For two generations society has been built of the concept of the regular wage earner. Housing, commercial development and politics have all been based on the presumption that most people will have regular jobs, bringing in regular incomes, and that they can expect this to continue until they retire.

This presumption was being put under considerable strain before COVID-19. Where once a single wage earner could buy and keep a home for their family, now two full-time incomes aren’t enough to enable people to own their own homes in the cities where they can earn that much. Employers are resorting ever more to temporary workers or zero hours and at will contracts because they can’t afford to pay pensions or benefits, and the inexorable march of a “free market” only free for a chosen few has eroded many of the certainties a prospering economy is supposed to provide.

COVID-19 has changed the game further. It was bad enough that politicians from the same parties that created an “us and them” attitude were now exploiting the problems of the same people they themselves had excluded as unworthy. Now those same politicians are wrecking economies with lockdowns – which may be necessary for health reasons (or not) but are rather an attempt to ensure that no one can have a future, unless the few that can provide
Yes Sir, No Sir

Russians might know what I am talking about. Didn’t they once have a revolution to get rid of the same thing?

The problem with the Tsarist system wasn’t that it was cruel, unjust or corrupt. If it had been, the Soviet Union would not have fitted the same description, and rejoiced in doing so, only the beneficiaries changing.

The Russian autocracy rested on understandings rather than laws. When you have rule of law, your point of reference is not what somebody thinks or wants, but a written text, passed by a competent governing authority, which is binding on everyone. Things are done on the basis of these laws rather than what someone above us happens to think or want at a given time – if they don’t like the law, they have to change it, following the proper procedure.

When everything is done via understandings, people act on the basis of what they think those above them want, regardless of what the law says. This can and does change from day to day, depending on all kinds of factors. As many modern refugees have found, today the government may like you because you say the right thing, but tomorrow that thing may not be what a new strategic partner likes to hear, so you are suddenly an enemy of the state.

Such a system is designed to create instability and dependence. When your life depends on keeping the right side of what the authorities want, you constantly have to kowtow to those authorities, determining their wishes and obeying them. You have no rights, no recourse, no redress, even if you have courts and tribunals and police. All you can do is obey, because if you don’t, everything you have can be taken away at any moment.

This is why the Tsarist system became so reviled, and why modern Russians didn’t bring it back when the Evil Empire finally fell, unlike in many other situations when a regime is toppled by popular pressure. Deep down, everyone wants democracy and rule of law, however they feel this is expressed – theocratic regimes in the Middle East, like the Communists of old, are seen as offering those very same things by their supporters.

COVID-19 has created a situation where everyone’s livelihood depends on what regulations the government is going to impose on a given day. One day your employer can function, the next they can’t, because someone above you made a decision without consulting you.

All you can do to secure your immediate future is try and work out what the government is going to do next, and show what a good person you are by jumping the right way and applauding it. Your employment rights, history with the company, skills and experience are irrelevant.

This is the polar opposite of government by the people, for the people. This is why a global pandemic is being used as the means of introducing it. “It isn’t us, it’s the virus.” Just like it is the fault of the poor and immigrants, those with the least ability to influence the economy, which created the problems which deter people from rising up against such nonsense.

Freedom at One End

When the internet came along, it was considered by many as a way of bucking the system. You could now create your own future by offering your skills directly, at your own price, rather than what your company chose to pay you.

You could live in some remote spot and still earn a working wage by reaching new customers your employer didn’t have. However the dream online jobs, as found on Craigslist or some freelancer sites, remain few and far between.

Yes, it is possible to run online businesses. But any prospective customer does not have an entirely online existence, so you are just as much dependent on the same economic realities as ever, online or not.

However flexible work, based on what you do best, based on your own schedule, remains an attractive idea. Consequently it is being increasingly offered as a cover for exploitation. “Work for us with all the advantages of being a freelancer, working from home, and you can do other work when we don’t need you.” Not when all your customers are in the same position you can’t – they can’t buy anything you have to offer when their own existences are as precarious as your own.

Often the employers offload everything onto the worker, no longer obliged to provide them with benefits, a set
schedule or regular payment. As a short term “gig employee,” you are even responsible for all taxes and other governmental contributions, and these are still levied on the basis that everyone has a regular set income, as they always have been.

Wages are being driving down by creating expendable jobs, and you can become redundant based on ratings received on online mobile applications, like uber drivers. Everything is on demand, on an as-needed basis, when the driver of those needs, the ability to pay for them, is no longer there with the same predictability.

The gig economy, far from freeing people to dip in and out as needed, is worse than wage slavery. You do not know when or if you are getting paid, or if you even have work, or what rates you will be offered or can charge.

Naturally, and it is described, “This new economy promises to wring out the waste and excess capacity that the old economy left in its wake and it presents enormous opportunities for those who seek a more sustainable, equitable, and diverse future”. But where does that leave the majority? Those of us who may not have benefited, or don’t know how to access this utopian dream to the fullest?

Bucked by the Same System

For some, the gig economy is a benefit. A correspondent of mine in the Republic of Georgia recently shared how the gig economy works for him.

“I never really knew about the 'gig economy' until very recently. A friend of mine enlightened me, and I realised I had been working gigs for a while, short jobs with quick pay, temp jobs or covering for someone. These past few months I have had a lot of these, but I didn't realise it was becoming a thing.

“Only yesterday I lost one job and gained another. In Tbilisi, the saying ‘As one door closes another one opens' really rings true, at least in my experience.

“People often ask me 'What are you doing here?' Why are you here? Why are you not in China or Russia where the big bucks are? Well they don't get it, they don't understand. I was where the big bucks are but was I happy?? Hell, no!!

“Getting up at 6am for a 7am class (and this was in school, not online folks) is really not my style. The country I am referring to is Vietnam, I was there for almost 2 years doing gig work for a teachers agency all around Vietnam. But because I was on short contracts for each place, it was difficult to start any relationships. I was living in a small town on the coast of Vietnam; the beach was just 5 minutes’ walk away. But I was deeply unhappy and lonely there, even though I was on a good wage.

“So now I’m Tbilisi, Georgia for the pandemic. I love where I am. It was my ambition to live and work here, and I’ll stay here till I drop because I love it. As for the gig work, as a native speaker from London, England, being an English teacher works to my advantage. It’s not just about where you are from - I have GCSE’S, a BA HONS and a TEFL, so it's not as if I’m under-qualified, which many teachers here maybe are.

“I think the gig economy is a good thing that I can rely on. There will always be students, so there will always be gigs and I don’t see them as a bad thing.”

Maybe so. But what does teaching English in Georgia actually mean? Training people who want a better life to do whatever someone else thinks they need to get that life.

If the political orientation of Georgia changes, not only will there be fewer English students, but those who have already bitten that bullet will be ostracised, and the other countries they hope to go to won’t want them because they will associate their country with its new orientation. This has happened again and again - think Belarus or Ukraine. Rather than being an antidote to the negative aspects of the gig economy, teaching EFL only hastens their consumption of everything in their path.

I’m not Moving

This problem is recognised, but imperfectly. As soon as someone tries to address it, the latest Covid news is released and everything falls flat.

In California in the November elections, the elected officials said Uber and Lyft ridesharing drivers should be treated as employees, but these corporations put a referendum on the ballot to undo it and it passed. It appears the main
reason the initiative failed was that the companies threatened to leave the state if the measure was passed – and everyone was scared that other employers might follow the same lead, including their own.

In a Zoom and other interviews in early November, Chairman of the US Federal Reserve Jerome Powell stated that the coronavirus has probably forever changed the economy. Two examples of such changes he mentioned were that people will increasingly work from home, which will change many things of which we are aware and also things we are currently unaware of, and that there might be a "permanent unemployed class" because many jobs have been either lost or "re-engineered" because of COVID.

Powell feared for this "permanent unemployed class," both in terms of their own economic survival and the social upheavals their presence may cause in the future. This is a reality already experienced in many once-prosperous industrial cities in the Western world, where local versions of Reaganomics destroyed whole communities forty years ago, and no one wants to replace the old industries because the people in them are regarded as “bad”, “unproductive” or “unskilled” because they were trained to work in jobs no longer there.

With more and more younger people not being able to work (because of no work being available) and not being able to attend university (because of cost), the additional layer of unemployed workers (because of COVID) is causing real social and economic upheaval. There have been pandemics and economic collapses before. But never before has there been a change from regular to irregular work as the main driver of an economy – because everyone has avoided it, no country being able to prosper that way.

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