# DEBATING PLATFORM CAPITALISM INTRODUCTION

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The following text represents one of the first results of a collective knowledge production of two partners in a European-wide research project on Platform Labour in Urban Spaces. The research aims not only to empirically examine the rise of the "gig economy" in European cities, which, overall, has been little studied and even less in comparison between European cities, but moreover to suggest as to how we can conceptualize this rise and the changing living and labour conditions in urban space within the context of an emerging platform urbanism. We assume that an understanding of this rise is unthinkable without a privileged perspective on the changing working conditions, making platform labour a central entry point to understanding the global transformations in times of platform capitalism.

During this work, which began in early 2019, we found ourselves unexpectedly and quite suddenly in a global political landscape, which was interspersed with the measures taken in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, and from which a global economic crisis is now emerging. Even before that, the rise of the gig economy was on everyone's lips, and a transition to what some have come to call a digital capitalism was conceivable. There were also already clear signs of conflict in the field: sometimes successful strikes by courier drivers, YouTubers organizing in a trade union or individual and collective resistance practices carried out in countless forms, in which they directed themselves against the invisible "ghost work" that they carried out on their home computers on a daily basis (for example, in the context of their work on Amazon Mechanical Turk or

other crowd-working platforms worldwide). First discussions in trade unions and first transnational connections like in the Fairwork Foundation debated what "good work" may be in the platform economy, often in cooperation with platforms themselves - which seems to be a very "German model" of compromise search. In many parts of the world the self-organization and struggles of riders have challenged such a model, opening up new political spaces and even raising the question of a democratization or social appropriation of the huge power accumulated by platforms. Multifarious experiences of "platform cooperativism" have also tackled this question from a peculiar angle.

As a result of the C-19 crisis, it quickly became clear that previous decades of austerity measures had undermined health provision in many countries around the world, and particularly so in Europe, and that the measures taken in government responses to the spreading virus —at least in many parts of Europe— had to do with the partial or imminent collapse of this health care system. At the same time, the public anger about this did not initially take on a particularly strong character due to the measures taken to combat the pandemic, which were able to reduce the number of deaths and cases of infection. Positive attitudes towards governments and their measures where therefore quite widespread. These attitudes, now flanked by enormous and also astonishing national and European interventions and mobilization of resources, have hardly been interrupted, even if here and there, as in Italy, strikes have taken place and mobilizations around such topics as education and health are spreading or, as in Germany, the anger against the restrictions and their everyday and economic implications briefly flared up in right-wing, anti-state protests, only to be overshadowed in the meantime by demonstrations of solidarity with the protests against the police assassination of George Floyd in the US – and a strong critic of racist policing.

However, with regard to the gig economy in the six European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, Tallinn) that we are investigating, our research relatively quickly revealed how the period of the lockdown could be maintained relatively comfortably for some, while for others it led to enormous risks. Those who were allowed to stay at home were dependent on a segregated workforce that continued to maintain care and comfort in the city: for example, in care and household, at home with laptops or as courier drivers, they struggled daily to secure their income, not to be driven out of their homes and against the potentially deadly virus. Those employed in the gig economy in particular were disproportionately pushed into precarious jobs. Although it was initially claimed that the virus did not discriminate under the conditions of this pandemic, the social dimensions quickly became apparent with regard to the degree of infection and lethality.

It was precisely the labour that suddenly appeared to be "systemically relevant" and moved into the public domain that proved to be particularly vulnerable, precisely because the formal status of work is formally determining access to health care -and less so where —like in the Gig Economy— so called self-employment comes as standard.

At the same time, the way in which tech companies made huge gains on the stock markets during the COVID-19 crises —and even though companies like Palantir were uninvited to use their software offerings for the city's infrastructure due to protests—, the influence of tech companies such as the Gates Foundation (which coordinates educational initiatives) or ex-Google CEO Eric Schmidt (in the transformation of New York's communications and government organization) paints a frightening picture of the surprisingly even faster rise of what is called Big Tech. It is precisely the disruptive function of the platform model that the following texts take as their starting point. And such disruptive character appears even harsher as the Covid-19 crisis. Far from merely offering "neutral" infrastructure by collecting data and providing services platforms prompt a reconfiguration of labour and life (not only) in our cities, in which the spatial hierarchization and the valorization of real estate are just tips of the iceberg for a reorganization of urban lives.

The research project, from which the following discussions on the concept of platform capitalism and especially of platform labour emerge, asks "from the perspective of labour" how these economic developments are to be understood —with the aim of considering what kind of urban spaces we will need and envisage in and for the future. By looking at platform labour, we believe, we search for (in-)appropriate forms and practices of daily life and work when the platformization not only of labour but also of urban spaces become the new normal. What we find is not only that labour is algorithmically organized and controlled, but also how this is also always already contested by those working in the Gig Economy. While platform labour with all its precarious (pre) conditions seems part of the tendency to disenfranchise not only labour but also social rights by challenging given employment standards (where they exist) and welfare states (where they exist), they make it even harder to secure the social reproduction needed. Hence, it promotes a political economy and social relations that we cannot pursue if we do not want to continue sliding from one crisis into the next.

Although we use such terms as sharing and gig economy, we are convinced that the concept of "platform capitalism" enables a more accurate gaze on the topics at stake in the pages that follow. An analysis of the operations of platforms cannot ignore their deep enmeshment in the fabric of contemporary capitalism. Platforms are driven by the logic of valorization and accumulation of capital, they are constantly seeking out "new

avenues for profit, new markets, new commodities, and new means of exploitation" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 3). The analysis of platform labor and platform urbanism that we pursue in our research project is meant to map the further entrenchment of the rule of capital that is connected with such processes. And at the same time, it aims to shed light on the spaces and opportunities to contest such rule that emerge from the embodied experience of workers and "users" that deal with platforms on a daily basis. Far from embracing a kind of "negative" critique of technology, we are interested in the multifarious ways in which algorithms and the very technological core of platforms become sites of struggle —in a way foreshadowing a different use of platforms.

Looking at what is often termed sharing and gig economy from the angle of platform capitalism leads us to ask relevant questions regarding the "source of value" in these domains of economic activity. Our research on "platform labor" points to the persistent relevance of labor from this point of view, which also means to the persistent relevance of exploitation. At the same time, in platform capitalism processes of labor exploitation run parallel to processes of extraction and manipulation of data, which build a second fundamental source of value. From Nick Srnicek (2017) to Shoshana Zuboff (2019) several scholars have underscored the relevance of this extractive moment for the working of platform and "surveillance" capitalism. There is therefore a need to look for innovative ways to combine struggles against exploitation with struggles against dispossession in platform capitalism. The extraction of data is indeed a form of dispossession of something that we produce in common. Taking back the control of data builds a crucial field of struggle in platform capitalism, which invokes a combined action at the urban, national, and transnational level. Needless to say, the European dimension is for us particularly important in this regard.

Stressing the extractive dimension of the operations of platforms allows establishing connections with other domains of contemporary capitalism —for instance with finance. More generally an investigation of platform capitalism is relevant today even beyond the boundaries of the "sector". Our research project joins indeed a growing body of investigations that invite to look at platform capitalism, platform labor, and platform urbanism to discern trends that are reshaping capitalism writ large. The blurring of the boundary between work and life, the spread of algorithmic forms of control across the world of labor and urban spaces, the entrenchment of a logistical rationality within the social fabric are just a couple of those trends. Focussed on "platform capitalism," our research project has therefore wider implications for a general theory of capitalism and society in the present. The pieces that follow are just the first outcomes of a work that will go on for a long time.