

The state in the platform economy: a typology of alternative governmentalities

Victo Silva¹

Abstract

The rapid growth of digital platforms has significantly impacted various sectors, prompting calls for stricter regulations and alternative models, such as state-led platformization. However, models of state involvement in the platform economy are still seen through a national lens. Based on the law and political economy literature, our typology highlights structural/light intervention and democratic vs. technocratic mandates. Finally, we discuss four proposals that exemplify each ideal type: platform socialism, platform developmentalism, government-as-a-platform, and social market platform economy. We have thus kickstarted the systematic discussion of alternative pathways based on distinct “value mixes” to inform digital platform policy.

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Introduction

In March 2022, Rio de Janeiro City Hall launched an app in the Apple and Google app stores called "Valeu". Developed by the *Empresa Municipal de Informática do Rio* (IPLANRIO), the app is an on-demand delivery platform that connects restaurants, customers and motorcycle couriers. It proposed to exempt restaurants from charging fees on orders up to 100 R\$ and to increase the percentage received by couriers by 27% compared to the market average. In the words of the then Secretary of Finance and Planning, they were seeking to act "on market failures such as excessive intermediation fees"², without referring directly to the private delivery platforms (iFood, Rappi, Uber Eats). A councilor filed a lawsuit asking for the app to be suspended, accusing the City Hall/IPLANRIO of misusing the state. In three instances IPLANRIO was defeated in its appeals and by the end of 2022, the app was suspended. The court concluded that the delivery app was a government intervention in the market, only justified in exceptional cases (*e.g.*, national sovereignty or relevant public interest). In addition, the court stated that this initiative should have been provided for by law, not by decree (PJRJ, 2022). This vignette exemplifies the ongoing legal battle to demarcate the boundaries of state participation in the platform economy (Cohen, 2019, p. 4).

The growth and consolidation of digital platforms (*e.g.*, Uber, iFood, AirBnb, TikTok) are considered one of the most critical socio-economic developments of the last decade (J. Cohen, 2019; Cusumano et al., 2019; Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Van Dijck et al., 2018). In contrast to organizations that articulate value production in a pipeline, digital platforms are orchestrators of interactions and flows of goods, services, and information between one or more groups (Parker et al., 2016). Virtual intermediaries of this sort are familiar, as electronic marketplaces have facilitated exchanges and expanded markets since the 2000s (Rossignoli et al., 2009). However, the ubiquity of digital connectivity, the abundance of data, the pervasive algorithmic governance, and the multiple functions of the spaces controlled by the platform owners have turbocharged the platformization of several sectors beyond commerce, including public and highly regulated sectors, such as health and education (Kerssens & Dijck, 2021; Kerssens & van Dijck, 2023; Ozalp et al., 2022).

As platforms gain traction, calls for the involvement of the State in the platform economy have been put forward. Muldoon (2022) advocates for socially owned platforms, in which both the state and part of civil society would own and govern platforms. Van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that the state should develop and operationalize digital platforms in sectors where public values are at stake. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mazzucato & Kattel (2020) argue that the state's capacity to govern data and digital platforms is central to democratizing the platform economy. Srnicek (2017) defends the nationalization of platform companies that control and provide infrastructural platform services. While these authors from different fields and disciplines argue in favor of greater state participation, others argue that the state already plays a role in the platform economy's current governmentality.

The "law and political economy" (LPE) school stresses that current neoliberal deregulation is also a way of regulating and ordering the state's participation in the (platform) economy. Under this influence, legal institutions and the state take on specific forms and functions, informed by an ideological framework that Julie Cohen calls the "neoliberal governmentality". Such a framework elevates private ordering to a fundamental principle, and the regulatory state is infused with principles of competitiveness, efficiency, private innovation, and utilitarian methods for assessing costs and benefits (Cohen, 2019, p. 173). Also under this framework, administrative law has curtailed the capacity and possibility of state participation in the economy; we witness the transition to the regulatory state, and even its regulatory functions are co-opted by the private sector; the space for

²<https://prefeitura.rio/fazenda/prefeitura-lanca-aplicativo-de-delivery-que-preve-taxa-zero-para-restaurantes-e-o-dobro-da-remuneracao-para-entregadores/>

industrial policy shrinks and there is a devolution of decision-making power and agency to private agents (Britton-Purdy et al., 2020; Cohen, 2019).

Although the critique of state participation that generates the so-called neoliberal governmentality of the platform economy is a major contribution, there are still no similar advances regarding alternative proposals to this scenario. The few existing studies adopt a national analytical lens. Bradford (2023) compares regulatory models in the US (market-driven), the EU (rights-driven) and China (state-driven). However, her focus is on the geopolitical competition between these models at the international level, not on law and political economy. Cohen (2019) also outlines competing "regimes" or "models", but uses the same national analytical lens to distill differences between the United States, Europe, and China. The USA and China are generally presented as models of platform economies that are not only different but also antagonistic. The Chinese platform economy is broadly described as an instance of the Chinese economy: a sector with high state participation and control (McKnight et al., 2023). In contrast, the US platform economy has been painted as an unregulated sector, driven by free market forces. Despite the regulatory differences, both the Chinese and American platform economies have state involvement and are classified as "state platform capitalism" (Rolf & Schindler, 2023). By adopting the national analytical lens, these authors miss the chance to highlight the nuances present in each country and each piece of regulation; in their accounts of alternative governmentalities to the neoliberal model, national characteristics take center stage, rather than ideological principles and political priorities.

We departed from the LPE school's insights to move towards a positive agenda of alternatives. We argue that any discussion of the active role of the state in shaping the platform economy must consider two critical dimensions. First, it should define the boundary between the public and the private in the platform economy, *i.e.*, what type of state intervention is being advocated? Griffin's (Griffin, n.d.) discussion about two schools of thought on platform regulation (*i.e.*, multistakeholderism and rule-of-law), finds non-intervention in market structures as a common point between the two. As we will see, some proposals envisage light whereas others envisage structural interventions in platform markets. Second, alternative governmentalities should clarify the spaces for popular participation regarding State interventions in the platform economy, *i.e.*, what is the ideal type of democratic control over state interventions in the platform economy? Kapczynski and Michaels (2024) point out that industrial policy is traditionally based on the expertise of small groups within the state bureaucracy, and that this concentration of decision-making power, shielded from popular participation, negatively affects the prospects for democracy. As we will see in the next sections, some proposals emphasize popular participation, while others see it as a dispensable accessory at best.

By plotting the two dimensions discussed and their variants on a one-dimensional plane, we obtain four different quadrants that inform a typology. These different configurations are the basis for a new normative typology of alternatives for state participation in the platform economy. Typology, as a methodological approach, plays a crucial role in various fields of research. It involves the classification of entities based on shared characteristics or attributes. It is defined as "grouping cases or participants into different types on the basis of their common features, with consideration of how each unique individual represents a particular pattern of features" (Stapley et al., 2022, p. 2). In our typology, the cases are alternative governmentalities. Each of them is our interpretation, our synthesis of the contributions of various authors on the subject. They are distinguished by the fact that they approach the aspects of state intervention and popular participation in these interventions in different ways. Our study of the literature operated dynamically, *i.e.*, we delimited the two axes and four quadrants of our typology and the cases that exemplify each of the quadrants in parallel. We, therefore, emphasize that the alternative governmentalities that illustrate our typology, are the best-formulated alternative proposals we have found but are not coterminous with the typology itself.

We found four alternative governmentalities for the platform economy: platform socialism, platform developmentalism, social market platform economy, and government as a platform. In some cases

(e.g., platform socialism) the authors explicitly discuss the political principles that should guide the state's actions in the platform economy. In other cases (e.g., government-as-a-platform), the authors rarely discuss these issues openly, but their proposals are implicitly built on certain visions of what the role of the state should be in this new economy. Each proposal highlights principles and extends pre-existing ideologies to the context of platformization. They differ in scope and in the number of related empirical examples. Most importantly, they markedly differ in the dimensions we are most interested in: the scope of state intervention in platform markets and the type of popular participation envisaged. We discuss each of the four proposals and highlight their risks and shortcomings. Finally, we offer some suggestions for the further development of this topic.

This article contributes to kickstarting a positive agenda of alternative governmentalities for the platform economy. We clarify which principles should be on the table when discussing the legal institutions of the platform economy: the principles of state intervention and popular participation in intervention policies. We then present four proposals for alternative governmentalities based on references that are more or less scattered in the literature. In common, they all depart (to varying degrees) from neoliberal governmentality, assigning more active roles to the state in the platform economy. However, each one advances in a specific way on the principles initially discussed. We have therefore contributed to clarifying the concrete ideological/political options for redirecting the platform economy away from neoliberal governmentality towards legal and economic scenarios in which the state and civil society play a more prominent role.

Related literature

Platforms: definitions and roles within the neoliberal governmentality

Before discussing the State's role in the platform economy, it is necessary to define *digital platforms*. Platforms are the paradigmatic organizational form of informational capitalism (Cohen, 2019); in a sense, they substitute markets, intermediating through their technical protocols and institutional rules the interactions between socio-economic actors (Cohen, 2019; Viljoen, 2023). From this perspective, *platform owners are norm-creating actors who compete with state sovereignty in specific legal systems* (Ranchordás & Goanta, 2020).

The asymmetry of power between platform companies and their users favors the implementation of the agenda of the controllers of these platforms, who use "their funds to exert influence over regulators and grant unelected elites increased political control" (Scholz, 2023, p. 27). Platforms have achieved this power and this ability to mobilize data from their users to generate value through four strategies: performative enclosures, productive appropriation, intermediary immunities and the power of interdiction (Cohen, 2019; Cohen, 2017). Performative enclosures are discursive strategies to declare rights over users of a closed platform system. Productive appropriation is the institutional strategy of enforcing unilaterally defined terms and conditions on users, so that data and algorithms are exclusively *de facto* (although not *de jure*) appropriated by the platforms. Intermediary immunity is the strategy of manipulating the meaning of free speech to equalize it to the control of platform networks. By associating platform control with censorship, platform controllers ensure that public opinion speaks out against stricter regulations on their business. Finally, the power of interdiction concerns the platforms' self-appointed place as resolvers of disputes internal to their digital "fiefdom". Together, these discursive and institutional strategies elevated platforms to one of the actors that most promoted neoliberal governmentality in the platform economy: the erosion of public decision-making spaces and the emergence and consolidation of the power to create and order networks in the hands of private actors.

The effects of neoliberal governmentality and platform companies' asymmetric power over their users and complementors (e.g., app developers or social media creators) can entail labor precarity and loss of autonomy regarding business models and service standards (Poell et al., 2022). Given that they often assume an infrastructural position, platform companies became censors of global cultural production (Poell et al., 2022) and leveraged infrastructural advantages without bearing the

corresponding responsibilities (Krisch, 2022). In general, they are overtaking nation-states by ruling private fiefdoms where the rule is privately defined and justice is privately delivered (Lehdonvirta, 2022). Since platform companies control the data of their users and complementors, they can collect and analyze data in real time, which puts them in a position to quantify social issues more accurately than the state (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Thus, their growth is “weakening states in their regalian domain” (Glasze et al., 2023, p. 949).

The unbridled power of platform companies led to a reaction, *i.e.*, a countermovement (Cohen, 2019), through regulation (Di Porto & Zuppetta, 2020; Gilbert, 2021; Montero & Finger, 2019; Nooren et al., 2018; Rieder & Hofmann, 2020). The current analysis points to a U-turn in European regulation of the digital space from a market-liberal stance towards a public-interventionist one (Heidebrecht, 2024). However, some critics point to strategies by Big Tech platform companies to stall (Mazur & Serafin, 2023) or even benefit from regulation (Geradin & Katsifis, 2020) through regulatory arbitration (Lobel, 2016). On top of that, the regulatory state itself has been contaminated by the ideology of neoliberal governability, in which there is, in practice, the devolution of regulatory power to private agents (Cohen, 2019).

Countervailing measures then should go beyond regulation (Sharon & Gellert, 2023) into the shores of “more assertive industrial policy” where “law is code” (Renda, 2021). In other terms, this means not attempting to regulate the platform as a company regime, but to move towards other platform regimes. Amongst the calls for different platform regimes³ capable of overcoming the dominant paradigm of platform-as-a-company (Woods et al., 2023), state-led platformization stands out as a promising, but less discussed alternative. To discuss the state's more active participation in the platform economy, it is necessary to discuss which principles animate the institutions that support this new state.

Law and political economy: gearing towards alternative governmentalities

There are two central dimensions to theorizing about the role of the state in the platform economy. Both are discussed in the LPE literature, but generally in a disjointed way. The first dimension concerns the boundaries of state intervention in platform markets (Griffin, 2023). Among the possible roles of the state in the platform economy, we must distinguish between facilitating and structural roles. Ferrari (2023) identifies the role of facilitators in which the state seeks to foster the growth of the digital market and domestic platforms through indirect channels, such as tax incentives and favorable legislation. Although the author tries to distinguish the role of the facilitating state from the role of the regulating state, both roles assume a clear boundary based on the free market economy (Spence, 2021): the state corrects excesses (market failures) via regulation and offers incentives via facilitation, but does not cross the line into offering platform services via alternative platformization models. A similar position to that of the regulator and facilitator role of the state is taken by Andreoni and Roberts (2022) who advocate an active entrepreneurial-regulator state, balancing platform industrial policy (to facilitate domestic platforms) with competition policy (to regulate foreign platforms) updated for the platform era. This industrial policy should not be bound by the dogmatism of competition as a non-negotiable value and recognizes that in certain cases little or no competition may be the best overall solution. Giving up competition, however, does not mean offering alternative (non-commercial) or state-owned platform services. Andreoni and Roberts (2022) give up the free market, but not the market.

The position of the studies reported above is that the role of the state in the platform economy should not cross a certain dividing line between public and private: that of structural intervention in the market. To differentiate between light and structural interventions, we consider that *structural intervention seeks to shape the markets following objectives set by the state through means such as providing non-commercial and collective models of digital platforms* (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020, p.

³ There are advocates for platform cooperatives (Schneider, 2018; Scholz, 2023), open-source platforms (FLOSS-based) (Mello Rose, 2021) and sharing economy platforms (Frenken & Schor, 2017). Their challenges in terms of scaling up and other managerial and financial limitations have been thoroughly mapped (Bunders et al., 2022; Wegner et al., 2023).

100). Why aren't state-owned platforms discussed in platform economy's regulatory policy and scholar circles? In the pre-digital economy, state-owned enterprises have become commonplace in any state, from neoliberal capitalism to Chinese market socialism (Musacchio et al., 2015). Recently scholars began to propose that a specific set of key digital platforms, *i.e.*, digital identities, and financial transactions, should be offered by the state (Hanna, 2018) and examples such as the one of Rio de Janeiro City Hall's delivery platform are starting to multiply.

The second dimension concerns the democratic control of state policies for the platform economy. Should the state conduct these policies following experts' decisions or should democratic control via broad popular participation be an objective (Kapczynski and Michel, 2024)? State intervention in the platform economy is a specific type of industrial policy (Foster & Azmeh, 2020; Gruber, 2019). A broad definition of industrial policy is "any type of selective intervention or government policy that attempts to alter the structure of production toward sectors that are expected to offer better prospects for economic growth than would occur in the absence of such intervention" (Pack & Saggi, 2006) Historical record shows that industrial policies also aim at fostering/protecting sectors "where leadership might have geopolitical, security, and military implications" (Terzi et al., 2023, p. 843).

In this sense, the recent literature on law and political economy recognizes (i) the importance of industrial policies to structure markets in order to achieve the greatest social benefit and (ii) the need to base these policies on up-to-date administrative law in which society has an active voice. As much as regulatory agencies and ministries follow technical criteria to guide their industrial policies (among others), every policy has a moral, political judgment at its core. The absence of social participation in the sphere of administrative law that disciplines policies such as industrial policy gave birth to the 'insulated administrative state' and led to a record negative evaluation of government policies in the USA (Barczewski, 2021, p. 427).

For this reason, the criticism of modern LPE falls precisely on 'ivory tower' administrative law. There are tools that can be put into practice to bring administrative law - and the policies that derive from its framework - closer to society. The principle behind these tools is that, within the public administration, spaces and resources must be created for the effective participation of disadvantaged sectors of society. This approach tackles one of the criticisms leveled at multistakeholderism, which is that it is merely open to the participation of different segments, but without recognizing and mitigating their different capacities. Among the tools are "mobilization beacheads", which seek to create spaces for the mobilization of disadvantaged groups; "operational empowerment", which appoints members of civil society to administrative positions, legitimizing their participation; and "enforcement empowerment", which signals to civil society that its permanent engagement in the evaluation of industrial policies is assured (Kapczynski and Michel, 2024).

A typology of alternative governmentalities for the platform economy

In this section, we present four alternative governmentalities for the platform economy. Each one is an ideal type, which exemplifies one of the four possible combinations of the proposed typology (**figure 1**). We define each alternative, its theoretical basis, and practical examples and comment on its shortcomings and risks.

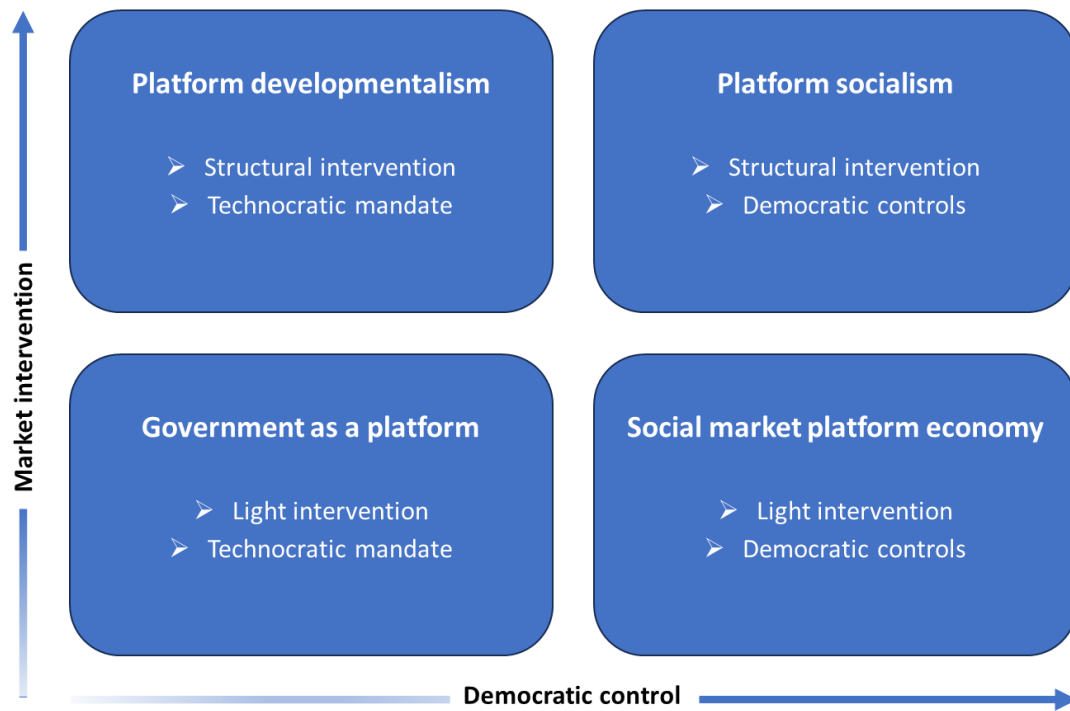


Figure 1. Typology of alternative governmentalities for the platform economy according to the type of market intervention (vertical axis) and type of control (horizontal axis).

Social market platform economy

We can define the social market platform economy (SMPE) as a socioeconomic regime based on social policies and regulatory frameworks aimed at balancing free-market platform-based principles with societal welfare. SMPE is an example of a governmentality that prioritizes light interventions and democratic controls. Similar to the traditional social market economy, the SMPE emphasizes the importance of combining entrepreneurial freedom and innovation with measures to mitigate inequalities, and uphold ethical standards and “shared norms and values” (van Dijck et al, 2018, p. 22, 161-2). This model seeks to establish a balance between the interests of platform businesses, users, workers, and society at large, fostering sustainable economic growth while addressing social concerns and maintaining a level playing field for all participants (Van Dijck, 2020). It is characterized by a proactive approach to regulation, collaborative governance mechanisms, and integrating social values into the design and operation of digital platforms, thereby striving to achieve both economic prosperity and social well-being in the digital age.

In general, social market economies balance economic interests with social welfare; strictly speaking, they are characterized by three main features in terms of their ends: publicly funded welfare systems, standardization of employment conditions, and collective bargaining of wages (Rueda & Pontusson, 2000). In terms of means, social market economies rely on a democratic but strong state that will provide regulation and “enforce” collaborative governance to guarantee free markets and societal welfare (Bonfeld, 2012). In the context of the European Union, the social market economy, also known as the *Rhineland model* (van Dijck, 2020) is positioned against 'Anglo-Saxon' free-market capitalism. It represents a middle ground that advocates for a balance between economic freedom and social welfare, aiming to create a system that benefits all members of society (Claassen et al., 2018).

The ambition to accommodate all members of society - including platform owners - in the platform’s governing arrangements is encapsulated by multistakeholderism (Cammaerts & Mansell, 2020; Helberger et al., 2018; Ranchordás & Goanta, 2020; Van Dijck, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2018). To protect public

values and interests, multistakeholder organizations⁴ would include platform owners and representatives of the state and civil society. The mission of these organizations is to guarantee the best possible arrangement in terms of competing values, being preferred over direct state regulation or self-regulation by platform companies (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020, p. 144). This approach is inspired by the European Rhineland model, also known as social market economy, in which market, state and civil society have their power balanced by multistakeholder organizations (van Dijck, 2020, p. 3).

When two or more values come into conflict, *e.g.*, maximizing economic value and one of the fundamental human rights (Belli & Zingales, 2020), the state, as the traditional custodian of public values (van Dijck et al, 2018) must resort to new means⁵ of intervening in the platform economy (Helberger et al, 2018; Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020). These values are not only notionally contradictory; on many occasions, *platform values* (Belli and Zingales, 2020; Ranchordas and Goanta, 2020) such as efficiency, effectiveness, and punctuality have ruled over public values such as quality and affordability of services (Ranchordas and Goanta, 2020). Several authors have documented public values being threatened by the predominance of platform values and state that, despite the variability of the public value substance, stakeholders (users, workers, and society at large) are entitled to participate in the governance of digital platforms that affect their lives.

In practice, these multistakeholder arrangements can take the form of contractual systems that are negotiated between all the parties, as in the case of smart-cities platforms and municipal authorities (Ranchordas and Goanta, 2020). Helberger et al (2018) list four steps to distribute cooperative responsibility among the main stakeholders: define the public values at stake in a particular setting/platform market; acceptance by each stakeholder that they have a co-responsibility to address those public values; set up a multistakeholder process of public deliberation to co-construct the solutions; finally, institutionalize the solution (in laws, regulations or standards).

Turning to the elusive public values reveals the underlying principles of the social market economy approach of the platforms. It is recognized that public values are in conflict with platform values, but fundamental questions about platform governance that give rise to conflicts remain unresolved (Griffin, 2023). If we look at the list of public values at risk, we can also see that there is a preponderance of the values of freedom and equality before the law, which are part of the apolitical way of law-making criticized by LPE researchers (Britton-Purdy et al, 2020): state intervention merely accommodates a market economy by mitigating its most harmful effects, correcting market failures.

In the platform economy the power of market actors overshadows the power of other stakeholders given its global scale and transnational headquarters (USA and China). In light of that, scholars have asked: “Can public values be forced upon the [platform] ecosystem’s architecture, when this ecosystem is dominated by United States (US)-based platforms?” (Mansell, 2021, p. 141). Answering Mansell’s question, Griffin (2023) states that the European Union is well-equipped to regulate companies, even those with international headquarters. Therefore, the problem lies not in the international origin of platform companies, but in how little multistakeholderism (and consequently SMPE) believes in state intervention as a solution. Multistakeholderists believe that state support for more robust civil society participation, *i.e.*, facilitating private accountability, is enough to change the course of the platform economy. They cling to the traditional structures of accountability and leave aside considerations of market structure and platform ownership (Griffin, 2023). Under this approach, the state’s role is limited to curbing the platform’s undesired market failures and facilitating domestic

⁴ “independent cooperations that develop decentralized yet interoperable systems which put public values at the center of their design” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 161)

⁵ “It is by enabling and shaping substantive public deliberations by crucial stakeholders on how to balance different public values in the management of contentious content that governments can and have to play a crucial democratic role”, (Helberger et al, 2018, p. 8).

platform companies' innovation (Ferrari, 2023), *i.e.*, light interventions. Structural interventions such as the demarketization of platforms through public ownership bypassed multistakeholderism so far.

SMPE seeks to transplant the tradition of consensus politics in the core of social market economies to the platform economy so that the commercial platform values wouldn't be the only vector guiding the platformization of society. In this sense, democratic control is crucial and is at the heart of this governmentality. However, given their preference for light state intervention, how multistakeholder platform organizations would come to fruition beyond general steps (Helberger et al, 2018) is unclear⁶. Openness to participation does not put different social segments on an equal footing since multinationals have far greater resources than civil society organizations to actively participate in governance, leading to innocuous participation (Cohen, 2019), constituting a "talking shop" with a limited capacity to define policy agendas (Powell, 2013). Likewise, the second step of Helberger et al's (2018) construction of shared responsibilities, in which resourceful transnational private entities "accept" this responsibility (public values), seems to theorize in an apolitical world, where actors cede space over their interests (platform values) without resistance and the distribution of power among social actors is just a second thought.

Platform socialism

In line with digital socialism (Fuchs, 2020; Huws, 2020; Morozov, 2019) scholars have been arguing for platform socialism, "the organization of the digital economy through the social ownership of digital assets and democratic control over the infrastructure and systems that govern our digital lives" (Muldoon, 2022, p. 3). These proponents argue that the problems created by commercial platform companies have a first tier related to public values such as "privacy, data and size" and a second tier related to "power, ownership, and control" (Muldoon, 2022).

As far as the first tier is concerned, a group of intellectuals from the North is said to have looked into these problems and drawn up "a liberal/progressive critique of Big Tech and a corresponding set of capitalist reforms" (Kwet, 2022, p. 69) divided into a "legal branch which focuses on anti-trust as its centerpiece to reform digital capitalism and a human rights branch which focuses on discrimination, privacy, content moderation and workers' welfare" (Kwet, 2022, p. 70). Although proponents of platform socialism acknowledge that there have been social benefits derived from concern with this first set of issues, they emphasize that issues related to the second tier of power and control have so far been neglected.

While for intellectuals working with the first tier of issues generated by Big Tech, "private ownership of intellectual property and means of computation is hardly questioned" (Kwet, 2022, p. 72), for platform socialists, this is the root of the problem. Proponents of this political-economic thought emphasize common or social ownership of the means of production and worker-led enterprises "for the purpose of curbing the domination of tech companies and enabling the popular control of digital services" (Muldoon, 2022a, p. 2). For platform socialists, regulation and multi-stakeholder consultation will not change the fact that investment decisions, and the direction of technological progress, "serve the needs of their current masters" (Huws, 2020, p. 148). Moreover, these few private platform "masters" determine what is done with the data of all users and service providers, taking advantage of their infrastructural position. Therefore, they should be "developed and maintained as public utilities which operate at cost for the public good rather than profit and growth." (Kwet, 2022, p. 76).

Platform socialists agree on the potential benefits of digital platforms for society: "What if these technologies could be repurposed, under different forms of ownership and with different objectives governing their design, into instruments for achieving social and economic good?" (Huws, 2020, p.

⁶ A somewhat applied version of a multistakeholder approach to digital platforms can be seen in the report Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (UNESCO, 2023). Aiming to balance freedom of expression and access to information on private social media platforms, the document advocates multistakeholder governance.

150). Ownership is the key to understanding this repositioning of values and objectives that drive digital platforms, for it would allow its controllers to establish an equitable technological architecture and governance structure. The transition from private masters to public masters, however, is not a guarantee of an equitable redesign of platforms. The Chinese Communist Party's control over the financial capital that funded Chinese platforms was enough for them to instrumentalize those platforms into a State Platform Capitalism (Rolf and Schindler, 2023).

One way to avoid the trap of centralizing power in the hands of an unaccountable state is the localist approach to platformization. Echoing the new municipalism movement (Thompson, 2021), the best practice for public platforms is “not to introduce them from above, via central government initiatives, but on the contrary, to root them in local communities” (Huws, 2020, p. 151). The localized nature of the ownership and management of platforms would guarantee their accountability; hence, the vision that the ideal authorities to become new masters of the platforms are, at most, city halls or regional governmental bodies.

Despite the consensus on new ownership and management models for digital platforms, there is some disagreement regarding the appropriate scale of these public platforms. While some argue that the platforms should be “socialised as public utilities at the local, state, or national level to service particular locales” (Kwet, 2022, p. 76), others emphasize that platform socialism is local at its core (Huws, 2020). Muldoon (2022) sketches a middle-ground typology: “short-term rental platforms, app-based ride hail services and food delivery platforms” exhibit specific properties that would naturally place them under the ownership and governance of municipal authorities; “healthcare, childcare and social security” in turn, would be better allocated under national authority.

The tradeoff is between accountability and efficiency. Given their network effects, platforms are more efficient and more valuable to their users the bigger they are. However, the bigger they are, the harder it is to keep platform management accountable for local demands. Keeping platforms local fosters the type of grassroots participation that could avoid the scenario in which “nationalization simply replaces private oligarchs with distant bureaucrats” (Muldoon, 2022). This grassroots participation embedded in the platform localism means “each locality should be able to come up with its own solution, using a bottom-up approach in which local stakeholders are brought together to brainstorm and decide what is best for their own community” (Huws, 2020, p. 166). That, however, comes at a cost. The multiplicity of solutions (public platforms), each one catering to specific local needs, in small-scale configurations might lead, in the best case scenario, to inefficient platforms and increased public costs; in the worst case scenario, to platforms that do not take off at all.

Platform developmentalism

Recently, scholars became aware that Global South economies can leverage local digital platforms to achieve substantial gains in their logistics systems (Daum et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2023). Researchers are starting to go beyond picturing platforms as rentier organizations that reproduce North-South rent extraction schemes and comprehending the productivity-enhancing features of platform organizations (Wei et al., 2023). While some have attempted to identify the implications of digital platforms to development from the final socioeconomic goal of specific platforms (Bonina et al., 2021) or the location of platforms in emergent/latecomer markets (Foster & Azmeh, 2020; Koskinen et al., 2019; Rossotto et al., 2018) an understanding based on a clear rationale and specific actors conducting this process is gaining traction (Reilly, 2020; Woods et al., 2023). The attempt to understand what the developmentalism doctrine means in the platform economy era argues that one should balance between the centrality of the citizen and industry, with national development as the guide (Woods et al., 2023, p. 2). Katherine Reilly crafted the term “platform developmentalism” which would mean “situating data and information systems at the centre of national development efforts and engaging in hands-on policies that advance the stewardship of data resources and information systems at a national level.” (Reilly, 2020, p.6).

In the literature on economic development, there is ample space devoted to the state's role in bringing about structural socio-economic transformation. The states that embarked on this interventionist mission over the economy (usually associated with the model adopted by northeast Asian states in the mid-20th century) were called "developmental states" (Woo-Cumings, 1999). The leaders of these developmental states had the support of the citizens to steer the country (and the markets) according to overriding social projects/objectives, *i.e.* economic development (Johnson, 1999, p. 52). However, the term has also been used more loosely, referring to similar experiences in other countries where the state adopts "a framework for socially-oriented policy-making" (Reilly, 2020, p. 3). Developmental states make use of several instruments to drive the market, such as regulatory instruments, but more importantly for our discussion, public corporations (mixed public-private) to steer the market in areas considered high risk (Johnson, 1999, p. 39).

One of the main objectives of the state that adheres to platform developmentalism is to boost growth. To this end, it must favor innovations within the state machinery that enable the management of information systems and data as means for that growth (Reilly, 2020, p. 10). Among these innovations would be the nationalization of parts of the data supply chain; institutional innovations, such as legislation on data ownership and encouraging the development of domestic information capabilities also play an important role (Reilly, 2020, p. 5). Therefore, digital sovereignty, (platform) nationalization and investment in domestic capacity (*i.e.*, national platforms) all emerge as possible means to the economic growth end.

As to who are the main actors from this perspective, Reilly (2020, p. 22) tries to bring the community to the table, but it appears as a passive actor, a recipient of the good-intentioned actions of the state and the private sector acting together through new models of cooperation. The examples in the literature also point to the state and corporate actors as protagonists. Woods *et al.* (2023) highlight the importance of the Singapore government in building an infrastructural platform for fintech companies to operate in the country. They value the co-construction of platformization between private companies and the state: "The balance between top-down infrastructural investment – or state-led platformisation – and bottom-up innovation creates an environment of inclusive participation" (Woods *et al.*, 2023, p. 8).

Infrastructural platforms are the natural focus of platform developmentalism. Infrastructural platforms owned by the Big Tech companies offer "key facilities" (e.g., ID services, cloud services, browsers) upon which all the other platforms and organizations are dependent (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018, p. 12-16). On reaching infrastructure status, platform companies are expected to offer their services following the common public utilities doctrine, observing universal, fair and non-discriminatory access. So far, however, there are no signs that this doctrine will be motivated by self-regulation since platform companies remain seeking "infrastructural ubiquity, but no transparency" (Poell *et al.*, 2022, p. 76). The framing of platforms as utilities (Bagnoli, 2020) paves the way for their regulation as such, but "there are major limitations on capacity for public oversight of their decisions and operations" (McQuire, 2019, p. 159). Thus, digital public infrastructure policies could be a solution to ensure universal and fair access to a set of key infrastructural platform services (Sandhu *et al.*, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

When the Indian government decided to create a national-wide digital payment infrastructure and platform it did not turn to the private sector: the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) and the Bharat Interface for Money (BHIM) were launched in 2016 by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), a not-for-profit company controlled by the Reserve Bank of India. The UPI is "a payment system [...] that enables instant fund transfers between bank accounts via a mobile phone" (Gupta *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). Its ecosystem is made up of banks, users, vendors, and third parties who adopt UPI as the backbone for their financial transactions. As of January 2024, 550 banks already use UPI⁷. The system is being exported to other countries, corroborating the assertion that "the UPI platform is

⁷ <https://www.npci.org.in/what-we-do/upi/product-statistics>

already driving a digital payment revolution” (Gupta et al, 2023, p. 2). NPCI also offers an alternative payment solution in the application layer. BHIM is built on top of UPI and offers real-time payment services for free. It is an alternative to the private (and foreign) fintech platforms that operate in the country, such as Google Pay, Amazon Pay, and Paytm, and in 2024 it ranks among the most used digital payment apps in the country⁸.

The big problem in development platform projects is their double effect: while the projects can actually improve the lives of the population, they reinforce the state's power over citizens. In this sense, the debate is whether this type of governance is empowering or commodifying (Cohen, 2019, p. 60-62). While there is less criticism about UPI, there is major criticism about Aadhar, the biometrics system that created a unique digital identity for Indians. This system expanded the state's power over the bodies, location and lives of Indians (Prasad, 2022).

To sum up, platform developmentalism advocates for a protagonist role of the state in steering the platform economy toward socially positive directions. Its supporters are following Reilly's advice, not to cling to the neoliberal cant and assume that structural interventions in the economy, with platform services offered directly by the state are a good idea (Reilly, 2020, p. 21). These new approaches are elements that are missing from platform multistakeholderism, which can be too timid about the role of the state and very zealous about the liberal economy. In doing so, they offer “new approaches to policy-making” that Cammaerts and Mansell (2020, p. 144) ask for⁹, but they neglect popular participation in these systems and the decisions associated with them. A governmentality is created in opposition to neoliberalism, but governed by another large non-participatory technocratic system, which does not in fact offer an alternative to the accumulation of discretionary power (Cohen, 2019, p. 228).

Government as a platform

The literature on digital government has dealt with the modernization of government vis-à-vis information technologies at least since the beginning of the 1990s, throughout different phases (Janowski, 2015). Currently, it is in a phase dominated by digital platforms (Fishenden & Thompson, 2013) and “platform paradigms” (Janowski et al., 2018), where “it is little exaggeration to state that digital ‘platforms’ have become increasingly viewed within public services as ‘the answer’ to the need for fundamental, Internet-enabled, transformation” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 168). Still, “confusion remains as to what ‘platforms’ are when associated with the government, and about the different roles that might be available to government in harnessing this phenomenon for public benefit.” (Thompson & Venters, 2021, p. 2) The idea of government-as-platform (GaaP) has sought to elucidate this relationship between the state and platformization (O’Reilly, 2010). Under GaaP, the state must modernize by developing its own digital, technological projects. The aim of this modernization is to offer better conditions for private accumulation and utility.

For instance, the relationship between the government and its citizens (G2C) is conceptualized as a public encounter: “the purposive interaction between the citizen and public official as they communicate to transact matters of some mutual interest.” (Lindgren et al., 2019, p. 429). This is the type of relationship that has received the most attention from governments and also from digital government literature (Idzi & Gomes, 2022). Once the public encounter undergoes a digital transformation, it still carries the same purposes as traditional public encounters: exchange of information, service provision, and control/constraint (Lindgren et al, 2019). The most diffused type of platform aiming to modernize public encounters is the one-stop shop national platform for public services (Idzi and Gomes, 2022). The success of pioneering national public service platforms such as the United Kingdom (Gov.uk) (Brown et al., 2017) has led to the spread of this model to other

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1348492/most-used-online-payments-by-brand-in-india>

⁹ “Missing from public debate is a fundamental challenge to the contemporary common sense about alternative pathways and a different value mix that might come to inform digital platform policy and regulation”.

countries. As well as demonstrating the efficiency of modernization, the platforms connecting citizens to the bodies that provide public services offer a model to other levels of government (regional, municipal).

Platform-centric government modernization also transforms the relations between government and business (G2B). Public procurement, the buying of goods and services by the government, was once pointed as lagging in digital transformation because of inadequate software platforms (Mccue & Roman, 2012) Currently, it is one of the G2B relations benefiting the most from platformization, especially in the global south (Adjei-Bamfo et al., 2019).

Smart cities are another major focus of interaction between public authorities, companies and citizens, mediated by government platforms. Initially seen as the technological way of inclusion and social participation in the political decisions of the city, empirical research has shown that in practice things are different. The establishment of smart city platforms has created mechanisms to strengthen state bureaucracy. In Shenzhen, the establishment of the platform has led to a concentration of data at the top levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy (Große-Bley & Kostka, 2021). In Mexico City, the development of a smart city platform has framed citizens as mere users, excluding them from processes of co-construction of solutions (Pansera et al., 2023).

A study of seven smart city initiatives in Europe found a pattern of reinforced bureaucracy, or what the authors called "platform-assisted bureaucracy" (Lekkas & Souitaris, 2023). Although there were tensions in the bureaucracy during the development phase, it always re-established itself by occupying control points as soon as the platform was established. This reflects a technocratic view of the state's participation in the economy (Pansera et al, 2023), which is linked to the idea of modernization to promote greater efficiency in the public sector *for the private sector*. To achieve these objectives, open data and interoperability are the rules on these platforms (O'Reilly, 2010). Public-private partnerships are seen as the solution to accelerate GaaP. The demotion of the citizen as a mere user and source of data to be exploited by the state and corporations fits into this light intervention in the economy, in which public-private platforms accommodate the free market and in fact expand it as they take initiatives to encourage the free flow of data.

	Social market platform economy	Platform socialism	Platform developmentalism	Government as a Platform
<i>Type of market intervention</i>	Light intervention	Structural intervention	Structural intervention	Light intervention
<i>Stance on democratic control</i>	Democratic control is critical	Democratic control is critical	Democratic control is eventual	Democratic control is eventual
<i>Root ideology</i>	Social market economy (<i>Rhine capitalism</i>)	Socialism	Developmentalism	Bureaucracy
<i>Organization</i>	Multistakeholder platform	Socially owned platform	State-owned platform	Public platform
<i>Rationale (why)</i>	Societal public values	People self- determination	Socio-economic development	State modernization

<i>Actors (who)</i>	State, private sector, civil society	State, civil society	State, private sector	State, private sector
<i>Emphasis (what)</i>	Public Values	Classes power struggle	Nations power struggle	Public services
<i>Tools (how)</i>	Governance	Ownership through the State	State's Ownership	Public-private partnerships

Table 1 –Summary of alternative governmentalities for the platform economy

Discussion

In this article, we discuss ideological and political principles for alternative governmentalities to the neoliberal platform economy. We highlight two principles: the nature of state intervention (whether structural or light) and democratic participation in this process (whether there are democratic controls or technocratic mandates). Finally, we present four proposals that exemplify different combinations of these two dimensions.

Except for platform socialism, none of the other governmentalities has been articulated as an integrated proposal as we sketch in this paper. All proposals are still far from fully developed principles and processes that an alternative governmentality ideally addresses: what about the legal status of data? Or, considering the global scale of some platforms, will priority be given to national or transnational scopes? This ‘work-in-progress’ aside, our paper makes four contributions.

Firstly, reinforcing the main objective of the law and political economy literature, the paper highlights the political nature that sustains new legal institutions. By shedding light on these choices that inform the institutional framework that will govern the platform economy, we emphasize that there is no ‘natural’ platform economy and that whatever configuration this economy takes, it is a social product and reflects the distribution and the exercise of power. Consequently, the alternative governmentalities listed here are also formed from ideologies and political wills.

This is the second contribution: to reveal that the alternative governmentalities also have their ideological underpinnings. Ideological choices need to be made in a post-neoliberalism scenario; in these alternative governmentalities, there are also drawbacks. None of the choices provide a perfect world, and navigating between the positive and negative points of each one will be up to each society to define. We believe that the value of the paper is in providing this list of options, which tries to be as transparent as possible.

Finally, our scheme of alternative governmentalities, unlike what has been done so far, is based on ideologies, principles, and political choices, instead of national “models”. Thus, we avoid localizing, territorializing, and ‘culturalizing’ the alternatives presented here. While previous literature pointed to an alternative type like “Chinese platform capitalism”, the ideal types discussed in our paper are country-agnostic. The examples we use to illustrate in more concrete terms some of the alternatives (in Brazil, India, Europe, or Singapore) do not constitute the boundaries of each alternative.

The mounting empirical evidence of state involvement in the platform economy contrasts with the dearth of studies that seek to understand the theoretical and conceptual features of the emerging new boundaries between public and private in the platform economy (Mansell and Steinmueller, 2020). We have thus kickstarted the systematic discussion of alternative pathways based on distinct “value mixes” to inform digital platform policy (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020, p. 144). The clash between these alternatives will determine the new institutions that will be created - such as the law that could have been proposed by the city of Rio de Janeiro, returning to the example that opened this article. In that case, the establishment of a law with broad democratic support could have created the support base necessary to legitimize the municipal delivery platform. From then on, the new foundations of the platform economy would have been outlined, defining “what constitutes ‘normal’ economic or government activity and what qualifies as actual or potential harm” (Cohen, 2019, p. 4) in the platform era.

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