbanism

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Introduction

How to do more with less? This is, essentially, austerity's onerous question. Its default answer, in turn, has been to defer, download, and outsource the burden of being overtasked and cash-strapped. As Peck notes, "austerity is ultimately concerned with offloading costs, displacing responsibility; it is about making *others* pay the price of fiscal retrenchment" (2012: 632, emphasis on original). These "others" are, invariably, marginalized communities of color and the low-income urban neighborhoods they inhabit, where the buck can no longer be passed and long-accumulating costs have created debts that can barely be serviced. Cities, to quote Peck again, are "where austerity bites" as it "operates on, and targets anew, an already neoliberalized institutional landscape" but does so in a highly uneven manner (ibid.: 29, 31). What Marxist-feminist scholars have referred to as the "crisis of social reproduction" or, more narrowly defined, the "crisis of care", is thus experienced differently depending on what urban household one belongs to (Fraser 2016; Hester 2018). In the face of enduring cuts to publicly provisioned social reproductive services and a "post-Fordist sexual contract" that expects women to excel both as mothers and as entrepreneurial professionals (Adkins 2016), White middle-class households have increasingly turned to the market to outsource their reproductive tasks (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010). As formal and informal markets for domestic work expand, they not only generate income opportunities for working class minority and migrant households but also intensify their social reproductive challenges (ibid.). Moreover, it has been extensively documented how such feminized and racialized reproductive labor continues to be highly precarious, un(der)-regulated, and subject to exploitation by employers and labor market intermediaries alike (e.g. Glenn 1992; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; McGrath and DeFilippis 2009). It is within this historical and socio-economic setting that this chapter considers the market entrance of a new type of "intermediary": the on-demand domestic work platform.

Digital platforms amplify existing power dynamics and inequalities while also introducing technologies and techniques that produce qualitatively new arrangements, conditions, and experiences of work. Whereas I have elsewhere focused on the historically gendered and racialized techniques that render platform-mediated domestic work invisible and devalued (Van Doorn 2017), here I examine how formally self-employed domestic

workers negotiate the engineering of their visibility, agency, and income opportunities on two home cleaning platforms – Handy and Helping. As Ticona and Mateescu have shown with respect to the care industry, platforms use metrics such as ratings and reviews in combination with profiles and background checks to construct individualized forms of visibility that serve to market care workers to potential clients, “displaying specific qualities of workers in standardized and comparable ways” (2018: 11). While these techniques are intended to foster trust on the clients’ side, the dynamically hierarchical display of “an abundant and always-available pool of workers” presents a novel market interface that may nevertheless exacerbate the deeply unequal power relations that have historically marked domestic work (ibid.; see also Hunt and Machingura 2016). Meanwhile, platform companies are less compelled to ensure the institutional/legal visibility of their “care professionals” as formally employed workers, to the extent that most companies identify as labor market intermediaries that match supply and demand rather than as employers or employment agencies. Even as they provide clients and workers with tools for documenting worked hours, processing payments, and/or calculating taxes, and despite framing the formalization of a largely informal sector as one of their main value propositions to both clients and policymakers, platforms managing care and other domestic work strategically refrain from enforcing the norms and requirements of formal employment (Ticona and Mateescu 2018) – an institution they dissolve into a nexus of private contracts and user agreements (Tomassetti 2016).

Instead, I argue that domestic work platforms engage in “selective formalization”, which points to a set of business practices that formalize some aspects of the gig while perpetuating and sometimes aggravating certain conditions of informality that have long characterized domestic labor. These practices structurally benefit the platform and its clients, while disempowering workers who are expected to carry all the (administrative, fiscal, and legal) burdens of a formal labor relation yet yield few of its benefits. Previous studies have already argued that the boundary between formal and informal employment is not as sharp or straightforward as it may initially seem and that labor platforms exploit this ambiguous terrain by technical and legal means (Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Fudge and Hobden 2018; Moore 2018; Flanagan 2018). For example, Moore notes that the characteristics of informal, non-standard work are prevalent in large parts of the gig economy, where work is largely under-regulated, frequently unprotected, “does not guarantee minimum wage”, “does not offer income security”, “runs a high risk of discrimination”, and offers no occupational health standards or career-enhancing educational prospects (2018: vi; see also Adamson and Roper 2019). In this precarious environment, gig workers run a higher risk of becoming subjected to

psychosocial violence that can take the form of “isolating people, manipulating reputations, withholding information, assigning tasks that do not match capabilities and assigning impossible goals and deadlines” (ibid: 2) – all of which are endemic practices on domestic work platforms. Likewise, in her historical analysis of domestic labor market intermediaries in Australia, Flanagan concludes that digital platforms have instigated a “paradigm shift” in worker control “from one of *dyadic* to *structural* domination” (2018: 15, emphasis in original). Whereas domestic workers have historically worked under informal conditions of dyadic domination, having to obey an individual employer, today’s domestic labor platforms enforce a semi-formalized regime of structural domination where workers can leave any household when they please while remaining captured by a platform-engineered “market system” that “provides the primary mechanism for worker discipline” by setting opaque and non-contestable “rules of the game” (ibid.). Echoing the previously mentioned authors, Flanagan argues that such discipline is achieved primarily through platforms’ extensive and often punitive surveillance capacities as well as their use of unilateral ranking and rating systems that operate “as a kind of ‘memory’ that is held by the entire market” rather than by individual employers (ibid.: 16).

What this study adds to the budding literature on gig work, and specifically to the still understudied topic of platform-mediated domestic labor (Ticona and Mateescu 2018), is a cross-national comparative analysis of how nominally self-employed cleaners in New York City and Berlin negotiate these conditions of structural domination and selectively imposed informality. It attends to how these cleaners attempt to exploit their ambiguous relation with the platforms they operate on by experimenting with work routines that incorporate more and less formal income opportunities. Structural domination should thus not be understood as a totalizing arrangement but rather as a pressured/pressurized space that leaves just enough wiggle room for people to improvise changes and switch gears – if not directions and destinations. What matters here is how “structural domination” – as an abstract category with descriptive and evaluative currency insofar as it is derived from concrete impediments and inequalities – is articulated on particular platforms operating in specific urban labor markets populated by low-wage workers whose dependency on and approach to platform labor vary considerably. In a similar vein, while neoliberalism and austerity are two concepts for making sense of how capital continues to dominate life and labor, they only gain their explanative power and shape by continuing to abstract general tendencies and patterns from the varieties of “actually existing” neoliberalization (Brenner 2002). As Baines and Cunningham write in their introduction to this volume, austerity is at once “a global phenomenon with continuities

across national contexts” and a “lived, local experience”. While I will briefly address some examples of austerity politics/policies across national and urban contexts, this chapter is primarily concerned with how the logics of austerity are scaled down to the level of everyday work life, where they become expressed in the activities and attitudes of platforms and gig workers alike. One reason why austerity policies have seen such a widespread – if uneven – uptake across nations and regions is because they do not only scaffold a political and socio-economic project of state reform but also have a strong moral dimension (Muehlebach 2016). In the words of Baines and Cunningham, austerity persuades as “an ideological frame that encourages sacrifice and lowered expectations from working people and average citizens with the promise of improvements at some undefined point in the future.” In certain ways, as I will show, platform labor satisfies austerity’s moral imperative to a tee: it is a form of sacrificial labor that pulls itself up by its own bootstraps in the hope that the hard work will pay off eventually, either by turning the gig into a sustainable occupation or by buying enough time to transition into something better. Yet we will also see that this is not all platform labor does, is, or means. Sometimes it enters people’s life as a gift and makes them feel like they won the lottery (cf. Ravenelle 2019).

The remainder of this chapter is structured into three sections. The next section situates Handy and Helping in the socio-economic context of two of their main markets, respectively New York City and Berlin, which both have been at the vanguard of “austerity urbanism” (Peck 2012). It also provides a brief overview of the research design. Sections 2a-c then offer an ethnographic account that relays the experiences of this chapter’s four main protagonists: Kenny and Tish, two African American Handy Pros; Alexis and Kostas, two Greek Helping cleaners. The third section reflects on these experiences and offers some concluding remarks.

Situating the platforms

Handy in New York City

While New York had made a name for itself as “a beacon for social policy reform” (Peck and Theodore 2015: 45) during the Progressive Era and continued to lead the way in the period between Roosevelt’s New Deal and Johnson’s Great Society, the city’s extensive welfare infrastructure became the target of politicians and bankers in 1975, when a major fiscal crisis nearly resulted in municipal bankruptcy (Phillips-Fein 2017). The far-reaching austerity measures imposed by the financial sector to teach public officials a lesson in fiscal

responsibility radically remade New York City, which since then has lead the way with respect to neoliberal welfare reform. A year before Clinton’s 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, for example, Giuliani’s Work Experience Program had already forced unemployed New Yorkers off the city’s welfare rolls and into poorly remunerated public sector jobs (Krinsky 2007). By that time, the city’s income and wealth inequality had ballooned and has since only continued to grow, resulting in a polarized environment where a massive low-wage service sector caters to a class of highly paid white collar professionals (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). This sector is sustained by the precarious labor of predominantly African American and Latinx workers whose low wages are frequently subsidized by food stamps and other forms of public “work support” that bolster low-road labor practices (Dickinson 2016). Domestic services constitute a large and growing industry within the city’s broader low-wage sector, composed of formal and informal markets where immigrants and women of color seek work that is typically isolated and “only partly covered by core employment and labor laws” on Federal and New York State levels (McGrath and DeFilippis 2009: 74). While exclusion from such laws was redressed when the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed the State legislature in 2010, after a six-year grassroots campaign (NDWA 2012), its enforceability remains a serious issue and (putatively) self-employed workers are exempt.

Such exemption from statutory labor laws is likely to be the main reason why Handy classified its “Pros” – as the company calls its cleaners and handymen – as independent contractors when it entered the NYC market in 2012, and why it continues to lobby the State legislature to pass a bill that would legally cement this status (Pinto et al. 2019). Now operating in over 450 locations in the US as well as some cities in Canada and the UK,¹ Handy markets its wide range of home services as affordable and reliable to potential customers while highlighting “great pay”, a “flexible schedule”, and “easy payments” as reasons to become a Pro.² Noting that it “is not an employer, but simply connects independent service professionals with customers,” it charges a “trust and support fee” for this matching service but also takes a significant cut (20-50%, depending on the source consulted)³ from each customer payment. Meanwhile, the payment NYC Pros receive is structured into four rolling tiers – \$15, \$17, \$20, and \$22 – that each come with a specific target regarding the number of jobs completed and average customer rating over a 28-day period. Whereas rolling tiers reset after 28 days, Handy also utilizes “weekly tiers” that come with their own performance benchmarks.⁴ All Pros have a basic profile showing their average rating, jobs completed, reviews, and an optional photo, but they can also purchase a Premium account for

\$8 per week that allows them to add biographical information and a Premium badge – among other privileges.⁵ Finally, the company deploys an elaborate system of disciplinary fees that, as I have written elsewhere, “are easy to incur, can be hard to avoid, and seriously destabilize the income streams [...] cleaners are trying to establish and maintain” (Van Doorn 2018).⁶

Between February and September 2018, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with Handy cleaners in NYC.⁷ Participant recruitment was challenging due to the isolated and hidden nature of domestic cleaning and happened mostly online (on Craigslist, Facebook, and LinkedIn), where possible augmented through snowball sampling. Interviews took place in public places and lasted between approximately 50 and 150 minutes. The participant sample consisted mostly of women (15) and African Americans (15), with African American women making up the largest contingent (10) followed by African American men (5). The sample further included two White men, two White women, two Latina women, and an Asian American woman. Participants were not consistently asked to disclose their age but most participants were in their 20s and 30s.

Helpling in Berlin

Less than a decade after its unification – and little over two decades after New York’s fiscal crisis, Berlin’s speculative real estate boom of the first half of the 1990s collapsed, city debts quickly rose, “the once subsidized industries on both sides of the Wall disintegrated, and the new knowledge sectors failed to replace them” (Beveridge and Naumann 2013: 189). While the impacts of this financial and economic downturn were most immediately felt in East Berlin, soon the entire city suffered from massive unemployment and a shrinking economic base (Bernt et al. 2013). By the turn of the century, the downturn had become a full-fledged crisis that was greatly exacerbated by the Berlin Senate, which had allowed a large public banking consortium to “engage in dubious real estate speculations and almost go bankrupt in 2001” (ibid.: 127). In what came to be known as the “Berlin banking scandal”, the Senate decided to bail out the consortium and thereby created an “extreme budgetary emergency” that “permanently changed the framework of Berlin’s urban politics”, by initiating as well as legitimizing enduring austerity measures and privatizations aimed at reducing the city’s enormous deficits (ibid.: 16). It was in this austere urban environment that the far-reaching Federal “Hartz reforms” were rolled out between January 2003 and January 2005, aiming to reduce unemployment and welfare dependency. While these workfare reforms did reduce national unemployment rates, they also increased income inequality and job insecurity by deregulating temporary and non-standard work arrangements – generating high volumes of

publicly subsidized low-wage jobs – while leaving the core labor market untouched (Chih-Mei 2018). Although Berlin’s income and wealth inequalities are benign compared to New York, the city thus also experienced an intensification of labor market dualization that has been compounded by rapid gentrification and exploding rents (Bernt et al. 2013).

Having reinvented itself as Europe’s rising tech and creative industries hub, Berlin annually attracts (tens of) thousands of foreign young professionals.⁸ When failing to land a job in their field, these hopefuls either return home or join ranks with other labor migrants and refugees whose “outsider” status and lack of German language skills drastically reduce their income opportunities and push them into precarious, often informal occupations such as home cleaning. As in the US, domestic work in Germany is characterized by informality and is mainly performed by immigrant women – in this case predominantly from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America (Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck 2010; Trebilcock 2018). While, officially, domestic workers are included in most of the nation’s labor laws (one notable exception being occupational health and safety regulation) and Germany ratified the ILO’s Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention in 2013, there are “inconsistencies and paradoxes between the *official welfare state policy* on domestic work and the *unofficial reality* of a feminized work sector which lacks rules on workers’ and clients’ protection” (Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck 2010: 420, emphasis in original). Similar to the situation in New York, the lack of regulatory oversight and enforcement combined with the rise of self-employment in this sector fuels these inconsistencies (ibid.).

Helping, founded in Berlin in 2014, has thrived under these conditions and publicly promotes its platform as an antidote to Germany’s large “black market” in domestic services (Höhne 2017), while accelerating the self-employment trend by classifying its cleaners as independent contractors. Active in over 200 cities in 10 countries across three continents, Helping’s operations and marketing approach vary (slightly) per country. In Germany, the company promotes its “reliable customer service”, “transparent prices”, “detailed [cleaner] profiles”, “liability insured cleaners”, and its award-winning platform.⁹ To potential cleaners, it highlights “complete flexibility” with respect to work scheduling, the presence of a “personal point of contact”, and the ability to “determine your own price”.¹⁰ Whereas Helping started out with a set hourly wage (11 euros in its Berlin market), it switched to cleaner-determined rates in 2018 – likely to avoid potential misclassification lawsuits. Although its commissions vary per market and type of service, the company takes between 25 and 33% from the amount a Berlin-based customer pays for a cleaning. The platform encourages cleaners to add personal information to their profile, which otherwise includes

one's hourly rate, average rating, reviews, number of jobs completed, and one's "verification level" (contingent on the submission of a business license and proof of a police check). Customers can either browse profiles and book a cleaner directly, or let Helpling make the match. In the latter case, Helpling selects cleaners who meet the customer's price range and sends out the offer.¹¹ While offers could previously be claimed only on a first-come-first-served basis, Helpling recently added "Countdown Offers" that allow customers select a "winner" from a pool of competing cleaners. To reduce cancellations and increase cleaners' "reliability", the platform used to deploy a Performance Score impacting a cleaner's income opportunities, but this score has been discontinued and since May 2019 Helpling – mimicking Handy – switched to a disciplinary fee system for cleaners and customers.

In the period between October 2018 and June 2019, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Berlin-based Helpling cleaners. Participant recruitment again happened mostly on Craigslist, Facebook, and LinkedIn, but snowball sampling played a bigger role in Berlin. Interviews took place in public places and lasted between approximately 60 and 140 minutes. Save for one German cleaner, the participant sample consists solely of migrants who came to Berlin either to pursue education, to seek work or asylum, or for an extended (working) holiday. The sample particularly reflects the large population of Chileans and Argentineans, mostly in their early 20s, who reside in the city on a one-year working holiday visa and sign each other up for Helpling (n = 10). Other than this group, cleaners came from various southern/eastern European countries, Brazil, India, Syria, South Africa, and Nigeria. Men (13) slightly outnumbered women (12) in the sample, which deviates from the gender distribution within Germany's overall domestic worker population but reflects how digital platforms have made cleaning work more palatable to migrant men.

A much needed resource

Kenny says he can defend Handy all day long if he has to. The way he sees things, "you gotta think on Handy's end" because they are a smart company that allows you to make good money as long as you work hard and use your smarts. Handy is a "take it or leave it kind of business" and he's more than willing to take it, because you get what you put in – at least most of the time – and over the last two years he's been putting in a lot. Kenny is an African American man in his mid-forties who grew up in Brooklyn but now lives in a remote part of Queens that is still affordable, which means that he has to travel about 90 minutes to get to Manhattan, where most of his clients live. It's a lot of travel time each day, for which he is not compensated, yet he doesn't really mind because the trains are relatively cheap as long as you

stay within the five boroughs. Lately, however, he's been getting more offers in Long Island due to his location and because he once accepted a job there without knowing it was Long Island, given that Handy doesn't provide the exact address before an offer is accepted. Although the Long Island Rail Road is more expensive and he definitely doesn't want more clients there, he still returns to that one address every other week because the client and her kids make him feel like part of the family. This is typical for Kenny, who will go out of his way for you as long as he is appreciated as a professional and treated well. He is good at his job, as can be gleaned from the 4.8 rating and glowing reviews on his profile, which he is quick to refer to when discussing his work. Cleaning has been something he's enjoyed since he was a kid but until a few years ago he never imagined himself able to make a living doing this work. Handy entered his life at an opportune moment and helped him get back on his feet, something for which he remains deeply grateful. About three years ago, as he was studying to get his Associate degree in healthcare administration and working a customer service job, he "got into trouble" at home and his girlfriend at the time put him out. Suddenly homeless, he ended up dropping out of school, losing his job and checking into a shelter – an option he preferred over "being a burden" to one of his friends. There he was told that he needed to be working if he wanted to stay in the shelter and get overnight passes or support with his housing search, which is when he remembered his ex-girlfriend – and mother of three of his seven kids – telling him about Handy. The problem was that, she had informed him, they "don't take felons" and Kenny had spent 18 months in prison for a felony conviction in the past. This is why he first turned to Uber Eats and Postmates as a quick way to make money for the shelter contribution and child support, doing food delivery on foot for about two weeks until people at the shelter told him they didn't consider app-based food delivery a "real job" because it had no set hours. At the end of his rope, he decided to try his luck with Handy and to his surprise the company took him on board.

The "onboarding" process, as gig companies call it in order to avoid looking like an employer that hires its workers, was quick and smooth: "You don't meet nobody at Handy", Kenny says, and he was pleasantly surprised that he only had to answer five easy questions about cleaning situations. "Once you pass the test then they tell you to download the app and then they'll be like 'Hey take some jobs because we gonna need some money from you'." While he, for unknown reasons, was not charged the usual background check fee, Handy did send him a starter kit with cleaning supplies for which they took \$50 out of his first paycheck. When asked if he thinks the company should have given him these supplies, Kenny gives me a smile communicating amused incredulity and brings up his independent contractor status as

if this should nip the discussion in the bud: *of course* he's responsible for these costs, that's just how things work. Moreover, he thinks it's fine "because they give you work. Like, when you first look at the app and then they say you're good, they show you work! You can get to work, get paid and get money in your pocket." For Kenny, whose criminal record has been an obstacle in his search for jobs, the most important thing is easy access to an income source and Handy suddenly provided him with a virtually constant stream of relatively well-paying cleaning gigs. While he started at \$15 an hour, he quickly managed to work himself up to the \$20 tier and is keen on staying there. Proud of always going "above and beyond" and ever the entrepreneur, he not only makes sure his cleanings are perfect but also carefully considers how he presents himself to new clients, having come up with a "mission statement" – because "most businesses have one" – which he gladly recites:

Hey, how are you doing. I'm [Kenny]. Thank you for using Handy. As you know we are independent contractors and I like to promote myself. They have a piece in the app called 'My Team' and if you like the service I provide for you today, if you can add me to your team, I'd greatly appreciate it. And my cleaning today, I will clean your home like it were my own. I may move some things in my cleaning to get up under there to make sure I cleaned everything. [...] And my motto is if you are early, you are on time and when you are on time you are late.

Adding the statement to his routine has been a boon, landing him a good number of regular clients so that he could build a steadier work schedule and reduce his travel time to unknown addresses for new or one-off clients. For the most part, then, Kenny feels like he's got it made: "It's the best thing that's ever happened to me [...] I mean you've got your freedom, you do what you do, you meet new people, I'm out here talking to you, having lunch." Compared to his previous jobs, and with the prison experience still on his mind, Handy offers him an unprecedented sense of freedom and control over his own schedule. When a cleaning falls through he can even go home early and "indulge" in some weed, without having to worry about getting fired over a urine test – something he always had to be vigilant about during his days as a customer service representative. Ultimately, "it's the cash and the flexibility" that make this platform such a great opportunity for him, one that he has been informing people in his community about.

For a while, Tish also thought that she had it made. Handy facilitated an income stream the likes of which she had never experienced during her previous cleaning work.

Whereas Kenny started doing cleaning at a later age after having to find work so he could contribute to his shelter costs, Tish got her first cleaning job at the age of 18 through a workforce re-entry program called Back to Work, which gained a reputation for funneling people into precarious jobs under the threat of benefits sanctions (Schwarzfeld 2008). At 17, Tish – who is African American and recently turned 27 – had already worked a summer job through a youth employment program, after her father was incarcerated, and when that job ended she turned to Back to Work because she needed the money and didn't want to lose her welfare benefits. Although she didn't want to do cleaning at first, she decided to give the job a try and it ended up growing on her. The first company she worked for paid \$9 an hour but quickly went out of business, after which she found another cleaning job via Craigslist – off the books for \$10 an hour. However, the woman she worked for ended up scamming her out of nearly \$700 in unpaid wages, which forced her to quit and again look for another job. She was by that time also in school to get an Associate degree in business management and tried to find a position that better matched her skills but to no avail. The pressures of mounting bills then quickly pushed her toward another cleaning company, which paid \$11 on the books and promoted her to supervision after some months. Yet while she was “climbing up the pay ladder little by little”, her salary didn't match the enormous amount of work she was now responsible for and when they repeatedly refused to give her a raise she grew increasingly impatient. It was around this time that she saw a street table promoting Handy to potential cleaners, but it eventually took her another year of financial struggles to finally quit her job and apply, in 2013.

Once she did, she loved the “easy approval” process, as she only had to attend a group orientation session (still a feature of Handy's “onboarding” routine back then) where they checked if you know how to clean, which she obviously did, and handed everyone a big blue bag containing a vacuum cleaner and other supplies – for which they subtracted \$150 from your first paycheck. Like Kenny, Tish was fine with this back then: “I mean, Handy was saying ‘oh, we're hiring cleaners for \$15 an hour’ and I'm like ‘oh my god that's the most I've ever made!’.” As she was used to doing three to four cleanings per day, she claimed a lot of offers during her first months – as many as she could – and quickly moved from the \$15 tier to \$17 and then even to \$22 for a while, raking in a lot of money in a “fully legit” way. In those early days she would even get paid daily, which made her “feel like a celebrity, like I would just wake up and ‘am I dreaming?’.” Pulling 50-hour work weeks was exhausting, especially with all the travelling she now needed to do, but instead of taking the train she was getting cabs everywhere because she felt that she could afford it. In hindsight, Tish believes

that she wasted too much money on transportation and shopping when she should have saved up, but at that time she let things get to her head. The experience of financial independence was intoxicating, and Handy stimulated her high: to retain her top tier hourly rate, which had become her new norm, she needed to keep up her ratings and monthly job target. According to Kenny, “you’d have to kill yourself” to do over 50 jobs in a 28-day period, but Tish got more done and was killing it that first year.

When I met Alexis, a 22-year-old man from a big city in Greece, he had just passed his first year with Helping in Berlin. Back home he had studied Pedagogy for two years before quitting the program and coming to Berlin, because it wasn’t the direction he wanted to go in and job prospects in Greece were looking dismal (cf. Pratsinakis et al. 2017). He used to work in a restaurant for 2,5 euros an hour and some of his friends are still stuck in similar situations despite having degrees. He needed an escape and a new goal so he moved to Berlin to study Fine Arts, for which he has been preparing himself by taking language courses and assembling his portfolio. As the move was rather impulsive, he arrived in the city without a place to stay and or money saved up, but through his social (media) network he managed to jump from couch to couch during the first three months. Still, he knew he had to find a job right away and, ironically, ended up working in another Greek restaurant that sweated him for eight hours a day, five days a week. Life was turning out to be a lot tougher than he had expected, especially because – once he found his own room in a shared apartment – Berlin’s rents were much higher than he was used to. Next to his rent, German language courses and art supplies also set him back a few hundred euros per month, even if he could hardly dedicate time to art or learning because he was always exhausted after working in that kitchen. When a friend recommended Helping to him, Alexis was hesitant at first because cleaning homes had never been something he had considered doing, but then he reassessed his situation:

I was like okay, I need to have a job that gives me some money. As I don’t speak German and I don’t have any kind of degree that can give me a better job, I will do either Foodora [food delivery platform] or waiter or cleaning houses. And cleaning houses was the best option.

It was the best option because, unlike waiting tables, he could set his own schedule and he does not like biking. Next to the relatively higher pay, temporal autonomy and a lack of personal supervision are two of the most attractive aspects of platform labor for low-wage workers. Alexis likes being able to listen to his own music while cleaning and, if the client is not home, to leave a little earlier than scheduled when the job is done – something that just

wasn't possible at the restaurant. Another freedom he used to enjoy was "trying out" new clients and then cancelling the next appointments when he didn't like them. Once he was onboarded – again an easy, impersonal process involving a phone call and a background check – he received so many offers that it didn't really seem to matter; there were always others. Although he received a warning email once, this kind of behavior didn't have serious repercussions until Helpling introduced the Performance Score, penalizing cancellations, yet by that time he had already assembled his roster of regular clients. As he recalls, it took him "like seven months of, like, cancelling and rescheduling and trying to find people who are okay to work with". It was a "stressy" period during which he worked a lot and was finally starting to make what in the beginning seemed like amazing money compared to Greek salaries. Yet when he found out that the 11 euros per hour Helpling had set as his default rate was not that much in Berlin and decided to raise his rate to 12,50, his offers diminished and he had to switch back to his old rate. This is why Alexis doesn't see much value in the ostensible "freedom" to set your own rates: "when somebody can hire somebody for 11 euros why would they have somebody for 14?" If the platform doesn't set the rates, the market will – as long as the labor is sufficiently commoditized.

Trouble brewing

But can we really separate platform discipline and market discipline? It is important to reiterate here that platforms actively engineer their multi-sided markets and although Helpling does not deploy a tiered wage system for its cleaners, like Handy, it still enforces wage discipline. It does so by engineering an evaluative infrastructure generating what could be called a "customer public sphere", in which clients are *collectively* empowered to compare cleaners' profiles based on ratings, reviews, and prices, in order to establish the best value for their money (cf. Kornberger et al. 2017; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). I emphasize "collectively" here because this arrangement does not just serve the individual client but empowers all members of the "customer class" – i.e. the structurally advantaged side of Helpling's marketplace – insofar as it aggregates pertinent market information that can be consulted and contributed to by everyone belonging to this class (cf. Flanagan 2018). Moreover, this information is also available to cleaners themselves, prompting vigilance and making price-based competition much more prevalent on Helpling than in informal home cleaning markets whose distributed interfaces haven't been centrally configured in favor of the demand side (Bratton 2016). Just ask Kostas, a Greek 28-year-old man who came to Berlin two years ago for an extended holiday after finishing his degree in interior architecture

and has – often reluctantly – stuck around after getting involved with another Greek man who had rooted in the city. Like Alexis and many other young migrants in Berlin, he soon found out that the city’s living costs are high while the chances of finding decent work are slim when you don’t speak German. Once again, Helpling offered the easiest access to money and because his financial situation was getting dire he decided to sign up, although he continues to resent that the company charges such a high commission. He also feels frustrated by certain changes to the platform since he’s been active, particularly when cleaners began to be able to set their own rates:

After a year, you could change your prices, you could ask for more money. Everything starts being really, really competitive you know, between the cleaners. When I started the job I made 11 euros [per hour], but if you are new in the job you don’t know how much cleaners charged before. Even if you [charge] 9 euros it’s okay because you don’t know how the market works in Berlin. So you can ask for less money. But if I am working in the company for more than a year and I have really good reviews...

With a 4,8 rating and over 400 completed cleanings, Kostas feels like he should be able to charge more than newcomers. But because Helpling allows cleaners to set their hourly rate (after commission) as low as 7,5 euros, he fears a race to the bottom in which more cleaners will feel compelled to decrease their rates in order to stay competitive in an environment where high ratings and good reviews are the norm rather than the exception.¹² In this sense, the “evaluative inflation” on the platform forces cleaners to compete on price instead of quality, in a market for labor that may be less fungible than food delivery but is nonetheless routinely subjected to commoditization. Kostas believes Helpling should raise its wage floor and do more to discourage new cleaners from charging less than 11 euros – the set rate he started out with. Not only have the costs of living gone up, he argues, but you also have to take into account that you have to pay for your own insurances as a self-employed cleaner, which is something many cleaners don’t consider and Helpling doesn’t sufficiently bring to people’s attention. When I note that the platform at least offers price recommendations based on “cleaners with similar profiles”, he counters that these recommendations are exactly the problem because they show how low a lot of people are willing to go. In other words, rather than operating purely in a prescriptive manner, this device is at once *descriptive* of segmented price-setting behavior and *performative* insofar as it influences this very behavior: if you set

your rate below the recommended margins you may get more work (Espeland and Sauder 2007).

Besides the price-setting system, Kostas thinks that Helpling's Performance Score – which purports to measure cleaners' quality, reliability, and communication – also contributed to the degradation of working conditions on the platform. Before its implementation he could cancel a client 48 hours in advance without repercussions, but now any cancellation lowers the score on the metric of reliability and if it drops below a certain threshold his account could be temporarily blocked. He doesn't just experience this new measure as an infringement on his freedom to call in sick or protect himself from bad clients, but also finds it offensive because he believes his quality or reliability cannot *and should not* be measured in such an impersonal way. To him the score rather measures Helpling's lack of trust in its cleaners and its eagerness to please its customer base: “they only care about their clients, they don't care about the cleaners, if they don't really get paid good, they don't care about health insurance, nothing.” His feeling that Helpling has become a more competitive platform catering only to the interest of clients was intensified when the platform introduced their “Countdown Offers” feature. Cleaner profiles, performance indices, and Countdown Offers all grant more control to clients while putting more pressure on cleaners to keep up their metrics while keeping down their prices, in order to appeal to the all-seeing eye of Helpling's prudent customer class. In this setting, Kostas is happy to have his regular customers, which – as we saw with Alexis – forms a measure of protection against the growing work insecurity induced by the platform. Then again, “happy” might not be the right term to describe his state of mind and, as we'll see below, he's been looking to transition out of Helpling, if not out of Germany.

Kostas's experience of labor degradation resonates with what Tish went through after her year-long honeymoon with Handy came to an end. After taking a two-month break because she got sick from working too much without taking care of herself, Tish found out that things had changed on the platform and she was back at square one making \$15 an hour. In the new system, she was only going to be as good as her last 28 days and if she, for whatever reason, did not maintain the performance criteria of her tier, Handy would demote her and decrease her pay. While the company's tiered wage system rewards active, highly rated Pros and prevents price-based competition between cleaners, Tish suddenly had to compete with herself, or rather with her own performance level subjected to a monthly audit. This made her feel a little betrayed: “I don't like it because [...] you work hard for it, and it's like all the work that I put in these last months doesn't mean anything right now [...] You just feel forgotten about.” She had no option but to start all over again and climb the payment tiers

as she had done before. This time, however, she never made it back to the \$22 tier because it had become harder to reach and the jobs were getting worse too, as she was often confronted with angry clients who took their frustrations with Handy or previous Pros out on her. Moreover, some clients would try to scam Handy by submitting a complaint so they wouldn't have to pay for the cleaning, which means Tish wouldn't get paid either or would even get fined. Although she was usually reimbursed to some degree after a client turned out to be absent, there were numerous incidents where people claimed she didn't show up while in fact she was on time but nobody opened the door. One time she traveled to a distant neighborhood in Queens only to be stood up and charged a \$50 fee for failing to show up without prior cancellation. Again, this triggered a sense of indignation because, as she told me, "I've put a lot of work in, I had great ratings, you know, customers gave me great feedback, like why would I ever do a no call, no show?" Whereas she used to be able to call a number and talk to someone, now she had to email her objections and it took a long time to get a response. Once she did, it was clear that they chose the client's side – and this wouldn't be the last time.

Tish still gets upset about her experience, which got her deactivated for some weeks: "So I traveled way out there, it's a fact that I was there [and Handy could have verified this by tracing her GPS signal]. If I didn't want to come I could have easily just cancelled and avoided a \$50 fee. Because canceling was only \$20, \$10 maybe." Whereas cancellations on Helping hurt a cleaner's performance score, Handy charges various fees depending on when the appointment has been cancelled.¹³ When Tish started with Handy there were no fees yet, but now she had to be much more careful about arriving late for a job or leaving earlier, even though she would be done, because clients could – and did – report her and she would be charged a \$15 fee. Yet some things were beyond her control, such as when her grandmother got sick and she had to cancel a few jobs less than 48 hours in advance, for which Handy charged her between \$10 and \$40 each. Instead of making money she was losing income, which meant that she needed to do more jobs to make up for her losses. Importantly, if it would have been possible to reschedule clients none of this would have happened, but Handy only shares a new client's contact information four hours ahead of the job and erases it afterwards (for one-off cleanings). Even when Tish did manage to reschedule a client a few hours in advance by calling him, he stood her up the next day and reported her to Handy for making arrangements with him outside the app, for which she was fined. In the face of such glaring power asymmetry, she felt angry and helpless but still remained determined to turn things around. She was going to have to work smarter, not just harder.

Kenny likes to think that he knows what working smarter means. While he is happy with Handy, he also acknowledges that there's quite some risk involved in operating via its platform and he has in the meantime found ways of either hedging against this risk or absorbing it in an attempt to turn it into a new business opportunity. Like Tish, he's noticed how more clients appear to be frustrated with Handy or previous cleaners these days, how they frequently cancel or try to reschedule last minute, how some try to scam their way to a free cleaning, and how Handy usually sides with the client rather than with its Pro in cases of dispute. These experiences have taught him the importance of taking screenshots, something Tish regrets she didn't do. Because "Handy has to see it to believe it", Kenny's phone is loaded with screenshots ready to be attached to emails providing evidence for his claims, activities, and whereabouts. This practice is especially essential because Handy regularly deletes job documentation from the app. Reminiscent of Tish's dispute, Kenny was once fined for a "no show" even though he was 15 minutes early and called the disgruntled client on the number that was left on a note outside, when communication via the app didn't work. Wanting to prove his communication attempts, he turned to his app only to find that Handy had already deleted the job information: "But I had his number still, that I called on my cellphone. So I erased all my other contacts, like all the people I had called, and sent them the thing [screenshot] saying 'Hey I called the guy and he did not want your service'." After much hassle back and forth, Handy finally retracted the fine and since then he's been meticulously screenshotting his jobs.

Still, screenshots can't protect him against all the risks that are unevenly distributed on Handy's platform. When Kenny accepts a new client, he usually has little information regarding the size of the home or the cleaning specifications, as clients are not required to share these details. In practice this means he is often confronted with a workload that exceeds his booked time and with "extras" (i.e. tasks with an additional charge) that weren't requested through the app. Instead of asking clients to add such extras so he can be properly reimbursed or just declining these tasks, he has an alternative strategy: "Another pro may say they need the money or something. I don't need nothing, I just need your repeat business, we good." Kenny is willing to absorb the risk offloaded on him by Handy and take small financial hits as long as this "investment" pays off on the long run. Not only does a portfolio of repeat clients offer a steadier income stream, it also – as Alexis and Kostas will confirm – reduces the risk and stress inherent to dealing with new clients: "I just don't want to have to be searching for jobs every day because that gets frustrating." As Kenny and his peers know, labor platforms may lower transaction costs on the demand side yet this often happens at the expense of those

supplying the commoditized labor. Faced with rising costs, they seek to stabilize their routine and/or shift their transactions (back) to the informal economy that shields them from platform surveillance and rent-seeking.

Stepping stone or dead end?

Kenny's livelihood depends on his cleaning work, which he considers not just his job but a "career" despite how "people talk shit" about him cleaning toilets. Given that Handy has played such a formative role in this career, I was surprised when I heard him dismiss the company as "nothing but that stupid platform." I think this remark reflects how he was trying to make himself less dependent on Handy's platform, which he now approached as merely a lead generator that connects him to new clients but otherwise mostly extracts value (in the form of commissions) rather than adding it. "At this point", he told me, "I am riding with them because I could take all their customers. Like I have two, three outside that I got through Handy." He never solicits his clients directly, but has started mentioning how much Handy takes from each transaction and when they show interest he'd suggest a better deal for both parties. One market device that really helps his "side hustle" is Cash App, a mobile payment service that he uses as a financial interface between him and his private clients, who usually "don't like cash." He, on the other hand, loves cash and Cash App comes with a debit card that he uses to cash out after clients have transferred the money via the app. Handy, which knows how important daily payments are for many of its Pros, also initiated an instant cash out option, but it charges \$3 per transaction – too much, if you ask Kenny.

Still, he uses the option frequently, just like he continues to work via (with, for? – he wasn't really sure) Handy as long as he's "getting the better end of the deal." For him, this means being able to make a decent living while enjoying his freedom, maintaining his selection of Handy regulars but increasingly adding private clients to his portfolio because this keeps the expensive middle man out. Otherwise, the distinction between formal and informal work isn't that clear in Kenny's world, which is largely due to Handy's selective formalization of the job. While it adds a digital payment system, standardized performance metrics, and work documentation tools, it also systematically erases this documentation and its metrics render the working conditions of its Pros highly insecure. Furthermore, while it issues a 1099 tax form to all Pros earning over \$600 per year, it doesn't offer tax information or enforce payment. This suits Kenny well, as he's trying to stay under the IRS's radar now that he's finally making good money after his child support contributions for two of his children have ended. "Nobody digs into my money mess with Handy", he says, and when I

mention the possibility of a tax audit his response – while sort of tongue in cheek – made my heart sink: “I mean, I am probably going to jail at some point... at least things are good on Handy’s end.”

Tish, who eventually left Handy after being deactivated a second time, likewise did not report any taxes during the four years she was on (and off) the platform: “Honestly, at that time, I didn't really care because it was just the money, and I didn't really understand it.” She thinks the company should have done more to inform its Pros, considering that “the majority of people that work with Handy are minorities, you know, so we don't really know that much about taxes. Like, a lot of people that work there was low-income.” The specter of an audit still looms over her as she is looking to set up her own cleaning company, expanding her customer base via the social network of the small group of clients she retained after her deactivation (for another incident where Handy took the client’s side). She uses Casp App, like Kenny, but also accepts PayPal and Venmo, doing as much as she can to streamline her transactions and optimize for convenience. Her biggest assets, as she knows, are the extensive professional experience she’s accumulated over the past decade and her Associate degree in business management. All she needs now are a business license, for which is she saving up, and her own website to market her services. Since she’s been working for a local upscale cleaning service to earn extra money, she has received many good ratings and personalized reviews on Yelp and she’s thinking about copy/pasting these to her future website as evidence of her skills. Unfortunately, she won’t be able to do the same with her Handy reputation, because she lost access to her account:

It was an obstacle because I had no proof of all the work that I did. Or the recognition. You know once you get deactivated, you can't log back into the app anymore [...] Especially because Handy shows how many jobs I did. And I had like almost 700 jobs. So I would love to show people how long I've worked with them, how many jobs I've completed, you know.

Deactivation doesn’t only pose an immediate livelihood crisis but is also a threat to future job opportunities because you lose your CV, which turns out never to have been truly yours. Your professional trajectory and identity has been erased and for everyone but Handy it’s as if you have never existed on the platform. Ultimately, however, Tish says she’s had a “wonderful time” with Handy, “despite the fees”, because it made her a lot of money and it has given her some valuable ideas about how (not) to run her own business using an app. In a weird and almost cruel way, it set her on this path toward starting her own business, making available

something Handy itself could never offer: a potential career. “It’s no progression, no benefits, no growth, you know?”, she reflects at the end of a long conversation, her perspective and mood suddenly shifting, “in that sense I wasted my time.” Her father always pleaded with her to get a job with benefits, but – like Kenny – she continues to depend on Medicaid despite officially exceeding the maximum income cap.

Kostas, meanwhile, depends on a European travel insurance to cover any healthcare costs he might incur in Berlin, although he isn’t quite sure how much it covers or if it covers him while working in people’s homes. He went for this option because he’s not able to afford the notoriously expensive German health insurance for freelancers, which is why he wants Helping to contribute to its cleaners’ insurance costs. This is just one of his many grievances with the company, which he can’t wait to leave because he feels “they don’t give a shit about you.” Still, he retains about eight regular customers through Helping because he needs the money, they treat him well, and they do not seem to be willing to use his services outside the platform. He’s noticed that many German clients are hesitant to break Helping’s rules and they don’t realize the company takes a cut from his wages. On a couple of occasions clients did solicit him with a reasonable offer, however, which he gladly accepted because its more money in his pocket and he doesn’t think he needs the platform anymore. While it has given him market access, it had also ruined this market for him. You don’t build trust with rating systems or performance scores – at least not mutual trust, which has to be earned by both parties. He’s just much more comfortable dealing with clients directly. Yet Kostas is tired, not just of Helping but of cleaning work, of Berlin, and of living in Germany. His heart yearns for Athens and he really wants to work in a field where he can put his degree and skills to good use. Even though he’s still on the platform, he speaks like he already checked out. In contrast to Kenny and Tish, Kostas had nothing good to say about Helping as he considers his past two years: “If it wasn’t Helping, it would have been another platform or something more creative. I can’t feel grateful for Helping because I’m doing all the work.” While doing all this work, he also allowed himself to fall “into the hole of Helping”, which he regrets much like how Tish laments wasting her time on Handy. He just got too comfortable in this hole, which shielded him from Berlin’s disappointing labor market prospects, but now he’s determined to pull himself out of it and move on with his life.¹⁴

For his part, finally, Alexis is equally dismissive of Helping but doesn’t think it is worth the risk or effort to take his regular clients off the platform. Sure, if this gig would be a permanent thing for him he would certainly pursue private clients, but he emphasizes that this is just a stopgap income opportunity until he starts school and/or finds another job. As a

matter of fact, he already found a part-time job in a theatre, which is much more up his alley than anything he's done so far. With a little luck, he will be able to get more hours there so that he can close this episode in his life. Whereas Kostas cannot help being emotionally invested in his cleaning work, which is why Helping frustrates him so much, Alexis has kept much more distance between him and the company. And where Kenny scoffs at the “stupid platform” that is lucky to profit from a cleaning professional like him, Alexis derides cleaning itself as “just a stupid job I have to do to get money.” He takes no pride in this work and is quick to dissociate himself from the cleaning profession, saying “I am not a cleaner. I am *working as a cleaner* – You get the difference?” When I ask him to elaborate, he adds:

I think that a lot of people are probably like, not really forced to do it but they don't really have so many choices. Like, from the people that I know, nobody wants to – like they are all looking for better jobs. They want to get better jobs and just because they don't speak the language or they haven't finished their studies, they cannot do it yet. So they have to make a living somehow and Helping offers that.

If Alexis could give newcomers one piece of advice, it would be to remember that these platforms are “a good place to start” but a bad spot to end up in.

Discussion and Conclusion

Alexis's advice sketches this chapter's main argument: in the context of an “acute confluence of austerity, diminishing public welfare, and fragmentation of formal employment” (Thieme 2018: 529), domestic labor platforms like Handy and Helping can offer an important economic lifeline to vulnerable labor market “outsiders” such as minorities and migrants. Yet what initially constitutes a stepping stone or stopgap opportunity eventually becomes – or threatens to become, if one doesn't continue to step up – a dead end. In cities where, for many of its inhabitants, “crises become unexceptional, and where coping with uncertainty is normalized” (ibid.: 530), these outsiders develop a “hustle” at once enabled and thwarted by platforms that constantly experiment with labor market governance and segmentation while operating on the cusp of formality and informality (cf. Ravenelle 2019; Van Doorn and Velthuis 2018). Improvisation, in this sense, comes from both sides, although information asymmetries and other (data-driven) instruments of structural domination regularly give domestic labor platforms and their customers the upper hand (Flanagan 2018). Moreover, the previous section demonstrated that the opportunities and challenges of platform labor are

unevenly distributed and some workers are better positioned than others to absorb the risks/costs attendant to platform companies' selective formalization of the labor relation and process.

For Kostas and Alexis, Berlin was less the origin of Greece's post-crisis suffering than a destination imbued with the hope of a fresh start, or at least a temporary reprieve. Their detached, often dismissive attitude toward Helping and platform-mediated domestic work stems as much from their educational and professional trajectories in Greece, co-constitutive of their gendered class identity, as from their imagined prospects in Berlin or elsewhere. After all, as European citizens they are more mobile than non-EU migrants or refugees (Könönen 2019), and neither of them has dependents to care for: if Berlin doesn't work out they could always return home or try again somewhere else. So while they occupy an outsider status on Berlin's labor market, primarily due to their struggles with the German language, Kostas and Alexis have accumulated/are accumulating enough "human capital" to treat Helping as little more than a necessary evil that holds them over until they find something better. In this position of relative privilege, the costs and insecurities of platform-governed self-employment are reluctantly accepted as a passing burden, such as when Kostas relies on his cheap travel insurance as a provisional healthcare solution. Conversely, Kenny and Tish's reliance on Medicaid is less a provisional solution than a protracted predicament. Faced with limited funds and mobility, New York is closer to destiny than destination. Although she has more diplomas than Alexis, Tish's care responsibilities tie her to the city and her job trajectory has gradually locked her into domestic cleaning as the most viable career option. Kenny's job mobility is likewise restricted due to his criminal record and his seven kids will need his support for years to come. Both have more to lose but also more to gain, which explains their entrepreneurial approach to domestic cleaning and their readiness to build on what Handy has made available. Beyond individual biographies and labor market trajectories, the long history of institutionalized anti-black racism and dispossession in the United States position Kenny and Tish as *de facto* outsiders in their own country (despite their formal citizenship – see Van Doorn 2019), compounding their vulnerability to Handy's selective formalization of their labor.

Finally, on a more general note, the notion that platform labor is primarily migrant and minority labor matters insofar as it recalibrates the parameters for any critical discussion about how and to what extent "the gig economy" exerts a downward pull on labor conditions and erodes the norms, standards, and protections scaffolding "regular employment" (Scholz 2016; Daugareilh et al. 2019). While certainly not denying such dynamics, I believe that

claims regarding the degradation of labor by gig platforms tend to mobilize a comparative frame of reference that has in fact little bearing on the everyday circumstances of many gig workers and indeed is increasingly negated by the practices and logics of neoliberal labor market governance. It is evident that we did not have to wait until the advent of gig platforms to witness the decline of the standard employment relation in various sectors, or the massive expansion of low wage insecure jobs (Crouch 2019; Kalleberg 2018). Platforms, as amplifiers, have a structural tendency to accelerate and scale the labor market dynamics, arrangements, and conditions that have been over four decades in the making, thereby crystallizing existing problems now subjected to a resurgence of public scrutiny that is nevertheless often too narrowly focused on platform culpability. Although this scrutiny is justified and useful, it is equally justified and useful to scrutinize our own assessments and aspirations with respect to platform labor. Are we expecting this type of work to be better than traditional forms of precarious work just because it is governed by a platform? When we judge platform labor to be “degraded”, what do we compare it to (Doussard 2013)? As I have shown, for minority and migrant workers whose experience with and short-term prospects for finding a “decent” job with proper protections and pay are minimal at best, gig work can present a provisional step *up* rather than down. Yet I have also demonstrated how working conditions and income opportunities on the platform tend to deteriorate over time, suggesting that labor degradation is more salient as a problem internal to platforms – as companies seek scale and profitability – than in comparison to other industry actors. Moreover, the broader point is that nobody should have to choose between a rock and a hard place. Instead of raising our norms and expectations solely with respect to platform labor, we should collectively raise the bar on non-standard work and social security in post-welfare societies, by organizing and legislating for higher wages, broader protections, more enforcement capacities, and a robust, redistributive social safety net. This would present “gig economy” companies with a new status quo: either follow suit or close shop following a worker exodus.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.handy.com/locations>.

² See, respectively, <https://www.handy.com/services/cleaning-service> and <https://www.handy.com/apply>

³ Add sources (only informal ones available).

⁴ See <https://prohelp.handy.com/hc/en-us/articles/217290407-Payment-tiers>.

⁵ See <https://prohelp.handy.com/hc/en-us/articles/115011938868-Pro-Premium-Accounts>

⁶ See <https://prohelp.handy.com/hc/en-us/articles/217287967-What-are-fees->.

7 Add short note on broader Platform Labor project.

8 See <https://www.berlin.de/sen/wirtschaft/en/about-us/artikel.458761.en.php>.

9 See <https://www.helpling.de/>. The English version of the German site mentions slightly different selling points, such as its English customer service and the ease of finding a cleaner in your price range (see https://www.helpling.de/de_en).

10 See <https://www.helpling.de/anmelden>.

11 Conversely, it frequently happens that cleaners receive offers below their hourly rate, ostensibly to increase their work opportunities.

12 Helpling has since raised the minimum rate to 10 euros per hour.

13 See <https://prohelp.handy.com/hc/en-us/articles/216655068-What-s-the-cancellation-policy->.

14 A few months after this conversation, Kostas informed me that he and his boyfriend were moving back to Athens to pursue new job opportunities there.

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