

Chapter 10

Digital Hoboism

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ABSTRACT

Digital hoboism represents the contemporary manifestation of transient labor in algorithmic economies, characterized by precarious employment, platform-mediated work arrangements, and perpetual mobility across digital and physical spaces. This chapter examines how algorithmic management systems shape the lived experiences of digital workers who operate outside traditional employment structures, including gig workers, digital nomads, freelance platform workers, and remotely employed individuals. Drawing upon critical platform studies, labor economics, and digital sociology, this analysis explores the ideological underpinnings of digital hoboism as both liberation narrative and exploitation mechanism. Through empirical data from platform labor markets, this chapter demonstrates how algorithmic systems create new forms of worker precarity while simultaneously promoting entrepre-

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neurial subjectivities. The research investigates the socio-technical assemblages that govern digital hobos, revealing tensions between flexibility and insecurity, mobility and rootlessness.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptualizing Digital Hoboism

Historical Context and Contemporary Manifestations

The term “hobo” historically referred to migrant workers who traveled across the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seeking temporary employment opportunities while maintaining a nomadic lifestyle. These workers embodied a particular form of labor precarity, existing outside stable employment relationships while performing essential economic functions. The hobo represented a unique social figure in American industrialization—neither entirely vagrant nor permanently settled, neither fully employed nor completely jobless. They moved with the seasons and economic cycles, following harvests from South to North, construction projects from East to West, and industrial opportunities wherever capital required flexible labor.

Contemporary digital economies have given rise to analogous forms of transient labor, characterized by platform-mediated work arrangements, algorithmic management, and perpetual mobility across both digital and physical spaces. This phenomenon, termed “digital hoboism,” represents a fundamental transformation in how labor is organized, controlled, and experienced in algorithmic culture. Just as historical hobos rode freight trains between temporary jobs, digital hobos navigate algorithmic platforms between discrete tasks, gigs, and short-term engagements. The railroad infrastructure that enabled hobo mobility has been replaced by digital infrastructure—smartphones, applications, internet connectivity, and platform architectures—that enables contemporary labor transience.

Digital hoboism encompasses multiple overlapping categories of workers operating across diverse sectors and geographic contexts. Gig economy platform workers such as rideshare drivers for Uber and Lyft, delivery couriers for DoorDash and Deliveroo, represent the most visible manifestation of digital hoboism. These workers use their personal vehicles and labor to fulfill algorithmically-allocated tasks, moving through urban spaces following digital commands. Digital nomads who combine remote work with international travel represent another form, leveraging mobile technologies and internet connectivity to perform location-independent work while moving between countries, cities, and co-working spaces. Freelance professionals operating through

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