

We the Working People

The sharing economy was supposed to bring Americans greater freedom at work, but critics are increasingly pointing out that platform companies exercise significant and largely unregulated control over workers. Are these two positions mutually exclusive? This paper uses ethnographic fieldwork across a range of platforms to argue that they are not. Instead, debates over employment in the sharing economy—especially over the issue of how to classify platform workers—reflect an underlying tension in both law and popular perception about what it means to be free at work. On the one hand, freedom at work relies on a classically “negative” conception of liberty as simple non-interference or the absence of employer control. The scheduling flexibility and entrepreneurial aspects of sharing economy labor speak to this view. On the other hand, freedom at work draws on a conception of liberty that is often called “republican,” according to which freedom lies in not being vulnerable to the potential, arbitrarily exercised power of another. The invisible and indirect authority exercised by platforms over their workers clashes with this view. Not only does the tension between these conceptions of freedom make it difficult to understand what “control” means in the sharing economy and thus whether platform workers ought to be employees rather than independent contractors, it also lies at the heart of long running debates over classification and work regulation more broadly.