

PLATFORM, SHARING OR GIG? AMBIGUITIES AND AMBIVALENCES OF THE DIGITALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY

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The rapid growth of the debate around the crucial transformations that our economy is having through the development and public diffusion of digital technologies seems to have a consequence: the confusing multiplications of words and concepts regarding labour and the following difficulty in formulating univocal definitions. Thus, such ambiguity often impedes to focus the real extent that the impact of digital technologies is having on our society. While in its initial stage their potential in reshaping the organization of services provision has attracted optimist comments from scholars and commentators, especially after workers started to organize and struggle, a flourishing critical literature has later emerged.

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In this article we want to frame a potential critical point of view on these transformations, focusing on some specific configurations they assumed: the platform business model and the so-called gig and sharing economy. We will start by scrutinizing the concept of platform. At first glance, platform is a business model allowing for the creation of new market places for the exchange of labour power, resources and assets, but they are also responsible of reconfiguring working processes and labour relations towards an algorithm-based exploitation. Secondly, we will move towards sharing economy and gig economy, which represent emerging sectors that, on the other side, condense larger socio-economic transformations.

Our aim is to show how these concepts represent a contested terrain between long term innovations, digital technologies and labour struggles.

Platform as disruptive business model

Platforms have often been associated with a neutral imaginary in which they function as a digital infrastructure intended to facilitate the interaction between demand and supply of goods and services provided by private entities (Gillespie, 2010). However, things are much more complex than this. Firstly, as Sundarayan (2016) underlines, they emerged as a distinct organizational model containing both the characteristics of a horizontal marketplace and the typical hierarchy of private companies. Secondly, platform seems to have become a new buzzword, covering various transformations happening in the global economy which are not easy to distinguish and classify (Plantin et al., 2016). In this regard, Gillespie (2010) writes of a general tendency towards a platformization¹ of the economy in which companies of all kinds are restructuring by using the possibilities offered by digital technologies aiming to avoid legal and labour limits to their initiative. In any case, we could highlight three main features of platform

1 Despite the variety and the ambiguity characterizing digital platforms, there have also been attempts to classify them. Firstly, according to their mission, differentiating between for-profit and non-profit platforms (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017) and free or paid services (Schuckert, Peters, and Pilz, 2018). Secondly, according to their functions, differentiating between crowdwork platforms providing services remotely, such as in the case of Amazon Mechanical Turk, and on-demand platforms providing services on-site like Deliveroo or Uber do (De Stefano, 2015; Huws et al., 2018).

However, a noteworthy classification comes from Srnicek's book *Platform Capitalism* (2016). Here, he classifies platforms according to their relationship with data management, which he considers as the real core of platforms representing their main distinctive feature. In this sense, similarly to what fossil fuels has represented for the old manufacturing industry: platforms do not simply use big data, but they are based on their ability of collecting and classifying them in the most efficient possible way.

business model (Parker, Van Alstyne and Choudary, 2017): the shift from the property of commodities to the governance of processes; the opening towards external interactions more than a closed productive process; the creation of an ecosystem of prosumers.

This complexity is reflected into the evaluation of platform impact on labour and economy. At the beginning of the phenomenon, a more optimistic understanding of platforms emerged from the notion of sharing economy, in which the role of digital platforms in overcoming private property and rigid employment relationships has been emphasized (Gold, 2004; Pais and Provasi, 2015; Sundarajan, 2016; Schor, 2016). Nevertheless, a more critical conceptualization of platforms developed alongside with the worldwide rise of platform workers' struggles, which have highlighted the strict relationship this model has with long term socio-economic transformations (Huws, 2014, 2019; Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta, 2018; Stanford, 2017). Thus, while platforms on the one hand present the same tendency to avoid regulation and responsibilities which characterized network capitalism debate during 90s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), on the other they have benefited from the social conditions that neoliberal policies have produced by undermining the welfare state, reducing wages and downsizing workers' rights. Both, in fact, have motivated an increasing number of individuals towards gig or sharing economy, becoming a crucial factor for the rise of platforms (Srnicsek, 2016; Scholz, 2017).

In this article, we want to focus particularly on so-called lean platforms (Srnicsek, 2016) that offer the possibility of hiring a specific asset for a time provided by a private third party. The problem in this latter case is that it often outsources costs and risks of the business on individuals. Moreover, rather than neutrally facilitating market transactions between private entities, they seem to make profit through a process of "infrastructurization" in which they encourage and instill to their users' specific attitudes and behaviors (Bruni and Esposito, 2019). By becoming infrastructures (Plantin et al., 2016), platforms develop a dependence of users towards them, emerging as a central actor around which economic life, especially in urban spaces, is organized. Therefore, the necessary conditions for such platforms to operate include a large network around which they organize business activities (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Andreassen et al., 2018). However, the mere ability to establish networks is not the only factor for lean platforms to make profits. Indeed, algorithms are crucial to provide the possibility to govern them (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016 Popescu, Petrescu, and Sabie, 2018). For this reason, the propriety of algorithms represents a key component of platform economy, transforming digital technologies into a sort of black box that platforms staunchly

protect. Furthermore, algorithms are also used to rapidly process data (Srnicsek 2016), “learning” and allowing platforms to quickly adapt to what is needed to preserve their position in the market (Domingos, 2015; O’Neil, 2016). This is a crucial skill in the scenario of “Great War of Platforms” (Srnicsek, 2016), where they compete to achieve a position allowing them to survive to the monopolistic tendency characterizing their market. In other words, it is the private property of algorithms and big data which allow platforms to extract and concentrate in their hands the greatest part of the value produced in the network they establish.

Contradictions in sharing and gig economy

In few words, we could frame platforms as a socio-economic² actor characterized by the creation of an ecosystem of prosumers and its algorithmic governance, the development of a digital infrastructure, labour deregulation. On the other hand, we may frame sharing and gig economy as particular sectors where the lean typology has been adopted in an extensive and intensive way to embed a large set of activities and to trigger a rapid growth of income and investments. In other words, if platform can be considered either as a digital device and a business model, sharing and gig are the content operating within that framework. Anyway, in some cases it is difficult to distinguish between gig employments and sharing activities —so much that some phenomena are often labelled with one or the other term. Newness and informality seem to be their features and we are going to explore them.

Far from adopting the idea that sharing economy is a new kind “that emerged, almost out of nowhere” (Huws, 2017)³, this contribution relates all of the main features emerged to longer-term transformations started at the end of 20th century and continued until the current one. However, the debate on sharing economy started much before 2014, giving birth to what is now a solid literature on this topic. We may relate the origin of this label to the so-called Californian ideology, which is usually intended as

2 We must add that platforms could be observed from the angle of the political and legal implications of their operations too. Benjamin Bratton’s (2015) notion of ‘platform sovereignty’ is a particularly important and influent instance of this trend, which tests the notion of government, governance, and governmentality from an original geopolitical angle. Referring to Benjamin Bratton (2015), we could also add another dimension, distinguishing the emerging of a distinct “geopolitics of platforms”. The role of China and the diffusion of platforms in other Asian countries, clearly show not only how digital platforms are not just a Global North phenomenon, but emerging countries, for instance China or Russia, play a crucial role in this global competition, conflict and cooperation.

3 Huws’ subject is actually platforms, but this “suggestion” is valid for the “sharing economy” too.

an optimistic and technology-driven approach depicted as a combination between “the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies” (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995). However, it is especially after “digital capitalism” (Schiller, 2000) became a popular topic that a more concerned consideration of the potential impact of sharing economy in the future of our societies has emerged. For example, in 2004 Yochai Benkler (2004) stated that this new kind of economy would be the very core of the most advanced economy. The year after, instead, Michel Bauwen’s (2005) focus shifted to P2P⁴ economy, which he sees as it “gives rise to the emergence of a third mode of production, a third mode of governance, and a third mode of property”. Despite these pioneering works, sharing economy exploded after 2007 financial crisis (Belk, 2007; Huws, 2017). Since then, a bloom of publications shored up the theoretical and political meanings of sharing economy, boosting from 2013, when a “paradigm shift”, “a new era of manufacturing and logistics” became clear (Löffler and Tschiesner, 2013). Nonetheless, the sharing perspective did not properly take shape. According to authors like Trebor Scholz (2016) not only sharing economy wasn’t supposed to be this way, but it became a “Trojan horse”, seducing an increasing number of people with slogans such as What’s mine is yours, providing us instead a “Jurassic form of labour”. Again, Sundararayan underlines how this was clear since the very beginning: “the infusion of venture capital and the emergence of platforms with large corporate investors lead many to believe that any ideals associated with a pre-2010 sharing economy cannot be sustained” (p. 26).

Something similar characterize the critical debate on gig economy, divided between those supporting the idea of its longer history and those who instead emphasize the disruptive role of digital technologies in making it popular. Actually, the idea that domestic labour (Flanagan, 2019) and —more generally— non-standard (Stanford, 2017) or informal labour (De Nicola, 2019) are the main source for gig economy’s development is fairly shared among scholars. In this sense, some of these authors have highlighted how the growth of gig economy should be considered an evolutive outcome of the expansion of contingent work within general employment structures (Bertram, 2016; Sargeant, 2017; Dunn, 2017). More specifically, as for example Gerald Friedman (2014) points out, gig economy developed in the United States much before the spread of digital labor (Fuchs, 2016) —especially in the construction sector and in agriculture, for instance— and for this reason it should not be overlapped neither limited to digital platforms. According to this interpretation, the spread of ‘gigging’ it depends on the succession

4 Peer-to-Peer economy is a model where people do business among each-other with no intermediations by third parties.

in the last period of phases of economic recession and of consequent de-regulation of forms of employment, more than to the development of new technologies of intermediation. Therefore, gig economy rather than heralding the emergence of a new, more flexible and dynamic work culture, in a context of unintentional and widespread situations of both employment-related and economic difficulty going at least since 90s, it has affirmed as a repository of last resort opportunities for the supply of work. On the other hand, it should also be stressed that it is when new forms of labour organization based on digital platforms have developed (Flanagan, 2019), alongside the progressive erosion of standard employments (Stanford, 2017), that those sectors mostly characterized by gig employments have been transformed into some of the most promising economies at a global level (Manyika et al., 2016; Crouch, 2019).

In both cases, it is quite clear as these sectors do not emerge from nothing but condense some long-time processes thanks to the implementation of platform business model. Furthermore, both sharing and gig lead a different concept of labour to the standard one: in the first case, it is presented as a peer-to-peer activity enriching all the participants; in the second one, labour is downgraded to a leisure and casual activity. Moreover, gig economy immediately presents itself as deeply intertwined with the concepts of sharing and platform economy (Ravenelle, 2018). This immediately poses the question of how gig and sharing economy could be conceptualized, resulting in a common difficulty in categorizing these activities as labour or not labour. In particular, legal approaches to this debate have especially focused the status of workers, debating whether they should be considered as employees, autonomous or independent (Friedman, 2014; Stewart, Stanford, 2017). Antonio Casilli (2019) has pointed out that from this point of view, digital labour in gig and sharing economy should be interpreted as the rise of a generalized regime of marchandage —a concept indicating how the decline of standardized, salaried, contract-based employment, intimately linked to the organizational model of the traditional company, enables the reappearance of old-fashioned forms of sale and lease of work. This labour conceptualization has effects also on social protections (Manyika et al., 2016; Wood et al. 2019). among them, we may also include gender discrimination or discrimination 3.0 (Barzilay and Anat Ben-David, 2017; van Doorn, 2017), resulting in salary and wage gaps, work-and-life unbalance and weakness of labour protections (including threats to privacy and increased risk of sexual harassment) to just mention few of the consequences of its expansion.

Finally, the focus on public policy intervention in the gig and sharing economy has turned the spotlight onto the potential role of new and old union practices of collective

bargaining (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). This, especially in light of an evident difficulty of agitating labour activism within such a fragmented and often not spatially contiguous working context. Moreover, the efficacy of unions and industrial relations is also related to workers' employment status and so it is undermined by the fact that many companies - either digital platforms or not - do not hire gig and sharing economy workers as standard employees. On the other hand, many of these workers are demanding the same labour rights and welfare benefits as standard employees (Prassl, 2018), often successfully contesting this classification. Therefore, despite difficulties, unions' activities are emerging as a driving force in the development of social and labour protections for those working in the gig economy (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018), providing the necessary social pressure for both elaborating and possibly adopting new regulatory policies.

Conclusions

In the previous pages, we have sketched a critical frame for increasingly popular concepts such as platform, sharing and gig economy. We have highlighted how they are the result of having become a contested terrain, where its critical aspects have emerged following workers which have worldwide broken the enthusiastic narrative lying at its origins.

Therefore, we intend the contesting platform worker as a paradigm able to clarify and reveal not only what is usually hidden to workers, meaning the peculiar exploitation they suffer, but also the impact digital platforms have on the rest of the society. The disattending of sharing economy promises and the rise of a scenario where the spread of digital platforms lead to an expansion of casual and unprotected working opportunities, not only challenge traditional employments and welfare states, but also the same possibility for individuals to fill their basic reproductive needs. In other words, platform capitalism is not only disrupting the way in which these sectors used to operate - absorbing in global capitalist accumulation activities which were once peripheral and informally conducted - but this is corresponding to an increasing demand for individuals to move resources from their reproductive sphere in order of supporting this labour regime.

Without the long-term consequences of neoliberal policies in relaxing employment protections and undermining welfare protection —particularly enhanced in the context of 2007 austerity policies— platforms simply could not achieve such a popularity. They, in fact, not only have provided the ideal legal and ideological environment to avoid their

responsibilities towards workers, but they also contributed in pushing an increasing number of individuals to casual working opportunities. More than being the mere result of technological development, in fact, digital platforms seem to be the result of thirty years of global neoliberal policies which have opened to platforms and their investors the possibility of using technologies to exacerbate the extractive tendencies of capitalism. In this perspective, digital platforms are not giving birth to any new economy of a disinterested sharing of goods and services, but they very much resemble old-fashioned economic dynamics based on dispossession and exploitation.

Nonetheless, digital platforms are also a breakthrough with the past. Even if digital technologies could not be considered as the only factor boosting platform economy, this does not mean that they have a marginal role. Indeed, algorithms and data properties are key in guaranteeing the possibility to fully control not only their workforce, but the whole network they establish in urban contexts. Thus, even if digital technologies may significantly benefit both workers and the society, they are instead used as a black box able to darken what happens within platforms.

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