

## **Collectivizing Convenience?**

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# COLLECTIVIZING CONVENIENCE? FROM DELIVERY TO LOGISTICALITY

ARMIN BEVERUNGEN

## Introduction

Amazon's convenience enchants. In 2019, 68% of US Americans were already Amazon Prime members. For Germany, Amazon's second largest market, that figure was 63%.<sup>1</sup> In these countries and many others, as Amazon expands globally and intensifies its grip on delivery and inroads into streaming, figures have risen and are expected to rise further. Amazon Prime provides the convenience of streaming media content and of home delivery of items from its web shop. Amazon has branded convenience, as Emily West suggests, with customers affectively and intimately enchanted by its brown boxes that seemingly magically appear at our doorsteps.<sup>2</sup> Convenience is thus key to understanding Amazon, and an account of convenience today requires making sense of how Amazon has shaped it.

At the same time, a significant part of scholars concerned with socialist or democratic planning are in thrall of Amazon and its promise of luxury and plenty. Framing Amazon alongside other companies such as Walmart as a 'master planner', which through its 'logistical and algorithmic innovations' provides the kinds of convenience desired by its customers, Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski suggest that 'Amazon offers techniques of production and distribution that are just waiting to be seized and repurposed'.<sup>3</sup> In putting this concern for the appropriation of Amazon's logistical prowess in the context of a debate on convenience, this contribution asks a simple question: can Amazon's convenience be collectivized? By characterizing Amazon's convenience as logistical, as *convenience delivered*, the contribution points to the entanglement between logistics, planning and convenience at Amazon. Where critical commentary has established the costs of convenience in terms of labor exploitation and consumer surveillance, the contribution contends that Amazon's convenience furthermore implies a logistification of life, which largely evacuates collectivity.

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- 1 L. Lohmeier, 'Umfrage zur Amazon Prime - Mitgliedschaft in den USA 2019', *Statista*, 2 January 2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1029566/umfrage/amazon-prime-mitgliedschaft-in-den-usa/>; L. Lohmeier, 'Amazon Prime - Mitgliedschaft in Deutschland 2019', *Statista*, 2 January 2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1029563/umfrage/amazon-prime-mitgliedschaft-in-deutschland/>.
  - 2 Emily West, *Buy Now: How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly*. Distribution Matters. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022.
  - 3 Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski, *The People's Republic of Walmart: How the World's Biggest Corporations Are Laying the Foundation for Socialism*, London: Verso, 2019, p. 77. Amazon is, besides Walmart and Project Cybersyn, perhaps the most important point of reference for recent debates around democratic planning and socialist calculation, also e.g. in Evgeny Morozov, 'Digital Socialism?', *New Left Review* 116/117 (2019): 33-67.

The contribution subsequently challenges celebrations of Amazon's logistical convenience, and suggests that a potential collectivization of convenience demands a more specific reckoning with convenience delivered. If Amazon's convenience is logistics in disguise, and if the techniques and operations of Amazon's logistics are fundamentally counter-collective, then Amazon's convenience cannot simply be collectivized. Instead, it must be confronted with logisticality, that is, the collective capacity to organize life without logistical planning. Logisticality defies logistical convenience, and may bring forth a different kind of convenience.

## Logistical Convenience, Convenience Delivered

How Amazon redefines convenience can be situated in a long history of technologies promising convenience. Thomas F. Tierney traces the emergence of a modern notion of convenience to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where convenience is 'is no longer a matter of the suitability of something to the facts, nature, or a moral code' but instead necessarily refers to a person's body, so that something is considered convenient 'in the modern sense of these words if it is suitable to personal comfort or ease'.<sup>4</sup> This coincides, according to Tierney, with a changed understanding of the body as imposing limits, and modern technology offering to overcome these: 'something is a convenience if it is suitable to the modern task of overcoming the limits which are imposed by the body'.<sup>5</sup> This value of convenience—the value of the masses [...] who consume the products of technical culture—comes to dominate technological development, according to Tierney.<sup>6</sup> Tierney's subsequently rather static notion of convenience lends itself to a quite determinist history of technology. In contrast, recognizing the plasticity and historicity of the notion of convenience puts into focus how convenience develops alongside technologies and their associated socialities and cultures.

How convenience changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been shown by Elizabeth Shove in her account of consumption cultures, highlighting in particular 'illuminating developments in the sociotemporal order'.<sup>7</sup> Where previously 'conveniences' were situated somewhere between necessity and luxury, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'hypermodern' conveniences such as 'microwave cookers, freezers, answerphones and text messaging facilities' promise the ability to affect timing: 'that is, the ability to shift and juggle obligations and to construct and determine personal schedules'.<sup>8</sup> A broad understanding of convenience as overcoming bodily limits here gives way to a socially and culturally coded capacity to order life temporally and spatially. The provision of this capacity is unevenly distributed and highly gendered and racialized, since many of the conveniences in question center around the household and therefore feminized and racialized labor, with convenience also always involving a reorganization of such labor.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Thomas F. Tierney, *The Value of Convenience: A Genealogy of Technical Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993, pp. 39, 91-93. See also: Rahul Oka, 'Introducing an Anthropology of Convenience', *Economic Anthropology* 8.2 (2021): 188-207.

5 Tierney, *The Value of Convenience*, p. 40.

6 Tierney, *The Value of Convenience*, p. 8.

7 Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, Oxford: Berg, 2003, p. 185.

8 Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience*, p. 186.

9 See, for example, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics*

At least since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, convenience has also become an explicit subject of marketing, and therefore shaped by the ways in which organizations seek to construct, promote and sell it, particular in relation to an emerging service sector.<sup>10</sup> That is not to suggest that convenience can be reduced to an attribute of a product or service, but to trace how its social and cultural dominance has been formed also by practices of marketing.<sup>11</sup> Amazon perhaps stands at the pinnacle of this development in marketing convenience: as West convincingly portrays, Amazon has branded convenience. Amazon offers a wide set of convenient services, such as media streaming and Alexa as personal assistant, which overall revolve around Amazon's image as a distribution brand which delivers convenience. As West puts it: 'The box encapsulates Amazon's brand promise to deliver smiles to our doorsteps – something the company rarely says with words, but communicates on every branded box and envelope'.<sup>12</sup> The 'everything store' literally promises—with its swoosh from A to Z—to make anything available for fast delivery.

Amazon is inscribed in broader shifts in convenience, which impact the spatio-temporal orderings explored by Shove. The juxtaposition with debates about convenient devices for the home, the convenience store or convenience food of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century makes clear what kinds of shifts have taken place in the meaning of convenience. Convenience stores respond to time-sensitivities of customer by providing easy ways to shop while on the road,<sup>13</sup> and convenience food both offers a reduction in the labour involved in its preparation and what Alan Warde calls 'time-shifting', in this case the ability to quickly and spontaneously prepare a meal.<sup>14</sup> Amazon is also in the business of convenience stores, providing a supposedly new level of convenience in enabling customers to skip queues at checkouts through its just-walk-out technology deployed in its Amazon Go stores, in North America and the UK.<sup>15</sup> And through Amazon Fresh and its takeover of Whole Foods in the USA, Amazon is also in the business of convenience food. However, Amazon's convenience pivots around delivery, and epitomizes the shift from retail to delivery in recent decades.

Focusing on convenience as convenience delivered, as well as on its concomitant spatio-temporal orderings, manifests its logistical character. It also indexes Amazon as a key player in logistics: according to Clare Lyster, Amazon represents 'the epitome of contemporary logistical intelligence'.<sup>16</sup> Last mile delivery is key to Amazon's promise and branding of convenience, since it is the brown box arriving on our doorsteps which fulfils this promise. In this, Amazon partakes in broader shifts towards 'logistical urbanism', wherein developments particularly

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of *Technological Futures*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019; Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

10 Jillian Dawes Farquhar and Jennifer Rowley, 'Convenience: A Services Perspective', *Marketing Theory* 9.4 (2009): 425-438.

11 Oka, 'Introducing an Anthropology of Convenience', 204.

12 West, *Buy Now*, p. 66.

13 Steven M. Graves, 'Convenience Stores: A Landscape Perspective', *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 79.1 (2017): 134-152.

14 Alan Warde, 'Convenience Food: Space and Timing', *British Food Journal* 101.7 (1999): 518.

15 Jenny Huberman, 'Amazon Go, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Ideology of Convenience', *Economic Anthropology* 8.2 (2021): 337-49.

16 Clare Lyster, *Learning from Logistics: How Networks Change Our Cities*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016, p. 119.

in last-mile logistics have shifted the terrain of how the temporalities and spatialities of cities are reproduced and repurposed around delivery.<sup>17</sup> It is not that convenience stores or convenience foods weren't logistical achievements—they merely followed a different logic oriented around the visit to the store rather than towards delivery.<sup>18</sup> Where a general focus on logistics makes cities appear in many ways always already ordered through the flows of communication and commerce, bringing forth their own topologies,<sup>19</sup> a specific focus on Amazon's logistics highlights how it produces particular notions of convenience and coincident spatio-temporal orderings.

Of note in particular is how Amazon has over the last years extensively developed not only its network of fulfillment centers, but also its capacities for last mile delivery, principally in North America and Europe, but also elsewhere such as the UAE.<sup>20</sup> This has allowed it to continuously improve on the speed and flexibility of last-mile delivery, moving from two-day to next-day to same-day delivery for popular items and customers in select urban areas mostly in the Global North, and even two-hour delivery for food in particular vicinities of Amazon Fresh stores in the USA. The urban landscape of fast delivery is crowded with other providers, such as DoorDash or UberEats for delivery of fresh meals, or Getyr, Zepto or Ola for 10-minute delivery of a limited basket of everyday goods. However, what qualifies Amazon's convenience is that Amazon's everything store offers a much wider range of goods than 10-minute-delivery companies, and its development of last-mile delivery infrastructure is matched only by postal services in its depth within individual countries. Its delivery is also thoroughly integrated with a broader technological stack, such as its '1-click-technology', easy payment facilities, or the voice assistant Alexa, framed as the easiest gateway to ordering.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, Amazon's convenience combines the breadth of products on offer in the everything store, ease of ordering and payment through specific technologies provided by or allowing access to Amazon's store, and speed of delivery to one's home. Variations and extensions of these elements are part of Amazon's promise of convenience, for example when it expands into retail or allows other providers to adapt its technologies—such as Amazon Pay or Amazon One for checkout with one's palm. Yet the key premise remains that customers are invited to stay at home, and to have goods delivered to their doorstep. The 'Amazonification' of logistics, building on earlier logistical imaginations like those associated with the Sears mail order catalogue,<sup>22</sup> can be understood as concerned with the consumer home as the end-point of logistics and the effort to dominate last touch logistics.<sup>23</sup> Amazon's convenience is logistical convenience, *convenience delivered*.

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17 Moritz Altenried, 'On the Last Mile: Logistical Urbanism and the Transformation of Labour', *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 13.1 (2019): 114-29.

18 See Joshua Neves and Marc Steinberg, 'In Convenience', this volume, for a useful discussion of the relation between the logistics of convenience stores and of platform capitalism today.

19 Lyster, *Learning from Logistics*.

20 Martin Kenney, Dafna Bearson, and John Zysman, 'The Platform Economy Matures: Measuring Pervasiveness and Exploring Power', *Socio-Economic Review* 19.4 (October 2021): 1467; Altenried, 'On the Last Mile', 124.

21 West, *Buy Now*, pp. 45-46.

22 Matthew Hockenberry, Nicole Starosielski, and Susan Zieger (eds) *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, p. 7.

23 Jake Alimahomed-Wilson, 'The Amazonification of Logistics: E-Commerce, Labor, and Exploitation in

## Inconveniences of Logistical Life

A concern with the collectivization of convenience builds on the malleability of technology, and therefore the possibility of appropriating the technologies at work in Amazon's logistical operations. It articulates a critique of how technology operates within Amazon today, yet presumes that this technology can operate differently in the context of socialist or democratic economic planning. For example, Srnicek and Williams argue that logistics will be essential for postcapitalism, that despite its association with the exploitation of labour, logistics is at the forefront of automation and struggles towards postwork.<sup>24</sup> These debates much less challenge Amazon's notion of convenience, which promises something close to an imaginary of luxury, of a kind of plenty or post-scarcity associated with the 'everything store' that makes goods available at home the next day; a resilient convenience that even promises to deliver when disaster looms, as Amazon did during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> The 'actually existing automation' at Amazon also serves as forerunner to post-scarcity in labour, which is a key element of visions of 'fully automated luxury communism'.<sup>26</sup>

Celebrations of Amazon's logistical operations to be repurposed for mostly centralized planning presume that the convenience of logistics can be disentangled from its inconveniences. Phillips and Rozworski, for example, note that, alongside Walmart, Amazon's story 'is another tale of getting the logistics right—in other words, getting things from point A to point B as cheaply as possible'.<sup>27</sup>

*In simplest terms, Amazon is a giant planned machine for distributing goods. It is a mechanism for forecasting, managing and meeting demand for an incredibly wide array of things we need and want. It is a collection of thousands of interlocking optimization systems that work together to carry out the deceptively simple task of moving objects from producers to consumers.*<sup>28</sup>

The authors qualify this adoration, noting how its planning technologies 'are a way of meeting a skewed set of social needs—one that ends up enriching a few, misusing substantial free social labor, and degrading workers'.<sup>29</sup> They also list some challenges in appropriating and collectivizing Amazon, in particular with regards to large-scale techni-

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the Last Mile', in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese (eds) *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy*, London: Pluto Press, 2021, pp. 69-70.

24 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, Revised and updated edition, London: Verso, 2016, pp. 150-154.

25 Dave Lee and Patricia Nilsson, 'Amazon Auditions to Be "the New Red Cross" in Covid-19 Crisis', *Financial Times*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/220bf850-726c-11ea-ad98-044200cb277f>. Amazon has also recently opened disaster relief hubs at various fulfilment centers in North America and Europe. On the relationship between convenience and resilience, see Orit Halpern's contribution in this volume.

26 Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto*, London: Verso, 2019, p. 88.

27 Phillips and Rozworski, *People's Republic of Walmart*, pp. 78, 80.

28 Phillips and Rozworski, *People's Republic of Walmart*, p. 92.

29 Phillips and Rozworski, *People's Republic of Walmart*, p. 93.

cal feasibility, its continuing reliance on the price mechanism of markets, and the dangers of surveillance.<sup>30</sup>

Yet their basic utopian premise is that some of these negative aspects of Amazon's logistical operations can be disentangled from the planning techniques to be appropriated and collectivized for centralized, democratic planning.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, focusing on the specificities of Amazon's logistical convenience as convenience delivered emphasizes how closely related it is to the inconveniences of Amazon's logistical operations, and how impossible it may be to recode technologies when they are precisely geared towards logistically managing workers and consumers. It suggests that Amazon's innovations may be found less in advanced planning techniques as in particular forms of automation which tie both workers and consumers to specific spatio-temporal regimes of control and speed, which exhibit what Neves and Steinberg characterize as the compulsory aspects of convenience.

The inconvenience of logistical labor at Amazon and elsewhere have been widely documented.<sup>32</sup> Fulfilment centers are spaces carefully designed and technologically equipped to organize logistical labor whose discrete grammars of action are meticulously captured.<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Delfanti describes the kinds of technologically enhanced forms of management in Amazon's fulfilment centres as 'machinic dispossession', wherein techniques of 'chaotic storage' deprive labour of the knowledge of the whereabouts of things in the warehouse, and 'augmented despotism', where machinic control is complemented with autocratic cultural-managerial techniques.<sup>34</sup> Beyond the warehouse, in the last-mile labor organized through the Amazon Flex app, a highly flexible and scalable workforce is algorithmically managed and directed.<sup>35</sup> Labor here is thoroughly coded and grammatized in logistical terms. For example, Matthew Hockenberry explores the role of the cell phone in constructing what he terms 'cellular labor': cellularity 'enables not just a multiplicity of mobility but a multiplication of management'.<sup>36</sup> As logistical media technologies, the cell phone and the Flex app allow cellular labor to be geolocated and directed, and they also allow the scanning of barcodes as the quintessential operation of tracking both logistical goods and the operations of logistical labor.

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30 Phillips and Rozworski, *People's Republic of Walmart*, pp. 93-95.

31 Current planning debates extend beyond rejuvenated proposals for centrally planned economies since William Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell, *Towards a New Socialism*, Nottingham: Spokesman, 1993. For an overview, see Christoph Sorg and Jan Groos (eds) *Competition and Change: special issue on 'Rethinking Economic Planning'* (2024, forthcoming); and Campbell Jones, 'Introduction: The Return of Economic Planning', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.1 (2020): 1-10.

32 Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese (eds), *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy*, London: Pluto Press, 2021; Alessandro Delfanti, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon*, London: Pluto Press, 2021.

33 Armin Beverungen, 'The Invisibilities of Capture in Amazon's Logistical Operations', *Digital Culture & Society* 7.2 (2022): 185-202.

34 Alessandro Delfanti, 'Machinic Dispossession and Augmented Despotism: Digital Work in an Amazon Warehouse', *New Media & Society* 23.1 (2021): 39-55.

35 Altenried, 'On the Last Mile', 123-126.

36 Matthew Hockenberry, 'Cellular Capitalism: Life and Labor at the End of the Digital Supply Chain', in Mark Graham and Fabian Ferrari (eds) *Digital Work in the Planetary Market*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022, p. 265.

The inconveniences of consumption at Amazon are usually discussed in terms of surveillance and capture. Jennifer Huberman, considering the case of Amazon Go stores, argues that convenience functions as an ideology justifying extraction and control in the register of surveillance capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Yet rather than obscure it, Amazon provides surveillance as a service: its attraction lies in ‘the brand’s knowledge of the consumers’ and therefore ‘the intimacy of the relationship and the quality of its services’.<sup>38</sup> This observation already points to how surveillance is more than an ideology at Amazon: the data gathered on consumer behavior constitutes an essential input for Amazon’s predictive algorithms, which tie its technologies for anticipatory shipping to the optimization of its logistical operations.<sup>39</sup> Despite being sold explicitly as a service, Amazon’s technologies of surveillance seek ‘to capture forms of behavior that are unaffected by self-conscious awareness of surveillance’,<sup>40</sup> with the Echo and Ring devices enticing us to unconscious consumption, in a process that David Hill calls ‘the disappearing from consciousness of “habitual media”’.<sup>41</sup>

The automation of behaviour and the attendant reduction of liberties are recurring themes in these critiques of Amazon, whether in the register of a critique of alienation, of ideology, or otherwise. These critiques, essential as they are, do not suffice to direct a collectivization of convenience which requires the disentangling of logistical planning from surveillance and control. On the one hand, operating in what Jean Burgess and her co-authors have called ‘big critique’, they partly overstate the efficacy of Amazon’s technologies, for example with regards to the automation of behaviour through an address of the unconscious.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, they potentially reproduce a technological sublime which also misleadingly fuels the infatuation with Amazon’s planning techniques. On the other hand, the critiques don’t fully articulate the consequences of convenience in terms of collectivity. West, Huberman, and more famously Shoshana Zuboff, lament the loss of the sovereign subject of consumption in the surveilled, served self of convenience.<sup>43</sup> Their analysis implies a politics which seeks a return to the sovereign subject of consumption. Yet as a political horizon for a collectivization of convenience this seems insufficient, considering the marketing of convenience is certainly not the starting point of an under-

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37 Huberman, ‘Amazon Go, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Ideology of Convenience’, 338, 346. The media scholar Lauren Bridges in a complementary way recounts how Amazon Ring devices, through what she calls ‘infrastructural obfuscation’, partakes in broader kinds of surveillance, where Amazon’s infrastructures of surveillance connect to carceral regimes. Lauren Bridges, ‘Infrastructural Obfuscation: Unpacking the Carceral Logics of the Ring Surveillant Assemblage’, *Information, Communication & Society* 24.6 (2021): 830-49.

38 West, *Buy Now*, p. 118.

39 Eva-Maria Nyckel, ‘Ahead of Time: The Infrastructure of Amazon’s Anticipatory Shipping Method’, in Axel Volmar and Kyle Stine (eds) *Media Infrastructures and the Politics of Digital Time: Essays on Hardwired Temporalities*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 263-78.

40 Mark Andrejevic, *Automated Media*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 40.

41 David W. Hill, ‘The Injuries of Platform Logistics’, *Media, Culture & Society* 42.4 (2020): 524-525.

42 Jean Burgess, ‘Everyday Data Cultures: Beyond Big Critique and the Technological Sublime’, *AI & Society* 38.3 (2023): 1243-1244.

43 Huberman, ‘Amazon Go, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Ideology of Convenience’; West, *Buy Now*, p. 133-137; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, 1st edition, New York: PublicAffairs, 2019.



mining of individual sovereignty, not to mention collectivity. The history of marketing, not only of convenience, is one traversed by attempts to undermine the sovereign subject.<sup>44</sup>

These inconveniences are not merely a negative flipside of convenience, to be separated from it or easily critiqued away. More fundamentally, they demonstrate how logistical convenience, as convenience delivered, imposes what I would call the logistification of life. Convenience as logistics in disguise requires the logistification of life, producing what Julian Reid has called 'logistical life': 'a life lived under the duress of the command to be efficient, to communicate one's purposes transparently in relation to others, to be positioned where one is required, to use time economically, to be able to move when and where one is told to'.<sup>45</sup> Here the inconveniences of labour and consumption become visible as related. For example, in having to make oneself available for the blocks of delivery offered by Amazon Flex or the changes in shift work in the fulfilment center, the logistification of labor extends to life. And Amazon's logistical convenience invites a personal logistics as much as the calculation of desires to be fulfilled becomes an essential part of planning and prediction.

The compulsory aspects of convenience that Neves and Steinberg describe are a key aspect of this logistification, here in the form of logistical convenience, convenience delivered. The compulsory aspects of logistical convenience become apparent, for example, in the 'personal logistics' described by Melissa Gregg as imposing 'the labor of synchronizing schedules and commitments' onto everyone, also with regards to the power differential between those who schedule and those who are scheduled.<sup>46</sup> They can also be recognized in what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call 'synaptic labor', which logistics demands and which they characterize as a 'capacity for composition given in having been entered, as it were, into the flow of assembly upon command': 'Synaptic labor plugs in anywhere, translates anything, and one must devise one's own forms of "queue theory" for the flow of lines that run in every direction, like a sea'.<sup>47</sup> These demands to be available for synchronization and for composition, essential for logistics, extend from the logistical labor of the warehouse and delivery to the consumer and citizen in their organization of daily, logistified life.

I want to suggest that the debates around economic planning and the collectivization of convenience would benefit from understanding Amazon's logistical convenience in terms of the

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44 The economic historian Philip Mirowski has called 'murketing' those practices which play on both a promise of sovereignty while at the same time undermining it, producing a murky space of decision and choice. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, London: Verso, 2013, pp. 138-148; also see Stephen Dunne, 'Murketing' and the Rhetoric of the New Sincerity', *Journal of Marketing Management* 34.15-16 (2018): 1296-1318.

45 Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity, and the Defence of Logistical Societies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 17. The quote continues: 'and crucially, to be able to extol these capacities as the values which one would willingly, if called upon, kill and die for'. To assess Reid's analysis of logistics in the context of a biopolitics of war would here sidestep the more immediate task of asking how Amazon contributes to the logistification of life.

46 Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 129-130.

47 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete*. Wivenhoe New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2021, p. 109.

logistification of life. The term highlights how closely Amazon's planning techniques are necessarily tied to automation, surveillance and capture as essential elements of its logistical operations; how the inconveniences of labor and consumption must not be tackled separately but rather be understood in the context of how logistical convenience structures life; and how this logistification is marked by an evacuation of collectivity. It complements interventions such as those by Brett Neilson who warns against a mere reverse engineering, and instead calls for a 'reverse of engineering', which formulates a critique of predictive techniques as extractivist and reliant on 'merely evidential and measurable' data, and instead wants to articulate planning with effective modes of political organization.<sup>48</sup> It also complements interventions such as Max Grünberg's, which challenges Amazon's characterization of its predictive analytics and machine learning capabilities as 'the state of the art in capitalist demand-forecasting' by exploring demand-forecasting not as a technique to be appropriated, but instead one which involves the modulation of behavior and the logistification of life.<sup>49</sup>

## Logistification as Collectivity Evacuated

The task of collectivizing convenience already seems formidable, considering how Amazon's convenience relies on the logistification of life. Amazon's logistical convenience also implies a fundamental evacuation of collectivity, which would need to be recuperated in democratic planning, if planning is not to mean the neutralization of the political.<sup>50</sup> First and foremost, the experience of labor at Amazon is highly individualized, as Amazon deploys standard managerial techniques derived from Taylorism, cybernetics and behavioral economics which are geared towards the individual worker, and ties these to algorithmic forms of management where workers mostly interact with algorithms measuring individual performance.<sup>51</sup> Amazon is also notorious for union busting; recent successes in unionization, such as the establishment of the Amazon Labor Union or increasing strike activities in various countries in Europe such as Italy, the UK and Germany, point to the discrepancy between the requirements of Amazon's logistical operations and the political desires of labor.<sup>52</sup> While this may be a price to pay for socialist planning, it certainly doesn't bolster the political composition of labour.

There are also specific ways in which Amazon seeks to foreclose a sense of collectivity or solidarity between its consumers and workers. Amazon, West argues, cultivates what she calls 'distribution fetishism', which means to 'encourage a personalized, affective relationship between consumer and brand, while discouraging attention to the labor and materiali-

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48 Brett Neilson, 'The Reverse of Engineering', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.1 (2020): 75-93.

49 Max Grünberg, 'The Planning Daemon: Future Desire and Communal Production', *Historical Materialism* 31.4 (2023): 115.

50 Matteo Mandarini and Alberto Toscano, 'Planning for Conflict', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.1 (2020): 11-30.

51 Armin Beverungen, 'Automatisiertes Verhalten: Regierungskünste Bei Amazon', in Georg Toepfer and Sophia Gräfe (eds) *Wissensgeschichte Des Verhaltens. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Berlin: DeGruyter, 2025, forthcoming.

52 Jodi Kantor and Karen Weise, 'How Christian Smalls and Derrick Palmer Beat Amazon', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/02/business/amazon-union-christian-smalls.html>.

ties that underlie heretofore unprecedented short delivery times'.<sup>53</sup> Hill similarly argues that 'unthinking' consumption conceals 'the labour that brings our purchases to the doorstep'.<sup>54</sup> One particular, and once again essential, technique which optimizes delivery is that of leaving parcels on the porch—a practice which was easily justified and became widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has become standard for Amazon. The point is that the relationship between customer and delivery driver becomes mediated through operational images, as drivers take pictures of parcels on the porch as proof of delivery: 'As the system does not intend for the consumer to see the worker, the worker need not see the consumer. It is the camera—the system—that sees'.<sup>55</sup> While making labour invisible doesn't preclude solidarity, and the design of unthinking consumption doesn't preclude thinking about social relations, this is yet another example of how Amazon's operational techniques discourage collectivization.

Consumption at Amazon is also fundamentally personalized. The personalization of the consumer experience mentioned above relies on algorithmic and data operations that are framed as collective, such as the 'collaborative filtering' that is pivotal to Amazon's recommender system,<sup>56</sup> yet whose purpose is precisely to identify patterns in consumer habits which allow further personalization. While some other platform enterprises such as Alibaba, Shein or Pinduoduo have experimented with collective shopping, where the sharing and discussion of consumer choices is central to the shopping experience, Amazon has largely refrained from doing so. As the architect Jesse LeCavalier notes, the fulfilment industries 'foreground the capacity for individual impulsive choice' and in doing so 'claim to free us from confronting either the abstract but shared responsibilities related to, for example, the "slow violence" of global warming or the collective immediate action required by contemporary crises of government, economy, or environment'.<sup>57</sup> A democratic planning that builds on these personalized modes of consumption associated with logistical convenience would need to step back from the admittedly limited politics of consumption widespread today,<sup>58</sup> as much as it would eschew the possibility for political composition in this realm.

The evacuation of collectivity also becomes apparent in what the architectural theorist Matthew Stewart has termed 'Amazon urbanism'.<sup>59</sup> The kinds of spatio-temporal orderings of the city that the patents Stewart explores, speculating as they do on drone delivery and flying warehouses, foresee automated logistical cities largely bereft of sociality.<sup>60</sup> The actuality of this

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53 West, *Buy Now*, pp. 62-63.

54 Hill, 'The Injuries of Platform Logistics', 5.

55 Hockenberry, 'Cellular Capitalism', 273.

56 Brent Smith and Greg Linden, 'Two Decades of Recommender Systems at Amazon.Com', *IEEE Internet Computing* 21.3 (May 2017): 12-18.

57 Jesse LeCavalier, 'New Interfaces in the Automated Landscapes of Logistics', *FOOTPRINT* 23: The Architecture of Logistics (Autumn / Winter 2018): 108.

58 Alan Bradshaw, Norah Campbell, and Stephen Dunne, 'The Politics of Consumption', *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 13.2 (2013): 203-16.

59 Matthew Stewart, 'Amazon Urbanism: Patents and The Totalizing World of Big Tech Futures', *Failed Architecture*, 23 May 2018, <https://failedarchitecture.com/amazon-urbanism-patents-and-the-totalizing-world-of-big-tech-futures/>.

60 Amazon's speculative experiments with drone delivery and robots are far from successful. Cf. Jeff

Amazon urbanism manifests itself in the parcels left on porches without human interaction, and the Amazon Go stores which are meant to require no interaction with a cashier. Amazon's logistical convenience is also more broadly reflected in the way Amazon is remaking the city, in the way its automated delivery builds on an existing 'urban stack' for last-mile delivery and introduces new elements such as Amazon lockers, producing new logistical topologies of the city largely bereft of human encounter and exchange.<sup>61</sup> In scenarios of what Lyster calls the 'post-human city', visions of automation perpetuate spatio-temporal arrangements in which a mix of architectures of convenience enable personalized consumption experiences. Lyster contends that cities are potentially rescripted today in more equitable ways, since automated landscapes 'open up the design of the city to a range of creative stakeholders'.<sup>62</sup> Again, though, most visions of automated logistical cities, and certainly those of Amazon urbanism, largely discourage collective experience.

Focusing on Amazon's logistical convenience, as *convenience delivered*, and on how this convenience requires the logistification of life, therefore highlights how in the realms of labour and consumption, as much as in the city, collectivity is eschewed. It also emphasises how convenience becomes a demand for a logistified life, which is not only captured and surveilled, but also thoroughly individualized and personalised. Not only do the inconveniences associated with Amazon's convenience appear as essential to it, but Amazon's operational techniques push against the collective at every juncture. A recuperation of Amazon's planning techniques is faced with the formidable challenge of fundamentally reorienting Amazon's technologies, given their articulation with these logics of personalization.

## After Logistical Convenience: Counter-Logistics and Logisticalty

Debates on economic planning have somewhat moved on since Phillips and Rozworski's intervention, distancing themselves from the distribution fetishism that characterized some of the earlier debates. For example, recent contributions recognize the need to develop 'alternative socio-technical infrastructures' and take account of aspects such as care work and the climate crisis,<sup>63</sup> and have explored ideas for distributed planned economies that do not commence with an infatuation with logistical convenience.<sup>64</sup> Jasper Bernes has already earlier proposed a 'counter-logistics' as 'a proletarian art of war to match capital's own *ars belli*'.<sup>65</sup> Instead of appropriating logistical techniques they would be turned against logistical capital-

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Link, 'Amazon's Drone Delivery Dream Is Crashing', *Wired*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/crashes-and-layoffs-plague-amazons-drone-delivery-pilot/>; James Vincent, 'Amazon Stops Field Tests of Its Delivery Robot Scout', *The Verge*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/10/7/23392360/amazon-disbands-delivery-robot-scout-development>.

61 Armin Beverungen, 'Automated Delivery: Amazon's Urban Stack', *Navigationen: Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaft* 24.2 (forthcoming).

62 Clare Lyster, 'Disciplinary Hybrids: Retail Landscapes of the Post-Human City', *Architectural Design* 89.1 (January 2019): 105.

63 Christoph Sorg, 'Failing to Plan Is Planning to Fail: Toward an Expanded Notion of Democratically Planned Postcapitalism', *Critical Sociology* 49.3 (2023): 478.

64 Jan Groos, 'Distributed Planned Economies in the Age of Their Technical Feasibility', *BEHEMOTH: A Journal on Social Dis/Order* 14.2 (2021): 75-87.

65 Jasper Bernes, 'Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect', *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 187.

ism. More recently, Bernes has rephrased his critique of central planning, noting—in a similar vein to the analysis above—that the efficacy of central planning requires ‘both surveillance and automatic coercion’ and thereby ‘reproduces much of what we find intolerable about capitalism’.<sup>66</sup> His contention is that a ‘truly emancipatory revolution’ requires ‘the distribution of power throughout society’;<sup>67</sup> implying that Amazon’s logistical convenience cannot be part of this politics.

Where counter-logistics is largely conceived as a resistive practice which opposes capitalist logistics, more recently it has been redefined as an affirmative project to recover the collective capacities that logistical convenience annihilates, particularly in the context of urbanism. Moving beyond conceiving of counter-logistics as disruption, Leandro Minuchin and Julieta Main identify a ‘popular logistics’ developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which differentially assembles the circulation of resources, solidarities and territorial scales.<sup>68</sup> These in their view could provide ‘a different territorial organisation structured around open and democratic supply chains that value environmental resources, cooperative economies and the sustainment of life’.<sup>69</sup> In a similar vein, Matthew Thompson and Yousaf Nishat-Botero contend that postcapitalist planning requires an urban revolution, which will transform the abstract space of logistical urbanism into a differential space, wherein planning must be ‘grounded in the actually existing material struggles and experiments of the “urban everyday”’.<sup>70</sup> These interventions open up a terrain of counter-logistics and alternatives for economic planning no longer derived from Amazon’s logistical convenience and focused instead on producing different spatio-temporal orderings of the urban. The analysis of logistical convenience as convenience delivered shares a concern for the urban while contributing an account of how Amazon’s logistical convenience relies on an urban stack for last-mile delivery and, more broadly, the automation of logistical cities.

These affirmative projects of counter-logistics, which do not embrace Amazon’s planning techniques but may merely appropriate particular elements, such as parts of its technological stack,<sup>71</sup> also align with a politics of what Harney and Moten have called ‘logisticality’. They define logisticality as ‘the resident capacity to live on earth’, opposed to logistics as ‘the regulation of that capacity in the service of making the work, the zero-one, one-two world that pursues the general antagonism of life on earth’.<sup>72</sup> This notion of logisticality surfaces from a more radical critique of logistics as a ‘science of whiteness’ emerging from the slave trade,<sup>73</sup>

66 Jasper Bernes, ‘Planning and Anarchy’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119.1 (2020): 68.

67 Bernes, ‘Planning and Anarchy’, 69.

68 Leandro Minuchin and Julieta Maino, ‘Counter-Logistics and Municipalism: Popular Infrastructures during the Pandemic in Rosario’, *Urban Studies* 60.11 (2023): 2073.

69 Minuchin and Maino, ‘Counter-Logistics and Municipalism’, 2092.

70 Matthew Thompson and Yousaf Nishat-Botero, ‘Postcapitalist Planning and Urban Revolution’, *Competition & Change* (2023, online first version): 16.

71 The artist collective knowbotiq, for example, has repurposed Amazon’s Dash buttons for an artistic project in which conversations with bots around laziness and work refusal are meant to produce solidarities. See knowbotiq, ‘Amazonian Flesh — how to hang in trees during strike?’, *knowbotiq + krcf*, 27 April 2019, <https://archive.knowbotiq.net/amazonian-flesh/>.

72 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, p. 64.

73 See also Susan Zieger, ‘“Shipped”: Paper, Print, and the Atlantic Slave Trade’, in Matthew Hockenberry,

and one which represents the degradation of means, where ‘the body is to become a means only for the smooth flow of transactions [...] for the interoperability of all things’.<sup>74</sup> Logisticality for Moten and Harney materializes alongside logistics in ‘the hold, the middle passage’, by the captured and the fugitive, as ‘the ability to find each other, to move together, to break the rule of Newtonian time and space, disorder it, and legislate new time and space to disorder, to gather, stranded into refuge together’.<sup>75</sup> This logisticality may seem distant today considering how logistical convenience or *convenience delivered* so thoroughly conditions life today. And yet, it may equally be perceptible in the multiple ways in which life is organized collectively despite or against logistics.

Logisticality, elusive as the term certainly is, here indexes a more radical politics against logistical convenience, one which refuses both the spatio-temporal orderings of logistics and the solutionism of convenience delivered offered by Amazon and others. Instead of collectivizing convenience, it suggests a move away from delivery to logisticality, a refusal of distribution fetishism and a recognition of the compulsory as much as antagonistic character of logistical convenience. It also indexes, against the evacuation of collectivity which characterizes the logistification of life underwriting Amazon’s logistical convenience, a concern for collective capacities which are not tied to centralized planning techniques, but rather rely on an assembly of a different stack of technologies, capacities and socialities situated in urban space. Consequently, it also demands an analysis more attuned to antagonism, to the ways in which the logistical capacities developed by Amazon may imply a denigration of collective capacities for logisticality. And how logisticality may in turn provide a ground for a different kind of convenience. What convenience could possibly denote in this context, other than logistical convenience as convenience delivered, and whether logisticality could point away from a broader condition of convenience that is compulsory and antagonistic, remains to be enumerated—not in writing but in the speculative practices associated with logisticality in urban spaces and beyond.

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Nicole Starosielski, and Susan Zieger (eds) *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 34–51.

74 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, pp. 14, 71.

75 Stefano Harney in Niccolò Cuppini and Mattia Frapporti, ‘Logistics Genealogies: A Dialogue with Stefano Harney’, *Social Text* 36.3 (2018): 98.

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