

Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider (eds.)

Ours to Hack and to Own. The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, a New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet, New York and London, OR Books, 2016, pp. 252

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According to the editors, *Ours to Hack and to Own* is a “guidebook for a fairer kind of Internet” built upon two pillars. First, democratic governance and democratic ownership are the fundamental aspects of platform cooperativism and, ultimately, the core topic of the book. In Scholz’s words: “The term ‘platform’ refers to places where we hang out, work, tinker, and generate value after we switch on our phones and computers. The ‘cooperativism’ part is about an ownership model for labor and logistics platforms or on-line marketplaces that replaces the likes of Uber with cooperatives, communities, cities, or inventive unions” (p. 24). Second, the book tries to foster a (lengthy, complex and messy) process, rather than advocating technological solutionism. Basically, the collection provides a snapshot of an emerging phenomenon and, at the same time, supports the efforts of co-constructing it, by promoting and vouching for it. As Scholz and Schneider clarify, the book is a direct follow-up of their meeting during a two-day event about platform cooperativism, where they both participated to present their works: “Platform Cooperativism: The Internet, Ownership, Democracy” (New York, November 2015). Coming from two separated, yet converging, intellectual trajectories – Scholz main focus is on platform cooperativism (Scholz 2016), while Schneider’s one is on shared ownership and governance (Schneider 2014) – the two embarked in this book project which resulted in a rich collection of short essays that, in my opinion, reads more like a manifesto for platform cooperativism than a guidebook for it.

In a historical moment when the imagined future of the “sharing economy”, together with its promises, has been progressively unmasked and replaced by the dominant orders of so called technocapitalism (Suarez-Villa 2001), gig economy (Todolí-Signes 2017) or platform capitalism, platform cooperativism emerges as a noteworthy alternative. For STS scholars, who have always been interested in the politics of technology (Winner 1980) and the infrastructuring processes that shape and (re)configure socio-technical power networks (Mongili and Pellegrino 2014), platform cooperativism can represent a relevant occasion to look at these themes and at how they play out through Internet from a perspective which we might call of “inverse infrastructuring” (Egyedi and Mehos 2012). In particular, this anthology can act as a thought-provoking work supporting STS scholars to get closer to the theme, and looking at it from the vantage point of those ones who are actually shaping it. The

book does not use STS vocabulary or constructs and, strictly speaking, it is not an academic work. However, it does address the topic by deconstructing and addressing it at many different levels. The lead title – *Ours to Hack and to Own* – is emblematic to this regard. Aligned with hackers' practices the book provides scaffolding tools for creating, spreading and supporting platform cooperativism, by including chapters as design guidelines for its technical protocols, its social and cultural aspects, as well as the economic, legal and organizational ones linked to the institution of cooperatives. Central idea threading among the chapters is always the preservation of the ownership of all the value aspects – not limited to the economic ones – emerging from a platform cooperative. It is in this light that, in my opinion, “hack” comes to hint at the original hackers' culture and suggests platform cooperativism as “an hack to the system of platform capitalism”.

Despite the number of topics dealt by the many small chapters can sometimes feel bewildering, I was positively surprised by how many of these chapters implicitly talk to each other and manage to square the circle for the materialization and sustainability of platform cooperativism, without betraying its founding principles. The followings are two valuable examples.

First, in her chapter, *Blockchains and Their Pitfall*, Rachel O'Dwyer raises a warning about the diffusion of the distributed database technology, known as blockchain. Mainly used for handling and accounting digital currencies and their transactions (e.g. BitCoin), blockchain is being adopted as a technological fix in other domains beyond the original one. However, O'Dwyer points out that “blockchain is what we call a ‘trustless architecture’. It *stands in* for trust in the absence of more traditional mechanisms like social networks and co-location” (p. 230). She warns us that complex and time-consuming processes cannot be replaced by technical solutions and that similar technical tools must always be accompanied by broader considerations. In *From Open Access to Digital Commons*, David Bollier takes stock of the warning when proposing blockchain technology as means to shift from open platforms – where access is free, but value is exploited by platform owners and not users – to communal ownership and management of digital artifacts and their related values. Here, the case is made for seeing blockchain as a complementary tool to a complex social, cultural, and technological reconfiguration process. Second, in *The realism of Cooperativism*, Yochai Benkler elaborates on four fundamental challenges which platform cooperativism needs to deal with in order to emerge and consolidate, and provides indications on how these might be tackled. The most troubling one relates to the means of long-term sustainability for platform cooperatives: these usually build on the organizing practices of peer production, although this typically relates to volunteer contributions by people who already have other means of subsistence. Conceptually, platform cooperativism could rely on commons

governance (Ostrom 1990), but it would still need practical means to break the ties with capitalist investments in the long term. *Money is the Root of all Platforms*, by Brendan Martin, deals with this issue: he identifies in the private and market oriented investments a constant danger for platform cooperatives. A way out is to see finance and platform financing as a platform: turning finance into a (pervasive) platform cooperative.

Ours to Hack and to Own includes contributions by activists, hackers, entrepreneurs, policy makers and researchers who are actively engaged with the core topic of the book. Each chapter begins by introducing and defining a challenge, approach or key aspect of platform cooperativism and, in a few pages (pp. 4-5), provides a direct answer to strengthen, pursue or solve it. Although for some chapters the feeling of remaining too much on the surface it is stronger than in others, I personally appreciated the assertive tone, and the clear and focused messages of each chapters, regardless of the limited available space for problematizing issues and dwelling into the details. The book is structured around four main parts (“Something to Say Yes to”; “Platform Capitalism”; “An Internet of Our Own”; “Conditions of Possibility”). The first one serves an introductory scope: the conceptual bases that define “platform cooperativism” and clarify its foundations are captured here. The second sets of essays collects critical reflections on platform capitalism that highlight the challenges and opportunities in the existing on-line (or sharing) economy. With fifteen and twelve chapters each, plus two showcase sections, the third and fourth parts of the book are the most substantial ones. The former addresses issues concerning the practical design and creation of on-line platforms cooperatives. The latter takes a broader perspective and deals with the ecosystem that is needed to widely support a shared, democratic ownership and governance of Internet. The showcase sections include more than a dozen of one-page sheets each. These describe noteworthy examples of running platform coops and ongoing projects that support platform coops from an ecosystem point of view. It is a pity that the book ends without a bibliography or an end-notes section, and only with a minimalist “Further Resources” section.

References

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