

Anke Strüver and Sybille Bauriedl (Eds.), **Platformisation of Urban Life: Towards a Technocapitalist Transformation of European Cities**, Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2022, 305 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

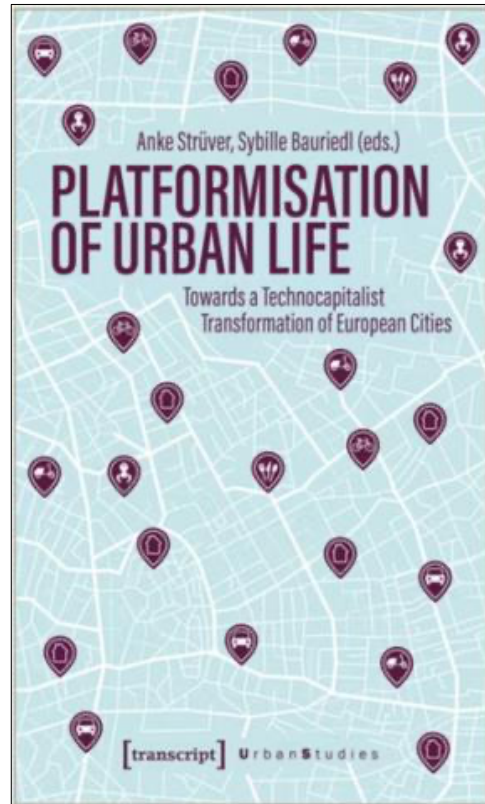
Reviewed by
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I read the book **Platformisation of Urban Life: Towards a Technocapitalist Transformation of European Cities** to inform my work on smart cities and the technification of the urban. I was surprised that it included none of the well-known scholars in the field of smart cities, such as Coletta, Evans, Heaphy, and Kitchin (2019), Karvonen, Cugurullo, and Caprotti (2019), or Mackinnon, Burns, and Fast (2023). Top scholars in smart city and platform urbanization scholarship are inconsistently cited within chapters. Case studies and scholars are situated almost exclusively in Germany and Austria. The anthology is edited by two human geographers in Austria and Germany, who may have solicited chapters from scholars they know rather than an open call.

The book is focused on European cities, in accordance with its title; however, I found the title itself confusing. With the use of “towards” it implies a recommendation, in this case, that European cities should be moving “towards a technocapitalist transformation,” a contentious proposition. And yet, this seems to be a grammatical rather than conceptual issue, as the book emphasizes critical approaches to technocapitalist transformation. The confusing title is emblematic of a deeper problem with the book, however. It is mired in confusing grammar, either badly translated from German (speaking German, I recognize this) or poorly proofread. This is off-putting for work at this level, which can be forgiven the odd typo but not hundreds of grammar mistakes.

While the anthology is dominated by geographers, it may have broader appeal to science and technology studies, consistent with the interdisciplinarity of smart cities research, which includes scholars in surveillance, data justice, and social sciences and humanities.

Moving on to content, the most salient definition of platforms is provided by Dowling: “Platforms are digital intermediaries to enable two or more groups to interact, providing the digital infrastructure that enables communication and exchange, rendering user data collected in the process productive in order to develop and marketize services” (p. 108). Other definitions omit key dimensions, such as marketization of services and exploitative productivity of data.



The proposition in several early chapters is that big tech platforms, providing services such as care, food delivery, ride sharing, accommodations, and delivery of goods, are no longer simply Internet-based services but supplant nondigital service-provision infrastructure. Moreover, they do so in a globally unregulated framework that downloads the responsibility and costs for services onto “users” rather than democratically providing them to citizens, particularly problematic when basic rights such as food, care, and housing are considered.

In some chapters, these effects are analyzed through intersectional frameworks on race and gender. Berfelde and Kluzic argue, using a lens of science and technology studies and feminist geography, that platforms are leveraging multiple crises “to position their business model as a privatized infrastructure for social reproduction” (p. 40). They point to the tension of financialized capitalist control over domestic and collective social reproduction, which often falls to women. This gendered lens on the care crisis, and platformization as a “care fix,” is further explored by Dowling, who references the “network effect” of platforms, where the dominance of one platform in a field draws network attention, gains algorithmic recommendations, and quickly grows toward monopolization. In digital self-care platforms, the pressure toward embodied self-management “puts personal responsibility center-stage and is a kind of care fix that privatizes the responsibility for care and turns self-care into a coping mechanism in the face of an inadequate and ailing care infrastructure” (p. 109). Thus, the platformization of care is an inequitable infrastructuralization of lacking services. Dowling interrogates how the platformized “care fix” is offered by the same capitalist political economy causing the care crisis, impeding the collective improvement of working conditions to systemically reduce stress, anxiety, and depression *before* they happen. Platforms providing a “caring” exchange, such as Casserole Club in the United Kingdom, where volunteers providing services and goods to neighbors in need, contribute replacement infrastructure for municipal services cut due to austerity, with racialized and gendered implications. These two chapters might point to further research on gendered and racialized exploitation in urbanized platforms, via algorithmic bias (Nah, Luo, & Joo, 2023), racialized AI (Noble, 2018), missing gender data (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017), and so on.

Some outlier chapters I found overly technical for a social science audience; however, they might be accessible to geographers. This included Michel and Schroeder-Bergen’s chapter on the politics of geodata production, and Krupp, Braun and Boeva’s piece on architecture platform market dominance through network effects.

More interesting to me were chapters examining resistance to urban platformization. Wiechers’ chapter explores how platforms might be open to “emancipatory practices” through glitches. “Glitch” refers to contestations of technology affordances, which Wiechers theorizes autoethnographically, narrating his own use of a rideshare platform. However, I was not persuaded by the emancipation narrative, given the first two glitches were oppressive. First, the app did not work, so he had to stand in front of the train station for ten minutes downloading a new app and (insecurely) uploading credit card information. Second, using Uber, contested by traditional taxi drivers, he feels guilty. In scenario three, the more convincingly emancipatory glitch is the Uber driver’s use of multiple apps for contingencies when one app is not functioning. He enjoys the autonomy of platform entrepreneurialism while nonetheless subjected to capitalist platform technologies

and debt systems. Thus “the claim of the fix and the reality of the glitch” (p. 98) are contradictions that bear further research on the complexities of entanglements with platform infrastructures.

Also contesting technological platform domination was Franz’s chapter on analogue platforms, in which the author explored a neighborhood, drawing attention to nondigital platforms such as community events poster boards, poles with handmade flyers, a park’s modular seats and tables, and DIY brightly painted skids forming U-shaped benches contesting commercialized public space. These analogue platform engagements were narrated through imagined inner monologues interpellating or hailing the passerby-as-citizen in invitations to meet neighbors, have conversations, and so on. There was a kind of nostalgic beauty to this chapter, an urgent yet relaxed call to resituate ourselves within physical rather than virtual urban spaces.

Two chapters offering counter-technological approaches were Exner and Hoflehner’s on “Smart Ambivalences,” and Bignami and Hanakata’s on “Platform Urbanization and Citizenship.” Here, use of the conceptual frame of urban citizenship, prevalent in data justice and smart cities research, flags its theorization in collections such as *Digital Citizenship* (Hintz, Dencik, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), *Inside Smart Cities* (Karvonen, Cugurullo, & Caprotti, 2019), and *Digital (In)Justice in the Smart City* (Mackinnon, Burns, & Fast, 2023). The chapters engage concepts of social, solidarity, and sharing economies and the urban commons. Offering systemic critiques of capitalist platforms, they critically examine examples of community-based resistant urban technologies, grounded in principles of collective public ownership of urban space, which could even be expanded (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Frischmann, Sanfilippo, & Madison, 2023; Harvey, 2012; Jeppesen, Kruzynski, Sarrasin, & Breton, 2013; Ostrom, 1990). That said, the empirical examples of citizen interventions into platform urbanization provide excellent insight regarding already existing alternatives to urban platform capitalism.

I was considering using this book as a course text; however, I do not consider it well enough written/proofread. Moreover, the book is uneven in its literature reviews and theoretical frameworks, with some exceptional chapters. It is a competent but not particularly consistent or coherent book.

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