Looking Forward

As I see it, there are three perspectives on the future of food platforms. The first is the game plan of the bosses themselves. The second is that game plan modified by a liberal reform agenda. The third is some form of democratic reorganization from below, led by the workers themselves. This chapter will explore these three perspectives in turn.

Fully Automated Luxury Food Delivery?

In March 2018, a presentation given by Deliveroo to potential investors was leaked to the restaurant trade press.[1] In it, Deliveroo outlined their vision for the future. Suffice to say, it was ambitious. The company aims to double their profit margins and halve costs to customers through the full automation of food production and delivery. It's hard to tell whether this is a sincere ambition, or a fairy tale told to investors to empty their wallets and allay any panic about when they can expect a return on their investment. But, either way, their plans are worth serious consideration.

The first question is, does the tech to automate food production and delivery exist? Maybe. There are a few contending companies aiming to lead the delivery-drone field. Starship Technologies have developed drones that are

essentially self-driving shopping trolleys which travel on pavements – described at sector conferences as 'under-utilised logistical infrastructure' – and fulfil shortdistance deliveries within a 2-mile radius in between 5 and 30 minutes. Their position is communicated to the customer's smartphone, and they have a number of security and anti-tampering features built in. Another company working in the sector is Kiwi. They claim their robots are 65 per cent faster than standard couriers, and the company runs a fully automated delivery service at the University of California's Berkeley campus. The Kiwi model is based on the pavement drone only completing the final 300 metres of the delivery, after having been dropped off by a semi-autonomous tricycle. The most significant automated delivery pilot scheme, however, is the Amazon 'Scout' drone-delivery scheme, launched in early 2019 in Washington state.[2] The automation of simple food production is similarly being introduced in small environments. 'Flippy', a burger flipping robot, has been in operation in a number of US restaurants since early 2018, and further automation of similar simple fast-food production seems possible. However, none of these technologies has been employed on an industrial scale.

The total vision of Deliveroo indicated by these plans is a radical departure from what we know. Dark kitchens would be established in low-rent locations across a city, within something like a 2-mile radius of each other. Each of these sites, presumably only staffed by human security and

engineers, would act as a production hub for their zone, with a kitchen full of robots churning out large quantities of cheap fast food on demand. A fleet of delivery drones, presumably numbering in the hundreds to cope with peak demand, would operate from the site, rolling out onto the pavement and off towards blocks of flats and basement apartments. The logistical network used by Deliveroo would be centralized and rationalized. From a decentralized mess of restaurants and customers, spread all over the map, would emerge a more regularly organized hub-and-spoke network with dark kitchens operating as distribution centres.

Powering this operation would be one of the largest and most complex databases about food delivery ever compiled. Deliveroo has collected an unprecedented dataset on the way in which we collectively eat, and each of its customers individually eats. Do we order more burgers and milkshakes on a Friday or Saturday evening? Deliveroo know, and they jealously guard this information. The platform 'locks out' restaurants from as much data as possible. In 2018, Deliveroo removed customer names and addresses from the paper receipts printed by restaurants, in order to prevent them understanding or mapping their own customer base. Deliveroo, having gained a monopoly over this data, are looking to use it as a resource to optimize their offering. What volume of food needs to be produced when, what items need to be on what menus at what times, and other business

decisions can all be made with newfound precision. The potential competitive advantage is significant.

The role of the Deliveroo worker would be totally transformed by this automation, of course. Chefs, software engineers, and couriers are all at risk of being tossed onto the scrapheap if Deliveroo's utopia is realized. Many of them would end up becoming trapped in crippling debt, unemployment, and poverty – particularly couriers, laid off without any of the claims to redundancy afforded to employees. A glorious new world of on-demand food delivery awaits us.

But would it really work? There are a number of obvious impediments to this model. First and foremost is a question of investment: would Deliveroo be able to raise the capital to invest in a global network of dark kitchens, complex robots, security staff, mechanics, additional software engineers, and the like before the platform capitalism bubble pops? They've still never turned an annual profit, and if there is a global economic downturn in the interim between this dream entering CEO Will Shu's head and its actual execution, the massive surplus capital investment which makes the Deliveroo model possible might vanish.

Beyond that, there are all kinds of technical questions to be answered. Could a small city like Brighton handle 500+ delivery drones on its pavements? How would these drones interact with human and vehicle traffic on a mass scale? What

would rates of theft be like? How would the government regulate them? Whenever I describe this potential future of automated shopping trollies rolling around our pavements, I always get the same response: won't drunk people just sabotage the whole thing? It's not hard to imagine the many possible ways drunk people could mess with delivery drones: riding on the back of them, trapping them in someone's garden, and throwing them in the sea all figure highly on the list. If human Deliveroo drivers already get harassed working on a Saturday night, it seems likely that Deliveroo drones would be the subject of even more negative attention.

In terms of food production, Deliveroo's menu of automated options might have to be restricted to burgers and chips, with human food preparation being retained for anything more complex. And beyond the small details, it's not at all obvious that Deliveroo has the experience to handle the challenges they would face whilst transitioning from an agile and expansive platform with limited investment in fixed capital to a company committed to owning, maintaining, and securing huge quantities of property and machinery.

Beyond these technical and change-management questions are the political questions of any such transition. When workers with relatively little to lose see their livelihoods being phased out, they can become very militant, very fast. The early industrial revolution saw craft weavers threatened with poverty by the development of mechanized textile mills launch

a mass campaign of machine-breaking. They were named 'Luddites' after the movement's fictional leader, Ned Ludd. Could the phaseout of Deliveroo couriers take place without Luddite-style mass machine-breaking of delivery drones? In San Francisco, Starship drones have already been roughed up by pedestrians, and that's without hundreds of angry, unemployed ex-Deliveroo workers sitting around with nothing to do.[3] Platform capitalism is already flammable – the issue of automation might prompt an inferno.

All considered, the barriers to the development of Deliveroo into a profitable and highly automated drone-based delivery company are significant. Whatever the future of the company is going to be, it is not going to be what the bosses think it is.

Progressive Futurism

For those who see this future of mass unemployment of food delivery drivers as potentially a bad thing, Tim O'Reilly, Silicon Valley venture capitalist and CEO, has a solution. O'Reilly is a progressive liberal, who acknowledges that the latest stage of capitalism is getting out of hand. Workers aren't being treated right, and the rich are getting too rich. He wants to 'play the game of business as if people matter'.[4] To work out how to do that, O'Reilly variously cites Jonathan Hall (an economist at Uber), Professor Andrei Haigu (in the Harvard Business Review), Simon Rothmans (venture capitalist), Tom Perez (secretary of labor under Obama), Steven Hill (of the Google-

backed New America think tank), and Jose Alvarez (ex-CEO). His positive examples of social change are those luminaries of human emancipation, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk.[5] His argument represents, in short, the ideas of the bleeding-heart ruling class.

His analysis of working conditions at a global platform like Uber begins with a very specific element of US employment law: that when employees work for over 30 hours a week, employers have a responsibility to pay a full-time benefits package. As a result, companies like Walmart and McDonald's maintain huge workforces on 29-hour-a-week schedules, with rotas organized via automated scheduling processes. This intentionally leaves employees in an unprotected grey area. The obvious solution to this, of course, is that every employer – be they outsourcing company or multinational giant – has to pay a full array of benefits to every worker, regardless of hours worked. In the US context, an even more obvious development would be for access to healthcare to be guaranteed – free at the point of use to everyone through a national health service. Then, there would be no need for workers to be slavishly reliant on an employer in order to get access to healthcare.

But no, O'Reilly has a different idea. His reform agenda begins from the idea that the solution to this benefits problem is to make all companies more like platforms. His argument goes as follows: Uber workers can work as many hours as they want.

Therefore, they are better off than Walmart workers trapped on 29 hours a week. So, working for Uber is better than working for Walmart – and so all employment should be reorganized along platform lines. Of course, Uber doesn't pay a comprehensive benefits package at all, and its workers have no guaranteed minimum rate of pay that means they will earn more than the Walmart worker after costs – but this escapes his analysis.

O'Reilly's initial premise is that, at the moment, capitalism operates as if its human workers are disposable things. He identifies that our social system is based only on the maximization of profit, rather than what's best for the majority of the population. To his credit, he does think this is a problem. But, despite starting from this recognition, his blundering argument fails to reach the most obvious conclusions. He can't see that the exploitation of labour is hardwired into the basic logic of capitalism, or that technological development under this is dictated by the interests of a tiny class dictatorship of billionaires. He won't admit that the entire 'game of business' is based on the domination of one class by another, and needs to be dumped unceremoniously into the dustbin of history, alongside feudalism, slavery, and all the other relics of a darker past. He knows that workers' lives are being 'crushed in the machine' – but refuses to go any further than shrugging his shoulders when asked what the machine is, how it works, and how we

smash it. All that is clear is that he thinks that making the lives of Walmart workers more like the lives of Uber workers will help. But exploitation is no historical hiccup that we can reform our way around – it's the basic condition of capitalist society. Austerity in the UK alone has led to 120,000 excess deaths since 2010.[6] In the context of a class war from above as vacuous as this, politics becomes polarized. O'Reilly, it seems, has picked a side – and it's not ours.

Progressive liberalism has no answers to the problems posed by the exploitation of labour under platform capitalism – because it has never had an answer to capitalism at all. There are no new ideas here, apart from a desperate plea to everyone to be nice to each other. O'Reilly's critique of socialism is that a total top-to-bottom transformation of the social relations of capitalism inevitably leads to disaster. No, instead, he argues, we have to go with the system we have, and try to modify it to make it nicer. The way to avoid disaster is to double down on a commitment to a social system that is currently a few decades of fossil-fuel emissions away from ending the possibility of human life on earth. That is how we can make everything better. It's hardly a convincing argument.

It is obvious that workers cannot rely on venture capitalists and charitable billionaires to solve the crises we face. Our answer has to be based in something more than progressive futurist hand-waving. The working class has to free itself through its own struggle.

Platform Cooperativism or Workers' Control?

Food platforms are locked in a cut-throat battle for supremacy. Deliveroo, UberEats, Foodora, JustEat, Glovo, Wolt, Caviar – the list is endless. In Amsterdam alone, there have been periods in the past two years when seven different food-delivery services have been operating at once. Each platform wants to win as much market share as possible, and is willing to provide services at a serious loss if it increases their market share and starves out competitors. All of these firms rely on vast sums of venture capital, which allow them to absorb big losses in pursuit of dominance.

It is in this context that some reformers like Trebor Scholz, to the left of the progressive liberalism of Tim O'Reilly, have begun to focus in on the idea of platform cooperatives. A simplified version of the idea is as follows: there is a large pool of dissatisfied workers and conscientious customers connected via these platforms. By connecting these workers (both couriers and software engineers) with these customers via a new cooperative platform structure, the dominance of existing private platforms could be challenged. These competing cooperatives could offer better working conditions and offer workers and consumers a greater degree of control. Because workers already provide the means of subsistence for the existing private platforms, the app is the only fixed capital

required to get a co-op going. Entering the food-platform market as a cooperative is comparatively easy compared to other sectors, given the lower start-up costs and the lightweight business model. Sometimes, co-op enthusiasts overestimate the ease of developing a Deliveroo-esque app, but the basic argument holds water. The problems of platform cooperativism are not in this sequence of conclusions, but rather in the actual details of what happens once a cooperative has entered the market.

If a successful large-scale cooperative food-delivery platform was established, it would immediately become the focus of an onslaught by the dominant capitalist platforms. This would likely consist of a two-pronged attack: first, a massive investment in lobbying and misinformation to undermine popular support for the cooperative; and, second, an aggressive competition strategy offering higher wages to lure away workers, and lower prices to lure away customers. The dominant private platforms, enabled by venture capital, already run at a significant loss in many of their locations in an effort to undermine competitors. Given that a co-op could not call on similar cash reserves, it's hard to see how it could compete. The results of this twofold pressure might well produce effects that undermine the whole purpose of a cooperative. In order to try to protect the market share of their cooperative, workers would likely accept lower wages, and so get locked into an intractable race to the bottom they

were supposed to have escaped. Self-exploitation, not much different from the effects of a piece wage, would be the condition of viability. So, this is the first sticking point of platform cooperativism: on an economic level, it takes no account of competitive pressure. Given that food platforms are already running each other into the ground to dominate a market with no clear profit margins, the opportunities for the development of large co-op competitors seem limited.[7]

One strategy with extensive historical precedent that might be used to prevent a platform co-op going under in the face of a venture capital-funded onslaught would be an equally aggressive strategy of state intervention. This intervention would have to find a mechanism to prevent the existing dominant platforms from undermining co-ops. It's likely that the only way to do so would be to restrict the vast resources of the dominant platforms via licensing, regulation, or some other measure, in order to create space in the market for self-managed platform cooperatives to grow.

Given this, one might well ask whether cooperatives made possible by state-level action and the regulation of platforms would really only consist of a poor version of a more expansive politics of workers' control. If the political will exists to restrict the operation of large platforms, why not also progressively undermine the private ownership of their assets and develop democratic mechanisms for their control from below? Rather than platform cooperativism combined with technocratic state

restriction of competition, we could imagine a more ambitious alternative: platform expropriation under workers' control.

Platform expropriation would consist of workers taking ownership of the private resources of food platforms – such as their data centres, dark kitchens, and customer base. This would be a mild form of reparation for all the profit made by Will Shu, Dan Warne, and others off the back of exploited workers. This expropriated capital would then be placed under workers' control via a system of democratic self-management participated in by all workers, from office cleaners to software engineers, call centre staff, app watchers, and delivery riders.

The resulting food platform, a people's Deliveroo, would not be run in the interests of bosses and their profits. Instead, its end goal would be to provide a socially useful service. Workers' control would likely lead to an internal revolution in the way that this service is provided, and the platform operates. The abolition of piece wages, and the transparent redesign of the app from a black-box algorithmic manager to a democratically controlled algorithmic planner, both seem like obvious first steps. However, to really grasp the potential of this radical programme of transformation, the platform needs to be understood from the perspective of both the worker in the platform and the worker that uses the platform. The Lucas plan is an often-cited example of how workers can come up with ideas for the redevelopment of their industries to produce for social need under workers' control. Lucas

Aerospace workers created the plan in the 1970s in an attempt to stave off layoffs. They proposed a series of socially useful technologies which the company could produce, in the place of the existing technology made by the firm.[8]

What might the Deliveroo/UberEats plan look like? The context for such a development could be an expanding provision of universal basic services (UBS). The UBS idea recently gained prominence via a 2017 UCL Institute for Global Prosperity report.[9] The report argued for the introduction of a range of services, free at the point of access, covering healthcare, education, democracy and legal services, shelter, transport, information, and food. One of the options envisioned in the discussion of a universal basic food service was a 'full community food programme'. This programme is described by the authors as follows:

> A community service with completely open access for all … This option embodies the kind of social institutional fabric that would support and develop a truly cohesive society in which UBS provide shared experiences and communal environments…. A community food program would necessarily be locally designed and delivered and would include many varieties of food service in every locality, from public canteens to food boxes for in-home preparation. Different options would cater for different dietary preferences (e.g. vegetarian) and different modalities (e.g. take away or eat in).

Some communities might offer more options and others less, all of which would be decided by, and managed by, an accountable local democracy. This option would have a total cost of around £21.2Bn, with values to households ranging from £45/week in the lowest deciles to £1.63/week in the highest deciles. Our cursory distributional analysis assumes lower take up rates in higher deciles, with 5% of those in the highest decile only using the service for 0.5 meals/week, while those in the lowest deciles would use 14 meals/week.[10]

An on-demand delivery platform under workers' control is an obvious candidate for part of the 'social institutional fabric' that this kind of programme would rely upon. A certain number of deliveries a week could be offered as part of the state pension, as part of maternity and paternity leave, as part of disability support allowance, and on NHS prescription for outpatients. A platform-based worker-run 'meals on wheels' service could begin to provide for the needs of an ageing population and expand the support available to those with additional temporary or permanent care needs. Additional on-demand delivery functions could be connected to a renationalized Royal Mail, with couriers providing another final-stage logistical option.

Dark kitchen sites could be turned into community food infrastructure in line with the wider UBS vision. Collective kitchens could be run by the community and provide a

multitude of social goods. They could use their procurement power to support the development of workers' control in agriculture. A high-wage apprentice system could provide food preparation skills to young people, and excess menial labour could be strategically reduced through the use of technology. These sites could be expanded from just delivery kitchens to fulfil the functions of restaurants and pubs, developing community cohesion through infrastructure that is redesigned for human need and not for profit. In some cases, they could be relocated closer to existing community hubs via the expropriation of under-used or empty commercial property. Community provision of food has always been an integral part of how human beings look after each other – this new vision would only be an extension of that fundamental solidarity through modern technological means.

The possibilities of a People's Deliveroo are limited only by our capacity to image a better society. Marx famously refused to write cookbooks for the chefs of the future, by which he meant he wouldn't predict the exact form in which socialism would emerge in advance. But perhaps it's possible to speculate about how those future cooks will get their food from kitchen to table.

The Question of Power

Speculations about platform expropriation under workers' control remain completely utopian if they do not deal with the

question of power. The ruling class have no interest in allowing workers to own and run the organizations they work for. That kind of reorganization of society from the bottom up will only be possible if the working class overturn the dominance of their bosses through class struggle. To understand the depth of the challenges which spiral out from that kind of confrontation, we have to address the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

Though the mainstream opinion is that capitalism and democracy have always gone hand in hand, the reality is more uncomfortable. Liberalism (understood as the political ideology of the capitalist ruling class) has had to mediate between these two potentially contradictory systems for centuries. Historian Ishay Landa argues that early liberals were fundamentally opposed to democracy. Thinkers like Locke and Burke were committed to the first principle of capitalism, private property, not the first principle of democracy: all the power to all the people.[11] Liberals only grudgingly accepted giving ordinary people the right to vote when the socialist movement forced their hand.[12] Democracy would be tolerated – however, this tolerance had a limit. This limit was private property. Democratic control of 'politics' was fine (that wasn't where the power was, anyway). But democratic control of the economy was beyond the pale.

Landa proposes that, whenever this limit has been challenged, liberalism has historically undergone a split: liberals who

prioritize its political commitments to democracy have tended to side with forces on the left, whereas the (majority of) liberals who prioritize private property and capitalism have had to look for other allies against the working class. Historically, these allies have been fascists. The sensible support of sensible members of the ruling class for the 'unfortunately necessary'[13] dictatorial regimes which prevent workers taking control of the economy itself – be they headed by Mussolini, Pinochet, or Bolsanaro – is the result of the contradictory limits of capitalist democracy and the failures of its ruling political ideology, liberalism.

So, the political stakes underlying the proposals of expropriation under workers' control should not be underestimated. Breaking the grip of the ruling class on the means of production is not a problem that can be skipped around with smart policy and branding. If workers get their hands on the levers of society and begin to challenge the fundamental basis of the mode of production, a desperate fight ensues between extreme reactionaries and the forces of social transformation. Examples of what this struggle looks like are scattered across the last century: Spain 1936, Chile 1973, Greece 2015, and many more besides. A people's Deliveroo might sound like common sense, but to achieve it alongside the more general transition to a socialist society, the workers' movement would have to be able to defeat the ruling class and its allies by exerting more power than them. It's not

enough to have a majority in parliament, because, in the final instance, the ruling class don't care about democracy – they care about ruling. The future of platforms will be determined by the balance of power between classes.

Notes

13.   [1.] S. Panja (2018) Deliveroo plans to make its own food and replace chefs and riders with robots. Eater. https://london.eater.com/2018/3/29/17175482/deliveroo-future-plans-robots-profits-investors.

14.   [2.] S. Scott (2019) Meet Scout. Amazon. https://blog.aboutamazon.com/transportation/meet-scout.

15.   [3.] L. A. Hamilton (2018) People kicking these food delivery robots is an early insight into how cruel humans could be to robots. SFGate. www.sfgate.com/technology/businessinsider/article/People-kicking-these-food-delivery-robots-is-an-12980712.php.

16.   [4.] T. O'Reilly (2017) WTF: what's the future and why it's up to us. Harper Collins, p. 273.

17.   [5.] O'Reilly, WTF, p. 302.

18.   [6.] J. Watkins, W. Wulaningsih, C. Da Zhou, et al. (2017) Effects of health and social care spending