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Geographies of the Platform Economy


Critical Perspectives

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Foreword: Platforms and the Disruption of Economic Space-Times

As the chapters in this book illustrate in detail, platforms have thoroughly disrupted the economic and organisational logics of many traditional services, their business models and their use of labour, in large part because they have reconfigured their spatial and temporal relations. Platforms provide a networked hosting architecture for supporting the work of many individuals and businesses in the buying, selling and sharing of goods and services, and supporting social activity (Kenney and Zysman 2016; Codagnone et al. 2019). By drawing together many actors and activities into a shared ecosystem, a platform acts as a digital enclosure that produces multiplier effects and scales of economy, improves productivity and reach, reduces costs and creates new markets (Andrejevic 2009; Srnicek 2017). Starting in the mid-1990s, web-based platforms enabled multiple sellers and services to be accessed, compared and engaged through a single website (e.g. retailer platforms such as Amazon, Hotels.com). From the mid-2000s, mobile internet and smartphone apps facilitated any time-everywhere user access to platforms and for platform workers and assets to be constantly enmeshed in the operational logics of a system.

In a relatively short period, a plethora of new platforms has quickly emerged across activities and sectors. These platforms take a number of forms. For example, transaction platforms act as digital matchmakers, using profiles and recommender systems to link customers with products (e.g. Airbnb matching those looking for accommodation with potential hosts). Innovation platforms provide a common technology framework on which others can build their products, such as Apple and Microsoft that facilitate the creation and hosting of apps, and Amazon Web Services that provide a cloud infrastructure. Social platforms, such as Facebook, provide a means to interact with friends, but also a channel through which businesses can interact with customers. Sharing platforms aim to capitalise on the collective labour and ideas of a community to create communal resources (e.g. Wikipedia and OpenStreetMap) or to realise the value of under-utilised assets and labour (e.g. Uber enabling car owners to share rides for a fee).

In most cases, platforms do not own the means of production but generate value by providing a conduit of connection and a shared marketplace through the unified

hosting infrastructure (Moazed 2016). For example, Airbnb does not own or rent any properties and Uber does not own any vehicles, but they provide a means through which those that do can trade. Owning and controlling a platform on which thousands of other companies and millions of consumers rely produce steady income streams (as a cut of all sales enacted on the platform, advertising revenue and sales of data to brokers) (Andrejevic 2009). Platforms have changed how companies are formed and expand by leveraging a number of factors. The use of cloud technologies enables a platform to be scaled quickly and be accessed by anyone with an internet connection, while reducing sunk investments into infrastructure and retaining the agility to switch suppliers. By hosting existing businesses and outsourcing labour to independent contractors, the need to on-board new employees or cover associated costs (such as minimum wage, overtime, health insurance, social security payments, redundancy) or invest in property as they entered new markets greatly reduce overheads while also enabling flexibility (Shapiro 2020). Saved overheads plus the injection of venture capital investments means platform companies can undercut companies with sunk costs and to carry losses for a number of years as market share is built. They can also steal trade from traditional businesses by shifting customer perceptions regarding the timeliness and convenience of services (Shapiro, 2020). In addition, they have staunchly sought to block the introduction of new rules and laws that would regulate their new business practices (Woodcock and Graham 2019). Consequently, the best-known platform companies have transitioned from start-ups with a handful of employees to multi-billion-dollar, global enterprises in very short timespans (less than a decade in many cases). This rapid transition occurs because their platforms capture a large portion of a sector, across geographic markets, within their enclosure as they seek to become a sectoral monopoly.

With respect to labour, platforms disrupt the nature, organisation and performance of work (see Chaps. 7, 8, 9 and 10). Platforms facilitate the flexible use of labour on a needs basis and the efficient management of a fluid, churning labour pool by shifting labour from secure employment paid in relation to time-served, to precarious, gig-based employment wherein people are hired and paid per job. Codagnone et al. (2019) identify two types of new labour relations created by platforms and the gig economy: online and mobile labour markets. Rather than being tied to particular employers located in specific places, such as offices or factories, and undertaking work at set hours, online labour markets enable workers to perform digital labour at a place and time of their choosing since there is no need for proximity between employers, workers and clients. Work consists of undertaking specific tasks for a fee, with two main kinds of task: performing numerous micro-tasks requiring low-to-middle-level skills (e.g. Amazon's Mechanical Turk), or undertaking an entire project requiring middle-to-high-level skills (e.g. Upwork) (Codagnone et al. 2019). In the case of online labour markets, it creates significant time-space compression, enabling workers from across the globe to compete for gigs. Mobile labour market workers also do not need a fixed site and times to work. They do, however, need to be locally present to perform the tasks mediated by digital platforms – for example, undertaking low-skilled manual work and errands such as delivering food or assembling furniture (e.g. Deliveroo and TaskRabbit), or enacting

higher-level tasks such as in-person consulting services and personal tutoring (e.g. Expert360 and TakeLessons) (Codagnone et al. 2019). In both online and mobile labour markets, platforms separate employment from employers (by treating workers as independent, self-employed contractors), deregulate the job market and jettison the notion of baseline income and benefits (e.g. providing no holiday or sick pay, no pension and no access to subsidised skill development) (Gregg 2018). Consequently, gig workers have poor regulatory protections, few employment rights and limited collective bargaining, yet because the work is piecemeal and often time-dependent, and work and income irregular, workers under pressure to accumulate and complete gigs to make a living wage and are open to exploitation (Woodcock and Graham 2019; Shapiro 2020).

In addition, platform companies themselves can take advantage of the reconfiguring of global production networks enabled through the Internet and networked systems. For example, enterprise resource planning, supply chain management and customer relationship management systems facilitate greater coordination and control within an organisation, and with other organisations and customers, through instantaneous communication and real-time tracking of corporate activity globally. These systems enable radical time-space distanciation – that is, control processes and decisions at a distance in real-time – with companies back-officing functions, or outsourcing work to other enterprises, in lower-income locations to take advantage of the spatial divisions of labour enabled by instantaneous global internet connections. For example, by relocating some of their service operations to India, companies in Europe and North America reduce their wage bill, but do not suffer a loss in efficiency, productivity or quality despite staff being located in a different time zone. Instead, companies use three forms of temporal arbitrage (organising local time to the temporal demands of others) to save costs and maximise profit (Nadeem 2009). First, they can exploit time zone differences to create a 24-hour global business cycle, with work passing between offices at the end of a local business day. Second, labour can be organised at the local site to align temporally with the main business hours of Europe and North America, with workers labouring throughout the night. Third, weaker laws concerning working hours and conditions can be exploited to employ people for longer hours, at a higher tempo and pace (Nadeem 2009). Cities such as Bangalore have capitalised on this temporal arbitrage to drive local economic development, becoming a site of fast urbanism as its population and economy expand rapidly as it seeks to consolidate its position a global service hub (Datta 2017). In many cases, much of the off-shored work is menial and unattractive, and in some cases potentially harmful. For example, cultural data work consisting of content moderation (assessing and screening out violence, hate and child pornography on social media) and responding to user queries and requests is largely undertaken by women of colour working in precarious conditions for poor wages in low-income countries (Gray and Suri 2019; Roberts 2019). In a variety of ways then, spatial divisions of labour and patterns of uneven development, within and between the Global North and South, are being reinforced.

At the same time, in the Global North, the restructuring of economic space-times has a number of consequences for city regions, from pressure being placed on high

streets due to platformed retail, to the demand for office space and the size and configuration of labour markets as companies contract or relocate (Barns 2020). Moreover, platforms are reorganising the geographies of particular sectors. For example, Airbnb has had profound effects on tourism accommodation markets, as well as local housing rental markets as properties shift from long-term to short-term rent. Uber and Lyft have transformed how taxi markets are organised and operate (Young et al. 2020; Chap. 3); food delivery platforms such as Deliveroo have disrupted the fast food trade, rapidly expanding home delivery (Richardson 2019); and housing platforms have reshaped real estate markets (Maalsen 2019). Platforms that support home-based work, such as Microsoft's 365 Sharepoint, are impacting transit, as well as office and housing markets, especially after lockdown measures introduced to tackle Covid-19 rapidly increased their uptake (Fiorentino et al. 2022). In all cases, while platforms operate across scales, their forms are grounded and situated in local contexts, shaped by place-based relations of culture, politics, governance and history, as well as infrastructural provisions (Hodson et al. 2020). As such, within and across cities and rural areas (Zhang and Webster, Chap. 9), platform geographies vary in their constitution, operation and effects (Hardaker, Chap. 6).

The chapters in this book provide a thorough analysis of these emerging geographies of the platform economy, along with how platforms are reshaping the wider space economy. As highlighted by Schröder-Bergen et al. (Chap. 4), platforms are 'inherently spatial' (Leszczynski 2019) reliant on geospatial data for their operations and organising their services in space for the benefit of users and their own profit. In particular, the chapters highlight and critique the differential, uneven and unequal socio-spatial relations in how platforms operate and their effects on sectors and communities, while also providing suggestions for either limiting their excesses or reconfiguring them into fairer arrangements. As the analysis notes, altering the socio-spatial relations of platforms is no easy task given the already embedded status of platform logics, technologies and economies, the considerable shareholder investment vested in their success and the stickiness of a capitalist-led political economy. Nonetheless, such a reorientation is necessary if alternative platform geographies are going to be produced on anything more than a local, piecemeal scale.

In turn, the chapters suggest a manifest for future research along at least four inter-related trajectories. First, there is a need to document the geographies of platforms (with respect to their constituent companies and technologies) in terms of how they are geographically configured and scaled from the local to the global and their diffusion of adoption. Second, continued work should be undertaken on the spatial, scalar and temporal effects of platforms across sectors and places with respect to labour, urban-regional and economic and social relations, and how platforms are reshaping time-space relations in various ways. Third, normative thinking needs to be further applied to platforms to consider what kinds of effects are desired and ethical – or, to put it another way, what kind of platform society, economy and geographies do we want to create? Fourth, and relatedly, it is necessary to continue to consider how such normative platform futures be produced and what

practical, communal, political, policy and legislative inventions are required to create such futures. Given that platforms are only going to become more central to social and economic life, such a manifest is essential for making sense of, and intervening and reconfiguring, the myriad ways in which platforms are evolving and disrupting activities and services.

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Acknowledgments

The idea of creating this edited book departed from the insights and inspirations taken in the 2nd Digital Geographies Conference – Critical perspectives on the platform economy – in 2021 when we were living pandemic times. In this conference, we aimed to bring the current debates from several perspectives about platform economy, gathering a great myriad of experts in the field. The success of this event made us to think in creating a book that could represent different approaches about the platform economy, an emerging context resulted from digital technologies development. Thanks to this event, and to other previously connections established, we were able to gather great experts working on the field to write in this book, with different perspectives and approaches. We believe that we could reach to a rich debate regarding the challenges, effects and the future pathways for the platform economy in territories and in society. As editors, we are very glad and thankful for presenting this book, and we would like to leave some acknowledgements for this achievement.

Firstly, we would like to thank to the Springer editors for giving us the opportunity to materialise this idea of integrating critical perspectives about platform economy, creating this book. We also need to thank to all authors who contributed to the chapters of this book. A special thank to Rob Kitchin for writing the foreword, and to Sarah Elwood for giving us some future pathways to reflect.

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Part I
Introduction

Chapter 1

Introduction: Critical Perspectives on the Geographies of the Platform Economy



Mário Vale, Daniela Ferreira, and Nuno Rodrigues

Abstract In the era of rapid technological change, digital platforms like Amazon, Uber, and Airbnb are transforming the global economy. This book takes a critical perspective on the geographies of the platform economy, exploring its impact on labour, socio-spatial inequalities, and digital divides. The book organisation is as follows. The first section examines the platform economy's role in economic organization, discussing terms like the “fourth industrial revolution” and gig economy. Digital platforms reshape value chains, markets, and firms, but concerns arise about worker exploitation and labour rights. The second section focuses on the position of digital platforms in work, addressing challenges faced by gig economy workers, including issues of immigration, gender, and access to citizenship. Cooperative models emerge as alternatives. The third section explores digital spatial divides, emphasizing the platform economy's rootedness in geographical dynamics. Internet access disparities and algorithmic management contribute to socio-spatial inequalities. The book concludes by unravelling the complex dimensions of the platform economy, shedding light on its profound impact on contemporary society, economy, and geography.

Keywords Platform economy · Digital transformation · Socio-spatial Inequalities · Gig economy

In an era of rapid technological change and digital transformation, the increasing online participation of users and the proliferation of digital platforms are reshaping the landscape of global economy and labour markets. Platforms like Amazon, Uber,

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