Platforms and the publicness of urban markets
Lizzie Richardson

Platforms offer one means of imagining how cities work. The term suggests infrastructure, perhaps most intuitively transport, as the combination of virtual and physical elements that sometimes form a coherent system that supports urban life. A go to example when examining platforms and cities is Uber, which provides a system for transporting individuals in a city through multiple unique journeys. In many instances, this has enlisted new taxi drivers together with the redeployment of an existing pool of workers through the Uber app, driving sometimes their own vehicle but often a vehicle leased from a third party. For those seeking to get from A to B, the result is supposedly an accessible service that is both more convenient and sometimes cheaper than other modes of mass transit. Yet when we consider which of these elements enrolled in the Uber platform are new, the list is not a long one. The roads, the cars, and even many of the drivers are already part of an urban infrastructure. In fact, the single novel element appears to be the Uber application, a piece of software. So are platforms in cities reducible to a piece of software? It is conceivable that this is the case, but perhaps a more pertinent issue is what is the question to which the concept of "platform urbanism" claims to be an answer?

At least in part, this question concerns the parameters and implications of a condition in which the public and private qualities of urban infrastructures are being reconfigured, an issue with most salience in cities where reliable state provision has been the norm. This is not simply a question of ownership in which, for example, a "public" infrastructural element is sold by the state to a "private" company. Indeed, platform urbanism could describe a shift away from ownership as a straightforward method for distinguishing between public and private. A public infrastructure becomes one which is made widely accessible for free, or more often, for the payment of a fee either at the point of use or through subscription. Public therefore denotes a quality of accessibility for collective use. To accept this definition requires remembering that a "public" or "public actor" is an historically and geographically specific invention, and which therefore can have shifting parameters of inclusion and exclusion. As the key agent historically in the definition of the boundaries of publicness, the state's combination of investment in and operation of a given infrastructure has defined it as public. Therefore from this perspective, instead of being reducible to the relationship between software and cities, platform urbanism denotes a wider mediation of infrastructural provision, in which the publicness of infrastructure is not constructed by the state but by *markets*.

To see a possible role for urban markets in creating publicness again requires a moment of recollection. Cities have historically been (and indeed continue to be) "physical" market places, that is, sites where heterogeneous actors coordinate for moments of exchange. Indeed, the specific sites of historical urban markets often retain some designation as "public spaces" in cities where commerce has largely been rendered devoid of plein air qualities. Yet the production of urban space as a "public" market place lies often in processes that resist fixed definition and static designation. As performances of exchange, markets construct publics through nuanced choreographies in which movement and interaction mean that the purposes and capacities of actors evolve as the drama unfolds. What is for sale, for how much and by whom varies according to the time and space of the market. Diverse people and things move into and out of the play, resulting in sometimes minute, sometimes seismic reconfigurations of the rules of the game and the capacities of the players involved. While markets have different kinds of impact on urban form, what does translate is a general principle of market-making in cities as processes of coordination of different actors with changing purposes and

capacities. If it is this general principle that produces the shifting publicness of urban space as market place, then it becomes possible to see how market-making can imply the creation of public infrastructure in cities.

The reason for pushing this connection between "a market" and "a public" is that one prevalent usage of the term "markets" is to connote "privatisation", processes by which the state operation of urban infrastructure is relinquished or terminated. This can be a problem for reasons ranging from the ideological (e.g. it is neither socially equitable nor democratic) to the practical (e.g. quality or quantity of provision may decline). Within this context, to draw attention to the publicness of urban markets is to refuse the definition of state ownership or operation as the only mode for qualifying public infrastructure. "Public" can be decoupled from a political definition singularly associated with state citizenship and rather can imply a broader collective with other parameters of qualification and disqualification. Thus public infrastructure can be separated from an operation uniquely resulting from an organisation that is premised on resources and capabilities accrued through acceptance of the state-citizen relation. Attention to other forms of publicness, including that of urban markets, is therefore vital for understanding how the collective life of cities takes place when the capacities of the state are changing or have historically been limited or absent.

This complexity of infrastructural investment and operation connoted by platform urbanism can certainly be investigated through a focus on site-specific practices of market-making emerging through software platforms. By highlighting the mediated functioning of infrastructure that is reliant on coordinated exchange between different actors, software platforms provide one example of how urban markets produce shifting forms of publicness. This emphasis on markets does not imply ignoring the role of companies such as Uber as owner of a given piece of software that results in exploitative working conditions. It does not deny that such a platform manifests as a capitalist arrangement. However, it does challenge a line of critique that singularly sees the platform as the latest behemoth in a linear evolution of capitalism. When attention is paid to the complexities of market making in cities, the efficacy of platforms as software to produce their desired results cannot be absolute, and moreover, it becomes clear that platforms are dependent upon a host of other arrangements that lie outside of their control. A corollary is that platforms can create, intentionally or not, new forms of collective practices through which cities function. In short, platform urbanism requires recognising the "failure of capitalist arrangements to become universal forms of economic life". ((Roitman, Janet. "The efficacy of the economy." *African Studies Review* 50, no. 2 (2007): 155-161.))

Bio
Lizzie is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of Geography at Durham University, UK. Much of her current research is examining contemporary technologies of work with a focus on two sites: the office and the urban food delivery platform. She is interested in the historically and geographically specific processes of definition of work and their implications for mobilisations of "the economy" variously as an urban, regional, national and global entity.

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