

Trump, a populist president, is flanked by tech billionaires at his inauguration



1 of 12 | Tech billionaires Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos were among those in attendance at Donald Trump's inauguration ceremony in Washington.



BY [ALISWENSON](#)

Updated 4:04 AM CEST, January 21, 2025

Share 

Sarrah Kassem

Scuola Normale Superiore,
Florence

Spring School: Political economy
of production and labour
SNS, 20 March 2026

LABOR IN THE DIGITAL AGE



01 Why Platforms

02 Broad debates and methods

03 Working conditions & agency
across platforms

To what extent do digital platforms reconfigure the political economy of labor through technological transformation?

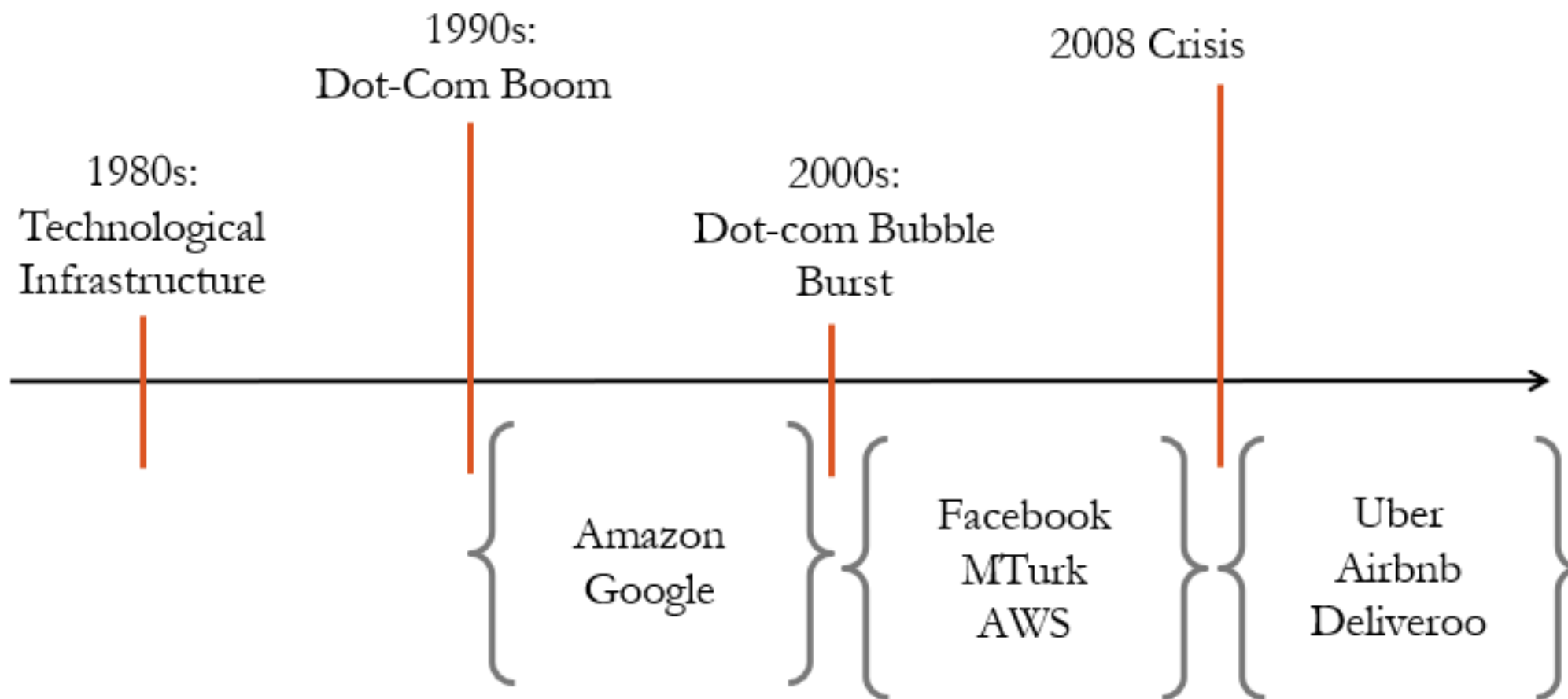
Understanding digital infrastructure and AI requires looking beyond code and algorithms to the material infrastructures and social relations that sustain it.





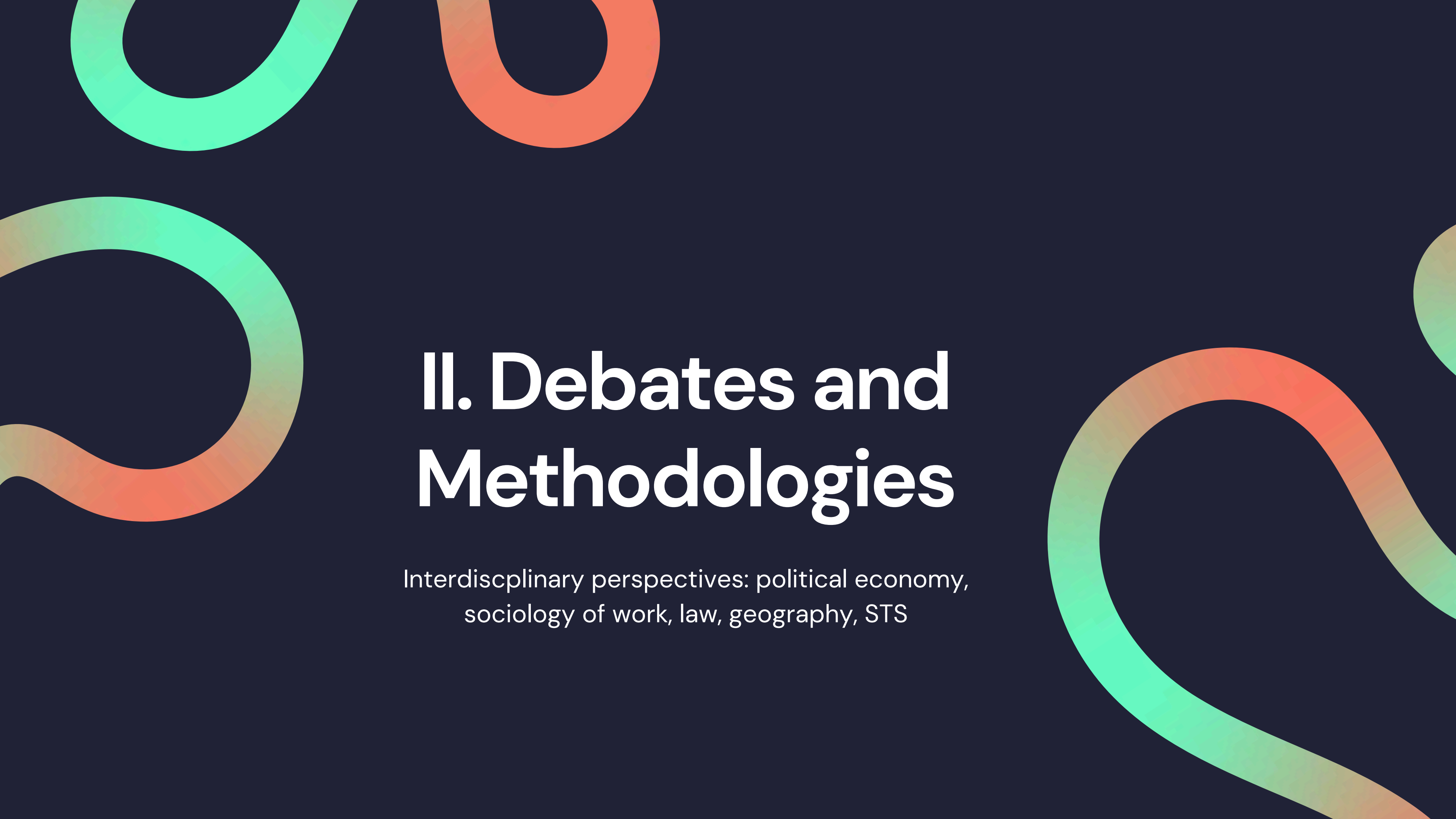
I. Why Platforms?

Platforms as trendsetters



Platforms' Trajectory

- McKinsey 2023: in next six years, mediate more than 30% of global economic activity (or 60 trillion)
- McKinsey 2024: biggest industry shifts by new tech giants



II. Debates and Methodologies

Interdisciplinary perspectives: political economy,
sociology of work, law, geography, STS

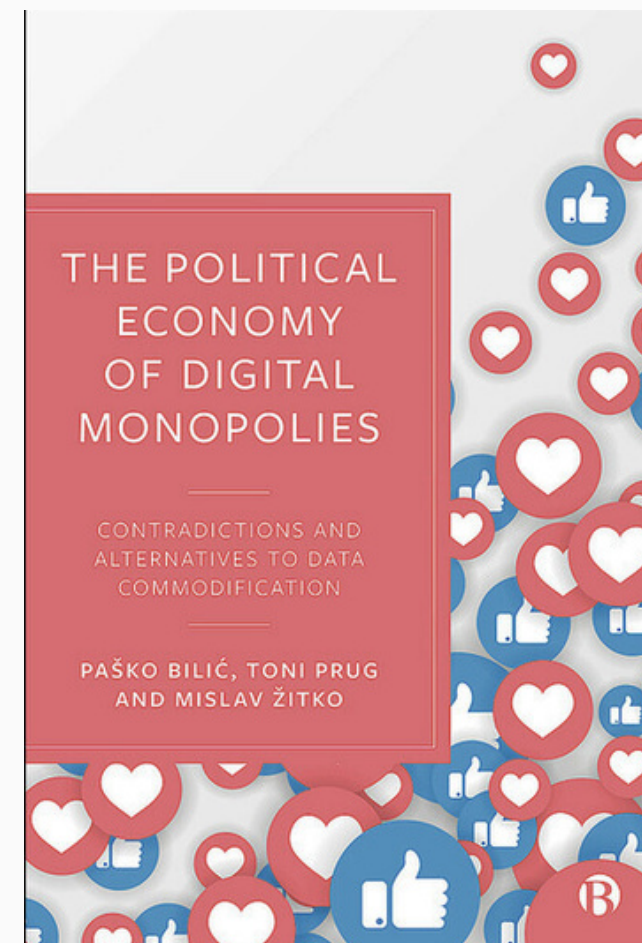
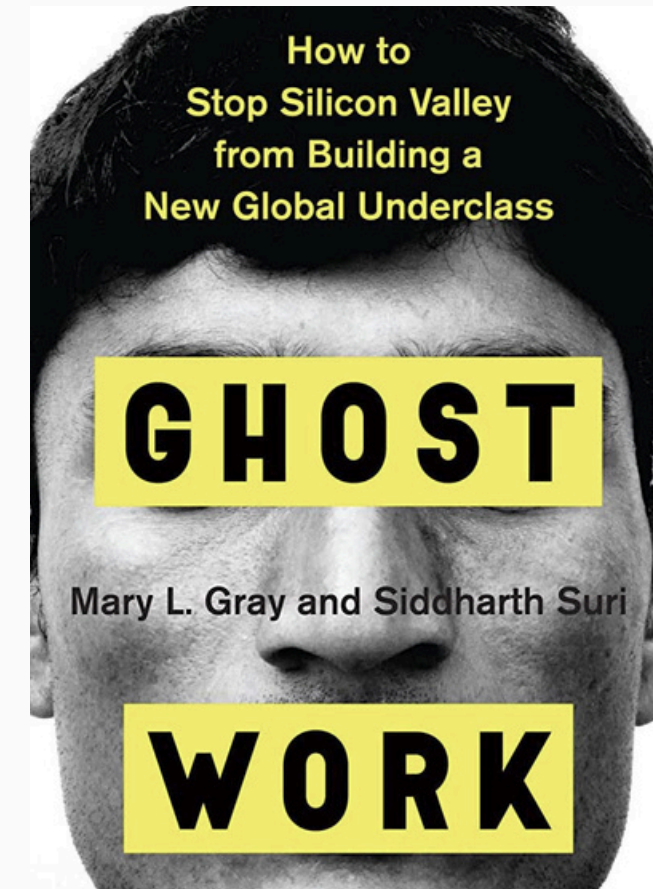
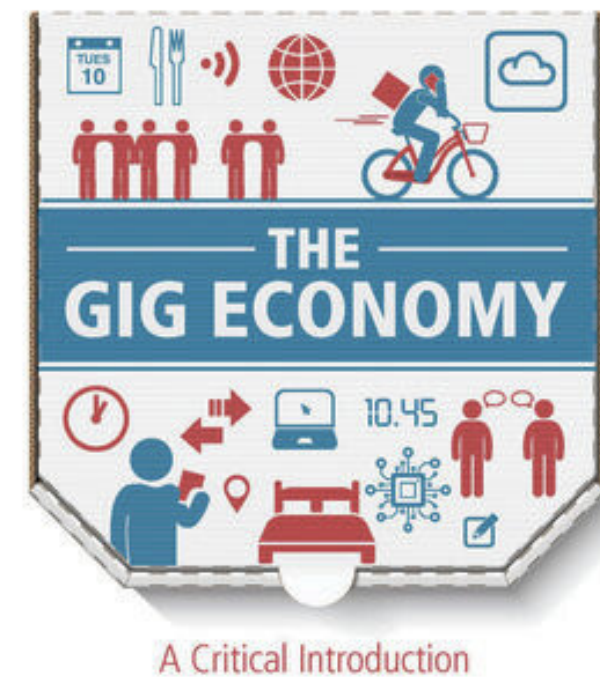
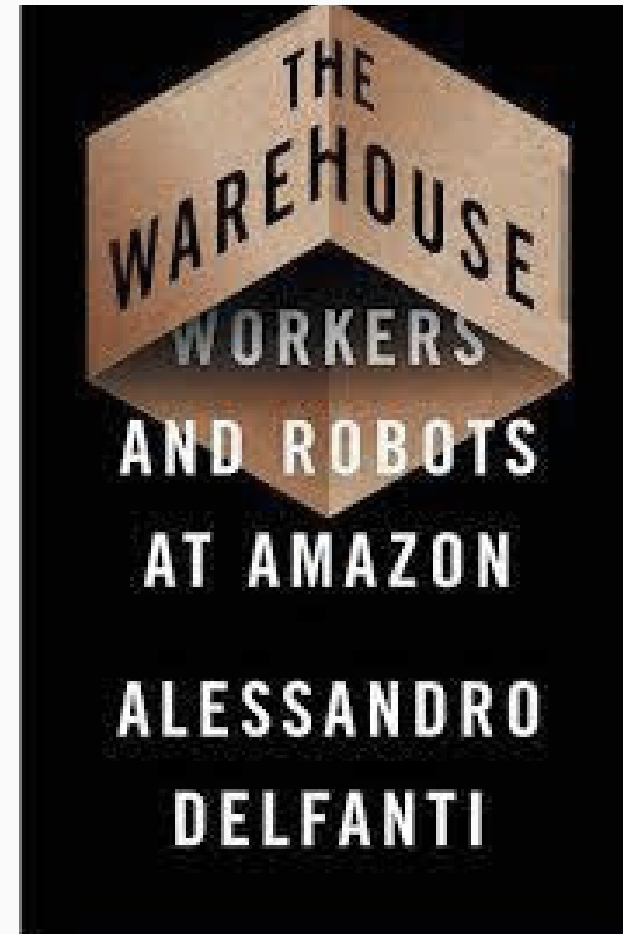
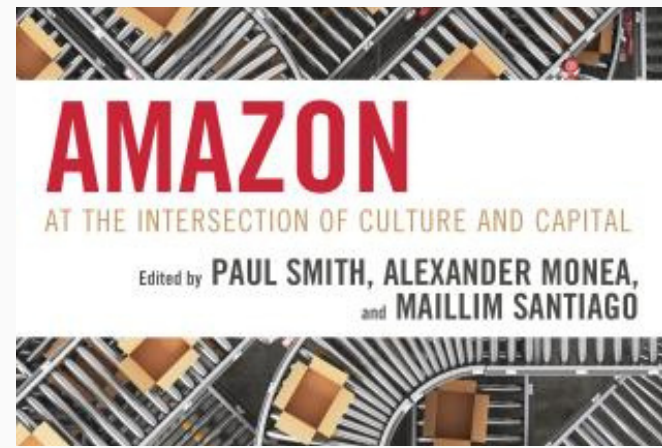
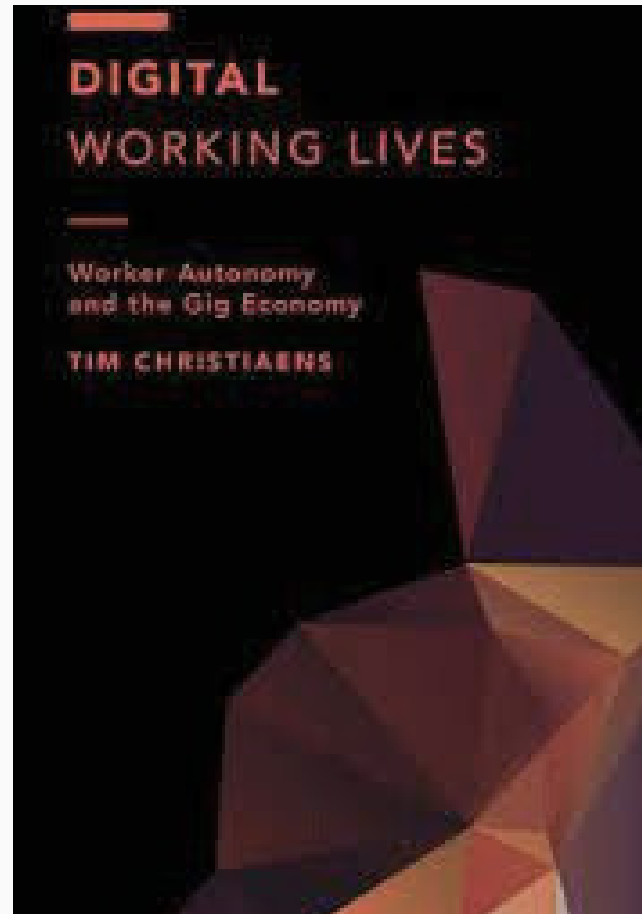
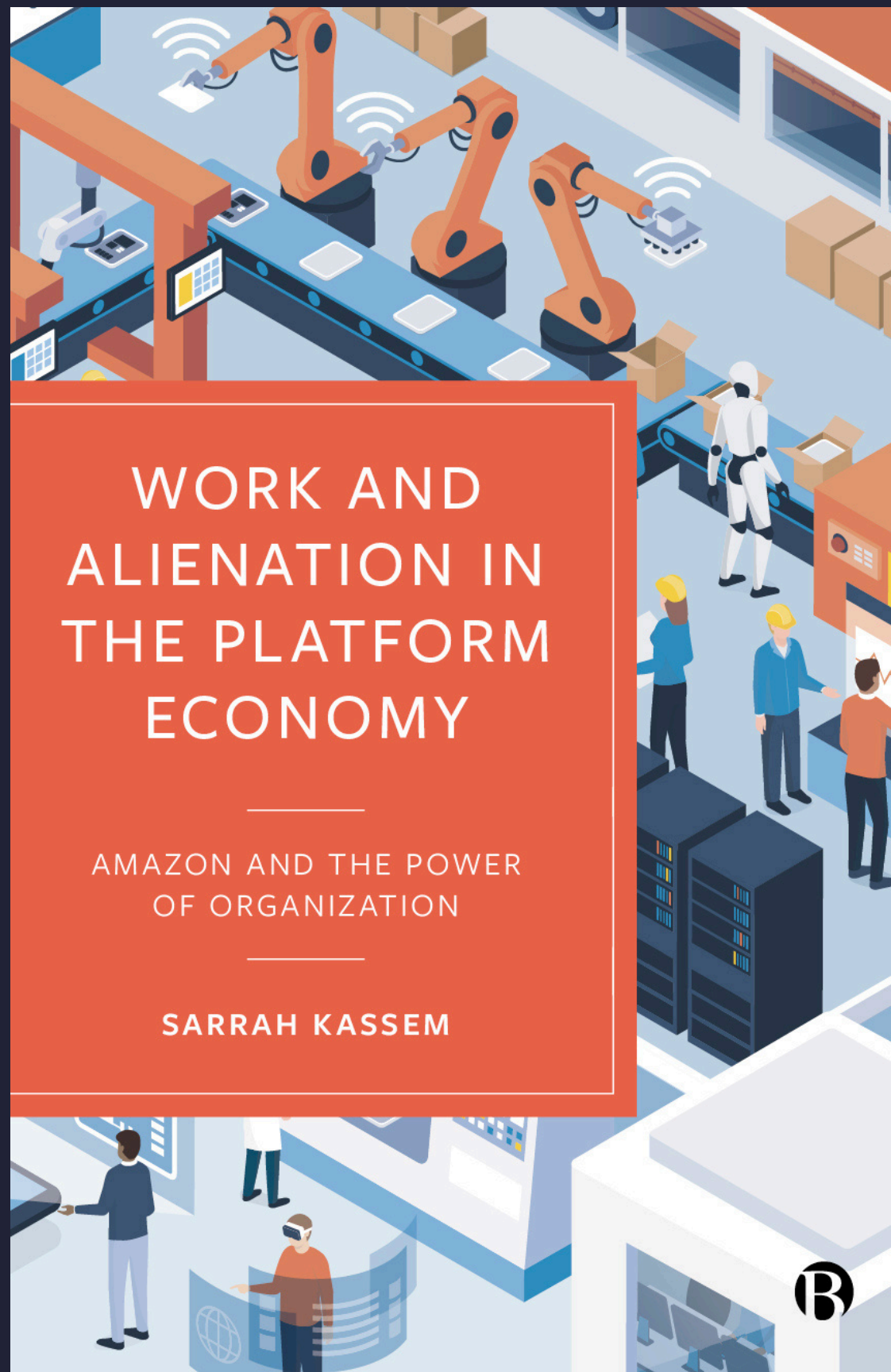
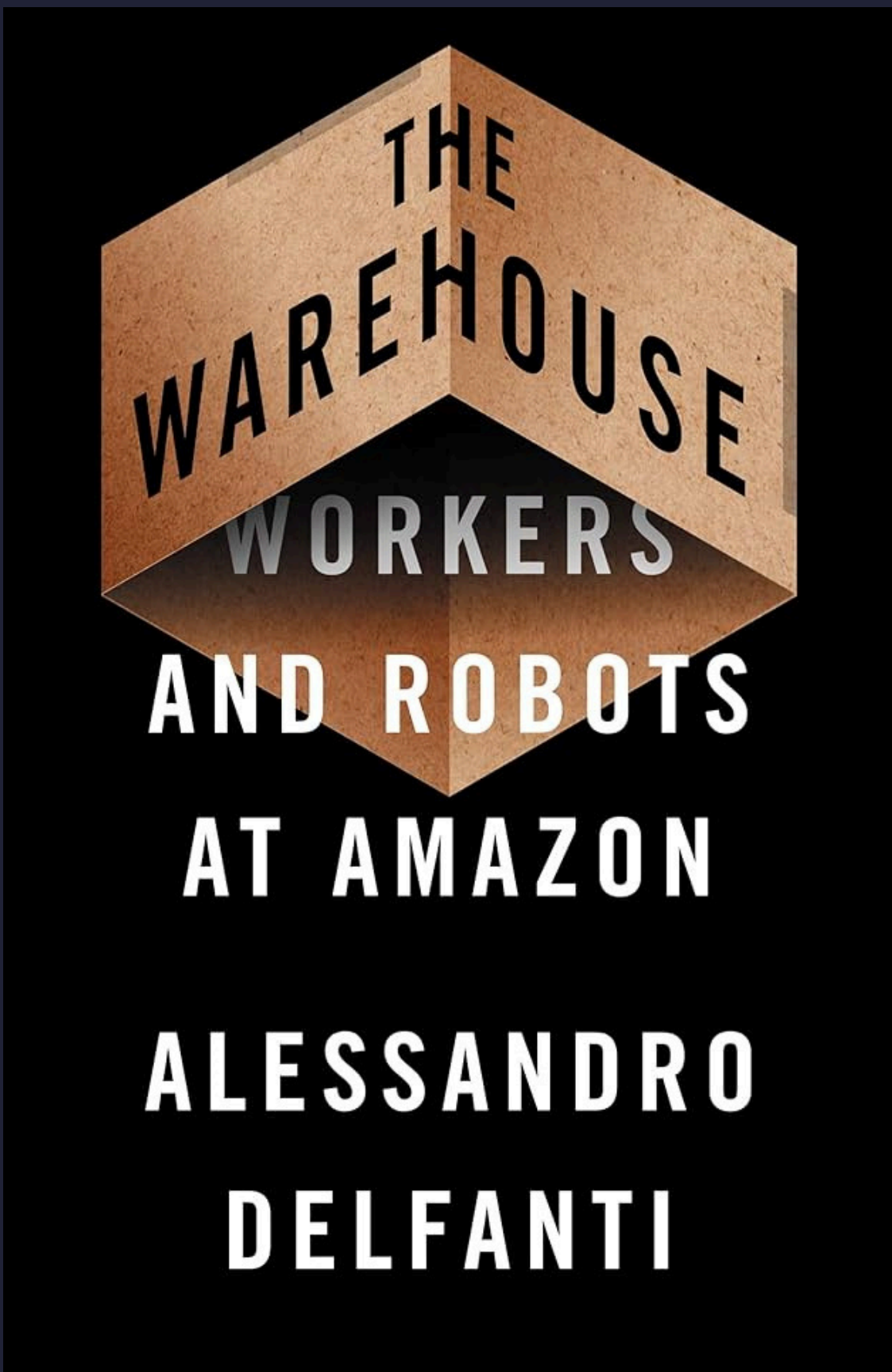


Table 1.1: Matrix of the organization of the platform economy

	Nature of the platform	
	Location-based	Web-based
Traditional time-wage	Amazon warehouses Amazon Web Services	
Gig time-wage	Google Facebook	
	Helping TaskRabbit	Upwork Toptal
	Deliveroo	Freelancer.com
Gig piece-wage	Uber Lyft	Amazon Mechanical Turk Upwork
	Deliveroo	Clickworker
	Airbnb	Prolific

Nature of the work

Nature of the platform





A Critical Introduction

Jamie Woodcock • Mark Graham

Antonio Aloisi and Valerio De Stefano



YOUR BOSS IS AN ALGORITHM

Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Labour



"Extraordinary." —Bill McKibben

AFTER THE GIG

HOW THE SHARING ECONOMY GOT HIJACKED



AND HOW TO WIN IT BACK

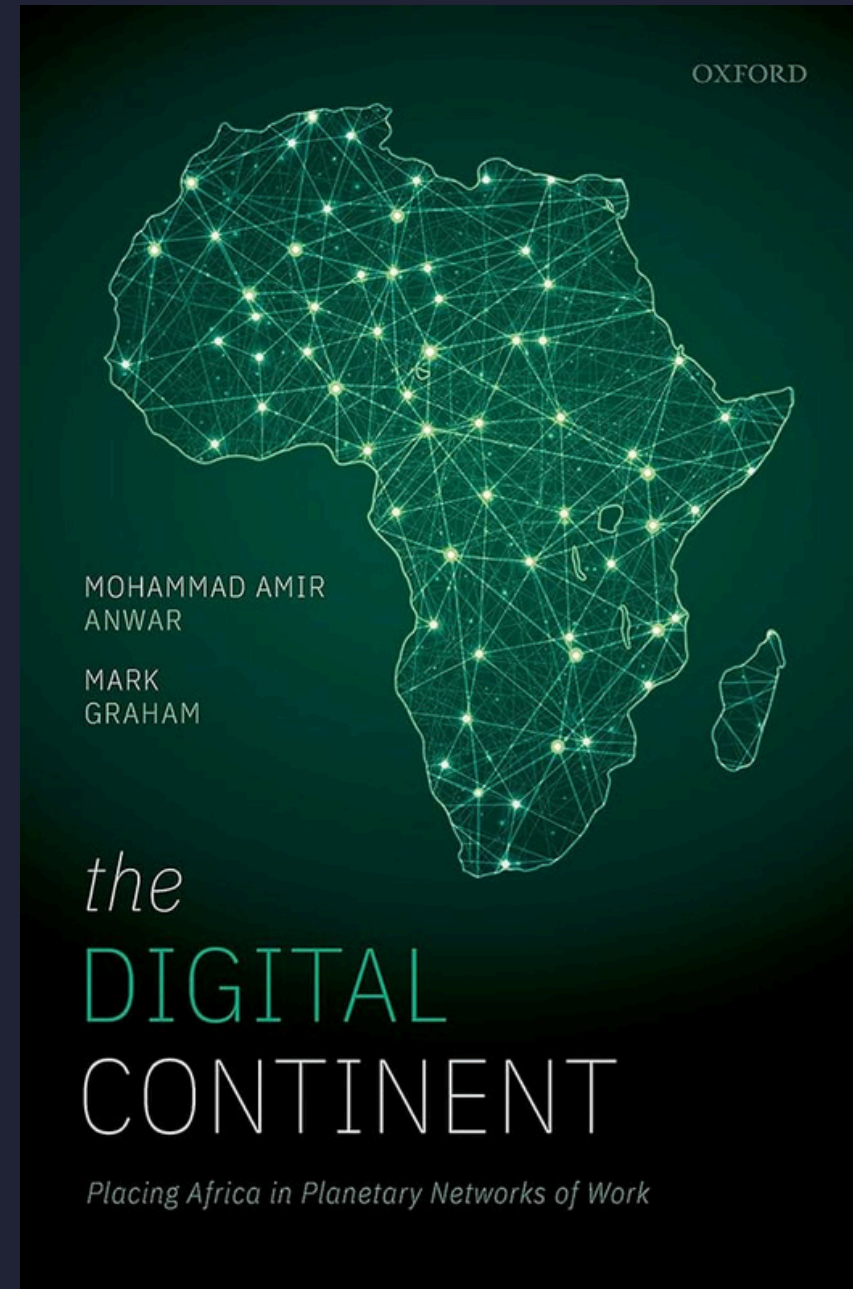
JULIET B. SCHOR

How to
Stop Silicon Valley
from Building a
New Global Underclass

GHOST

Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri

WORK



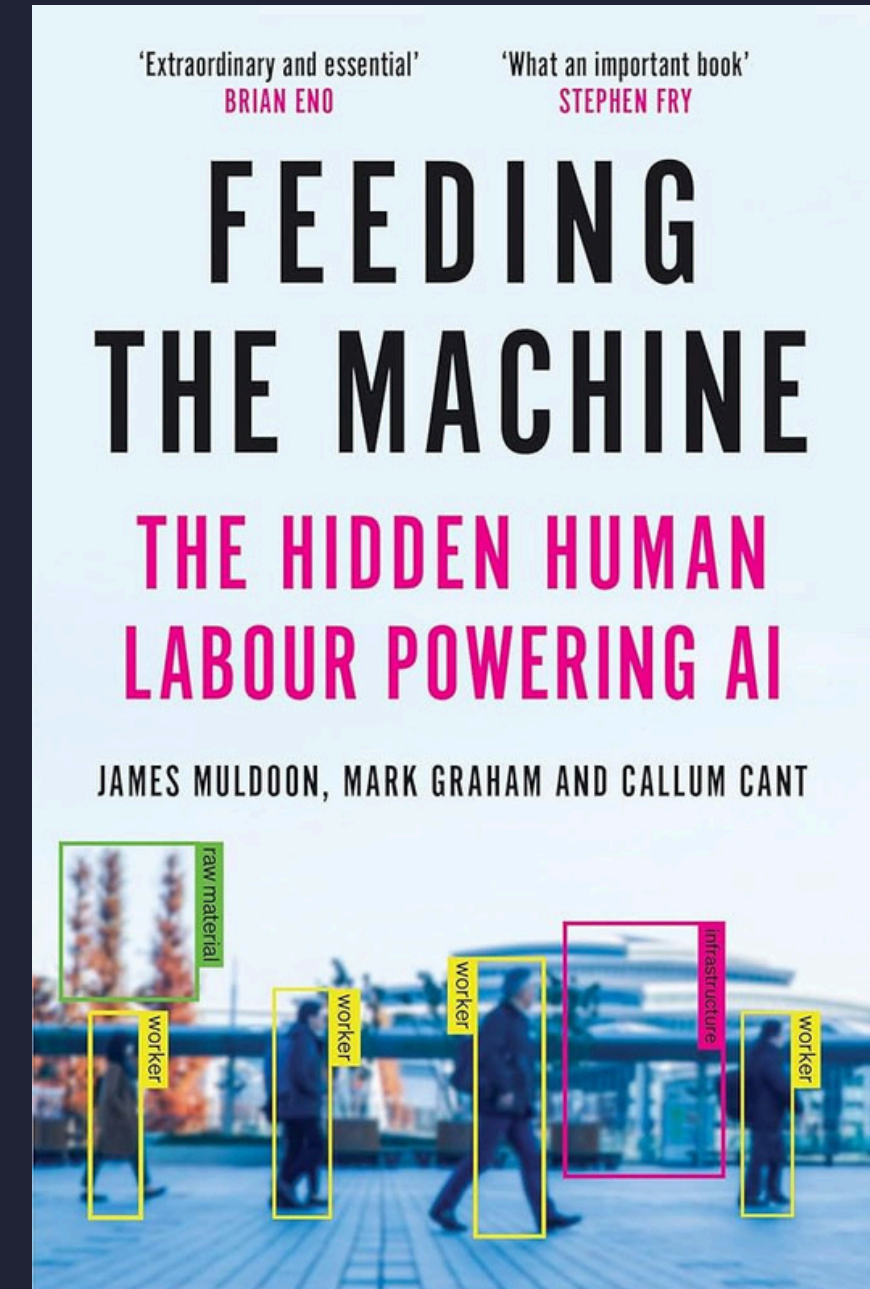
**WAITING
FOR
ROBOTS**



The Hired Hands
of Automation

Antonio A. Casilli

TRANSLATED BY SASKIA BROWN



Methodologies: Accessing the field

Location-based (traditional) platforms	Gig-based location-based	Gig-based web-based
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• more traditional access to workers• field research, engaging in strike action, attending (trans)national union meetings• interviewing or surveying workers <p>• Apicella 2021; Barthel 2019; Delfanti 2021; Kassem 2023; Lee et al. 2022; Reese 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• more dispersed workforce• being a gig worker as means of auto-ethnography or multi-sited ethnography• joining social media groups, focus groups• approaching workers on break and interviewing afterwards <p>• Altenried 2024; Cant 2020; Cini, Maccarone and Tassinari, 2022; Dubal, 2023; Gebrial 2024; Heiland 2021</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• digital fieldwork: sign up on platforms, conduct ethnographic study as worker, posting remunerated tasks like surveys• Reddit and other forums <p>• Anwar and Graham 2022; Berg and Rani 2021; Gray and Suri, 2019; Kassem 2023 McKenzie 2024; Miceli and Posada 2022</p>



III. Working conditions and agency

Who are the workers? What characterizes their working conditions? And what do they do about it?

Amazon Warehouses



Digital Taylorism

Divisions of Tasks, UPH rate, digital panopticon (Apicella, 2021; Delfanti 2021a; 2021b, Reese and Alimahomed)

WHO ARE THE WORKERS?

Disruptive Action and Transnational Organizing

Structural power, associational power, institutional power, societal power (Boewe and Schulten, 2019; Kassem, 2023)





Location-based gig workers

Algorithmic management

hire and fire by algorithms
black box, algorithmic insecurity
algorithmic wage discrimination
(Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021;
Dubal, 2023; van Doorn and
Badger, 2020, Gandini, 2019)



WHO ARE THE WORKERS?

Disruptive Action and Organizing

regulatory protests; more traditional unions focussing on regulation, classification and associational rights
distributive protests: grassroots, initiatives and labor addressing unrest (Vandaele et al, 2024; Woodcock, 2021; Cini et al, 2022; Umney et al 2024)

MTurk & digital labor platforms

WHO ARE THE WORKERS?

Racial wage gap on Mturk

- Indian MTurk workers average hourly wage: **US\$2.48**; US earned US\$6.90 (Rani and Furrer, 2019)
- neocolonial data extraction (Casilli, 2017)

Gendered wage gap

- 20% lower hourly wage for women (Adams and Berg, 2019; Adams-Prassl et al., 2023)
- double shifts of work, production and reproductive labor (Tandon and Sekharan, 2022)

Digital Cubicles in Digital Assembly Lines

Human Intelligence Tasks, AM for monitoring and evaluating, Approval Ratings (Irani, 2013; Aytes, 2013; Difallah et al, 2018; Aloisi and De Stefano, 2022; Gray and Suri, 2019)

communicativity:	3.25 / 5	pay/	\$0-\$4
fairness	4.50 / 5	hr	\$4-\$7
promptness	2.50 / 5		\$7-\$10
			\$10-\$15
			\$15+

Mturk Approval Rating Calculator

How many more approved HITs do I need to reach my desired approval rating?

Current Approved HITs:

Current Rejected HITs:

Desired Rating:

Amazon Mechanical Turk

Access a global, on-demand, 24x7 workforce

This HIT's reference number is 3951595



Alternative forms of organizing

Traditional organizing more difficult, gig workers, Collective Digital Spaces (Irani and Silberman, 2013; Savage and Jarrahi, 2020; Gerber, 2022; Kassem, 2023)

How do digital platforms reconfigure the political economy of labor through both technological transformation?



Conclusion: Understanding digital infrastructure and AI requires looking beyond code and algorithms to the material infrastructures and social relations that sustain it.

1

Why are platforms relevant?

Positions platforms and AI within systems of **power, control, and capital accumulation**

2

Where is tech in labor processes?

Reshaping labor processes through **algorithmic management**

3

Who are the workers?

disproportionately **racialized and gendered workers**



THANK YOU!