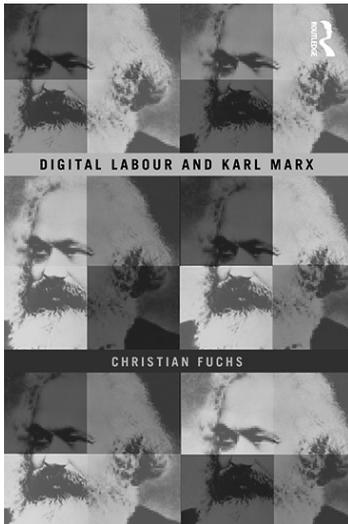


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Book Review: Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*



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In *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, Christian Fuchs aims to reposition Marxist critique at the center of digital media discourse. Fuchs's study is as comprehensive as it is provocative, using empirical evidence filtered through Marxist political economy to suggest in part that the "reality of digital media is that iPhones and Nokia phones, iPads and iMacs are 'blood phones', 'blood pads' and 'blood Macs' [...]."¹ Fuchs charts the exploitative labor practices of the ICT (Information and Communications Technologies) industry, which encompass the mining of raw minerals in Africa, assembly practices in China, and the "prosumer" labor of Facebook users, ultimately advocating for a critical return to Marx and thus a revival of commons-based alternatives to capitalism's violent and alienating effects. The book is both content- and context-rich, its engagement with the foundational Marxist economic concepts, such as "work" and "labor," are discussed both through case study applications and put in dialogue with an array of critical, political, and cultural theorists including Dallas Smythe and Lawrence Grossberg. This approach lends *Digital Labour* its textbook-like qualities (Fuchs himself calls the book

part of "a digital labour theory-toolbox"²), ideal for instructors searching for an all-in-one Marxist evaluation of digital media production and practice for advanced undergraduates and graduates alike.

After detailing the need for a Marxist approach to digital media in his introduction, chapters two through four foreground the absence and recent resurrection of a critical engagement with class in the university system. Here Fuchs argues that "[...] paradoxically the crisis of capitalism is accompanied by a crisis of Cultural Studies."³ He maintains that with the 2008 global economic crisis came a renewed interest in class and labor relations that continues to stir controversy reminiscent of Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg's debate that pitted Cultural Studies and Critical Political Economy against each other in the 1990s. Reliving this debate, Fuchs counters Grossberg's notion of cultural relativism, indicating the "need for a conceptual apparatus that allows one to analyse the power relations between" the multifarious institutions of contemporary modern society.⁴ Fuchs contends that Marxism is best positioned to reveal the core social and economic relations of digital media because of

its *critique* of political economy and revolutionary potential.

Essential to the beginning chapters of the book and the build-up toward Fuchs' case studies is Dallas Smythe's notion of the audience commodity. For social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, consumption is subsumed by commodity production. That is, as the service is consumed, new commodities (user-generated data) are produced that in turn can be sold to advertisers, therefore generating a twofold commodification of the user that Fuchs labels the "digital labor prosumer commodity." Ideology plays a major role in both coercing social media users to opt-in to this relationship and combating a Marxian dialectic approach to understanding ICTs. Chapter five details the ideological violence that results from the theorization of contemporary society as either a state of unchanged capitalism or a radically different information society. A continuity hypothesis fails to take into account the changes of the twenty-first century, specifically the labor conditions and practices of digital and new media. Information society rhetoric upholds the "new" at the expense of "radical potentials" of change and a critique of how these potentials have been marginalized in the history of capitalism. Although the binary vision of "contemporary society" Fuchs offers in defense of the Marxist alternative effectively elides the nuances of theoretical work produced on this topic, at no point does the book purport to be an exegesis on the critical approaches to modernization and thus the shorthand Fuchs employs to streamline his argument can be understood more as an act of unburdening the reader than one of careless reasoning.

While the beginning chapters do an expert job defending the need for a Marxist perspective to digital media, the whole of Fuchs's approach hinges on the juxtaposition of case studies and the logic he follows to justify their comparison. To illustrate the role information plays in today's global economy, Fuchs advocates for a Hegelian dialectic model that holds that "information has its own economy—it is work that creates specific use-values."⁵ This helps to demonstrate the direct correlation between the physical commodification of products in manufacturing to the informational processes that manage such work, and allows Fuchs to make the claim that while "[w]ork requires information,"

"information is also work."⁶ This thought process leads the author to lump African laborers who mine for the minerals used in ICT devices (material resource commodification) with those who buy and operate such devices for social media purposes (information commodification); for Fuchs, they are all part of the same network of exploited labor associated with the ICT industry. Such a rhetorical leap – from the literally enslaved to the virtually enslaved – masks the vast difference between the various forms of labor exploitation. Not all exploitation can or should be treated equally, and in fact by comparing material resource economies with informational ones the author erases the critical factor of privilege from the debate, therefore giving an ethical "out" to ICT users who fancy themselves "slaves" to the system without recourse. So despite his troubling and weighty existentialist intimations of a future in which humankind's "species-being" (a Marxist term defined here by the basic output and social functions of human beings) carries a price that's determined by capitalist market fluctuations, in the end I am less likely to delete my Facebook profile in a display of solidarity with the global underprivileged than I am to feel comforted by the fact that, as an ICT user, I am equally a member of the enslaved proletariat yet I am exempt from the truly torturous conditions of African miners or Chinese sweatshop laborers.

Yet Fuchs doesn't completely shy away from a debate over privilege as it relates to digital labor. The author takes up as his main challenge the assumption that because Internet and social media use are, in comparison to wage labor or slave labor, voluntary activities, then these daily rituals can't by definition constitute forms of digital labor. His rationalization, while slightly self-neutralizing (and admittedly so) in that he relies on literal interpretations of Marxist texts already thoroughly established, effectively defends the existence of digital labor as such, making the case for Marx's place in any discussion of digital media. Fuchs' counter is two-pronged. First, social media are becoming more and more essential to maintaining healthy social relations, so much so that we are dealt real and ideological blows when and if we choose not to participate; "it is...a social form of coercion that threatens the user with isolation and social disadvantages."⁷ Acknowledging that the threat of social exclusion isn't enough to

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support the claim that Facebook exploits its users, his second argument successfully asserts that even voluntary labor can result in exploitation; Marx detailed that the level of volition is arbitrary when calculating for exploitation.⁸ Once again, as Fuchs notes, these insights might be gained by a visit to the source texts themselves (Marx's *Das Kapital* or the unfinished *Grundrisse*, for example), unabashedly rendering his own contribution less an argument than an argument for an argument, or a defense of a defense. But Fuchs's passion and efficient execution remind us that – despite his own personal intervention – the stakes involved in digital media practice and production remain dangerously

high.

While Fuchs employs a large arsenal of argumentative devices, don't expect illustrious prose to be one of them. This is a calculated and systematic approach wherein the use of repetition sometimes makes it laborious to navigate but in doing so it encourages a variety of reading strategies that may come in handy for instructors. Readers need not be well-versed in Marxist theory, seeing as much of the repetition comes in the form of basic Marxist tenets. That said, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* is a cumulative and definitive text that lays the essential groundwork for any Marxist critique of digital and social media.

Jacob Bohrod recently received his M.A. in critical studies and will pursue his Ph.D. starting fall 2015 at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. His areas of interest include ethics, new media, and interactivity. Before entering graduate school, Jake spent time teaching English in both Japan and Turkey.

Notes

1. Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 130.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 71.
4. *Ibid.*, 67.
5. *Ibid.*, 250.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 254-255.
8. *Ibid.*, 274-275.