CHAPTER 6

# General Conclusion

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Crowdfunding platforms are not just 'trendy' phenomena. They are symptomatic of broader ideological forms inherent to technological innovation, economic change and the emerging 'new capitalism'. As we've made clear in our second chapter, the logics of crowdfunding find their origins in a more distant and plural past, which to some extent serves to legitimize the presence and activities of contemporary platforms. The digital 'renewal' of these practices integrates somewhat diverse ideological values and conceptions. For instance, these play upon the 'gift-counter-gift' logic in order to ensure new forms of financialization of both contents and lived experiences. These same logics of  outsourcing and transfer toward citizen/consumers operate indirectly in the case of crowdsourcing and far more directly with its financial variation, crowdfunding. However, citizen and consumer participation is far from homogeneous and in this respect derides the very notion of a 'crowd', given the unequal usages among social classes in the countries where these platforms currently operate.

   Our third chapter shows that, despite effectively giving visibility and economic valorisation to cultural projects that were formerly left in the shadows, these platforms must also be questioned in regard to the true alternative potential they offer. Having become new intermediaries in the cultural and creative industries, they seek to integrate and create 'ecosystems' using the might of their political, economical and technical apparatuses, which contribute to a

normalization of practices. Far from being the very alternatives that dominant discourses suggest, they effectively preempt concepts stemming from alternative theory and practice without engaging with its finalities. Thus, they become mere relays of broader mainstream communication and marketing logics (content individualization, self-branding, B2B and B2C match-making, personal data-mining, etc.). Beyond their apparent heterogeneity, these platforms now clearly tend toward normalization, both in terms of the rationalization of business models and externally, with regard to forms of editing, skills and actions required from project carriers and funders, as well as in terms of visibility of selected projects.

As chapter 4 shows, these platforms are reinforcing new modes of production, and indeed contributing to the tendency toward outsourced labour, in some cases 'free' labour, under the guise of both increased participation and what has been coined 'gamification'. This leads to polymorphous forms of entrepreneurship, within the organisation of platforms themselves, but also among project carriers, who have an obligation to not only seek funding but activate networks, educate and communicate in order to generate confidence and participation.

The final chapter allows us to reflect on these questions from a broader perspective. Does the development of such platforms, and the uptake of their usage, in the so-called 'Global South', correspond to (or link up with) new opportunities of emancipatory politics, diverging with the homogenizing effects of Western 'free-market' economics and forms of 'globalization' suggested by Appadurai (2001)? The results of our fieldwork in both Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America provide some significant answers to this key question. They offer various complex examples of both compliance and resistance toward international trends, but highlight the constraints of a broadly neocolonial context within which cultural, social and economical players continue to fight out struggles which are often far removed from the simple issue of cultural crowdfunding.

### In the Service of Cultural Democratization?

These forms of cultural financing, which aim to develop individual 'creativity', also attract public and para-public institutions, which may use private platforms or develop their own. Participatory funding makes it possible to 'place cultural activity clearly at the heart of city life, as a major element in innovation, economic dynamism, attractiveness, social cohesion, and influence' (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication 2015: 3). Ultimately, viewed this way, crowdfunding is 'without doubt a strong vector of cultural democratization and a means of reappropriating public action' (Fohr 2016: 23). If we follow this logic, will we soon see similar apparatuses emerge which allow the inhabitants of an area to directly fund a new doctor's surgery, or a new hospital? Or to

finance public transport, if they live in an area abandoned by the authorities as too unprofitable? Looking past the claims of politicians and administrators who see crowdfunding as a complementary tool, rather than an exclusive one, we believe these platforms are the forerunners of logics aiming at generalized outsourcing, with activities, teams and communal and 'public' organizations funded solely by those citizens who consume them—all in the name of 'participative democracy' and a 'collaborative' economy. We should add that, while the use of crowdfunding is primarily a communication activity, it is also a way of overcoming the state's own failures using private economic logics.

## Criticism of these Innovations

Most of those who have such experiences respond with enthusiasm in the initial phases, and remain positive about them, because they met expectations which were fixed in time. But forms of discontent also become visible.

Firstly, constant involvement in the valorization process requires skills far removed from those required to launch the project. This demands time, energy and above all the possession or construction of a 'community' to support the project. Our research shows that, while people are initially very willing to use these platforms to fund their projects, those who have done so once are often hesitant to renew their project. While 83% of project creators state that they would like to use these platforms for funding, only 33% would do so for a second time.

The second concern involves the way the platforms work. MyMajorCompany and Indiegogo, for instance, have been attacked both by project creators and funders, who complain that their financial management and editorial decisions were opaque. Given the business models used, it may be that the argument that such platforms provide an alternative to the cultural industries is invalid. More recently, Patreon received heavy criticism for abruptly revising its methods for charging fees and transferring money. This is the same sort of asymmetric relationship imposed by the Big Five. It is a class relationship which favours the owners of the means of communication: the terms of service can be modified without consultation overnight.

There is also criticism of the platforms' lack of interest in providing assistance, or in offering help when litigation arises. The terms of service state clearly that these platforms are not liable in such disputes. Project creators alone are responsible. These disputes are much more frequent for technology projects. Unlike cultural projects, which are often funded by family members, technology projects attract a wider audience, without offering any guarantee of success. If a project is funded but is not completed then, regardless of the misfortunes encountered during production, the project creator will have to deal with a complaint—and do so without any hope of support from the platform.

Participation in the digital era is described as opening up a wider field of possibilities. But the tensions and contradictions noted so far raise questions

about the weaknesses of such evangelism. The first of these questions is about actual citizen participation, which is often more fantasy than reality. Such participation is far from homogeneous. As with Wikipedia (Levrel 2006) or information production (Rebillard 2007), online participation is very uneven, and often follows the 1–10–100 rule: for each person active full-time, ten work only sporadically, and a further hundred merely consult what has been done by those eleven. Referring to this rule, Dominique Cardon (2010) argues that participation establishes a hierarchy between those who are very active, those who are occasionally active, and the vast majority who consult the services or content produced. Financial participation through crowdfunding follows a similar logic. Beyond a few very active funders, who the platforms emphasize and who are even recognized by the ministry of culture as 'cultural donors', financial involvement varies greatly, and is not related solely to projects.

The support which these apparatuses provide no doubt serves as a political and communicative argument for the importance ascribed to digital technologies and citizen participation. Politically, many cities (including Paris and Grenoble) have launched initiatives with participatory budgets, allowing citizens to finance selected projects. But most of these initiatives are highly fragmented and maintain the established decision-making hierarchies, creating the suspicion that participation is just a way of giving a misleading new shine to existing structures while impacting them very little, if at all. Furthermore, under the guise of emancipation and freedom, 'participatory' digital platforms act as tools of systematic control—for instance, through geolocation, the requirement to use online services, and nudging. It is no small matter that most platforms use proprietary code, far from the values of free and open source software (Smyrnaios 2018).

This leads us back to the requirement/suggestion to participate, and the need to develop effective forms of communication—for instance, educational workshops which invite as many people as possible to participate. While we are not critical of this approach in itself, we are more cautious when this participation involves the outsourcing of tasks and the shifting of financial risk onto the citizen/user/consumer alone. This marks a possible disengagement on the part of institutions and new forms of digital labour which are often 'free', breaking with hard-won legislation and social advances over the course of previous centuries. They are accompanied by educational logics which blur the lines between work and leisure, part of a process of 'gamifying society'.

Finally, there is the question of cultural diversity. The 'community' gives participation its strength, but it also marks its limit. The editorial logics which the platforms establish and community members 'put into practice' do not necessarily lead to openness and cultural diversity. Following other researchers, we have shown that the motivation for participation is based on affective proximity to the project and, often, to the person or people in charge. In such conditions, it is difficult to promote projects with aesthetic or original themes which lie on the fringes of traditional or 'mainstream' logics. Under the guise

of 'participation' and freedom, the platforms valorize these disinterested, outsourced production methods using classic capitalistic logics: data banks, big data, outsourcing tasks, and reducing investment risks. Most of them serve as new intermediaries in cultural and media strategies which have been known for decades.

Participation is therefore paradoxical: the majority of political, economic, cultural and social actors invite us to join in, but they take no responsibility for its ultimate end. In contrast to the emancipatory principles which are claimed, the participatory register is too often based on a sort of instrumentalization—one which involves nothing less than the shaping of socio-economic power relations, to the detriment of citizens and workers both nationally and internationally.

## Living in Project Mode

More generally, these platforms raise questions about the displacement of social structures in which the project becomes central. Every moment of life is governed by a project. From an early age, one has to build a life project. Students, the unemployed, academics, retirees, politicians—all must base their lives and work around the constant renewal of projects. Managers define several different project models: project companies, project portfolios, project teams, and so on (Asquin et al. 2005). Mainstream media is full of articles encouraging us to develop our economic life, our entrepreneurial life, and our personal life in 'project mode'. There are a vast number of books like Charles Smith's (2017), full of tips for succeeding in these new approaches. The challenge is to overcome all possible barriers to achieving one's goal, facing down constant challenges. 'Project planning' is defined by its unique, non-renewable nature. It involves the experiential dimension discussed above. Success depends on one's ability to master these unforeseeable events and to monitor a range of environmental constraints, all in a determined, 'irreversible' period of time. Moreover, this conception of life in project mode correlates to a dynamic aim of progress and increased action on the part of citizens.

Paradoxically, the individualization which 'project' mode brings with it is necessarily accompanied by forms of collaboration and sharing. Crowdfunding platforms valorize this project mode, and are saturated with this ideology—a genuine instance of social engineering, based on the short term, the permanent fragmentation of individual social spaces, the multiplication and diversification of skills, and permanent competition. In their own way, they track broader transformations in social structure. For this reason, as the proponents of the most retrograde social reforms claim, 'pedagogy' is necessary. Any contradiction can supposedly be dissolved with some 'educational' effort. As we have seen throughout this book, we are far from Foucault's disciplinary society: these platforms illustrate and contribute to the development of suggestions

whose nature is, in reality, that of a command. These platforms seem to reject any obligation, and deploy discursive strategies where we can observe a shift towards forms of suggestion which should be followed—but without guaranteeing success for any users who comply. They participate in processes of normalization which, once accepted and naturalized, are no longer questioned. Criticising them becomes all the more complex as there is no longer any obligation—an argument used systematically by the platforms whenever criticism is raised. Lastly, crowdfunding's use of brief, short-term modalities of action denies any form of long-term commitment.

Other forms of participation and collaboration exist, some financial and others not, and these deserve more attention. They are part of the logic of the commons, of a 'commonwealth' (Hardt and Negri 2009), and serve the collective on the basis of exchanging individual resources. The relationship between proposals and participative funding would no longer be exclusively monetary, taking in broader forms of exchanging and bartering skills, places, tools, and so on. Like some forms of crowdsourcing and some 'alternative' platforms, this approach is based on pooling services which can be traded in space and time—a collective commitment where each person contributes what they want (i.e. money, skills, or time), enabling the means of production to be reappropriated (Scholz, 2016). These forms of participation invite us to overcome the difficulties and contradictions of independent initiatives—for instance, independent media initiatives (Fuchs 2014)—and so revive the links between the individual and the community. They could draw inspiration from the modalities established by the open source community, for instance, or in agriculture by 'short circuits', which often aim to produce and share their goods on the fringes of capitalist economic market logic. Such forms of participation are based on solidarity and equitable economies, and demonstrate both efficiency and a willingness to consider digital tools as a means and not an end, tying them to democratic, economic and environmental goals.

We wish to end by stressing this particular point, for we must indeed question platforms and their usages with regard to the impact they have on the environment and on global warming. So often referred to in terms of creativity, innovation, democratized usage and other such 'one-click wonders', these platforms – like all ICTs – clearly no longer correspond to the angelic expectations formulated in the 1990s (reduction in ink and paper consumption and waste, limited transport-related pollution thanks to remote working, etc.), even if they have increased knowledge transfers, exchanges and thus productivity (Rodhain and Fallery 2013). Upstream however, before we even begin to discuss either the cultural merits or the ideological threats posed by these apparatuses, we must recognise that as part of the digital economy, they require the extraction of costly raw materials, the exploitation of precarious labour, 'big data' and 'cloud' storage centres which are of course far from immaterial with regard to their high energy consumption. Downstream, the functions these platforms perform and their usages also imply ever increasing consumption of energy

and contribute to climate change. Without a collective awareness and appropriate decisions on the part of all players 'participating' in this inherently reckless activity, the cultural show will go on, but until when, in what conditions and with what ultimate results?

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