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Evil Intermediation Platforms

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A political-cultural perspective on the sociology of digital intermediation platforms interrogates what a particular set of social arrangements implies about relations of production and asks: How do digital intermediation platforms contribute to legitimising contemporary capitalism, and potentially to redesigning processes of domination and exploitation of (digital) labor? How are these platforms used as a justification register, i.e. the use of digital commons for ideological purposes, in the sense of Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) economies of worth? Is a specific model, for example platform cooperativism, an antidote to those "evil" platforms or yet another iteration?

The proliferation of digital intermediation platforms occurs in diverse fields: cultural crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, content aggregation, advertising and marketing, on-line dating, car-pooling, ethical commerce, alternative finance, to name a few. Distribution, information and transaction occur in multi-sided markets, capturing positive externalities produced by the interactions of tech giants who might not even be producing content, goods or services of their own. Platforms play on all tables: dead labour, intellectual labour, manual labour, and of course audience labour. They perform activities regarding the organisation of labour, on three levels (for example in cultural crowdfunding): inside their own structures; filtering and editing contents, linking projects to external partners, often resorting to traditional forms of exploitation of cultural labour; stimulating audience labour on external networks. Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing platforms are also producers of ideological discourses, busy promoting their short-term agendas and producing the illusion of modified relations of production and of an inversion of the production cycle. Users are not only moderated/stimulated, but also "educated" with a profusion of communication kits and induced into "micro-targeted" or mainstream commercial partnerships. Users must "be part of an innovative, creative family" claims Kisskissbankbank CEO, Vincent Ricordeau.

This rapid expansion of the digital economy is born out of varieties of capitalism across vast ranging national institutional frameworks, state-labour relations, re-regulations, privatizations, cross-class relations and coordination arrangements within diverse political systems (Hancké et al. 2009). And yet, overall, the digital economy dances to the rhythm of two predatory forms of capitalist expansion: what Chris Harman (2010) calls "zombie capitalism" and Phil Graham (2006) calls "hypercapitalism". Zombie capitalism refers to Marx's argument that "once all capitalists introduce these techniques the value of the goods falls until it corresponds to the average amount of labour needed to produce them under the new techniques. The additional profit disappears - and if more means of production are used to get access to the new techniques, the rate of profit falls... If some capitalists are to make an adequate profit it can only be at the expense of other capitalists who are driven out of business. The drive to accumulate leads inevitably to crises. And the greater the scale of past accumulation, the deeper the crises will be" (Harman, 2010: 72). Hypercapitalism refers to the trajectory of systemic capital extending the processes of commodification to include every aspect of existence: "...the social process in a knowledge economy, because of its focus on commodifying the products of language and thought, includes the entire network of activities and artefacts through which individuals and societies reproduce themselves at every level: materially, spiritually, socially, relationally intellectually, technologically" (Graham, 2006: 69).

Connecting cognitive frames, social relations and organizational factors can elaborate on how the crisis of accumulation and hypercapitalist expansion affects socio-economic structures within the context of digital intermediation platforms. A critical political economy approach is used in order to analyse the role these platforms play within (or "above") production and capitalisation cycles (Matthews, 2016). Secondly, our research draws from cyberconflict theory to map the sociopolitical, ideological and organizational environment these platforms operate within, and the

resistances they face (Karatzogianni, 2015). To get more theoretical leverage, we draw empirical attention to the rhetorical foundations of the “sharing economy” and the effect of ideological variants on the formations of diverse models, organizations and modes of production in the network economy, by analysing the views of relevant actors we interviewed in Barcelona, Paris and Berlin between November 2015-September 2016.

Such an enquiry comprehends the subtle features of anticapitalist discourse as an ideological spectrum, ranging from commons-oriented, peer-to-peer, decentralised, platform-cooperativist rhetoric influencing activist, corporatist and statist rhetoric on the digital economy. There is evidence to support that actors in the intermediation platforms are conditioned by this spectrum of “collaborative”, “sharing” ideologies and that structures are effectively produced in direct relation to specific ideological frames. We found that a particular rhetorical foundation is tied to the notion of the commons. With all twenty-three actors we interviewed so far, in observational ethnography across the three geographical settings, despite the different configurations of “commons” capital, p2p value, commons-oriented paradigms and varieties, the “commons” features center stage. The understanding and practice of the commons translates and affects directly decisions about governance, business models, labour conditions, and critically how productive, commodity and money capital circulate in specific organizations structures, irrespective of traditional varieties of capitalism. Platform cooperativism (Sholtz, 2016) is one of current efforts to create alternative productive structures by proposing cloning the tech of gig economy giants, developing solidarity of ownership and management, and reframing the ideas of innovation to not just benefit the few. It remains to be seen if such a model is effective enough to overcome the exploitative character of the “sharing” economy employed to sustain a capitalist order in crisis.

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