

Between Political Commitment and Theoretical Rigour: Rethinking the “Digital Labour” Theory

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With the emergence of internet-centered social media, Christian Fuchs’s “digital labour” concept has further developed the “audience commodity” thesis within the political economy of communication. However, researchers mainly evaluate its political-economic merits and limitations, without examining why Fuchs so strongly opposes the “cognitive rent” approach and firmly upholds his problematic theory. On a subjective level, Fuchs gives up theoretical precision and scientific soundness in order to sustain a position of opposition to Western digital capitalism. On an objective level, the conflict over standpoint theory exposes an empiricist illusion: an incapacity to grasp scientifically the relationship between essence and appearance, as well as the notion of “matter”. Only by exploring this oppositional stance as a subjective motive and the empiricist illusion as an objective factor can we carry out a thorough critique of the digital labour theory and thus improve our comprehension of social reality in the age of digital capitalism.

Keywords: Digital capitalism, audience commodity, Christian Fuchs, empiricism, digital labour

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, digital technology organized around the internet has become essential to capitalism, turning “digital capitalism” into an actual condition (Schiller, 1999). Within Western critical political economy, scholars working in the Marxist tradition criticize its underlying social relations. A leading example is Christian Fuchs’s “digital labour” theory, which extends the “audience commodity” thesis to the online environment, claiming that users’ unpaid leisure activities on the internet (“digital labour”) are exploited by digital capital and thereby intensify capital’s control over labour (Fuchs, 2013).

Although the theory has achieved considerable influence (Bolaño, 2015; Garnham, 2016; Kangal, 2016), scholars seldom investigate why Fuchs, despite being conscious of its weaknesses, so forcefully dismisses the competing “cognitive rent” theory and continues to defend his own position. This article considers both the subjective motivation and the deeper philosophical mistake. It is organized into four sections: the first addresses the contradictions within the “audience commodity” theory and Fuchs’s effort to overcome them; the second outlines the political-economic shortcomings of “digital labour”; the third investigates the subjective motivation—Fuchs’s oppositional standpoint as a Western radical leftist; and the fourth analyzes how the conflict between standpoint and theory reflects a profound entrenchment in the illusion of empiricism.

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“Audience Commodity” Theory: Self-Contradiction

Fuchs explicitly connects his “digital labour” theory to Dallas Smythe’s “audience commodity” theory. Smythe, examining newspapers and magazines, maintained that mass media generate a particular commodity—the audience—which they then sell to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). During the period in which audiences are sold, they labour to produce demand for advertised products, thereby laying the foundation of the paradigm. Sut Jhally and Bill Livant subsequently adapted this idea to television, reconceiving the commodity as “watching-time” (Jhally & Livant, 1986). They identified two distinct processes: the audience sells its “watching-power” to media, which in turn sells “watching-time” to advertisers. This enabled quantitative treatment (for example, in a 12-hour programme containing 8 hours of advertisements, 4 hours count as necessary watching-time and 8 hours as surplus watching-time). Importantly, they regarded this as part of surplus-value realisation, with media capital obtaining a share of industrial surplus value in the form of rent.

Nevertheless, this paradigm contained two internal contradictions. It drew an analogy between the audience commodity and surplus-value production while simultaneously insisting that the system only involved the realisation of surplus value, and it employed “rent”—an appropriation based on monopoly and unrelated to production—to explain media profits. As Jakob Rigi, a proponent of the competing “cognitive rent” theory, emphasised, profit originates from production and circulation, whereas rent stems from monopoly; media capital cannot obtain both at the same time (Rigi & Prey, 2015).

After the internet disrupted traditional mass media, the audience commodity theory declined until social platforms brought it back into focus. In reaction, critical political economy formulated the “digital labour” theory. Drawing on the autonomist notion of “immaterial labour”, Tiziana Terranova introduced “free labour”, contending that unpaid online activities constitute value-creating labour (Terranova, 2000). Fuchs then systematised this position: internet users (“prosumers”) carry out unpaid digital labour on social platforms, producing “data commodities” (uploaded content, social connections, interests, browsing patterns, and so on). Platforms possess and sell these data commodities to advertisers; surplus value is realised when users click on advertisements. In this way, platforms profit by exploiting both paid workers and unpaid users. Fuchs concludes that internet users function as productive labourers subjected to capitalist exploitation.

The digital labour theory modifies the earlier “audience commodity” paradigm in three respects. First, it differentiates active online content creation (value production) from ad-clicking (value realisation), instead of viewing audiences as passive spectators. Second, it relocates the audience commodity from the realm of realisation into the realm of surplus-value production. Third, it redefines platform revenue as profit, with advertisers merely realising the surplus value, rather than characterising it as rent.

Yet, notwithstanding this apparent solution, a closer look at Fuchs’s positive arguments and his defensive responses shows that the digital labour theory continues to suffer from undeniable weaknesses at the level of political economy.

The Flaws in the Dimension of Political Economy

“Digital labour” theory of Fuchs has been subject to repeated questioning and counterarguments. His reasoning operates on two levels: affirmatively, he claims that non-wage digital labour can generate surplus value; negatively, he attempts to refute the “cognitive rent” theory.

In his affirmative argument, Fuchs first seeks to demonstrate that non-wage labour can produce surplus value. According to Marx, surplus value emerges from the difference between the value of labour power and the value that labour power creates. Once purchased, labour power becomes wage labour. Digital labourers, however, have no employment relation with platforms or advertisers. To overcome this difficulty, Fuchs broadens Marx's concept of "productive labour", asserting that Marx provides three definitions: (1) labour that produces use-value; (2) labour that produces surplus value for capital; (3) labour that forms part of the collective worker producing surplus value (Fuchs, 2015a). Fuchs maintains that only the second definition confines productive labour to wage labour, while the third does not imply that wage labour alone is productive labour, since the collective worker encompasses unpaid activities that serve capital. Internet users, he argues, fall within this third definition. This interpretation, however, is forced. Marx does say that one need only function as an organ of the collective labourer, but he immediately adds that the concept of the productive worker includes a specific, social, historically formed production relation—the capitalist wage relation (Marx & Engels, 1996). Fuchs never clarifies what production relation actually obtains between users and platforms.

Even if non-wage labour could produce surplus value, Fuchs's second step is to claim that digital labour really does so for platforms. His "proof by contradiction" is strikingly simplistic: without users, Facebook would earn no profits; therefore users must generate that profit. But "no A, hence no B" merely shows that B is a sufficient condition for A, not that A produces B. As Carchedi observes, being a condition for value production is not equivalent to producing value (Carchedi, 2014). Fuchs's positive case therefore depends on a strained expansion of "productive labour" and a logical fallacy.

In direct contrast, the "cognitive rent" theory represented by Rigi attempts to resolve the audience commodity's contradictions in a different way (Rigi & Prey, 2015). Drawing on empirical research, it argues that no "audience commodity" exists online; platform earnings are rent, obtained through monopoly, while user activity remains unrelated to surplus-value production and does not constitute productive labour.

Fuchs treats the "media-audience" process as surplus-value production and the "media-advertiser" process as its realisation. Rigi insists these are distinct. Regarding the production of the so-called data commodity, Marx held that a commodity's value is determined by the socially necessary labour-time required for its reproduction. Since the reproduction costs of data are nearly zero, the priced "data commodity" possesses no value; users cannot objectify human labour within it. If surplus value emerges during data processing, its source is platform employees, not unpaid users. As for the sale of the data commodity, Rigi's advertising data reveal no statistical correlation between advertisers' payments and user activity on platforms. Platform income is surplus value transferred by advertisers in return for renting advertising space. Rigi identifies four revenue sources: renting ad space, selling information, selling information-processing services, and financial speculation. What Fuchs interprets as the production and realisation of surplus value are simply two forms of rent.

Fuchs asserts that his theory requires Marx's concepts of value, productive labour, and rent. He stretches "productive labour" for his positive case, but when refuting "cognitive rent", he avoids engaging its central challenge and instead charges it with violating Marx's definition. Yet Marx's rent theory primarily concerns ground rent, and the cognitive rent theory's extension is no more audacious than Fuchs's own broadening of "productive labour". As is widely known, ground rent derives from historically specific relations, and Marx presents no general theory of rent; automatically applying conclusions from one context to another is unsound. Fuchs's criticism is therefore unjustified.

A fundamental logical defect in Fuchs's approach is a double standard: he freely stretches the definition of "productive labour" without clear textual support, while criticising his opponents for supposedly violating the definition of "rent", concluding that the cognitive rent category is useless and that the prosumer commodity concept is superior. As a result, Fuchs cannot adequately answer the cognitive rent theory's direct negation, and his own challenges to its premises remain unconvincing. In both affirmative exposition and negative refutation, his "digital labour" theory displays significant political-economic deficiencies.

A Stance of Resistance: Subjective Motivation

Most academic discussions of Fuchs simply identify the political-economic weaknesses in his theory (Bolaño, 2015; Garnham, 2016; Kangal, 2016), without investigating why he and his advocates, despite recognising these issues, still dismiss the "cognitive rent" theory and hold fast to "digital labour". A genuine reflection demands attention to both the subjective motivation and the objective causes.

Subjectively, Fuchs's insistence reflects his uncompromising stance of opposition to digital capitalism. Throughout his arguments, he repeatedly moves beyond political economy to appeal to real-world struggle. Whether digital labour counts as "productive labour" becomes central. Although this appears to be a theoretical disagreement, Fuchs has made its political implications explicit, stating that Marx's concept of "productive labour" is a political concept intended to identify who possesses the power and capacity to launch a revolutionary struggle against capitalism (Fuchs, 2015b). He reiterated elsewhere that the labour theory of value is a theoretical instrument for political struggle, identifying who is exploited and thus constitutes "actual or potential revolutionary subjects" (Fuchs, 2015a). This explains why Fuchs insists that digital labour must be treated as productive labour.

Positively, Fuchs believes that regarding digital labour as productive labour counters what he calls "wage labour fetishism", which recognises only traditional wage workers as exploited (Fuchs, 2015c). Since capital dominates both work and leisure, all dominated groups—including digital labourers—must be acknowledged as producers of surplus value in order to gain legitimacy and the capacity for resistance, even the power to paralyse social media through strikes. Negatively, the cognitive rent theory's classification of digital labour as unproductive is politically damaging: it presents users as parasitic non-producers, weakens solidarity with wage workers, and denies them the status of revolutionary subjects. Fuchs therefore concludes that only his theory provides a vision of user solidarity, whereas the rent theory slanders users as irrelevant to class struggle.

This demonstrates why Fuchs so forcefully rejects cognitive rent. For him, that theory is incompatible with resistance and cannot mobilise users; only "digital labour" can validate them as agents of struggle. Whatever the theoretical counterarguments, he can accuse opponents of "repeating bourgeois ideology" that sees no exploitation and presents social media as unproblematic.

Fuchs's dedication to Marxist analysis and his oppositional stance are sympathetic, but sympathy does not equal agreement. Sacrificing rigour for stance prevents a scientific understanding of digital capitalism and cannot guide actual struggle. This conflict between stance and theory originates in the illusion of empiricism. Although he notes global exploitation and calls for political solidarity, Fuchs remains confined within a West-centred empiricism, focusing narrowly on Western internet users and labelling them revolutionary subjects simply because they appear as the visible face of digital capitalism. Theoretically, he cites Marx extensively but applies nineteenth-century categories such as "productive labour" and "exploitation" unreflectively to digital capitalism,

a move Marx himself would have rejected as an ahistorical generalisation. This empiricism encourages distortion rather than serious inquiry.

In sum, Fuchs's adherence to the flawed theory is driven by a resistant stance that clashes with theoretical rigour, a clash rooted in the illusion of empiricism. Only by examining his philosophical errors at the epistemological and ontological levels can we fully grasp this empiricism and the objective reasons behind his theoretical commitments.

The Illusion of Empiricism: Objective Cause

At the epistemological level, the illusion of empiricism manifests as Fuchs's failure to distinguish essence from appearance in the Marxist sense. Marx observed that if appearance and essence coincided, science would be unnecessary; yet Fuchs's theory, like vulgar economics, remains on the surface. As Vincent Mosco notes, the audience commodity tradition has consistently operated within the "media-audience-advertiser triad" (Mosco, 2009). Fuchs similarly presents a single circuit: users produce data commodities, platforms sell them to advertisers, ads are displayed, and users click—seemingly a complete capital circuit. The cognitive rent theory demonstrates that this triad is mere appearance; the data commodity and the placed ads are unrelated. What looks like one circuit is actually two separate circuits converging on the same three actors.

The first circuit concerns the production and sale of data commodities, undergoing the transformation from productive to money capital. The second, unrelated circuit involves an advertiser renting ad space and users clicking. In the first, the triad functions as subjects of one circuit; in the second, they are merely participants in distributing surplus value from another capital. Fuchs mistakenly equates the surplus value produced in the first circuit with the surplus value distributed in the second, committing what Marx called "personification"—treating economic roles as independent agents rather than as bearers of economic relations. This empiricist epistemology reduces both users and platforms to personified appearances: users seem to generate data and click ads within a single activity, but in reality they occupy different roles in two circuits; platforms appear to receive one unified payment, but in fact act as commodity sellers and space renters in distinct circuits. Because neither users nor platforms directly experience this duality, a theory confined to the surface must invent contrivances to merge them. Marx lamented that vulgar economics merely systematises the conceptions of agents trapped within bourgeois relations. Likewise, the digital labour theory's triad is only a systematic expression of surface experience, an error Lebowitz had already identified in 1986 with respect to the audience commodity theory (Lebowitz, 2009).

At the ontological level, the illusion appears as Fuchs's one-sided grasp of "matter". His attitude toward "immaterial labour" reveals this. Negri and Hardt defined immaterial labour by the immateriality of its product while insisting that the labour itself is material (Hardt & Negri, 2005). Sean Sayers criticised this by arguing that all labour products are ultimately material—marks, sounds, electronic pulses (Sayers, 2007). Fuchs similarly rejects "immaterial labour", claiming it wrongly implies a detachment from matter. For him, digital labour is material simply because it is brain activity, a material system.

Although this criticism has some merit, it exposes a narrow understanding of materiality as mere physicality. As Kaan Kangal argues against Sayers (Kangal, 2017), Marx's concept of materiality possesses two dimensions: one connected to concrete labour and use-value, where certain products may be called immaterial; another linked to abstract labour and value, denoting the objectivity of the social production process, which is entirely material. The immaterial is merely a form of appearance of material reality. Fuchs's error is the same: he recognises only

physical materiality and overlooks the materiality of social relations. Consequently, he remains trapped in personified appearances—visible, physical interactions—and cannot grasp the invisible but objective economic relations that determine whether users produce surplus value. This ontological limitation explains why he stretches the definition of productive labour on the basis of experiential appearances, rather than analysing the historically specific relation of production that actually matters.

Conclusion

In summary, Fuchs's "digital labour" theory sacrifices theoretical rigour and scientific validity in order to preserve a stance of resistance. Subjectively, this accounts for his forceful rejection of the "cognitive rent" theory and his defence of a flawed position. At a deeper level, the conflict between stance and theory exposes a philosophical illusion of empiricism: epistemologically, an incapacity to understand scientifically the relation between essence and appearance; ontologically, a failure to grasp the concept of "matter". This constitutes the objective cause for producing and continuing to uphold a flawed theory.

Reflection does not amount to mere negation. The theory is highly innovative, has advanced Marxist political economy, and merits recognition. Two points should be emphasised. First, as a self-understanding within Western capitalist society, the theory's conflict between stance and theory reflects the irresolvable tensions of capitalism. Second, its philosophical errors are not an isolated case; many Western radical left-wing theories have likewise fallen into the illusion of empiricism. Only by grasping Marxist scientific epistemology and accurately understanding "matter" can we better comprehend the social reality of digital capitalism.

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