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*Capitalism in the Platform Age: Emerging Assemblages of Labour and Welfare in Urban Spaces.* By Sandro Mezzadra, Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti, & Maurilio Pirone (Eds.),  
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**Abstract.** This edited volume, emerging from the Horizon 2020 project "Platform Labor in Urban Spaces" (PLUS), offers a critical, interdisciplinary investigation into the evolving nature of platform capitalism as an urban phenomenon. Focused on the operations of four distinct platforms—Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, and Helpling—across seven major European cities (including Bologna, London, and Lisbon), the book argues that digital platforms are not merely new firms but powerful digital infrastructures that constitute a new phase of capitalism: the Platform Age. The core analysis centers on the "platformization" of labour, urban life, and welfare, exploring how algorithmic management creates a "complex hyper-urbanscape" where precarity, affect, and feminised labour are intensified. The research employs a theoretical framework rooted in alternative, heterodox, and Marxian economics, focusing on the processes of valorization and the crisis of the historical "standard employment relationship" in the West. Crucially, the volume does not limit itself to critique but explores emerging worker subjectivities, informal unionism, and tangible alternatives, including proposals for new social protection models like universal basic income and innovative local governance practices.

**Keywords.** Platform Capitalism; Platform Labour; Platformization; Urban Governance; Welfare State Crisis.

**JEL.** B51; J81; L89; P13, R58.

## Book Review

**C***apitalism in the Platform Age: Emerging Assemblages of Labour and Welfare in Urban Spaces*, edited by Sandro Mezzadra, Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti, and Maurilio Pirone, is a timely and foundational contribution to critical digital studies and urban political economy. Born out of the ambitious Horizon 2020 Project PLUS ("Platform Labor in Urban Spaces"), the volume moves beyond the simple characterization of the "gig economy" to frame digital platforms as the "generative mechanisms" that define a new phase of accumulation—platform capitalism. The central intellectual task of the book is to analyze the "intertwining" of labour, urban transformations, and welfare, arguing that these dimensions are fundamentally reorganized and restructured by the systemic deployment of digital platforms.

The book's empirical depth—drawing on comparative case studies of four platforms (Airbnb, Deliveroo, Helpling, Uber) across seven distinct European urban settings (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Tallinn)—is matched by its theoretical ambition, which is firmly rooted in

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heterodox and Marxist traditions of alternative economics. It serves as a necessary corrective to analyses that treat digital platforms as purely technological or market phenomena, insisting instead on their political and infrastructural role as devices that enforce a "**conduct of conducts**" within the urban milieu. This review will examine the book's theoretical deployment of "platformization," its detailed empirical findings on the variegation of labour and the infrastructuralization of the city, and its final proposals for developing emancipatory alternatives to the platform model.

## II. Theoretical Foundations: Platformization and the Crisis of the Standard

The first section of the book, "Theoretical Foundations," establishes the conceptual tools necessary for a critical engagement with platform capitalism. The editors and contributors consciously distance their work from "neutral" descriptions of technology, instead positioning platforms squarely within the history and drive of capital accumulation.

### A. Platform Capitalism and Valorization

Andrea Fumagalli's chapter on The Process of Valorization in Platform Capitalism is central, providing a contemporary update on Marxian theory. It explores how digital platforms, in their drive to "capture interactions and act as intermediators," convert social life into vehicles for the valorization of capital. The argument is that platforms are inherently extractive, not just in terms of data mining, but in their capacity to disrupt the work-life balance and capture value from formerly non-commodified interactions. This perspective is vital, suggesting that the logic of digital intermediation is a new engine of accumulation, fundamentally altering how surplus value is generated.

### B. The Infrastructural and Political Power of Platforms

Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, and Mattia Frapporti's chapters expand the understanding of platforms as digital infrastructures. Platforms are portrayed as more than just a layer of the economy; they are "generative mechanisms" that establish the very protocols and conditions for participation. This infrastructural power transforms the internet into an "urbanization of the internet," where the web becomes a digital copy of urban power relations, colonizing space through the management of time. This reframing—seeing platforms as complex, self-optimizing, computational systems that regulate human labour and social interactions—underscores the political, rather than merely commercial, function of platform operations.

### C. The Crisis of the Standard Employment Relationship

Maurilio Pirone's contribution, Out of the Standard. Towards a Global Approach to Platform Labour, is crucial for policy analysis. It critiques the European focus on classifying platform workers as employees as the "sole gateway to full social protections". Pirone argues that this focus relies on the historical, geographically-specific identification of the "standard employment relationship" (full-time, open-ended contract) as a universal truth, a product of specific 19th-century capital/labour negotiations. By exposing this historical contingency, the chapter implicitly calls for universal and adaptable social protection models that acknowledge the global, variegated, and non-standard nature of modern labour. This challenge to the welfare state model forms the second major theoretical strand of the book.

### III. Empirical Evidence: Variegation, Urban Transformation, and Frictions

Part III of the book, "Notes From the Field," translates the theoretical concepts into grounded, empirical research. By focusing on specific platforms in diverse urban contexts, the book demonstrates the heterogeneity of "platformization" and the emergence of "variegated platform capitalism".

#### A. Urban Scale and Labor Process

The comparative study by Marco Marrone and Giorgio Pirina on Deliveroo in Bologna and Uber in Lisbon is exemplary. It shows that the platform's business model and the operation of its algorithms are not globally uniform but adapt to local specificities, such as the urban structure, the labour process, and existing institutions. This variegation, the authors suggest, is what allows platforms to simultaneously define global operating standards and adapt their strategy to local contexts in pursuit of a "rent position". This finding complicates universal regulatory attempts and necessitates context-specific urban governance responses.

#### B. Affect, Gender, and Migration in Platform Work

Several chapters highlight the social and political stratification inherent in platform labour:

- **Feminised Labour and Affect:** Nelli Kambouri's chapter, *Affect, Precarity and Feminised Labour in Airbnb in London*, explores how the platform relies on affective labour—often feminised and invisible—to mediate interactions and manage risk. Airbnb hosts and cleaners are subjected to precarity and a blurring of work/life boundaries inherent in the platform's extractive logic.
- **Infrastructuring Migration and Racism:** Stefania Animento argues that platforms are involved in the "infrastructuring" of human labour mobility across national and platform borders. Platforms rely on a disposable and cheap migrant labour force and use their systems to channel and mould mobilities. By adjusting their business models, platforms can create a pool of mobile labour force, often offering better conditions initially, only to later cut benefits and reduce wages, trapping disadvantaged workers in a cycle of precarity. The book thus successfully connects digital infrastructure, logistics, and race/migration studies.
- **Decent Work Perceptions:** The research on platform taxi drivers in Tallinn provides a contrasting, detailed look at workers' perceptions of "decent work," underscoring how working conditions are subjectively experienced and shaped by local labour market norms.

### IV. Resistance and Alternatives: The Politics of Subjectivity and Welfare

A crucial strength of the book is its commitment to using worker struggles not just as a mapping exercise, but as a "methodic principle" to guide research, focusing on "frictions and tensions" and spaces for "appropriation and subversion" of the platform code. The final section offers concrete proposals for a post-platform future.

#### A. Emerging Workers' Subjectivity and Organization

Federico Chicchi and Marco Marrone's chapter explores the rise of a new workers' subjectivity through informal unionism. The global mobilisation of riders and drivers, a powerful social movement, has spurred intense law-making processes, leading to diversified labour processes and market

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dynamics. This new subjectivity is characterized by "Latent Conflict, Invisible Organisation," suggesting that everyday struggles and micro-resistance (such as manipulating algorithms or using counter-bots) are as important as formal union organizing.

B. Policy and Governance Solutions

The volume concludes with several chapters offering a policy roadmap towards alternatives, bridging academic critique with tangible policy proposals:

- **Building Alternatives:** Melissa Renau Cano, Ricard Espelt, and Mayo Fuster Morell discuss How to Build Alternatives to Platform Capitalism. They provide examples of cooperatives and other collective models that aim to appropriate the technological means of production and redistribute value away from venture capital.
- **Social Protection Reform:** Andrea Fumagalli et al. argue for Social Protection, Basic Income and Taxation in the Digital Economy. They contend that the valorization of life itself as a mode of production in the Platform Age necessitates new welfare models. A universal basic income, in this context, is re-evaluated not as a palliative but as an "alternative model of production and life," favouring the production of eco-friendly use value over harmful exchange value.
- **Urban Governance Best Practices:** Michelangelo Secchi, Franco Tomassoni, and Giovanni Allegretti emphasize the importance of Local Best Practices: Urban Governance and the Ongoing Platformization Process. They argue that, due to the platforms' fundamentally urban nature, local governance and municipalities are critical sites of regulation and resistance. They provide guidelines for urban actors to manage and shape the platformization process.

V. Critical Assessment and Final Verdict

*Capitalism in the Platform Age* is a magisterial work that successfully executes its ambitious, integrated agenda. Its primary success lies in its sophisticated theoretical framing, which refuses to isolate technology from political economy, and its empirical richness, which demonstrates the **variegated** and context-dependent nature of platform capitalism across European cities. By combining heterodox economics, critical urban studies, and labour process theory, the book provides a robust framework for understanding the "emerging assemblages of labour and welfare".

The critical challenge posed by the book is less a flaw in its analysis and more a reflection of the scope of the problem it addresses. While the proposals for "super-soft diplomacy" and a "politics of hope" are compelling, the practical political difficulties of implementing radical social protection reforms, such as a universal basic income, and achieving coordinated urban governance across numerous states in the face of platform power remain immense. The final step—moving from mapping resistance to establishing systemic, non-capitalist alternatives—is acknowledged as an ongoing, complex struggle.

Nevertheless, the book's value as a comprehensive, critical, and interdisciplinary resource cannot be overstated. By focusing on labour, urban space, and welfare as a single, interconnected system, and by rooting its analysis in European experiences while demanding a "de-Westernization" of platform studies, the editors and contributors have produced an essential text. It is required reading for any academic or policymaker concerned with the

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future of work, the city, and social protection in the digital era. This volume is arguably the most important academic analysis of platform capitalism to emerge in the last five years.



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