

CHAPTER 8

On Value and Labour in the Age of Platforms

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On Platform Economy

This chapter analyses the most widely credited hypotheses on platform economy – those of Tarleton Gillespie, Nick Srnicek, José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal and Shoshona Zuboff – and its ability to shape work forces and social subjectivities. Even though the *platformization* discourse is widespread, we focus on the main attempts to define a general theory.

Gillespie focuses on the rise of platforms as intermediaries and on the responsibility of the companies in control of them. Hence, the ‘platform’ is a new agency taking on the functions of previous gatekeepers – aggregators or search engines – with the same goal of providing users with a ‘safe harbour’ in the open sea of the web. Gillespie (2010, 349) rightly notes that the term ‘platform’ did not appear out of nowhere and that it was knowingly chosen to put an emphasis on the alleged neutrality of the new mediators. The neutral façade of platforms depicted by influential stakeholders – or by those Dean (2010) would call ‘displaced mediators’ (26–29) – was purposely designed to make the internal tensions intrinsic to platforms’ service opaque – that is the tensions between amateur and professional content, between moderation and neutrality

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and between self-branding and community. Gillespie (2017) describes platforms as the following:

I mean sites and services that host public expression, store it on and serve it up from the cloud, organize access to it through search and recommendation [...] This includes Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, Instagram, and Snapchat [...] but also Google Search and Bing, Apple App Store and Google Play, Medium and Blogger, Foursquare and Nextdoor, Tinder and Grindr, Etsy and Kickstarter, Whisper and Yik Yak. (255)

Gillespie (2018) equates platforms to social media, and here lies the difference with other interpretations, as he distinguishes between two categories. On the one hand, we have social media, which connects people to each other and offers customised recommendations with the goal of keeping users on the platform and collecting their data. On the other hand, we have 'market-place services', which 'present themselves as social media platforms' while being based on different business models (Gillespie 2018, 41–43). The core mission of platforms is to provide a mediation by means of content moderation; therefore, other services that 'do not nearly fit the definition of platform' and still perform 'some tasks of content moderation' should be properly clustered in 'a second set' that contains TripAdvisor, Airbnb and Uber (Gillespie 2018, 18).

Gillespie's (2018) final elaboration further narrows the definition by shedding light on content moderation, which takes place in three different environments: editorial review, community flagging by users and algorithmic automatic detection. As the first category shows, Gillespie (2018, 114–117, 120–124) is well aware that computer-mediated communication (CMC), for instance the removal of illegal posts or pornographic images, requires human work, and this crowdsourcing is used by companies to hire low-waged collaborators. Nonetheless, he is less interested in the division of labour than in the overall function played by the platforms. The ultimate definition of platforms provided by Gillespie (2018, 18–21) tends to include services that:

- a) host, organise, and circulate users' shared content or social interactions for them,
- b) require others – rather than platforms themselves – to produce or commission content,
- c) are built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data for customer service, advertising, and profit,
- d) platforms do, and must, moderate the content and activity of users, using some logistics of detection, review and enforcement.

There are two aspects of Gillespie's (2018) contribution that need to be considered, specifically that the definition of platform is restricted to social platforms, which mainly work through user-generated content (UGC) moderation, and that more attention is paid to their social function than to the human effort underpinning them. Gillespie argues that, 'moderation is, in many ways, the commodity that platforms offer' (13). This may be true, but it would still require a deeper understanding of the human labour involved. The blind-spot of his analysis is therefore the *value* issue, which is understandable given the priorities of the author, but a further investigation remains necessary.

In contrast, Srnicek's (2016) analysis presents itself as an inquiry into the economic side of platform society, starting with the very title of his book. He can be credited with tracing the first application of 'platform' discourse back to business language. Like Gillespie (2010), Srnicek detects the bias of the word itself, which was intentionally chosen by influential players and used to prepare the ground for a new market. This may be a positive and necessary illusion for a debate that often mistakes many-to-many communication for grassroots participation and two-sided platforms for bottom-up phenomena.

In Srnicek's (2016) work, the platform is the operational answer to global capitalism's crisis, just as Castells (1996) connected the origin of network society to the restructuring of industrial economies after the 1973 downturn. Twenty-first century capitalism eventually adopted a new solution due to the discovery of 'a particular kind of raw material: data' (Srnicek 2016, 39). Platforms arise from the internal company's need to collect and analyse data (Zuboff 2019). Therefore, platformization takes place in all fields of economics, leading to five different versions of platforms: *advertising* platforms, such as Google and Facebook; *cloud* platforms, which own the hardware or software for business; *industrial* platforms, which build hardware and software; *product* platforms, such as Spotify, whose business model is based on fees or rent; and *lean* platforms, such as Uber, which reduce their asset to the minimum and offer their space to buyers and sellers (2017, 28–45). One may become aware of an extensive generalisation of the platformization idea, which is typical of the hype of a concept. As for Srnicek's (2016) definition of platforms, unlike Gillespie's (2017), it is based on economic value:

at the most general level, platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects. (25)

Srnicek (2016) frames the origins of platform economy within the history of capitalism by considering its *disruptive*, constant look for new markets to exploit. Nonetheless, any similarities of Srnicek's view to a Marxist-based

analysis are superficial as he willingly underestimates the role of labour in the digital economy by arguing that ‘revenue is generated through the extraction of data from users’ activities online’ rather than through the appropriation of unwaged labour (31). His work is part of a broader tendency to consider data as the main – if not the sole – source of value for digital capitalism.

The underestimation of labour also leads Srnicek (2016) to interpret digital disruption as the result of purely intra-capitalist competition. Therefore, the adoption of the platform model makes the difference in competition between companies, where it can explain the survival of some and the fall of others. In this respect, his analysis of the labour market results in a singular consideration:

not all – and not even most – of our social interactions are co-opted into a system of profit generation. In fact one of the reasons why companies must compete to build platforms is that most of our social interactions do not enter into a valorisation process. If all of our actions were already captured within capitalist valorisation, it is hard to see why there would be a need to build the extractive apparatus of platforms. (Srnicek 2016, 30)

This is hardly conclusive as according to Marx (1867, 359–360), subsumption is a never-ending process and the transition from absolute to relative surplus value is never complete and constantly takes place in different job markets. Capitalism is driven by the production of value, however, which is the appropriation of people’s time by companies. Indeed, Marxist thought has been split into two different interpretations of the origin of conflict. In traditional versions, history is propelled by capital and workers subsequently fight back by forming their unions, whereas according to Italian *operaismo* theory (Tronto 2019), history is rather propelled by social evolution – from *mass* to social *class* to *multitude* – and capital organises itself following these transformations with the purpose of regulating it (Negri and Hardt 2004).

In any case, the history of capital *is linked to that of labour*, which is not the case for Srnicek (2016). Although other interpretations of capitalism are possible, such interpretations should be acknowledged – something Srnicek did not do when quoting *Capital* and when considering competition as the main force behind modern capitalism. To some extent, Srnicek shares Gillespie’s (2017) unclear position on the agency/structure issue, with the emphasis on economic enterprise blinding them both when it comes to the appearance of neoliberal subjectivity.

Van Dijck et al. (2018) are positioned in the middle as they look at the technological, social and economic aspects of the process. At first glance, their book reflects the historical moment when the web was carried along by centralisation tendencies (Helmond 2015) with the most popular sites becoming platforms and invading the network’s ecosystem. Here is the ‘ecological’ idea of platforms as the sum total of human activities, but where no reference is made to McLuhan’s theory, which seems to fit the case.

In all likelihood, the idea derives from the merging of social media studies, namely van Dijck and Poell's (2013) tetrad, with the contiguous field of 'infrastructural studies' (Plantin, Lagoze and Edwards 2016). Platforms are not simply used by people or companies, they are closed systems in which economic and political processes increasingly take place. An affinity emerges here with Castells' (1993, 136) idea of a 'space of flows' as the topological pattern of the global economy. The main difference is that Castells took into account the relationship between network society and other frameworks, such as post-industrialism and post-Fordism, while the macro-text of platform society, with the partial exception of Srnicek and Zuboff, reveals a lack of contextualisation in the analysis of the contemporary world.

Here, a problem emerges, which has to do with social subjectivity and the unclear hierarchy between different players and with the tension between structure and agency. Platform economy is overdetermined by the power of platforms' owners, while its future will be shaped by the decisions we will take (Kenney and Zysman 2016), which is not useful until one clearly sketches the lines of social conflict. The open conclusion of van Dijck et al. (2018, 144–154) leaves us with a similar assumption: the future is still to be written and platforms are a space for citizens to step in and contribute to the shaping of a sustainable innovation. Here, van Dijck et al. (2018, 55–56) do not adopt a position regarding the structure/agency issue. They observe that platformization brought about both enabling and disabling effects and favoured both people's empowerment and disempowerment. This is a sort of paradox. On one hand, the concept of platforms is *reified* by the idea of the free space of the web being colonised by monopolists. On the other, emphasis is put on *agency*, as if users are vested with the power of reprogramming the networks.

This is the same trajectory as that of Castells' (1996) theory, which was originally based on the 'pre-eminence of social morphology over social action' (469), and even on the 'schizophrenia between structure and meaning' (3), while his later work (2009; 2012) suddenly prioritises agency over structure in the name of the so-called insurgent politics. The more the web becomes a closed system, the more Internet Studies take the side of *agency*, a choice that has the effect, if not the intention, of taking attention away from the consolidation of monopolies and from the narrowing of space for social action (Dean 2016, 73). In a similar vein, Zuboff's call for a collective mobilisation can hardly be understood (influenced by behaviourist psychologist B. F. Skinner) in the light of her interpretation of digital manipulation.

Regarding the definition of platforms, according to van Dijck et al. (2018), they are made of four elements and vitalised by three kinds of processes. The four elements have to do with platforms being fed by data, organised by algorithms, framed by 'ownership relations driven by business models' and ruled 'through user agreements' (van Dijck 2018, 9–12). The three processes can be defined as datafication, commodification and selection. Platforms store personal data, translate them into economic value and use them to customise

information. This led to van Dijck et al. making a distinction between ‘infra-structural platforms’ – the Big Five: Google/Alphabet, Meta, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft – and ‘sectoral platforms’, such as Airbnb and Uber. The latter provide specific services and are unable to survive without the foundations provided by the former.

While van Dijck et al. (2018) offer a detailed investigation of some sectoral platforms and a thorough analysis of a variety of data mining practices (Plantin 2019), here we deal with a broader theoretical assumption. By commodification, van Dijck et al. mean the conversion of ‘online *and* offline objects, activities, emotions and ideas into tradable commodities’ (37), a definition that is very close to the Marxist one. This notwithstanding, their technical definition of platforms describes them as ‘multi-sided markets’ that can include audiences, advertisers, providers and all other players (van Dijck 2018, 59). As an evolution of network economy theories, the multi-sided market model deals with *individuals* rather than social classes, which is a symptom of a bigger problem. The concept of commodification, which is not the same as *commoditisation*, implies a specific notion of *value*. This is not compatible with the multi-sided model, which replaces value extraction with marginal costs. It also implies the underestimation of exchange-value dynamics, which are discussed in the next section.

Critical Theory and Platform Society

When reflecting on platform economy, three main problems can be detected. Gillespie (2018) has a tendency to ignore labour issues, Srnicek (2016) prioritises data extraction over other forms of value production and van Dijck et al. (2018) fail to address the incongruence between the notion of a multi-sided market and that of commodification. We discuss these three issues in this order.

To some extent, Gillespie’s (2018) definition is the least controversial from the perspective of critical theory as it mostly focuses on non-economic aspects. Nonetheless, Gillespie has the ability to reflect on the ‘hidden labor behind content moderation’ (9), along with the conditions of crowdsourcing, the precariousness of the labour conditions in IT factories (83, 122–123) and the pyramid of CMC contributors, from waged to unwaged (116). His work, as well as research by Roberts (2016), lifts the curtain on various invisible activities and reminds us that far from replacing human labour, digital platforms still require it. Casilli (2019, 208–212) describes the tendency of digital capital to hide the contribution of human work, which takes post-Fordist externalisation strategies to their limits, and conceal it beneath the image of artificial intelligence and robotisation – so-called ‘fauxtimation’ (Taylor 2018).

Conversely, the main thing missing in Gillespie’s (2018) analysis is the connection between *labour* and *value*, which would require a shift from an integrated view of the functions carried out by the platforms to the idea of

conflict taking place *within* the platforms. Kenney, Rouvinen and Zysman (2020) provide a rejoinder to this claim by proposing a taxonomy of platforms' economic capabilities and forms of value production. In the case of 'platform-mediated content creation', which is the closest to Gillespie's, there are three possible forms of value: data extraction, building of websites and content creation in the strictest sense. In 'platform-mediated work', we can find direct forms of work for the platforms, as well as the wide range of gig professions. The 'platform firm' sector is organised around a classical hierarchy of high-income creative professionals and low-waged freelance contributors. In all cases, platformization of work becomes one with its *taskification*, a tendency that Amazon Mechanical Turk is stressing to its limits.

In both Kenney, Rouvinen and Zysman (2020) and Gillespie (2018), no reference is made to the labour–value dyad, which might seem to be a neutral assumption that also engenders well-defined consequences. The idea of platforms as multi-sided markets, where offer and demand meet, is one of those slippery ideas that are freighted with more than what they literally mean. A corollary of the multi-sided theory is that the market is the confluence between companies and workers, where decisive processes happen and balances and counterbalances are in equilibrium but where things would radically change with the introduction of value as a main variable.

Srnicek (2016) is in good company as his idea of Big Data marking a turning point is diffused and comes in different versions. According to Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013), digital capital is replacing value production with the intrinsic value of raw information, so that 'value will be in data itself' (134). They argue that the economy is no longer regulated by money due to the transition from 'money-rich markets' to 'data-rich' markets.

With the market economy advancing with the help of data, we may no longer label the future 'capitalist' in the sense of power concentrated by the holders of money. Ironically perhaps, as data-driven markets devalue the role for money, they prove Karl Marx wrong, not Adam Smith. (Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge 2018, 143)

Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge (2018) perfectly define the problem we have already detected. According to Marx (1867), capitalism has little to do with the 'power concentrated by the holders of money', its main goal is the extraction of value to be subsequently converted into money. It is a common mistake to declassify the concept of value in terms of a monetary unit that materialises as its final objectivation. Data collecting is the ultimate form of value appropriation, and its transformation into actual revenue is the last manifestation of a classical mechanism. By directly trading people's *time*, the web economy has not overturned capitalism, instead it is revealing its genuine nature. According to Marx, 'Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities', 'it is essentially the production of surplus-value' (1867, 359).

Couldry and Mejias (2019) developed a similar idea in terms of ‘data colonialism’. They consider data exploitation within the frame of capitalist exploitation, while also accentuating the innovative tracts of algorithmic dispossession, and define our present as a colonial era due to the discovery of a new raw material. Much like geographical explorations opened the way for modern capitalism by providing the Western world with resources and staple goods, the accumulation of data has enabled digital capitalism to appropriate human life itself. The first problem with this description is in the comparison of historical and digital colonialism as this no longer functions when one considers that data, *unlike* the natural resources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are not raw material to be collected. Data are created by means of both direct and indirect human labour; usually by machines *built by human work and incorporating that work*, according to a typical Marxist concept. This is also the problem with Srnicek’s (2016) idea that value is based on data rather than on labour. A similar misunderstanding can be found in van Dijck et al.’s (2018) idea of datafication as a typical feature of platforms if one keeps in mind that data are a main resource for some of these platforms, such as Facebook, an indirect source of value for others, for example Amazon, and not even part of the core business of others, such as Apple or Microsoft, which are industrial companies in the traditional sense. According to Marx (1864), different forms of value production *are integrated with each other*, given that a commodity incorporates the quantum of labour needed for its production. Therefore, data *do not replace* human labour as they are the last link in a longer value chain.

The main objection by Srnicek (2016), among others, is that unwaged labour performed by web users is not intended as a form of labour as it takes place outside of the context of a ‘production process oriented towards exchange’ (30). Srnicek aptly notes that digital capitalism is based on many other value sources, but I think he misses the point when replacing labour with data. User-generated content can be framed in terms of labour/value as they arise from a specific production relationship – the separation between human activities, such as posting a video or liking a picture, and the control of the technical means necessary for these activities. Therefore, the client/server hierarchy is the ultimate version of the fundamental process Marx (1867) referred to as ‘primitive accumulation’ (508), the split between labour as human effort and the material conditions necessary for its realisation.

Van Dijck et al. (2018), for their part, do not pay proper attention to labour issues, not even when they are directly engendered by platformization, as in the gig economy. Their definition of platforms brings together different forms of labour with no distinction between well-paid and low-paid and waged and unwaged tasks. Furthermore, a contradiction takes place due to the concept of commodification clashing with the multi-sided model. As discussed previously, van Dijck et al. interpret commodification in a Marxist way, which deals with the extraction of vital resources on the part of capital. On the contrary,

the multi-sided economic model is all about coordination between parts, and platforms serve the interests of all players. In other words, 'provide participants with the ability to search over participants on the other side and the opportunity to consummate matches' (Evans et al. 2011, 5). Here, platforms' owners mostly act as regulators, and in so doing, they make the meeting of different social groups and complementors possible (Boudreau and Hagiu 2009, 164–166). In multi-sided markets, marginal costs make the difference, but is this still the case under the rules of commodification theory?

In actuality, Marx is clear about value being extracted *before* the market stage, when labour time is appropriated by capital. This is precisely what the notion of *value* refers to, so that:

the result is not altered by introducing money, as a medium of circulation, between the commodities, and making the sale and the purchase two distinct acts. The value of a commodity is expressed in its price before it goes into circulation, and is therefore a precedent condition of circulation, not its result. (Marx 1867, 112)

The value of a commodity is a measure of the amount of socially needed work, the objectification of human time requested by its production. What owners control is the exchange-value made by 'incorporated social labour' through a series of transitions, and the same happens in *digital* transitions (Fuchs 2012). All these state transitions change the *form* of value, while not engendering any 'change in the magnitude of the value' itself (Marx 1867, 112). Therefore, value production takes place 'in the background' (Marx 1867, 115) before the circulation and before the conversion of value into money and that of money into a specific prize. That is commodification according to Marx (1867), and from this perspective, marginal costs do not make any real difference as value is extracted before players meet on the market.

In this respect, Zuboff (2019) is on the opposite side of the spectrum as she focuses on the close connection between surveillance and exploitation (Allmer 2015; Seignani 2016). From her perspective, the 'Big Other' is even expropriating human rights and shaping a new social order that is based on people being captured as raw material rather than a workforce in the traditional sense. Zuboff (2019) also takes into account the whole arsenal of digital capitalism – automation, job surveillance, the quantified self and targeted advertising – and traces back the new accumulation regime to the rise of Google, whose impact 'was just as dramatic as Ford's' (87). Zuboff provides a precious overview of the history of platformization but falls short when identifying the corresponding forms of social subjectivity. With capitalism appropriating human 'voices, personalities, and emotions', which is hardly a new argument, we would witness the rise of a 'behavioural surplus' (Zuboff 2019, 8). Nonetheless, the conversion of 'behavioural data' into 'means of behavioural modification' – a problem

close to Marx's *transformation* – is more a tendency than it is a provable form of 'mass behaviour modification' (ibid., 8).

Zuboff (2019) purposefully uses an old Pavlovian paradigm like B. F. Skinner's to define the contemporary reinvestment cycle: as the market mostly trades in consumers' acts, big companies take advantage of their ability to 'predict or influence' people's future behaviour. It should be noted, however, that *predicting* and *influencing* behaviour are different tasks. The former has to do with Big Data articulating the repetitive patterns of everyday life (Barabási 2010), while the latter requires a more advanced analysis than Skinner's simplistic psychology.

Conclusion

As often happens to arguments reaching a peak in interest platform theory needs to be thoroughly discussed. In the hype cycle, the platformization concept is sometimes used to relabel traditional processes with no significant increase in knowledge. According to van Dijk's (1999a, 242; 1999b) critique of Castells' theory, this runs the risk of somehow *reifying* platform as a universal keyword. Castells' theory shows his propensity towards the reification of the network as a protagonist of human history. With the same category applying to both Apple and WhatsApp, for example, *two platforms that have little in common*, the discourse about platformization eventually comes across the same problem.

In some situations, there is the risk of reifying the network, as stated previously, and reifying platforms, when one considers that the same category also covers geopolitical and governmental issues (van Dijck et al. 2018, 160–161, 163–166) and is expected to account for all forms of commodification and surveillance (Zuboff 2019). There is also a more subtle consequence of this emphasis on platforms: the common definition of a multi-sided market becomes *equidistant* between the extremes of critical and marketing-driven theories. Being equidistant is useful in many aspects of life, and it may sound like a good rhetorical adjustment, but is it any good when it comes to scientific knowledge? Weber (1949) wrote that:

We must oppose to the utmost the widespread view that scientific 'objectivity' is achieved by weighing the various evaluations against one another and making a 'statesman-like' compromise among them. Not only is the 'middle way' just as undemonstrable scientifically (with the means of the empirical sciences) as the 'most extreme' evaluations; rather, in the sphere of evaluations, it is the least unequivocal. (10)

Weber's statement fits the platform paradigm, which avoids taking a position on decisive issues, such as labour/value and agency/structure, and borrows concepts from both marketing and critical theory.

In the end, it is worth recalling that we did not take into account all facets of the platformization process, such as the design of platforms (de Reuver, Sorensen and Basole 2018; Lovink 2019) or the different market segments affected by the process (Wilken 2014). We rather adopted a perspective based on the concepts of value and neoliberal subjectivity. By applying the category of labour/value, we came across three main problems: the underrated role of human work, the over-estimation of data mining and the irreconcilability of the concept of commodification and the multi-sided model. One may argue that other interpretations of capitalism are possible, *and actually they are*, in the macro-text of platforms theory, although these interpretations are never declared or explicitly put into action. On the contrary, Marxist formulas are widely used, resulting in a sort of stylistic appropriation of some of the main motifs of Marxist theory. For the platform society to become a new paradigm, a more substantial confrontation with critical theory is needed.

Note

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