CHAPTER 4

Platforms in a Time of Pandemic

Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti and Maurilio Pirone

Introduction

The recent and still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has been described both as an extraordinary event transforming our lives and as a tipping point in a shift towards labour digitalisation. The activity of platforms has acquired more and more scholarly interest because their business has been considered as the future of work. In this chapter we will try to enlarge the perspective and place the current wave of digitalisation within a longer-term process. From this perspective we consider the pandemic as an event highlighting and accelerating some structural features of the platform economy and, more generally, of contemporary capitalism. The aim is to understand how such general tendencies have changed after, and because of, the Covid-19 outbreak.

The premise of this approach is to consider platforms as a very resilient and flexible business model. Based on algorithmic management, certain aspects of self-entrepreneurialism and the use of radical digital technologies such as smartphones (Greenfield 2017), platforms mobilise data extraction and workforce exploitation through multiple forms of territorialization. This means they do not exist in a vacuum but embed and reshape prior socio-economic conditions – such as urban specificities, omissions in labour law, gender and race inequalities – towards the commodification of social reproduction and cooperation.

Obviously, there are alternative ways of distinguishing between platforms' typologies. Our aim is to concentrate on so-called lean platforms (Srnicek 2016) and geographically tethered workers (Woodcock and Graham 2020), primarily characterised by their supply of local services (i.e. ride hailing, house cleaning, etc.). Despite the positive rhetoric regarding a gig or sharing economy, we highlight how such platforms pose several challenges to other 'actors' within cities. While labour conditions under platforms are always more scrutinised for their consequences on workforce living conditions, some other elements seem to involve more than just these platform workers: for instance, urban landscapes have been radically modified by actors such as Airbnb in terms of rent increases, the expulsion of citizens and access to space. These features of platform growth have provoked a major public debate on their regulation and role, as well as generating protests we may frame in terms of class struggle and urban unionism. Recently, platform capitalism has been transformed by the Covid-19 outbreak too, and the platforms' ecosystem has had to quickly adapt to this new circumstance.

In this chapter we will consider the pandemic as a moment highlighting the resilience of platform capitalism as well as its internal differences (first section). In particular, we will consider such resilience in relation to urban transformations (second section) and labour organisation (third section), taking two platforms – respectively Airbnb and Deliveroo – as illustrative of these processes. Finally, we will summarise some of platform capitalism's features that we consider relevant in and beyond the pandemic.

Fifty Years of Changes: Toward a Post-Pandemic Transition?

Over the last fifty years we have witnessed multiple transitions, sometimes hastily called 'revolutions' (Into the Black Box 2018; Benvegnù et al. 2021). In the 1960s and early 1970s, we witnessed the *logistics revolution* when, due to the introduction of some innovative technologies, such as that of container technology (Levinson 2016), and to a changed approach in terms of transportation management (Allen 1997; Bonacich and Wilson 2008), the circulation of commodities became a new 'continent' to be explored and rendered economically valuable (Cowen 2014; Hassan 2020). Then, in the 1980s the revolution was in the field of retail: Wal-Mart became the new paradigmatic brand of the economy, roaring 'out of an isolated corner of the rural South to become the vanguard of a retail revolution that has transformed the nature of US employment, sent US manufacturing abroad, and redefined the very meaning of globalization' (Lichtenstein 2009, 4). After the neoliberal politics of Reagan and Thatcher, the global network society of the 1990s (Castells 2010) witnessed a deep change in the market with the advent of a *dotcom revolution* (Becker 2006) bringing actors such as Amazon centre stage. Eventually, after the 2008 economic crisis, *platform capitalism* (Srnicek 2016) burst onto the scene, as

an unprecedented set of digital platforms 'have penetrated the heart of societies' (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2019, 2), quickly defining new forms of consumption as well as new groups of workers (Huws 2014). Nowadays, the Covid-19 crisis has been framed as the umpteenth revolution. Is that true? Or to frame this more precisely moving beyond a superficial approach, which changes have been brought about by the pandemic, adding to this long-term tendency towards a networked (reticular) and digital capitalism?

Covid-19 constitutes a serious threat to the global economy as containment measures imposed everywhere have limited human mobility and mitigated the flow of commodities. An economic and social system based on so-called *supply chain capitalism* (Tsing 2009) has suddenly been forced to reconsider some structural features of its mode of operation, and even for the *platform society* the pandemic was deeply shocking. On this matter we ought to make a distinction. Following José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal we can assume two types of platform: infrastructural and sectoral. The former represents 'the heart of the ecosystem upon which many other platforms and apps can be built' (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2019, 13). Most of these infrastructures are owned by Alphabet-Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft – the so-called Big Five of the IT sector. Complementarily, sectoral platforms 'serve a particular sector or niche, such as news, transportation, food, education, health, finance, or hospitality' (ibid). Infrastructural platforms allow a digitalisation of many working activities, a general platformization of labour with many activities adopting ICT solutions. Sectoral platforms are more urban-based and transform particular activities into a supposedly entrepreneurial job. Adopting this distinction, we may highlight a first feature of the pandemic's impact: whereas infrastructural platforms expanded during and because of the Covid-19 outbreak, the situation is much more heterogenous for sectoral platforms. Put differently, we may observe a general tendency towards the digitalisation of services as being replayed during the pandemic. The use of the internet, of smartphone applications and other ICTs has seen the reorganisation of the productive process in wider and more scattered spaces, guaranteeing at the same time a high level of coordination and supervision. Some platforms represent leading players in the furnishing of digital infrastructures. Here we can consider the paradigmatic example of Amazon. Since the very start of the first pandemic wave some analysts claimed that Amazon 'will emerge stronger than ever' (Semuels 2020), bringing about the 'Amazonification of the Planet' (Merchant 2020). According to the *Financial Times*, 'lockeddown shoppers drove sales 40 per cent higher' for Jeff Bezos' company, which ended with sales of 'between $87bn and $93bn […] up by about a third on the same quarter of 2019' for the second quarter of 2020 (Lee 2020). In contrast, the experience of sectorial platforms was very different. Those like Airbnb experienced a real shock; those like Deliveroo and other short-range logistics firms saw big increases in income. In this chapter we delve into this, outlining some insights.

This acceleration in the process of digitalisation brings us to a second hypothesis concerning the emergence of a new technical division in labour composition between so-called *smart-working* and *urban-based jobs*. On the one hand, a *housewification* of working space is observed, which means the extreme development of outsourcing, even pushed into living spaces, with an overlap between the productive and reproductive spheres (Pirone 2021); the scattered production of a reticular capitalism may individualise all these working spaces, too. On the other hand, the public spaces of cities turn into factories without walls. Platforms allow for the management of data flows, which logistically connect multiple urban places.

Both are grounded on a general push for digitalisation that favours platforms in general, and a consequent further assault on workers' rights as the status of self-employed 'independence' seems to be the newly dominant paradigm in platform capitalism. Even in 2004 the theorist Tiziana Terranova claimed that 'the expansion of the Internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends towards increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as "supplementing"' (2004, 74). The pandemic could lead to a further intensification of this. However, notwithstanding that a platformization of society is all but sketched out, digital workers may still be able to play an important role in influencing or contesting such a transition, and we will try to understand how.

The pandemic also imposed a distinction between essential and non-essential productive activities – with web services and logistics deemed the former – revealing the productive hierarchies in the organisation of contemporary capitalism. Among those who were able to continue to work during lockdowns, employees in long-range logistics were immediately classed as key workers. This acknowledgement could have further consequences for some ongoing processes. Indeed, for many years now we have witnessed protests and strikes in the logistics sector. On a global level, over the last decade, circulation struggles occurred that have had a major impact on the capitalistic economy (Cuppini, Frapporti and Pirone 2015; Moody 2017; Ness and Alimahomed-Wilson 2018; Clover 2019; Dyer-Whiteford, Brenes-Ryes and Liu 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the strategic importance of logistic workers to society, and the fragility of global value chains. As a matter of fact, although during the pandemic many container shipping companies saw increased income, showing a 'surprising resilience' (Pooler and Hale 2020), it must be noted that work intensification, a sense of precarity and health risks within the sector have led to protests and strikes (Workers Inquiry Network 2020). This could have further consequences bringing new forms of mobilisation and protest to this crucial arena of contemporary capitalism.

To conclude, the pandemic has revealed some structural features of contemporary capitalism: productive processes are based on a logistical management of (data, people and commodity) flows that require a hierarchical infrastructure of platforms. The Covid-19 outbreak does not simply illustrate a condition

but operates as a transition towards a higher level of labour digitalisation that entails a further technical division of class composition according to the spaces of production. In this sense, cities constitute the main space for platform territorialization, and the pandemic has influenced the ways they will develop in the coming years, both in terms of landscape and subjectivities. We will now go on to examine this in further detail.

Is the Pandemic Shock for Airbnb a Crisis of Platform Urbanism More Broadly?

In recent years, Airbnb has deeply influenced the design of urban landscapes, urban economics and urban life (Ferreri and Romola Sanyal 2018; Gallagher 2018; Gyódi 2019; Guttentag 2013; Nieuwland and van Melik 2018; Stors and Kagermeier 2015; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). The 'Airification of cities' (Picascia, Romano and Teobaldi 2017) seemed, for a while, to represent an irresistible tendency towards a complete redefinition of urban dynamics. However, this platform has been one of the most severely impacted by the pandemic.

The blanket cancellations suffered by Airbnb left owners vulnerable, with no income for mortgage interest payments and local taxes, and the company plunged to almost half its value (Nhamo, Dube and Chikodzi 2020), within the broader context of the crisis of a tourism industry based on human mobility (Uğur and Akbıyık 2020; Williams 2020). The hospitality and travel industry have perhaps been the most hard-hit economic sector, with hourly paid workers facing potentially devastating hardships (Nicola et al. 2020).

While in recent years Airbnb has severely disrupted this sector, it now seems that Covid-19 has 'disrupted the disruptor'. It is the planetary dimension of this shock which made it so hard for Airbnb to find a way to relaunch its business. There has been no way out. This situation could lead to an increase in the extractive strategies of Airbnb, or it could lead to other scenarios. The shock has impacted both professional and non-professional hosts (Farmaki, Stergiou and Kaniadakis 2019). Dolnicar and Zare (2020) optimistically suggest that – following the three host type differentiations proposed in Hardy and Dolnicar (2017) – whilst the proportion of 'capitalist hosts' will decline in the future, the proportion of 'befriender and ethicist hosts' will increase, 'moving Airbnb back towards its original ethos of space sharing among ordinary citizens'. This implies that the long-term rental market came back onto the scene to help absorb shock-related risks. At the same time, hosting platforms developed other strategies to attract tourists in ways that were compatible with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic – particularly in terms of the geographic locations of listings. For instance, there was an increase in listings based in rural settings and small historical towns, in part boosted through promotions such as Airbnb's 'Italian Villages' project (Airbnb 2017).

Therefore, while many countries and municipalities were trying to regulate short-term letting to minimise negative side effects to the community (von Briel and Dolnicar 2020), it is possible to hypothesise that this dynamic could be turned upside down. To give an example, within our research we have observed that the Bologna Municipality and the University of Bologna are promoting short-term rentals to attract students to the city in order to address the urban economic losses caused by 'distance learning' on a city campus like Bologna. Rather than imposing tighter regulations on the sector, policymakers could possibly even incentivise the trading of rental space via online platforms.

Furthermore, there is a third perspective that should be taken into consideration concerning the core business of platforms like Airbnb (i.e. Big Data extraction) and its financial aspects (the company was listed on the stock exchange in 2020). Neither have been directly impacted by the pandemic, confirming their role as invariants in the development of platforms.

Even though, initially, Airbnb appeared to be a 'loser platform' during the pandemic, it is hard to sustain the argument that the company will collapse in the near future. *Airification* is not over but looks set to be extended to other territories not yet touched by platform colonisation. More importantly, our argument is that apart from the specific future of Airbnb as a company, the key point is to analyse it as a 'model', a 'rationality'. And our impression is that – as the example of Bologna shows – the platformization of the urban is a dynamic that will continue to grow. In other words, platform urbanism (van der Graaf and Ballon 2019; Mahmoudi, Levenda and Stehlin 2021) is an emerging assemblage and a way of transforming and redefining relations between institutions, markets, and urban agents, actors and populations, which is consolidating as a sort of *urban institution* (van Doorn 2020) and as a specific logic of urban development. In this sense, the uncertainties induced by the pandemic will probably increase the logistical logic of the 'just in time and to the point' (Into the Black Box 2019) use of cities, and platforms (such as Airbnb) remain the best tool for realising this logic.

The Unpeaceful Growth of Food Delivery Services

A different fate has befallen other disruptive platforms, such as Deliveroo. While Airbnb is considered meaningful for urban processes such as gentrification, food delivery platforms are often associated with another typical phenomenon linked to the digitalisation of services: the spread of forms of independent work – represented in this case by fleets of riders. It must be noted that last-mile logistics – in contrast to tourism – never stopped during the pandemic, with workers, such as food delivery riders, continuing to drive around urban spaces. Enterprises like Deliveroo gained market share almost everywhere because mobility and activity restrictions moved consumption towards digital platforms, while many restaurants searched for other potential markets.

In Italy the company reported an increase of 40% of affiliated restaurants in March 2020, and Uber Eats saw an increase of more than 55% in purchases (Chicchi et al. 2020). Last-mile logistics has been considered, in many cases, a sort of essential service for the social reproduction of the urban masses. The infrastructural role assumed by these sectoral platforms led them to a dominant position in respect to working conditions and state regulations. Nevertheless, this view of food delivery platforms as essential infrastructure did not lead to a corresponding view of delivery riders as essential workers (Chicchi et al. 2020). During the pandemic an internal migration between platforms was observed as many workers moved from services such as transportation to others such as food delivery. At the same time, due to the high demand for deliveries after the outbreak of Covid-19, Deliveroo introduced, in some major European cities including Barcelona, Paris and Bologna, a 'free login' system in order to stimulate riders to log on to the platform to offer their services at any time during the working day. Together with the loss of clear working times, riders witnessed the complete adoption of a piece-working system of payment. This system of organisation of the productive process is not only based on a tendency towards self-entrepreneurialism and valorisation of so-called human capital but moves the competition from the market to the workforce. In this case, we do not see a price decrease, but a rights decrease. Even if the growth of the food delivery market was interrupted due to the relaxing of containment measures, 'piece-working' has remained valid and become the hegemonic form of payment for almost all platforms. This lack of protections and the resulting low incomes has led to strikes and protests in the sector, despite the restrictions put in place to contain the pandemic. In this sense, riders represent not only the expansion of forms of independent work but are also at the forefront of resistance against the post-capitalist narrative of a sharing or gig economy supposedly without vertical relations of exploitation. The global labour movement of riders gained strength from the discontent around food delivery working conditions and the fear of contagion by the virus. In Latin America and Europe, protests broke out to demand wage increases, welfare and personal protective equipment (Workers Inquiry Network 2020) and culminated in the first global strike on 8 October 2020.

How to Fight the Giants

We initially reported the concept of transition to frame the Covid-19 outbreak as a moment for capitalist reorganisation based on the acceleration of some tendencies and the emergence of new challenges. It seems that generally the current pandemic will lead to a push for more automation and digitalisation, and so favour platforms. Put differently, the pandemic could reinforce a shut-in economic model with a major role for last-mile logistics and web services. In this sense, we are witnessing and experiencing the consolidating dominance of

some infrastructural platforms like Amazon, and also the emergence within infrastructure of an involvement in social reproduction for some sectoral platforms. Platforms indeed demonstrate a high level of adaptability to different circumstances and, as the case of Airbnb demonstrates, are quickly modifying their services according to local conditions. Platform territorialization is a just-in-time phenomenon that is easily able to adapt to market demand and to the colonisation of new geographies. In some cases, the coronacrisis has even proved to be an opportunity to take further steps towards the imposition of more flexible and casual forms of labour organisation and payment. Nevertheless, this condition is permitted only due to a massive availability of platform workers who are, however, starting to question the forms and conditions of their labour. If platforms took advantage of the pandemic to weaken attempts at regulation, it also increased the need to search for strategies for regulating platforms themselves. We may identify several emerging strategies, each one with a particular – or more than one – subjectivity engaged. We may note the same platform workers who are organising to resist the power of the algorithm are also experimenting with new forms of unionism (Woodcock 2021), whereas others are building digital cooperatives to exercise more democratic control (Scholz 2016). If these strategies are more focused on sectoral platforms, more general perspectives regarding infrastructural platforms are gaining attention within platform society. In this instance claims are being made to either place platforms that play an essential role in society under state control (Srnicek 2016) or alternatively to share data profits and management (Morozov 2019). Far from hailing one of these as being more valid or efficient, we think they constitute different forms of engagement with platform capitalism. In this sense, the pandemic has demonstrated that, for discontented subjects, targeting vital junctures in the platform economy is the way to define a more general strategy through their articulation.

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et al. 2020), elaborated to map local responses to the Covid-19 outbreak. Furthermore, in April/May 2020 we undertook two video inquiries – one on Airbnb and urbanism, one on Deliveroo and food delivery – to analyse platforms' reaction to Covid-19 with the collaboration of several experts, activists and workers.

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