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Peer reviewed

Book review

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Algorithms of Resistance: The Everyday Fight Against Platform Power

by Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré (2024)

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

The story of the gig economy is oft told as David and Goliath – workers and platform designers – struggling over digitally mediated communication, labor, and politics.

Stories of resistance matter. Resistance reveals the fissures of systems, their emergent logics, and political potentials among those impacted by them. However, when do acts of resistance act as a palliative, when do they challenge power structures, and when might they reinforce them?

These questions matter to me because I've spent fifteen years involved with Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, first building and maintaining Turkopticon, a tool to share reviews of employers and then transitioning the project to a worker-run advocacy organization. Over the years, I would be asked whether helping workers review their employers was really resistance or merely a palliative to survive bad platform working conditions. Bonini and Treré's *Algorithms of Resistance* offers a theoretical way to answer the question.

Algorithms of Resistance is a fascinating book that proposes we inquire into the moral economy revealed in the resistance activities of platform users. Moral economy is a term made famous by E.P. Thompson to clarify the logic among English peasants punishing bakers for overcharging, revealing a moral logic and coherence to what historians had more typically depicted as senseless mobs. A moral economy is a way of understand the moral logic and expectations that structure people's interactions with one another. Bonini and Treré propose two competing moral economies in the digital world: the "platform moral economy" and "user moral economy." The platform moral economy is the morality inscribed by platform company designers through messaging, affordances, and functionality, typified by the authors as "the free market, individualism, consumerism, data extractivism, optimization of performance, self-entrepreneurship, meritocratic ideology, and competition among users." By comparison, "user moral economies" asks what platform users or workers find legitimate and illegitimate, desirable and undesirable in platforms, and how that shapes the kinds of actions they take on and around the platform. Some users resist designer intentions, but still do so in keeping with the platform moral economy – such as when delivery drivers use multiple

phones to better compete with less resourced drivers for jobs. Users aligned with the platform's moral economy might agree with the platform's own claims and even deploy them to discipline and blame users in trouble for not being smart, skilled, or careful enough. By contrast, "user moral economies" challenge platform morality by, for example, organizing collective rejection of work to drive wages up and challenging company narratives in everyday talk. "There is no clear boundary between one moral economy and another," Bonini and Treré write, "and [users] can swing from one side to another" as users negotiate and navigate shifting material and discursive conditions.

Bonini and Treré also differentiate user actions as tactical and strategic, or as Eric Olin Wright might have put it "moves in the game" or changing the "rules of the game" (2019). The authors draw on de Certeau's distinction between the perspective of the pedestrian and the planner-manager-state, but allow for more agency among users – especially organized users – than in my reading of de Certeau.

This framework allows critical AI scholars and organizers alike to look at user practices for how people, in their situated cultural understandings and actions, orient towards the platforms and the ideologies companies attempt to mobilize around them. This helps us appreciate user practices – including our own – without subjecting them to purity tests of whether those actions look like liberal democratic, anarchist, communist (or pick your lineage) organizing and resistance. People figure out how to thread the needle of their values and their material needs in all kinds of ways, and we develop and change in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) over time. An appreciation for users' moral economies is even more essential than the right political theory in being able to appreciate and forge coalitions in emergence. This allows us to build on the practical nucleus of "good sense" for those hoping to challenge ruling coalitions' "common sense" (Gramsci 1971:328).

In my worlds of technology-related organizing, this would have been a very useful, theoretically informed sensibility. Mechanical Turk workers told many stories over the years about drive-by leftists telling them they needed a union without stakes in making a living on the platform (Irani forthcoming). Turk workers hurling insults at researchers stealing worker wages would show up clearly as user moral economies and tactics of solidarity and wage recovery. Worker attempts to gain recognition from Institutional Review Boards for minimum compensation rates similarly appear as strategic resistance, even though they don't challenge independent contractor classifications. Finally, this framework would help theoretically distinguish between review tools built by entrepreneurial Turk workers to help them outcompete other workers from Turkopticon's open-source, no-cost infrastructure to encourage mutual aid.

At times, I wish that Bonini and Treré's accounting for users' moral economies took seriously users' very different political geographies across Italy, India, China, Mexico, and Spain where they conducted research. Julie Chen and Veena Dubal have both argued that platform driver-workers have targeted governments, whether in China or California, for enabling platforms to mistreat workers (Chen 2017; Dubal 2022). As Dubal and Chen showed, repertoires of resistance can engage with local historical conditions, whether legal or other social relations. How, for example, do histories of caste and service labor relations in India influence Indian gig workers' moralities, tactics, and strategies? When do user moral economies implicate governments as much as platform companies for enabling the mistreatment of workers?

For those seeking an overview of formalized resistance, such as by unions, NGOs, or coalitions, the book offers hints of this work in Europe but not elsewhere, and the relationship between moral economies and formalizing processes is not explored. Finally, the chapter on resistance in politics was overly focused, in my mind, on people using algorithms and platforms to resist to the exclusion of those using protest, legal reform, or other forms of non-algorithmic action such as workplace and municipal laws restricting AI use (e.g. Irani & Alexander 2022).

Still, I enjoyed this book, I assigned two chapters for undergraduates in my Communication course, and I find its theorization of moral economies, strategies, and tactics a clarifying and powerful lens. At a time when right wing movements capture the hopes of workers and the poor transnationally, it is more vital than ever to tune into the moral economies to make possible hegemonic coalitions that can defeat oligarch choreographed politics of revenge.

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