

# The trials of labour in the digital age

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**Fuchs, Christian (2014).** *Digital Labour and Karl Marx. New York and Abingdon: London.*

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**Fuchs has** composed a serious, thorough and carefully-considered work, which covers more ground than that indicated by the title, since it deals with topics such as Dallas Smythe and the media audience, forms of exploitation in Silicon Valley, and the reappearance of that mode of oppressive managerial oversight known as 'Taylorism', currently applied to the social discipline imposed within call centres (anyone interested in an earlier critique of Taylorism as a practice might consult Andrew's book from 1981, *Closing the Iron Cage*). The admirable aspect of Fuch's book, as with the rest of his extensive oeuvre, is its uncompromising yet rational commitment to a radical critique of a form of techno-economic power that is often lauded as progressive and democratic.

Unlike some authors who undertake this form of analysis, but appear to have little real empathy for the labourers and (increasingly) the educated drones who supply the system with its essential energies, Fuchs begins his book by providing an insight into the actual conditions of work suffered by these neglected human subjects. He offers a series of dramatic accounts of relentless and hazardous work, taken from the horrendous experiences of many individuals enmeshed in the coils of 'digital labour'. The point of supplying these testimonies is to demonstrate that the notion of employment in the

'new media' industries is not composed of some exalted form of immaterial activity, but that it is in fact resolutely material and positively harmful to those engaged in it.

The reproduction of these accounts helps Fuchs to take an inclusive stance on the issue of class in the ICT industry, contending that the subject should be approached from the viewpoint of the industry as a whole, in order to stress the commonality of exploitation, capital as the common enemy of a broad range of workers and the need to globalise struggles in order to overcome the rule of capitalism (4).

In making an admittedly valid point about the commonality of experience within the digital economy, the implication of this inclusivity is, however, to create a very broad model of the digital workforce, one that lumps together the fortunes of the most wretched with the trajectory of other groups that might actually constitute a 'transitional' class (represented, for example, by relatively prosperous middle-class individuals who only temporarily occupy that strata known as the 'precariat'). This means that issues of stratification and the inevitable divisions in status found among ICT workers, are deemed less important, yet it is these divisions that may well frustrate attempts to mount a successful opposition to capitalism as a system (quite besides the challenge mounted by the 'neo-liberal' state's reversion, post-9/11, to crude forms of militarised violence against internal dissent, demonstrated most recently in the Ferguson protests in the USA).

Despite this initial assertion, Fuchs is able to outline the dramatic differences between the functions and roles that individuals undertake, describing the 'unpaid digital labourers, a highly paid and highly stressed worker aristocracy', and 'knowledge workers in developing countries ... [and] ... 'Taylorist call centre workers' (296). Academics will doubtless recognise the similarity between those aspects of their own roles that have been influenced by the reorganisation of labour under the reign of ICT, and the analysis set out in this book. New media forms, however, are not entirely responsible for the deterioration of working conditions, but are rather another useful technique for the restructuring of the social order (essentially based on massive 'workforce reductions') introduced under the guise of austerity, and which still continues now that this destructive phase has supposedly achieved its economic goals. The complexity inherent within those work roles that actually remain, is an important aspect of this debate, since it is the principle of managerialism as such that ensures that even high-ranking professionals are 'de-skilled' whenever they are called upon to undertake functional activities.

Another useful feature of this book is Fuch's ability to examine the subtleties and ambiguities of key terms, based upon a close reading (drawn

from both English translations and the German originals) of the relevant sections of Marx's output. He produces a useful account of the distinction between *labour* and *work*, for example, and introduces helpful insights into the labour theory of value and recent German work on the notion that exchange (rather than inherent money-value) is the moment at which value is produced. At other points, however, Fuchs tendency is to provide an accumulation of data, suggestive of a slight case of 'list mania': in most cases, this information is useful, but on at least one occasion, where a hybrid form of discussion ensues, the material provided seems very much like a first draft that might have been better placed in an appendix (the long list of challenges and answers to the Marxist position on page 15 is a case in point, and some of these are a little rhetorical).

Fuchs is, nonetheless, able to combine an astute account of contemporary capitalism with a proven capability in the realm of content analysis, giving depth to a critique that in some other hands might be overly 'cultural', considering the ever-present temptation to provide more accessible instances of alienation and oppression. Authors should not perhaps be criticised for failing to provide perspectives that they have never intended to supply, but some discussion of the language of the ICT economy would have been interesting, since Fuchs does provide extensive evidence of the statements made by companies like Facebook, letting these discursive interventions speak for themselves (for a more extensive analysis, see Marazzi, 2011). Again, there is no section that deals explicitly with the 'psychological' effects of digital labour, but these concerns emerge to some extent in the work on alienation where, for instance, Fuchs demonstrates the limitations of those dismissive arguments that assert the voluntary nature of online participation, observing that 'in order to exist humans not only have to eat, but also must enter social relations' (254). He goes on to present a perceptive account of the socio-economic relations enabled through the hierarchical structure of social media forms, identifying the 'economic poor' within the digital system, and noting that the object of endeavour in information work depends primarily on 'ideas and human subjectivity' (247).

Fuchs does not engage, at least explicitly, with the 'capital as power' thesis advanced by Nitzan and Bichler (2009), which might have been interesting since these authors represent a strand of enquiry that openly expresses antipathy to the labour theory of value while still insisting that a general '*theory of value*' is required (84, my emphasis). In sum, although Fuchs is no stylist and is therefore unlikely to coin easily reproducible or elegant theoretical terms, his strength is in the determination with which he

draws our attention to the strenuous physical and mental labour that is hidden behind the rhetoric of a pervasive bourgeois myth, of a digital world of leisure, democracy and enhanced personal contact.

The challenge is not, however, to ensure that one ailing model of democratic engagement is somehow enhanced, but rather that real obstacles are placed in the path of a capitalism that is free not just to move between physical sites, but that has seemingly returned to an early nineteenth-century mode in which it is free to carry out the most outrageous forms of social and economic abuse.