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Governing invisibility in the platform economy: excavating the logics of platform care

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Abstract: There has been a mounting research output on the social dimensions of the datafication, fragmentation and platformisation of infrastructures. This paper conceptually excavates the logics of 'platform care' as a continuation of historically invisibilised reproductive labour. Although affective labour provided in private homes cannot be fully hierarchised, sold, nor algorithmically sorted, digital platforms provide short-term techno-fixes to fill in 'care gaps', acting as technocapitalist assemblages governing invisibility.

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Introduction

‘The classed and heteronormative obsession with work–life balance, efficiency, and time management displayed by Mommy’s-basement apps suggest that one can escape patriarchy or gendered labor in an instant—one just needs the right app!’ (Sharma, 2018, n.p.)

Recent visions of technological determinism have fueled the fix-all solutionism of apps and digital platforms to not only optimise supply chains, mine data, optimise bodies, but to also fix societal problems. The increasing ubiquity of ‘biopolitical platforms’ (Gregory & Sadowski, 2021) and the platformisation of everyday life affect the constitution of public and private spaces alike. When scholarship debates the emerging futures of the platform economy¹, it is primarily concerned with the ‘platform imperialism’ (Jin, 2013) of Amazon, Uber and Airbnb; and the expansion of the ‘Uberisation’ of work centred around the ongoing responsabilisation of workers for their economic faith. Less attention is given to digitally mediated care work through platforms such as Helpling in Europe, Care.com in the United States or SweepSouth in South Africa. This paper therefore considers ‘platform care’ as a continuation of historically invisibilised reproductive labour, with platforms acting as technocapitalist assemblages that govern invisibility and ultimately producing feminised and racialised precarity.

To date, there has been a mounting scholarly and media interest in the study of digital platforms, not only to study its effects on society, but also to relate to socio-spatial inequalities that are constitutive of ‘platform urbanism’ (Barns, 2019; Fields et al., 2020; Leszczynski, 2020; van der Graaf & Ballon, 2019; Van Doorn, 2020; Sadowski, 2020), i.e. in transportation, financial services, housing, ride-hailing, health, and domestic labour. Recent contributions have put a spotlight on the

1. In this paper, I will refer to the term ‘platform economy’ as it appears to be the most neutral label for the transformation of labour, livelihoods and social worlds in general and increasing deregulation and fragmentation of the labour market and its social implications in particular. Other researchers prefer to speak of the ‘gig economy’, referring back to the short-term arrangements of a ‘gig’ in the music industry, to signify the transforming world of work (Crouch, 2019; Woodcock & Graham, 2020). It is usually negatively connotated (Pesole et al., 2018, p. 7). On the other side we find the terms of ‘collaborative economy’ (Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014) or ‘sharing economy’ (Schor, 2016) that often signify the revival of community- and sharing-based ideas, practices and organisational models.

‘crisis of social reproduction’ and the role of digital platforms (Altenried et al., 2021), while Ticona and Mateescu (2018) highlight the role of domestic platform workers in the United States as ‘cultural entrepreneurs’, and Bauriedl and Strüver (2020) examine the production of public and private spaces and socio-spatial inequalities through mobility and care platforms. From a feminist geography standpoint, Schwiter and Steiner argue how care work is transformed through the ambivalent effects of digital technologies and how the household is turned into a feminised and precarious workplace (Schwiter and Steiner, 2020). These analyses, however, would benefit from an accompanied, interdisciplinary account that revises the ambiguities of reproductive labour to capture the techno-fixes meant to solve multiple ‘care crises’ (Dowling, 2021; Hester, 2018).

In an influential paper, legal scholar Frank Pasquale asks: ‘[I]s platform capitalism really a route to opportunity for labour, or just one more play for capital accumulation in an increasingly stratified economy?’ (Pasquale, 2016, p. 313). He develops a framework of narratives and counternarratives of platform capitalism, in which he reflects Michel Foucault’s development of the term ‘counter-memory’ or ‘counter-history’ to dominant epistemologies to platform capitalism. I will recall Pasquale’s guiding question in asking: is platform capitalism really a route to opportunity for the squeezing of reproductive labour, or just one more modulation/adjustment screw to *perpetuate intersectional inequalities*? In a double move, I aim to expose the previously underexplored intersectional (class, race, and gender based) inequalities at stake when it comes to what I term the ‘social study of platforms’. It foregrounds that digital platforms, both social media platforms and digital labour platforms, do not only replicate and operate within societal structures, they also actively *produce* the social structures they are embedded within (see Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

I argue that, under the imperative of self-realisation and flexibility, the ‘worker citizen’ is pushed to diversify their portfolio through piecemeal work. The precarious self emerges through a biopolitical re-engineering of micro- and macrostructures centred upon digital technologies constitutive of a ‘too smart capitalism’ (Sadowski, 2020). However, common extractivist platform imaginaries where humans become objects from which raw materials are being extracted and expropriated for predictive future investment are *not* the centre knot of care and reproductive labour. The affective labour provided in the home cannot be fully hierarchised, sold, nor algorithmically sorted. Nevertheless, platforms provide short-term techno-fixes—flexible, just-in-time solutionism—to fill in ‘care gaps’. Against this backdrop, the conceptualisation of ‘flexploitation’, as I have put forward elsewhere

(Kluzik, 2021), understood as the exploitation of platform workers under the guise of flexibility, allows to revive the privatisation of risks and the disposability of life-sustaining work in negating affective bonds and ultimately perpetuating invisibility of reproductive labour.

In combining an eclectic reading of feminist theory, Science and Technology Studies (STS), political economy and critical urban studies, I consider care and reproductive labour as a 'site of biopolitics' (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2007). In doing so, I first focus on the 'big picture' of the historically devaluated and invisibilised reproductive labour via a re-reading of feminist theory around care, invisibility and the histories of gendered inequalities. Secondly, the global nature of care circularity and the intersectional lens is put forward. In a third step, processes of platformisation, the operations of platforms as technocapitalist assemblages and the limited application onto care work are outlined. In a fourth step, I propose to approach 'platform care' through the register of governing invisibility and flexploitation. In a last step, I put forward some civil society and policy responses to foster 'caring democracies' against the backdrop of omnipresent tech-solutionism.

Enabling reproduction, mediating invisibility: approaching caring economies

In feminist theory and politics, the concept of care entails different meanings and scope. A broad reference considers care as a 'species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'' (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40). This world includes our bodies and our environment, which we seek to interweave in a complex, 'life-sustaining web'. Tronto and Fisher identify four phases of care: caring about, caring for, care-giving and care-receiving. Relatedly, Joan Tronto develops the term 'caring democracy' to indicate that 'democratic politics should centre upon assigning responsibilities for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities' (Tronto, 2013, p. 30). In the recent decades, the concept of care has been increasingly tied to ecological and social justice concerns, to care for humans and non-humans as 'multispecies justice' (Haraway, 2013), to re-conceptualise masculinist ideas of socio-ecological change in the Anthropocene (Barca, 2020) and to understand 'matters of care' as 'speculative ethics' (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017).

Feminist scholars have argued for the distinctive lineages of 'care', 'social reproduction' or 'reproductive labour' (Caffentzis, 2002; Williams, 2018). In this paper, care and reproductive labour are understood interchangeably to signify *both* the paid

and unpaid reproductive-affective labour that sustains life. In order to understand the reproduction gaps that digital platforms may be able to accommodate, a thorough examination of the ensemble of *social reproduction and care through the lens of labour* is needed. Two issues in particular are at stake here. First, the devaluation and invisibilisation of reproduction in comparison to production, as criticised by Marxist-feminist theorists. Second, the connection between multiple crises of reproduction and the externalisation of European welfare states readjustment of the responsibilities of individuals, the market, the community and the welfare state, which take place under the parallel processes of re-commodification and de-commodification of care work.

The role of waged labour and unwaged reproductive labour in light of ongoing technological change has been a central concern of the second wave of feminism and feminist economic critique that has developed since the late 1970s (Bakker, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 2006). In 1972, Marxist Feminists launched the international campaign 'Wages for Housework'. Central to its agenda was, on a theoretical level, a critique of Marx's analysis of labour that undertheorised the role of reproductive labour and, on the political side, the recognition of housework as (wage) labour, as a critique of the relationship between unpaid, unproductive housework in contrast to productive wage labour (Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Federici, 1975; Fortunati, 1995). Silvia Federici prominently claimed, 'To have a wage is to be part of a social contract' (Federici, 2012, p. 16). The campaign identified both the structural relationship of unpaid work to paid work *and* the nature of unpaid gendered work as the material basis for women's structural inequality and oppression. The structural devaluation and invisibilisation of domestic work have been enabled by the framing of these reproductive activities as 'labour of love'. Its social organisation is gendered, as qualities read as natural and feminine, so that reproductive labour attains the 'status of natural resource' (Bauhardt, 2013, p. 365). The Marxist-feminist critique points toward the fact that Marx's analysis of political economy was hampered by his inability to conceptualise value-producing labour other than in terms of commodity production, and his consequent blindness to the importance of women's unpaid reproductive labour in the process of capital accumulation. Accordingly, in performing domestic work, women produce not only immediate use value, but also labour power, which is the basic commodity on which the capitalist production process depends. As Ursula Huws explores, the so-called 'domestic labour debate' has been underexplored when linking to recent contradictions and conflicts around the provision of paid and unpaid care (Huws, 2019, p. 9).

In the past decade, various streams of feminist theory have come together under

the umbrella of 'Social Reproduction Theory' (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2019) and post-work critique (Weeks, 2011). Social Reproduction Theory draws on Marx's argument about the dialectical unity of production and reproduction, noting that the relationship between the production of commodities and the (re)production of labour power is necessary but inherently contradictory, as reproductive activities are notoriously devalued and 'in crisis'. They work with a broader definition of reproductive labour to include all those who (re)produce and sustain life in patriarchal capitalism, whether paid or unpaid, in the home, communities or institutions. According to Nancy Fraser, the crisis of care points to the indispensability of social reproduction for the economic production in a capitalist society. Whereas in 19th century liberal competitive capitalism the reproduction was found outside of the circuits of monetised value, it was largely underpinned by colonial and post-colonial expropriation in the periphery and supported by state and corporate provision of welfare. In financialized capitalism of the present day, Fraser remarks, the subjugation of reproduction to production leads to a 'dualized organisation of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatised for those who cannot' (Fraser, 2016, p. 111).

Circulating care, circulating precarity: the digital geographies of care

To capture the racialised and gendered perspectives on the provision of 'care as a service', I consider it essential to de-construct distinctive geographies of labour centred upon the Global North and the ascribed heteronormativity of providing care and reproductive labour. As Nancy Ettliger notes: 'Beyond effects of specific global events and macroscale structures, precarity inhabits the microspaces of everyday life' (Ettliger, 2007, p. 319). Around the world, care giving in private households has developed into the largest employment for migrant women and racialised nationals. This has happened through increasing state withdrawal from the institutional provision of care and the introduction of 'cash for care' policies into private households in European welfare states. The 'feminisation of labour' pinpoints that women have increasingly displaced men at the workplace but have not been released from their duties of care in the household. Women are therefore confronted with a 'triple burden': they do most of the (unwaged, invisibilised) care work for children and 'the home', take part in the labour market to afford 'the home' and care for the growing number of elderly relatives (Standing, 2011, p. 61).

What seems most appropriate to capture current care migration is the model of transnational social inequality (TSI) that analyses the ambiguities of care-related

cross-border movements. First, female care work is coded as a gendered form of capital and also a 'gendered obligation' interlinked with the 'moral economy of kin', framing acts of caring as a 'moral duty'. Second, transnational inequality entails a lack of social protection. Third, the race-migration nexus is under-explored and how certain migrant groups are first discursively and later materially devalued and 'othered as backward, uncivilized or profiteers' (Lutz, 2018, p. 583). Especially in cities, middle class households outsource their care work, their responsibility as 'mothers' and 'housewives', to migrant women—a new paradigm that Jacqueline Andall (2000) describes as 'post-feminist-paradigm'. However, one has to be cautious with the claim of a new paradigm here, as historical analyses examined the continuities of 'racial' divisions of paid reproductive labour (Glenn, 1992; Collins, 1996; Gutierréz Rodriguez, 2014).

This paradigm is connected to broader structural components of the contemporary European welfare state: contemporary societies need low-paid workers to do the maintenance of their care regimes. The dualised organisation of social reproduction reflects the simultaneous communitisation of reproductive labour. On the one hand, the communitisation of care work describes processes of outsourcing to the wider community. State disinvestment in social care as well as in austerity, responsibility and activation policies and an externalisation of care responsibilities onto families and community paved the way for a regime that political sociologist Silke van Dyk (2018) calls the 'rise of community capitalism' and 'post-wage politics'. The increasing dependency and outsourcing of care tasks to communities, such as neighbourhoods as infrastructure of care or volunteering present themselves as unpaid affective acts of solidarity. In this regard, volunteering or neighborhood platforms are recent examples of 'citizen-based welfare' (Mos, 2021) that reorganise unpaid volunteering work and broader questions of solidarity. The question of reproduction remains of central importance, especially due to the intensifying demographic change and newly emerging reproduction gaps, technological change and the role of financialisation and austerity politics. On the other hand, the recommodification of care work is taking place as for-profit platforms offer care fixes as market solutions. Which role the platforms play in this regard will be examined next.

Platforms as the new default? Approaching technocapitalist assemblages

In a financialised society that is increasingly being mediated by platforms, citizens are confronted with new possibilities of self-realisation and collective organisa-

tion, but also face new regimes of (digital) exclusion. In the world of platform infrastructures, food orders, cleaning services and taxi rides can be easily purchased through a few clicks with a mobile device. As entrepreneurial endeavours of tech-solutionism have flourished since the financial crisis in 2008, digital platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, Deliveroo, Amazon or Helpling have substantially changed socio-spatial configurations so that some claims were raised to describe how platforms are becoming 'infrastructural' (Berfelde & Kluzik, forthcoming). On the one hand, these platforms promise their workers and users alike a new level of flexibility. On the other hand, platform infrastructures question key sociological variables of social trust and connection (Schor, 2016).

While social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter propagated a 'democratisation of communication' that would accompany their introduction, digital corporations and start-ups adorned the emergence of the so-called sharing economy with a narrative of the 'democratisation of labour' (Pasquale, 2016). While the 'sharing economy' served as a starting point to fundamentally change patterns of consumption and ownership, it has quickly dismantled itself as a new phase of political-economic organisation of what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron once described as the "Californian Ideology" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995), a free-market counterculture that has now translated into 'Uber for X' (Schor, 2020). How can one explain the shift from Fordist-Taylorist labour organisation to tech-solutionist visions in the sector of reproductive labour? To do so, it is necessary to first draw along the lines of critical political economy, media studies, critical urban studies and STS literature to excavate the specific imaginaries, historic conjunctures of platformisation—and how limited their analysis are for the social study of platform care.

In his widely acclaimed book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek (2017) traced the development of this new paradigm. He describes platform infrastructures as specific socio-technological architectures and economic actors at the same time that gained momentum since 2008. Since then, platforms have changed conventional economic transactions, the re-organisation of work and related social and cultural practices under the dictum of disruption. Srnicek describes the developmental path of this new paradigm in terms of specific historical crises: first the downturn of the 1970s, the 'boom and bust' of the 1990s and the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis of 2008. Platforms are guided by a shift from manufacturing to services, rely on network effects and are characterised by a tendency of monopolisation, how "capitalism has turned to data as one way to maintain economic growth and vitality in the face of a sluggish production sector" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 6).

Platforms do not act as neutral infrastructures of mere web- or app-based job placements, but are understood as ‘extractive data apparatuses’ (Srniczek, 2017, p. 48) that are the emblematic form of contemporary capitalism that is organised around the axes datafication, accumulation, extraction, and speculation (Sadowski, 2019; Couldry & Mejijas, 2019; Komporozos-Athanasidou, 2022).

The rise of digital (labour) platforms has enabled the so-called ‘platformisation of work’, as Ursula Huws and others have explored in a broad empirical study of platform work in Europe (Huws et al., 2016, 2019). Central to this is that the use of platform work in general and the number of platform workers has increased across Europe, but empirically only a fraction of the composite monthly wage is generated by working on a platform. Many workers work in parallel on multiple platforms or use the wages generated by platform work to supplement income elsewhere—a phenomenon the authors call ‘patchwork livelihood’ (Huws et al., 2019, p. 8). Colin Crouch refers to this trend of platformisation as ‘diversifying the portfolio of the precarious self’ (2019, p. 3) to create patchwork livelihoods from various services, often offered on various platforms. This insight is central to understanding platformisation, that is, a fragmentation of individual aspects of labour as well as a valorisation of informal, immaterial and affective labour.

In media studies and in overlaps to sociology, Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and José van Dijck summarise the proliferation of platforms as infrastructures of everyday life as ‘platformisation’, i.e. the ‘penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks by platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life’ (Poell et al., 2019, p. 6). They describe a simultaneous ‘platformisation of infrastructures’ and an ‘infrastructuralisation of platforms’, when platforms rise to new forms of formerly collective or public infrastructure. With regard to the geographies of labour of digital platforms, a distinction is made between two types: the first describes work that is performed location-independently and web-based, which is referred to by terms such as ‘crowdwork’ (Altenried, 2020; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019) or ‘remote gig work’ (Wood et al., 2019). The second form of platform work is location-specific, i.e. organised via online presence or app but carried out on site, and named ‘offline platform work’ or a geographically bound model (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 50). This type of work requires spatial proximity and temporal synchronicity, such as delivery, courier, transport and care work.

The challenges for workers are manifold, so much so that Niels van Doorn notes: ‘In the world of the platform economy, inequality is a trait, not a bug’ (2017, p. 907). Platform workers do not benefit from social security mechanisms, receive a

low piece rate with a high commission for the platform operators, insurance and working material have to be provided by themselves (e.g. cars or bicycles for delivery services). Platforms do not speak of workers. Instead, they refer to 'partners' to blur the actual responsibility of the platform and shift all responsibility onto the workers' shoulders. This radical responsabilisation of the workforce goes hand in hand with a meticulous visibility management of workers. Workers are encouraged to permanently self-optimize their profiles through feedback loops of algorithmic management. The spaces for self-organisation or union representation are limited, however there has been an increasing resistance to exploitative working conditions (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2019; Heiland, 2020; Trappmann et al., 2020) and the evolving tension between mainstream and grassroots approaches in collective organisation strategies (Johnston, 2020).

Conceptualising platform care

The discourse around the 'future of work' has been increasingly linked towards the narrative of 'Uberification' or 'Uberisation' which implies the dissemination of the ideological, socio-cultural model linked to ride-hailing service Uber. In a nutshell, it examines the ongoing responsabilisation of workers for their economic faith (Daidj, 2019; Fleming, 2017; Nerinckx, 2016). The central idea behind a growing spread of organisational forms lies on the assumption of a 'truly free market', where employers can maximise flexibility and shift the responsibilities onto the workers while maximising platform operator's revenues (Crouch, 2019, p. 3). The example of Uber presents an ethically superior and sustainable business model which pairs flexibility with ubiquitous availability. In this, performances of sharing are framed 'both as part of the capitalist economy and as an alternative' (Cockayne, 2016, p. 74). As Woodcock and Graham (2020, p. 79) illustrate in their first systematic overview of the gig economy, the 'Uber for X' shorthand and its implications serve as the 'go-to example' of offline platform work, focusing on the fragmentation, deregulation and informalisation of work *vis-à-vis* the dismantling (or, at best, slowly adjusting) of existing welfare mechanisms under the narrative of a flexibility-pushing 'Uberisation'.

However, platform work which focuses on domestic work offers limited comparability. Numbers from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) suggest that there are 67 million domestic workers provide care services, of whom 11.5 million are migrant domestic workers and 8.5 million migrant female workers respectively (ILO 2015). In recent years it has become increasingly popular to organise care services via digital labour platforms instead of 'classical employment agencies', for in-

stance with Care.com in the US, SweepSouth in South Africa or Helpling in Europe. Take for instance Care.com: it operates in twenty countries with 12.7 million ‘care-givers’, a significantly higher number than the 3.9 million drivers claimed by Uber (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, p. 81). In the single comprehensive study of digital care platforms in the United States until the present day, Julia Ticona and Andrea Mateescu analyse the re-framing of care workers as ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ through digitally mediated platform work. They analyse paid domestic work as a ‘quintessential example of invisible work due to its devaluation, low pay, and legal disenfranchisement’ (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4387). In contrast to more intensively studied visible platform work, they explain how these platforms serve as matchmakers, facilitate trust between strangers and—at first sight—promote a de-informalisation of a highly informal work through the creation of more transparent employment conditions.

Recent scholarship focusing on two German care platforms: Betreut.de and Helpling have outlined the large number of services offered and mediated via platforms: on the website of Betreut.de, the German website of Care.com, you can find babysitters, nannies, au-pairs, grannies, senior care, dog or cat sitters, and household helpers (Mos, 2021; Bor, 2021). Another platform, Helpling, is specialised in the matchmaking of cleaners. These platforms position themselves confidently and assure the regulation of a contested sector with tech-solutionist answers. For example, Helpling’s co-founder Benedikt Franke proclaimed that Helpling would ‘fight the black market’ by brokering client relationships and therefore reducing inequalities. However, he refrained from the idea of a responsible company: one is only in the ‘position of an intermediary’.

This shows how the platformisation of care reveals itself as a consequence of the tendency towards datafication, logistification and commodification of reproductive-affective labour. Platforms can be read as agents of social and individual insecurity. It is about governing invisibility in the Foucauldian sense: intertwined at both the level of technologies of the self and at the platform level of the labour force management. Of central importance here can be the way in which a platform ‘sees’, that is, attempts to orchestrate labouring and caring bodies through algorithmically controlled subjectification agents. Digital platforms, which are driving the dissolution of labour boundaries, are first to be understood as a structural phenomenon. What can be observed here is what I call the ‘platformisation of care’. This term refers to intertwined processes of increasing (I) ambiguous framing as a ‘service’ and (II) spatial reorganisation of care activities.

5.1 Care as a service: new markets and modes of valorising/valuing

Fragmentation in this context means that increasingly small-scale reproductive activities are offered as services via digital platforms. The range of care work offered and mediated via platforms is large and reflects an ongoing trend to outsource more of reproductive labour. This development can be described as ‘market take-away and give-back’, following Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012). In her sociological classic *The Outsourced Self*, Hochschild describes the outsourcing of activities that in the past were classically performed by the community or the (heteronormative) nuclear family. She writes: ‘While tendencies towards marketisation contributed to destabilisation and insecurities were observed in gainful employment as well as in the household, ironically it is now precisely the market that offers support and relief’ (Hochschild 2012, p. 10). Even though Hochschild focuses on the specific case of US consumer society around the turn of the 2000s, this development cannot be detached from the experimental phase of the tech corporations that paved the way for the platform economy.

With the platformisation of care, the question of valuation versus valorisation has gained new momentum. In the recent debate on the valorisation of reproductive labour in the broader sense, which has been going on for some time, especially approaches from Science and Technology Studies (STS) examine primarily new sites of commodification and capitalist value creation (see for example Cooper, 2011; Cooper & Waldby, 2014). In a different vein and through understanding the complex lineages of financialisation and the crisis of social reproduction, Emma Dowling (2016) has proposed an analytical distinction between two different modes to capture the crisis of social reproduction: *modes of valorising* and *modes of valuing* social reproduction. Foregrounding that reproductive labour constitutes both a ‘cost for capital’ as well as a ‘central source of capital’s surplus’. She outlines how modes of valorising, modes of valuing social reproduction signifies an ‘open and contested process’ in which ‘modes of valuing social reproduction can be thought of as a set of social and ethical practices that attribute value to social reproduction’ (ibid, p. 461). Connected to the imaginaries of platform care, these infrastructures put forward another mechanism of valorising, not valuing, the various tasks of reproductive labour.

5.2 Spatial reorganisation (and its limits)

The platformisation of care entails a spatial reorganisation, as recent geographical research has suggested (Gabauer et al., 2021). This happens in two parallel

processes: on the one hand, through outsourcing to communities and a re-familiarisation of reproductive activities, and on the other hand, through marketisation and the increasing enmeshing of digital platforms with already existing structures on a local level. The reasons for both processes have been specified in more detail by geographer Lizzie Richardson (2020a, 2020b). In contrast to prevailing foci of the platform as a company (Srnicek, 2017) and as an on-screen interface and hidden algorithm (van Doorn, 2017), Richardson offers a broader perspective incorporating analyses of socio-spatial configurations. She describes the specific spatial production through platforms as a 'flexible spatial arrangement' (Richardson, 2020a), an assemblage, an interplay of differently networked actors orchestrated by the platform. In doing so, she draws on approaches from actor-network theory, in particular Michel Callon (2016) to view the specifics of the 'delivered meal' as platform good through the Deliveroo platform. The concrete geographies of digital labour, Richardson argues, are never static, but are reconfigured and reassembled with each transaction. The advantage of the assemblage approach is a multi-perspective examination of actors, algorithms and interfaces in order to shed light on aspects of that mediation process that previously appeared as a black box. In platform care, the service of the booked activity has to be spatially embedded and is not fully dependent on an algorithm. Because the worker herself *is* the service, and there is no product to be delivered, as in the case of food couriers, the person becomes the platform good.

The making of the caring reserve army

In the field of care platforms, a fixation on data extraction, surveillance and nudging of workers—common for the analysis of labour relations in platform capitalism—does not seem warranted at first glance. Although social reproduction can never be made fully dependent on the logics of commodification, the household is increasingly permeated by capitalist logics (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019, p. 90). I propose to understand precarity and precarisation as categories of order that not only take into account the sphere of paid work, but also the unpaid, reproductive sphere. Understanding precarisation after the biopolitical turn therefore means looking at it in both of these spheres. If one considers the processes of flexibilisation, fragmentation and dissolution of boundaries that have significantly changed the world of paid work, these processes also have an impact on the reproductive sphere.

The concept of 'flexploitation' introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) to characterise a global inequality regime, can fill a void here. As I have outlined elsewhere

(Kluzik 2021), the conceptualisation of flexploitation, the subtle exploitation of workers while propagating flexibility as an all-encompassing meta-narrative, allows us to trace the privatisation of risk and the overlapping moments of crisis of the present day's organisation of labour. Flexibility as the dominant narrative in the platform economy can be quickly undermined by the logic of exploitation operating at the same time: both at the level of self-technologies and at the platform-governmental level of labour management, which are also intertwined in the case of platform care. Of central importance here is the way a platform 'sees', that is, seeks to orchestrate caring bodies through platforms as algorithmically controlled agents of subjectivation.

Due to the oversupply of workers on platforms, they have to stand out in particular. By necessity, they have to engage in various practices of visibility management in order to assert themselves in the pool of care workers, fuelled by new techniques of self-tracking (McEwens, 2018). These include curating their profiles according to desired characteristics (punctual, reliable) in order to optimise their visibility—which, however, is always controlled by platform-specific metrics and is difficult for users to understand. First, workers are encouraged to reinvent themselves as 'entrepreneurial selves' (Bröckling, 2015) in order to demonstrate constant customer orientation, innovation and creativity. Self-shaping and aesthetic responsibility are attributed to the 'intimate unknowns' because the production of sincerity and trust has become central to the mediation of social practices on digital platforms. Ultimately, this leads to a reinforcement of racialised and feminised inequalities in the platform economy, as Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark (2016) state in their study of racial bias in the ride service Uber. Secondly, care workers have to deal with rating systems that only react to a limited extent to bad ratings (for example, when workers are late). Even if there is no 'dictatorship of the stars' from the platform operators' point of view, as Helpling's co-founder Benedikt Franke proclaims, the opposite seems to be the case: through rating practices, reciprocal visibility management on platforms is analysed, hierarchised and finally (in-)visibilised by users and workers. Technological infrastructures co-create precarious workers who are assigned their place in the app ecology through automated feedback loops, self-tracking, control and optimisation systems, as Charitsis (2019) has outlined for the platformisation of healthcare. Through the processes of and spatial reorganisation, one witnesses the platformisation of work and life. It is productive to understand the platformisation of care as a primary process to witness the unstable categories of production/reproduction, visibility/invisibility, public/private. In this way, one can approach a current diagnosis of crisis (in this case, the care crisis) and its connected techno-fixes without disregarding long existing in-

equalities.

Conclusion: towards multiple futures of work in the light of multiple care crises

Platform care is another contemporary example of emerging (or consolidating) 'hustle and gig' (Ravenelle, 2019) life-worlds. Platform economy's double structure of global supply chains on the one hand and embeddedness in local contexts with a multitude of actors on the other should not neglect platformisation of care. It is the centre knot where a multitude of blind spots of the contemporary organisation of production and reproduction, of public and private, of marketisation and re-familiarisation come together. This contribution should sharpen the view of a platformisation of care and the role of feminised and racialised precarity, both on a structural level and on the level of the subjectivation of workers. The affirmative narrative of flexibility and the simultaneous subtle exploitation of workers by platform operators can be subsumed under the concept of flexploitation. However, platforms act here as agents of social and individual insecurity that employ the relational practice of governing invisibility. This conceptual perspective can help to focus on the constantly renegotiated relations of labour, techno-fixes, care, and social change and laying bare the mechanisms of platform care, in reference to Emma Dowling's work, as a *mode of valorising*, and not *valuing* reproductive labour. As Ursula Huws claims 'it is apparent that there is no simple technological fix for the problem of housework' (Huws, 2019, p. 21).

In the debate about strategies to address the role of reproductive labour in contemporary societies, a variety of 'doing otherwise' is usually put forward. Huws (2019) for instance concludes that it is a combination of the bottom-up design of technologies that serve communities and the demands for increasing public services (Huws, 2019; Schor, 2020). On the one hand you find debates of 'platform cooperativism' (Scholz, 2016), the 'commons' and 'peer-to-peer production' (Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014). They adapt classic cooperative organising to the digital age to promote a more democratically organized digital cooperativism. Recent analyses have also outlined the contradictions of platform cooperativism and the hidden 'entrepreneurial activism' (Sandoval, 2020). On the other hand, voices for updated regulatory frameworks are necessary to limit exploitative framings of platform workers. Another pathway signifies the importance of social movements to reorganise, as put forward by solidarity movements such as 'Care Revolution' (Winker, 2015). This is to recognise care as the basis for societal processes and foregrounds non-discriminatory politics in today's societies.

What is urgently needed then is a broader paradigm change that incorporates *all three* alternatives to come closer to a vision of ‘caring democracies’ (Tronto, 2013; Williams, 2018, p. 558). As Sarah Sharma outlines, the recent technocapitalist fixes ‘obscures the inescapable realities of care work that so many women, people of color, and precarious workers undertake out of survival. A Mommy’s-basement world forecloses the possibility of a reconfigured technological future that is not based on exploiting the labor of others. And it co-opts the political potential of care as a category of feminist organizing’ (Sharma, 2018, n.p.).

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