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“MY MARXIST FEMINIST DIALECTIC BRINGS ALL THE BOYS TO THE YARD”: WHAT MARXIST FEMINIST THEORY CAN TELL US ABOUT CONSUMER LABOUR IN DIGITAL MEDIA

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The activities of consumers in digital media environments have increasingly been conceptualised as labour. Consumers are understood to provide unpaid labour by contributing content to websites in the form of game play, videos, memes, status updates and the affective investment that renders commercial digital media pleasurable and meaningful. Consumer activity also forms the data that is captured by the economic systems of such sites, with clickstream data and taste information being onsold to advertisers and marketing companies. Beginning with the important work of Tiziana Terranova (2000) and through the rigorous theorisations of Christian Fuchs (2008: 2009; see also Cohen 2008; Scholz (ed.) 2013; Kücklich 2005), it has also become common to view this labour as exploited. This is the case in the practical sense because such work is not (typically) financially compensated, despite its contribution to the generation of surplus value for the site’s parent company. It is also exploitative in terms of the formal theoretical understandings of Marxism in which the use-values that are inherent to user activities are transformed into a commodified object with an exchange-value over which the user has no control.

However, this argument has not gone unchallenged. Theorists such as Mark Andrejevic (2009), David Hesmondhalgh (2010) and John Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008) question the designation of such exchanges as exploitative. The conditions and experiences associated with alienated industrialised labour do not directly correspond with the experiences of consumers in digital media contexts. The voluntary nature of these exchanges, particularly when compared to (compulsory) waged labour, raises questions about this application of Marxist thought. Users maintain a greater sense of agency and retain meaning and affective intensity in their labour for digital media companies than has typically been attributed to industrialised workers. To reduce these exchanges to merely conditions of exploitation is to not fully appreciate the complexity of the social relations mediated by the digital.

The question then emerges of how to generate an economic model of these exchanges that can incorporate the agency and affect of users (see Lamla 2007). I will argue in this theoretical paper that Marxist Feminist theory, particularly that used to explain the

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economic role of domestic labour, offers a way out of this impasse. I will suggest that the neglect of these approaches has been an effect of a reliance on the work of Italian Autonomist Marxists, but in particular Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 2009) in which the contributions of feminist scholars are name-checked but not fully explored. Rather, there has been an assumption that the types of activities now exploited in digital media – affective, cognitive or immaterial labour – have only recently become essential to the circuits of production and thus to capitalist economics. Contrarily, feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972), Silvia Federici (2004) and importantly Leopoldina Fortunati (1995: 2007) assert that such work has always made an essential contribution to capitalist economics in the form of the domestic labour that has reproduced the labouring body and the labouring subject. Returning the models feminists have used for understanding domestic and affective labour offer useful tools to the analysis of digital media and allow for different insights into the nature of consumer exploitation.

This paper is thus concerned with exploring the impact of conceptualising this labour through the prism offered by Feminist Marxist thought. It will criticise the current framing of the social factory as a novel set of conditions, and outline the economic model of domestic labour defined by Fortunati in *The Arcane of Reproduction* (1995). This paper will argue that a renewed emphasis on the particularity of domestic labour is essential to a more complete understanding of how consumer labour is implicated in capitalism. This model allows for the persistence of use-values in the exploitative circuits of capital and in doing so, brings attention to the ways in which this labour is reproductive of social logics, including capitalist modes of being. The paper will focus throughout on meme sharing, such as the meme from which this paper draws its title, to provide examples of what is illuminated when Marxist Feminist theory is allowed to properly contribute to our understandings of consumer labour in digital media. In doing so it will show precisely what can be brought to the yard by a Marxist Feminist dialectic.

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