

Geert Lovink

Stuck on the Platform

Reclaiming the Internet

Valiz

MAKING PUBLIC

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Valiz, Amsterdam

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Stuck on the Platform

Notes on the Networked Regression

"I can't believe video games are real."

Sarah Hagi

"Men build the structures, women fill them."

Tech saying

"Go down into the underground, and pass from the hyper-virtual, fleshless world to the suffering flesh of the poor."

Pope Francis

"We are not afraid of ruins. We who ploughed the prairies and built the cities can build again, only better next time. We carry a new world, here in our hearts."

Malatesta

"It is easier to imagine Facebook causing the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of Facebook."

@libshipwreck (Librarianshipwreck)

"All science begins with fiction."

Speaking Truth to the Platform

"Every time I think I've sorted out my life, capitalism collapses."

@zinovievletter (Juliet Jacques)

"Anyway, it's always the others who die."

Marcel Duchamp

“I thought the dystopic future would be more exciting.”

@sosadtoday (Melissa Broder)

“The internet is a metaphysical horror game, not a representational machine.”

@bognamk (Bogna Konior)

**“You read one email,
you’ve read them all.”**

Andrew Weatherhead

**“Once I was mine.
Now I am theirs.”**

Shoshana Zuboff

**“Bring up irrelevant issues
as frequently as possible.”**

CIA manual

**“All this time I thought I was a
nomad, now I’m just a runaway.”**

Sybil Prentice

**“Recession is when your neighbour
loses their job. Depression is when
you lose yours.”**

Nicolas LePan

“Internet is the God that failed.”

Johan Sjerpstra

“Repress yourself.”

Mark Dery

“We’re Not Bored. We’re Boring.”

Snapchat saying

In this social media age, the dream of many students is to start their own platform.¹ This widely spread ideal already presumes an entrepreneurial aspiration many are not even aware of. Platform has become a meta concept, a flexible container filled with promises and dreams. This isn't just about followers, it's a mindset, an aspirational building project. Forget scarcity.² Get ready to boost your "platformativity." Competition is for suckers. Don't be satisfied with a few crumbs. The crumbs are for the losers further down in the food chain. This is the neoliberal version of the 1980's demand: "We do not wait to have a piece of the cake; we want to own the whole bloody bakery."

How did the "platform potential" become such a desired object? The dream is to ride the speculative wave and be where the money is made. Turning the dream into reality means owning the nodes and exchanges. This is how artists, activists, designers, and geeks envision reaching their audiences—while meanwhile becoming rich and famous. Why strive to become an influencer when you could also become the owner? Welcome to platform fetishism, where social relationships are defined by the values created in social interaction itself. In this outgoing neoliberal age, the prime directive is to look down on the poor suckers that can only buy and sell. The trick is to persuade others to play according to the rules that you, the owner (aka designer) of the market, set.

The platform a-priori is the widespread belief in the goodness of sharing. Platform = society.³ While users are encouraged to share their profiles, comments, preferences and likes, they are kept in the dark that they share not just with friends and family (and the company that facilitates all this), but primarily with third parties. In an internal email, Mark Zuckerberg explained the mechanism:

We're trying to enable people to share everything they want and do it on Facebook. Sometimes the best way to enable people to

1 Download the platform design toolkit and there you go: platformdesigntoolkit.com/.

2 Sarah Rexford, "Platform Starts with Your Mindset," *Almost An Author*, October 18, 2020, www.almostanauthor.com/platform-starts-with-your-mindset/.

3 Angela Xiao Wu criticizes the tendency of many researchers, policy makers, and journalists to see platform data as a true mirror of society. "Platform data do not provide a direct window into human behaviour. Rather, they are direct records of how we behave under platforms' influence." This is the all too obvious that is not obvious that characterizes the platform era. See Angela Xiao Wu, "How Not to Know Ourselves," *Points Data & Society*, July 28, 2020, points.datasociety.net/how-not-to-know-ourselves-5227c185569.

share something is to have a developer build a special purpose app or network for that type of content and make that app social by having Facebook plug into it. However, that may be good for the world but it's not good for us unless people share back to Facebook and that content increases the value of our network. So ultimately, I think the purpose of the platform ... is to increase sharing back into Facebook.⁴

Here we see the building of new enclosures at work. Far from contributing to their personal networks, users and third parties ultimately serve the purpose of platform fortification.

None of this seems to hamper the rise and rise of the platform. In fact, the term's sheer ubiquity led it to be added to the Banished Words 2019 list.⁵ The promise of the platform is simple and alluring: everyone benefits, from producers and customers to founders. Everyone is included. Everyone plays along. It's a win, win, win. The platform has become a *Kulturideal*, long ago dislodging the website, the blog, and, in turn, the web design studio as a startup model. At the same time, a ballooning social media definition established itself. Social media apps enlarged to include stories, short-form video, live streaming, and shopping. Single apps expanded—*Inception*-like—to feature platforms inside platforms. Platforms seem to be eating the world.

Properties of Platforms

Platforms always come back to capital. There is a longing to harness value instead of losing ourselves in the messiness of the rhizomatic network. The platform dream has further consolidated the venture capital mode that seeks hypergrowth in the shortest amount of time, setting its sights on “unicorn” market domination and a monopoly position. While very few will become billionaires, the lottery aspect of the ruthless Darwinist strategy still attracts many. It's hegemonic, as they say. Elon Musk's

4 Internal Facebook email, November 19, 2012, quoted in Steven Levy, *Facebook: The Inside Story* (London: Penguin Business, 2020), p. 173.

5 www.lssu.edu/traditions/banishedwords/year/#toggle-id-37. “People use it as an excuse to rant. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter have become platforms. Even athletes call a post-game interview a ‘platform.’ Step down from the platform, already.” Michael, Alameda, California.

appeal has not yet faded. The celebrity obsession is such that the pop critique of capitalism will not really question the right to become a billionaire. We all want to run our own platform—regardless of what we are longing for.

Platforms create proprietary marketplaces, connectors of supply and demand that bear little—if any—cost of production, yet are rarely neutral.⁶ They are not mere “service providers.” In many cases the platforms themselves are also significant players in those markets. Revenue-wise, these are advertising giants rather than just “technology” companies.⁷ So platforms do not merely stage, organize, and regulate markets, they also command outsized influence over neighboring businesses and the wider ecology. Think of the road congestion and air pollution caused by all those Uber taxis just idling. Consider the environmental impact of a million e-commerce packages being delivered, rather than purchasing them all at once from a mall or shopping street. The core of the capitalist rationale remains socializing costs while privatizing profits under the banner of personal choice and convenience. Unintended consequences are a feature, not a bug.

There never was such a thing as the “passage to the platform.” The ideology of creative destruction and disruption may be properly deconstructed by now. Yet the overnight migration of millions of users to different apps remains a mystery. Can the herd swell so suddenly? Can “social contagion” spread that fast? The fact is, ever since their arrival in the early 2010s, platforms simply are. In fact, this inevitability, this seemingly natural presence, is part of their appeal. The internet itself is rarely mentioned anymore. Most people use the terms social media or platforms when they speak about the internet. Invisible wireless connectivity turns the platform into another part of the landscape. Like electricity, the platform is infrastructure that is always there, on call and available.

6 In his review, “A Tale of Two Platforms,” Tim O’Reilly writes about platforms as marketplaces, “connecting and enabling both buyers and sellers. One of the big problems in these hyper-scaled marketplaces is building up both sides of the market at the same time. Uber and Lyft demonstrate just how expensive it is. They invested billions of dollars in marketing, and even today arguably sell their services for less than it costs to provide them in order to acquire more passengers.” O’Reilly notices that it’s a lot easier if you only have to build one side of the market. “When Amazon launched in 1995 as ‘the world’s biggest bookstore’, it didn’t have to spend money assembling a critical mass of books, publishers, and authors. Ingram had already done that,” www.linkedin.com/pulse/tale-two-platforms-tim-o-reilly/.
7 Quotes and summary of Ana Milicevic, “The Trouble with Platforms,” pando.com, June 29, 2020, pando.com/2020/06/29/trouble-platforms-google-amazon-facebook-apple-market-cap/.

The platform is the message: content is tired, “platform” is wired. According to Marc Steinberg, platforms have become universal translation devices: they are the place where money, people, and commodities meet and transactions happen. See them as abstract mega-nodes. “Almost anything can become a platform, if one merely calls it such.”⁸ We move away from the framing of new media, with its emphasis on static archives and databases, and toward a more frenetic mode of never-ending, ever-changing feeds and pages. The platform splices together liveness with transactions (“only one room left!”).⁹ Notifications snowball, microscopic customizations aim to elicit your attention, to make you an offer you can’t refuse. Yet while this surface appears to be an ever-changing, personalized semiotic spectacle, the platform—like capitalism—is dead inside. According to Mariana Mazzucato, “platforms operate in two-sided markets developing the supply and demand sites of the market, as the lynchpin, connector or gatekeeper between them.” She concludes that

consumers accept being tracked and surrendering their personal data, even if ideally they would prefer not to, not because they have happily embraced the quid pro quo, but out of resignation and frustration.¹⁰

The platforms that we inhabit are aspirational media for the users that go there in search of something. I’m here—now what do I want again? The search engines developed by IT engineers and library scientists were rational and cold, empty tools that obeyed your command. In contrast, today’s platforms are fuzzier and more accommodating, offering personalized information for the swiping dazed and confused. The search engine had us search through the dank corridors of the archive; the platform gives us the feeling of being on top of the world. This is why Ana Milicevic proposes we speak about platform oases and no longer use the walled garden metaphor. “There’s still life outside of a walled garden; outside of an oasis the air is

⁸ Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 1, 92 and 115.

⁹ Kevin Brasler, “Travel Websites Mislead by Falsely Declaring Few Rooms Remain,” *Consumers’ Checkbook*, August 2019, www.checkbook.org/boston-area/travel-websites-mislead-by-falsely-declaring-few-rooms-remain/.

¹⁰ Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 216 and 219.

arid and you're lucky if you run into a tumbleweed here and there."¹¹

Platforms know us intimately, serving up comforting content. They recommend media according to our tastes, preferences, previous orders, search history, and likes. This digital memory allows platforms to both comfort us and trigger us. We messy humans hate starting from scratch. "Dear cookie, please save the settings for me." After all, we're not cold scientists, interested in objective knowledge. We like to save time and take shortcuts. We appreciate the machine for supplementing our weaknesses and remembering things for us. We love it for talking to us, telling us exactly how close the Uber driver is, what comparable products cost elsewhere, and what this user that just showed up is sharing with others. We break down easily as our busy multitasking lives are always on the brink of collapse. This is why we find comfort on the platform, our new virtual domicile.

For David Golumbia, it is obvious what should happen to platforms: "They should not exist."¹² But what does it mean to say that social media should not exist? Are extractive platforms like nuclear weapons—once invented, built, and deployed, they simply become part of the human story? This is the question Günther Anders struggled with, writing in the shadow of Hiroshima. Can these platforms be crippled by regulation, be broken up, or simply taken off the net? Or perhaps, more idealistically, might they get collectively cancelled or become unfashionable and disappear for good? At first, we Web 2.0 critics thought they would simply fade away after they had gone through their hype cycle. Two decades later, we know better. How can billions get rid of something they do not even like, are addicted to, and do not know how to get rid of? The conclusion can only be that the "aesthetics of disappearance" has never been properly taught. Please share the art of the collective quit. The neoliberal consumerist mindset taught us to focus on the new—on becoming, founding, and incorporating—while never giving a thought to terminating. As Neil Sedaka noted: "breaking up is hard to do."

11 pando.com/2020/06/29/trouble-platforms-google-amazon-facebook-apple-market-cap/.
12 David Golumbia (@dgolumbia), November 11, 2020, twitter.com/dgolumbia/status/1326521004160655365.

Platform Stagnation

Let's dig deeper into platform stagnation. Venkatesh Rao has given us the concept of "premium mediocre," associating the term with cruise ships, artisan pizza, Game of Thrones, and The Bellagio. Premium mediocre is anything that is branded "signature." It is "food that Instagrams better than it tastes."¹³ How does this apply to the internet? Post-democratic internet culture is increasingly less trashy. Platforms are becoming smoother, allowing us to swipe faster in a safe but highly constrained environment. These environments are slightly upbeat but never resort to yelling. This is my reading of Rao's concept.

It's "premium" to pay for a service while constantly telling ourselves that one day we'll be the ones getting paid. Premium lifts us out of the trash heap of everyday existence, away from the petty commoners that can only afford what is free. In preparation for your future success, you surf the internet, scanning for your next partner, your next project, your next wardrobe item. In exchange, you temporarily suspend your deep cynicism. Sincerity in a fake world means staying true to one's profile, neatly summarized in the Venkatesh Rao for dummies formula: "Great minds discuss ideas; mediocre minds discuss events; small minds discuss people. Premium mediocre minds discuss bitcoin." It is the "premium mediocre" label that we want platforms to become. This is their historical, emancipatory drive—and one of the reasons why they're so hard to leave, as we'll first have to confront and overcome the premium mediocre desires in ourselves.

Most folk theory in the age of regressive populism merely reproduces the status quo. This is to be expected: further replication is only making things worse. Yet there are exceptions, gems that seem to perfectly pinpoint our current condition. In the "Platform is the Enemy," Daniel Markham states: "Technology's goal is to make us better, not dumber. Wait one second. Is that true?"¹⁴ Let's give him the ample space he deserves in a sea of complicit literature.

Each piece of technology we deploy can have the goal of helping us do what we've already

¹³ Venkatesh Rao, "Medium Mediocre Life of Maya Millennial," *Ribbonfarm*, August 17, 2017, www.ribbonfarm.com/2017/08/17/the-premium-mediocre-life-of-maya-millennial/.

¹⁴ danielbmarkham.com/the-platform-is-the-enemy/.

decided to do or helping us decide what to do. The first option leaves the thinking up to us. The second option “helps” us think ... The minute we create a platform for something, whether it’s rating movies, tracking projects, or chatting with friends about work, as that platform takes over mindshare, *the assumption becomes that this is a solved problem.*

Implicitly, Markham calls for a theory of “interreactivity.” Platforms are designed for users to react.¹⁵ They are not calling for interactive engagement—let alone interpassivity as Pfaller once described. “With the phone,” Markham writes,

I know who I want to call and why. I push buttons and we are connected. The tech helps me do what I’ve already decided to do. With Facebook, on the other hand, they get paid to show me things in a certain order. The premise is that I’m waiting (or “exploring” if you prefer) until I find something to interact with. The phone is a tool for me to use. I am the tool Facebook is using. I am no longer acting. I am reacting.

Many do not use the internet; the internet uses them. “Platforms, by their very nature, constantly send out the subtle message: *This is a solved problem. No further effort on your part is required here. No thinking needed.*” The logic here is one of brain efficiency that enables us to focus on more important issues, or have a break and relax. “Let the platform decide. Energy not needed. Dump those neurons.” For Markham, platforms are the enemy because “they resist analysis in the areas they dominate. Platforms turn into settled fact things that should be open for debate.” They do the work of deciding what categories various things go into. Popular platforms aren’t just a danger economically because they control commerce.

They’re an extinction-level, existential danger to humans because they prevent people from seriously considering what kinds of categories

15 As Benjamin Bratton writes: “Platforms are generative mechanisms—engines that set the terms of participation according to fixed protocols (e.g., technical, discursive, formal protocols). They gain size and strength by mediating unplanned and unplannable interactions.” *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), p. 44.

are important in each of their lives. They resist their own analysis and over time make people dumber.

In an interview, Zadie Smith once said: “My novels are about the challenge of actually being human and not avoiding the responsibility of being human, which is very heavy.”¹⁶ This is precisely what we project onto platforms: they should not be detached tools or cold systems, but rather act like soulmates that we carry with us, like pets. The platform should be a safe place, a dreamy wannabe world that prefers fluid comfort over dragging complexity. “Please,” I tell my phone, “limit my choices, whisper to me what I want.” Think, for instance, of Facebook’s childish interface design that is destined to stay the same (while superficially changing every few seconds, without us noticing). The problem here is that there is nothing to think about or remember. Billions of us spend hours a day on Facebook, but would fail if we were asked to reconstruct what this “webpage” looks like. Something vaguely blue, with a newsfeed, updates, and some random friends?

Aspirational life is an endless succession of prototypes, versions, halfway attempts that later get aborted and forgotten. The numbness in the digital state of affairs reflects this. It is never real or material, but rather hovers between proposal and the point after which things expire. We resent the objects that are unable to simply be in the world. High tech is unable to merely exist, it is always on the verge of “notworking”—your battery dies, your internet connection fails, your software-as-a-service subscription runs out. In the meanwhile, any critical internet theory that can offer escape has all but disappeared, vanished into the grey zone of paywalled journal articles and exorbitantly expensive books (available, of course, on Amazon). The ritual use of the correct academic references sits at the very opposite spectrum of the “toxoplasma of rage” pole, where the more controversial the information that is being marketed, the more it gets talked about.

16 Deborah Dundas, “Zadie Smith on Fighting the Algorithm: ‘If you are under 30, and you are able to think for yourself right now, God bless you,’” *The Star*, November 8, 2019, www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2019/11/08/zadie-smith-on-fighting-the-algorithm-if-you-are-under-30-and-you-are-able-to-think-for-yourself-right-now-god-bless-you.html.

Platform Realism

When it comes to platforms, we seem to be stuck or stagnated. What might we call this condition? Net artist Ben Grosser proposes the term platform realism. Grosser's term builds on Mark Fisher's articulation of capitalism realism, the idea that we don't imagine or build alternatives to capitalism because we can no longer envision a world without it. Big tech, in a few short years, has managed to instill within the public a similar state of *platform realism*. So many are unable to imagine how global communication, media, search, etc. could ever function without the platforms. Despite a growing platform malaise, it has become difficult for many to consider a world without big tech platforms as a viable conception of the future.¹⁷

Platforms are political and platforms constrain political thought. Michael Seemann's *Die Macht der Plattformen* could serve as an example of this tendency. In his PhD thesis, he argues that we should see platforms as political decision-making arenas. Seemann stressed that "we need to understand platforms as something inherently political, as new political institutions, political battlegrounds instead of depoliticizing them through technical means." He came to realize that the decentralist rejection of power leads nowhere.

The upheavals of the past years—from the rise of right wing populisms to hate speech and disinformation—were not caused by the power of platforms but by unchecked empowerment of users. There was a lack of enforcement, a lack of moderation that caused most of the harm.¹⁸

How might we surface and critique this politics? According to Grosser, platforms are "encodings of tech bro entrepreneurial ideology, agential systems that enact and amplify their beliefs in the importance of scale, the imperative of

¹⁷ From a private email exchange, June 28, 2021, then reworked and published here: Geert Lovink, "Ben Grosser: Planning the Exodus from Platform Realism," *Institute of Network Cultures*, June 29, 2021, networkcultures.org/blog/2021/06/29/platform-realism/.

¹⁸ Quotes from a private email exchange with Michael Seemann, November 20, 2021.

growth, and the superiority of the quantitative.” Grosser’s own projects include *Go Rando*, *Facebook Demetricator*, *Order of Magnitude* and *The Endless Doomscroller*. These projects all operate with existing platforms, obfuscating your feelings, hiding metrics, confusing algorithmic profiling, and generally making their central manipulation mechanisms visible.¹⁹ Grosser also mentions projects by artists such as Joana Moll and Disnovation, as well as essential critiques by thinkers in media and software studies such as Wendy Chun, Safiya Noble, Matthew Fuller, and Søren Pold. Grosser concludes: “The more we can illuminate existing connections between wider societal ills and the ways that big tech models, reifies, and amplifies them, the easier any exodus will be.”

Besides building alternatives, Grosser also argues that we also need to engage the world where they are. With over 3 billion people already signed up, that means we also need to agitate inside Big Tech’s platforms themselves.

This isn’t as bad as it sounds because platforms can be fruitful spaces for cultivating criticality. Whether covertly subversive or overtly confrontational, platform manipulations such as those that can be enacted via browser extensions or online performance projects can prompt users to reconsider the role of these systems they currently see as inevitable parts of the 21st century landscape. By exposing the hidden and hiding the visible, hacktivist art, tactical media, and other related practices can help users question the role of platforms in everyday life. Why are they built this way? Who benefits? Who is made most vulnerable? How could it be different?

Flocks and Herds

I like to compare the platform condition with the way Michel Foucault described pastoral power. Particularly interesting in this context is what he calls the paradox of the shepherd.

The duty of the pastor (to the point of self-sacrifice) was the salvation of the flock; and finally, it was an individualizing power, in that the pastor must care for each and every member of the flock singly. Because the pastor must care for the multiplicity as a whole while at the same time providing for the particular salvation of each, there must necessarily be both a “sacrifice of one for all, and the sacrifice of all for one, which will be at the absolute heart of the Christian problematic of the pastorate.”²⁰

The flock is still there, including its times of grazing, rest, and erratic movements—but the pastor is nowhere to be seen.

Power today in the West has shifted from the church and the state to corporations. The aim is no longer to redeem people. What happens is the outsourcing of tasks the state previously understood as theirs: the gathering of knowledge of both the population at large and that of users, formerly known as individuals. Both are taken care of, in the shape of markets, on the platform. We should read this as a design challenge and see geeks, admins, designers, marketers, tech entrepreneurs, and behavioral scientists as today’s shepherds. However, their explicit task is to remain invisible and thus unaccountable. Their guidance is felt as abstract “algorithmic governance,” the rule of AI and big data.

So one approach to this question is to point at the theological foundations of today’s political power of social media platforms. Mark Zuckerberg’s repetitive referencing of the Judeo-Christian term “community” would be an ideal political theology reference here. Another would be the “subject formation” through the addictive repetition of numbness, going back time and again, without purpose. We are part of that electronic herd and need that reaffirmation. Yet, why is this interrogation of the present so difficult for us?

Platforms are dynamic systems for millions of users, a transient space for the multitude who act and interact. We could freeze-dry Uber or Tinder, but that doesn’t help us much to get a better understanding. If we return the

next day, or within the next five minutes, the site looks different, offering other products and prices, blackmailing users with non-existing urgencies and scarcities. We're nervous, in a rush, and so are the platforms that have been designed to exploit these human conditions. This view breaks with the "remediation" thesis as we're no longer dealing with digitized versions of heavy, static media objects such as photographs, paintings, film roles, paper books, and newspapers, but with tiny, fragile data trails that pop up, leave a trace (likes, transactions, page views) and then disappear again. Rapid changes on the platform pulverize the fixed status of the file and the very idea of a static site with "pages."

What happens to the notion of liminality when people are stuck midway in the digitization rite of passage and are not supposed to change anymore, frozen, pinned down by limited technical options and polarized conversations, in a regressive era that rules out metamorphosis?²¹ The closing of Yahoo! Groups in 2020 was yet another sign of dominant platform players actively scaling down community tools in favor of profile-centric liking and sharing. Besides going completely offline, the most effective critique still remains empowerment with autonomous tools.

From Neofeudalism to Self-Organization

Both what Europeans call regression and Americans call neo-feudalism describe the return to earlier stages of psycho-capitalist development. In her review of McKenzie Wark's *Capital is Dead*, Jodi Dean compares digital platforms with the role of water mills in agrarian societies.

Platforms are doubly extractive. Unlike the water mill, peasants had no choice but to use, platforms not only position themselves so that their use is basically necessary (like banks, credit cards, phones, and roads) but that their use generates data for their owners. Users not only pay for the service but the platform collects the data generated by the use of the

service. The cloud platform extracts rents and data, like land squared.²²

Jodi Dean describes the neo-feudal tendency as “becoming-peasant, that is, to becoming one who owns means of production but whose labour increases the capital of the platform owner.” Here, platforms are seen as meta-industrial infrastructural networks, parasitic in nature, driven by higher forms of exploitation and extraction.

Both platform workers and users are regressive eighteenth-century pre-industrial figures, almost-proletarians, the “entreprenariat” (as Silvio Lorusso called them) stuck in stressful, depressive pseudo-work that neither feels productive nor satisfactory. The platform mentality, which spread over the past decade, is in fact a meta-market mentality (a term used in response to economist Von Mises). The trickle-down effect of wealth and power is not happening—and this somehow comes as a surprise to the neocon libertarians that still believe in “the market” and do not understand why some rich millennials are “plotting the end of civilization.”²³ The monopoly is a fact. An anonymous Amazon worker stated that the company is an opportunistic corporation:

It invests in businesses where we think we have a competitive advantage. In general, Amazon thinks of itself as a technology company. So we put the technology first, whatever the product is that we’re selling. And we believe that because we have so much talent and so much capital, we should be able to use our technology advantage to dominate any market that we decide to enter.²⁴

In this situation, is all we can hope for sporadic peasant revolts? Where is the twenty-first-century equivalent of the skilled, self-educated, and most of all, self-conscious worker that understands the need to get organized? All aspects of work have now been digitized. Instead of conspiratorial,

²² See Jodi Dean, “Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 12, 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/.

²³ Doug French, “Rich Millennials Plot the End of Civilization,” *Mises Wire*, December 22, 2020, mises.org/wire/rich-millennials-plot-end-civilization. More on this in the debate between Slavoj Žižek and Yanis Varoufakis, Ljubljana, October 21, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghx0sq_gXK4.

²⁴ logicmag.io/commons/inside-the-whale-an-interview-with-an-anonymous-amazonian/.

professional revolutionaries, we're left with do-gooder NGO workers on temporary contracts. This leaves us with the desire to leave behind the neo-feudal stage and fast forward to a series of early twentieth-century questions to do with strategy. Revolution and reform, rejection or adaptation, abolition or "civilization" of the platform-as-form? Should platforms be dismantled or appropriated? According to the accelerationists, platforms are the technological expression of "planetary computation," constructs that can be reprogrammed for post-capitalist purposes. Instead of being questioned, the platform is embraced as a bastion of efficiency, smoothness, and scale: Everyman Their Own Platform.²⁵ Such concepts seem to be byproducts of a lost decade, when we failed to discuss alternatives and mindlessly installed every app. Critical discussion about platforms has yet to start.

Let's come together and plan the exodus. In 1961, James Baldwin told an audience at a forum on US nationalism and colonialism: "Time passed, and now, whether I like it or not, I can not only describe myself but, what is much more horrifying, I can describe you!" This is the original promise of alternative media. Victims or minority groups do not need to be represented and can speak for themselves, thank you very much. The question is whether current social media platforms still can be used for this purpose. "How do you call the Multitude tamed by the platforms? The Platitude," Morozov once tweeted. So key to getting out is finding forms of self-organization that work. How to organize in the shadow of the perpetual present, without being bothered by filters, trolls, secret services, algorithms, and other automated authorities? How can we communicate and come together without having to entirely depend on offline encounters?

An important source of inspiration in this respect can be the federated Twitter alternative Mastodon. "Twitter has only two discoverability layers: your network and the whole world. Either a small group of contacts, or everybody in the whole world. That's crazy," Carlos Fenollosa explains.²⁶ Mastodon, instead, has an extra layer between your network and the whole world: messages from people

on your server, called the local timeline. The Mastodon idea is to show how exciting it is to log into the unknown and realize that there are people who share your interests.

Call it organized networks or a network union.²⁷ Connected cells of organizational units, post-platform coops with a purpose that consist of strong links, operating in opposition to the extractive “weak links” logic of the “friend of a friend” platforms. Organized networks focus on common tasks that need to be done, not on “updating” solitary users. Not *What’s New* or *What’s Happening* but *What’s to be Done*. Please liberate us, lonely, desperate souls. Refuse, walk away. If the network is the memory of the event, and the platform the memory of the network, what’s next?