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BOOK REVIEWS

José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018), *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 226.

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Capitalism, as both its supporters and detractors have long known, tends to be restructured when a crisis hits. Since the 2008 crisis, new digital technologies have given rise to new organizational forms and modes of exploitation that have jointly created a new way of accumulating capital. Described by a proliferating multitude of epochal labels like the "third globalization" and "fourth industrial revolution" or more tailored designations like the "sharing economy," the "attention economy", and the "gig economy", this digitally-powered transformation of capitalism centers on the extraction and (monopolistic) use of arguably the most valuable raw material of the twenty-first century: data. The practical realization of the new, data-based capital accumulation is carried by the business model of the platform – a multisided digital framework that connects individuals with each other and with goods or services. The connectivity they create gives digital platforms a great deal of social and commercial power. They define the terms on which individuals interact and exchange, and have exclusive access to valuable information regarding those individuals' details, interests, and preferences. As more and more users provide platforms with more and more information to be sold to well-paying third parties, employed to stimulate more sales, or used to (often aggressively) increase productivity, platforms' impact on society is steadily growing.

Indeed, an expanding range of human activities today takes place through platforms. Some 45 per cent of the global population is active on social media. Besides engaging with friends and family through platforms like Facebook, recent research conducted in the United States and Europe also shows that the majority of people under the age of 50 also get their news primarily from social media, rather than from print media or television (Matsa et al. 2018; Shearer and Grieco 2019). Meanwhile, the share of e-commerce sales through platforms like Amazon in total retail sales has grown by double digits in many parts of the world, and currently stands at just over 10 per cent in the US and 23 per cent in China (US Census Bureau News 2019; J.P. Morgan Global Payment 2019). Similarly reflecting the increasing influence of digital platforms on both society and economy, the employment share of gig economy platforms like Uber and Glovo is growing fast, already today ranging from 1 and 7 per cent among OECD countries (Schwellnus 2019).

Though these developments have been realized by a wide array of platforms and groups of users, they are led by a small pack of leading companies that have, at dizzying speed, achieved equally dizzying levels of economic prowess. The "Big Five" of companies driving the platform economy (Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook) now occupy the first five spots on the list of the ten most valuable companies globally, while only one of them (Microsoft), was on that list ten years ago. As the might of these companies grew, society has been struggling to keep apace. The 2000s were, in many quarters, marked by an (in hindsight perhaps naïvely optimistic) emphasis on digital technologies' innovative potential for matters like cultural production and political mobilization (Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006). In recent years, scandals pertaining to issues like platform users' privacy, the Big Five's tax practices, and platform workers' (mist)treatment have led to a more critical attitude among both politicians and the general public. In the academic sphere, too, the past years have seen a surge in influential critical studies on the social consequences of various elements of the emerging platform economy (Scrnicek 2016; Fuchs 2013; Morozov 2013; Zuboff 2018; Pasquale 2015).

The expanding literature on the impact of platforms' rising ubiquity notwithstanding, the consequences of the arrival of what Nick Srnicek (2016) has dubbed "platform capitalism" remain as conceptually elusive as they are practically pervasive. In the book under review here, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, media studies experts José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal astutely suggest that the former has likely facilitated the latter (2018, 2-3). Before a real, conceptually lucid, public debate on the place platforms ought to occupy in society could take off, platforms quickly and firmly established themselves at the heart of the post-crisis reconfig-

uration of the global economy. Despite their shaping influence on key sectors of public utility such as journalism and education, the authors observe, platforms have consequently been able to evade fundamental questions regarding the governance of digital platforms and the compatibility of corporate interests and the public good. By the authors' own admission, then, *The Platform Society* is a long overdue – yet, for precisely that reason, particularly welcome – effort to develop an analytical framework through which the joint effects of platformization on society as a whole can be understood. The first priority of their self-proclaimed "omnivorous" endeavor, as reflected by the book's research question, is therefore to analyze what role online platforms play in the organization of what they refer to as "public values" in American and western European societies. This objective is subservient, however, to what they consider the most urgent question pertaining to the rise of platforms, namely "who is or should be responsible and accountable for governing a fair and democratic platform society" (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018; 6).

In pursuit of this question, the authors dedicate the bulk of their book to analyzing the dynamics defining the platform society at its different levels: the micro-level of individual platforms, the meso-level of platform ecosystems, and the macro-level of the platform society as a whole. Their exposé highlights how, contrary to common perception, platforms are not value-free, but rather promote neoliberal market values that are at odds with democratic collective issues traditionally represented by civil society and governments. As the authors show by means of case studies from four different sectors (journalism, urban transport, healthcare and education), these neoliberal values are inscribed in the architecture of digital platforms. They find their expression through the three related processes that mark their expansion: datafication (the systematic capture of users' data), commodification (valorizing said data by turning it into tradable commodities), and selection (the selective usage of users' data and activities). Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal warn that as these processes have largely gone unchecked (permitting some exceptions, particularly in Europe), the dominance of profit-prioritizing platforms has made the negotiation of public values in our connective world increasingly difficult. In order to rebalance the scales between private and public goals, they make the case for extensive government regulatory action, particularly on the supranational level. The prime objective of such action, they argue, should be to commit the corporate owners of platforms to a renewed social contract geared towards the creation of public value as the shared responsibility of companies, citizens and governments alike. *The Platform Society* presents these analyses and arguments through three parts, comprising a total of seven chapters. The three sections that follow below will, firstly, summarize the contents of the book's chapters, secondly, high-

light its strengths, and, thirdly, draw attention to two areas that merit more extensive coverage and consideration than they received in Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal's book.

The first part of *The Platform Society*, consisting of its first two chapters, lays the groundworks for the rest of the book by theorizing the platform society's organization from a political economy perspective. The first chapter presents a detailed discussion of the platforms as digital architectures "fueled by *data*, automated and organized through *algorithms* and *interfaces*, formalized through *ownership relations* driven by *business models*, and governed through *user agreements*" (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 10). The business models underlying platforms, the authors emphasize early on, are an intricate part of their corporate owners' philosophy. Employing the case of Airbnb as an example, they demonstrate the accommodation platform's reluctance to comply with hospitality sector regulations and share information with local governments seeking to counter adverse effects of Airbnb's rise on rental prices and overall livability. This reluctance, they argue, echoes a neoliberal vision "of the state as the enemy of private individuals and businesses" that is commonplace among platform enthusiasts (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 26). Indeed, behind their purported status of mere intermediary between different parties interested in, as Mark Zuckerberg put it, "giv[ing] people the power to build a global community that works for all of us," lurks an ideology that holds that corporations are far better positioned than governments to "empower" individuals to, for instance, obtain better health and education (cited in Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 32). This effectively communicated vision, as the authors point out, conceals distinctly problematic shadow sides to the machinations of platformization. However convenient, the services provided by platforms are paired to systematic surveillance of users, inaccessible to those with limited means, and, moreover, actively accelerate the decline of important sectors of public utility.

This is certainly true for individual platforms, which are moored in paradoxical discrepancies between claims of egalitarian, bottom-up, and localized organization and actually hierarchical, top-down, and highly centralized digital architectures. It is also true, however, for the ecosystem that these platforms jointly form. Here, the authors distinguish between *infrastructural* platforms like Facebook, and *sectoral* platforms like Deliveroo, whereby the former provide crucial basic information services upon which the latter can be stacked or built. Infrastructural platforms are mostly operated by the Big Five, who have thus "laid the foundation for a system that offers its users convenience in exchange for control over their data" (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 18). While platforms appear as individual "connectors" that merely link users to "complementors" that provide goods and services – often commercial parties like restaurants or stores, but also public institutions like universities or hospitals – they form, in reality,

a closely-knit, highly integrated network of actors. As such, the connectivity they facilitate is valuable: it reduces transaction costs and improves economic coordination. Yet, their monetization of this connectivity through the monopolization of data analytics captures a very large part of the economic value originally created by the "complementors" that offer the real-life goods and services on which "connectors" depend. This lucrative and exclusive control over valuable data has enabled the connective platforms in both the infrastructural and sectoral categories to capture different sides of a growing number of markets. Facebook, for example, has captured reading audiences through Facebook Articles and its "news feed", making news outlets dependent on its services, and simultaneously uses the data it collects about news readers to attract advertisers that would previously have advertised in those same outlets. Such dynamics have allowed platforms to infiltrate virtually all areas of social and economic life while, by and large, successfully evading appropriately profound questions about the social, political, and plainly moral implications of their growing power. This kind of power, the authors posit, has to be matched by some degree of social responsibility. To explore how such responsibility might be brought into balance with platforms' private objectives, they adopt Mark Moore's framework of public value creation (1995), which revolves around "the value that an organization contributes to society to benefit the common good." Additionally drawing on Barry Bozeman's work (2007), the authors then identify as their goal to examine the discrepancy between the role platforms do, and ought to, play in social actors' "collective participation in the formation of a shared set of norms and values" that serve the common good (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 25).

Having thus set the analytical scene, the authors proceed to, in their second chapter, detail the main mechanisms through which platforms have built and continue to consolidate their powerful position. As mentioned above, these mechanisms concern datafication, commodification, and selection. Datafication, firstly, describes digital platforms' fundamental practice of rendering into data many aspects of the world that had heretofore not been quantified on this scale and level of detail. Both a techno-commercial strategy and a user practice, datafication takes place through platform features like searches, rating, watching, dating, liking, following, and sharing. These allow platform corporations to link users' basic demographic information with time stamps, location, performances, interests, sentiments, transactions, socialization routines, and much more. The circulation of this data through application programming interfaces (APIs) enables end users and third parties to engage with others online and participate in the online economy. Commodification, secondly, involves platforms transforming the user activity thus facilitated, as well as the online and offline objects to which it re-

lates, into tradable commodities. The massive amount of data collected and processed pertaining to users' preferences and needs is used to connect them to the personalized services and advertisements of a wide array of "complementors".

The third mechanism, finally, concerns the selection of relevant topics, actors, offers, services, objects, etc. Where, traditionally, credentialed experts and institutions directed by professional norms would determine, for example, what counts as news, a good choice of hotel, or an appropriate course to fit a curriculum, digital platforms have introduced user-driven and algorithm-driven selection. The authors identify three main types of selection that have a shaping influence on platform dynamics: personalization, reputation and trends, and moderation. Personalization builds on signals of both individual users and larger user aggregates to determine which content or options a user gets to see. The algorithms through which this personalized selection takes place are usually protected as a trade secret. Naturally, this impedes users and scholars' understanding of the process that determines, for example, the results of our Google searches. While personalized selection is crucial to helping users find the offers and information most relevant to them, it can also lead to social fragmentation into virtually segregated "filter bubbles". Trends and reputation, too, determine which content users are most likely to encounter. Many platforms offer lists of "trending topics" on the basis of the algorithmic identification of words or items that recently generated the largest increase in engagement. In a similar vein, users' ratings and reviews of other users, services, and goods generates "reputations" that are then fed back to users to allow them to quickly assess whether they are interested in the user, service, or good at hand. Finally, platforms engage in the moderation of content through both automated filters and human scrutiny. In the case of social media, such moderation has often led to controversy when platforms appear to moderate too much, for example by deleting important historical or cultural content judged to be violating regulations regarding nudity or graphic violence. On the other hand, regarding online hate speech or, in the case of some sectoral platforms, expressions of discrimination, platforms have at times been criticized for not moderating enough. At any rate, it is clear that moderation practices means that platforms have considerable influence over the terms of public debate and standards of online behavior. By introducing new social categories and shaping online norms, the authors conclude, platforms thus establish new relations of authority and effectively "reorganize value regimes and economies" (Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018, 52). In line with their overall argument, they emphasize that this reorganization is not value-free and should be subject and accountable to an inclusive, democratic, public deliberation.

The second part of the book, comprising the four next chapters, apply the analytical framework laid out in the first part to a number of case studies in four different sectors: news and journalism, urban transport, the health sector, and education. These chapters critically analyze the impact of platform mechanisms on existing social structures on both sides of the Atlantic and turn the spotlight on the contestation of public values during the implementation of platforms in each sector discussed. Discussing the news industry, Chapter 3 analyzes how platformization has brought an end to legacy journalistic organizations' traditional "bundling" of news stories and advertisements into an integrated whole. Readers increasingly consume (isolated) articles through social media platforms, which have consequently been able to capture much of the advertising market. Faced with strongly declining revenues from advertising and heavy competition to capture the audience's interest, there is much pressure on legacy outlets to focus their efforts on the optimization of attention. This, in turn, has put pressure on the public value of journalism as a custodian of democracy and accountability.

Moving on to urban transport, Chapter 4 discusses how the introduction of e-hailing taxi apps (Uber and Lyft) and a large number of sharing schemes have superimposed a veritable platform ecosystem on a sector that until recently rested upon public transport organizations and legacy businesses like taxi companies. The recent emergence of overarching connective platforms that allow users to plan their itinerary using both public and private means of transportation have furthermore blurred the dividing lines between public and private arrangements in this sector. Yet, it still falls upon governments alone to bear the costs for the maintenance of the infrastructure on which the urban transport platform ecosystem relies. While it should be recognized that the platformization of urban transport has tremendously enlarged consumers' mobility options, platforms like Uber have gone to great lengths to shirk taxation responsibilities and to undercut safety and labor regimes that apply to their legacy counterparts. As the authors stress, however, there are ways for the power balance to be redressed in the interest of the common good. In various parts of Europe, (local) governments have successfully pushed back against Uber's exploitative practices. In San Paolo, meanwhile, the municipal government has experimented with allowing transport platforms to use infrastructure in return for direct contributions to its maintenance.

Chapter 5 and 6, finally, discuss various health and education-centered platforms, including both well-known examples such as WebMD and Coursera and lesser-known up-and-coming platforms. Both chapters critically assess the extent to which these platforms manage to combine pursuing profit with serving public interest. The main public values at stake here are privacy, transparency, and accountability, as they relate to the use of the sensitive data that the operators of the sectoral platforms under anal-

ysis collect. Questions over these values are especially pertinent in a time when, in many countries, government expenditure on public education, healthcare, and health research is shrinking in relative terms. In this context, educational institutions and health professionals feel increasingly compelled to turn to private partners like platforms as an alternative source of funding. In addition to their monopolistic control over the valuable data they collect, this dynamic gives education and health platforms much power over the direction in which these sectors develop. This, again, calls for regulation strategies that carefully balance recognition of the benefits these platforms bring with protection of the aforementioned public values.

In the third and final part of the book, the authors shift their focus from the analytical to the normative. They conclude from the preceding that the rise of platform ecosystems in different sectors of key public utility has brought about a fully-fledged platform society in which public values are no longer safeguarded by their traditional custodians. Indeed, public values are under threat from powerful corporate actors who adhere to a neoliberal philosophy that is hostile towards government regulation and whose primary concern is their commercial agenda. Through the mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selection, platforms have carved out for themselves a near-monopolistic position from where they lucratively exploit the collection of data without sharing their newfound power, capabilities and profits with the rest of society. What is needed, then, is to create a more balanced, public value-centered platform society. By taking more social responsibility, market actors (business, entrepreneurs, consumers, global corporations) have an important role to play in achieving a new balance. However, to seriously redress the balance of power, now is the time for the allocation of more influence to civil society (citizens, cooperatives, NGOs) and the state (local, national, and supranational governments). Particularly in the European context, where the state has traditionally played a very (pro)active role in negotiating public values on behalf of citizens and consumers, the authors argue that governments should take ambitious action to limit the power of platforms and submit them to value-centered legislation. Thus, Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal conclude, government action should pave the way for the construction of a balanced platform society, in which corporations, governments, and civil society share responsibility for an open society that anchors its public values in a transparent and accountable fashion.

With this plea for a transformative redirection of the platformization of our economies and societies towards the common good, *The Platform Society* has delivered a captivating contribution to the burgeoning literature on this topic. Its strengths are multiple, but come to expression, first and foremost, in the book's ambitious scope. In critically reviewing the ideological tenets and interests that shaped the platform socie-

ty as we know it today, they draw together insights from not only the authors' own field of expertise (media studies), but also from science and technology studies, legal studies, political economy, and business and management studies. This "omnivorous" approach to their subject allows them to paint a convincing picture of the mutual shaping of technological advancements, commercial strategies, users' demand for connectivity, and competing visions of society. The books draws on a wealthy, multidisciplinary bibliography and brings into its analytical fold a wide range of case studies that effectively apply the interpretative framework developed in the first two chapters. This framework, with its helpful differentiation between the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the platform society and detailed analysis of the relations between infrastructural and sectoral platforms, as well as the mechanisms (datafication, commodification, and selection) that fuel platformization, constitutes another major strength of the book. Especially readers who are relatively new to the topic or seek an update on its current state of affairs will find Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal's carefully constructed analysis particularly instructive. Ultimately, however, the most significant contribution of the book, as the authors themselves suggest, can be found in the extremely timely questions it asks. Who holds power in the platform society? Which ideological configuration legitimizes that power? How did these power arrangements come into being, and how are they maintained? And, crucially, (how) can they be reconciled with the public values fundamental to a fair and democratic society? If we are to arrive at a platform society that serves the common good, the authors convincingly argue, addressing precisely these questions is a *condicio sine qua non*.

Its strengths notwithstanding, there are two areas of significance that merit more elaborate discussion than the authors offer in *The Platform Society*. The first of these concerns the analytical prism through which Van Dijck and her colleagues have chosen to connect the topic of platformization to questions regarding the common good – namely that of public value creation. Besides a concise definition and an inexhaustive enumeration of examples of public values, the authors do not make it explicitly clear how, precisely, "public" values differ from the "economic" or "market" values with which they are contrasted. Or, indeed, how they relate to the apparently "democratic" values like "diversity, liberty, and solidarity" with which they are at times associated. As we thus lack a rigorous understanding of what substantively delineates a public value, readers are likely to, sooner or later in the reading process, start interpreting this central concept as a rather vacuous term that can take on a host of meanings depending on context. If such a reading is incorrect, it seems fair to apportion at least some of the blame to the book's rather terse treatment of one of its core concepts. Equally, if this reading is in fact correct and the authors consider the interpretation of public values

dependent on one's ideology, they would have done well to dedicate a section of their book entirely to the analysis of competing conceptions of the common good. Although the authors frequently refer to the "neoliberal" thinking inscribed into the architecture of platforms and discuss a small number of expressions by platform owners indicative of anti-government, plausibly quasi-cyberlibertarian thinking, they do not weave these references into a clear ideological profile of platform enthusiasts.

In a sense more troubling, however, is the fact that the authors reflect even less on their own ideological positioning. Their seemingly approving citation of authors like Evgeny Morozov and Mariana Mazzucato, in conjunction with their problematization of the dominance of neoliberal values, could be interpreted as expressive of a distinct outlook. Yet, obviously, tacit endorsements cannot substitute the articulation of a clear ideological position that could have helped frame the argumentation of the book. Moreover, the authors' insistence that the platform society would, "ideally," be grounded on a "social contract" negotiated, created and enforced by market actors as parties apparently equal to state authorities and civil society quite evidently does not sit well with the politico-philosophical orientation represented by the aforementioned thinkers. Instead, such statements suggest that Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal almost self-evidently ground their attachment to public values on a social-liberal, associative conception of democracy, which they contrast with a competing vision rooted in unspecified "neoliberal" principles. The fact that they do not elucidate their understanding of either vision – or, indeed, the way these visions inform distinct perspectives on (the organization of) public value – constitutes a considerable lacuna in the overall structure of their book.

We may hypothesize that the lack of conceptual and ideological clarity in relation to the concept of public value also explains the absence of a considered exploration of popular and political stances on platforms' responsibility towards the creation of public value. It is worth noting, in this context, that recent research shows that platform-based businesses like Amazon and Google are considered more trustworthy than the press and public institutions like universities, the police, and the government itself (Ladd, Tucker, and Kates 2018). Is it possible that large parts of the population share corporate platforms owners' anti-government, profit-centered perspective on society? Or does people's lack of trust in public institutions express disappointment with their failure to live up to expectations that they simply do not have of platforms? And in what ways do the press, public institutions, and platforms influence these attitudes? Regarding the latter, it is no secret that platforms like Uber actively try to push public debate in directions favorable to its corporate agenda (Tusk 2018; Culpepper and Thelen, 2019). At any rate, such questions further complicate *The Platform Society*'s con-

ceptual reliance on public value creation, and addressing them would usefully have complemented the book's analysis.

The second shortcoming in *The Platform Society* is arguably less fundamental, yet decidedly more extensive. References in passing and the occasional brief paragraph notwithstanding, the place of work and workers in the platform society constitute a major gap in this book. Although the authors themselves acknowledge that privacy, transparency, and accountability have received much more attention in the debate on platformization than solidarity-related issues, their chapters heavily focus on precisely those familiar topics at the expense of the pressing issue of the exploitation of (digital) work in the platform economy. Indeed, "labor" and "workers" as social categories are systematically absent from the book's typologies and diagrams, and, despite the political economy approach the authors adopt in the first section of the book, rarely mentioned when the authors question which economic interests platforms serve. This is particularly surprising given the tremendous amount of attention in recent years for the so-called "gig economy" – a term mentioned only once (!) in *The Platform Society's* main text –, which, as this special issue illustrates, has been accompanied by a wealth of illuminating studies.[1] According to some estimates referenced in the introduction to this review, employment in the gig economy on average already accounts for 2-3 per cent of total employment in OECD countries, and this figure is expected to rise steadily in the upcoming years. That makes working life a key feature of the platform society, and renders its near-absence from the book all the more striking. Even when, in the final chapter, the authors dedicate an entire section to civil society's potential in countervailing platforms' power, trade unions and alternative forms of (platform) workers' organization are virtually absent from their analysis. The book thus wholly overlooks the fact that workers' movements and their allies have turned labor-capital relations one of the main areas of contestation in the ongoing platformization of our economies and societies. This is true not only in the US and Europe – where the treatment and struggle of Uber drivers and food delivery workers have garnered some notoriety among the general public, which might explain why the former are among the very few exceptions to workers' otherwise limited presence in the book – but also in regions excluded from the book's purview (Wood, Lehdonvirta, and Graham 2018). In this sense, attention for platforms' transnational exploitation of on-demand labor could have had the added benefit of expanding the book's Western-centric scope.

[1] A good example is the work of Niels van Doorn (Van Doorn 2014; 2017), whose work the authors repeatedly cite without reference to the effects of platformization on workers.

These points of criticism by no means diminish the aforementioned strengths of Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal's work. They do, however, highlight an important point of wider significance. While social progress always springs from sharp observers raising the right questions, meaningful change can only be affected on the basis of imaginative answers to those questions. By their own early admission, the authors of the book reviewed here limit their ambition to pose questions that, in their estimation, should frame the debate we ought to be having regarding the future role of digital platforms in our society. While they laudably succeed in this particular respect, readers are consequently left without a clear sense of the concrete shape a socio-political agenda for a more socially sustainable platformization should take. In light of promising developments such as the increasing popular awareness, as well as political contestation, of the less favorable sides of platforms' rising ubiquity, successful examples of collective organization among platform workers from all over the world, and the growth of popular cooperativism, the time appears ripe for researchers to move beyond pondering questions and start formulating answers. Scholars interested in pursuing the latter goal, it is worth reiterating in conclusion, will certainly benefit from the analytical pointers offered by *The Platform Society*.

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