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## INSIDE THE INNOVATORS ISSUE

### Many Liberals Have Embraced the Sharing Economy. But Can They Survive It?

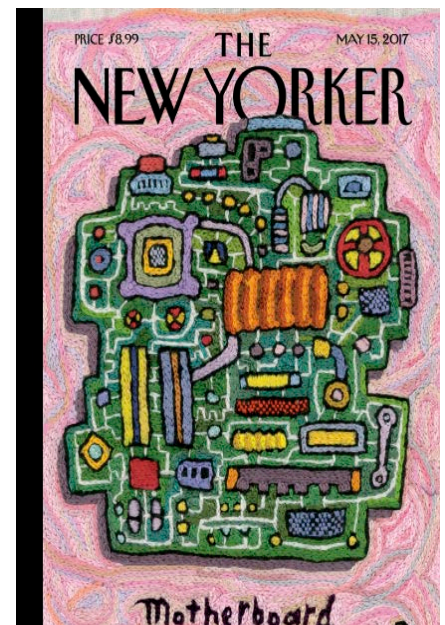
In the May 15, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in “The Gig Is Up” (p. 52), **Nathan Heller** takes a close look at a promising—and controversial—new business model at the intersection of innovation, labor, and politics: the sharing or gig economy. Reporting on companies like Lyft, Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit, Heller points out that the gig economy has a close relationship with progressive politics and the Democratic Party—a surprising fact, given the model’s aversion to traditional employee protections. At a time when working-class jobs carry electoral weight, is the gig economy a key to the future? Or are progressives squandering their prized safety net? To find out, Heller talks with scores of people—from contract workers to company executives and Democratic Party leaders. One young entrepreneur, Caitlin Connors, was able to clear her rent and travel just by Airbnb-ing her apartment one week a month. Like many people, she hired a management company, called Happy Host, to help manage the Airbnb listing. “Startup founders, consultants, people in private equity have been really drawn to this, because they’re so busy, they don’t have time to respond to a guest inquiry within the hour,” Happy Host’s founder, Blake Hinckley, tells Heller. That prosperous market is at odds with a defense given by Chris Lehane, a strategist in the Clinton Administration and now Airbnb’s head of global policy and public affairs. “Ultimately, what we’re doing is driving wealth down to the people,” he says.

If the gigging model is to deliver lasting social benefit, Heller discovers, certain new protections will have to be applied. But what should those look like? Diane Mulcahy, author of “The Gig Economy,” argues for eliminating the current distinction between employees and contract workers. Jacob Hacker, a political-science professor at Yale, also advocates creating a single category of employment. Tom Perez, the chair of the Democratic National Committee and former Secretary of Labor, doesn’t like the idea of eliminating work categories, or of adding a new one. He believes we’d lose hard-won benefits included with W-2 employment, either in the compromise to a single category or because current W-2 companies would find ways to slide into the new classification. As debate intensifies, Heller looks to a company called Hello Alfred, whose gigging staff is made up of W-2 employees. The tax burden is greater for Hello Alfred than it would be on a 1099 model, the hourly rate is high, and the required human-resources infrastructure drives up the cost. Still, Heller writes, “companies such as Hello Alfred, going above and beyond market demands out of principle, may be the gig economy’s best hope.”

### Zainab Ahmad’s Mission to Show that Criminal Prosecution Is the Best Counterterrorism Strategy

In “A Righteous Case” (p. 64), **William Finnegan** profiles Zainab Ahmad, 37, an Assistant United States Attorney with the Eastern District of New York, who has prosecuted thirteen people for terrorism since 2009—and has not lost a single case. The Eastern District of New York has long been known for its work against organized crime, but since 9/11 it has taken the lead in counterterrorism, Ahmad’s specialty. Ahmad spends a great deal of time overseas, negotiating with foreign officials, interviewing witnesses (often in prison), and combing the ground for evidence in terror-related crimes against Americans. She spends time in American prisons as well, typically with convicted jihadists. A former supervisor of Ahmad’s told Finnegan that she has probably logged more hours talking to “legitimate Al Qaeda members, hardened terrorist killers,” than any other prosecutor in America. Ahmad said, “They’re treasure troves of information about the networks, once they decide to cooperate...they’re very vulnerable. Everybody’s human. You pull the levers.” One judge she clerked for, Reena Raggi, of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, recalls, “Zainab doesn’t come across as a hardboiled, aggressive prosecutor. She’s reserved—that’s her upbringing. She would have been successful in any field. But, I must admit, I didn’t see *this* coming.” As Ahmad began travelling in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and began winning significant convictions, her stock at the F.B.I. rose—Judge Margo Brodie told Finnegan, “Agents were bringing their cases to the office, begging to have her take them. It never dawned on her that the reason she had so much work was that she’s so good.” Finnegan heard from several people that Ahmad has a great rapport with juries. “Maybe it’s because I feel comfortable with them. The mosque I went to as a kid was in Queens, and it drew people from all over Brooklyn, Long Island, the Bronx—cabdrivers, truck drivers, regular working-class people,” she said. “When I look at these Brooklyn juries, I see the people I grew up around.” Ahmad’s parents were part of the Pakistani diaspora, and she grew up in Nassau County, on Long Island, and went to Cornell and to Columbia Law School.

Currently, Ahmad has two terrorism defendants in custody awaiting trial: an Iraqi-Canadian accused of organizing Tunisian suicide bombers for Al Qaeda in Iraq, causing the deaths of five American soldiers—it took four years of hard work by Ahmad to persuade the Canadians to extradite this suspect to the U.S.; and Mohanad Mahmoud al-Farekh, a senior Al Qaeda leader and U.S. citizen who was captured in Pakistan. Ahmad and her colleagues remain deep in debate over what to do with jihadists returning from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, especially when it comes to ISIS. She asks, “When should we prosecute? Material support for ISIS is a crime, but can we make good cases? Can these guys be rehabilitated? How useful is their intel? If they’re not in custody, what level of surveillance?” Ahmad has been working to develop, with considerable quiet success, a criminal-justice alternative to Guantánamo, where military commissions have failed miserably. Nevertheless, President Trump has repeatedly declared his enthusiasm for the military prison at Guantánamo. According to Ahmad, the public has unique expectations of law enforcement with respect to terrorism. “When there’s a bank robbery, we try to solve the crime,” she said. “But nobody thinks our job is to stamp out bank robbery. Terrorism is different. People expect us to prevent it.” Many terror cases are difficult to make, with the strongest evidence often classified or inadmissible. “And we can’t afford to lose,” Ahmad told Finnegan. “We can’t get anything wrong. If we lost a major extra-territorial case, there might never be another chance.”



## Seeing with Your Tongue, and Other Surprises of Sensory-substitution Technology

In “Sight Unseen” (p. 38), **Nicola Twilley** reports on how advances in sensory-substitution technology are altering our understanding of how the brain works. Twilley speaks with Erik Weihenmayer, who was born with a condition that caused him to lose his sight by the time he reached high school. Weihenmayer uses a sensory-substitution device called the BrainPort, which enables him to “see” using his tongue. The BrainPort transmits low-resolution grey-scale footage from a camera to a grid of electrodes on a postage-stamp-size white plastic lollipop, which is held in the mouth. Dark pixels provide a strong shock; lighter pixels merely tingle. Weihenmayer describes the sensation as “pictures being painted with tiny bubbles.” Weihenmayer is a climber, and he uses the BrainPort on challenging outdoor climbs in Utah and Colorado. He told Twilley that he loves the way it restores his lost hand-eye coordination. “I can see the hold, I reach up, and I’m, like, ‘Pow!’” he said. “It’s in space, and I just grabbed it in space. It sounds so simple when you have eyes, but that’s a really cool feeling.” The BrainPort is currently priced at ten thousand dollars, restricting its potential for widespread adoption. In addition, despite Erik Weihenmayer’s enthusiasm, many blind people don’t feel that it’s worth the investment of time required to become proficient users of a device that, at its best, offers limited results.

The BrainPort is one of a number of so-called sensory-substitution devices that have emerged alongside a growing understanding of adult neuroplasticity. While these devices were designed with the goal of restoring lost sensation, in the past decade they have begun to revise our understanding of brain organization and development. “The idea that underlies sensory substitution is a radical one: that the brain is capable of processing perceptual information in much the same way, no matter which organ delivers it,” Twilley writes. As the BrainPort’s inventor, the neuroscientist Paul Bach-y-Rita, put it, “You don’t see with the eyes. You see with the brain.” These ideas—that seeing can take place through the skin and that the visual cortex can learn to process tactile input—remain controversial, but neuroscientist David Eagleman told Twilley that he believes the adult brain may be flexible enough to encompass entirely novel senses. Another neuroscientist, Amir Amedi, said, “The community of people that work in sensory substitution is very small, and ninety-nine per cent of them, including me, used to be very focussed on restoration, rehabilitation, and basic science.... Now, even just in the last year, the pendulum has swung in the direction of creating superabilities.”

## Richard Russell’s XL Recordings Is an Empire Built On the Art of Listening

In “Track Record” (p. 44), **Matthew Trammell** profiles Richard Russell, the head of XL Recordings, known for signing distinctive and driven young artists, from M.I.A. to Vampire Weekend to Adele. The label is defiantly choosy, passing on many performers with strong music, large followings, well-connected management, and success at other companies. Jonathan Dickins, who manages Adele and the guitar antihero King Krule, called a deal with the label “the Holy Grail.” XL—whose roster includes Radiohead, the xx, and FKA Twigs—is a “hybrid” between major labels, where artists may feel constrained by the demands of a multinational corporation, and indie labels, where artists enjoy more creative freedom, but can feel limited by smaller budgets. Russell explained, “For the type of artist who was going to be the best type of artist, you didn’t really want to compromise on either one of those things.” Adele recalls working with Russell on her second album, “21,” telling Trammell, in an e-mail, “he truly treated me like an artist. There was zero record-exec bullshit or hidden agendas.... He builds the vessel, but we are the captains.” Ben Beardsworth, XL’s managing director, said XL allows artists to continue releasing material even “if it’s not sticking commercially straightaway.” Russell said, “Normally, in business, there’s this growth thing. This growth bullshit. Not everything is meant to grow!” Russell would like to see XL’s records get more obscure, and its signings even more lean. “I suppose from the outside it’s, like, ‘Well, what are they going to do—what do they do after Adele?’” he said. “Twelve-inch singles. Electronic music. Shit that’s banging. That’s what we do. And then? Then stuff happens.”

Although Russell remains XL’s top executive, he has begun devoting himself almost entirely to producing music of his own. “To do a record label well is so similar to being an artist,” Russell told Trammell. “You have to be bloody-minded, and you have to be awkward. You have to be, like, ‘I’m doing it like this.’ It doesn’t matter what everyone’s saying it should be like. Every artist you’ve ever loved has done that.” His debut album, signed to XL, will be released under the name Everything Is Recorded, and he has recruited guest performers from across the XL roster to contribute vocals and production. Trammell writes, “One could read unease in his decision to make a solo album with so many guest artists. But his sound is indelibly tied to the ways in which he has nurtured the voices of others, even as he cultivates his own. Russell’s vision, it seems, is about the power of collaboration.”

**Plus:** In Comment, **Amy Davidson** considers how Barack Obama’s post-Presidency financial decisions complicate the role that the Democrats need him to play (p. 31); in the Financial Page, **Sheelah Kolhatkar** examines how Donald Trump’s disregard for business-ethics standards is creating a new atmosphere around financial compliance (p. 37); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Ian Frazier** describes his experience with loss of funding (p. 43); **Adam Gopnik** reads several books that rethink the American Revolution (p. 79); **Vinson Cunningham** reads John McWhorter’s new book, “Talking Back, Talking Black,” which offers an explanation, a defense, and a celebration of Black English (p. 85); **Dan Chiasson** reads new collections of poetry by Mai Der Vang and Aireia D. Matthews (p. 88); **Peter Schjeldahl** attends a Florine Stettheimer retrospective at the Jewish Museum (p. 90); **Alex Ross** reviews Chaya Czernowin’s new opera, “Infinite Now,” at the Flemish Opera, in Ghent (p. 92); **Anthony Lane** reviews James Gunn’s “Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2” and Philippe Falardeau’s “Chuck” (p. 94); poetry by **Emily Jungmin Yoon** (p. 59) and **Yusef Komunyakaa** (p. 70); and new fiction by **Etgar Keret** (p. 76).

**Podcasts:** **Dorothy Wickenden** speaks with **Benjamin Wallace-Wells** and **John Cassidy** about the future of the Democratic Party; and **Etgar Keret** reads his short story “Fly Already.”

**Digital Extras:** An animated gif of the making of **Roz Chast**’s cover “Motherboard”; **Emily Jungmin Yoon** reads her poem; and a slide show of art works by Florine Stettheimer.

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