

Archive of the Social Science Seminar



Cover Images

Left – “Coding in social media” © This is Engineering

Right – “Permanent Platforms From Mobile Platform Grid” © Theen Moy

Archive of the Social Science Seminar

2023-2024

Founded in 1973, the School of Social Science is the most recent and smallest of the four Schools of the Institute for Advanced Study. It takes as its mission the analysis of contemporary societies and social change. It is devoted to a pluralistic and critical approach to social research, from a multidisciplinary and international perspective. Each year, the School invites approximately twenty-five scholars who conduct research with various perspectives, methods and topics, providing a space for intellectual debate and mutual enrichment. Scholars are drawn from a wide range of disciplines, notably political science, economics, law, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and literature. To facilitate intellectual engagement among the visiting scholars, the School defines a theme for each year.

Besides the informal conversations that take place all year long, the scientific activity of the School is mostly centered on two moments. The weekly Social Science Seminar offers the opportunity to all members to present their work, whether it is related to the theme or not. The Theme Seminar meets on a bimonthly basis and is mostly based on discussion of the literature and works relevant to the theme. In 2023-2024, the theme was "PLATFORM." The program was led by Alondra Nelson, Harold F. Linder Professor, and Visiting Professors Christian Sandvig and Lisa Nakamura of the University of Michigan.

**School of Social Science
2023-2024**

Faculty

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Alondra Nelson, Harold F. Linder Professor

Visiting Professors

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Christian Sandvig

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Social Science Seminar

PLATFORM SOCIETY

Alondra Nelson

The platform is a vehicle, venue, or medium that enables and constrains expression, action, agency, and social value creation on the part of individuals and institutions. Platforms—as infrastructures, architectures, and affordances for action—channel social, economic, and political possibilities, and condition how the world is experienced and represented.

Early scholarship, rightly critical of inflationary corporate language, downplayed the growing ubiquity of “the platform” as marketing. In ensuing years, platform studies (broadly considered) has grown alongside the evident expansion of the platform across global society. The field has evolved largely around case studies of specific platforms, particularly examples from social media. Yet the tendency to downplay the societal significance of platforms, on the one hand, and to study them in silos, on the other, have limited scholars’ ability to both apprehend and account for the power of platforms *in toto* and as a dominant form of social life.

Platforms are powerful, in part, because they facilitate relations between actors and entities. While understanding and analyzing social relations is a central focus of social science, researchers have not developed an accounting of the platform grounded in social theory—or a social theory of the platform.

In this presentation, I begin to develop an account of how platforms of different kinds have collective power with broad societal impact. Drawing on examples from biomedicine, social media, and artificial intelligence, I describe how platforms today are a key vector of social organization and a key affordance for social, political, and economic life. I discuss how these platforms share in common—across sector and use case—the ability to structure, reorganize, and consolidate knowledge, markets, labor, and more.

September 26, 2023

CLIMATE OF UNCERTAINTY

Geoff Mann

Currently, our principle conceptual tool for understanding climate change—indeed, for understanding virtually all significant forms of “rupture” in the expected order of things—is the concept of “crisis”, one of a family of terms that have become indispensable to modern politics and economics: crisis, emergency, exception, shock. Each carries within its meanings an unspoken but irreducible opposition to a presumed *status quo* characterized by business-as-usual, the normal. This pairing of crisis and stability, exception and norm, is central to what we might call our reality management system. According to that system, “normal” names what we can reasonably expected to understand and anticipate; the crisis is by definition unexpected or at least unintended. This dichotomy that has been and remains inseparable from the ways that the questions of political economy, political theory, science and the practice of government are constructed in the global North. Virtually all of which, from our distributional policies to our democratic institutions to our production systems, is predicated on at least some general sense of predictability, of an equilibrium or expected way of things. We organize these fundamental social institutions as much as possible to weather storms or manage crises, but in the part of the globe we call “the West”, the idea of permanent emergency is an oxymoron.

Climate change, however, means the new “normal” for social and political economic systems has no identifiable centre toward which it settles or tends. Keynes famously warned that faith in long run equilibrium “is a misleading guide to current affairs”: “In the long run we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they can only tell us that when the storm is long past the ocean is flat again”. Today this seems like a terrible understatement: the long run is not just a misleading guide to how we should manage our immediate affairs, it is a misleading guide to the long run itself. If in “the long run we are all dead”, it is not just because (as Keynes meant) the short-run might swallow us before we get there. Now the long-run’s jaws are open too.

In the face of a future in which these possibilities are no longer considered exaggerations, this project is an attempt to think about what approaches to uncertainty might be able to provide some orientation in these uncertain times. It is a sympathetic but rigorous critique of the effort to tame, diminish or dismiss uncertainty in a moment when communities across the planet are falling forward into a future for which the past is not necessarily a useful guide. What approaches to the unknowability of what is to come might support collective institutions might make hope seem like a sensible thing to have, without pretending that tomorrow will be like today, or that somehow, everything will turn out all right? If our politics and economies are built on the expectation that in the face of disintegrating social and ecological systems, we will turn on each other, then we are much more likely to do so. That is perhaps the worst disaster of all, and regardless of what else the future might hold, it, at least, is entirely avoidable.

October 2, 2023

**REVOCABILITY, EXCEPTION, DISQUALIFICATION:
GRAMMARS OF POWER AFTER DOBBS
Penelope Deutscher**

The U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, revoking the constitutional legality of abortion in the United States, was widely characterized as a use of raw power. Opening with a review of terminological interventions that have been used to characterize the legal decision, the paper asks: what kind(s) of power are really in question? How does the post-Dobbs moment encapsulate a number of hinges between formations of power characterized in post-Foucauldian-theory? This paper moves from a vocabulary of hinges between sovereign, biopolitical and disciplinary forms, to an augmented vocabulary whose consideration of reproductive governance is based around three terms: “revocability,” “exception” and “disqualification.”

Speaking to the importance of this trio for fluency in the politicization of abortion and reproductive government, the paper considers the relationship between rights-bearing and the differential distribution of expectations (for some) that rights be accompanied by particular kinds of good conduct, while distributing exemptions for others. It doing so, it considers the relationship between exception and exemption. It asks what kind of citizenship is in question, when it is understood to be undermined by a loss of reproductive rights. Turning to the terminology “abortion exceptionalism” (most broadly, the use of pregnancy to set aside rights the bearer might otherwise be assumed to have), the paper asks how and why abortion has served as device for setting aside a broad range of rights. The argument gives special attention to the phenomenon of “exemption” and “self-exemption,” as means of understanding the specificity of the reproductive governance of abortion. Reproductive freedom is analyzed as a framework for scrutinizing anticipated “bad [reproductive] conduct”. However, while, as implemented, it appears intuitive to see this as the projected absence of “good conduct,” in fact, the opposite of “bad conduct” is, in lieu of a fulfilled ideal, exception (from scrutiny). In an environment that assigns and distributes “incapacity,” the paper considers some Republican arguments that sex should lead to “taking one’s children” to emphasis three points. Interrogating the meaning of these “children,” and these regimes of qualification and exemption, the paper observes that no-one takes “the children,” no-one “qualifies,” and “compassionate” exceptions are inaccessible in this context.

October 9, 2023

THEORIZING, LOCATING & ANALYZING INSTITUTIONAL PLATFORM POWER

David B. Nieborg

This project lays the foundation for a forthcoming book, co-authored by Profs. Poell & van Dijck, on the question of “platform power.” That is, to address the potential harms of seemingly unbridled corporate power held by transnational platform companies, we ask: How have platform companies become so powerful in the first place? How do they exercise power? And, perhaps one of the most complex questions of all, where exactly is such control located? To address this challenge, we engage with the question of institutional platform power, which is understood as the ability of transnationally operating corporations – such as Amazon, Meta, and Tencent – to sustain, influence, or impede the actions of other institutions through economic, infrastructural, and regulatory interventions. Such “other institutions” include incorporated organizations (businesses), incorporated individuals (freelancers and self-employed individuals), as well as public organizations (governments), and non-profit organizations. In the end, platform power is inherently relational (distributed) and contingent (dynamic). The starting point of this project is the assumption that US and China-based platform companies have become dominant corporate actors across a wide range of industries (Couldry & Mejías, 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2022). Not only have they created new markets, they also build vast digital and physical infrastructures, and in the process introduced new rules, standards, norms and guidelines (Gillespie; 2018; Plantin et al., 2018). As a result, among legal scholars (Cohen, 2019), economists (Moore & Tambini, 2018), and policy makers (Klobuchar, 2021), the question of institutional platform power has gained significant urgency because of its impact on culture and politics. In past scholarship we contributed to these debates by studying platforms and cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2021); analyzing how platforms evolve as infrastructures (Helmond et al., 2019; Nieborg & Helmond, 2019); and exploring the roots of uneven revenue distribution in platform markets (Nieborg et al., 2020; Rietveld et al., 2020). This book builds on this scholarship and aims to provide a novel contribution to the field of platform studies by providing a framework to locate and analyze institutional platform power. First, we ask: what is our unit of analysis? Simply put, we need to see the proverbial forest for the trees by untangling the layered nature of platform infrastructures (van Dijck, Poell, et al., 2018; van Dijck, Nieborg et al., 2019; van Dijck, 2021). Second, to better understand how platform companies have become dominant we will engage with four corporate strategies: platformization, infrastructuralization, financialization, and conglomeration. There is a rich body of work that studies each of these strategies in depth. In this project we seek to study their interactions to account for the different ways in which platform power is accrued and wielded. Third, we seek to make explicit the potential harms of platform power for both corporate actors (e.g., monopolization, precarious labor, etc.) and end-users (e.g., privacy, discrimination, etc.). Listing these harms provides the impetus for more informed regulatory interventions. To this end, the project aims to conduct four in-depth case studies: digital advertising, cloud computing, search (engines), and payment infrastructures. A study of each of these sectors will enable us to systematically engage with the question how institutional platform power accumulates, how it is exercised, what the harms are, how platform power might be regulated, and what viable alternatives may look like.

October 16, 2023

#NO COP CITY AND REPARATIVE DEMOCRACY

Wendy Brown

Ecological Politics and Reparative Democracy in #NoCopCity

How does the crisis of fossil modernity (climate change, species collapse, fouled lands and waters) intersect the crises of constitutional representative democracy (rising authoritarianisms supersession by finance capital, exhaustion of the form)? What new practices and principles of democracy might meet both challenges? What new solidarities among human and non-human life are called to respond to these intersecting crises? And how might these be appearing in uprisings that themselves might be understood as instances of “reparative democracy”—democracy that both repairs from its own troubled pasts and has a reparative orientation toward the future? This talk examines this problem at a theoretical and concrete level. The former is pursued through considerations of the reformations and reformulations of democratic principles—from freedom and equality to sovereignty and the very nature of the demos—that reparative democracy requires. The latter is pursued through reflections on alignments of power and resistance in “Cop City,” the massive police training site designed to be built in a forest abutting poor, black neighborhoods in southeast Atlanta, Georgia.

October 23, 2023

PLAYING THE MIGRANT IN HUMANITARIAN DIGITAL GAMES

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

This presentation analyzes digital, free-to-play games about migration as “charismatic technologies” that derive their power experientially and symbolically through the possibility or promise of action. The key charismatic promise of all of these games is empathy, the pledge that their game will “put you in the shoes of” or “make you feel what it is like to be” a migrant. I do not believe this to be the case. Instead, I argue that we must analyze these games as simulations of the systems, networks, and power relations that shape migration in order to understand migration as a phenomenon that involves us all, albeit from different perspectives and positions.

Unraveling the hold of empathy on the reception of these games requires a further anterior step: questioning the assumptions (1) that play is a transparent process and (2) that play is necessarily generative. In my theoretical frameworks, I propose to reconfigure the process of engaging with migration games as a simulation of power through play and to re-conceptualize “the migrant” from an essence or identity inherent in an individual to a figure or a social position which we engage with through play.

The result is what I call the “theory of the player as a citizen-user.” The ideal player imagines themselves as having rights in the virtual world: a right to choices, and a right to prosper. If the model player gives in to the rules of the game, some economic, political, and social choices will be always open to them. Although many of these examples include migrant subjects as avatars or as interlocutors for their citizen-users, the modes of interaction facilitated by the platform effectively disavow the migrant’s status as a political subject by turning all its extracted fragments (histories, words, likeness) into a controlled interactive experience. Whatever the genre, format, or narrative of the game, given this central dynamic, the citizen gets to play while the migrant gets played.

October 30, 2023

ON EXILE AND POSTCOLONIAL NATIONHOOD

Natacha Nsabimana

Exile, Edward Said wrote, is “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience... Its essential sadness can never be surmounted.” For Said, this sadness begins with the fracture between individuals and their home. The impossibility of return in the present and the memory of this rift make exile “terrible to experience.” [1] What happens, at the collective level, if return is actualized? Does the experience of exile have any bearing on the exiled once they have returned? What if this return is not itself totally secure, but repeated across time and generations? What kind of political communities are created under conditions of anticipated flight? These questions are the core of my research inquiries. My preoccupations are not so much about geographies of origins but about political time in postcolonial Rwanda and Burundi. That is a temporal sociopolitical landscape, in the aftermath of European colonialism, predicated on a fundamental tension between the imagined stability of a native place, land, and geography alongside the permanent fear of losing said place.

Despite the differences in their political histories, in both countries, during most of the seven decades since independence, different groups have been violently expelled from the political community. This recurring political violence, often articulated in terms of ethnicity or race, always occurs in conjunction with massive displacement. My focus is on this recurrent rhythm of displacement and the kinds of political landscape this produces.

Different episodes of political violence are also always narrated in a serialized manner. The historical moments tied to each date are brought together in serial form to explain the past and justify the present. This attunement to serialization makes for a particular habitation in the social: exile and displacement are normalized and anticipated. Part of what it means to understand oneself as a Burundian or Rwandan political subject today—regardless of ethnic affiliation—undoubtedly entails reckoning with past or anticipated displacement.

My central arguments are first, that what is at stake within the geographies of Rwanda and Burundi and at their borders is a claim about the moral contours of the political community and its rightful inhabitants. Second, this claim on the national imaginary has been, since the early years of independence, often articulated in exile making it a crucial constitutive aspect of postcolonial life. This political predicament and its corollary movements across time and space highlight an undertheorized question in research about Rwanda and Burundi: How do we understand nationalist imaginaries formed in or around exile? Rwanda’s and Burundi’s postcolonial histories of displacement show that, to comprehend political violence, we need not only to look through the prisms of political identity and law, but also grapple with a temporal social space of repeated and anticipated exclusion during which the political boundaries of the nation are redrawn and contested.

[1] Said, Edward, “Reflections on Exile” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 137

November 6, 2023

**THE QUEEN OF MYSPACE:
TILA TEQUILA AND ASIAN AMERICAN SOCIAL MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE**
Lisa Nakamura

The Queen of Myspace: Tila Tequila and the Asian American Roots of Social Media

In this paper I read the social media industry's development through the figure of the queer Asian American refugee woman who was both its most visible figure and its most valuable content creator and builder during a pivotal moment in its development and, after her turn to American fascism, one of its most hated figures. I read her through the lens of critical refugee and Asian American Studies because these fields focus on the "legal-political (and social, civil) category of the not-quite-human: immigrant, coolie, neocolonial, transnational laborer, sex worker, call center operator, etc.," roles that Tila Tequila either made digital for the first time on Myspace or was made to occupy before it. Tila's formative not-quite-humanness blurred the line between these roles just as the first group—people of color displaced by wars, economic hardship, or genocides began to create the conditions for the second group's work to become digital.

November 13, 2023

**THE STATE AS PLATFORM:
INDIA AFTER BIOMETRICS**
Kriti Kapila

This paper - and the larger project it introduces is about a new state form and a new epistemic object - which I call the platform state. Aspects and features of this new state form - that is the platform state, are in different stages of progress as we speak, and in this paper I focus on the two of the most well-developed features. The first is the vision that lies behind this new articulation, and the second is the basis of that vision, which is Aadhaar. Aadhaar is the world's largest biometrics-based identification programme. Today, every resident - and citizen of India is de facto required to have enrolled under this programme, which assigns a unique 12-digit number to every Aadhaar card, which encodes biological attributes - facial scan, iris, fingerprints as well as sociological indices, such as name, gender, date of birth, and address. As of last month, 1.4 billion Aadhaar enrolments have taken place. To my mind, the adoption of Aadhaar as de facto mandatory (the law is ambiguous on its mandatory status), is a watershed moment in state-making in India, as I will explore today. The implications of this incremental adoption of Aadhaar by stealth as mandatory identification go well beyond surveillance (even though surveillance in itself is a big enough concern). I examine these implications today at different scales: the individual body, as part of a larger infrastructure, and finally its role in shaping a whole vision for the future of the nation. I attempt here an anthropology of vision and the particular vision that underpins this new state form. This new state I believe is at the same time also a new visual regime, and I provide an anthropology of vision in this second sense in the second half of the paper. The new state form is an architecture of extant dematerialisation of the state. I argue that this new governance infrastructure radically recasts prevailing settlements between the state and citizens, among citizens themselves, between the state and capital, and the digital and social. As this technology becomes exported to governments across the world, its implications exceed the specific context of India and are therefore global.

November 20, 2023

THE ASTORS, ELITE NEW YORK, AND HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Shamus Khan

In this presentation I outline the plan of my forthcoming book on the Astor family. It follows John Jacob wandering through Canada, enlisting Native Americans to hunt for furs he will sell in Macao while “Mrs. Astor” manages the New York business, bargaining with local merchants over ginseng extracted from the hills of Appalachia. We watch as Astor funds both Aaron Burr as he flees after the death of Hamilton, and Lewis and Clark as they seek a water passage through a land that is less a resource and more a persistent obstruction. The story then follows their son, William Backhouse, as he travels to Europe for his education and in the desperate hope of establishing the family as a member of the aristocracy. The romantic idealism of the philosophical moment overtakes him. He remained in Germany for nearly a decade, studying at Göttingen and Heidelberg, with Baron von Bunsen as his private tutor (and encountering von Schlegel, Feuerbach, Heyne, and Niebur); I trace the influence of these ideas upon William and upon the family legacy for the next two generations. We see how this New York family, merchants who profited from slavery, pivot to supporting the North during the Civil War.

Caroline Astor heralds from two Dutch dynasties that originated in the first founding of New York (the Schermerhorns and the Van Cortlandts); she brought the grandest pedigree to the Astor line. We watch her manage Gilded Age New York: arranging marriages, finding ways to secure the positions of socially established families by linking them with an emerging industrial elite. We also see her mercilessly drive her husband’s older brother from New York. Mrs. Astor dies four years before her son, John Jacob IV. He had visited his uncle’s new family in England, choosing to return on the Titanic. Though few had worked in his family since his great grandfather, he had the unfortunate distinction of being the boat’s wealthiest passenger, among the richest men in the world.

His son, Vincent, dropped out of Harvard upon his father’s death and sought to “remake” the Astor name. Since the death of John Jacob, the Astor’s had been known as “New York’s Landlords”—and as immigrants poured into New York after the Civil War, they increasingly had become New York’s Slum Lords. Astor liquidated his ownership of these slums, selling them to the city of New York at half their value to establish the first public housing project in the nation: the “First Houses” in lower Manhattan. He sold his grandmother’s home making way for the building of the Empire State Building, along with the home he grew up in making way for Tempel Emanuel-El. Friends with Franklin D. Roosevelt, he was an unlikely liberal whose favorite entertainment was the minstrel radio show, “Amos ‘N Andy” (his calendar was always blocked from 7-7:15 so that he could listen).

Vincent was an unhappy man. The final of his three wives, Roberta Brooke Russell, was married to him for only 6 years before he died of a heart attack brought on by alcoholism. The book closes with Brooke Astor’s desperate attempts to maintain the standing of the family she married into, as the foundations of class, wealth, and status in America shift beneath her feet.

This book builds upon my earlier work in elites, gender, and attempts a kind of historical ethnography with the family as the central unit of analysis. It draws heavily on my own discipline of sociology—particularly in telling the story of intergenerational class reproduction. But the telling requires much more: re-centering early American history around China, understanding the range of philosophical discussions in Germany from 1808-1816, making sense of the economic and political calculus of New York merchants as they abandon slave plantations that have been such a steady source of high profits, the shifting gender relationships across newly two centuries.

November 28, 2023

CARIBBEAN POLIS:
RECALLING C.L.R. JAMES ON DECOLONIZATION, INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISM, AND
THE GOOD LIFE
Gary Wilder

This talk is drawn from a larger project on the political thought of the great Trinidadian Marxist, C.L.R. James that is provisionally entitled “Recalling CLR James, Reconsidering Black Marxism.” I use “recall” in the double sense of remembering and conjuring. My aim is threefold: 1. to grasp James’s work in relation to the mid-20th century world from which and to which he wrote. 2. to reflect on how his itinerary invites us to reconsider conventional narratives about Western Marxism, Black Marxism, and the Black radical tradition. And 3. to reactivate aspects of James’s legacy that may speak productively to a number of our current political impasses and challenges. James regarded Lenin as the greatest Marxist because he “translated” Marx’s insights for the specific conditions of Tsarist Russia and a new phase of capitalism grounded in monopolies, finance, and imperialism. Fidelity to Marx’s method and central insights meant reworking many of his categories and analyses. In this same spirit, James sought to “translate” Lenin (and Marx) for his time. Likewise, I am trying, with this work, to recall aspects of James’s legacy for our time.

This talk focuses specifically on James’s reflections, beginning in the late 1950s, on a possible Caribbean decolonization. Running through his thinking at this time were several political dilemmas: 1. Whether and how, as a revolutionary international socialist, to participate in a bourgeois nationalist government that did not share his expansive political vision. 2. How to reconcile the fact that substantive societal transformation would require a West Indian mass movement nourished by something like a *national* popular will with an internationalist commitment to create a new postcolonial society that was not organized as a national state; 3. What might be the grounds on which, or resources through which, West Indians might even envision, let alone create, what James called “something new” out of this opportunity for decolonization; and 4. Were there possible political forms, or conjunctures of forms, through which to relate collective self-management for a given political community with something like planetary democracy and a socialist world order?

December 4, 2023

DIGITAL FREUD: THE REFIGURATION OF INEQUALITY, SOCIALITY, AND PERSONHOOD IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Pablo Boczkowski

In this seminar I presented a preliminary analysis of an ongoing ethnographic study of the socio-material dynamics of access, adoption, and use of digital technology by psychologists and psychiatrists in the Greater Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. I argued that these dynamics are tied to a refiguration of discourses and practices of inequality, sociality and personhood in contemporary life.

December 11, 2023

**IS MACHINE LEARNING A NEW STYLE OF IGNORANCE?
PROMISCUOUS ASSOCIATION AND OPTIMIZATION IN MEDIA PLATFORMS AND
BEYOND**

Christian Sandvig

January 22, 2024

PSYCHOPOLITICS

Zahid Chaudhary

The observation that our global public spheres have been filled with noise and distortions has become as common as the noise itself. Thus, the phrase “assault on truth,” for example, while understandably ubiquitous in recent academic and journalistic accounts, has become another element in a collective life already given to outrage and paranoia. “Assaults on truth” are not simply correlated with a distrust of institutions and other forms of authority but are often psychical engagements with such authority. Scholars have tended to locate the origins of public feelings (outrage and paranoia) in political-economic realities. These accounts of an increasingly deformed or disappearing reality have much to recommend them: their willingness to take irrationality seriously instead of dismissing it, their broad economic view, and their historical contextualization of the conditions in which the current forms of truth demolition flourish. Yet at times such interpretations are suspiciously commonsensical as well, driven by unexamined assumptions about false consciousness that assume ideologies are largely the distorted effects of politico-economic constraints and hence that assuaging economic anxiety can restore truth and public reason. Yet political-economic processes entail psychosocial effects, and since subjects and social formations are what makes the effects of a governing reason adhere and persist over time (as Wendy Brown has argued), then a symptomology of the psychic dimensions of these formations is critical for understanding them.

This lecture maps out a psychopolitical reading of two related social movements: medical freedom and parental rights. It analyzes how paranoia has become a central feature of contemporary forms of veridiction, and underwrites emerging notions of freedom in far-right circles in the United States. For activists and communities espousing medical freedom or parental authority, the family becomes a grounds for a new kind of freedom, one opposed simultaneously to social responsibility and to existing law. What are the psychodynamics of this kind of political imaginary that claims for itself exemptions from everything, from public health ordinances to education curricula in schools? How does “freedom” become a form of enjoyment in these politics and what are the social effects of this notion of freedom?

January 29, 2024

ALGORITHMIC UNDERGROUND

Malte Ziewitz

“Algorithmic Underground” Malte Ziewitz When someone types the words “abortion ithaca ny” into Google search and presses enter, the resulting list of ten blue links is only partially produced by Google’s algorithmic systems. It is also the result of strategic interventions by a cottage industry of search engine optimization (SEO) professionals—an often overlooked cast of actors who help business owners, activists, and citizens to increase their websites’ visibility in search results. In this case, two organizations are competing fiercely in their attempts to redirect the searcher: the local branch of Planned Parenthood, an organization offering abortion services to women, and the Ithaca Pregnancy Center, a Christian faith-based organization focusing on pregnancy advice. The stakes of a search like this are high. In real life, the two organizations are five blocks apart—on the web, a single click. This project investigates the practical politics of what I call the algorithmic underground, a sphere of activities designed to influence, contest, and game the workings of an automated system by circumventing (and subverting) its accepted forms of participation. Who are those SEO professionals tasked with extending the fight over abortion into the operation of an algorithmic system? How do they know what kinds of measures work in view of computational procedures that are widely portrayed as inscrutable? How do these interventions interact with companies’ desire to protect and safeguard the “integrity” of systems? And what can these activities tell us about the politics of platforms and the forms of moral ordering that they provoke?

Algorithmic Underground tells the stories of these people and the peculiar sphere in which they operate. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with SEO consultants in the UK and the U.S., it traces how an unlikely cast of self-taught professionals has come to occupy a key role at the intersection of a platform and its subjects. Often dismissed as “spammers, evildoers, opportunists,” these practitioners engage in a process of continuous arbitrage between the capabilities of humans and machines, operating in a normatively charged and morally ambiguous space between legitimate optimization and illegitimate manipulation. By foregrounding the algorithmic underground, the project theorizes a neglected aspect of contemporary platform capitalism and challenges us to rethink the very terms on which it is investigated.

February 5, 2024

CHEMISTRY OR HARASSMENT?
RELATIONAL (MIS)MATCHES IN ORIENTATIONS TOWARD WORK IN PORNOGRAPHY
PRODUCTION
Hannah Wohl

Interacting with coworkers is tricky work. To collaborate effectively, coworkers must build rapport while also not overstepping personal boundaries. Navigating this boundary between the personal and the professional is riskier when one's job requires having sex with different coworkers every day. I explore this core workplace tension by drawing on an extensive ethnographic study of the Los Angeles pornography and adult content creation (i.e. OnlyFans) industry, including 72 interviews with industry members, observations of over 50 pornographic shoots, and fieldwork at other events. I examine how performers navigate efficiently producing pornographic scenes, while also managing sexual intimacy both on and off camera. Building on relational approaches from cultural and economic sociology, I reveal how conflicting orientations toward sexual appropriateness—potentially leading to allegations of sexual misconduct—rarely center around sex acts themselves, but instead develop from mismatched interpretations of the symbolic meaning of their work.

February 12, 2024

"DIVINE DISOBEDIENCE" AND THE REIMAGINATION OF MORALITY

Nadia Marzouki

In this talk, I present an overview of the book I have been working on while at IAS. The book is interested in groups and individuals acting and contesting in the name of “what’s right” while experiencing and rationalizing this moral contestation as part of their religious values, and tradition. This is an inquiry into the old question of the nexus among religion-law, and morality that ties back to a long and familiar trend of protest and activism. The title of the talk refers to book by Francine du Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience, Profiles in Catholic Radicalism* (1970) that tells the story of the brothers Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Their work was part of a long tradition of prophetic activism and faith-based civil disobedience that includes Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr, Ella Baker and Abraham Heschel.

In my book, I approach religion not as a site of ethical self-disciplining. I am more interested in religion as sites of normative contest. Distancing myself from fashionable labels such as “religious left” or “prophetic activism”, I coin the working concept of the “theo-moral” that I define as a commitment to values and action of solidarity and fraternity rooted in deeply held religious convictions and traditions, and that implies a public-facing work of normative claim-making. The book is based on multi-sited research on cases in Italy, Tunisia, and the United States. It is not a systematic cross-country comparison aimed at coming up with a universal overview of the theo-moral. I designed the research to include the three monotheist religions and think beyond the usual boundary between Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. I chose these cases due to my familiarity with the contexts but also because the groups and initiatives under scrutiny share similar preoccupations around structural issues of poverty, displacement, and war.

In this talk, I will give a brief overview of the cases and the book outline. I will then zoom in on two cases that illustrate aspects of the confrontation between the theo-moral and law: I will analyze the trials of two faith leaders that I place under the rubric of theo-moral confrontation, the trial of Rev William Barber (Raleigh, North Carolina) and the trial of Don Alberto Vigorelli (Como, Italy). The talk concludes with a provisional elaboration of some of the common features of the theo-moral grammar by drawing on other cases examined in the book.

February 20, 2024

THE "GOOD BAD" JOB: HOW THE GIG ECONOMY MAKES WORK STICKY

Lindsey Cameron

Uber. TaskRabbit. DoorDash. The on-demand or "gig" economy has rapidly changed how work is organized, with digital platforms connecting workers and customers for tasks that last only minutes or hours, and algorithmic performing functions previously carried out by human managers. Much of the positive press about these companies, fueled by their tech founders, focuses on workers' schedule flexibility in that they can "Be their Own Boss" and "Ditch the 9 -5." In contrast, negative accounts, often written by critical scholars and journalists, emphasize the controlling nature of the algorithmic management system and the precarious work conditions these workers face--yet individuals continue to flock to these jobs even in a tight labor market. With such contrasting perspectives, what accounts for the ever-increasing popularity of gig work? In this book project, based on seven years of ethnographic research, tentatively titled "'Good Bad" Job: How the Gig Economy Makes Work Sticky I examine the cultural and technical elements that gig work so appealing for workers and how customers, merchants, and even cities quickly become enthralled by gig work.

February 26, 2024

“THE WALL STREET CONSENSUS”
THE RETURN OF THE INTERVENTIONIST STATE
Daniela Gabor

The “big state” is back, and large-scale economic transformation is once again the business of politics. In the US, Bidenomics promises a post-neoliberal state that strategically mobilizes private investment, strengthens labor standards, and protects the climate, under a broader commitment to safeguard national security. Climate has become the new frontier of geopolitical struggle, as the United States and the European Union embrace industrial policy in an explicit pushback against China’s increasing domination of cleantech industries.

How do we understand the return of the transformative state? Skeptics tell us that not much has changed, pointing to the relentless march of austerity in Europe or the debt crisis in poor countries. Optimistic pundits read in the revival of industrial policy or the new geopolitics of war evidence that the state is dropping its neoliberal shackles to tighten the leash on global (financial) capitalism and reclaim its capacity to pursue economic transformation. This project offers a different reading. Drawing on a critical macrofinance lens, it examines the new state-capital dynamics as political struggles fought on macrofinancial terrain, where the growing structural dominance of shadow banking (institutional capital) meets the ideological dominance of inflation targeting, a neoliberal institutional set-up that prioritizes central bank independence and fiscal restraint. When transformative ambitions run into the macrofinancial politics of ‘how do we pay for transformation’, the outcome is a global convergence towards Big Finance -led, state derisked capitalism. Through this lens, every crisis since 2008 was a good crisis for Big Finance, not simply in terms of profitability or political power, but *in solidifying its project to transform the state*. In Bidenomics, Lula’s green plans in Brazil, Vietnam’s energy strategy or Namibia’s green hydrogen plans, across the World Bank’s and African Development Bank’s agenda, a new grammar of statecraft is coded as the joint pursuit of “investability”: public ambitions can only be met if the state enhances private returns, or, in the jargon of financiers, “derisks” private investment with generous carrots and no sticks. The state that Big Finance wants layers new institutions onto the neoliberal set-up, geared towards the transformation of public policy goals into investible assets. Financiers recast Keynes’s “anything we can do, we can afford” into “anything we want to do, only private capital can afford, with the right incentives from the state.” *That* is the Wall Street Consensus.

The new Consensus was not inevitable. Rather, the state twice since 2008 attempted to discipline Big Finance: first after the global financial crisis, and then at the height of climate activism just before the 2020 global pandemic. Big Finance successfully engineered U-turns on both occasions, by focusing the debate *on how to pay for* transformative ambitions, rather than how to create the necessary state capacity to design and implement them. In every U-turn, Big Finance advanced its project to enlist the state in securing its profits, first in infrastructure (social or energy), and then industrial policy. But the foundations of this project are fragile: derisking capitalism is *not fast enough* since it delegates the pace and nature of economic transformation to private capital whose investment is vulnerable to changing market conditions, or *just enough*, since it de facto privatizes and financializes public goods, a regressive distributional politics that leads to public backlash and political support for anti-green populism. Alternatives like the Big Green State must be imagined, and building them must start from changing the macrofinancial status-quo: the macroeconomic doctrine of inflation targeting and the power of Big Finance.

March 4, 2024

EVER-RECOMMENCING EXILE
ETHNOGRAPHY AND GEOPOLITICS
Didier Fassin

In past decades, the forced displacement of populations has fuelled nationalist and xenophobic discourses across the world, arousing fear and hostility. Policies have been implemented to deter migrants, crack down on humanitarian workers and externalize border monitoring on remote territories. Men, women and children who flee political violence, religious persecution or poverty in their country and set off on journeys often lasting years therefore take dangerous routes, facing police brutality and gang rackets, confinement camps and barbed-wire walls, the rigors of the desert and the perils of the sea. Many lose their lives.

In this global landscape, Europe - i.e. both the European Union and individual European countries - is exemplary in terms of the constant hardening of its hostile policy towards people from third countries, the multiplication of material and human obstacles placed in the way of migratory routes, the deployment of a surveillance system with an agency, Frontex, whose budget has grown exponentially, and the outsourcing of border control beyond the Mediterranean, to North Africa, the Sahel, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon. The cost of this politics is high in terms of human hardships people experience through the Sahara, in Libya and across the Mediterranean, as a result of arrangements between European and African governments.

This political violence of immigration control was explored in five-year research conducted with Anne-Claire Defossez at the border between Italy and France, in the Hautes-Alpes and in the Val di Susa, where the Montgenèvre pass which is one of the two entry points for most people coming from Afghanistan, Iran, Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. The border was used both as a scene in which virtual or actual interactions were taking place daily between exiles, police and military trying to prevent them from crossing, and volunteers assisting them in the mountain and at a refuge, and as a prism, from which the tribulations they had lived through on the route were reconstituted. Ninety interviews were carried out about their journey, of which sometimes detailed narratives, often only fragments were collected. The central methodological question asked is how to link the microsocial and the macropolitical, ethnography and geopolitics.

March 11, 2024

**THE HUMBLE BRICK:
MOSQUITO VECTORS, DESIGNING WITH AIR, AND THE INCREMENTAL HOME
Ann H. Kelly**

How do mosquitoes come to matter as a problem of climate change?

Mosquitoes are exquisitely temperature-sensitive. Thriving in warmer and more humid conditions, mosquitoes' ectothermic biology has made them sentinels for the disease risk in an era of climate change, prompting calls for invasive species surveillance and ever-more expansive program of chemoprophylactic control. This paper explores another approach to the threat mosquitoes pose, a transdisciplinary project seeking to redesign the 'humble brick' as a tool for public health.

Long absent from global health policy, improving the material quality of housing as a means of disease control is making its way back on the malaria research agenda—but what version of the home becomes articulated by those measures remains contested. To provide orientation to those debates, I offer an account of how the home has historically conjugated malaria control, from international eradication programs to latter-day approaches designed to correct the shortcomings of previous domestic interventions. I suggest how, despite many creative efforts to enfold the lived realities and material conditions of local homes into malaria control, these interventions have struggled to fully capture the affective, fiscal, and material processes through which domestic comfort is pursued and sustained over time.

Attention to construction and brickworks offers an alternative vision for the mosquito-proof home—a (quite literally) more foundational approach that, we believe, offers a platform from which to reconnect malaria control to what I describe as a 'post-growth' mode of development. The most used building material in the world, bricks are cheap, durable, modular, low-maintenance, energy-efficient, and have great potential for recycling and reuse. Those properties present an exciting opportunity for mosquito-borne disease control—a field dominated by commodity-based solutions designed at a distance from their situations they are ultimately deployed at scale. Designed with both human and mosquito vitalities in mind, tethered to a stepwise process of construction, brickworks enhance protective affordances of domestic space working precisely interim situations and dynamics socio-material circumstances that have historically been ignored by malaria control programs and their preoccupation with discrete, sealed spaces. More than a vector control tool, transforming the humble brick can help rearticulate aspirations for social progress within an enterprise circumscribed by biosecurity anxieties and humanitarian commitments, providing the foundations for more expansive imaginary for healthy and climate-resilient living—a global health better equipped to meet the needs of our collective thermal future.

March 18, 2024

SPOTTING CRIME, HEALTH, HEAT: OPERATIONAL BANALITIES OF ADMINISTRATIVE GEOSURVEILLANCE

Shiloh Krupar

Policy interventions delineate problems to be administered. This sociotechnical process frequently entails locating problems, using administrative procedures and technological platforms to target specific populations and/or spaces as “the problem.” The administrative operation figuratively known as hot spotting enlists data mapping techniques and spatial analysis that uses locational data to predict spatial concentrations and determine population segments for intervention. Premised on the idea of hot spots as the intensification of something defined spatially—from concentrations of tourists to places of elevated disease or danger—hot spotting articulates with diverse genealogies of knowledge-making and professional organization across multiple policy areas and domains of administrative action.

This project examines hot spotting in policing, health care, and the management of heat related to climate concerns: In other words, crime hot spotting, medical hot spotting, and literal hot spotting. Spotting crime, health, and heat shows the intertwining of ambient law enforcement (environmental and algorithmic) with disease containment and climate securitization. Furthermore, the project considers the racial operations of these targeted policy interventions, and how technical platforms in each policy arena operate as platforms of racial governance: From SoundThinking’s “one-stop shop” police management system, to medical utilization algorithms and Health Coach behavioral tools, to the heat information systems and health trackers of Heat.gov. Scrutinizing this array of administrative technologies, does locating hot spots of crime, health, and heat—allocating resources toward these areas and segmenting their treatment and care—resolve the problem? Or does it provide opportunities for further reining in of resources, disciplinary action, abandonment and/or exploitation of vulnerable groups? More broadly, how do geosurveillance technologies both expand and limit interventions, and what can be done to achieve better policy and outcomes?

Central to the inquiry, the project uses the framework of “folklore of operational banality” to limn the banal protocols and managerial decisions, mediated by algorithmic thinking and cost-benefit analysis, that support policy interventions as the most rational, thus ordinary, response, consequently perpetuating the operation because it is expected and unremarkable. Ordinary appearances of FOOB evince the political-economic moral signifier of “remaining operational” (rather than truthful). A system that demonstrates FOOB is reductive, tautological, and iterative—that is, incentivized to prioritize perpetuating itself. Hot spotting shows FOOB tendencies: It imposes grids of cost-effectiveness and data mapping that enable authorities to act, and superimposes the spatial grids of digitally-driven geosurveillance and prediction technologies onto maps, connecting the feature spaces of algorithms with geolocational data that are then operationalized in physical spaces. FOOB exposes how hot spotting (1) expresses problems as concentrations, coded on operational surfaces (as risk, enemy, disease, crime, deadly heat) in order to be made actionable, in feedback loops with physical spaces; (2) enacts targeting as “actional intelligence”—in the form of accusation, workfare, extraction, etc.—premised on spatial division and spatially ontologized inequality that blur penal and welfare functions, and (3) optimizes administrative operations by optimizing inequality, under the sign of evidence-based legitimacy and moral claims of proactivity—of constantly doing—as governing strategy, regardless of the policy narrative or intervention rationale.

April 1, 2024

**TRANSATLANTIC THOUGHT:
COLONIALISM, MISPLACEMENT, CONCATENATION**
Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo

Transatlantic Constellations formulates a critical history of the making of modern western political thought. It consists of a novel materialist account of the historicity of political thought that is adept at grasping the historical sedimentations, mediations, blockages, and contradictions in the making of modern political thought both in Europe and in the colonial and postcolonial contexts across the Atlantic world. In place of linear accounts, I argue for multi-directional processes of mimesis and borrowing. *Transatlantic Constellations* calls into question simplistic narratives about concept formation that either present ideas as socially indeterminate, or as shackled by material determinations. It equally challenges diffusionist accounts of how ideas emerge and travel in the transatlantic world. Ultimately, the book defends an “earthly” (*irdische*), materialist tradition of theoretical discourse, that takes concepts to emerge from concrete historical realities and experiences, as the best approach for a critical history of transatlantic political thought.

I propose to bring the dialectical legacy of critical theory to bear on some of the axiomatic claims found among postcolonial and decolonial theories. This legacy calls into question these axioms and formulates theoretical approaches that are more adept at grasping the historical sedimentations and contradictions defining colonial and postcolonial situations and their corollary predicaments of power.

This book pursues **three** interrelated lines of inquiry. **First**, I am concerned with a systematic critique of theoretical signposts of decolonial theory. These are historicized, compared, and interrogated from the perspective of genuinely critical scholarship on colonialism and its aftermaths. **Second**, as an alternative to decolonial categories, I reconstruct a more discerning approach based on the dialectical legacy of critical theory in which notions like misplacement and concatenation are placed alongside other dialectical notions, like mediation and blockages, as able to best grasp colonialism and its aftermaths. **Third**, I move from critique to reconstruction and formulate an alternative that at once constitutes a politically and critically robust approach to questions of colonialism and the history of transatlantic thought. The goal: to formulate a more nuanced understanding of how concepts emerge in history and are always forged in response to material and historical processes. This study thus thematizes colonialism and historical sedimentation in a more differentiated, critical and accurate account that is truer to the actual historical traveling, placements, and misplacements of political ideas, and their actualization both in the European and non-European worlds.

April 8, 2024

**TRUSTED STRANGERS:
DOMESTIC WORK, REPUTATION, & THE POLITICS OF ONLINE MARKETS**
Julia Ticona

Platforms don't transform the labor of domestic work. Childcare platforms don't tell a nanny when it's time to change a diaper or which books to read. However, while they may not be acting like a manager, this doesn't mean they're not disciplining workers. This project examines how childcare platforms, like Care.com, have transformed carework into a commodity that can be bought and sold online. The project explains how these platforms sought to automate the intermediary, scaling up informal neighborhood networks by reshaping the collection and use of personal data, in other words, they have reshaped how *reputation* works online. By doing so, they reshape the ways that reputation is used to control labor.

Reputation is anything but neutral. Reputation has been wielded both by and against women as a technique to control their labor and enforce racialized and gendered social hierarchies between women and between families. Tracking changes to the shape and circulation of reputation is important to understanding labor because throughout history, women's labor can often be found at the experimental frontier of capitalism and despite, or maybe because of, its perennial qualities, domestic work is no exception.

Women's work is both at the forefront of transformations and perennial in its production of structural inequalities. Domestic work is an index for major forms of class, gender, and racial inequalities in the U.S.. While the first part of the 20th century saw large scale declines in the number of women working as domestics, as income inequality climbs, the last sixty years have seen the return of the "servant economy." Looking at transformations of labor through the lens of these platforms invites us to examine the ways that platforms intervene in longer historical processes of both the commodification of personal data and the reproduction of social inequalities.

In their attempts to change and control the environments within which people transact and exchange information, and their ability to match and order participants in these markets, platforms do relational work. Platforms do the work of creating relations, from bringing different parties of a transaction together, to attempting to match transactions with appropriate media. This work isn't new, domestic work labor markets have seen many different types of intermediaries– from those selling enslaved people to newspaper classified ads to nanny agencies – but in using different kinds of information to construct and institutionalize reputation, they have facilitated different techniques of power and had different results for the accumulation of power in employment relationships.

April 15, 2024

TORTURE TAXIS AND SPECULATIVE FUTURES IN CAPTIVITY

Darryl Li

The idea of the project is to use the Forever War context to theorize captivity as a relation of holding, to ask what kinds of relations and subjectivities does captivity produce, and to explore other questions? The notion of captivity here has several dimensions: First, captivity arises from a situation of violence: the captive is the one who is in the power of another, who can be killed but whose life is spared. There may be an implicit promise or exchange here, but any lasting legitimacy is belied by the coercive circumstances at work. Terms like *detainee*, *prisoner*, *hostage* all presuppose certain normative valences: they may normalize a particular status in a legal system or perhaps suggest an illegitimate form of coercion. I don't believe captive is necessarily a "neutral" or "objective" term, but there may be a kind of zero-level immediacy to it that tends to keep some of these other questions in abeyance. At the very least, *captivity* suggests the absence of a shared normative universe between captor and captive. Historically there have been strong continuities and affinities between the institutions of captivity and slavery but as Walter Rodney has pointed out, captivity was temporally and geographically antecedent to enslavement. All slaves are captives but not all captives are slaves: this conceptual disentanglement allows for a rigorous engagement with the thinking that came out of the Atlantic world's racialized chattel slavery without reducing it to a generalized stand-in for oppression or discrimination.

Second, I think of captivity as a form of enforced mobility. Capture is rarely about pure immobilization in the place of capture. What is important about captivity is the way that even as people are constrained they are often set into motion by others against their will. This process of displacement is most immediately spatial or geographical, but it often means movement across cultural contexts as well – all of which make captivity being particularly powerful in the remaking of subjectivities. This emphasis on mobility also sets up a helpful contrast from approaches that focus on specific archetypes of place. Here I'm thinking of the prison, the camp, or the plantation, all spaces of confinement that have been theorized as paradigmatic of modern power in some sense far beyond their physical manifestations. Essentially they are laboratories for specific theories of power and subjectivity – so discipline for Foucault begins in the prison, sovereignty and biopower for Agamben are most vividly demonstrated in the camp, necropolitics for Achille Mbembe in the plantation. This type of thinking can be quite productive and of course serves as another important reference point, but I'm also particularly interested in theorizing captivity on its own terms and for its own sake.

Third, captivity also recalls the kindred concept of captivation: like captivity, a relation of holding, but here what is being held is attention. Or, to put it otherwise, captivation entails the act of beholding and being beheld. The thing with captivity is that narration is always seen as deferred or impinged, which of course only heightens the allure: a memoir published after obtaining freedom, or correspondence always marred by the suspicion of being composed under compulsion. It's not necessarily the case that narration from captivity is more mediated or more suspect than other type of narration, but there is something about the awareness of captivity that maybe heightens these concerns. Captivation will help critically navigate the materiality of captivity's archive.

April 22, 2024

**THIRD PARTY:
AMAZON MARKETPLACE AND THE MAKING OF PLATFORM WORLDS
Maira Weigel**

Scholars of comparative literature have long argued that worlds are constituted through the circulation and translation of texts. Adopting a comparative approach to platform studies, this talk examines how the circulation of platform data across national and linguistic borders leads people to understand—or misunderstand—one another. How does the practice of working with such data shape how users see themselves and their place in the world?

I explore these questions through the lens of Amazon’s “third party” marketplace platform. This platform enables users almost anywhere in the world to open seller accounts, access large quantities of data about prospective customers and competitors, and use Amazon’s advertising and fulfillment services to promote, transport, store, and deliver goods. Several million third parties sell over 60% of everything bought on Amazon.com and are overwhelmingly concentrated in China and the United States, with only around 5% located anywhere else.

Drawing on over three years of research, I begin by explaining the complex and often confounding history of the marketplace. I show that, although the interface renders these “third parties” largely invisible, they have played a key role in the growth of Amazon as a whole, providing both the testing ground and the revenue for much of the company’s expansion in logistics, targeted advertising, and cloud computing, among other fields. In doing so, I make an ontological claim that, I argue, entails epistemological consequences—a claim about what a platform *is* that informs *how we can know* about it.

I argue that third parties, sometimes called “complementors,” should be treated not as incidental or secondary but as central to and constitutive of platforms that their experiences and that their perspectives offer key insight into the platform as a representational problem. That is, as entities that exert force across inherently fuzzy borders.

I then explore two sets of different practices that have arisen through and with the Amazon marketplace platform. The first, arbitrage, involves sourcing and reselling goods. The second, registered branding, involves combining platform data from multiple sources in an effort to transcend Amazon. Examining these two sets of practices, I argue that they enroll third parties in different ways of imagining others and themselves that nonetheless advance platform growth. I conclude with a broader set of reflections on how the case of Amazon might inform ongoing debates about the nature of digital capitalism—as a *capitalism of intermediaries*, that not only interposes a new layer of data collection on existing social activities but also enrolls third parties in acting as platform agents or intermediaries themselves.

April 29, 2024

II

Theme Seminar

PLATFORM

Beginning in 2023, working individually and collaboratively, the PLATFORM group met to discuss, describe, and examine the expansion, rise, and influence of “the platform” in global society. Members sought to incite scholarly thinking across platforms of different kinds, and in various mediums—including analog, electronic, and virtual—to explore the norms and practices that organize, permeate, and stem from them.

A platform operates across devices and experiences, de-emphasizing form in favor of content. A platform can be a foundation for political ideology, a web-based application for discourse, a system yielding multifaceted biomedical and communicative ends, and more. From a social science perspective, a platform can be understood as an infrastructure for action, an architecture or affordance that enables and constrains social, economic, and political possibilities, and conditions how we represent and experience the world.

Reading, thinking, and writing on individual projects and collectively, the PLATFORM group explored these issues and questions: Platforms have become default archives for both personal and institutional artifacts like data, text, sound, and images. Whose history is being preserved and whose is lost? How does exclusion from a platform—such as the deplatforming of controversial nations or figures, and particular forms of speech—highlight its power?

What historical, technological, theoretical, and policy perspectives and methodologies are key for understanding platforms and how they operate in academia, government, and industry, as well as in the physical world and in the realm of social relations? In what ways do platforms—such as biomedical technologies—structure, reorganize, and consolidate science, knowledge, and markets? How does the dominance of private platforms produce inequality—including along vectors of race, gender, class, nation, and region—and compel reimaginings of public infrastructure? How do today’s platforms differ from the social infrastructures and architectures of the past?

Read coverage of PLATFORM members’ scholarship [here](#).

FIVE THESES ON THE GRAVITY OF PLATFORMS

The PLATFORM group considered “the platform” on both conceptual and empirical registers. Platforms seem to assemble capabilities, users, and interests and thereby set new futures in motion. Platforms are architectures for action that enable and constrain social, cultural, economic, and political possibilities, and shape how we structure, represent, and experience the world. Platforms are socio-technical infrastructures that can coordinate, consolidate, extend, and empower the activities of individuals, communities, corporations, and other actors. The group explored the *gravity* of the platform across humanistic and social science perspectives, [advancing five theses](#) about how they simultaneously attract and repulse social action.



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