Digital Labour and the Internet Prosumer Commodity: In Conversation with Christian Fuchs

Matthew Flisfeder[1] **(MF):** In the "Introduction" to *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (2014a), you write that with the global crisis of capitalism that began in 2007-2008 we have entered "new Marxian times." What is particularly new here? Does the context of the crisis add something new to Marxism and Marx's critique of capitalism, or has the crisis brought about a renewal of interest in Marx and Marxism?

Christian Fuchs[2] **(CF):** Since some time in the 1980s, Marxist and socialist thought, politics and practice faced a backlash and repression because of the rise of neoliberalism, the colonisation of social democracy by neoliberalism, the rise of culturalism and postmodernism, the structural self-destruction of the Soviet Union, etc. Being a socialist or Marxist in politics or academia or everyday life meant that people were frowning on you and that you often had to face outright repression. The new collected interview volume *Key Thinkers in Communication Scholarship* (Lent and Amazeen, 2015) tells the stories of how Marxist communication scholars faced and confronted different forms of anti-socialist repression such as physical violence, hiring discrimination, salary discrimination, publication denial, denial of tenure, ideological scapegoating, racism, denial of important institutional positions, isolation, legal silencing by threat of legal proceedings or actual law-suits, or massive amounts of work-time. Marxism and socialism were repressed although at the same time capitalist inequality was rising. In scholarship, the economy was often simply ignored and its relevance downplayed. All of this has changed a bit with the new crisis of global capitalism that started in 2008.

Now there is more interest in Marxist theory and socialist politics. Just look at the popularity of Jeremy Corbyn here in the United Kingdom.

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This shows us that some changes are happening and that the Left has new potentials for a renewal. We should think of the old and the new of Marxism and socialist politics precisely in Marxian-dialectical logical and dialectical-historical terms: Capitalism changes dynamically in order to remain the same system of exploitation. Marxist theory therefore needs to be based on a dialectic of continuity and change in order to understand the changes capitalist society and communications in it have been undergoing. So society, communications, and theory are neither completely new nor completely unchanged. It is one of the tasks of my own work to show the relevance of such a historical dialectic.

MF: In the context of communications and media studies, Dallas Smythe's (1977) essay *Communications: A Blindspot of Western Marxism*, and his concept of the "audience commodity," is often taken up in critical political economic analyses of the media. His work also figures quite prominently in your analysis of social media and social media labour. Could you explain the significance of Smythe's concept and how it translates over into the critical analysis of social media labour?

CF: I have written in detail on these issues in the books *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (2014) and *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (2015a), so I would like to refer the reader to these works. I have just completed a companion to Marx's *Capital Volume 1* from a media and communication studies perspective (Fuchs, 2016). Marx starts this key work with the statement: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form" (Marx, 1990, 125). This means that the critique of political economy always has to start with the questions: What is the commodity form we are confronted with? Who produces it? Let's think of advertising-funded media. What is their commodity? The attention produced by audiences. This relates to Smythe's notions of audience labour and the audience commodity. Now think of Facebook, a targeted-advertising based social media corporation that is besides Google the world's largest advertising agency.

What is the commodity form? The personal, social, and meta-data that users' digital labour creates. So here the notion of the social media data commodity that is produced by users' digital labour is important. The data commodity shares qualities with the audience commodity, but also has new qualities, such as constant real-time surveillance, the production of not just meaning, but also social use-values, the corporations' total knowledge of user activities (in the case of the broadcast and newspaper audience commodity, one has in contrast to conduct audience studies in

order to learn about the consumers' preferences), there is prosumption[3] (productive consumption), advertisements can be targeted and personalised, there are algorithmic auctions that set the price of ad space, etc (see Fuchs 2015a, chapter 5). This is again an example of the Marxian dialectic of continuity and change: there is a continuity of the commodity form and the audience commodity as well as the emergence of new qualities that help to reproduce the commodity form.

MF: If communications, then, was a blindspot for Western Marxism in the late 1970s, when Smythe's article was published, you now say that Marxism has in fact become a blindspot for communications, and the whole of the social sciences more generally? Why do you think that this is the case?

CF: Media and communication studies is overall a rather politically conservative field. Its mainstream is focused on administrative research. There have been the traditions of critical political economy of the media/communications, critical cultural studies, critical media/communications studies, etc. But they are marginal in comparison to the mainstream. Just look at the major journals in our field. The *Journal of Communication* has, for example, not published a Marxist article in ages. This was a bit different in the 1980s when George Gerbner was the editor and critical scholars could get their articles published in this journal. Today, such journals that represent the mainstream simply ignore, reject and indirectly repress critical scholarship. At the same time, there is a growing number of critical scholars, especially in the younger generation and among Ph.D. students, who also self-organise against the mainstream. We have a profound intellectual struggle between critical and administrative research going on in the field. A journal such as *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (www.triple-c.at) is explicitly a project that wants to be a home for critical communications scholarships that challenges the mainstream. We have to create more institutions and structures that foster critical scholarship. Part of the problem is that critical scholars are often isolated in their departments and universities. Therefore, it is important that they network with each other and act together.

MF: *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* provides a detailed introduction to Marx's critique of political economy, with a particular focus on the exploitation and alienation of labour. Early on, you distinguish between

3 The term "prosumption," first introduced by Alvin Toffler (1980), refers to the confluence of production and consumption. Internet and social media users are often in critical media studies thought of as "prosumers" since they are both producers and consumers of content.

"labour" and "work." What is the difference between the two? How does each relate to digital labour (or work)?

CF: I do not want to repeat this explanation in detail here because the interested reader can simply look at chapter 2 and especially figure 2.2 in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs, 2015a). Linguistically, terms such as *work* (English), *Werktätigkeit* (German), and *ouvrer* (French), on the one hand, and *labour*, *Arbeit*, and *travailler*, on the other hand, have different societal roots. The first group has to do with anthropological features of human beings, the capacity to be creative and the fact that this creativity results in works that satisfy human needs. The second group of linguistic terms has emerged with the rise of class societies and often means things such as slavery, toil, pain, and hardship, etc.

MF: I'd like to return to the question of work and labour in a moment, but first let's talk some more about the role of Marxism in communication and cultural studies. The third chapter of your *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* focuses on cultural studies' "troubled" relationship with Marx. How do you respond to the charge made by some prominent cultural studies thinkers in the 1990s that Marxism is a form of economic reductionism, which privileges class above other markers of identity, such as gender, race, and sexuality? Is a distinction between cultural studies and critical political economy justified, or does the debate obfuscate something central to both? In other words, what do these approaches share in common and how are they useful for studying digital culture? Or, more to the point of your book, why might the exploitation of digital labour be a concern for cultural studies?

CF: I personally do not care if someone is a political economist and/or a cultural studies scholar as long as she or he is a socialist and is inspired in his or her research by socialist goals. This also means that we have to see that the economic and the non-economic are in capitalism necessarily related to each other, but not reducible to each other. So when we talk about a non-economic topic, we have to talk about class, and when we talk about the economy, we also need to see its connections to racism, patriarchy, etc. There is both celebratory cultural studies as well as non-Marxist political economy of communication. I am critical of both approaches. Shortly before Stuart Hall died, he gave an interview to Sut Jhally, in which he said that cultural studies should return to its Marxist roots. Otherwise it would be pointless. I think he made an important point there. If you remember the debate between Garnham and Grossberg, then the situation was quite polarised (see Garnham, 1995a; 1995b; Grossberg, 1995). The separation was probably very artificial and overstated. From

today's perspective, the interesting thing is, however, that Garnham, who in this debate took the position of a quite orthodox Marxist, today opposes Marxist political economy. You can read more about it in a debate between him and me in a forthcoming issue of *Media, Culture & Society* as well as in a discussion published in *tripleC* (see Garnham and Fuchs, 2014).

Personally I think that the gap between cultural studies and political economy can easily be bridged if we analyse how production, circulation, and consumption belong together. That was Marx's point in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Stuart Hall took up the Introduction in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' stencilled occasional papers #1 in 1973. This was Marxist cultural studies at its best. We have to again in a different context ask questions about capitalism, the relation of the economic and the non-economic, production/circulation/consumption, the commodity, labour, the relationship of exploitation and domination, class struggles, socialism, alternatives, etc. I also think engaging with Raymond Williams' cultural materialism helps us in a lot of respects today. Overall, we should overcome defining ourselves as either cultural studies thinkers or political economists. The point is if you are a Marxist/socialist cultural studies thinker, a Marxist/socialist political economist, a Marxist/socialist critical theorist, a Marxist/socialist feminist, a Marxist/socialist critic of ideology and discourse, etc. The unity in diversity is to think of ourselves as socialist and Marxist media and communications scholars and to explore the history of Marxist and critical theories in a dialectical manner.

MF: Going back to questions about labour, there are now many contemporary critical theorists writing about digital media and culture, such as Tiziana Terranova, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who draw upon the tradition of Autonomist Marxism, and the concept of "immaterial labour" in particular. Do you find anything useful in the notion of "immaterial labour"? How does your own concept of the "Internet Prosumer Commodity" relate to or differ from the concept of "immaterial labour"?

CF: I have argued multiple times that the very term "immaterial" is idealist and religious because it philosophically implies that there are two substances: matter and spirit, which contradicts the philosophical law of ground. I have co-authored a book called *Practical Civil Virtues in Cyberspace: Towards the Utopian Identity of Civitas and Multitudo* (Fuchs and Zimmermann, 2009) that is a detailed engagement with Hardt and Negri. Although I do not want to use the term "immaterial" and think all communication and all thought is material in a materialist philosophy, ontology, and epistemology, I find the notions of the social factory and the

social worker helpful because they allow us to overcome orthodox and Stalinist versions of the labour theory of value that only see wage-labour as creating surplus-value.

Also housework, unpaid labour in the free economy, the 30 million slaves in the world, etc. create parts of global capitalism's surplus-value. In *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital Volume 1* (Fuchs, 2016), I repeatedly point out the connection of the notion of the social worker and Marx's concept of the collective worker that he introduces in Capital Volume 1's chapter 16. Value-production, and therefore class and exploitation are quite complex and global today; they form a differentiated unity in diversity organised as a global division of labour.

MF: As with Smythe's argument that audiences work when they are watching TV programs, there are probably many who might disagree with the idea that Facebook or Twitter users, for example, are in fact exploited labourers. After all, aren't users receiving a payment in kind from the service provided by the platform itself? Isn't there value in the modalities of connectivity made possible through social media? How do you respond to this argument? How can users' participation on social media be conceived as a form of exploited labour?

CF: I think my recent books give the answers to this question, so there is no point that I repeat the argument here in detail. The wage is the price of labour-power. And price is the monetary expression of a commodity's labour-power. In capitalism, price is measured in monetary terms. Money is a universal commodity, a universal equivalent of exchange. You can buy food by money, but not by Facebook access. Facebook access is not a universal equivalent of exchange, it is no payment and no wage. Most people who argue Facebook users are not exploited actually think that everything is alright with Facebook and Google and nothing needs to be changed. But in fact these are large monopoly-capitalist corporations whose power has negative impacts in many respects.

MF: But where does the money come from? Since exploited labourers only produce surplus value and not profit itself, which has to be realized in the market through the sale of goods, how in fact is the Internet Prosumer Commodity realized as profit? Who is purchasing this commodity?

CF: There is a production and a realisation process. The users create the data commodity's value. The actual realisation and sales process that generates Google and Facebook's profits is either a user's click on an advertisement (Pay-per-Click) or the presentation of an ad on a profile

(Pay-per-View). Google and Facebook's advertising clients purchase the data commodity and only pay if a user clicks on an ad or views an ad. Of course this advertising economy is connected to the circulation process of other commodities that the advertisers want to sell. There are however a lot of uncertainties about the question of how efficient and effective targeted advertising is, and as a result of these uncertainties the social media economy is also a financialized, crisis-prone bubble economy.

MF: Could you please elaborate a bit more on the production and realization process. Where, in fact, is surplus value produced and how does the users' labour relate to socially necessary abstract labour time?

CF: This question has resulted in a quite substantial debate about what Marxian concepts we should use for understanding advertising and digital labour on social media. I can best refer the readers to chapter 5 in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs, 2015a) that gives an overview of the state of this debate and to the forthcoming volume *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age* (Fisher and Fuchs, 2015) that documents the contributions of a workshop that Eran Fisher and I organised in 2014 at the Open University of Israel. The workshop focused on exactly this question. The basic difference is between those that use the concept of rent and those who use the concept of productive labour. I belong to the second group of thinkers. The scholars in the first group argue that advertising in general and targeted advertising on social media in particular is an unproductive attribute of monopoly capital and that the whole advertising sector does not produce, but consume surplus-value created in other industries. It is seen as a "parasitic" sector of the economy, one, in which there is no productive labour, but in which rent is created that comes out of a transfer of the surplus-value exploited in other economic sectors.

The second approach argues that there is productive labour and therefore exploitation, wherever labour produces commodities that are sold in order to accumulate capital. Advertising is not just part of the sales and production process of other commodities, but is also a capitalist industry in itself that produces a distinct service that is sold as commodity. The fact that we have social media prosumption as form of user-labour that transcends the boundaries between production, circulation, and consumption shows that drawing a division between productive industry and unproductive advertising is monolithic. Such an assumption is a form of orthodox Marxism that has an old-fashioned understanding of the working class that goes back to the time when advertising and consumer culture did not play an important role in capitalism.

There is a third approach, namely those Autonomist Marxists, who speak of the becoming-rent-of-profit. In my view, we do not need the term rent for understanding the political economy of advertising-based social media. But at a level of abstraction, these authors share theoretically and politically more characteristics with the second group than with the first. In the book that Eran and I edited, these three positions become quite evident.

There is a reason why an Apple iPhone 6 costs around £450-£550 and an Acer Liquid Jade smartphone only around £100-£200: the iPhone is a more well-known brand. You pay more for the brand ideology. But ideologies are not free-floating structures; they need to be produced by someone. The commodity's ideology that is expressed in advertising is produced by concrete and abstract labour so that additional value, i.e. labour-time, beyond the basic value is objectified in the products that are advertised. Apple invests much more into marketing, branding and advertising than Acer. And such investments mean actual labour conducted by workers in advertising, marketing and PR departments, and labour conducted by user-workers and consumer-workers.

Marx thought of transport labour as a special form of labour. If you think of a commodity, then it is not just physically transported from the producer to the consumer or in the case of a digital information commodity not just sent over the Internet. There is something more: the commodity ideology expressed in advertisements needs to be produced (by advertisement workers) and transported (i.e. targeted) to consumers and users. The use of targeted advertising-based social media and the consumption of advertisements in general is ideological transport labour, it helps "transporting" the commodity ideologies created by advertising workers to potential consumers. I make this argument in detail in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs, 2015a). The point is that there are many forms of labour that do not immediately appear to us as labour because they are unwaged. Audience labour and digital labour on social media are just two of them. Housework is another one. A specific orthodoxy only considers wage-labour as productive, which downplays the importance of the exploitation of housework and other forms of unpaid labour in capitalism. It is a quite patriarchal argument that fetishizes the wage, a form of wage-labour fetishism. Earning a wage is not a necessary criterion for being a productive and therefore exploited worker and thereby part of the working class. Advertising as ideological commodity aesthetic has become an integral part of contemporary capitalism. Substantial amounts of time are invested into the production and consumption of ads. The labour theory of value is a theory of time in

capitalism (see Fuchs, 2015a, chapter 4). Advertising as ideology is organized in space and time and needs to be produced and reproduced.

The fact that producing and transporting advertisements creates commodity ideologies also points towards the important interconnection of the economy and culture, labour and ideology, in capitalism. We have to stop separating the economy on the one hand and ideology on the other hand (O'Brien, 2015). One should in a cultural-materialist manner in the analysis of labour not just analyze the work-process, but also ideology (the ideology of labour, how ideologies are part of management, how they play a role at the everyday workplace, can be challenged by unions and activists, etc.); and we should, when we analyze ideology, not just analyze texts, but also the labour context (the labour that creates and transports ideology). Labour and ideology are in a dialectical manner identical and non-identical at the same time. Ideologies are created by labour, but also have emergent properties, by which they go beyond the economy and as distorted meanings take effect all over society.

MF: Speaking of which, I'm quite interested in the way that you deal with the relationship between exploited labour on social media and the problem of ideology. You attend to, in parts of your book, the cultural studies critique of "false consciousness" as a way of explaining the problem of ideology. In dealing with the question of ideology, you note (similarly to others, like Jodi Dean) that social media and the Internet are often championed as platforms for democracy and participatory culture. If users are in fact merely contributing to the mechanisms of their own exploitation as parts of the Internet Prosumer Commodity, are claims about democracy on the Internet not simply new forms of "false consciousness"? What about the use of social media for purposes of resistance, such as the so-called "Arab Spring" movement, Occupy Wall Street, and the "Maple Spring" and the Idle No More movements in Canada?

CF: I say a lot about this issue in my book *OccupyMedia!: The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism* (2014b). The problem of social movement media studies is that they tend to neglect political economy. Scholars conducting such studies sympathise with the movements they study. This often blinds them from asking critical questions. It does not help social movements if scholars in a techno-determinist manner celebrate them. It is however also wrong to argue that the Internet and social media have no influence at all on political change. They are neither unimportant nor determinant, there is a dialectic of online/offline, media/society, face-to-face/mediated communication, etc. There is a lack of political economy and a lack of

profound empirical studies that address the actual role of social media in protests. For finding out the actual role, theory alone is not enough, we need empirical studies. *OccupyMedia!* is a quite unique approach in this respect. I also recommend that people interested in social media politics read Todd Wolfson's book *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* (2014; see also Fuchs, 2015c). Reading *OccupyMedia!* and Todd's book together opens up a dialectical political economy perspective on digital media and social movements.

MF: If, then, the Internet, digital culture, and social media are mechanism of exploitation, today, how might they figure in an emancipated society? You mentioned, for instance, the unpaid free labour of housework earlier. Do campaigns like "Wages for Facebook" (modeled after the "Wages for Housework" campaigns of the 1970s) hold any traction? What possibilities are there for the development of a non-exploitative Internet? To put it more bluntly: what would the Internet look like in a "communist" society? Can you propose a way forward towards this possibility?

CF: The question is if as the Left we should demand "wages for Facebook" or public funding for alternative social media and alternative non-commercial non-capitalist media in general. I find the idea of wages for Facebook interesting, but I disagree with it. Only arguing for wages and higher wages is purely immanent and reformist, it cannot go beyond Facebook and capitalism. It makes Facebook less exploitative, but does not question exploitation as such. Therefore, I think we need to foster initiatives that channel resources towards non-capitalist media projects. One idea for this is taxing advertising and capital in general to a higher degree and using participatory budgeting for channelling such income to non-commercial media. I call this policy perspective the "participatory social media fee" (see Fuchs, 2015b). It combines state action and civil society action, the public, and the commons. We need a renewed Left, which means in the end a renewed social democracy in the sense that Rosa Luxemburg understood social democracy, and as part of it we need left-wing media politics. Socialism is not an idea of the past, but a democratic idea for the future.

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