

Digital Labour and the Accumulation of Capital



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- Productive labour as central category of capital accumulation
- Productive and unproductive labour as functional categories
- Production and realisation of value equally important, effects of virtual labour in realisation process crucial
- Central role of virtual labour in globalised logistics
- Virtual work as materialisation of abstract labour
- But contradictory character of labour – abstractification and subjectivisation – is persisting → Challenges

Productive and unproductive labour

- Central categories for the understanding the process of capital accumulation
- Theoretical terms relating to the functioning of accumulation on the level of total capital, not single capital
- Theoretical/functional categories, not moral or political ones
- The same labour can be productive or unproductive, depending on the function of its result in capital accumulation
- Results of productive labour serve in the next accumulation period, that of unproductive labour don't

- In capitalism, productive labour produces surplus-value (which presupposes the successful realisation of value before) to be re-invested in the next accumulation cycle
- Productive labour has to be wage labour successfully exploited (value side)
- Its results have to be material or immaterial part of a new accumulation of capital (use-value side)
- I.e. its products have to contribute to the subsistence of the labouring population (variable capital) or to the reproduction of means of production (fixed or constant capital)

Unproductive labour

- Labour can be useful, appropriate, necessary, morally good, but all that may be unproductive
- Not every wage labourer is a productive worker in that sense
- Large sectors of capitalist economy which are unproductive (Marx: „dead costs“, „faux frais of capitalist production“)
- E.g. „commercial capital“ (money and trade incl. distribution and marketing, but excl. transport), luxury production and consumption (i.e. above average historical subsistence level, exchange against revenue), large parts of state expenditure and consumption (cf. older debate on „permanent arms economy“)

Redistribution of surplus-value

- Production and services in these sectors provided by wage labour and capital maybe profitable, but they are not productive, hence not value producing (Sohn-Rethel: „non reproductive values“); profits arise from the re-distribution of surplus-value (via averaging the rates of profit)
- Capital aware of that: Struggle to reduce overhead costs and to limit and rationalise circulation expenses, intensification of work
- Any expansion of these (for the accumulation of capital) unproductive sectors lowers (cet. par.) the average profit rate
 - Aim of capital: Limit and decrease these dead costs

Distribution and consumption labour productive (value-producing)?

- Thoroughgoing commodification of these activities (but individual and family household work has hardly decreased empirically)
- But basic function of consumers' activities (in e-commerce b2c, e-banking, consumption profiling via social networks etc.; cf. debate on „audience commodity“ by Smythe and followers) is to lower costs of circulation and reproduction
- I.e. it is decreasing dead costs and/or the costs of reproducing labour power
 - The virtual work of the consuming and reproducing masses is not value-producing, but cost reduction in that double sense

Virtual work in production and distribution

- Large parts of virtual work (besides circulation) in logistics (the material basis of the new international division of labour and of globalisation)
- Modern production and provision of services based on virtual organisation of the material production chains; virtual work here concentrated in logistics inside and outside production units, part of productive total work
- Globalisation means not only the world-wide expansion and intensification of information and networks, but equally that of material distribution and transport → revolution of world-wide logistics, large expansion of productive virtual work

Pure theoretical or academic dispute?

- Accumulation of capital (the valorisation of capital) decisive for dynamics of capitalist society, crises, growth or stagnation, conflicts, struggles etc.
- Expanding the notion of productive, value-producing work to any activity in the context of commodification suggests new unknown and unlimited perspectives of growth of capitalist economy
- Analysis of 2008/09 crisis reduced to pure financial dimensions
- Looking critically at the accumulation of capital allows to see its roots in the „real“ capitalist economy and the limits of its dynamics, in its inner (and further looming) crisis tendencies

Virtual work as abstract labour

- Marx: Capitalist production based on „abstract labour“, i.e. work which is losing its specific qualities, is done only for the valorisation of capital → important dimension of alienation
- Result of „real subsumption of labour to capital“ (Marx): Capital, in the course of its development, is creating its own specific types of labour power which it needs in the respective period
- Today's information work is handling abstractions (information is always an abstraction of reality, it is a formalised model of reality) → Not only the function of work is becoming abstract („formal subsumtion“), but also its content („real subsumtion“); Marx: „real abstraction“ (Hegel: „Becoming towards its term“)

Virtual work is system-bound

- Virtual (informatised) labour part of systems and processes which are structured and controlled through information systems (Beniger: „The control revolution“)
- The experience of directly working on reality is getting lost, instead, secondary experiences adapted to the changing tools and machinery are developed, i.e. active adaptation is necessary
- Formalisation and the omnipresence of formalised (and informatised) control are a dominant tendency – but it is contradictory in itself: It is dependent on subjective contributions, on the active participation of the working subject

Contradictory character of virtual work

- Furthermore, the worlds of information are realms of partial or instrumental rationality – the world as a whole is not working along algorithmic formulas
- The inevitable holes and breaks between the informatised fields and processes have to be bridged by human intelligent activities, i.e. by experience, knowledge, communication, improvisation which can be provided only by living labour (subjects)
- Abstractification of work and its subjectivisation are the two sides of one coin, of working in informatised contexts and within strongly structured systems

Challenges of virtual work

- On one hand, subjectivisation of work opens up chances of individually acting in the contradictory situation, special expertnesses might even allow a personal power position
- On the other hand, formalisation is allways tied up with coercive moments, the ubiquitous formal rules and controls produce strong tendencies towards intensification and extensification of work (Knoke: „New employment contract“, „high-performance workplace practices“)
- Growth of stress, burn-out and depressions in and around work point to this side of virtual work and to the challenge to deal with its contradictory demands

- Relocation of these challenges of work into work itself and its subjectivisation lead to an erosion of working conditions (erosion of „normal work“, growth of precarious work) and to weakening of workers' organisations (decreasing degrees of unionisation)
- Informatisation of virtual work goes – up to now – along with furthering the anonymity of class and power relations
- Only de-mystification of ICTs – i.e. recognising its formative properties for the social, power and class relations we live and work under, and its active participative shaping in social processes – will allow to tackle the dominant passivity towards ICTs and the contents and conditions of virtual work



Thank you for your attention!

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