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Digital Labour

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Across the 20th century, the spread of information and communication technologies had huge implications for the development of capitalism and labour relations, especially from the 1970s onward, with the trend toward the computerization of the workplace. While all this is already well-known, the subsequent rise of pervasive interconnected networks (the Internet) brought forth two seemingly new forms of labour, entirely mediated through digital platforms, which came to be designated as *digital labour*.

The first kind is publicly discussed as "uberisation" but we could also call it *digital waged labour*. It brings us back to the core of Marx's concern, where technological change affects the socialisation of labour and shapes class conflict: capitalist platforms act as mere intermediaries between freelance workers and clients, each providing a virtualised and automated front-end (a web site or a mobile phone application) for a certain type of service. It extends from the coordination of physical tasks, which are geographically anchored – like Uber's transportation services, but also other companies offering delivery, catering, housework, etc. services –, to a variety of purely informational tasks, realized by workers competing on a global scale – requiring as much skill as graphic design, IT services, accounting, etc., or as unskilled and degrading as micro-tasking on Amazon Mechanical Turk (an online market place where individuals can trade their human intelligence). Sociological studies of such digitally socialized waged labour have undeniably deepened our understanding of contemporary capitalism (Huws 2013, 2016; Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta 2017), adding a valuable chapter to the central section of Marx' *Capital*[1] by showing how networks increase surveillance and domination, precarity, and competition between atomised workers. The second kind of digital labour – let's refer to it as *digital unwaged labour* – is located at the uncertain margins of Marx' theory, and the least we can say is that it is a much contested terrain. It refers to the ordinary spontaneous activities and social interactions that are mediated through digital platforms and which generate data. Indeed, certain capitalist platforms (whether meant for blogging, tweeting, posting pictures or videos, professional networking, etc.) manage to offer to millions of users a free service, and concentrate huge amounts of capital while formally employing very few workers. If we acknowledge that value does not pop up from nowhere but has to derive from labour – a keystone of the Marxian critique of political economy –, then someone who produces data, even accidentally or without knowing it, while relating with friends or using any connected device, must literally be considered to be working and exploited.

When the notion was coined in 2008 and 2012[2], global digital outsourcing was already a decade old but the fast-pace growth of digital platforms directly affecting the larger public was fairly recent. "Digital labour" might then have been at first an umbrella term for loosely connected phenomena, which mainly had in common a striking technologically driven tendency to renew capitalist accumulation, and that shook up our usual framework for analysing labour relations and organizing resistance. Its unity, therefore, may well be found on the level of the historical context of its formulation – one of practical and theoretical uncertainty – though not necessarily in the deeper logic of each phenomenon. Indeed, the theoretical justification of the extension of the concept of labour to such free participation and leisure depends on two traditions that proposed very innovative reinterpretations of Marxian thought: first, the "blindspot debate" which animated Anglophone critical media studies in the 1970s (Smythe 1977)[3] centred around the potentially productive – and not only ideological – role of media infrastructure under

late capitalism; second, the Italian post-operaist school of thought and the theory of cognitive capitalism (Virno 1992; Lazzarato 1996; Terranova 2000, Dyer-Witheford 2010). Concepts such as *audience labour*, or *social factory* and *immaterial labour*, allowed the theory to grasp the blurring of boundaries between the workplace and the rest of social life under the influence of communication technologies. As pointed out by Kylie Jarrett (2016), the difficulties of such a notion of *digital unwaged labour* – is it labour, if it is so free, what exactly is the product, and how can its value be measured? – were largely due to the inherently gendered apprehension of work it presupposed. In reality, the realm of waged labour, of producing commodities and of that which is measured through value, has *always* been dependent on a more fundamental sphere of work: that of the reproduction of the workers themselves.[4]

Reframing digital unwaged labour rather as a *digital reproductive labour* would mean that it contributes more to the networked reproduction of social life, which is an underlying condition of capitalist accumulation, than to the direct production of actual commodities.
Thus, the application of *social reproduction theory* to new technologies makes visible what is certainly the moment of truth for the concept of *digital labour*. It is an attempt at realizing an encompassing critique of pervasive digital technologies, beyond the sole focus on privacy: whether by enrolling digitally mediated activities into the direct production of commodities or not, it remains that these technologies shape the very subjects and their interactions – inside or outside of the workplace – in relation to the structures of capitalist societies.

Notes

1] The long chapters 13-15 of Marx' *Capital* are entirely dedicated to the question of labour socialization, of the eliciting and coordinating of partial tasks into a full labour process under the command of capital.

2] In 2009, in North America, two conferences were held that marked the birth of the field: "Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens", organized by The Digital Labour Group of University of Western Ontario, created in 2008; and "The Internet as Playground and Factory" hosted at the New School in New York, whose proceedings were published in 2012 (Cf. Scholz 2012).

3] To learn more about the "blindspot debate" and its relevance for new media issues, see Andrejevic 2002; Manzerolle 2010; Fuchs 2014.

4] In addition to Jarrett's work, see Fortunati 2011; Jarrett 2016; Thorburn 2016.

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Dirty Capitalism

Sonja Buckel & Lukas Oberndorfer

The concept of 'dirty capitalism' (Buckel 2015) opposes the idea of a "pure" capitalism according to which an analysis of social developments can be achieved by applying the category of class and focusing on the contradiction between capital and labor. With Marx and against Marx the term counters such conceptualizations with an analysis of the historically grown capitalist mode of socialization ("Vergesellschaftung"), in which diverse relations of power combine and newly articulate a complex whole.

Thus, categories such as race and gender neither present side contradictions (Nebenwidersprüche) of capitalism nor extensions to enrich its analysis, but are the product of conditions on whose continuation capitalism is constitutively dependent.

The term "dirty capitalism" emphasizes a double movement. Firstly, it is a social-theoretical concept which emphasizes that there is no, and has never been an, "impure"[1] form of capitalism in the above-mentioned sense. Secondly, capitalism is dirty in that it is a multiple relation of domination. Critical analysis of capitalism therefore always means analyzing with the objective of emancipation.