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DIGITAL LABOR AND RENTIER PLATFORM CAPITALISM: REFORM OR REVOLUTION?

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Digital labor has become an umbrella term for describing a range of digitally mediated practices from paid work in the gig economy (Srnicsek 2017) to cultivating a personal brand on social media (Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018). It seems that every day, scholars identify a new type of labor being performed in the digital economy: aspirational labor (Duffy 2016) listing labor (Kneese and Palm 2020), labored identity (Aires 2020), tidying labor (Li 2023), and more have appeared to describe the myriad activities that users undertake on social networking and other sites online. In many cases, social media users are theorized as workers who perform unremunerated labor (Fuchs 2014) akin to immaterial labor (Lazzarato 1996; Terranova 2000) and unwaged housework (Jarrett 2015; Federici 1975). This wellspring of new labor(s) has, however, muddied the waters: digital labor is an ambiguous concept at best (Gandini 2021; Goodwin 2022). Despite recent attempts to clarify it, the “user labor” (Jarrett 2022) version of the concept, we argue, obscures more than it clarifies the user/platform relation. Moreover, this framing of user activity as labor has political limitations, producing reformist rather than revolutionary demands.

In series of articles later published as *The Housing Question*, Engels ([1887] 1970) engages in a polemic against Proudhonists who argue that tenants have the same relationship to landlords as workers do to capitalists. This, he says, is totally untrue: tenants confront landlords wishing to purchase housing, not sell a commodity. Following Engels, we argue analogously that typical social media users—those whose activity Jarret (2022) describes as “user labor”—are less like workers than they are like tenants. Users do not confront platforms as sellers of labor-power but as buyers of a commodity. In the first instance, platforms provide (the use of) a commodity or service to users, not the other way around (Fumagalli et al. 2018). This does not mean that users aren’t exploited, though; landlords exploit tenants and creditors exploit debtors despite neither

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of them performing labor. Rather, platforms offer the use of a particular commodity to users (terms and conditions apply) and extract profit in the form of rent from advertisers (Rigi and Prey 2015). From this foundation, we engage with ongoing debates on the audience commodity (Kaplan 2019) and digital rent (Frayssé 2015) to begin articulating a more precise account of social media platforms' valorization process and the user/platform relation therein.

The valorization of social media platforms must be understood in context of the expansion of rentier capitalism (Rigi and Prey 2015). Rentier capitalism describes an economic configuration wherein charging rent to access a monopolized asset becomes a predominant mode of accumulation (Christophers 2020). Marx's theory of rent extends to digital platforms, which do not create value but capture it by embedding themselves into spaces, interactions, and information flows (Sadowski 2020). A shift toward extracting profit through rentier relations has seen corporate platforms like Alphabet and Meta come to dominate the world economy over the last decade, and there is little incentive to create value when some of the world's highest earning companies are so successful simply capturing value instead. This valorizing model is not entirely new, though. Technological rents have been identified as a key feature of the late capitalist economy for half a century (Mandel [1972] 1975) and digital platforms can be seen as a new "spatial fix" in the long history of capitalist expansion (Greene and Joseph 2015; Harvey 1981). This economic arrangement nonetheless remains an underexplored cause of lowering rates of productivity and profit, and a decline of real wages (Moseley 2014). Distinguishing where surplus value is created versus captured is therefore crucial for understanding the relationship between platforms and economic crises.

Counterintuitively, theorizing users not as workers actually empowers a stronger political response to digital exploitation. By misidentifying the user/platform relation, "user labor" concedes the commoditization of communication rather than challenging it. Reformist demands follow: "Wages for Facebook" (Ptak 2014 as cited in Jung 2014) or "data agency," meaning the owning and selling of one's own data on open data markets, as proposed in legislation introduced by Democrats in 2020 (Chakravorti 2020). As Marx, Engels, and many others after have argued, the goal, however, is not for workers to own the commodities they produce. What benefit is it to the worker to own ten yards of linen at the end of each day, or for users to own data about themselves, of which they can make neither sense nor use? Instead, it is capitalist data relations (Mejias and Couldry 2019) and the existence of for-profit social media platforms that ought to be opposed from the outset. Our present condition of communicative capitalism (Dean 2009) is a situation in which the values of democracy have been subsumed by capital through social media, and it cannot be solved by compensating users for so-called labor. Formalized wage relations would exacerbate the problem by creating more financial incentives with which to remain trapped in the feedback and drive (Dean 2010) corporate owned platforms, increasing their influence, power, and profits.

It is not necessary to cast the activity of users as labor in order to identify the exploitation at the core of digital platforms. Moreover, turn towards digital labor has arguably displaced a more revolutionary platform politics. Rather than advocating for

progressive reform from unwaged to waged labor, platforms must instead be disentangled from the stranglehold of capital and transformed into public utilities with democratic accountability. Platforms like Google and Facebook have won the status of infrastructure by becoming increasingly essential to our daily lives (Plantin et al. 2018), and our platform politics must treat them as such (Srnicek 2019). As part of the work of revolution we must socialize the means of communication as well as the means of production. What this looks like in practice is freeing platforms from the rentier relations of user exploitation and turning these infrastructures—email, social networking sites, video sharing—into public utilities. The horizon of our platform politics must not stop short at remuneration for the daily activities of platform users but extend to the creation of genuinely democratic infrastructures.

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