

Platform Socialism

‘A ground-breaking, ambitious and rigorous account of how and why we must take control over contemporary digital technologies.’

—Nick Srnicek, Lecturer in Digital Economy, King’s College London
and author of *Platform Capitalism*

‘A clarion call for hope amid twenty-first-century doom. With analytical flair, he shows that platforms are not invincible and that their infrastructure may be the key to a better world.’

—Phil Jones, author of *Work Without the Worker:
Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism*

‘A compelling account of the political struggles that will be needed to challenge capital’s control over digital platforms, and an essential read for anyone who believes in technology’s emancipatory potential.’

—Wendy Liu, author of *Abolish Silicon Valley:
How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism*

‘A punchy analysis of the platform economy that offers more than a critique of big tech’s vision of our collective future. Muldoon sketches the contours of a democratic socialist alternative.’

—Aaron Benanav, Researcher at Humboldt University of Berlin
and author of *Automation and the Future of Work*

‘Encourages us to open our minds fully to the possibility of an alternative future, in which technology is put to work for the many, not the few.’

—Lizzie O’Shea, lawyer and author of *Future Histories*

Platform Socialism

How to Reclaim our Digital Future
from Big Tech

James Muldoon

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Introduction

The most tragic form of loss isn't the loss of security; it's the loss of the capacity to imagine that things could be different.

Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*

A deep sense of technological determinism pervades our present era. Tech entrepreneurs predict how technology will transform our world for years to come. These silicon prophets concoct grand visions of our automated and bioengineered future with glittery images of luxury and convenience. Technology is habitually cast as an external force developing on its own accord and dragging us along with it. Too often, calls for 'digital transformation' involve us adapting to the demands of new technology rather than us consciously shaping it. In the absence of any bold ideas from politicians, the tech world has claimed ownership over the future tense.

We have come to see it as normal to give up control over our data and allow platform companies to profit from our activity. The exchange appears to be innocent and even beneficial to us – we use a free service and in exchange companies can use information gathered from the platform to sell targeted advertising. We take it for granted that digital platforms should be privately owned fiefdoms ruled by a tech despot, with billions in profits distributed to a few wealthy shareholders. We accept this situation because this is how the technology has always been presented to us. Platform companies established set patterns for how these products would operate at a time when it was still unclear how fundamentally they would transform our lives. As new markets opened up, a generation of entrepreneurs and gurus took advantage of the public's relative ignorance to claim dominance over this new arena of social life.

But we need to confront the threat Big Tech currently poses to our freedom and democracy. While some of the methods are new, we shouldn't allow the technology to obscure the fact that the basic structure is all too familiar. Platform companies set the rules of the game and benefit from the wealth we create. As individual users of the platform we have little power to affect how it is organised. Now we face a dilemma. We have

more tools at our disposal but less control over how they are designed. We can communicate with nearly anyone across the globe but can't determine the conditions in which we connect. We use services for free but see little of the value extracted from our digital lives. It has become easier for us to imagine humans living forever in colonies on Mars than exercising meaningful democratic control over digital platforms.

Big Tech promotes ideas of 'global community' and puts forward wholesome images of their companies helping others connect and find belonging in an alienated and globalised world. Despite their litigious campaigns to undermine local governments and evade regulations, tech companies paint themselves as benevolent partners of local communities and facilitators of new forms of tech-enabled social life. By creating the digital infrastructure that facilitates online communities, platform companies have inserted value capture mechanisms between people seeking to interact and exchange online. Digital platforms are tools that enable a more sophisticated business model for exploiting our social interactions and connections with others. Rather than view this as an aberrant form of 'surveillance capitalism' – driven by an alternative logic and responding to fundamentally different imperatives than capitalism itself – it is more accurate to understand this as an extension and intensification of capitalism's central drive of appropriating human life for profit.¹

Questions of ownership and control have not been at the forefront of debates over technology. Currently, many assume the main problems with big platforms are their privacy breaches, monopolistic practices and surveillance technologies. The answer to these problems is more – and better – regulation by government. But the fact that these are our main concerns reflects a prior victory for Silicon Valley in setting a limited horizon for how we imagine our digital lives. By failing to acknowledge the depth of the crisis, everybody from libertarians like Andrew Yang to social democrats like Elizabeth Warren miss the possibility for more ambitious and effective proposals. We need to shift our focus from 'privacy, data and size' to 'power, ownership and control'. The first set of issues are important, but they're secondary to a deeper set of concerns about who owns the platforms, who has control and who benefits from the status quo. Technology can either be controlled by private companies and used to generate profit for the few, or it can be directed by communities to benefit the many.

Reclaiming our sense of collective self-determination requires a new kind of platform economy. How do we imagine an alternative that is

neither private oligarchy nor unaccountable state bureaucracy – an alternative outside of rule by Big Tech or Big State? The answer lies in new forms of participatory and decentralised governance which place human freedom over profits and ensure the benefits of technology are equally distributed. It involves citizens' active participation in the design and control of socio-technical systems rather than their after-the-fact regulation by a technocratic elite. I call this idea *platform socialism* – the organisation of the digital economy through the social ownership of digital assets and democratic control over the infrastructure and systems that govern our digital lives.

Platform socialism describes both an ideal and a process. On the one hand, it functions as a Kantian regulative idea – a goal we strive towards that helps us determine how to engage with immediate challenges. It is an ideal that we may never fully realise, but it stands as a systematic alternative to the status quo. This allows it to be ambitious in its scope but modest and flexible in how it is applied to empirical reality. It provides a bold vision that attempts to unite different forms of localised resistance around a shared vision of a democratic digital future. By serving as a critical tool, it can also expose the limitations of current digital platforms and proposals for reform. It facilitates holistic thinking about the systemic nature of the problems we face and the need for genuine alternatives that fundamentally break with the extractive model of the corporate digital economy. Rather than just trying to fix Facebook, we should start to imagine what better alternatives could take its place.

On the other hand, platform socialism is about reclaiming a long-term counter-hegemonic project for challenging capitalist control over technology. It must be based on political struggles against the concentrated power of capital and efforts to overcome its control over our lives. This movement is not a quest for an ideal or harmonious society but is driven by antagonistic practices and a resistance to commodification and exploitation. It gestures beyond piecemeal reforms and the bland crisis management and troubleshooting that characterises much of our present response to Big Tech. As a process, platform socialism connects the struggles of different policy spheres and addresses these at the level of concrete institutions and practices. It opens up a space of reflection on our vision of the future in order to encourage deliberation and debate. Rather than providing a rigid blueprint, it invites amendments, additions and corrections. Our sketches should be provisional, contestable and part of an ongoing process of discovery and refinement.

The task of engaging in constructive thinking about how to imagine a future socialist society has for a long time been stifled within the movement. Marx and Engels declined to write ‘recipes’ for the ‘cookshops of the future’ and concentrated on a detailed analysis of the capitalist economy. They opposed their own scientific socialism to the ‘utopian socialism’ of those who imagined societies of the future, but who failed to base their theories on the movement of existing social forces. They believed that constructing detailed blueprints required knowledge that we could not have and that new modes of production would emerge naturally from the development of the old ones.

We have good reason to doubt the cogeny of what has been called Marx’s ‘utopophobia.’² We should free ourselves from the shackles preventing us from imagining new institutional forms. In addition to offering a negative account of the problematic features of our own society, we should say something positive about what will replace it. The technological determinism of our time increases the urgency for us to imagine different ways in which digital platforms could be organised. There are many existing accounts of what is wrong with Big Tech but few detailed proposals for how these problems should be addressed.

Without a clear vision of the future and an alternative to the ideological framework of ‘capitalist realism,’ it can be difficult to imagine how another world could be possible.³ Reflecting on how we want to live can give us a clearer appreciation of what is at stake and make our goals more vivid and tangible. It is strategically unsound to always be on the defensive, waiting to protest the latest round of capitalist tech innovation. We need to challenge the seeming inevitability of technological progress by putting forward our own vision of how tech should be designed and implemented.

It is also essential to bear in mind that the scope of what is considered feasible is itself a contested and ever-shifting political terrain. Images of radical transformation can help shift the Overton window and make space for new demands and ideas for reform. Restricting our sociological imagination to the confines of what the present order would allow leaves us without the resources to imagine the new. Recovering ideas from the past allows us to explore historical roads not taken and cast new light on overlooked possibilities in the present.

Finally, by imagining visions of the future we actively contribute to the task of turning these into reality. By giving us something to strive for they can generate new desires for change and help channel discontent into

meaningful action. They open up a space for what philosopher Miguel Abensour called ‘the education of our desires’ – how utopian thinking can disrupt our taken-for-granted ways of acting and teach us ‘to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way.’⁴

To this end, platform socialism seeks to achieve six important goals. First, platform socialism is concerned with expanding the realm of human freedom by enabling communities to actively participate in their own self-governance. It is about creating new digital platforms in which citizens can take back control over their services and public spaces. Freedom in this sense must be understood as more than simply the negative liberty of avoiding interference from others.⁵ Debates in the digital economy have been oriented around ideas of negative liberty: the right not to be surveilled, to be left alone and to have proprietary rights over our personal data. All of these are important, but this framework neglects more substantive participatory rights to direct and control how platforms operate. A richer conception of freedom includes an idea of actively shaping the major institutions which affect the material conditions of our lives. Before the dominance of a liberal understanding of negative liberty, emancipatory groups strived for a conception of *freedom as collective self-determination*. This idea goes back to the oldest versions of active citizenship in the Athenian polis, but it also resonates with similar conceptions practised by marginalised groups engaged in a struggle for the expansion of their freedom, from workers and women to black freedom activists and decolonisation movements.⁶ Freedom in this sense is understood as an ongoing collective struggle and must be practised rather than enjoyed as a passive condition.⁷

Second, it strives for social ownership over digital assets – the critical infrastructure, software and organisations of the digital economy. This is based on the idea that society’s wealth is socially produced through everybody’s collective and collaborative labour and should therefore be owned in common and used for the benefit of all. Currently, giant platform companies are highly financialised with large market capitalisations and enormous financial power. The socialisation of these digital platforms would expand the autonomy of workers and enable them to benefit from the value of this technology. Social ownership is neither pure state ownership nor worker ownership. Centralising all property in the instrument of the state risks it devolving into a new bureaucracy, whereas pure worker ownership discriminates against the many people who do not engage in full-time paid labour and creates tensions between

workers in different parts of the economy. Achieving a degree of diversity of ownership in the platform economy matters because assets range from multi-billion dollar data centres to local on-demand courier services. A broad ecology of social ownership acknowledges the multiple and overlapping associations to which individuals belong and promotes the flourishing of different communities from mutual societies to platform co-operatives, data trusts and international social networks.

Third, platform socialism enacts community control over the governance of digital platforms. Digital platforms should be reformed so they become internally democratic associations that balance the needs of diverse stakeholders including workers, producers, users and local communities. Representing different parties in the democratic governance process is particularly important because digital platforms are designed to bring together a diverse range of people who may have conflicting interests about how the platform operates. Workers should have a large degree of autonomy in how they perform their work, but the operation of the platform needs to be balanced with the interests of different types of users and members of the community. All those whose interests are significantly affected by the operation of a digital platform should have some say in how it operates. How this is realised in practice depends on the size of the community and the nature of the service. Separating questions of ownership and governance is an important step because it enables smaller communities to exercise control over services that may require large amounts of capital investment in digital infrastructure. The move from shareholder primacy over appointing the board of a company to multi-stakeholder governance structures changes the purpose of digital platforms from maximising profit to creating social value.

Fourth, platform socialism seeks to ensure that the social and economic benefits of digital technology are shared more equitably throughout society. In today's platform economy, the value generated by ordinary users of platforms is hoarded by shareholders who benefit from generous payouts and dividends. Socialising these resources would enable the establishment of large digital social wealth funds to provide investment capacity for new infrastructure and projects. Recapturing the wealth produced through the use of technology would allow for new research and development into socially useful services to provide for people's genuine needs. It would also put an end to the exploitation of society's most vulnerable and precarious workers forced into the gig economy. In addition, it puts forward an idea of data not as a commodity

but as a collective resource to be held in common and used to empower citizens and help them solve shared problems. A range of associations would exist, some of which would provide benefits to their members while others would seek to generate social value that would benefit all.

Fifth, an emancipatory movement should aim to combat power inequalities based on social hierarchies. The dynamics of capitalist accumulation intersect and reciprocally reinforce other power relations connected to race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality. As a result, the opportunities and benefits of technology are unevenly distributed across the globe. The exploitation experienced by a highly paid software engineer at Google is different from a coder in India, a factory worker in China or a cobalt miner in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Digital platforms have led to the creation of a large global underclass of ‘microwork’ platform labourers performing monotonous and repetitive tasks for low pay – often women of colour working in precarious conditions.⁸ Big Tech is global in scope, but also fundamentally colonial in character.⁹ American and Chinese corporations accumulate the vast majority of profits through their ownership of digital infrastructure, software and intellectual property rights, which imposes a condition of permanent dependency on workers in the Global South. Changes in ownership structure do not automatically challenge structures of colonialism, racism and sexism. A commitment to counteracting these power structures needs to be a grounding principle built into the design and implementation of new systems.¹⁰ If not, new platforms may end up reproducing and exacerbating existing patterns of inequality. Digital platforms should serve members of marginalised communities who rely on them most and who are most vulnerable to exploitation.

Sixth, it fosters a culture of collaboration, solidarity and hope in which a spirit of innovation and invention is harnessed for socially useful ends. The problem-solving and tinkering culture which has long been part of the technology world can only be fully realised when technology is liberated from capitalism.¹¹ Collaboration towards shared goals rather than competition between profit-making firms should be the driving principle of the development of new technology. Our brightest minds should be empowered to work towards producing socially beneficial technology rather than solving narrow problems around generating revenue and increasing user engagement. We need a new sense of hope for the future to replace the current cynicism and pessimism about the future of technology.

In many respects, this proposal runs against the grain of contemporary criticism of digital platforms from the Left and Right. After 2016, with Trump's election, the Cambridge Analytica data breach scandal and growing awareness of the rampant exploitation of the gig economy, few would argue that digital platforms could help tackle society's problems. But without a belief in the possibility of a better future emancipatory politics becomes impossible. There is much that remains open and uncertain in our world. Nobody could have predicted the unforeseen changes that have occurred over the past decade. We require what Ernst Bloch calls *docta spes*, 'educated hope', a belief in the rich potential of our agency which has not yet been realised in the world. This does not mean we should adopt a naively optimistic standpoint or doubt the enormity of the task facing us. Our 'pessimism of the intellect' needs to be combined with a commitment to a future of mutual care, solidarity and collaboration based on our collective capacity for political action.

To achieve these goals, this book proposes a series of concrete institutional reforms to recode how the digital economy operates. The first level concerns the democratisation of the platform – individual platform companies should be opened up to the ideas and actions of their members through changes to their ownership and governance structures. After developing the principles of platform socialism through engagement with neglected figures from the socialist tradition, I examine four specific cases of a ride hail app, short-term rentals, an internet search engine and distributed social networks. These case studies range from the local and civic to the international, demonstrating how we could think about democratisation at different levels of complexity.

Our concern, however, is not only with questions of workplace democracy – how individual enterprises should be owned and managed – but with broader considerations of economic democracy concerning larger macro-level issues over the allocation of resources. The majority of the analysis in this book focuses on the platform economy rather than the tech industry as a whole or the broader economy. The world's largest digital platforms present an important case study of what is happening at the cutting edge of capitalist development. The largest and most profitable companies in the world are now mostly American tech companies. Their extraordinary concentration of power, immense profitability and wide-ranging effects on social life have made these firms particularly prominent in the public consciousness. The world of tech is where the American dream of rags to riches is still alive and well. The

platform economy matters deeply both strategically and ideologically to capitalism, which is why it serves as an important site for democratic intervention. However, democratising digital platforms necessarily lead us to broader issues of how resources are allocated. I discuss a system of *participatory planning* as a way for us to deliberate over the best allocation of resources in a democratic and pluralist economy.

Our vision of the future needs to be accompanied by a plan for how to achieve it. Lasting change will never come about with benevolent Silicon Valley CEOs growing a conscience. A fundamental transformation of the platform economy will only be achieved through a shift in the balance of power between platform owners and the communities they exploit. Achieving this will require an analysis of the current balance of forces to understand how we can swing them in our favour. We need to pinpoint strategically vulnerable points to focus our energies and identify the types of reforms that would strengthen our position.

We are currently in a dire situation. Tech platforms have enormous power and opponents of digital platforms are deeply divided on the nature of the problem and how best to address it. We should be under no illusions about the difficult road ahead. Struggling against the power of the tech capitalist class will require transforming society from the bottom up and engaging in multiple and diverse struggles at different points in the system. Any kind of truly transformative project will take time and will require the gradual build up of oppositional forces.

The approach advocated here is a threefold strategy of *resisting*, *regulating* and *recoding* existing digital platforms.¹² First, we need to support bottom-up struggles that resist the power of Big Tech companies and the immediate harms they cause to workers and the broader community. Second, we should also call on states and transnational regulatory authorities to further enhance protections for workers and to properly enforce existing laws. Finally, we need to foster alternative systems and processes of collaborative production that could eventually come to replace these companies with democratic alternatives. These three strategies are complementary. Stronger regulations can enhance workers' bargaining power and catalyse more workers to join unions. Similarly, empowered social movements applying pressure from below can push governments to take bolder action in reining in Big Tech. A thriving ecosystem of well-established alternative models also weakens the power of major tech companies to control how we envision the future. We need to support existing movements against Big Tech that put forward radical

demands and place questions of democracy, ownership and control at the centre of their organising.

This book is about how we can reimagine our relationship with digital platforms. It invites readers to consider how we can press the reset button on the drive to commodification and establish a radically new set of principles for our digital lives. Through the collective action of workers and platform users we need to build our power to fight back against Big Tech. My hope is that recognising the fragility of Big Tech's grasp on our future and the collective strength that exists in our communities might embolden us to strive for more radical alternatives to the status quo. We are now at a crossroads. The next ten years will prove decisive as to whether we can reclaim our digital future from the hands of tech billionaires or whether we will continue down a path of exploitation and domination. Whoever controls the platforms, controls the future. The simple proposition of this book is that this should be us.