

Book review: Reconsidering value and labour in the digital age (dynamics of virtual work series)

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Reconsidering value and labour in the digital age (dynamics of virtual work series)

Eran Fisher and Christian Fuchs (eds) (2015), Houndmills/Basingstoke/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-137-47856-6, xiii + 268 pp.


This is a book of papers originally presented at a workshop entitled 'Marx's Labour Theory of Value in the Digital Age' which was held in June 2014 at the Open University of Israel under the auspices of the EU COST network on *The Dynamics of Virtual Work*. The question of value production and the valorisation of capital in the era of digitisation (which is inseparable from financialisation and globalisation) has attracted special social scientific and political attention recently. The starting point of this book is the question of how the process of extracting value from labour has changed with the recent digitisation of work under capitalism. In their introductory chapter, Fisher and Fuchs stress the importance of this Marxian theoretical tradition and devote most of it to an overview of his writings on labour, value, productive labour and rent.

In the first part of the book entitled 'Foundations', Fuchs discusses productive labour and rent. He argues that 'the concept of rent is mistaken for understanding the political economy of Facebook and [...] Facebook users are productive transport workers who communicate advertising ideologies that make use-value promises. Their activities are productive labour (1, 2, 3)' (p. 38). By 1, 2, 3 he means Marx's three central criteria for productive labour: that it produces use-values, that it produces capital and surplus-value for accumulation, and that it includes combined or collective labour for these purposes.

In the second article in this section, Sandoval argues for an inclusive approach to cultural labour. She criticises optimistic theories of the information society and cultural work which focus almost entirely on immaterial labour, insisting that we 'consider both the hands and brains of cultural production to avoid mystifying the materiality of digital culture' (p. 43). She stresses the importance of the technological basis of today's information, communication and knowledge production and sees the global division of labour in global value chains as 'the dirty secret of the digital revolution'. This argument echoes Raymond Williams's materialist critique of a merely idealist concept of culture and cultural work, and is supported by examples of the value chains and the accompanying social inequalities of big cultural producers like Apple and Google.

The second part of the book deals with 'Labour and Class'. Lund sets out a critique of the concept 'playbour' by analysing play, game, work and labour to show that 'play and labour are [...] each other's opposites: a qualitative non-instrumentality and a quantitative instrumentality' (p. 67). Work by Hannah Arendt and Moishe Postone is deployed in support of this argument, and the author concludes that peer production with its focus on use-values and free associations has an emancipatory potential because it transcends the division of labour and alienation in 'a generalised workplay or playwork' (p. 76).

Recent labour statistics reveal more than twelve million Internet workers in China, and Xia's chapter places them within an analysis of the Chinese class structure. They regularly work overtime without proper pay, suffer high work intensity, mostly low workplace autonomy and precarious insecurity. They are highly educated, but most of them work in private firms which have poorer pay

	
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1 and working conditions than those of state owned enterprises. Xia describes them
2 as lower middle-class, but with similar social problems to those of the working
3 class; both are exploited by a capitalist class which has emerged through priva-
4 tisation within a bureaucratic state capitalist system.

5 The third part of the book covers 'The Labour of Internet Users'. Nixon's chapter
6 sets out a theory of the exploitation of audience labour, and argues that 'objec-
7 tified meaning is consumed, but more importantly, it is worked on [in] (a pro-
8 ductive process)' (p. 106). This involves indirect mechanisms of exploitation, because
9 the owners of commercial capital can capitalise on the acquired consumption
10 labour, especially the meaning produced. The novelty of Nixon's approach, com-
11 pared, for example to existing discussions of consumption labour and 'prosum-
12 erism' remains unclear, however.

13 Fisher's clearly-argued and fascinating chapter entitled 'Audience Labour on
14 Social Media' provides both theoretical argument and empirical evidence, including
15 a case study of Facebook's Sponsored Stories advertising plan, to show that in
16 social networks the content is produced nearly exclusively by users. '...the audi-
17 ence in social media produces information, the importance of which increases in
18 contemporary capitalism' (p. 120). This information—demographic information,
19 information on the self, content (often mundane or emotional), performative and
20 network information—supports multiple value chains. The social network systems
21 which rely on these types of information widen the scope of audience exploitation,
22 compared with mass media. They create a dialectic of the exacerbation and si-
23 multaneous alleviation of alienation, but in this dialectic, Fisher argues, there is
24 simultaneously the possibility of resistance.

25 The third chapter in this section by Na considers the question of why the
26 reality of social media exploitation by advertising is obscured by the ideology of
27 free access to these media. 70–95% of the revenues of the three leading Chinese
28 social media sites which provide blogging, video sharing and social networks
29 come from advertising. Na argues that these companies sell audiences' and read-
30 ers' time and data to advertisers, thereby exploiting both their employees' wage-
31 labour and their users' unpaid labour to generate profits.

32 Part Four of the book deals with 'Rent and the Commons'. In a well-structured
33 and cogently argued chapter, Allmer, Sevignani and Prodnik review competing
34 approaches to user participation and digital labour. They contrast theories cele-
35 brating the social status quo (that is, those treating digital technologies as a means
36 to free human beings and to tame capitalism) with two major critical approaches
37 to the digital labour debate. One of these, developed by Fuchs, draws on Dallas
38 Smythe's work on critical communication studies. The other, set out most com-
39 prehensively by Huws, locates digital labour within a Marxian theorising of rent.
40 Allmer and colleagues present the main arguments and implications of both these
41 approaches, placing them within a Marxian analysis of modes of production, a
42 discussion which would perhaps serve as a more appropriate introduction to the
43 entire book than the current one does.

44 Frayssé's chapter also considers the relevance of the concept of rent for surplus
45 value and exploitation in the digital world. He discusses rent as a concept which
46 has had relevance from the Sumerian culture to the present day, where it can
47 be applied particularly to advertising. 'Here exploitation takes two forms: profit
48 from unpaid labour (manning the devices) and the expropriation of rent (occu-
49 pying your space). In the same way, internet-based watchers of consumer behaviour
50 both make a profit on your labour of being watched and expropriate your ground-
51 rent by occupying your devices' (p. 185). In the following chapter, Rigi pursues
52 this theme by arguing that cognitive labour, here treated as valueless commons,
53 has become an object of monopoly rent whereas most service labour is still wage
54 labour. The expansion of wage labour through the industrialisation of developing
55 economies, not least in the former socialist countries goes along with the pro-
56 duction of more cognitive products, generating rent either by capital in productive
57 usage or by consumers.

1 The final section of the book is entitled 'Productivity in Reproduction' and is
2 a somewhat heterogeneous group of theoretical writings. In her chapter, Jarrett
3 effectively bridges the binaries of productive/unproductive, alienation/agency and
4 economy/culture, drawing on a Marxist-feminist analysis of domestic work and
5 drawing out the similarities with consumption work. Her argument is that do-
6 mestic labour reproduces labour power and its human embodiment, but simul-
7 taneously creates and reproduces the private, social world without which these
8 workers cannot live. The same is by and large true for consumption work, and
9 because of that duality, domestic work and consumption work are only indirectly
10 related to capital.

11 In his chapter, Fumagalli sets out nothing less than a theory of contemporary
12 capitalism, dubbed 'bio-cognitive capitalism'. He argues that we are entering a
13 new phase in the subsumption of labour to capital, since the general intellect is
14 increasingly dependent on living labour, and less fixed in machinery. A new 'life
15 subsumption' with new forms of governance is developing in the form of what
16 Deleuze called a 'society of control'. Its main features are: supranational monetary
17 systems accompanied by debt serving as a disciplinary tool and also to instil a
18 sense of guilt and self-control; generalised conditions of precarity; and the social
19 enslavement wrought by the 'brandisation of life' via its total commodification.
20 This latter development is reflected in the growing importance of 'human capital',
21 the self-employed person and the consumer. Despite its sometimes apocalyptic
22 tone, this is an original theoretical approach worthy of further consideration.

23 The last essay in this collection, by Pitts, deals with the theoretical distinction
24 between productive and unproductive labour in Marxian value theory, with a
25 focus on the role of the creative industries (graphic design, advertising and brand-
26 ing) in the valorisation process. Pitts's argument is that not only are production
27 and circulation a unity which can only realise surplus-value together, but, further,
28 that, circulation labour is the basis of value production, since something produced
29 only becomes a commodity, and the labour embodied within it only becomes
30 abstract labour, once it is sold. In passing, Pitts describes the fostering of con-
31 sumer demand and desire through circulation processes such as advertising, which
32 one could interpret as the addition of use-value (as with transport). It would
33 have been useful if he had made a closer, more analytical examination of these
34 circulation industries, their work and their function within value chains in con-
35 temporary capitalism.

36 The collection of papers and approaches in the book is very heterogeneous, but
37 in some of the individual articles the scope of the discussion is somewhat narrow.
38 There are also some notable omissions. None of the chapters consider the total
39 social process of valorisation, although, as many of them indicate, this is clearly
40 a key aspect of value creation in the digital age. It would also be very interesting
41 to explore the destructive dimensions of open communication (as in hate shit-
42 storms or the recent US election campaign) and its technological means (e.g. bots,
43 hacker or secret service steered waves) are not broached in any of the book's
44 chapters. However, the book does reflect the current state of much of the con-
45 temporary international debate on labour and value. In that sense, it is well worth
46 reading and using as a stimulus for further debate.

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