

VALUE, LABOUR, AND WORK IN CORPORATE SOCIAL MEDIA

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A Marxist Study of User-Generated Data and the Online Targeted Advertising Strategy from the Perspective of Production/Valorisation

Efstratios (Stratos) Kladis

Kladis-ef@hotmail.com

5939836

Supervisor: dr. Ingrid Hoofd

Second Reader: prof. dr. Frank Kessler

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Kladis-ef@hotmail.com

Από εκείνον τον Δεκέμβρη

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Abstract and Keywords

The goal of this thesis is to examine the targeted advertising model utilised by corporate social media such as Facebook and the specific way data are being produced by their users. Mine will be a discussion based on the Marxist *theory of value* and concepts such as *use* and *exchange value*, *work* and *labour*, and *alienation*. Two divergent approaches to user-generated data, both of which focus on the production/valorisation phase, will be considered: Christian Fuchs's '*digital labour*' thesis and David Harvey's '*free gifts*'. Although the latter does not directly refer to user-generated data, my slight reworking of it will make the connection obvious. These two distinct points of view essentially emerge from the question: *do user-generated data contain themselves value?* Fuchs says "yes"; Harvey says "no". I consider the latter to be more consistent with the peculiar character of user-generated data and the role that these play in the information capitalist mode of production. Consequently, a recast of my argument from the perspective of alienation—the feeling of estrangement caused by separating one from the products of her work—will further illustrate how the case of exploitation in corporate social media is more complex than the 'digital labour' (Fuchs's) thesis takes it to be. This is because the circulation of information among the users is being relatively unaffected by the circulation of information among the capitalists participating in the targeted advertising model, i.e. the social media platform and the third parties in need of promotion. The two spheres are *experientially disjointed*; the users of Facebook and the like cannot witness the nature and magnitude of exploitation taking place. Nevertheless, data and metadata are important raw materials which we should preserve and attempt to utilise alternatively.

* * *

Alienation, critical media studies, capitalist accumulation, Christian Fuchs, David Harvey, data, diaspora*, digital capitalism, Facebook, information capitalism, internet, Karl Marx, labour, Marxist theory, metadata, political economy of the media and communication, primitive accumulation, social media, targeted advertising, user-generated data, value theory, work, workers exploitation.

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I. Introduction

There is actually a way for you to predict the content of my thesis even without reading this introduction. If only you had access to my search engine entries, website visits, online text messages, and more, you would have already shaped a very clear idea about what is troubling me for the past couple of months. You might have wanted to help me by suggesting a relevant article or a seminar held near my area. You might have criticised my choice of framework or literature. Alternatively, you might have been more curious about why I spent half an hour the other day searching for aeroplane tickets. Since you are granted with such an insight, why not prioritise your benefit over mine? Maybe you have some tickets for sale yourself; maybe you know someone in this business; or maybe you collaborate with an airline company willing to pay you a fee for bringing them to my attention. Maybe you are Google or Facebook.

Whether you are an internet multinational enterprise or a simple user who does not care about anyone else's data than her own, you should be aware by now that every online 'click' we make produces bits of potentially profitable information. It is also no secret that, in our current socio-economic system, our preferences eventually lead us to purchase one or multiple commodities or services. Thus, contemporary media and network technologies give the potential sellers of those commodities the opportunity to promote their products not merely by 'guessing' who the recipient of their advertisement might be, as in the case of television. Interactive network technologies like the internet constitute the next chapter in marketing (see, for instance, Ofcom 2018, 76 or WARC 2018). Through them, entrepreneurs can make a step forward in more adequately identifying their target groups by consulting the users' past online activity—their digital profile.

This becomes possible by companies which intervene in and facilitate this process in a rather interesting fashion. What differentiates these companies' practices from traditional advertising is the fact that they do not only produce the digital equivalent of commercials, bulletins, and billboards, but also admittedly helpful services and applications. In many cases, these are also free of charge. And why would they not be? In this peculiar triangle, the 'real' transaction takes place between the networking companies and those in need of promotion. From this point of view, the users of Facebook, for instance, are just 'caught in the middle' (this is the case with 'two-sided markets'; see Financial Times 2018). They do not pay for the services they utilise; they rather exchange, consciously or not, their data for them.

These chunks of information regarding usually banal and everyday activities are worth next to nothing when taken individually. In their aggregated and analysed form though, as *metadata*, they are indispensable. "Metadata can be logically conceived as the 'measure' of information, the computation of its social dimension and its transformation into value" (Pasquinelli

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2015, 63). This form of information constitutes the basis of one of the most successful business plans of our times—the so-called online *targeted advertising* strategy. The outcomes of this strategy are some particularly insightful advertisements which appear in the cyberspace after users have made any kind of online ‘move’ indicating that they might be interested in a specific commodity or service. Having consulted the data collected by the corporate social media (or SNS) platforms, advertising messages from third parties appear on the users’ screens just in time for responding to those people’s presumed demands.

Variations of this plan, all subscribing to the commercial potentiality of user-generated data, have now found such a broad implementation (up to 90% according to Sandoval 2012) that have raised the question whether heavy industry is still the moving spirit of our economy or we have already moved to a kind of *information or digital capitalism*.

[I]s ours a new kind of society, as was capitalism, or is it just a form of capitalism, perhaps to be called informational capitalism? Are the forces of new communication and information technology so revolutionary that they are bringing about a radical restructuring that will lead to the transformation or even the dissolution of capitalism?

(Mosco [1996] 2009, 3)

Even a more modest approach to the relevance of network and information technologies, though, cannot but acknowledge what the industry knows only too well: “the term ‘data capital’ has been associated with data these days because, if exploited correctly, it can offer economical advantage, spur innovations, and generate revenue to enterprises” (Yousif 2015, 4). Data have quickly become not just another field of business activity but rather a foundation for most large-scale investments. No contemporary company goes very far without retaining and expanding its own databases, upon which its business endeavours are largely based. In some extreme cases, such as Facebook, data capital comes close to being the *only* non-human capital (see Wei 2016).

Along with the commercial exploitation of information, though, concerns regarding the theoretical groundings of such processes emerge. The concept that usually justifies private use (the right to ‘usufruct’) and ownership of goods is *private property* (PP) or, in the case of information, *intellectual private property* (IntPP). By now, entire libraries can be filled with dissertations on topics related to IntPP coming from lawyers, applied-ethicists, political scientists, or thinkers of various other disciplines trying to come up with a coherent theory capable of incorporating patents, trademarks, trade secrets, copyrights, and more. “The very phrase ‘intellectual property’ is a source of so much confusion. The phrase is as contested as it is ubiquitous. It stands in for a complex tangle of laws, policies, and values that govern the dissemination of ideas, expressions, inventions, creativity, and data collection” (Vaidhyanathan 2017, 32). How can we

then begin to talk about ‘data capital’ or ‘buying’ and ‘selling of information’ without first establishing a firm connection between information and property? Well, markets can be very impatient... On the other hand, one does not have to seek a monetary gain in order to be interested in understanding how information flows can be regulated. “[I]n a world where increasingly, data means power and money, we should also be asking ourselves the bigger question of who owns and controls our data—and how we can change this unequal relationship” (Ball 2018).

Speaking of a potentially critical approach to the media and information economy, a specific area of studies comes to mind. *Political economy of the media and communication* is a distinct branch of political theory occupied with “*the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of [information] resources*” (Mosco [1996] 2009, 2; emphasis in the original); or, in other words, the evaluation of “the effects of communication agencies in terms of the policies by which they are organised and operated” and the examination of “the structure and policies of these communication agencies in their social settings” (Smythe 1960, 564). Figures such as Christian Fuchs, Jonathan Hardy, Vincent Mosco, Janet Wasko, and the previous generation of Dallas W. Smythe, Graham Murdock, and Peter Golding have been occupied with the deconstruction of economic relations in media and network technologies. Their critique of contemporary information industries and their products is often dominated by references to the Marxist tradition of political and economic thought.

These references signify the extension of the Marxist theory to a field of study which has for long been considered one of Marxism’s weaker links. “The obvious starting point for a political economy of mass communications is the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (Murdock and Golding 1973, 205–6). Until this consideration was seriously taken into account, media and their by-products were generally considered part of the *ideological superstructure* (Marx [1859] 1987, 263; see Althusser [1970] 2014) and, thus, of secondary importance to Marxist political economy. This absence of a critique of media from the perspective of the *economic base* has often been referred to by media scholars as ‘the blind-spot of Western Marxism’ (Smythe 1977, 1994; Murdock 1978; Livant 1979; Jhally 1982). Analyses, such as those by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1973), paved the way inside the Marxist tradition for an understanding of information in equal terms with other, more tangible, forms of commodified goods. A few decades after the initial attempts of approaching the media sector in Marxist economic terms, there exists a plethora of well-thought-out such inquiries to consider (see also the discussion in Fuchs 2017, 55).

This constitutes only an example of how, two hundred years after Karl Marx’s birth (5th of May 1818) and one hundred fifty years after the publication of his magnum opus *Das Kapital* (1867), his theories still affect the contemporary academic debate as well as inspire radical

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political action. Especially after the global financial crisis of 2008 and the resurgence of the debate about wealth inequality and its consequences (see, for instance, Piketty and Goldhammer 2013),¹ many have argued that “*Marx Was Right*” (Vedder 2017; or, more extensively, Eagleton 2011). Likewise, in the domain of critical media and information studies, more than a few analysts would agree with Jean-Paul Sartre that “Marxism remains the philosophy of our time because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it” (1963; also quoted in Wasko 2014). These analysts advocate that a Marxist examination of media remains today not only possible but actually called for.

This is exactly the connection I will be pursuing in this thesis as well: to describe the practices of corporate social media utilising the targeted advertising strategy through the Marxist framework. More specifically, mine will be a discussion based on the Marxist *theory of value* and concepts such as *use* and *exchange value*, *work* and *labour*, and *alienation*. I will do this by considering two divergent approaches to user-generated data, both of which constitute part of the production/valorisation phase: Christian Fuchs’s ‘*digital labour*’ thesis and David Harvey’s ‘*free gifts*’. Although the latter does not directly refer to user-generated data, my slight reworking of it will make the connection obvious. These two distinct points of view essentially emerge from the question: *do user-generated data contain themselves value?* Fuchs says “yes”; Harvey says “no”.

The reader should be prompted that this is, to a large extent, an internal-to-Marxism debate and the term ‘value’ is used in such a very specific manner (more on that later). I will, thus, delve into both theories to show that the ‘free gifts’ approach of Harvey, as further developed by me, is ultimately more consistent with the peculiar character of user-generated data and the role that these play in the information capitalist mode of production. This will help me to show that ‘free gifts’ allow one the theoretical space needed for understanding user-generated data not as a product of organised labour but rather as an extremely important resource which is given away for ‘free’. At that point, I will also consider how both Fuchs and Harvey relate to the Autonomist Marxist tradition and Marx’s own concept of the “general intellect” ([1857–1858] 1987, 92).

Consequently, a recast of my arguments from the perspective of *alienation*—the feeling of estrangement caused by separating one from the products of her work—will further illustrate how the case of exploitation in corporate social media is more complex than the ‘digital labour’ (Fuchs’s) thesis takes it to be. This is because, as I will be arguing, the circulation of information among the users is being relatively unaffected by the circulation of information among the capitalists, i.e. the social media platform and the third parties in need of promotion. This creates an *experiential disjointedness* between the everyday use of the social media platforms and the

¹ Despite Piketty’s exaggerated claims that “[he] never managed to read [Marx]” (Chotiner 2014), there are definitely many instances of Piketty’s work which resonate with the Marxist discourse.

source of exploitation which cannot be made obvious unless one is exposed to the macroeconomic model utilised by Facebook and the like. Unless one faces, that is, how the user-generated data are now being manipulated as metadata, as “data [...] about other data” (merriam-webster.com 2018), and attempts to imagine a distinct and more fulfilling alternative, no broader case can be raised on the grounds of the everyday use of the platform.

I believe that this observation, if sound, should change the terms by which we can justify a socialist approach to user-generated data. The antagonisms of online information exchange do not take the form of a desperate struggle by impoverished and alienated proletarians who “have nothing to lose but their chains” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1970, 76). Social media do not have to be a bleak factory to be exploitative and users do not have to be poor and hopeless to be exploited. One can still be taken advantage of even though one is given an extraordinary tool, the Facebook platform, for instance, to work with. This is by no means an apologism for corporate social media and information capitalism but rather an attempt to describe the system without relying on preconceived discontents. There is something intuitively wrong about one or, at least, very few companies, having the sole control over the online communication scenery. Yet, diagnosing where and how the problem begins and how can it be remedied might not be as straightforward as it initially seems. If anything, Facebook did not become a monopoly by itself; users did support it and probably not merely because there were somehow coerced into doing so.

I will, thus, critically examine the online targeted advertising strategy of corporate social media while remaining openminded to the possibility of there actually existing something worth retaining about it. Not everything about corporate social media needs to be grim for us to pursue their radical change, and, if not everything about corporate social media turns out to be grim, we will at least have a simple explanation about why we are so eager to use them in the first place. Given that the online targeted advertising strategy is creative enough to, at least in this very specific context, overpass the need for separating the producer from the products of her work, i.e. the user from her data, I argue that any claim against Facebook cannot be grounded on the basis of the sense of estrangement caused to the individual user. Because, if there is a plane where users are actually separated from something, it is where their user-generated data are amassed and turned into something worth exploiting (and not the plane of the individual everyday experience). Since the potential of the metadata is what users are losing, this cannot but be a matter of public concern and collective counteraction.

For me, deciding on how, at the end of the day, we want to utilise our data and their by-products is nothing less than a question about how we want to utilise the resources available to us as a species—either those created by our environment alone, like fossil fuels or forests, or those specifically compiled by us, such as language, behavioural codes, etc. A common thread can be drawn between user-generated data and those resources only if we shift our attention

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from the possibility of a ‘rehabilitation’ of Facebook to the uppermost goal of creating, possibly from the ground up, alternatives which straightforwardly anticipate a more democratic economy.

In other words, I believe that whether one subscribes to the idea of collectively owned and controlled data should be determined not by the immediate experience of using the platforms as they are today, nor by the prospect of them being more adequately regulated, but from a solid understanding of what lies under corporate social media’s ‘hood’ and the alternatives which can be constructed thereafter. For better or worse, coming up with a full-blown such alternative goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Here, it is my sole goal to help in updating the Marxist framework for it to better depict the world of corporate social media and user-generated data. By no means I claim that, by doing so, I will also give answers to any of the challenges Marxist theory and practice still face—the need for a redefined state, democracy, technology, among others.

The structure of the present thesis is the following: I will set the stage for my argument by discussing my premises regarding the topic of user-generated data and by justifying the specific methodological point of view utilised—what is included, what is excluded, and why. I will, then, offer a detailed overview of the capitalist mode of production as conceptualised by Marx himself. How user-generated data become incorporated in this scheme will be defined thereafter. I will present both Fuchs’s ‘digital labour’ thesis and Harvey’s ‘free gifts’ and, through a fairly extensive examination of both, I will explain why I find the latter more adequate than the former in addressing the incorporation of user-generated data in the information capitalist mode of production. I will then consider the role which alienation plays for corporate social media and their users. To finish with, I will briefly speculate about a future alternative to corporate social media.

II. On My Methodology and Terminology

Some clarifications are first in order regarding my methodology and specific terms I will be using throughout this thesis. The circumstances under which users of corporate social media produce data and allow these to be commercially utilised by the platforms is such a vast and controversial issue that forces one to be very specific about the way she approaches it—especially when this happens in fewer than one hundred pages. My enquiry constitutes only one attempt of understanding the relatively new strategies involved in the online exchange of information of corporate social media like Facebook—taken, here, as an example par excellence. By no means, I consider my contribution exhaustive of even the processes described in a considerable detail. Thus, for avoiding any confusion, the reader is encouraged to pay close attention to this preparatory chapter. My very specific goals, assumptions, and limitations are, here, explained. (Some of those might sound a bit arbitrary at this moment because they are bound to the discussion that follows; this chapter can, thus, be read even as the very last one.)

Let me start by explaining the various terms related to private property included in this thesis. I use *private property* (PP) as the broadest possible category of appropriated material goods. I, here, employ the broadest possible definition of the term as any idea which demarcates the allocation and use of resources, be they purely material or not. I am distinguishing PP from resources that are yet untapped, completely unregulated, or undiscovered/unknown. *Individual private property* (IndPP), in contrast with *communal private property* (CPP), is constituted by goods that, when appropriated, are assigned to individuals instead of groups or communities.² The same distinctions apply when we transfer traditional concepts of private property to its intellectual counterpart. Thus, *intellectual private property* (IntPP) functions as the umbrella term; *individual intellectual private property* (IndIntPP) is information attributed to and controlled by individuals; and, finally, *communal intellectual private property* (CIntPP) approaches information as a public or communal good [these categories are inspired by the ones in (Rossi and Argenton 2017)].

I understand that some contexts might make such distinctions redundant. Nevertheless, having to go back and forth between PP and IntPP in multiple points of my analysis, I find it rather safe to incorporate them devoutly. Generally, I also consider them very helpful in addressing some common misconceptions. There exists, for instance, a line of thinking which conflates CPP with the idea of ‘the commons’—of an unregulated situation where people just ‘jump in’ at any moment and appropriate the resources available at will. Since none of the beneficiaries

² In this broad categorisation of mine, *public property*, i.e. the kind of property which is regulated by the state and destined to be used by its citizens falls under the CPP group.

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accommodates the replenishment of the goods constituting the common, this inevitably results in their extinction—the so-called ‘tragedy of the commons’ (see Forster Lloyd 1833; Hardin 1968). As any anthropologist would probably attest, this was ever hardly the case with the tribal societies which are usually taken as case studies while discussing ideas of CPP (see Brooks 2005). CPP does not indicate the absence of regulation but rather regulation which takes the sum of the community as its fundamental unit instead of the individual—a challenging but not impossible task. This forms only an example of how such specific categories may justify their use.³

When applied to the examination of information capitalism and its practices, these PP-related concepts resemble the following sequence—every category derives from the one on its left:

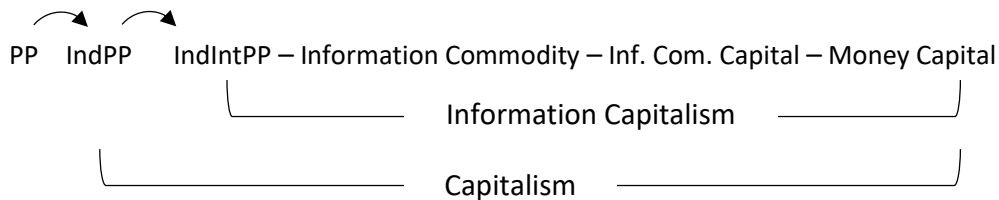


Figure 1 From private property to the information commodity and money capital: considering the theoretical groundings of information capitalism

Notice the two ‘jumps’ (indicated by the two curved arrows). These correspond to the two major theoretical movements necessary for creating the philosophical foundations of information capitalism. The first one, i.e. from ‘PP’ to ‘IndPP’, is rather crucial for establishing *any* form of capitalism. The second one, i.e. from ‘IndPP’ to ‘IndIntPP’, is specific to the exchange of information. Once these leaps are completed, the rest ‘merely’ follow; insofar as one equates information with IndPP, the journey from ‘IndIntPP’ to ‘Money Capital’ is assured by the very list of rights in which IndPP can be expanded (mainly by the right to commercially benefit from one’s property; see, for instance, Becker [1977] 2014, chap. “Property rights”).

Since the processes of production and valorisation of user-generated data in corporate social media will be my focus, I will generally only utilise the part of the sequence beginning at ‘IndIntPP’ and ending with the ‘Information Commodity Capital’. Extending further into the ‘phase of liquidation’, i.e. from ‘Information Commodity Capital’ to ‘Money Capital’, would require shifting my attention from the relation between the users and the platforms to that between the platforms and the third parties in need of promotion. This lies beyond the scope of my

³ According to this, even Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s idea of the ‘common’ (2009) is not really the ‘commons’, as in the ‘tragedy of the commons’, but rather a form of CPP.

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approach which is focused on the users themselves and the process of production/valorisation. Thus, since I will not delve into the stages of exchange or consumption of digital information, I will try to keep my occasional references to those as open to multiple conceptualisations as possible.

On the other hand, I cannot proceed any further without providing some more information about the entry point of my analysis: the liberal idea of 'IndIntPP'. This suggests that specific concepts which demarcate our relationship with purely physical objects/candidates-for-appropriation are also compatible with information. Such attempts to justify IndIntPP cannot but assume a firm connection between information and IndPP and, consequently, be based on influential conceptualisations of the latter. Thus, there exist: (a) theories, usually associated with G.W.F. Hegel, which consider ideas an immediate extension of one's personality, (b) utilitarian approaches, which ground IndIntPP on the basis of social advancement and innovation, and, lastly, (c) Lockean perspectives, which seek to justify IndIntPP through the concept of work (Hughes 1988; Moore 2008; also cited in Moore and Himma 2014). One can add to these the (d) social-planning theory (see: Fisher 2001).⁴ These four theories might disagree on what could be the most suitable justification for IndIntPP but, in one way or another, they all support the basic idea of surrounding specific bits of information with juristic 'fences', similar to those of purely material assets, and assigning them to individuals.

There has also been a large debate about what the consequences might be from attempting to incorporate both tangible and non-tangible, rivalrous and non-rivalrous goods under the same legal framework of IndPP. Information is so flexible, volatile, and easy to transmit that makes it extremely hard to assure over it a classical idea of property—the "sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe" (Blackstone 1765). The apparent 'disintegrating' effects which information has to property has led some to conclude that the "the advanced capitalist economies could easily do without using the term 'property' at all" but rather rely on a 'list-' or 'bundle-of-rights' (Grey 1980, 73). Others have jumped, though, to the concept's defence suggesting that exactly because property can evolve, expand and contract, it remains relevant (Epstein 2010; or more generally Mossoff 2003).

Put bluntly, my approach to this debate could be summarised as 'if it feels like property, then it probably is'. In our world of galloping concentration of wealth (see, for instance: Inequality.org 2018; Roser 2019), I do not see how anyone could justify a 'real' disintegration of property. I do understand that there might be some theoretical mismatches between information and the juridical or philosophical concept of property but, given the empirical evidence, we seem to be doing 'just fine' in practice. By that, I mean that, from a consequentialist perspective, the

⁴ Only to this latter approach Marx might have a connection (see Fisher 2001).

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enclosing of information seems to have the same results as that of any other resource. Since corporate social media are largely successful in claiming, accumulating, commodifying, and profiteering from user-generated data, it makes little difference for my analysis whether they do it on the grounds of a unified PP theory, separate PP rights, or of a notion which is indistinguishable from that of PP when it comes to our everyday practices and their effects. Even if user-generated data turn out to be anything but property, I cannot help but conclude that, at this very moment, they are controlled by notions which do not differ considerably from those of IndPP.

Having read Facebook's 'Terms of Service' (Facebook 2018), I found that all four of the above groups of theories are largely compatible with the idea of the user being able to accept Facebook's 'offer' and allow the platform to commercial utilise the data produced. I also do not think that other commercial social media platforms or internet companies in general considerably deviate from Facebook in that. This should come as no surprise since 'empowering' the individual to bargain in her own terms, about her own IndIntPP (her data), in a free-market context is what is generally considered to be a core aspect of the classical liberal approach to commerce (which is again compatible with all four of the above theories). Therefore, at least in this initial stage, I see no contradiction arising between any of those approaches and the 'contract' of corporate social media. As long as one is free to accept or decline, the liberal premise holds true. Later in my analysis, I will consider how this liberal 'contract' is eventually undermined by the fact that there exist only a handful of choices, if not only Facebook, when it comes to this specific kind of online communication. This is irrelevant, though, for this preparatory phase of my examination.

Going back to a potentially firm connection between information and IndPP, I must emphasise that, at least for the needs of this thesis, I am totally on board with approaching information as PP (in general). I am only critical about straightforwardly endorsing the individual perspective (IndPP). In other words, I do think that approaching information through PP can be fruitful and, more specifically, I also find this approach generally compatible with Marxist theory. Through PP, I am reading Marx himself. I suggest that all the passionate accusations fired against 'bourgeois property' (only in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* one can find more such indictments than one can handle; Marx and Engels [1848] 1970), in my terms, would target solely IndPP. I find it obvious that Marx was aiming at the abolition—or, more precisely, *dialectical supersedence*—of only this category of PP and not PP as defined by me here. I do not see how anyone can put forward any idea of societal planning, Marxists/socialists included, without relying on *some* sort of systematic appropriation of goods and resources (PP).

Unfortunately, references to ownership over information appear only in a scattered and obscure fashion in Marx's opus and usually only in relation to scientific knowledge. As far as I know, Marx did never discuss information in an immediate connection with PP—the same way he was generally reluctant to discuss anything in relation with PP as such. Nevertheless, I believe

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that his ideas are indeed compatible with my understanding of CPP. Especially when it comes to information/knowledge destined for productive use, I find it self-evident why, for Marx, this would constitute a free-for-all good. Passages such as the following I have in mind:

From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and, like *boni patres familias*, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.

(Marx [1894] 1998, 763; emphasis in the original)

Even when I carry out scientific work, etc., an activity which I can seldom conduct in direct association with other men—I perform a social, because human, act. It is not only the material of my activity—like the language itself which the thinker uses—which is given to me as a social product. My own existence is a social activity.

(Marx [1844] 1956, 77)

By describing one's entire 'existence' as 'a social activity', Marx positions himself as remotely as possible from any idea of *IndPP*. I do not see, though, why he (or me studying him) should have any problem with a form of appropriation which totally respects this idea of human social existence—treating information as a global public good.⁵

That being said, choosing to follow this path, i.e. approach information as PP, is, for me, more of an experiment than a definite claim about the nature of information. Especially when it comes to imagining alternatives, it is perfectly possible for someone else to conclude that what we now perceive as *IntPP* is not property at all and that we should organize flows of information according to completely different principles. A communal—or *communist*—approach to digital information, which I myself will be promoting through this contribution, has probably nothing to lose from such a conclusion in the long run. It is difficult to imagine an approach more hostile to communal ideals than that of a strict *IndPP*.

⁵ It is worth noting that information cannot be 'freer' than that because, in contrast to physical resources, it cannot exist in any form without human supervision and maintenance. This, if you may, is an extreme case of a 'tragedy of the commons': the moment information is left 'on its own', it instantly vanishes. Yet, this does not anyhow affect the situation where information can be freely exchanged and accessed by everyone given that care is taken in its storage.

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To sum up, PP and its derivatives, as utilised here, are *descriptive* of ideas and practices which, no matter how provisional, are already part of our lives. They can potentially be *normative* as well but only under the assumption that a theory of PP, be it IndPP or CPP, can indeed incorporate information. I am also accepting of the latter. Any critique against this assumption (as well as my choices to focus on questions of productivity/creativity, valorisation, class, and so on) is certainly a critique against the theoretical framework of my project, but not necessarily against its ultimate ambition for collectively controlled data and communication networks. The latter is also what fundamentally connects me with all the Marxist analysts discussed throughout this thesis, despite my occasional critique of some of the specific ways they apply Marx's concepts to contemporary phenomena.

One last bit of the liberal assumption that I am also willing to absorb is the depiction of buyers and sellers, in this case—users and representatives of corporate social media, as free-willing and rational juridical individuals. This happens solely for tactical reasons though. I believe that the situation with the online exchange of user-generated data is so structurally undemocratic that one does not have to include in her argument any kind of ideological coercion exercised by our contemporary corporate social media (see, for instance, the recent Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal; Ball 2018) to show that this sector has gone astray. Again, I am not saying that such enterprises are not being ideologically coercive but rather that, when this happens, it only adds to the picture I will be painting here. Why Facebook, among other internet behemoths, should not be allowed to continue working in the manner they do today can, for me, be easily shown by a simple economic-oriented argument. Facebook is a private monopoly (or at least a duopoly along with Google; see Garrahan 2016) and I do not think that *any* truly liberal, let alone socialist, political theory can really support that. Even if Facebook's algorithms were completely unbiased—they are not!—the fact that one single enterprise has access to such a tremendous and tremendously valuable quantity of data is by itself something to worry about and fight against no matter which of the two perspective one assumes.

Moreover, I think that there is a fragile balance to be struck by anyone playing the card of ideological coercion. At some point, I suppose, one would have to make a distinction between the forms of coercion which can be remedied by our existing socio-economic system and those whose resolution requires a more radical change. What would happen then? In my view, Facebook and the like only function the way they do because the expansion of their monetary gain is at stake (see the discussion in Murdock and Golding 1973, 223). If the latter could be ensured without a form of coercion, then, it probably would. I am openly sceptical about such a possibility though. I believe that the economic structure of contemporary social media has everything to do with the way these function. That is why I choose to focus on a question which would immediately arise from any attempt to radically reconfigure the corporate social media scene: given that there is essentially something wrong with the extreme concentration of data and power in

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corporate social media, what could generally be a more democratically organised form of creative online communication?

Hence, by denying myself the ‘extra help’ of a coercion-targeting argument, I also put a degree of pressure on the users-creators of information themselves. Setting aside any claims against Facebook on the grounds of its ‘darker’ ideological or even propagandistic instances, e.g. phenomena of online meddling, favouritism, discrimination, filter-bubbles, feedback loops, etc, clears the (theoretical) way for what I consider to be a question of utter importance: given the chance, how would we proceed with utilising the data (and metadata) to which we all contribute in a more fulfilling for us manner? I see limited benefit in a struggle for a coercion-free Facebook if the very socio-economic structure through which the platform operates is defective at its very core. Unless one expects that an ideological purification (whatever that might mean) of the platform will somehow also make it less of a monopoly or a more acceptable one—which I doubt—Facebook will continue to benefit to a greater or lesser degree from the data an enormous number of users produce. Is that acceptable under any circumstances? About this, I will argue, the users should mainly be wondering.

To be fair, though, since some kind of structure for creative online communication would presumably take Facebook’s place if the latter was to disappear, one could argue that ideological coercion will still be lurking. In that regard, discussing those issues today will be helpful in avoiding them tomorrow as well. Here, lies one more assumption of mine. Judging from present alternatives to Facebook, like the diaspora* collectively owned and decentralised social network (<https://diasporafoundation.org/>), I find that one’s concerns when leaving the world of corporate social media shift dramatically. This is obviously not an argument about prioritising the economy over concerns of another nature but rather an agnostic realisation that what lies beyond an entire reconstruction of the online communication scene is hard to predict. I anticipate that a more democratic internet, in terms of its economic structure, cannot but be a less ideologically coercive internet and this I consider enough for putting emphasis on the former. Hence, I choose to prioritise a more economy-oriented argument because (a) I think that creating a different platform from the ground up is necessary (and more feasible than rehabilitating Facebook) and because (b) I admittedly cannot predict which of the ideological deficiencies of today will persist after the online communication scene has been radically changed—if it hopefully does.

For similar reasons, I will also be leaving aside, for the time being, the very popular discussion on digital privacy. I will eventually acknowledge its significant role in the struggle for a more democratically controlled online communication scene but not use it as a way of pushing forward any of my main arguments. Since a question about the utilisation of the resources available to us as a species, digital information included, lies at the core of my enquiry, privacy concerns are only complementary to it. They can certainly create the ‘safe space’ needed for asking

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such questions but cannot immediately answer them. In this context, I will argue, privacy is more of a means to an end instead of an end in itself.

To finish, one should keep in mind that all the agents and processes discussed here are products of personifications and modelisations respectively. This is an openly reductionist approach. Each term used indicates only a moment—a snapshot, if you may—of an entire socio-economic ecosystem. A ‘capitalist’ or a ‘proletarian’ remain true to their depictions (or the Marxist depictions) as long as they are inclined to behave as such within the capitalist mode of production. Under different circumstances, a ‘capitalist’ can be a loving spouse, a devoted fan, a compulsive gambler, or what have you. When she does remain loyal, though, to the demands of the current socio-economic system, and to the extent that the Marxist analysis of this mode is generally valid, the ‘capitalist’ should be expected to behave as such. The same goes for the process of production itself. The capitalist mode of production, as presented here, constitutes an abstraction. Anyone who has worked even a single day in her life, or know people who have, could argue that things have happened differently. They have happened differently for me as well. Yet, when I try to see beyond the specificities of each case and think about what all these admittedly diverse experiences might have in common, I do see truth in the Marxist reductive formulations.

To recap, here is a list of the main assumptions/limitations of my enquiry (in the same order presented above):

- A valid connection between information and PP (under my definition) is implied both in a descriptive and normative manner.
- I will approach user-generated data from the perspective of the user—individually and as a totality or class—and the relevant mode of production/objectification/valorisation.
- I will try to avoid preconceived accusations about this mode. If the online targeted advertising strategy is indeed so innovative, it is possible that it has already outgrown parts of our critique and/or even our analytical tools themselves.
- Users will be approached as largely autonomous and critical beings, as always being capable of reflecting on their actions and changing them. If anything, this is a tactical choice aiming at putting pressure both to the liberal theories, from which it derives, and the users who have rested assured that a truly democratic information capitalism is possible.
- The political economy of the media and communication largely constitutes my framework of choice.
- Digital privacy concerns will be acknowledged but not be made part of my core argument. From my perspective, these are means to an end and not ends in themselves.
- I will largely rely on abstractions; the Marxist personifications and modelisations of the phenomena I will be examining.

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Some of those choices are inspired by the assumptions which Marx himself shoulders in the first volume of *Capital*, according to David Harvey's reading of the text (2010).

Concluding, I should make a final brief clarification regarding the use of the terms: 'information', 'knowledge', and 'data'. These are being utilised almost interchangeably. One may notice that: 'information' is being employed during the most abstract parts of the discussion; 'knowledge' is usually preceded by the word 'human'; and 'data' is mostly referring to digital applications. These, though, are merely soft distinctions based on the everyday use of those words. On the other side of the spectrum of property, purely 'physical', 'material', or 'tangible' goods are simply those which do not incorporate any IntPP component. Certainly, a kind of knowledge has affected the formation of every physical object and vice versa; the two are dialectically connected for sure (see Marx [1867] 1975, 187). Yet, there is a separation to be made when, for instance, one is given a newspaper and a blank piece of paper: both are material, but, at least in the Marxist view I will employ, only the former transfers a form of value to its recipient which can possibly extend beyond the mere physicality of the paper-medium.

III. Theoretical Framework: Marx on the Capitalist Mode of Production

Since the Marxist political economy of the media and communication is my choice of framework, I cannot but begin with an overview of how the process of capitalist accumulation was originally conceptualised by Karl Marx himself. This will not only help me to discuss, in the following chapter, the role that user-generated data play in this process but also initiate the discussion on value and digital information in general. As I have already indicated, deciding on how users' data relate to the Marxist concepts of value and surplus value is of absolute importance for anyone trying to imagine a Marxist response to our current corporate social media scene. Whether one chooses to side with Christian Fuchs and approach the users of corporate social media as exploited labourers or with my interpretation of David Harvey and think of user-generated data as resources external—but essential—to the organised mode of production, is defined by this very basic discussion on value and the capitalist mode of production. The reader who is already familiar with the latter may consider skipping this chapter.

A. Value, Use Value, and Exchange Value

“Capital is [...] value in motion,” concludes David Harvey in his close reading of Marx (2010, 90; see also Marx [1867] 1975, 164). If there is one thing that this definition makes clear is that capital is not a thing or sum of things, but rather the process of their production, circulation, and consumption as values (in a general sense).⁶ In Marx's own words, “[v]alue is [...] a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things” ([1867] 1975, 85). In addition, these values are not natural or inherent to the articles themselves, but only attributed to them by the society in question ([1867] 1975, 81–94). This process of production is both *materialist*, in the sense that tangible resources and human labour need to be invested in the creation of goods, but also, in a sense, *idealist*, because these goods mean nothing unless humans perceive them as essential for their lives. According to Marx, the value of an object/commodity is the “socially necessary labour time” for its creation and maintenance—always taking into account the technological and

⁶ There exist many eminent theorists who use ‘capital’ and ‘wealth’ as synonyms (see, for instance, Piketty and Goldhammer 2013). It is perfectly clear that this is not the case with Marx though. For the latter, even money is not capital unless it becomes incorporated in the process of its own propagation—“money which begets money” (Marx [1867] 1975, 166).

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cultural circumstances ([1867] 1975, 49).⁷ A more extended definition, taking into account more references, equates value with “socially necessary alienated labour” or “the social labour we do for others as organised through commodity exchanges in competitive price-fixing markets” (Harvey 2017, 195, 4).

We, thus, immediately confront two more ‘values’: *use* and *exchange value*.⁸ I will discuss them in that order.

“The utility of a thing makes it a use value” (Marx [1867] 1975, 46). No matter how many hours were spent in its formation, nobody would show interest in an item which does not “[meet] a human want, need, or desire” (Harvey 2010, 16). There exists an indissoluble bond between the usefulness of things and their production as such: only humans understand their necessities and only humans can strive for fulfilling exactly those (Marx [1867] 1975, 48–51). No matter what kind of aspirations we are trying to fulfil, the mere fact that we need to manipulate articles external to our bodies puts us face to face with their distinct use values. Would an apple be enough to take the edge off my hunger or do I need a ‘proper’ meal? Is this the type of housing that would support my everyday activity? What kind of music do I enjoy listening to? These and similar questions cannot be addressed without approaching things as use values.⁹ These are the aspects that make articles generally desirable and, for this to be the case, it means that someone already took into consideration our needs when creating them (in case it was not us who made them for ourselves).

The use value of objects is, then, the most straightforward, fundamental, and maybe ‘honest’ of their aspects. It is the feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment we all receive when we utilise or absorb goods which are crucial to our existence as human beings. They might vary from time-to-time and place-to-place, but, as a category, they have always been with us and they will probably continue so (Marx [1867] 1975, 133; see also Harvey 2017, 10). In contrast to value and

⁷ From this perspective, Marx might seem to align himself with David Ricardo’s *labour theory of value*. Both have been heavily critiqued for choosing labour as the measure of value or even declared outdated by multiple contemporary (political) economists. Hopefully, the more I delve into my analysis the clearer it will become that Marx’s theory of value is not as restrictive as Ricardo’s and, by expanding on Marx’s theory, one would certainly have a lot to say about our contemporary socio-economic phenomena (see Harvey 2018b).

⁸ Working with these concepts would be easier if the term ‘value’ was defined by Marx the way ‘*use value*’ and ‘*exchange value*’ are—using two words instead of one. Nevertheless, it was not. The unfamiliar-with-Marxism reader should, thus, be very careful not to understand ‘value’ as an umbrella term and the rest two as derivatives. All three concepts are certainly connected but not in the sense that any of those necessarily constitutes some sort of more specific version of the other; they rather exist *in parallel*.

⁹ It is worth noting that, since use values are not quantifiable as their socially necessary labour time is, they cannot function as a standard for measuring desires but rather as a way of understanding their role for the economy in purely qualitative terms.

A. Value, Use Value, and Exchange Value

exchange value, use value is, thus, the only of the three concepts which extends beyond capitalism.

For this reason, it is also possible to have use value (which is understood as universal) without value (which is specific to the capitalist mode of production); useful things, that is, which are not commodities (Marx [1867] 1975, 51–52). The fact that we need to consider the usefulness of things when we build them, does not mean that useful things, like air, water, and fertile soil, cannot be found ‘by accident’ in our environment without our intervention. Yet, in their initial form, most resources are of limited help to our species because we need to somehow process or transform them to enjoy them.

Therefore, use values are not restricted to individual consumption. The same way each of us utilises and absorbs objects, any productive process does it too:

Such productive consumption is distinguished from individual consumption by this, that the latter uses up products, as means of subsistence for the living individual; the former, as means whereby alone, labour, the labour power of the living individual, is enabled to act. The product, therefore, of individual consumption, is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption, is a product distinct from the consumer.

(Marx [1867] 1975, 193, see also [1867] 1975, 287)

As Marx points out, people do not only consume for their immediate own sake, they also engage in a distinct mode of consumption whose uppermost goal is to produce more complex objects. The latter are, then, either consumed by the producers themselves, given to others for free, or exchanged for something which also bears value.

But what happens when one creates an object for someone else to enjoy and then ask for a return? Through the exchange of goods in a market situation, exchange value manifests itself. This is why the exchange value of goods is so important for capitalism. First off, engaging in exchange does not alter the fact that time needs to be invested in bringing all the raw materials together and, through some form of planning, transforming them into something useful. The difference is that, while earlier we could assume that the producer and user overlap or are, at least, very closely related, we now witness an increasing distance between them.

This has also a similar effect to the way they perceive value. When the allocation of goods does not happen within a limited network of trusty co-workers, members of the same tribe, or even relatives, but is rather turned into a neutralised procedure during which people meet solely for the purpose of exchanging products, exchange value tends to dominate. The latter relates only to the impact articles have as trade goods; as objects measured against other objects in a

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well-established system of exchange. “As use values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use value” (Marx [1867] 1975, 48).

Labour, on the other hand, is turned from *concrete*, when it aimed to immediately fulfil use values, to *abstract*, now that the products are destined for trade (Marx [1867] 1975, 68).¹⁰ When items are acquired through the market, their new owners, not having an immediate relation with the process of production, can only speculate about the time spent in that process and the conditions under which this operates. With exchange value, an additional layer of mediation is inserted between consumption and production, between use value and value. The exchange value of a good constitutes, thus, only an attempt by agents who did not necessarily contribute to the goods’ formation of imagining their cost in terms of labour time. For this reason, abstract labour is purely quantitative in nature (Marx [1867] 1975, 55).

A tension also emerges between use and exchange value—these two distinct aspects of the same object. In purely material goods, neither of those can manifest itself without excluding the other; use and exchange value constitute “bilateral polar opposites” (Marx [1859] 1987, 326). In order for one to sell one’s jacket, one needs to stop wearing it first. If that individual is, now, indeed successful in trading the jacket, only through the same process can she get it back. Later I will show how this is only partly relevant to non-rivalrous goods, such as information. Generally, though, use and exchange value can indeed be considered antagonistic to each other and, in capitalism, always bound to value. The three of them, i.e. value, use value, exchange value, constitute a *dialectic triangle* (see: Fuchs 2014, 51) crucial for a Marxist understanding of the capitalist system.

I want to call the reader’s attention to the fact that, although I began talking about the exchange value of products, I do not mean their price in money. The Marxist magnitude of value, which is always measured in labour time (hours), is bound to the process of production; price, or the money-name of commodities, on the other hand, is only the outcome of successful exchange.¹¹ In other words, if exchange value is a representation of labour time, then *price is a representation of a representation. Price is the money-name of exchange value which, in turn, is an estimation of its value in terms of ‘socially necessary labour time’* (see Marx [1867] 1975, 111).

¹⁰ The categories of ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract labour’ can be more easily defined in English as simply ‘work’ and ‘labour’ respectively. Marx, originally writing in German, he used the word ‘Arbeit’ for both and had to further specify (see: Marx [1867] 1975, 57, fn. 1; Fuchs and Seignani 2013, 240).

¹¹ The reason why Marx, in the first volume of *Capital* and elsewhere, uses money to compare the values of products is because he has already assumed “that commodities are sold at their value” ([1867] 1975, 519). In that case, differentiating between prices and labour time is less important because the one is a faithful reflection of the other. For my analysis, though, which does not extend to the realm of exchange and liquidation, there is no reason to make such an assumption or equate value and price.

A. Value, Use Value, and Exchange Value

In fact, my entire analysis here, as well as Marx's in the first volume of *Capital* upon which I am heavily drawing, is not particularly interested in questions of price formation. Value becomes relevant when the 'supply and demand' model (the usual justification for the fluctuation of price) finds itself in equilibrium (Marx [1867] 1975, 538). *Value is price's 'centre of gravity'*. Assuming that products are acquired by the consumers in the same rate they are created by the producers, the discussion on value as labour time aims to answer the question: 'why shoes generally cost x and cars cost *one-hundred times x* ?' The answer, for Marx, is simply: 'because the production of shoes can be one-hundred times faster than that of cars' (including the time needed to produce and maintain all the specialised equipment needed in both cases). Marx's value theory seeks to justify why, at any moment, we would be reluctant to pay as much for a pair of shoes as for a car, although some specific market configuration might have raised the price of shoes to that of cars. For Marx, the point of equilibrium is not the mere outcome of the forces of supply and demand; it is rather the point when the true value of the article in question—its socially necessary labour time—rises to the surface.

B. The Formula of Capitalist Accumulation

Not being specifically interested in price formation does not mean, though, that money in general is not a category of significant importance for the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production. And how could it not be? Marx fully acknowledges that the accumulation of money is nothing less than the driving force of capital. Money turns goods into commodities, into quantifiable versions of themselves; liquidation is the uppermost goal of the capitalist mode of production. Value, though, is what enables us to break the process of commodity production/valorisation open.

As already mentioned, exchange value implies a well-established system of commerce. This can be further analysed as a socio-economic configuration which allows an x amount of a good A to be traded for a y amount of a good B . In the most advanced form of such a system, capitalism being *the* case, both commodities A and B can be translated into a definite amount of an abstract commodity C whose only use is to enable the exchange by universalising it. Commodity C is, then, the *universal equivalent*; any commodity entering the market can and must be traded for a definite amount of this common currency. In our contemporary situation, money, i.e. euros, dollars, yens, or what have you, is the specific social manifestation of this universal equivalent. It should be obvious why the latter, since it can be exchanged for literary any other product, constitutes the most powerful commodity. Money is a defining aspect of the capitalist system as a whole and, more specifically, the measure of success of the individual capitalist

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(personified as such). Therefore, entrepreneurs are mostly interested in this very aspect of commodities that represents and enables their transmissibility: their money-form.

Such transmissibility of commodities also fosters the expansion of the capitalist system. This, for Marx, constitutes the process of *capitalist accumulation*. This is a highly formalised procedure through which money, the most powerful form of capital, expands (Marx [1867] 1975, pt. II. “The Transformation of Money into Capital”).

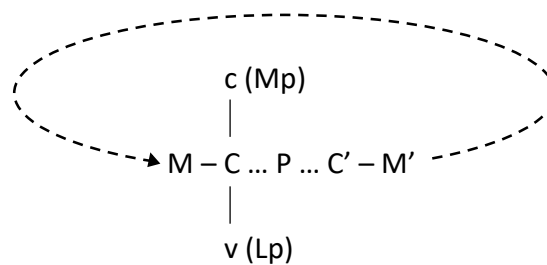


Figure 2 Karl Marx's process of capitalist accumulation in its simple form

The above formula indicates that from the point of having an initial amount of *money capital* (M), the capitalist is able to augment it ($M' = M + \Delta M$; Marx [1867] 1975, 161). To do this, the capitalist has first to invest her money in purchasing the *means of production* or *constant capital* (Mp or c) which usually take the form of tools, machinery, buildings, or, generally, technologies of any sort upon which production can be based. These are rather useless, though, unless someone puts them to work. Hence, the capitalist is also required to invest in another commodity which is fundamentally different than that of the means of production: *human labour power* or *variable capital* (Lp or v). Obtaining human labour power presupposes not only a well-established currency and market, as it is generally true with exchange values, but a situation where the buying and selling of one's ability to work have also become a regularity (Marx [1867] 1975, 179).

Moving forward, when these two commodities, i.e. Mp and Lp , come together in the *process of production* (P)—are put under productive use—they result in a *commodity capital* of higher value than themselves ($C' > C$). When C' becomes successfully liquidated, i.e. goods are being sold in the market, the capitalist ends up with more money capital than she initially invested. Finally, the process is repeated: the M' of the previous cycle becomes the M of the next

B. The Formula of Capitalist Accumulation

one and so on. This completes the ongoing process of capital circulation (in its relatively simple form and as observed solely from the perspective of production/valorisation).¹²

It is now worth describing in more detail the production process (*P*) itself. How does *C* turn into *C'* really? For Marx, the prerequisite for capital's increase is the labour power commodity. While the lifeless means of production are being gradually consumed in the process of production and, thus, transfer their entire value straight to the final product (Marx [1867] 1975, 214),¹³ *labour power ends up adding to the outcome more value than labour power initially cost* (Marx [1867] 1975, 219).¹⁴ In other words, for this scheme to thrive, the worker must produce more than she herself receives in the form of wage. This extra is called *surplus labour*—producing, in turn, *surplus value*—to be differentiated from the *necessary labour* during which the labourer is, in theory, occupied with the reproduction of her own existence (Marx [1867] 1975, 205–6). “All surplus value [...] is in substance the materialization of unpaid labour. The secret of the self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people's unpaid labour (Marx [1867] 1975, 534)”

If we take a single man-hour as our example, then the first thirty minutes might result in the production of goods equal to a value depicted by the labourer's salary while the rest thirty minutes would result in goods whose value is being appropriated by the capitalist. The labourer does not have the option of leaving the workplace or taking a break after the means of her own survival have been accomplished; she must continue to produce for the capitalist as well. If the labourer chooses not to, then the capitalist, not being a labourer herself, has no way of making either the necessary for her own survival or the capital needed for the maintenance and expansion of her business. This puts the two, i.e. the proletariat and the capitalist, in a constant antagonism over the necessary/surplus labour ratio (Marx [1867] 1975, chap. X. “The Working Day”).

¹² This is obviously a simplified version of capitalist accumulation lacking many important aspects: e.g. concerns regarding the ‘effective demand’ (see: Keynes [1936] 1997) on both production and circulation, the redistribution of *M'* in wages, taxes, rent, etc, or the ‘free gifts’ that the capital receives from nature/human nature. From these, only the latter are relevant to my argument about user-generated data and will be considered later.

¹³ This method of estimating the value transferred to the production process from the gradual wearing out of the means of production which Marx, here, employs is still used in accounting today. It is generally known as the ‘straight line depreciation’ model (for more information, see Bragg 2017).

¹⁴ Note here that, if I wanted to be perfectly consistent, I should have formulated this last phrase in the following manner: “labour power ends up adding to the outcome more value *than the goods corresponding to the labourer's wage require for their production.*” This would more accurately describe the series of layers value goes through while finding its way in a market economy like the capitalist one (value → exchange value → price or money-form). Yet, it is sometimes more convenient during the discussion to eliminate some of the stages of this sequence and treat ‘price’ as a synonym for ‘value’ despite the fact that the latter is only an instance of the former (see fn. 11 of the existing document).

III. Theoretical Framework: Marx on the Capitalist Mode of Production

From the above description, two basic equations can be extracted. The first describes the *value* (V') of any produced commodity and is equal to the sum of the constant capital (c), variable capital (v), and profit or surplus value (p ; Marx [1867] 1975, 222):

$$V' = c + v + p$$

The second equation encapsulates the struggle over the composition of the working day. The *rate of surplus value* or *rate of exploitation* (e) is the ratio of unpaid or surplus labour time (s) to paid or necessary labour time (v ; Marx [1867] 1975, “The rate of surplus value”):

$$e = s / v$$

To finish with, a further classification of surplus value can be made on the basis of its source: *absolute* and *relative surplus value* (Marx [1867] 1975, chpt. XII. “The Concept of Relative Surplus Value”). The former describes any pay-less “prolongation of the working day” while the latter, and more elaborate, “the curtailment of the necessary labour time” (Marx [1867] 1975, 320). Relative surplus value, thus, indicates any attempt of increasing the rate of exploitation by reducing v instead of increasing s .

Relative surplus value is extremely important for understanding the role which information, user-generated data included, plays for our contemporary socio-economic system. Why this is the case will be shown in the next subsection.

C. Surplus Value Without Value

As a contribution to the relative surplus value can be considered any attempt to utilise the means of production more efficiently. For instance, this can occur from a rearrangement of the workflow within a department of business, a training of the personnel in new methods, a purchase of a more technologically advanced tool, or (most relevant to the case of user-generated data) a utilisation of resources which are ‘up for grabs’. The situation becomes even more interesting when these new materials or techniques cost, in terms of value at least, no more than the ones being replaced or even nothing at all (Marx [1867] 1975, 52, 389–90). When this is the case, we confront the very peculiar case of *more surplus value being extracted from the production process while the total value employed remains the same or even decreases*.

C. Surplus Value Without Value

This is unique to all the methods and materials that, although extend the extraction of surplus value, they themselves add no more value to the production process because they require no more extra labour time (or no labour time at all) to be created. They manipulate the outcome of the existing labour power and means of production without anyhow adding to their value. A new machine which makes production faster might itself take as much time to be created as the previous one. The value of both is the same (since the same time has been invested in their creation) but the newer one is obviously more beneficial for the course of production, thus, the extraction of surplus value. Tweaking the schedule so workers can better combine with each other does not necessarily require employing them for more hours or increasing their salary. Similarly, utilising a resource, like air or sea water, upon which labour time needs not to be invested—other than that of its extraction or gathering—adds to the production process no further value. This latter case is the most relevant for user-generated data. It also exemplifies a situation where not only surplus value, but also productive use value can occur without there being value to begin with. Any such gains go straight into the pocket of the capitalist as a surplus value (or profit, when it eventually becomes liquidised).

Such advantages only become exhausted when other entrepreneurs incorporate similar techniques or resources in their own businesses and the entire market becomes eventually adjusted to this new reality (Marx [1867] 1975, 322).¹⁵ This corresponds to the ‘socially necessary’ part of value. *Temporality* plays a defining role in this peculiar instance of something giving an excess of surplus while not containing itself more value. *Spatiality* is of equal importance when uneven access to such resources due to geographical limitations becomes relevant.

Put simply, working with contemporary materials and technologies yields more surplus than working with outdated means. Competition demands constant innovation. From that perspective, value is bound to the level of technological advancement in the current place and era as well as the resources available (see the discussion on “moral depreciation” in Marx [1867] 1975, 407–8). We should always keep in mind that any straightforward comparison between values can only be made when such differences, caused by its time and space displacements, are either non-existent or negligible. Hence, Marx’s theory of value is rather useless as an accounting tool: one cannot appreciate the course of one’s business knowing that the value of the assets or products is unique to any given moment and place. To what extent other approaches have

¹⁵ In Marx, there is also a more polemic version of this argument:

This is so very true that the trail-blazers generally go bankrupt, and only those who later buy the buildings, machinery etc., at a cheaper price make money out of it. It is therefore, generally the most worthless and miserable sort of money capitalists who draw the greatest profit out of all the new developments of the universal labour of the human spirit and their social application through combined labour.

(Marx [1894] 1998, 106)

III. Theoretical Framework: Marx on the Capitalist Mode of Production

bypassed this impasse is still open to discussion but goes beyond the scope of my enquiry. Since contributing to a critical political economy of the media and not accounting is the goal of this thesis, such issues are of secondary importance (see also Harvey 2017, 63–64).

What does that mean though? What can a discussion based on Marx's idea of value do that one on price cannot? As already indicated, value is an attempt to grasp the very essence of capitalist mode of production. Not everything about capitalism can be discussed through the notion of value, but capitalism cannot exist without producing and exploiting value. Many activities or resources can contribute to the production of surplus value, and as such they are of vital importance for the system, but value always functions as a base for such additional gains. This is, at least, Marx's thesis in the first volume of *Capital*.

Such a view enables us to formulate a solid critique against capitalism and to start imagining alternatives. The very discussion on 'surplus value which does not have value' constitutes such an 'exit point'. It constitutes both one of the most extremely debated topics in Marxist theory and the most popular idea among Marxists for establishing a counter-plan to capitalism. In the original text, though, only the purely material aspect of this discussion is given enough attention. The way capitalism incorporates information or knowledge in the production of surplus value is far less developed. The following is an oft-cited passage from the 'Fragment on Machine' in *Grundrisse* which indeed considers the "general intellect":¹⁶

Nature does not construct machines, locomotives, railways, ELECTRIC TELEGRAPHS, SELF-ACTING MULES, etc. They are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of man's will over Nature, or of man's activity in Nature. They are *organs of the human mind which are created by the human hand*, the objectified power of knowledge. The development of fixed capital shows the degree to which society's general science, KNOWLEDGE, has become an *immediate productive force*, and hence the degree to which the conditions of the social life process itself have been brought under the control of the GENERAL INTELLECT and remoulded according to it. It shows the degree to which the social productive forces are produced not merely in the form of knowledge but as immediate organs of social praxis, of the actual life process.

(Marx [1857–1858] 1987, 92; emphases in the original)

This is literally the only time in Marx's opus that a connection to human knowledge is pursued (see Smith 2013, 35). The amount of theory that such a single reference has inspired, though, is

¹⁶ In the *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works* series published from 1975 to 2004 by 'International Publishers' cited here, the "Fragment on Machine" has been assigned the title of "Fixed Capital and the Development of the Productive Forces of Society" (Marx [1857–1858] 1987, 80–98).

just astounding. I will give my own take on this concept (and the bibliography involved) after I first show how the basic discussion on value can be applied to user-generated information.

The goal of these initial sections was, thus, to establish the basic concepts of the Marxist discourse and prepare the ground for connecting these to digital information. I will stop here for now. The discussion will be carried on after all the concepts defined so far have been discussed specifically in relation with user-generated data. My very last deviation gives a brief account of the origins of capitalist accumulation (which will also be picked up later).

D. The Origins of Capitalist Accumulation

But where did the capitalists find their very first money anyway? How was the capitalist mode of production described so far initiated? For Marx, *primitive accumulation* signifies this exact historical procedure through which the initial amount of capital, needed at the ‘kick-off’ of industrial capitalism, was acquired ([1867] 1975, pt. VIII. "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation"). It describes the deceitful separation of the agricultural populations of feudalism from their privately owned and cultivated land. This not only facilitated the transfer and centralization of resources to the hands of a few powerful men but also helped in the formation of a mass that had nothing to benefit from other than their sole ability to work—the *proletariat*. This ability was, then, ‘welcomed’ by the industrial capitalists in return for wages—monetary compensations for the time which the proletarian spent working under the command of the capitalist and utilise the latter’s privately-owned means of production. The exploitation and liquidation of this ‘stolen’ PP are what gave the means for the establishment of the capitalist mode of production in its primary form.

For some Marxist theorists, though, primitive accumulation does not stop, as Marx seems to suggest, when the capitalist mode of production is thoroughly implemented. Harvey, inspired by Rosa Luxemburg’s discussion on imperialism ([1913] 2003), puts forward a hybrid understanding of primitive accumulation which is as relevant today as it has ever been. He suggests that capitalism still can and does utilise aspects of primitive accumulation depending on the situation it finds itself in. The concept of *accumulation by dispossession* (references can be found throughout Harvey’s work: 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2010; in relation to media, see: Böhm, Land, and Beverungen 2012; Ekman 2016) succeeds in explaining, among others, contemporary capitalist practices during which resources that comprise small IndPPs (or are still utilised in some non-capitalist way) are forcefully converted to centralised capitalist assets. Through privatisation, commodification, financialisation, creation and management of crises, and questionable state interventions, global capital manages to ever increase its ranks while disempowering its non-capitalist ‘competitors’. Even the entire exploitation of surplus value, can, according to Harvey, be thought of as being part of accumulation by dispossession strategy (Harvey 2010, 311).

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(The attentive reader might have already realised that the formulas offered earlier derive from the basic discussion on value and its exploitation and not from matters regarding e.g. primitive accumulation, the time/space-specificity of value, or the general intellect. This is perfectly understandable, given that addressing such matters does not include—or *cannot* include—precise estimations of the magnitudes involved. The basic formulas, according to Marx [and the Marxists], help us approach the essence of the capitalist mode of production in its primary form to the extent it can be presented in an algebraic form. Many more relevant Marxist ideas exist, though, and should be taken into account, despite the fact that they cannot be quantified.)

IV. Analysis: User-Generated Data and Capital

Let me now move to user-generated information. In what follows, all the concepts and formulas reviewed in the previous chapter will be further developed specifically in relation to user-generated data. I will start by addressing what I consider to be the most straightforward part: how user-generated data originally became a part of capital. I will, then, move to discuss two fundamentally distinct ways of understanding the role which user-generated data play in the process of capitalist accumulation itself. These are the ‘digital labour’ thesis of Christian Fuchs and the ‘free gifts’ approach of David Harvey. As it will eventually become clear, I find the latter more adequate than the former, and it is through the latter that I will pursue my own arguments later on. Yet, Fuchs’s Marxist analysis of corporate social media is still, to the best my knowledge, the most comprehensive of its kind. As such I will utilise it as the starting point of my own inquiry.

A. How User-Generated Data Pertain to Primitive Accumulation

A process similar to that of primitive accumulation of physical resources was arguably already completed in user-generated data when companies such as Facebook, Google, or their predecessors took advantage of the technologies (some of them developed by the companies themselves) which facilitated the production of these data.¹⁷ In this case, though, no immediate dispossession of anyone’s IndPP seems to have taken place. No such system as ‘information feudalism’ existed before the act of the initial amassing of information produced in digital environments. One can certainly suggest that a form of socially aggregated knowledge—communal or tribal wisdom—played a defining role for the communities of Mediaeval Europe or, alternatively, tribal societies which existed during the same era around the globe. An argument can be made, then, along the lines of today’s information being an extension of such communal wisdom which obviously should not belong to anyone in particular but rather constitute the stock of the entire human race. Unfortunately, though, I believe that the connection between communal wisdom and user-generated data is not that self-evident.

To begin with, it is clear that when user-generated data (in the exact form discussed here) became a possibility, capitalism had already been ‘the only game in town’. By appropriating users’ data, information capitalism seems to take with one hand what specific network

¹⁷ Here, although I am taking into account the development of the internet technology during the past few decades, for the sake of keeping the ‘pre-information capitalism’ part of my analysis as brief as possible, I will not include references to specific events (for a summary of internet history from a Marxist perspective, see Bolaño and Vieira 2015).

IV. Analysis: User-Generated Data and Capital

technologies, children of the same system, give with the other. The exploitation of user-generated data can be considered a capitalist innovation. Extracting value from even the most negligible, from the user's point of view, pieces of information is a development of the newest form of our current socio-economic system. Before that, even if people imagined a situation where such tiny bits of information might prove themselves useful, they certainly did not have the technologies required for the tasks of extraction and analysis. There was no 'primitive' situation during which users were harvesting, accumulating, and utilising their own data in a non-capitalist manner; only a period when this information was unclaimed or even unattainable. Thus, it is rather the aspect of the exploitation of formerly untapped resources that it is relevant to information capitalism and not so much expropriation, quite literally, as in the case of land (see Ekman 2016, 108). The first 'occupants' of user-generated data were the companies providing the services which made the extraction of such information feasible in the first place.

From another perspective, considering user-generated data part of our species' collective wisdom or CIntPP would assume that, at least at some point, they were extensively treated as such. For our ancestors, this could not be the case. Even today, though, user-generated data rarely qualify as 'collective wisdom' or anything directly pertaining to CIntPP. For better or worse, the discussion over this kind of information is more about what *not* to do with it—the case for privacy (will be considered later)—rather than how user-generated data could be generally useful for our societies beyond or in parallel with the capitalist mode of production. This positions that kind of information apart from the usually accepted and respected forms of IndIntPP, such as patents, trademarks, trade secrets, and copyrights or their communal counterparts (whichever these might be). Until the time of this writing, such 'cheap' forms of information have been relatively neglected from the perspective of PP.¹⁸

This points to an important difference between user-generated data and scientific knowledge or any other 'important' form of information. It seems like a commonly accepted truth that the information produced through our everyday online communication in social media does not really qualify as a kind of information worth protecting as IntPP. In that respect, the capitalist exploitation of user-generated data has lowered the bar indicating what kind of information can indeed be commercially exploited; it expanded from "the law of the deviation of the magnetic needle" (Marx [1867] 1975, 89–90) to our grocery list. Hence, corporate social media utilising the targeted advertising strategy are not companies of the tertiary/service sector which *only* benefit from the high scientific knowledge of their workers. Their profits come also from the successful widening of the 'pie' so that data produced by users can become part of it.

What lies free becomes 'at once' part of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey 2017, 100); it is *commodified*. "Commodification is the process of transforming things valued for their

¹⁸ Although some theorists have already argued that raising user's information to the level of IndIntPP might indeed give people the power needed for protecting themselves (see: Samuelson 1999).

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use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange" (Mosco [1996] 2009, 2). Unlike the long struggle through which, according to Marx ([1867] 1975, pt. VIII. "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation"), the small feudal properties were concentrated in the hands of a few capitalists, user's digital information have no lasting battles to show for. Their creation, in many cases, even followed the establishment of the platforms as companies aiming at expanding their profits. The obvious difference between the process of appropriating user-generated data and that of expropriating land, for instance, is that the former happened under an already established capitalist regime; it constituted only an addition to existing practices.

The question, then, changes quickly from how user-generated data were appropriated in the first place to how the latter pertain to the ongoing process of capitalist accumulation. Considering that these have, almost from the very beginning, been a part of the capitalist system, puts the side of 'capitalist accumulation' to an advantageous position over that of 'primitive accumulation' (or 'accumulation by dispossession'). This is exactly why almost my entire examination from now on will focus on how users' digital traces function as a firm part of the information capitalist mode of production.

B. How User-Generated Data Pertain to Capitalist Accumulation

Within Marxism, to the best of my knowledge, there can be two distinct paths through which an analysis of user-generated data can largely be made possible from the perspective of their production/valorisation. The point of divergence occurs when one attempts to answer the question: *do user-generated data contain themselves value?* In other words, are these data similar to the purely physical commodities infused with value by the workers or are they more closely related to a kind of human knowledge which, although does not itself contain value, can be made to contribute to the production of *surplus* value?

I, once more, want to emphasise that the term 'value', although broadly incorporated in multiple politico-economic theories as well as in everyday speech, has a very distinct and specific meaning for the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Not having 'value' does not mean that something is insignificant or irrelevant but rather that it cannot be adequately addressed through that particular category. As explained earlier, value is socially necessary labour time for the production of useful objects destined to be sold in a marketplace. It is, thus, not as straightforward as it might seem in the beginning to attribute value to user-generated data. If anything, there needs to be shown that these are the products of human alienated labour (again, in the Marxist sense of the term).

Nevertheless, failing to do so does not necessarily mean that the topic cannot be addressed through the Marxist critique of capitalism *in general* nor that there is necessarily

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something inconsistent or outdated about the theory. Marxism is certainly not limited to the first volume of *Capital*, as the Autonomists remind us, and not every concept, even in political economy, must be quantifiable to be objective and respectable. I have already briefly indicated how broader and immeasurable magnitudes, like human knowledge (the ‘general intellect’), benefit the production process without, though, themselves bearing value or being subject to exact estimations. Before I explain how I believe that the examination of user-generated data can occur in less compatible with economic algebra but also more fruitful theoretical grounds, I would like to delve into a somewhat different approach: Christian Fuchs’s account of users’ digital information through the concept of *digital labour*.

In case it is not immediately obvious, by calling users ‘labourers’, Fuchs does indeed assume that the information produced by them contains value in the most traditional Marxist sense of the term and is, thus, subject of the corresponding equations. To this latter point I, among others (for instance: Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012; Andrejevic 2015; Bolaño and Vieira 2015), remain sceptical. In what follows, it is my goal to delineate the inconsistencies of Fuchs’s thesis by expanding on the internal-to-Marxism critique which he has already faced.

However, this is not a call for abandoning Fuchs’s approach. When it comes to its fundamentals, Fuchs’s framework contains indeed a lot of insights worth retaining in any case; but even its weaker parts, once analysed, are extremely educative. All in all, I cannot imagine an attempt of approaching the political economy of our contemporary social media from a Marxist perspective without considering Fuchs. In Kaan Kangal’s words, “[c]onsidering [Fuchs] is one of the few scholars trying to fill the gap between Marxian critique of political economy and new economic forms of the digital media, we ought to take his point of view in the current debate seriously” (2016, 417). This section will hopefully make Fuchs’s significance apparent but also offer a critical perspective of his work.

1. User-Generated Data as Commodities Produced through Digital Labour

The concept of ‘digital labour’ is inspired by the struggles of the Italian Workerist and Autonomist movements and the additional theoretical contributions of Mauricio Lazzarato, Carlo Vercellone, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and others (more about the Italian Marxist branch will be discussed later). It defines the type of work which internet users, especially social media users, carry out through their everyday interaction with popular online platforms (see: Burston, Dyer-Witheford, and Hearn 2010; Fuchs and Sevignani 2013; Scholz and Liu 2011; Scholz 2013; Terranova 2000, 2004).

The basic argument in this debate is that the dominant capital accumulation model of contemporary corporate Internet platforms is based on the exploitation of users’ unpaid labour, who engage in the creation of content and the use of blogs, social

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networking sites, wikis, microblogs, content sharing sites for fun and in these activities create value that is at the heart of profit generation.

(Fuchs and Seignani 2013)

This signifies the starting point of a mechanism that enables internet companies to harvest the collectively generated information in search of their target groups and marketing opportunities.

In the case of corporate social media like Facebook, this mechanism is no other than the *online targeted advertising*. Its outcome is some particularly insightful advertisements which appear in cyberspace after users have made any kind of online ‘move’ indicating that they might be interested in a specific commodity or service. Having consulted the user-generated data collected by the corporate social media platforms, advertising messages from third parties appear on the users’ screens just in time for responding to those people’s presumed desires. The connection between users’ activity and the online targeted advertising strategy is unquestionable, but the digital labour approach goes one step further: it puts users right at the very core of value generation as themselves being (unpaid) labourers of an “unconscious production process” (Kangal 2016, 421).

Thus, (digital) labour should not be conflated with (digital) work (Fuchs and Seignani 2013). According to Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani, Marx’s ‘Arbeit’ had a twofold meaning and, luckily, this can be made more obvious through the English language (see also: Marx [1867] 1975, 57, fn. 1). “Labour which creates use-values and is qualitatively determined is called ‘work’ as opposed to ‘labour’; labour which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called ‘labour’, as opposed to ‘work’” (Fuchs and Seignani 2013, 240).

In the first case, that of ‘work’, participants are producing for the sole purpose of providing each other with useful articles. They have no long-term plans of capitalising on the end-product, hence exchange value is nowhere to be found. ‘Work’ corresponds to a more communal, tribal, family-related, or, simply, ‘friendly’ mode of production. It is based on close relations between its participants and on a long-lasting reciprocal attitude designed to keep the given community intact.

On the other hand, ‘labour’ constitutes the commercialised version of ‘work’; exchange values, both of products and labour power itself, dominate the relations of production. Reciprocity is formalised as a contractual relation between juridical individuals and it usually involves money—a wage. You agree to offer your services to me for a specific period and I agree to pay you for this. After our agreement has been met, we do not owe anything to each other; you are free to buy whatever you like from the market using your wage and I am free to sell the objects-commodities which you in part produced in a similar manner.

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These definitions showcase the common thread that can be drawn between the following antithetical couples of categories: work/labour, concrete/abstract labour, use/exchange value, qualitative/quantitative. The latter part, i.e. abstract labour-exchange value-quantitative, is specific to capitalism; the former, i.e. work-concrete labour-use value-qualitative, can potentially show the way beyond the current socio-economic system.

On which side should we position users' contributions though? Fuchs, as already indicated, understands user-generated data as abstract labour which (unintentionally) produces exchange values. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, among other publications of his, utilises an updated version of Marx's capitalist accumulation formula which specifically depicts the process of capitalist accumulation in combination with the online targeted advertising strategy (2014, 102):¹⁹

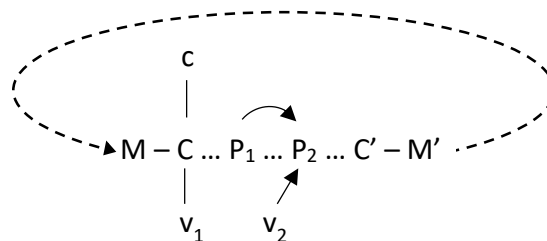


Figure 3 Christian Fuchs's 'Capital accumulation on corporate social media platforms that are based on targeted advertising'

What Fuchs adds to Marx's basic formula is an additional production process (P_2) and a distinct variable capital (v_2), both associated with users' contributions. Thus, v_2 is the unpaid form of labour power which is being willingly offered to the information capitalists. This has also an effect on the final product of the process (C'). Fuchs, drawing from Dallas Smythe (1981), suggests that "[u]ser data and the users are the social media commodity;" these constitute the "*internet prosumer commodity*"—a variant of Marx's commodity capital (2014, 102; my emphasis).

The term 'prosumer', often utilised by Fuchs (2009, 2010, 2011b, 2011a, 2012a, 2014), derives from the words 'producer' and 'consumer'. Coined by Alvin Toffler in the 1980s, it signifies the "progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer" (1980, 267). Fuchs gives it a more critical twist by showing that this also goes hand-in-hand with the "outsourcing [of] work to users and consumers, who work without payment" (2014, 99).

¹⁹ Changes to Fuchs's figure have been made only for it to match my own style of presentation.

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Taking these additions into account, Fuchs's deduces that: (a) users of social media receive no wage or no true wage equivalent ($v = 0$); (b) all their labour is a surplus for the corporate social media platforms; (c) thus, users of social media are being *infinitely exploited* (2014, "Dallas Smythe and Audience Labour Today").²⁰ Fuchs arrives at this provoking final remark, i.e. that users are being 'infinitely exploited', after having examined the possible alternatives (and their combination) regarding the kind of wage users receive (if at all) and the kind of value they produce. In showing, here, why I believe his conclusion is rather problematic, I will reconstruct parts of his analysis. For the reader's convenience, I will start by including a graph illustrating the different combinations of wage and surplus value produced, as well as the immediate conclusions emerging from each pair. Since unpaid digital labour is what Fuchs is essentially discussing here, necessary labour time, the value represented by the labourer's wage, is brought back to the discussion only in the cases of 'payment-in-kind' (which Fuchs acknowledges but does not ultimately support).

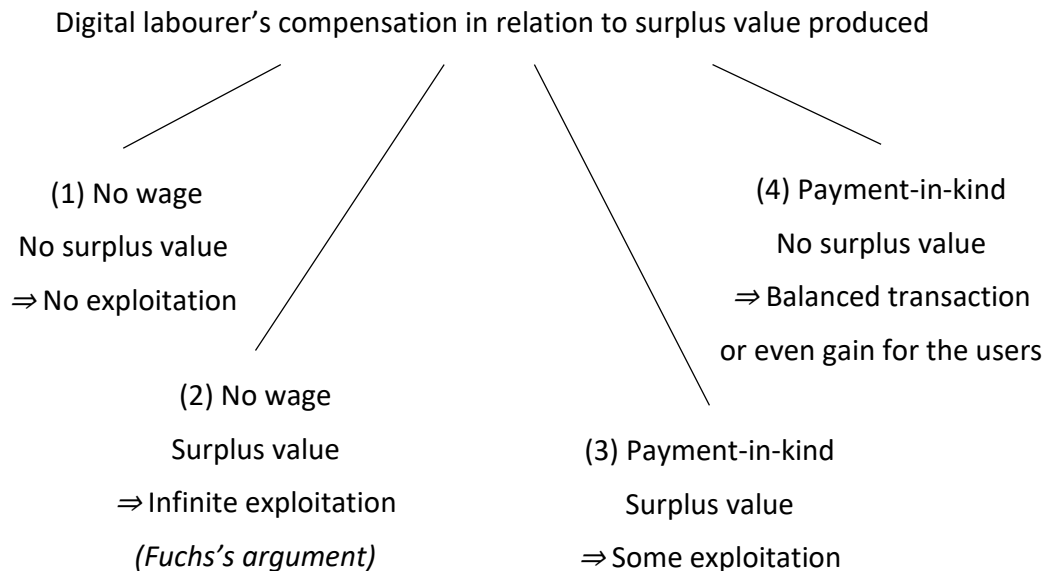


Figure 4 My interpretation of the logical structure emerging from Christian Fuchs's analysis regarding digital labourer's compensation and surplus value produced

²⁰ This oft-repeated by Fuchs argument has spurred a long debate (Fuchs 2012d, 2015; Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012; Andrejevic 2015; Robinson 2015; Jin and Feenberg 2015; Bolaño and Vieira 2015; Kangal 2016).

IV. Analysis: User-Generated Data and Capital

a. Labour which Produces No Surplus Value(?)

To begin with, I agree with Fuchs that any option which includes the ‘no surplus value’ ([1] and [4] of fig. 4) comes dangerously close in making no acknowledgement whatsoever about the contribution of users to the production process of corporate social media. Thus, such views are rightfully susceptible to, among others, Feminist or Autonomist Marxist critiques. Capitalist accumulation in digital social media obviously benefits not only from the work of its paid employees but also from the users utilising the platforms for communicating with each other. There is a long-standing argument in the Marxist tradition—although not extensively explored by Marx himself—which holds that capitalist exploitation extends beyond the working place and paid relations (see, for instance, Lefebvre [1947] 2008). One has only to imagine those agents which, even though they are not physically present during the production process, nevertheless, contribute to it indirectly. Any form of unpaid services, such as the nutrition of children, house-related chores, or even sleep, which are usually connected with the idea of the *reproduction of labour power*, are obvious examples. Arguing that only the ‘properly-paid’ workers are objects of exploitation fails to consider the surplus value added to the capitalist accumulation process by such activities. Especially in the case of user-generated data, it should be self-evident why targeted advertising does not rely solely on the company’s employees.

b. Labour which Produces Surplus Value but Receives No Wage(?)

However, judging that unpaid labour indeed produces surplus value for the system (option [2] of fig. 4), entirely from a consequentialist point of view, is not a significant help to an attempt of pinpointing the magnitude of this value or the specific nature of exploitation taking place. From this perspective, it is as obvious that the system would tremble if its ‘unpaid workers’ disappear as it is hard to calculate their exact offering. The latter task puts a significant pressure to Fuchs himself and forces him to reach what I, among others (Andrejevic 2015; Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012; Kangal 2016), consider to be a rather awkward conclusion.

A simple look at the rate of exploitation formula ($e = s/v$), after the substitution has taken place, should give a hint about the instability of Fuchs’s ‘infinite exploitation’ argument. If $v = 0$, and $s \neq 0$, then $e = s/0$. Generally, division by zero ($s/0$) cannot be defined because there can be no number which, when multiplied by zero, would give s (this is also pointed out in Andrejevic 2015, 11; Kangal 2016, 423). From an algebraic perspective, the only way of e approaching ∞ (infinity), which is Fuchs’s conclusion, would be to assume a number of paid labour hours as close to zero as possible (let us say $v = 0.00001$) without, though, ever them actually reaching zero. The less the amount we choose; the closer we would get to $e = \infty$. But this is just not true in our case: we are not just free to decide on a number. Users do not receive a single cent of wage for the hours spent on Facebook. Thus, v *should stay* = 0. The logical conclusion would, then, be that, *although users of social media are not offered a wage, their rate of exploitation cannot be defined*

B. How User-Generated Data Pertain to Capitalist Accumulation

using Marx's equation. The mere idea of the rate of exploitation, as expressed by Marx, presupposes that there exist at least two competing magnitudes whose relation we want to measure.

This is not the only reason, though, why an idea of 'infinite exploitation' is not, in my view, the best explanation of the phenomenon. Additionally, I believe that such an extreme formulation buries even deeper an already neglected aspect of the Marxist political theory: Marx's and Engel's in part appreciation for capitalism: "[t]he bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1970, 37; see also Marx [1857–1858] 1987, 336–37). Interestingly enough, among the passionate aphorisms of the *Communist Manifesto*, survives the admission of capitalism's immense productive capabilities. Their descriptive assertions of capitalism, through concepts such as capitalist accumulation and rate of surplus, further attest to that dialectical appreciation of the system. Marx does not say that the proletariat does not get anything out of the production process. He rather suggests that, in order for her to get something, much more needs to be produced for the capitalist. The socialist question, then, becomes how we can increase the former while decreasing or completely giving up on the latter.

'Infinite exploitation' is rather 'guilty' from that perspective. It creates a misleading impression that the only thing which prevents users from quitting Facebook is coercion of some sort. This is rather inaccurate. Although I have already acknowledged that coercion, especially in a monopoly as that of Facebook, plays an essential role, I refuse to use the concept as a justification for everything. There are obvious benefits in the daily use of corporate social media which just do not qualify for coercion of any sort. Fast, creative, and relatively unrestrained means of online communication is part of what users enjoy when they log in to Facebook. That is one of the reasons why they continually do so. Yes, there is coercion involved caused by Facebook's biased and profit-seeking algorithms, its 'darker', propagandistic instances, or the specific image of one's self that it creates—we should be perfectly aware of those. Mine is not an apologism for corporate social media or commercialised internet in general but rather a suggestion for examining the specific restrictions opposed by the capitalist mode of production while acknowledging the general usefulness of the technologies in question (to that latter point Fuchs would also agree).

Marx's rate of exploitation is just that: a *ratio* between a negative and a positive pole. It perfectly summarises the situation where workers in their pursuit of v , their means of subsistence and well-being, are also compelled to produce s , the means of subsistence of the capitalist as well as the capital needed for the sustaining and expansion of the business. They do the latter without having any important say in the process of the reproduction of their material environment and, thus, their own existence which depends on that. The dialectical relation of the two, i.e. the workers' means of subsistence (v) and the means of subsistence of the capitalist system (s), once analysed as such, is there for everyone to contemplate upon. Any possibility for their

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synthesis or the negation/surpassing of the negative pole, to put it in Hegelian terms, is grounded on this dialectical connection. ‘Infinite exploitation’, unfortunately, does not maintain such a view.

Lastly, even from a strategic perspective, failing to add to the analysis an admission that technologies, such as social media, are useful creates a rather unstable connection between theory and (counter-)practice. “[A]ny anti-capitalist society will have to evolve out of the womb of contemporary capitalism, out of that world in which everything is, as Marx puts it, ‘pregnant with its opposite’” (Harvey 2017, 78; referring to Marx and Engels 1978, 636). The socialist project should be based on concepts which would enable the construction of a bridge between our current situation and a future, more self-fulfilling society. Frankly, we might already be in a position where capitalism has moulded us to such an extent that we can no longer hope for discarding the system in its entirety without risking our own stability (Weeks 2016, 203). On the other hand, completely abandoning all the components of capitalism might not be the best solution anyway. Marx’s and Engel’s project was, as shown by the quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, not a nihilist one. Their work can be read as a plea for a distinct manipulation of materials and technologies and ultimately as a way of renegotiating our social relations which are, in turn, affected by the current state of those resources. I am afraid that any kind of infinite negativity not only fails in describing the situation as we now experience it but might also create an obstacle towards a well-thought political reaction.

To be fair, Fuchs’s writings, in general, are anything but thoughtless in shedding light on alternative political movements of social media and the internet. Yet, this aspect of his work, Fuchs’s “progressive agenda” (Kangal 2016, 426), is rather based on his analysis as a whole, which is generally very insightful in addressing the internet economy, and not so much on such specific formulations. ‘Infinite exploitation’, by itself, seems to put us in an awkward position in relation to the technologies in question. While Fuchs is mostly positive towards the possibility of utilising social media in a more fulfilling for the users way, his analysis of the phenomenon through the rate of exploitation formula does not correspond adequately to such a view.

c. Labour which Produces Surplus Value and Receives a Payment-in-Kind(?)

For these reasons, I believe that we would be better off if we at least opted for an understanding of the social/labour relations in corporate social media which incorporates and attempts to define in detail both the exploitation practices of the capitalists and the kind of gain users receive. Still following Fuchs’s terms, the latter would resemble a ‘payment-in-kind’ (option [3] of fig. 4).

Fuchs comes very close in accepting this latter option and also attempts to calculate the value given to the users by the platforms in those terms ($v = V'$; something which would also contribute in resolving the ‘rate of exploitation problem’). Although he remains attached to his own interpretation, Fuchs seems, in principle, to accept this alternative route—given that both

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approaches legitimise digital labourer's exploitation only to different degrees (2014, 105). Unfortunately, though, even this perspective runs into some considerable difficulties when tested against the Marxist economic formulas which are a direct outcome of the 'digital labour' thesis. Furthermore, it ultimately suffers from pretty much the same analytical vagueness pointed out above.

To begin with, Fuchs, siding with Göran Bolin (2011), maintains that by accepting to treat the social media platforms as contributions in kind puts us in an awkward position in relation to the concept of wage (or money in general), which play a constitutional role for the capitalist system (2014, 104–5). Although wages did not emerge solely within capitalism (and, vice versa, not every wage relation is a capitalist one), they constitute one of its building blocks. Without paid workers, capitalism would not be able to manifest itself as such. *Wages are the money-name of labour power like commodity prices are the money-name of the exchange value of goods.* In capitalism, money-names are everywhere. I have no means or reasons to challenge Fuchs on this observation. The relevance of money is unquestionable, and it should definitely constitute the core of our analytical assertion of capitalism. In his words:

Money is in capitalism the monopolized general equivalent of exchange. It has special relevance because it can be used for getting hold of most use-values. [...] The specific structures of capitalism privilege money as a specific and general equivalent of exchange. The money logic therefore has special relevance.

(Fuchs 2014, 105)

Indeed, 'money logic [...] has special relevance'. Fuchs is also right in associating this 'special relevance' with the ability to acquire pretty much any commodified use value. Providing people with specific commodities, in this case—specific services of digital communication, is not nearly as rewarding as giving them money and, thus, the possibility of choosing for themselves among the variety of offerings in a free-market economy.

That payment-in-kind is by no means a salary, though, is not the same as saying that what the users are being granted does not carry any *use-fulness* (as in use value) whatsoever. Judging from the people's eagerness of accepting the offerings of Facebook, one could speculate that part of their salary would anyway go to such services even if these were not free. Merely by browsing social media, users "cannot generate money for buying food or other goods needed for survival" (Fuchs 2014, 104) in general but are offered a use value which would otherwise have to spend money on (unless online communication is turned into some sort of public good). Going back to the description of how capitalism regularly chooses to represent value, i.e. the 'value → exchange value → price (money form)' sequence, we might agree with Fuchs that if money is not involved, then this is not a truly capitalist exchange we are considering. But who can tell that, if

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this is *generally* the system's most profitable way of approaching value, it will also *always* be the best method of extracting surplus value? Against Fuchs, I would suggest that the 'money logic [...] has special relevance' exactly because money, the most powerful commodity, is not spared to the users but is solely kept in a circulation process internal to capital.

Assuming the perspective of the information capitalist, the initiator of the entire scheme of capitalist accumulation in corporate social media, we should ask: Why would Facebook, having already achieved the capitalist dream of being a monopoly (or at least a duopoly along with Google), take the risk of offering people a monetary compensation for their data and digital labour only to try to earn this back later, in a free market situation? Why not stick with a lower form of compensation, an offering-in-kind? I believe that Facebook's directors understand enough about the power of the money-form of capital in order not to risk it. Having by now conquered the very top of the economic pyramid by exploiting previously untapped resources, Facebook has no reason of relatively empowering its users by opening options for them. In the online targeted advertising model, *money remains relevant because money becomes strategically obsolete*.

A wage relation, when it is employed, is first and foremost a socio-economic necessity for the capitalist and not philanthropy. The proletariat must have enough money to buy back at least a portion of what itself produces. The workers help the capitalist in the phase of liquidation of the augmented commodity capital ($C' - M'$). Corporate social media, though, do not have such needs because their clients are more often than not capitalists themselves. These are also called "third payers" (Bolaño and Vieira 2015, 58) and the process "indirect commoditization" (Herscovici 2009, 9; also cited in Bolaño and Vieira 2015, 58).

As long as Facebook can thrive by externalising the costs of an economically healthy proletariat to more traditional kinds of commerce or even the government, Facebook has no motivation for shouldering such a weight. Third parties (and their lobbyists) are more suitable for ensuring that effective demand for commodities stays at functioning levels simply because they will be the first to be affected in the case of a downturn. Corporate social media, building upon previously developed forms of capitalism and statal arrangements, are also utilising them as an 'economic bulwark'. From this perspective, Facebook does not pay its users because, given the state of the global economy today and the public's low awareness of the issue, it has not been necessary. The online targeted advertising model puts corporate social media in this special position.

This is not the first time, though, that special treatment is kept in store for a specific area of commerce. One has only to consider the keenness with which governments worldwide choose to monetarily support their private financial sectors when the latter struggle to overcome an economic crisis—the one of 2008 being a recent example. Any bailing out of a bank is considered a contribution to the national economy and all the citizens. Although the financial sector has for

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long enjoyed such privileges and has arguably acquired them through a completely different historical procedure than the corporate social media world—in fact, finance might be older than the state itself—their position nowadays seems very similar in that regard. Both benefit from externalising the costs of an economically healthy proletariat class and even from direct perks—doses of monetary liquidity in one case, legal exemption to freely benefit from user-generated data in the other.

In adequately considering the role money plays for the corporate social media, I believe we should be stimulated by David Harvey and his work on ‘accumulation by dispossession’. At its core, this concept exemplifies a situation where, facing unique circumstances, capitalism ‘leaps backwards’. If this is indeed the most dynamic and fluid socio-economic system humankind has invented, such a ‘leap’ should come as no surprise. Given that profits are still accumulating, why should the information capitalist not reinvent the relations at the digital ‘working place’ by reintroducing something from the past? If paying her digital workers in-kind benefits the capitalist more than wages would, and the users themselves tolerate it, why not opt for a payment-in-kind?

With the slave [...] even that part of his labour which is paid appears to be unpaid. [...] S]ince no bargain is struck between him and his master, and no acts of selling and buying are going on between the two parties, all his labour seems to be given away for nothing.

(Marx 1865, 20)

Hence, like free individual bargainers, users choose whether they accept Facebook’s offer (although the platform is pretty much a monopoly) and, as servant-like workers, they are being rewarded for their data with advanced digital communication services. The latter is, similarly to the case of wage, a socio-economic necessity for the information capitalist: if users are not brought together under a single roof by being offered a single platform to communicate with, the raw material of user-generated data will be dispersed or even lost.

In contrast with Fuchs, I do not believe that distancing our analysis from the concept of wage, as originally formulated by Marx, undermines one’s attempt to examine the relation between users and information capitalists. On the contrary, I find that deconstructing those categories only to reassemble them according to our contemporary situation constitutes an imperative. For the final part of this subsection, I will be accepting the position of ‘payment-in-kind’, as a modification of wage relations, only to show that, for better or worse, even this cannot go very far—but *not* for the reasons Fuchs is putting forward. I should remind the reader that what I am anticipating is an approach to user-generated data entirely distinct from the concept of ‘digital labour’. Before I delve into that, though, let me attempt once again to capture the peculiar

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character of the economy of digital information, this time assuming a payment-in-kind for the users. To do so, I will have to go back to the processes of calculating the rate of exploitation as well as the value of the service which, under this new approach, the users receive—the value of the platform that is.

The value of the social media platform itself (C_1 or $V_{platform}$) is equal to the sum of the constant (c_1) and variable capital (v_1) invested into it, in addition to the surplus value or profit (p_1) generated through the production process ($C_1 = V_{platform} = c_1 + v_1 + p_1$). Since the service of the platform is given to the users for free, then $p_1 = 0$ and $C_1 = V_{platform} = c_1 + v_1$. The latter should be plausible to estimate. This calculation, though, assumes breaking the production process to two (like Fuchs partially does).

In other words, we have to distinguish between the production process (P_1) of the platform (C_1), which is given to the users for free, and the production process (P_2) of packaging the user-generated data collected (C'), access to which is, finally, sold to third parties ($C' - M'$). Between the two commodity capitals, i.e. the platform and the metadata, there exists the commodity-capital (C_2) of the materials and technologies needed for the analysis and ‘packaging’ of the information (c_2) and the employees solely responsible for it (v_2). C_2 resembles the amount of capital that is *not* transferred to the users, since it occurs after the use of the platform, but only constitutes a part of the final commercial product—the metadata (C'). This is how Fuchs’s figure from earlier [fig. 4] would look like if a ‘payment-in-kind’ acquired prominence:

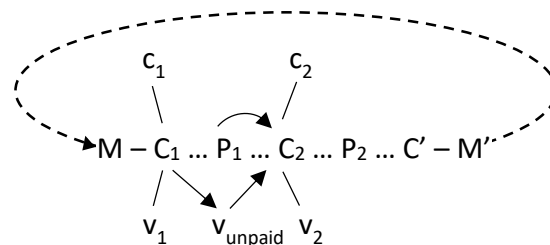


Figure 5 My reworking of Christian Fuchs’s ‘Capital accumulation on corporate social media platforms that are based on targeted advertising’ to resemble the ‘payment-in-kind’ option

It should be clear that the breaking down of the production process into two is a theoretical move which, if applied to the reality of the situation, might immediately create an accounting conundrum. Some employees and technologies would probably be ‘shared’ by the two production processes and it would be impossible to attribute them exclusively to either the one or the other. Nevertheless, this updated version of Fuchs’s formula should suffice for this transitional

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phase of my argument. Some of the difficulties it showcases are exactly those to which I want to call attention.

Having these new tools at hand, let us now once again confront the rate of exploitation ($e = s/v$). We already know the value of the variable capital (the platform users: v_{unpaid}) because, by assuming a payment-in-kind, we equated it with the value of the platform itself ($v_{\text{unpaid}} = V_{\text{platform}}$). Since we now have a non-zero value for the variable capital of the users, we can move beyond the point we stopped earlier. We only have to estimate the surplus value (s) produced by users and our calculation of the rate of exploitation will be complete. Unfortunately, we cannot do that...

From C_1 (platform), C_2 (data analysis) and C' (metadata), only the latter is being sold. Thus, only for the latter, which contains the previous two plus the profit ($C' = C_1 + C_2 + p$), we can have an estimation of the surplus. This brings us to a situation where *we cannot calculate the surplus produced by the digital labourers separately from that of the digital workers*, the contribution of the company's employees separately from that of the users. Although we do understand that there exists something distinguishable in those two kinds of labour, their exploitation appears as a *joint magnitude* (also pointed out in Kangal 2016, 423). Fuchs also reaches the same conclusion. Yet, since he has already rejected this path for the wage-related reasons discussed previously, he has no reason to assign any significance to it. He finally adheres to his conclusion from earlier: "Partly the users and partly the corporations' employees create the surplus value contained in this commodity. The difference is that the users are unpaid and therefore—in monetary terms—infinately exploited" (Fuchs 2014, 102).

As I have shown, if we were to extend Fuchs's observation, we would reach a point beyond which we cannot proceed without somehow incorporating the idea of the *collective worker*—the entity "formed by the combination of a number of detail labourers" (Marx [1867] 1975, 354). Choosing the collective worker instead of the individual as the fundamental unit of our analysis, though, makes the analytical process rather cumbersome. For sure, there exist phenomena which are just not accessible from the individual perspective, yet there exist others which will be forever overlooked, if we assume the broader approach.

As a matter of fact, in our case, when 'zooming in' is not a possibility, no distinction can be made between paid and unpaid contributors—between digital work and digital labour. Once again, we are forced to observe exploitation solely from a consequentialist and general point of view. But if we cannot make further classifications and/or assign specific amounts of the surplus value to either the digital workers or the digital labourers, then the latter being 'infinately exploited' is as likely as them going through *any* amount of exploitation (other than none). We do know that the targeted online advertising model cannot function without the user-generated data, but this is pretty much the only claim allowed to us.

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As with the case of the rate of exploitation in the 'no-payment' options, I chose to be very strict about theoretical interpretations of the online targeted advertising strategy which fail to prove themselves as economic formulas (assuming that the latter constitute an indissoluble part of the former). I claim that the inconsistencies or limitations which arise when working with the latter are a sign of an underlying analytical deficiency of the 'user's online activity as digital labour' thesis. By assuming this frame, we seem trapped between a conclusion extreme enough to describe users as 'infinitely exploited' and an agnostic approach to digital surplus labour and exploitation which cannot distinguish them from their more traditional forms. None of them, as I have hopefully shown, is stable enough to adequately describe the phenomenon of digital information exchange and the peculiar social relation which stem from it. A resolution cannot be reached until we move to a fundamentally different concept of the Marxist theory: David Harvey's 'free gifts'.

2. User-Generated Data as 'Free Gifts of Human Nature'

In this subsection, I will delve into what I consider to be a more adequate and fruitful approach to user-generated data. To do so, I will be drawing from David Harvey's latest book, *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*, and especially from his discussion on the 'free gifts' (2017, 6, fig. 2). Once again, I will first consider the concept in its own right and, then, connect it to user-generated data.

Generally speaking, one can think of free gifts as part of the constant capital/means of production. The fundamental difference, though, is that free gifts constitute resources which belong to a form of public domain and/or can be found in abundance in nature. For these, the capitalist does not have to pay anything (either in terms of value or price); she can straightforwardly proceed with their productive consumption and the extraction of surplus value.

[S]ome use values enter into capitalist production as 'free gifts.' This occurs when the "object of labour [...] is something provided by nature free of charge, as in the case of metals, minerals, coal, stone, etc." While capital rests materially on its metabolic relation with nature, this does not mean that nature in itself has value. It is a storehouse of free gifts that capital can use without paying anything. Such use values may, however, acquire a price if they are enclosed and become the private property of another.

(Harvey 2017, 94; quoting Marx [1867] 1975, 599)

Free gifts do not solely comprise natural resources though. Combining Marx's account of the 'free gifts of nature' with that of 'general intellect', Harvey discusses the free gifts of *human* nature

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(2017, 6, fig. 2). The latter includes human “history, culture, knowledge, artistic constructions, skills and practices” (Harvey, 2017. 100), which are there for anyone to benefit from—the capitalist included. These are tightly connected with the process of the reproduction of labour power (abbreviated as ‘RoLp’ in [fig. 6]), thus the variable capital.

The worker is not only shaped by the goods she buys with her wage. Simultaneously, she is exposed to her society’s qualities, collective wisdom, scientific knowledge, traditions, etc. which are not solely products of a specific production process or societal arrangement but have rather been accumulated and developed throughout the long history of our species. In this, they are very similar to natural resources like fossil fuels which themselves took thousands of years to formulate but remain relatively open to us to benefit from (considerations regarding extraction costs will be discussed along the way). As rightly pointed out by Harvey, these, similarly with any other commodified good, are socially constituted wealth and, in our current society, emerge through their enclosing as IndPP.²¹

This is how this specific part of David Harvey’s “The paths of value in motion as derived from the study of Marx’s writings of political economy” figure looks like:²²

²¹ One could certainly pursue a connection between Harvey’s use of the word ‘gift’ and anthropological writings such as those related to Marcel Mauss’s famous formulation ([1925] 1970). The communitarian and reciprocal relations which are part of the initial concept seem to be still present at the core of Harvey’s formulation (see also the discussion on the reciprocity of work on p. 36 of my thesis). Notice, though, how the latter adds the adjective ‘free’. This, in my view, shows cleverly how indeed such a practice, i.e. the act of adding to communal wealth (CPP), might have the potential of creating a social bond and a new form of society—or, as Kōjin Karatani would call it, “the return of the repressed [...] in a higher dimension” (2014, xi–xii). Yet, it is given away to the capitalist mode of production ‘prematurely’, as an increment to the surplus value produced, or for ‘free’.

²² Similar to the case of Christian Fuchs’s *figure* from earlier, David Harvey’s one has been adapted to my own style of presentation without any other alterations. In Harvey’s case, though, most of the initial information has been excluded as largely irrelevant to the case of user-generated data. The reader is more than encouraged to find Harvey’s figure ‘in all its glory’ in his very insightful book (2017, 6, fig. 2).

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Production, Reproduction and Destruction of Space, Place, and Nature

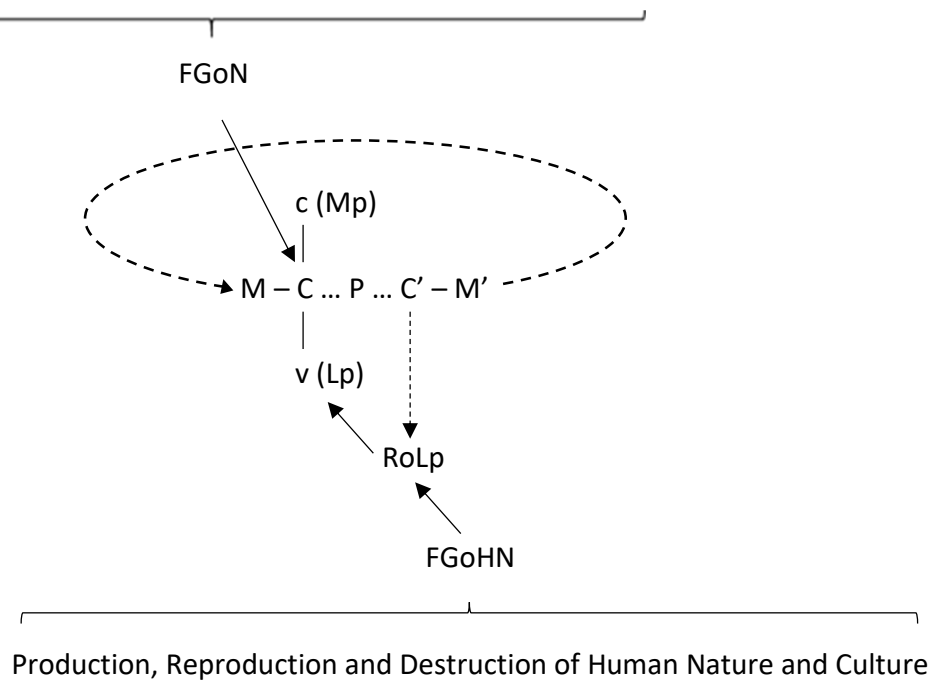


Figure 6 The process of capitalist accumulation including the ‘free gifts’; part of David Harvey’s ‘The paths of value in motion as derived from the study of Marx’s writings of political economy’

Since free gifts do not rely solely on a concentration of capital to be created, they were the first on which our current system focused in order to advance its specific process of production. Although they do not contain themselves value, they created—and still do—a framework in which the circulation of value can thrive. Hence, they are of vital importance to the discussion of the primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession).

The free gifts of nature and of the cultural history of human nature are the basis for capital accumulation to begin in earnest. Such free gifts continue to be of great importance even as capital increasingly seeks to enclose and privatise them and to extract rents from them (by imposing a price upon knowledge that has no value, for example).”

(Harvey 2017, 116)

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Although the margins are significantly less than, for instance, during the 18th or 19th century, the individual privatisation of free gifts still happens and seems unlikely to stop despite the consequences for the natural environment and human culture.

As discussed earlier, the difference between primitive accumulation/accumulation by dispossession and the appropriation of free gifts is, in my view, that in the latter case no clear dispossession of one's IndPP occurs. This approach would change entirely if we had a solid reason for considering free gifts a form of CPP. I am afraid, though, that, especially for user-generated data, there is no public intuition, let alone legislation, strong enough to support such an assumption. The 'production, reproduction and destruction of space, place and nature/human nature and culture' are processes that far exceed the specificities of a single socio-economic system and the concept of PP, be it IndPP or CPP, is not an exception.

Surely, such processes are mediated through the specificities of the mode of production opposed by capitalism, as the last figure shows [fig. 6] but this does not mean that the two overlap: *IndPP (or even CPP) is only one way of regulating nature and human nature.* To the extent that specific resources are not treated as such by the society in question, then our assertion should read like this: *free gifts are not collectively enclosed by the society which creates or maintains them and are, thus, open for appropriation by a specific powerful class—the capitalist.* This is why we call them 'free gifts' anyway. To the extent that a kind of broad consensus could be reached regarding the treatment of those resources, a form of CPP that is, then cases could be raised that exclusive usage of those resources by individuals might constitute an expropriation of collective private property. But I find that this has *never* been the case for user-generated data.

* * *

I think that 'free gifts' are extremely relevant to the case of user-generated data exactly because, by calling user-generated data a 'free gift' for the information capitalist, one is already adequately describing both sides', i.e. the users' and the capitalists', attitude towards these resources. "I need a reliable medium to communicate with all my friends and affiliates", the user says, "and my data, as long as they are not turned against me, is something I am willing to spare—I never benefited from them anyway!" The information capitalist responds: "I can have your data, they can be extremely lucrative when treated with my tools and personnel. In exchange, I can use some of my profit to provide you, the user, with a platform through which you can communicate with pretty much anyone."

I cannot think of a better example of an appropriation of largely unclaimed resources from recent history than user-generated data. The reason why, I suggest, internet companies such as Facebook managed to find themselves in the top ranks of successful enterprises (77th as for 2017

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according to Forbes 2018) is because they ‘discovered’ and exploited a raw material which until then was either neglected or impossible to harvest. Suddenly, an entirely new world was open for appropriation: the collectively-constituted digital domain with its unique raw materials in the form of user-generated data. Therefore, the latter should be approached as *a digital raw material—rather than a commodity produced by digital labourers—and, more precisely, as a digital free gift.*

Here, I suggest that user-generated data are generally compatible with the concept of free gifts, even though they do not straightforwardly fit into any of the two categories specified by Harvey. From the perspective of the corporate social media, user-generated data appear much alike natural resources; Facebook can, thus, also be considered a company of the (digital) primary sector. Its field of activity consists of harvesting a raw material—user’s digital traces—which is, then, adequately ‘polished’—organised, analysed, anonymised, etc.—for it to be accessed by third parties willing to pay. Facebook is not predominantly engaged with the products created through the productive consumption of the metadata Facebook sells; harvesting and organising them consists its main occupation. On the other hand, it is not nature’s metabolic procedures in general which give birth to such resources but rather specific online human activity. From this point of view, digital free gifts are as socially and technologically constituted as the free gifts of human nature. Likewise, there is no external-to-humans procedure which would produce user-generated data and, the other way around, no living being which can directly benefit from those except us.

Therefore, I take the initiative of coining out a third category borrowing aspects from both Harvey’s but leaning mostly towards the side of the ‘human nature and culture’.²³ For want of a better title, *I call the raw information material produced by internet users and incorporated without cost (other than that of the extraction) in the process of capitalist accumulation ‘free gifts of human nature in digital environments’.* Obviously, this is not so much an independent concept but rather an addition to Harvey’s roster. In the last figure [fig. 6], I would position ‘free gifts of human nature in digital environments’ right next to the ‘free gifts of human nature’ and above the ‘production, reproduction and destruction of human nature and culture’.

Free gifts of human nature in digital environments, given their quantitative character, go through a more formalised harvesting procedure than free gifts of human nature. Sentiments expressed through ‘clicks’, ‘views’, ‘friends’, ‘followers’, ‘likes’, and so on differ from human knowledge in general only in the sense that the former is so obviously tailored for commercial use. This does not prevent, though, entrepreneurs of the corporate social media from benefiting from both: FGoHN are necessary for establishing rather any business activity, while the FGoDHN

²³ In that respect, I also partly disagree with Kaan Kangal’s conclusion that “user activity is accorded to exploitation not as commodity but as raw material” (Kangal 2016, 422). It is actually a *socially* constituted raw material.

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can be turned into some very profitable metadata. In other words, although the latter is a much more specific version of the former, for the companies in question are both of uppermost importance. Facebook can equally benefit from the fact that its employees keep themselves updated with all the new technological and social breakthroughs, as well as from the user-generated data which constitute nothing less than the company's main field of activity. There exist parts of the information capitalist extraction/production process where the one is more valuable than the other, but, generally, both can be profitable and, more importantly, both are without charge (other than that of the extraction and without taking into account its environmental/social 'cost').

One restriction, though, inherited in the social aspect of the free gifts of human nature, and shared by their digital counterpart, is that they absolutely rely upon a form of societal arrangement—physical in the former case—both physical and digital in the latter—to become available. In other words, user-generated data cannot happen without the internet and human factors who affect and contribute to its function.

Currently, although internet technologies are mediated through the free market economy, they are only in principle free-to-choose. Platforms like Facebook are largely monopolies and this, especially in the communications sector, has a significant effect on people's choices as consumers. Although all sorts of alternatives do exist (e.g. the diaspora* project which will be discussed in my last chapter), the fact that they are massively less popular undermines the reason why users are drawn to social media in the first place. Moving from one social platform to another is relatively hard because it presupposes that the people you want to communicate with are willing to move along with you (opting out from social media entirely, on the other hand, means losing them for good in some cases).

The indirect forcing factors are basically the disadvantages that you might experience when being outside a network platform such as Facebook, for example the loss of job-opportunities, personal connections, social relations, and other immaterial assets. The price of being outside could be measured against the fact that you 'sell' all your information and activities to a commercial actor to be able to participate.

(Ekman 2016, 125)

The latter, i.e. the 'selling' of information, does not even qualify as a loss for most of the users because they were not anyhow benefiting from keeping this information private anyway. For them, it is like receiving something useful in return for their garbage—why not accept the deal?

Even if the users wanted to somehow benefit from their personal data, the chances that they could do so are fairly limited. A tiny piece of information regarding someone's banal

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everyday activities constitutes less ground for sustaining oneself than, for instance, a set of simple tools. Put bluntly, owning a hammer, a screwdriver, and a saw would give you at least *some* potential to begin a repairs service or work in someone else's. The fact that you are fully aware and proud that you visited the city of Rome last summer, by itself, does not point towards any obvious possibilities for earning a living (unless you are a movie star selling her own aura). Providing people with glimpses of one's travelling experiences and so on might stir their interest in such activities or help the participants create a mutual bond, but this, in most of the cases, does not further develop into an economic relation.

To be fair, social media and digital platforms, in general, do offer some financial opportunities to even the less privileged. Some of those platforms are actually built around this prospect: eBay, Craigslist, and Etsy being only a few famous examples. By no means, though, do I believe that anyone could compare Facebook's revenues with the 'pocket money' earned by selling one's private collection of used LPs on eBay. There exist obvious quantitative as well as qualitative differences. Furthermore, endeavours similar to the latter, i.e. the selling of one's collectables, do not anyhow contradict or get in the way of the commercial exploitation of user-generated data. In other words, feel free to regularly sell and buy stuff on eBay; as of today, the company will charge you with at least a basic 10% for all the successful transactions (eBay Inc. 2018), and then sell the advertising rights to third parties for a significant additional gain.

Thus, the users are compelled to 'go with the flow'. This constitutes another similarity between the more traditional communities/societies which give birth to the FGoHN and their digital counterparts. In the same manner you cannot but be a member of at least some 'real life' community, contribute to, and get affected by it, becoming a part of some internet platform which showcases the same characteristics is nowadays almost equally necessary.

Certainly, not every 'contribution' can be simply turned into a free gift for information capitalism. There exist all sorts of practices, both in digital and physical space, which just cannot be easily assimilated. I will not discuss how such instances can be turned into full-blown anti-capitalist strategies. It suffices, for now, to consider that many users are 'politicised enough' to use the cyberspace as a means of expanding their sociability rather than their money capital. The creativity of internet users, which often far exceeds that of the capitalist mode of production could, by itself, be a socialist ideal. At the very least, user-generated data is a collective project, which although being predominantly exploited by the capital, also points beyond the particularities of the existing system. Companies like Facebook which now dominate cyberspace and inevitably monopolise online communications are not a general prerequisite for the digital social activity but rather a specific form that this takes. The 'free gifts' approach to user-generated data positions them next to the fruits of human sociability, or "collective subjectivity" (Bolaño and Vieira 2015, 59), which has, for long, been incorporated into a capitalist production process, although the former far exceeds the latter in scope.

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Hence, the relation between users and the corporate social media is not, in my view, the contractual relation between juridical individuals willing to sell or buy labour power—not even an unconscious acceptance of such an agreement as suggested by Fuchs. Distinctively, it is a situation where humans, the social and socially-constituted beings they are, utilise the means of communication available to them at any time to reproduce their very nature. This human nature constitutes a whole irreducible to its parts and a generality incompletely represented by its specific manifestations. Information capitalism, by individually appropriating instances of this process, diminishes them to aspects of its specific means of production. There is a certain *discontinuity* between the collective process of reproducing human nature in general, digitally or physically, and the single role certain aspects of this process play in the reproduction of the capitalist system. This contradiction is broader than the one suggested by the rate of exploitation of a single worker; it constitutes a category of exploitation which, not being limited to a labour-relation, cannot be calculated by its formulas. *The ‘free gifts’ approach is, thus, not so much the solution to the difficulties posed by the ‘digital labour’ thesis of Fuchs but rather their embracement.*

* * *

Now, to further illustrate my point, I will only briefly expose my own argument to the same Marxist formulas that my critique of Fuchs was largely based on. The problem which arises immediately, though, is that most of them are just not applicable. Honestly, I do not see how defining the value added to the production process by the creators of the free gifts would not result in an attempt to calculate the value of *every-thing*. To begin with, in order for them to be determinable by Marx’s formulas, free gifts need to be quantifiable. But how can anyone assign value, defined by Marx as “socially necessary labour time” ([1867] 1975, 2), to a scientific concept, for instance? Let alone the ‘cheap’ pieces of information that user-generated data are...

It is equally hard to do the same with natural resources such as coal (before it gets drawn out of the soil, thus, acquiring the value of its extraction) simply because these are, by definition, not immediately created by humans. These resources are important in the sense that they are there for us to benefit, but they do not bear value in the Marxist sense because no human labour has been straightforwardly put in their formation and because they were not created solely for being exchanged. From this perspective, it is absolutely possible for them to add surplus value to the final product, when appropriated as such, without themselves bearing any value. Again, ‘not containing value’ does not make them irrelevant; it just positions them in a different sphere of analysis.

Even if, in the case of free gifts of human labour, we were to argue that human effort did indeed go in their formation, our claim would not go very far. The main problem is that this effort has been dispersed throughout the history of our species and, thus, it is rather impossible to

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measure. Gravity might, in theory, be given a value equal to the countless hours physicists of different epochs had contemplated about it. Sure, but this cannot be empirically estimated. It only helps us in asserting the magnitude of exploitation involved in extremely abstract and possibly misleading terms. How can one be exploited anyway if one is already dead? If our understanding of gravity constitutes an exploitation of the generations who contributed to the formation of the scientific axiom, are we all not appropriating the concept even if we do not belong to the capitalist class? I think that Marx's goal, in works like the *Capital* or the *Grundrisse*, was not to come up with a way of evaluating every conceivable form of exploitation but rather describe in detail the specific form of exploitation taking place under the measurable conditions of factory-like labour (Jin and Feenberg 2015, 57).

A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her song for money, she is to that extent a wage labourer or merchant. But if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she produces capital directly.

(Marx [1867] 1976, 1044)

Notice how, under different circumstances, the role of the singer changes from an unproductive-for-the-capital creator to a self-sustaining entrepreneur and, finally, to a proletarian—to a worker thoroughly subsumed to the capitalist mode of production (for the latter, see also: Marx [1867] 1975, 510).²⁴ Taking this into account, approaching user-generated data as 'free gifts' positions the users in the first stage, i.e. 'free creators', and not, as the 'digital labour' thesis has it, in the stage of the productive worker/proletarian. This is exactly why there cannot be any precise estimation of the magnitude of exploitation.

Lastly, even if we approached user-generated data as something closer to natural resources instead of human knowledge, the above conclusion persists. In this context, only the value of the extraction of user-generated data, which automatically becomes their sole value (V'), can be calculated, but nothing related to the exploitation of the users as such emerges.

If the spinner, instead of spinning, were working in a coal mine, the subject of his labour, the coal, would be supplied by Nature; nevertheless, a definite quantity of

²⁴ Bruce Robinson, starting from the same passage, makes a further distinction between 'unproductive labour' and 'non-subsumed labour' (2015, 45). I do not find this more detailed categorisation necessary for my analysis and, thus, to avoid making the issue of labour even more complicated, I will refrain from using it. Note, also, that the issue of productive and unproductive labour as a whole is far from settled within Marxism or beyond (for more on this, see Robinson 2015, 50, fn. 1).

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extracted coal, a hundredweight for example, would represent a definite quantity of absorbed labour.

(Marx [1867] 1975, 200)

In this case, constant capital is either zero or very close to it—given that at least some human-made tools are always needed for any kind of extraction (see also Marx [1867] 1975, 223 & 231). To the extent that user-generated data, although socially constituted, also showcase the quantifiable aspects of raw materials, we can say that their value (V') equals the value of their extraction: the value spent in the creation and maintenance of the social media platform that is. Since the extraction is destined for productive consumption internal to the firm, there exists no profit (p). Yet, we can still consider the constant capital/means of production spent (c ; this is far from being a primitive extraction process like those examined by Marx) and the variable capital/human labour power (v ; $V' = c + v$).

This is identical to the way we earlier attempted to calculate the value given to the users while assuming a payment-in-kind. The difference, here, is that we do not intend to use this in justifying users' exploitation as labourers. The value of the extracted user-generated data, being equal to the value of the platform, is an interesting piece of accounting information which does not, though, somehow advance the 'free gifts' argument. As it has been pointed out, according to this approach, such exploitation occurs in a different plane where, for better or worse, no calculation is possible.

However, this does not restrict us from theorising in different terms about the extension of human nature in digital environments and its free gifts to information capitalism. By examining aspects of David Harvey's newest contribution to the Marxist political economy, I concluded that user-generated data become part of two distinct circulation processes (in the broadest sense): The first one, i.e. the reproduction of human nature, cannot but be a social/collective project which is as old as human sociability itself and, nowadays, merely continues in the digital domain. The other, i.e. the incorporation of specific by-products, the metadata, of this grand process is a narrower endeavour bound to the particularities of the capitalist system. In the following section, I will address the obvious similarities—but also some less obvious dissimilarities—between my reading of 'free gifts' and similar notions coming from the Italian Marxist tradition of the 1960s and onwards.

3. Free Gifts, Digital Labour, and the Autonomist Marxist Tradition

Let me resume from the exact point I stopped in the chapter about Marx and the capitalist mode of production (III. C.)—that of the 'general intellect'. Since this concept is utilised by Marx in such an admittedly cryptic way ([1857–1858] 1987, 92), I find more fruitful to delve into how some

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more contemporary theorists have appropriated and transformed the term instead of producing yet another textual analysis of the original. This approach carries the additional benefit that many of these theorists, usually associated with the Italian Autonomist Marxist tradition, have already incorporated in their critique instances of information capitalism. Hence, we can proceed with approaching ‘free gifts’, in relation to this discourse, empowered by the fact that both Harvey and the theorists described below had the chance to consider contemporary phenomena in their analyses. The reader should keep in mind that this is by no means an exhaustive presentation of Autonomist Marxism; my goal is solely to use instances of this tradition to illuminate my own arguments regarding user-generated data and the online targeted advertising model.

In Marxist studies, there exists an entire genealogy of concepts largely affected by Marx’s one and only reference to general intellect ([1857–1858] 1987, 92). Roughly in historical order, these are only a few of the evolutionary stages Marx’s general intellect has gone through in the Italian Autonomist Marxist tradition: ‘social factory’ (Tronti [1962] 2013), ‘valorising information’ (Alquati 1962a, 1962b; see Pasquinelli 2015), ‘immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato 1996), ‘mass intellectuality’ (Virno 2001), ‘diffuse intellectuality’ (Vercellone 2007), ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Boutang [2004] 2011; Vercellone 2005, 2007), and ‘multitude/empire’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, 2009; Virno 2003).²⁵

All these constitute instances of a generalised attempt to update the Marxist theoretical framework so it can better depict our contemporary situation of: an economy extending to more and more abstract fields of activity such as information patenting and renting, the ongoing economisation of our everyday lives, our highly sophisticated but precarious work conditions, and the emerging forms of coercion and opposition (mainly from a West-centric point of view). For doing so, such theorists actively pursue a widening of the notions of class, value, labour/work, workplace, exploitation, and others so to better accommodate these contemporary socio-economic phenomena.

This ‘widening’ of the Marxist analytical toolkit forms one valid path of action when facing a theoretical framework which, due to its open historical character, cannot but eventually become limiting. There are certain methodological assumptions worth examining in this approach. The most important, I think, is the tendency of the Autonomist branch to position newly observed socio-economic practices not ‘next’ to existing ones but rather ‘on top’ or even ‘in place of’ them.

²⁵ One could certainly incorporate in this mapping Michel Foucault’s ‘biopower/biopolitics’ ([1978–1979] 2008) and their derivatives. This would create an additional tree illustrating how Marx’s approach to knowledge and information has affected the French tradition as well—although French intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and today have usually been more critical about Marxism than their Italian colleagues. That being said, I chose to stick with the Italian branch because I find it generally more compatible with my approach to the topic of user-generated data. Lastly, I want to apologise in advance if, by any chance, I have ignored any other important debates in which Marx’s ‘general intellect’ might have found its way.

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This also constitutes a general difference between the Autonomists and more orthodox readers of Marx like Fuchs or Harvey. Of course, as I will show, and as the theorists themselves acknowledge, this is by no means an unbridgeable gap. It is still clear enough, though, that the latter seek to interpret contemporary phenomena of the capitalist economy through the more traditional Marxist framework without relying on dire modifications. The former, i.e. the Autonomists, although always resorting to Marx for specific ideas and insights, they also suggest that a radical revision of his theory is needed.

For instance, it has been said about the evolution of labour and value by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri that:

The central role previously occupied by the labour power of mass factory workers in the production of surplus value is today increasingly filled by intellectual, immaterial, and communicative labour power. It is thus necessary to develop a new political theory of value that can pose the problem of this new capitalist accumulation of value at the centre of the mechanism of exploitation (and thus, perhaps, at the centre of potential revolt).

(Hardt and Negri 2000, 29)

Furthermore, “[t]he inside defined by use value and the outside of exchange value is nowhere to be found, and hence any politics of use value, which was always based on an illusion of separability, is now definitely inconceivable” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 209). Along those lines, Paolo Virno also claims that: “[t]he so-called law of value (that the value of a commodity is determined by the labour time embodied in it) is regarded by Marx as the architrave of modern social relations, yet it crumbles in the face of the development of capitalism” (Virno 2001, see also 2003). And, for this reason, Carlo Vercellone argues for a “passage from a theory of time-value of labour to a theory of knowledge-value where the principal fixed capital is man ‘in whose brain exists the accumulated knowledge of society’” (Vercellone 2007, 31; referring to Marx [1857–1858] 1987, 97; see also Vercellone 2010; and the discussion on Virno and Vercellone in Smith 2013).

David Harvey, on the other hand, maintains a different view:

Much of the concern in recent critical commentaries has been to incorporate knowledge and science, unpaid household work and the ‘free gifts’ of nature into the value calculus. Are they not, after all, a source of value? Marx’s answer is that they are analogous to the case of machines: they cannot be a source of value as capital defines it even as they are a source of relative surplus value for the capitalist class insofar as they contribute to the productivity of labour power. There currently is a widespread desire to incorporate the hitherto ‘not valued’ into the regime of

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capitalist value production and circulation. This strategy is understandable (partly because of the positive connotations that a term like value has and the understandable demand for recognition of what is all too often ignored). But it gets things entirely the wrong way round politically. It fails to understand the dialectical role of not- or anti-value (and of unalienated labour and disposable time) in oppositional politics. It is from the spaces of not-value and unalienated labour that a deep and widespread popular critique of the capitalist mode of production and its distinctive form of value and its alienations can be mounted. And it is from these sites too that the lineaments of a post-capitalist economy might best be identified. To be a producer of value and surplus value within a capitalist mode of production is, Marx noted, not a blessing but ‘a misfortune’.

(Harvey 2017, 90–91; quoting Marx [1867] 1975, 510)

At the beginning of my enquiry, I argued that the entire Marxist debate over digital information produced in corporate social media by their users can be summarised by the question: do user-generated data contain themselves value? Here, one can see how this question constitutes only a part of a larger discourse on the evolution of capital from its embryonic state as merchant capital to today’s information or data one. It is important, though, not to understand such a yes-no question as one creating an insuperable dichotomy. This is a much more nuanced debate and, if one chooses to follow it thoroughly, one would probably witness all such Marxist approaches, no matter how distinct, coming together under a common goal. At the end of the day, as illuminated by Harvey, the entire discussion—the Marxist discussion—aims at providing a feasible alternative to capitalism. From that perspective, the question of value (and labour/work) turns from an academic debate to one of political strategy. This is where the nuance can be more easily felt exactly because politics do not so easily boil down to a “yes” or “no”, “this” or “that”.

The Autonomist side (summarised as such) seems to suggest that a more viable counterplan would arise, if we loosened the traditional distinctions between productive and unproductive work, material and immaterial labour, value and non-value, etc. But what about the McDonald’s cashier working somewhere in North America or Europe or the Asian factory worker who only recently abandoned her agricultural life? These exist alongside (quite literally in some cases) the highly educated workers of the financial or the administrative sector. The latter constitute indeed a *qualitative* development of the global workforce but, from a *quantitative* perspective, all three of these roles still co-exist. In fact, although the industrial worker might be considered as one of the primary manifestations of the proletariat (and, thus, obsolete?), the industrialisation of vast areas of Asia has doubled or even tripled the global population of factory workers in a period of a few decades. There are indeed more industrial workers today than there were in

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the 19th or 20th century. Such a development remains underrepresented by an approach aiming its attention at qualitative changes.

I understand why focusing on how our system evolves qualitatively might be much more compelling for a Marxist scholar. As noted, even Marx himself was analysing a socio-economic phenomenon, i.e. the capitalist mode of production, which only existed in very few places during his era. In that regard, today's Marxist theorists have 'every right' to attempt the same and consequently argue that we should indeed approach the entire capitalist system through its most recent manifestations—both affirmative and oppositional.

Nevertheless, I believe that doing so at the obvious expense of some other phenomena, which are only developing quantitatively, is generally not the way to go. I am totally on board with any attempt to create an "equal opportunity of resistance" and mutual bonds between the people occupying divergent positions in the workplace or beyond (Hardt and Negri 2004, 107). But this cannot be the case, I suggest, if a balance is not struck between new and old—but still vastly exercised—forms of labour (see also the critique of 'multitude' in Choonara 2005). Such a theoretical balance is, for instance, wonderfully struck for the concept of 'primitive accumulation' when Harvey updates it to 'accumulation by dispossession'. We should also remember that the same theorist who so astutely analysed capitalism in its infancy also pointed out that "*merely quantitative differences beyond a certain point pass into qualitative changes*" (Marx [1867] 1975, 313; my emphasis). If this is true, then even the recently created proletariat of Asia can be the "centre of potential revolt" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 29). They can do this by evolving into something different than their European colleagues.

Therefore, I believe that trying to explain contemporary socio-economic phenomena while roughly retaining some past conceptual distinctions is fruitful because it better facilitates the theoretical balance between the two. I do not think that this necessarily means that different social groups conducting their own form of anti-capitalist struggle will face difficulties in endorsing each other. On the contrary, it might make it easier for them to cooperate if they understand their differences. It seems to me that by giving the initiative to a specific kind of labour or a specific production process also means repeating some of the strategic-political mistakes of the past. Certainly, creating information by means of information will probably have the same groundbreaking effects that "the production of machines by machines" had (Marx [1867] 1975, 388; see Chapter XV, Section 1. "The Development of Machinery"). Yet, we should not so easily conflate this with an opportunity to overthrow capitalism. I remain convinced that it is perfectly possible for such a development to somehow worsen our life conditions, bring about a new era of capitalist domination, *and* not cause any generalised counter-action. It all boils down to how these developments are *perceived*. Thus, my own hope lies with the possibility of making the debate on value and labour/work as accessible as possible but without resorting to potentially misleading hierarchies, as in the case of 'immaterial labour over industrial labour', or by unnecessarily

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tearing down some theoretical distinctions only to bring to the fore the newest part of the analysis, as in ‘knowledge-value instead of time-value’.

For these reasons, I side with Harvey and Tony Smith in what might seem like a more ‘traditional’ approach to value, labour, and work.

Privately undertaken labour must still be validated as socially necessary through the sale of commodities for money, no matter how highly developed the general intellect manifested in that labour might be, and this privately undertaken labour is validated as socially necessary only insofar as surplus value is produced and appropriated. This means that value theory remains as important for the comprehension of capitalism today as any previous period in its history. As the general intellect develops, the potential development of wealth is indeed increasingly hampered by the demands of valorisation. But this increasing social irrationality should be seen as a confirmation of Marx’s value theory, not a refutation.

(Smith 2013, 32; see also Harvey 2017, 96–98)

In this ‘irrationality’ also lies the key to a society and economy beyond the capitalist one; in the distinction between activities that straightforwardly produce value and commodities for the capital, i.e. labour, and those that do not and are incorporated in the capitalist mode of production as surplus value, as ‘free gifts,’ only ‘after the fact’ of their creation, i.e. work.

It should be made perfectly clear that not producing value for the capital makes one not irrelevant to but, on the contrary, a potential example par excellence of anti-capitalist struggle. I do understand that the term ‘unproductive’ carries a specific dissonance and negative historical correlations (see Fuchs 2015, 66), but, at the end of the day, so does the entire Marxist theory. I agree with Harvey that we need to move beyond such intuitions. It suffices for this case to specify that this unproductivity relates to the necessary conditions for the capitalist mode of production to emerge and not to the contributions of an individual to her society as a whole. Exactly because they are unproductive only in that sense, the everyday users of social media, or the internet in general, constitute a kind of *immature revolutionaries*: ‘revolutionaries’ because they indeed create and exchange information with each other on the sole basis of use values (many of them at least); ‘immature’ because they are not fully aware of or they do not care about how the traces of these transactions are utilised by the corporate social media platforms. “Consumers are interested in the use value aspect of media and technology, whereas capitalists are interested in the exchange value aspect that helps them to accumulate money capital” (Fuchs and Mosco 2012, 12). The benefits of maintaining the distinctions (here, in relation to value) are exemplified in this very statement. The above would make no sense in a context where every contribution outside the ‘factory walls’ is approached as an immediate contribution to the capitalist mode of

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production or as a single form of value. There, one would not have the theoretical space needed for arguing that the user-generated data are both a use value for the users and a productive use value (from ‘productive consumption’) for the capitalists.²⁶ Thus, one might miss this glimpse of revolutionary potential embedded in our existing situation. It is not a matter of delineating the dominant form of capitalist exploitation but rather of construing the *necessary conditions* for such exploitation and, consequently, a counterplan which targets them.

Since, by quoting Fuchs, I implicitly reintroduced him in the discussion, let me briefly explain where I believe he stands in the broader debate on labour and value emerging from the ‘general intellect’. Put simply, Fuchs is closer to Harvey than the Autonomist branch. He fully acknowledges and utilises the distinctions between work and labour, value and non-/not-/anti-value in a rather traditional manner. He notices, for instance, that “Negri does not distinguish between work and labour, but conceives both as necessarily alienated” (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013, 249; see also Fuchs 2012c, 635). For me, problems only arise from how he specifically chooses to utilise these distinctions by approaching user-generated data as products of digital labour instead of free gifts or digital work. From that perspective, I find the Autonomists’ choice of pushing such activities and their products into the realm of the unquantifiable contributions to the capitalist mode of production more insightful (for instance, Hardt and Negri 2000, 358). This does not mean that the users-workers are not being exploited; exploitation does happen but under different conditions.

As shown, splitting the debate on work/labour and value in two is not always representative of its reality; the disagreements involved are sometimes much more nuanced and flexible. This is how, for instance, Harvey partly sides with the Autonomists a few pages before he expresses his—equally in part—differentiation from some of their assumptions (2017, 90-91):

The working class (however defined) is the embodiment of anti-value. It is on the basis of this conception of alienated labour that Tronti, Negri, and the Italian autonomistas build their theory of labour resistance and class struggle at the point of production. The act of refusal to work is anti-value personified.

(Harvey 2017, 77)

It is certainly not my intention to delve any deeper into how these seemingly contradictory remarks are indeed compatible. To avoid making this subsection needlessly long, I will attempt to

²⁶ This difference between the users’ and the capitalists’ aspirations is further widened by the fact that digital information, being a non-rivalrous good, can manifest both these roles without becoming somehow depleted. This is how users can, at the same time, conduct an ‘immature revolution’ while also contribute in a concrete sense to the capitalist mode of production (more on that later).

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end this discussion with one conclusive but opened statement. Instead of showing, that is, in more detail how any or every of the concepts and tendencies mentioned specifically relates to my reading of Harvey's 'free gifts', I will provide a general prerequisite that, if met, my 'free gifts' can be connected to any concept from the Marxist tradition (or even beyond). *As long as the theoretical distinctions between labour and work, value and non-/not-/anti-value, or similar notions are maintained, then one is free to assume that the concept of 'free gifts', as approached by me, is compatible with any other description of a process through which previously untapped resources are willingly left to be exploited by the dominant mode of production.* This is the case now, with capitalism, but it can also be the case with any other socio-economic system.

The concept of 'free gifts', as defined above, is, thus, my theoretical 'weapon of choice' when it comes to addressing the phenomenon of user-generated data in corporate social media. This means that, for me, *user-generated data are products of digital work and not digital labour (like Fuchs has it) and, thus, they, in themselves, do not carry value but still contribute in the production of surplus value. Furthermore, they carry a seed of human creativity beyond the specificities of capitalism—that of non-/not-/anti-value, or of use value without value. If understood and further pursued as such, they can contribute to truly democratising our socio-economic conditions.*

Now, the latter is anything but a straightforward task. Our contemporary struggles over the user-generated digital information (to the extent we participate in one) are positioned within a wider, lasting, and turbulent battle over the control of the material resources needed for the survival and well-being of our very species. This battle is only to a limited extent theoretical. Its most important part is (or should be) conducted by people who face the negative consequences of the current mode of production in their most direct and everyday form. The Marxist theory promotes the possibility of us, as a species, coming up with a mode of producing our material necessities without, by doing so, also establishing materialistic social hierarchies. But how do we get there? What must happen within that everyday sphere for one to decide that a different way of utilising the resources available to or produced by us constitutes an imperative? Do such revolutionary moments emerge when one participates as a mere user in our contemporary corporate social media? I wish I could say that the internet of corporate social media offers more opportunities for experiencing the need for a radical transformation of our economy and society than, for instance, the 'traditional' workplace. It will be the goal of the next section to explain why this is not the case.

C. Redefining Corporate Social Media

Now that I have already examined in some detail how the basic concepts of the Marxist theory of value translate to user-generated data and corporate social media, it is time to discuss what I find so distinct about them. There is something straightforward but also ‘evilly’ ingenious about the online targeted advertising strategy: it exploits a non-rivalrous and negligible good. The user-generated data can circulate as use values between the users as well as exchange values—once turned into metadata—between capitalists (between the platforms and the third-parties in need of promotion). In the case of a purely material and rivalrous good, this would obviously result in a conflict between these different aspirations. In user-generated data, though, use and exchange values manifest themselves as non-exclusive to each other.

In what follows, a recast of my argument from the perspective of *alienation* and the everyday experience of the corporate social media platforms will help me to show how the discontinuity between the collective process of reproducing human nature in the digital domain and the specific role this plays in the reproduction of the capitalist system is first and foremost an *experiential* one. In other words, although I claim that the conceptual framework so far described—the ‘free gifts’ approach—is the most suitable one, I also acknowledge the improbability of it emerging solely from an everyday use of Facebook and the like.

What can still be felt from that perspective, though, are privacy breaches. The user can easily understand, given how specific to her the advertisements she comes across are, that her information is being recorded and commercially utilised. No wonder why the topic of *digital privacy* dominates the debate on corporate social media. My approach does not use the concept of privacy (not even its Marxist equivalent) or add anything to it. Yet, it is worth reviewing it briefly to showcase the differences between the two, i.e. the ‘free gifts of human nature in digital environments’ and the ‘digital privacy’ perspective. I claim that the former has something which escapes the latter. The example of diaspora* user-owned social network will help me better illustrate this point.

1. From the Perspective of the User: A Dialecticised Alienation

“Alright!”, one might say, “I can hear you loud and clear... You are suggesting that all we want is to keep in touch and be creative, like we always did in one way or another, and all *they* do is try to get as much metadata and profit possible out of it. But what’s really the problem with that? What’s wrong about Facebook for someone who just wants to go online, read the news, and chat with her friends?” “Nothing”, I would respond, and my answer would not be some sort of shallow provocation. Frankly, there is not much in my approach for someone who “just” uses Facebook. Such an individual might use the platform in any imaginable way and still not be hindered by any

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kind of exploitation of her free gifts—her data. Every text she sends will reach its recipient; any picture she uploads will have the exact form she desires; the latest ideas, reports, notifications, and information of any sort will reach her from every direction. She will be just ‘fine’. Getting a decent ad-blocking application, for the sake of cutting down some of the advertising noise, might be the only counter-action needed in this case.

Most Marxists, facing such a ‘so what?’ question, would probably point towards the psychosocial category of *alienation*. The latter summarises the effects which the capitalist workplace has to the labourers and the society constituted by them. But, as I will show, it is not that straightforward with user-generated data...

Alienation describes the schism gradually created between the individual labourer and the rest of her society as the former becomes increasingly dependent on and absorbed by the mentality of the capitalist mode of production (Marx [1844] 1975, sec. “Estranged Labour”; see also: Mészáros 1970; Ollman [1971] 1977; Sayers 2011).²⁷ This begins with the separation of the worker from the object of her work. As I already described, once the worker has accepted the capitalist’s offer, everything created during the specified working hours belongs to the latter. The capitalist keeps for herself all the means of production along with the commodity-capital produced and the labourer returns home with her wage—this is the deal.

According to Marx, one’s relation with the products of her work cannot, however, be adequately substituted by the money-name of the value produced. Even if the worker was to receive her full value in money, which, as we have seen, would result in the bankruptcy (or the radical transformation) of the enterprise in question, something would still be missing. The feeling of estrangement caused by the initial separation from the tools, materials, and products of labour is transferred to the inability to control the (re)production process in which the worker is embedded. This, for Marx, goes against the very essence of our species and, finally, results in a situation where one does not feel at ease with oneself, with her fellow workers, her society, and her environment as a whole.

The material on which [living labour] works is *alien* material; just as the instrument is an *alien* instrument; its labour appears as a mere accessory to them as substance and therefore objectifies itself in things not belonging to *it*. Indeed, living labour itself appears as *alien* vis-à-vis living labour capacity whose labour it is, whose life it expresses, for it is surrendered to capital in return for objectified labour, for the product of labour itself. [...] Therefore, naturally, the product appears to it as a combination of alien material, alien instrument and alien labour—as *alien property*,

²⁷ Here, the concept of alienation will be used only in relation to labour and the objects produced (for a broader perspective, see Harvey 2018a).

and after production it has only become poorer by the life force expended; but begins the DRUDGERY anew of itself as a merely subjective labour capacity separated from the condition of its life.”

(Marx [1857–1858] 1986, 390; emphases in the original)

In industrial capitalism, both exploitation and alienation are inextricably connected; workers feel alienated because they are being exploited and they are being exploited because the fruits of their work are taken away from them. Exploitation can, then, be approached as the technical, from the perspective of political economy, explanation of alienation—of a sentiment that workers already have. For Marx, human nature is bound to the collective efforts of our species to construct objects external to our bodies and through them redefine our relationship with our environment and our fellow humans (Marx [1845] 1975, 4). Alienation is always present when this process is hampered. Ideological factors might only temporarily convince people of the opposite: “Why bother with the products you made and left behind? You have a wage now to buy anything you want!” Yet, if Marx’s approach is correct, it should not take long until the feeling of estrangement rises to the surface, probably during a kind of crisis, only to be suppressed again and so on and so forth. The only resolution to this psychosomatic struggle would be reached when, at last, the enormous capabilities of the collective human spirit (‘Gattungswesen’) are set free and the workers succeed in establishing an anti-hierarchical and inclusive process of production: “[w]hen the labourer co-operates systematically with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species” (Marx [1867] 1975, 334).

Here, I want to put forward the claim that the *online targeted advertising strategy relativises alienation to such a degree that users of the corporate social media might not experience that feeling at all in their everyday use of the platforms.*

The non-rivalrous nature of information allows for a discontinuity between the sphere of ‘production, reproduction and destruction of human nature and culture’ in the digital domain and its specific implementation in the capitalist mode of production of corporate social media. Users are free to create and exchange information while the information capitalists are harvesting these data. The two processes exist independently from each other in the sense that capturing the user-generated data does not prevent their creators from making decisions in their own sphere of production and circulation. As long as the users do not come up with some ‘crazy’ idea of somehow harvesting this information for themselves—thus upsetting the second part of the production process—the one related with the constitution of metadata and their liquidation—there exists no real antagonism between the users’ sphere and the capitalists’ one. Information exchange in digital environments drastically alters the way alienation is experienced. The *immediate* outcomes of users’ daily activity on corporate social media are never actually taken away from them or drastically altered. In Dal Yong Jin’s and Andrew Feenberg’s words:

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Corporations commodify the knowledge commons, but they do not transform its content as thoroughly as were land and labour at an earlier stage. Of course the content is shaped to some extent by the design of the interface and worked up by such procedures as data mining, but the original flow of data is not much altered in the process. There is indeed a certain degree of standardization involved in the process, but it does not go as far as in the cases Marx considered. Unlike land cleared and fenced for raising sheep, or labour stripped of skills, online communications remain essentially what they were even after they are commodified.

(Jin and Feenberg 2015, 56)

Hence, although the outcomes of the digital human sociability are being exploited as free gifts, the users never experience a moment of separation from the immediate products of their work.

The discontinuity between the two spheres, that is, is successful insofar as it is kept inaccessible to the senses of the everyday user.²⁸ The latter can witness the outcome of the targeted advertising model only when they are confronted by some peculiarly insightful ads. But even then, by no means, they become immediately aware (if at all) of the various stages their 'clicks' have gone through, neither of their value or price. Not even a single sensuous proof of exploitation is to be found. From this perspective, users only know that they now possess something that nobody else in the history of our kind had before: a highly customisable, creative, trustworthy, and without charge means of instantaneous communication. Nothing seems to be excluding them from the information they create through the platform in hand and nothing actually does so. The metadata, in which information capitalism is essentially interested, is only a by-product of the user-generated data. As long as one interprets the latter as information exchanged by users for their very own reasons, no alienation occurs. One 'friend' sends the data; the other 'friend' receives the data; both 'friends' are 'happy'.

Users not being susceptible to alienation might seem as simply a direct outcome of the 'free gifts' category. If the concept of alienation, as described by Marx, is bound to labour we conduct for others, then one might think that by abandoning the concept of labour and choosing to approach user-generated data as free gifts or digital work, one also loses the theoretical 'access' to alienation. This is not necessarily true though. Instances can be perceived, cases of appropriation by dispossession, of things produced solely as use values only to be eventually taken from their creators and subsumed in the capitalist mode of production. Do those workers, those free creators, not feel alienated as any labourer would?

²⁸ For an interesting study of this 'experiential disjointedness', from a different perspective than mine, see Mark Hansen's *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (2015).

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Actually, such a worker might feel even more alienated than a labourer acting under a contractual relation with a capitalist, because the latter has, at least to some degree, consented to or at least acknowledged this transaction. As already indicated, not being a ‘proper’ labourer does not make one immune to either exploitation or alienation. It is perfectly feasible for her to be separated from the products of her work even though she might have completed them for reasons which had initially nothing to do with a capitalist mode of production. There is always a chance for these products to be more innovative and valuable (whatever that might mean) exactly because they were not created under the industry standards and with exchange value in mind. More importantly, someone else was responsible for the costs of their conceptualisation and creation of those objects and that alone might make them more sought-after—the fact that they constitute *free* gifts.

It seems that the only disadvantage of the appropriation by dispossession of free gifts is that some tension is inevitable when such transfers take place—well, not with non-rivalrous goods such as user-generated data though. Since use and exchange values of information can manifest themselves without excluding each other, no one needs to be dispossessed of anything for the target advertising strategy to be successful. No matter how one chooses to conceptualise the spheres of ‘production, reproduction and destruction of human nature and culture’ in the digital domain and that of capitalist accumulation in corporate social media, the non-exclusive relation between the use and exchange values involved endures. Being non-rivalrous, digital information can appear in my emails, texts, and other digital objects while, at the same time, be part of a database owned by the company providing me with those services. Manipulating the information in one of those hubs does not necessarily mean that it will cease to exist in another. A company using my preferences as raw material for the coordination of a marketing campaign does not restrict me from communicating those preferences with my affiliates (the company actually relies on it).

This is mainly the reason why I was so keen on accepting the deal in the first place: it seems like a ‘positive-sum game’ or even better. When I was initially ‘approached’ by Facebook, I was offered unprecedented services in the form of an easy-to-use, creative, trustworthy, widespread, and, most importantly, free-of-charge digital platform for communicating with my ‘friends’. All I was asked in return were very specific aspects of my information—and even that request was buried under the lengthy list of terms of service which I probably skipped reading. But, whether I am actually aware of what I am giving in return, this does not change the fact that my contribution to this ‘contract’ consists of aspects that were never immediately beneficial for me anyways. In addition, their utilisation by someone else does not set any immediate constraints in my usual everyday online activity—something that I do care about.

With user-generated data, one can almost ‘have her cake and eat it too’. Use and exchange values can manifest themselves in different spheres of production, circulation, and

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consumption without necessarily excluding each other. Everyone *seems* to be winning: users get to utilise the platform for communicating and expressing themselves, the company owning and maintaining the platform makes a profit, and the third parties find some space to inform people about their new products or services. Setting aside, for a moment, concerns regarding privacy, from the users' side, and the protection of trademarks, trade secrets, and copyrights, from the side of the entrepreneurs, all three agents' aspirations seem to generally be fulfilled by the described model—by an internet of unconstrained information flows. The latter appears not only adequately accessible, creative, and trustworthy to the users but also orientated to some reasonable demands of the market. From this perspective, no antagonisms between the different values and the agents involved arise.

Since, as I have already discussed, Facebook can externalise its costs (and not only its costs) and find users interested in utilising the platform (and, by doing so, create the raw material Facebook needs) there is generally no logic in interfering with the users' decisions about their non-rivalrous data. Let them conduct revolutions through the platform! After all, even the suppliers of Molotov parts might use some promotion!

Hence, by 'liberating' the users-prosumers, Facebook establishes a constant flow of information which then is packaged accordingly and access to it is granted to anyone willing to pay. The users, during that time, remain untouched in their own sphere of production, circulation, and consumption of information—this is why one can call them *pro-sumers* (producers + consumers) anyway. For the users of social media, the 'circle' remains complete; they have, thus, no reason to feel alienated, given that the everyday non-commercial use of their information is not in any way interfered with. On the contrary, for them to feel welcome and the targeted advertising model to actually obtain some truthful information, the users need to be able to express themselves freely about their wants, needs, and desires (see again: Jin and Feenberg 2015, 56). With online targeted advertising strategy, *empowering to some degree the user becomes a necessity*.

* * *

But what happens if we choose to consider the side of the commercial exploitation of the 'by-product' instead? Alienation does indeed become felt and largely relevant as a concept when we move to the sphere of metadata. Here, a sense of separation might occur when an individual comes across the specific manipulation of her information. One might indeed feel estranged if one were to witness the process through which all of the online activity in the social media platforms is being harvested, quantified, anonymised, and, finally, 'fed' to third parties.

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Furthermore, and this is my ultimate aim, *the user would feel alienated if she were to consider the possibility of collectively manipulating the metadata for purposes other than those of promoting commodities*. What if the amassed sentiments of users helped in something broader than that? What if the user-generated data became a means for organising at least a part of the productive sector of society? This is certainly something we, as a sum of producers of the raw material of information, are alienated from, yet, it is also the very thing obscured by our immediate experience of corporate social media. We would only have access to it if we chose to think beyond this restriction.

Hence, inasmuch as users consider themselves individually (or individualistically), no general demands can be made towards corporate social media on the grounds of alienation. Alienation simply cannot be felt. Nevertheless, the claim that alienation does not occur while remaining at the everyday level does not mean that digital information is not subjected to alienation in general.

As I have shown, there exist specific aspects of information, closely related to monetary gains, that are protected as crown jewels by corporate social media like Facebook. These do not, of course, target single chunks of information; such a limited insight does not often allow much profiteering and is, thus, irrelevant. The entire industry is built upon the prospect of collecting and analysing huge volumes of user-generated data and this is exactly where the only alienation, I think, takes place. Users are separated from the benefits which the aggregated form of their data can bring; they are *alienated as a totality* of free creators against their collectively produced digital information and the benefits this can bring. As individual users of Facebook, they have no particular interest in some rather dull pieces of information regarding their everyday lives (apart from considerations regarding their privacy). When these are combined, though, a new prospect and power arise: that of organising parts of the production and circulation process of material goods according to these aggregated sentiments. Users-prosumers are denied access to this ‘higher dimension’ of their data while they are spared their individual everyday uses. In that sense, I suggest that alienation is being relativised or even *dialecticised*.

This distinct understanding of alienation I am proposing is based upon the discussion on how an excess of surplus value can be obtained even though some of the raw materials involved, user-generated data—in this case, do not themselves contain value (see section: “Surplus Value Without Value”). From that point of view, what users of corporate social media are denied is their relative surplus value; the extra value emerging from the amassing and manipulation of their data. Only in relation to the former, users are being alienated. It is not the individual user of corporate social media who is being exploited but rather the entire human sociability in those platforms. Nobody except Facebook’s employees participates in the extraction of surplus value from these enormous—and enormously profitable—datasets and even they do not do it in their own terms.

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I argue that, to continue discussing alienation in digital information, we ought to focus on that specific plane where our individual data create a sum. Only in that sphere, users are being exploited and they are being exploited as something distinctive from digital labourers. Users are not alienated as labourers in the service of capital but as (re)producers of their own human nature whose spin-offs are 'after the fact' incorporated in the process of capitalist accumulation. This is what the 'free gifts' approach ultimately shows us.

Such considerations are what I find missing from the work of Fuchs and others endorsing the digital labour thesis. No matter how compatible a concept of 'relativised alienation' is to their analyses of value, to the best of my knowledge, no clear account of it can be found in their writings. Fuchs, for instance, although generally being very explicit in describing the non-rivalrous character of digital information (in Fuchs 2014, 114, for instance), 'forgets' to incorporate this description in his discussion of alienation. The latter concept is, in most of his extensive publications, considered more traditionally: alienation looms large in digital labour like it would in any other kind of labour. "Users of commercial social media platforms do not control and own their data; they are alienated from it", he states at some point (Fuchs 2014, 91). He does not seem to acknowledge any kind of tension emerging from the fact that the commodity in question is non-rivalrous. He does not give attention to how this aspect is cunningly utilised by the online targeted advertising strategy either. The same goes for other proponents of the 'digital labour' thesis such as Tiziana Terranova (2000, 2004) or Trebor Scholz (2011; 2013). They too seem to be somewhat attached to a 'traditional' understanding of use and exchange values, as them being rivalrous, even in digital information (for an exception, see: Robinson 2015).

Keeping in mind the exact circumstances under which information can become an object of alienation can potentially help anyone willing to change the existing conditions understand why most people act and think the way they do while browsing corporate social media platforms. Why are questions of privacy more common than those of alternative utilisation of user's metadata? Could it be because the former issues are more accessible from the perspective of the individual everyday user than the latter?

In what follows, I will indeed discuss the topic of digital privacy. The latter always lurks when user-generated data and corporate social media are discussed. My framework is only loosely connected to consideration regarding digital privacy, yet, by juxtaposing my 'free gifts' approach to that emphasising the importance of confidentiality of personal information, I will be able to better illustrate what the former actually brings to the table.

2. The Case for Privacy

A *negative* understanding of privacy can be thought of as the Marxist equivalent of the concept. Multiple Marxist scholars, Christian Fuchs included, have attempted to transform the classical liberal idea of privacy into a weapon against vulturous capitalist practices aiming at extracting and commercially exploiting information about internet users (Allmer 2011; Fuchs 2011c, 2012d, 2012b, 2013; Seignani 2013, 2012, 2016). In that regard, privacy is not promoted as something intrinsically important (the mentioned authors are very ambivalent whether such importance exists) but rather as a means to the end of disempowering information capitalism—thus the word ‘negative’. I am very sympathetic to the anti-capitalist/anti-monopolistic strategies proposed by the theorists mentioned on the basis of this negative approach to privacy and I agree with them that this is probably the only one compatible with Marxism. Yet, even this one I find, in a sense, restrictive.

My whole issue with privacy (Marxist or non-Marxist alike) is that it generally signifies a tendency towards less recording, less utilisation of data, and, inevitably, less metadata. I do understand the rationale behind such a move given our situation today. If the most important thing we do with user-generated data is using them to promote commodities to their creators, the best solution might indeed be, for the time being, not to record them at all. Even the technologies, hardware and software, used for such tasks thus far are anything but neutral. Since they were developed within capitalism, it is only reasonable to assert that the pursuit of exchange values and profit play a primary role in their function. Yet, I cannot but observe the fundamental tension between the demand for fewer data and the theoretical framework described in this thesis. My framework approaches metadata as a very important raw material despite its incorporation in the capitalist mode of production today. Yes, it is largely lead astray in the hands of information capitalism; but, no, I do not believe that this is the only plausible outcome.

Certainly, the more information on their users companies like Facebook have and are allowed to use the more invasive online advertising becomes. It is already hard enough, in some cases, to distinguish between promotional material and the ‘real’ content of the web. It would be even more disturbing to experience an internet where content would be totally subjugated to advertising; a network of commodified reflections of everyone’s wants, needs, or desires (which the capitalist system itself partly dictates). Not to mention how cyberspace might be transformed, if a government assumed similar power: What chance would, then, people have against repressive authorities? How much do the information agencies of even the most democratic states already know about their citizens through their online activity? The revelations of Edward Snowden (see: The Courage Foundation n.d.), among others, fuel the fire of many dystopic scenarios regarding the future of network technologies.

In response, public concerns about digital privacy and the struggle against the internet giants utilising user-generated data have helped, at least in some cases, in tightening the legal

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framework through which production and exchange of information become possible. The *2018 Reform of EU Data Protection Rules* (European Commission 2018a), for instance, has arguably had positive effects on the empowerment of the user. The European Commission has also lately proposed a radical transformation of the taxing code to better include digital companies and compensate the contributions of the users (2018b). Still, I believe that such institutional reforms can only go so far in addressing the asymmetries of digital information exchange.

A more promising and all-encompassing approach to the matter are the non-commercial alternatives to corporate social media. The diaspora* user-owned social network is a prominent example. Diaspora* functions as a network of “independently run servers (‘pods’)” scattered “all over the world” (Diaspora Foundation 2018). The user is encouraged to pick a server near her location or in a country known for its strict regulations regarding digital information. One’s data is, then, stored in her server of choice and access to it is strictly granted only to those indicated by the user; no ‘contracts’ are involved between any multinational corporations and the users. “Privacy” is one of three pylons which hold the diaspora* project together. The other two are “Decentralization”, referring to the server architecture, and “Freedom”, which has to do with the users being prompted to create multiple digital identities of themselves without being restrained by their ‘real’ ones (Diaspora Foundation 2018). In addition, diaspora* even supports cross-posting to other popular social media for those not confident enough to make a total shift. It is a well-balanced project which combines a user-centric view on the topic of user-generated data with some realist connections to the current state of social media.

Diaspora* generally lives up to the users’ expectations as any other popular social medium would. The most important disadvantages I have spotted, when testing it myself, are the ones obviously imposed by its limited userbase—around 700.000 accounts as of the beginning of 2017. Not everyone is on diaspora* (yet), thus not every topic of the public discourse is adequately represented on the platform. A disproportionate weight is given to leftist points of view on politically-charged topics vis-à-vis, for instance, fun and popular activities. Put bluntly, there is enough material on class struggle in Latin America but not on Pokémon. Many people, I included, might personally be fine with that. Yet, this limitation, for better or worse, has a restraining effect on the further expansion of the platform. Diaspora*, in contrast to Facebook, seems to draw the attention of groups of people already concerned with the struggle for digital privacy or radical leftist politics in general.

On the bright side, the measures which diaspora* takes against the capitalist exploitation of user-generated data and privacy concerns have been, until the time of my writing, more than effective for the users who made the switch. By transferring to the user the entire responsibility of choosing when, where, how, and if her data will be shared, diaspora* practically wipes out the foundations of the online targeted advertising strategy. Diaspora* gives third parties in need of promotion absolutely nothing to work with. The entire process of online communication

becomes successfully decommercialised and, as proof, no ads are there to be found when browsing the platform.

This becomes, of course, only possible because the people involved in the establishing and maintenance of each individual server have alternative means of income. Diaspora* does not constitute a full-blown plan for the surpassing of information capitalism but rather a timid initial step to that direction. To that extent, I agree with Fuchs that “[n]on-commercial non-profit online projects [,such as diaspora*,] are an expression of the struggle for a society and an Internet that is not ruled by the logic of commodities and exchange value” (2014, 120). Diaspora*, along with similar projects like Wikipedia, should be avidly supported for this reason.

That being said and emphasised, we must become perfectly aware that something is missing even from such projects. No matter how crucial they are, I cannot but notice that these remain mostly at the level of the individual user, her data, and their protection from commercial interests. They also engage with digital data only from a negative perspective. These endeavours certainly battle the monopoly of Facebook and, as such, are vital. Yet, they do not make any extra progress towards allowing the users (or their representatives?) access to at least some version of the metadata which can potentially be extracted in the process. In diaspora*, the latter are never created, to begin with, since the user-generated data remain untouched and dispersed in multiple servers around the globe.

Not allowing the production of metadata might suffice for the initial stage of the anti-capitalist struggle we find ourselves in now but, for me, it should not constitute an end-goal as well. At least theoretically, for the time being, I think we should engage with the possibility of allowing the harvesting of metadata under specific circumstances and for purposes broader than the promotion of individual commodities. Facebook succeeds now in taming the beast of user’s metadata for its own commercial benefit. Diaspora*’s response is to kill it. But what if ‘taming’ is actually not the wrong strategy? What if the problems we now face do not arise from the act of ‘taming’ itself but rather from the orders we give to this ‘tamed beast’ of user’s data and metadata?

Such questions are hard to tackle when we approach corporate social media solely as a means of communicating within which users’ privacy must be protected. Privacy, insofar as it is not coupled with deeper structural changes to the economic structure of corporate social media, remains, for me, at the preparatory stage of a long struggle yet to be undertaken. In other words, privacy is more of a means to an end rather than an end in itself. It is needed to allow us to contemplate about a more self-fulfilling utilisation of our data and metadata but, by itself, cannot respond to those considerations. Contrarily, I claim that my approach indeed helps to at least open up the discussion about what we, at the end of the day, want from our amassed and organised data—our metadata. For me, the ‘antagonisms of digital information’, after all, point to

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questions so universal, persistent, and challenging as how we, as a species, want to utilise the resources available to us.

V. Conclusion: ‘Social’ or ‘Social-ist Media’?

It should be clear by now that my analysis of the economy of corporate social media aims to bring to the fore issues which just cannot be accommodated on the basis of the individual user (or her privacy) alone. A couple of aspects of user-generated data point towards this improbability. Users’ digital information is appropriated only after the fact of its initial creation by the users for their own immediate sake (or, at least, for reasons distinct from the pursuit of monetary gain). This, in accordance with David Harvey, makes them ‘free gifts’; (productive) use values which are incorporated in the capitalist mode of production without additional cost. Moreover, being non-rivalrous, user-generated data can exist in the sphere within which users communicate with each other but also in the sphere of surplus value production and exchange. For the latter to conclude, literally nothing needs to be taken away from the user other than the prospect of utilising the metadata she herself contributed in. Only in the latter instance, a case based on alienation can be made. What users of corporate social media lose are use values which has not been materialised yet—the prospect of their metadata.

Taking into account the framework I have been building so far, the attempt of diaspora*, or similar projects, to empower the individual user by making her the sole master of her data (to the extent that it is taken up by the user) constitutes a compromise. It involves discarding the possibility of collectively gaining from the data we all produce because a specific group of people once claimed these resources for their own benefit alone. This is certainly an option but also a wasteful one.

I obviously do not mean that we should be granted access to each other’s possibly sensitive information for the sake of not ‘wasting’ them; there is no social gain in that. I still entertain the possibility, though, of roughly keeping the process of creating metadata from user-generated data as it now functions while discarding the final bit—the most important one for the capitalist mode of production. Retain, I mean, the practice of organising and anonymising users’ sentiments but, instead of using them for the promotion of individual commodities, make them the basis for coordinating parts of the production and circulation processes of a more democratic economy. Utilise them more or less as a global logistical tool: every ‘like’ registered would help in directing the creation of goods, estimating the production costs and targets, delivering the products when these are finally completed, etc. If online targeted advertising is a method of

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promoting commodities in information capitalism, then a socialist online communication network functioning as described above could be a method for allocating goods in information socialism.²⁹

This would contribute to what Harvey understands to be

[t]he only ultimate solution as far as Marx is concerned[, ...] the total abolition of exchange value which, of course, also implies the abolition of value as socially necessary labour time leaving the organised exchange of use values as the only remnant of the categories Marx derived from capitalism.

(Harvey 2017, 59)

By utilising online social networks in such a manner, both kinds of use values related to user-generated data can manifest themselves in a more fulfilling manner for the users. The use value emerging from the direct creation and exchange of digital information will still be there. In the realm of productive use value, now, i.e. the consumption of resources for the creation of more complex objects, is where my thought experiment makes a bigger difference. It implies that resources, i.e. the metadata, which were previously only controlled by a few multinational corporations and their directors, become a public good facilitating the “cooperative action of all of mankind” (Marx [1844] 1975, 333).

As long as the metadata remain anonymous and the users themselves are perfectly aware of this functionality and how/when/whether they can/want to contribute to it, I see no immediate problem arising from the perspective of privacy either. Furthermore, due to this general availability or abundance of digital information, there would hopefully be no way of extracting exchange value solely from selling access to metadata. The latter would, then, be more easily redirected to the further expansion of the production and exchange of use value. But even if a society of use values is just too much to ask even while speculating, making anonymized metadata publicly available on the moment of their creation is certainly an improvement on what we have

²⁹ What differentiates my own suggestion from that of Adam Arvidsson (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; 2012; for a critique, see Fuchs 2012c), for instance, is that I have no interest in just renegotiating the relation between customers and companies while retaining the broader asymmetry between them. The reason why I have already made perfectly clear that my own suggestion is purely speculative is because it requires a lot more than that. The radical reconstruction of the corporate social media scenery cannot but be part of a plan which would target every other field of production, circulation, and consumption of goods and resources as well.

On the other hand, Fuchs’s own policy suggestion for a media-specific voucher system (2018a, 2018b; see also: McChesney 2012; McChesney and Nichols 2010) indeed prepares the ground for such a radical reconfiguration. It still does not take into account, though, my approach to user-generated data as raw materials worth retaining. Fuchs’s suggestion is not presented here for this reason.

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today. Even within capitalism, this would help in decentralising the online economy of information, which I find to be generally a positive development. Moreover, turning the process through which metadata occur, the creation of the algorithms themselves, into an open-source project would further contribute to such a decentralisation.

But I must stop here. I am aware that the above suggestions, no matter how openly speculative and experimental, raise more questions than they answer: Who would organise and have access to such a tool and how can the rest ensure that it will not be misused? Is this not simply a technocratic regime with a humane pretext? Which other existing power imbalances might persist? And so on...

My response to the above critical questions is that they are not unique to my endeavour; they rather constitute the challenges which Marxism, and radical socialism in general, have been facing probably since their conception. All I promised for this thesis was that I would compile a framework through which user-generated data and corporate social media could be approached in Marxist terms. In other words, my goal has been to help in raising the analysis of the political economy of corporate social media to the level of the rest of Marxist theory—*not moving beyond that*. Approaching, now, the end of my enquiry and attempting to imagine the practical consequences of the theory described, it is only reasonable to encounter the same problems other Marxist theorists have been facing for more than a century. Nothing less than the need for a redefined state, democracy, technology, and so on.³⁰ A social-ist online communication network based on use value and the active utilisation of its users' data for better organising and meeting societal demands is an immediate outcome of the theoretical framework discussed so far. It is mentioned, here, strictly for this reason.

My suggestion requires a profound political motivation the likes of which this world has never seen. And, if my account of alienation in corporate social media is at all true, then such motivation is even harder to emerge through the everyday use of corporate social media. The way alienation manifests itself in those sets an obvious additional obstacle. As I have shown, users are not alienated as labourers—to the extent they are alienated at all. There is no such commonly shared negative experience emerging solely from the act of browsing Facebook and the like. Thus, the main problem with my suggestion about a democratically controlled network of online communication is probably, in the end, neither how considerable different this is from our current situation (including the counter-practices of platforms like diaspora*) nor the questions it leaves unanswered. It is rather the fact that the catalyst for such a drastic change is unlikely to emerge from one's everyday use of the corporate social media.

³⁰ These limitations can also be traced back to the base-superstructure model of Marx ([1859] 1987, 263; see also Harvey 2010, 189–201)

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This might sound like a (disorderly) retreat to traditional Marxist ideas. Yet, on the very grounds of my own analysis, I must concede that it is still more probable for the 'traditional' workplace to give rise to enduring radical political action than the internet of corporate social media. This is because participating in the former includes one being separated from the products of her work in the most immediate sense. If my conclusions are justified, Facebook offers an environment completely different to that of the average working place in the sense that nobody is clearly asked to give away anything. Users continually exchange digital objects, while the platform harvests and eventually commodifies their moves. The two spheres, focusing on use and exchange value respectively, are certainly related but not connected in a mutually exclusive fashion. Users, unlike factory labourers, are not gathered under the same roof only to collectively witness their exploitation. Their online activity is still exploited as a free gift to the capitalist mode of production but only after the users have utilised the social media platforms for communicating with each other; only after the users have extracted their own use values from the process.

For this reason, I am rather pessimistic towards the possibility of a new anti-capitalist movement emerging from the experience of utilising the corporate social media as a user. In other words, I do not think that the user is somehow the new proletariat—to the extent that we need such a revolutionary agent. Establishing social media which would also function as global logistical tools seems, then, like a win-more scenario; a plan of what to do with social media after we have already put under our belts the reconfiguration of other productive sectors. It should still be important but not an absolute priority. After all, for goods to be allocated through the use of the metadata produced by a social-ist network of communication, goods need to be produced in a non-capitalist manner, to begin with. Judging from both the immediate experience of users and the practicalities of any production process, I conclude that, no matter how important I consider such a reconfiguration of the corporate social media scenery, it presumably requires other steps to be made first or at least in parallel.

This does not mean, though, that projects such as the diaspora* collectively owned and decentralised social network, or the Wikipedia online encyclopaedia, should be anyhow suspended or hampered. If anything, such endeavours are needed to remind everyone that alternatives do exist and are worthy of our attention although they, in themselves, might be compromises. Even though these are rather focused on addressing users' specific concerns, they, nevertheless, constitute factual responses to Facebook's or Google's omnipotence. The struggle against the capitalist mode of production or the capitalist society, in general, is essentially a struggle against the idea that the latter is the only feasible path. This is what eventually brings me together with Christian Fuchs and others despite my occasional critique of their theoretical approaches. No matter how one chooses to resolve the paradoxical relation between user-generated data and value, the capitalist monopoly over digital information is so dire that no one has the luxury of turning down projects which immediately challenge such status quo. Until we are in a position to become the recipients of our own digital gifts, the sole heirs of our own human

V. Conclusion: 'Social' or 'Social-ist Media'?

digital nature and culture, any attempt of taking some power away from the monopolistic corporate social media should be welcome.

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Kladis-ef@hotmail.com

