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TOWARDS A DIGITAL MATERIALISM

REVIEW ESSAY ON CHRISTIAN FUCHS (2015),
CULTURE AND ECONOMY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA,
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The extremely productive Christian Fuchs, critical theoretician on digital media and professor at Westminster, London, has published yet another book, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Routledge, 2015). This title follows Fuchs' impressive list of book publications from last year alone: *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (2014), *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (2014), *Critique, Social Media and the Information Society* (2014, co-edited with Marisol Sandoval) and *OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism* (2014).

Inspired by Dallas Smythe's seminal article "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" (1977), Fuchs quite successfully attempts to revive Marxism vis-à-vis communication studies in the digital age. To this end, he evokes Raymond Williams' so-called *cultural materialism*, which – among other things – challenges the tendency (also within Marxist theory) to think, analyse and criticize societal tendencies in terms of a strict logic of separation, for example between base and superstructure. Instead, Fuchs would rather see a genuinely "dialectical cultural materialism that [...] sees culture, ideas, information, knowledge, communication, ideology, circulation, consumption, and reproduction as inherently material, social, and economic" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 375). But he also wants to look at all of these things as specific forms of work, which just like any other kinds of work (and its workers) can be exploited and made subject to alienation – and hopefully also de-alienation.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the book's brief introductory chapter, the author programmatically states that an understanding of social media does not come about just by studying social media practices in isolation, it also entails coming to grips with their relationship to especially culture and the economy.

How this understanding is to be brought about is elaborated in chapter 2, entitled "Culture and Work" (co-authored with Marisol Sandoval), in which the theoretical foundation for the entire book is laid. Fuchs (and Sandoval), inspired by Jim McGuigan & Marie Moran (2014), elaborates in substantial detail on the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, which on the one hand enables Fuchs to look at social media practices as kinds of work, and on the other hand allows him to illuminate how these seemingly immaterial practices of social media use are intimately entangled both with highly material mining and assembly practices that produce the actual digital apparatuses (the physical machines) on which these practices are performed; with the so-called immaterial labour of programming and software design; and with the political, economic, and legal conditions that form the overall context. Cultural activities are material activities, and vice versa. And they have increasingly also "become productive labour – watching, reading, and listening as working, play labour, and prosumption" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 21). Hence, the overall intention of this chapter is to establish how Raymond Williams' Marx-

inspired cultural materialism is the better theoretical alternative, and to drive home the argument that all the various kinds of activities that go into social media are all – despite some obvious differences – economically productive activities *per se*; that is, forms of work/labour (even though this sometimes goes both unnoticed and unpaid). In relation to this, Marx’ theory of *alienation* is brought into play, and the contrasting ideal, *creativity*, is introduced. “For Marx”, Fuchs and Sandoval note with reference to his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, “work is a creative human activity conducted in society” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 37). To this end, the writings of Herbert Marcuse on the future role of technology vis-à-vis the ambition to limit alienation and further creativity are also brought into play (more on this below).

The main thrust of chapter 3, “Communication, Ideology, and Labour”, is to establish, how – besides being “the way for humans to engage in, create and maintain social relations” (p. 71) – communication is also a fundamentally work-related practice. And it is so in a triple sense: as a product (the result of specific work processes), as a means of production, and finally as a form of work of and in itself. This argument is made against Jürgen Habermas’ categorical distinction between communicative action on the one hand and so-called purposive/instrumental/strategic action (which is the only kind of action that includes work in Habermas’ dichotomy) on the other. In contrast, Fuchs convincingly points out how every – or at least most – work processes requires cognition, communication, and co-operation, but also how communication itself is a form of work: “communication is work and work always involves communication” (p. 57). This is exemplified by the kind of making and distribution of meaning and “thinkable possibilities” for action and thought (p. 83) that we often refer to as *ideology*. Ideology is the stuff *ideological workers* produce. In contrast to “ideological work”, Fuchs refers to the production of critical knowledge and counter-hegemonic communication as “critical cultural work” (p. 82). The point is, that both of these practices are not just – explicit or implicit – reflections on work-related issues such as economy, class, politics, and so on, they are also work processes in and of themselves. But they are so – I might add as a personal comment (see also my comments on this below) – in such a way that they become materialized. Not merely in the shape of mediated world views as is the case in literature, visual art or digital media ‘content’, but also in material media themselves; that is, in the technological apparatuses of digital media and the kind of use (and misuse) they afford (cf. Gibson’s (1979) notion of ‘affordances’).

In chapter 4, “Social Media and Labour”, the issues discussed in the previous chapters are picked up; this time specifically applied to social media. At the centre stage is what we might term a spatial or topological issue: where is labour currently performed, and where is it not?; As well as the temporal ones: when does labour time begin (and end)? The main argument is that, on closer scrutiny, all our activities and all the time we spend on social media does, in fact, amount to work; albeit for someone else, which is why it is so rarely recognized as work. With the rise of social media, which Fuchs with reference

to Zygmunt Bauman also labels ‘liquid media’, work has increasingly become ‘social’. It has diffused into all – or most – realms of society, where it functions as invisible or often unnoticed free labour that can be exploited systematically. According to Fuchs’ Marx-inspired analysis, this tendency fits perfectly with capitalism’s perpetual urge to increase unpaid labour time in order to make more profit out of it.

Chapter 5 is concerned with how value is actually created on social media, mostly filtered through Marx’ notions of ‘productive labour’ and ‘rent’, which are discussed quite extensively. Fuchs concludes, much like the point of the previous chapter, that contemporary digital capitalism has transgressed the dualities characteristic for Fordist capitalism, hence blurring the previously well-established boundaries between informational *versus* industrial as well as unproductive *versus* productive work, work versus leisure, office/factory *versus* home, and so on, in order to capitalize even more extensively on Man’s every waking hour. At the end of this chapter, Fuchs also goes into more specifics and fleshes out some future grounds for struggles against capital’s tendency to colonize everything: increased use of ad blocking software and do-not-track protocols (not just in order to avoid surveillance, but rather as part of the socio-economic struggle against capitalization upon user behaviour), the organization/unification of social media users, and even “user strikes”.

Chapter 6 covers the international division of digital labour (IDDL); that is, the intimate, albeit often overlooked, entanglement of all the different kinds of participants in the political economy of digital media. This complex assemblage includes both the traditional categories of various sorts of workers in the production supply chain; ranging from miners working under slave-like conditions to produce minerals for digital technologies and the Fordist assembly workers that process these raw materials into digital machines, to software industry programmers and engineers in both India and Silicon valley (the latter of whom we typically associate with social media). But it also includes the users, who are just as important (and equally overlooked) producers of content as well as activity and sociality, which the social media companies rely so heavily upon (e.g. for the huge data sets that can both be sold and used for targeted marketing, and so on). This leads Fuchs to conclude that the “digital tools we use for writing, reading, communicating, uploading, browsing, collaborating, chatting, befriending, or liking” – that is, mostly things we often quite explicitly associate with non-economic activities – are, in fact, all “embedded into a world of exploitation” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 245). For this reason, Fuchs notes in the conclusion of chapter 6, it is about time we “broaden the meaning of the term *digital labour* to include all forms of paid and unpaid labour that are needed for existence, production, diffusion, and use of digital media” (p. 231). And this broadening could best be achieved by applying the theoretical lens of ‘digital materialism’ (p. 235); the digitally enlarged version of Williams’ cultural materialism, which he advocated in the beginning of the book.

Although it is not given all that much attention in Fuchs' book, which mostly focuses on economic/labour issues, one could argue that this analysis could – and perhaps also should – quite easily be related to recent work done by Jennifer Gabrys (2011) on 'digital rubbish' and the natural history of electronics, Maxwell & Miller's *Greening the Media* (2012) or Jussi Parikka's so-called 'geology of media' (2015), which all point to the dire environmental consequences of capital's colonization of all spheres of human existence that accompany the mostly work-related, political-economic hassles which Fuchs points out.

Chapter 7 is a case study of social media in China and its political economy, contrasted to that of Western social media (especially Facebook). Besides bringing up Marx at length once again, Fuchs also uses this chapter to indicate the contours of the kind of 'truly social media' he believes should replace corporate social media as we know them. This point is driven home by contrasting the actual socio-economic and political realities of social media with the (mis)conceptions of digital media (in particular Web 2.0) as technologies of freedom, co-operation, and so on, which have been produced by *cadres* of ideology workers.

In Chapter 8, Fuchs turns his attention to the relationship between "Social media and the public sphere", in relation to which he advocates a (critically informed) return to Habermas' notion of the public sphere, which Fuchs quite convincingly argues has been read much too idealistically. We should, Fuchs argues, rediscover Habermas' critical focus on the material and political-economical aspects of the public sphere, instead of simply dismissing his theory (which has become a popular sport). Taking his cue from the notion of Public Service Broadcasting – relabelled as Public Service Media to rid it of its mass media connotations and give it a more dialogical feel – as the cornerstone of democracy, Fuchs argues that we should develop 'alternative social media', which unlike existing corporate social media should not be tailored to merely accommodate the economic and political interests of the Establishment (including problems like surveillance, 'filter bubbles' (cf. Pariser, 2011), etc.). Alternative media should rather accommodate civil-democratic interests: "What we need is not more market, advertising, and commerce on social media, but more platforms that are based on the logics of the commons and public service." (Fuchs, 2015, p. 362) Although the ideals explicitly waived by social media advocates are not totally off – after all, they are pivotal to the ideal of participatory democracy too, which is what Fuchs speaks in favour of – the actual media practices of contemporary social media do in reality "limit the liberal freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, assembly, and association" that they promise to deliver themselves (p. 361).

In order to counter an all-pervasive and all-engulfing capitalism, we'll need some kind of digital commons allowing us to freely access, reuse, remix, and recirculate our shared cultural (digital) resources, rather than merely enabling the kind of pseudo-participation that is the kind of value-generation often euphemistically referred to as 'crowdsourcing' (p. 363). The difficulties of establishing and running alternative media under the current

conditions of corporate media-dictated oligopoly are finally discussed (for instance, the risk of adding yet another chapter of voluntary self-exploitative labour to the history of alternative media), and a specific solution is suggested, namely channelling a large media corporation tax to non-commercial media, distributed through a participatory budgeting process; the so-called ‘participatory budgeted media fee’ (p. 368-369). Besides loosening the ideological and economic grip of social media conglomerates, this could also help consolidate subaltern public spheres (cf. Fraser, 1992) in which marginalized and oppressed groups could gain access and find ‘voice’.

Besides summing up the main findings of the book in the concluding chapter, Fuchs also stresses another aspect of the political economy of social media, which has not been discussed previously in the book, namely the gender equality issue (in relation to the precarious working conditions that seems to unceasingly stick to especially cultural digital labour).

THE PROBLEM OF WORK

As should be clear by now, the notion of ‘work’ – or ‘labour’ as its alienated version is mostly referred to – is very much at the centre of Fuchs’ attention, especially in the first parts of the book. To this end, William Morris and Herbert Marcuse are called upon as proponents of what post-capitalist, unalienated work might look like. But pivotal, of course, is Karl Marx himself, whose key notions are given quite substantial attention in order to make him relevant to the political economy of digital media today. And perhaps, as I will explain below, too much attention is given to this endeavour – at least according to this reader.

Thus, a crucial issue in the mostly theoretical chapter 2 is whether Karl Marx was consistent or not throughout his authorship; for instance, on what sort of status work has/should have in Man’s life, and what work would look like in post-capitalist society. This has, as Fuchs correctly indicates, been an ongoing discussion throughout the second half of the 20th Century especially. Here normative distinctions between ‘young’ Marx (the author of *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*) versus ‘mature Marx (who wrote *Capital*), and dichotomies between the ‘philosophical’ and/or ‘romantic’ Marx versus ‘economic’ Marx, and so on, have dominated the discussions. Although insisting on consistency and trying to bridge the gaps that have been talked into being during the reception history of Marx’s oeuvre, Fuchs himself – perhaps somewhat unwarily, it seems – ends up with a rather essentialist definition of Man as a creatively productive being; that is, a position which actually is mostly in line with young, romantic and/or philosophical Marx. Or perhaps rather: a position that is in line with how he was often described in the heyday of counterculture and the new left; a reading which privileges the conception of Man as a creatively productive being currently

estranged/alienated from himself (and his fellow human beings) by the capitalist mode of production (the exploitation of labour) and consumer society.

It is this specific conception of what kind of being Man is that brings Fuchs to conclude that the benchmark of post-capitalism will be its ability to establish the right conditions for Man's (self-)realisation as such a creatively productive being; both in order to be realigned with his nature as a human being (cf. Marx's (1967, p. 293–295) notion of 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*)) and with his fellow productive beings. This is to be achieved through the reduction of unnecessary labour – and, not least, unnecessarily unpleasant labour – by applying new technologies in the right manner.¹ Fuchs sums this up the following way (simultaneously trying to make ends meet between the different Marxes/readings of Marx):

“It is rather a consistent theme in Marx's oeuvre that the technological increase of productivity intensifies (and to some extent also extends) work in capitalism (*more work* and exploitation in less time, *more work* as longer working hours), but has the potential to lessen necessary work for all (less work) in a post-capitalist society to a minimum so that *alternative forms of work* (better work) emerge that are non-coerced, go beyond necessity, and are an expression of well-rounded individuality and human creativity.” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 41)

If this might not be all that controversial a claim (although not entirely agreed upon either), the following description of a free society does seem more idiosyncratic: “A free society can also abolish the division of labour so that everyone is enabled to become a creative worker as s/he pleases” (p. 46). Of course, this idea does match a number of passages in Marx' oeuvre – albeit some better than others, namely those from the young Marx; especially the famous passage from “The German Ideology” in which the abolition of the division of work within communist society is discussed (1967, p. 424–425). But what it especially echoes, as already mentioned, is the Marxist Humanists' reading of these specific early writings by Marx. In particular those readings which emphatically brought to the fore – and popularized – the idea that creativity and work as a productive activity have something in common on a more general level: that freed post-capitalist labour is creative work. Or put even more simply (and in the shape of an equation): that labour *minus* alienation *equals* creativity (*plus* a lot of other things that were found warranted under capitalism, such as autonomy, sociality, community, participation, democracy, etc.).²

Historically speaking, this line of thought pervaded much of what Boltanski & Chiapello (2005) have called the artistic (or cultural) critique of capitalism, which throughout the 'long sixties' (Marwick 2005) accused capitalism of stifling Man's creativity through the alienation of work and social relations. Take, for instance, Erich Fromm's conception of what freedom in the work situation might – and might not – look like:

“Freedom in the work situation is not freedom from work (in order to have leisure), it is not freedom from exploitation; it is the freedom to spend one's energy in a meaningful,

productive way, by being an active, responsible, unalienated participant in the total work situation.” (1959, p. 16).

In a similar vein, Fromm also notes in his introductory chapter to *Marx's Concept of Man*, the hugely influential, first English translation of (young) Marx's writings on alienation, that what is essential in these specific texts is Marx's point that “in the process of work, and especially of work under the conditions of capitalism, man is estranged from his own creative powers” (1961, p. 48). After which Fromm notes – in opposition to the kind of critique Boltanski & Chiapello would later label ‘social’ – that a

“misunderstanding of Marx on this point is widespread, even among socialists. It is believed that Marx spoke primarily of the economic exploitation of the worker, and the fact that his share of the product was not as large as it should be, or that the product should belong to him, instead of to the capitalist. [...] He is not concerned primarily with the equalization of income. He is concerned with the liberation of man from a kind of work which destroys his individuality” (p. 49).

Thus, in order to realize himself not only as an individual, but as ‘species-being’ as Marx termed it, we need to replace alienated labour with unalienated work, which is something that involves Man's creative powers.

Although they *do*, as already mentioned, agree on the pivotal role of creativity to Man's productive activity in post-capitalist society, Fuchs does not believe in the de-alienation of *all* labour into creative work, as Fromm might have done. According to Fuchs, the trick – although certainly not an easy one – is to apply technology in such a way that the unpleasant, but often necessary work, is brought to a minimum. It's about making the worst realms of unpleasant necessity as small as possible, so that the other realms of necessity eventually could be transformed into productive practises that are not just much less unpleasant, but are forms of practice that even involve creativity.

Fuchs finds this conception of work in the free, post-capitalist society most saliently formulated in the writings of critical theorist and counterculture guru Herbert Marcuse, for instance, in his lecture “The End of Utopia” given at Freie Universität in West Berlin, July 1967. Here, Marcuse, in light of the potentials of new technologies of production, states, that he believes that “one of the new possibilities, which gives an indication of the qualitative difference between the free and the unfree society, is that of letting the realm of freedom appear within the realm of necessity – in labor and not only beyond labor.” Something that would surmount to “a possible society in which work becomes play, a society in which even socially necessary labor can be organized in harmony with the liberated, genuine needs of men” (1967).

In contrast to Fuchs, however, Marcuse actually insisted that Marx himself did not envision the possibility of such a radical transformation of work. The working day would – according to Marx, according to Marcuse – “remain a day of unfreedom, rational but not free.” This in turn meant, that if we were to think this differently given the develop-

ment of the productive forces, our whole analytical and conceptual framework would also – as Marcuse put it two years later in “An Essay on Liberation” (1969) – need to shift “from Marx to Fourier; [...] from realism to surrealism”.³ Marcuse saw these, Fourier and surrealism, as “the great, real, transcending force [in] the rebellion for the total transvaluation of values, for qualitatively different ways of life: the May rebellion in France”. Power to the imagination!

So to sum up, one of the important things Fuchs picks up from Marcuse is the argument that it is, in fact, feasible to “install” creativity in work. It’s not just something we get to enjoy in our free time – if we’re lucky. Work *can* be transformed, albeit not *tout court*; and to this end we need to look to technology (which is the other important argument Fuchs picks up from Marcuse). Fuchs is, however, not just advocating a *technological fix* (nor was Marcuse for that sake). Most technologies, even those new digital technologies of communication that we today so often tend to perceive as socio-political game changers, are deeply embedded in capitalist logics of exploitation and alienation (in spite of the tendency to wrap them in post-capitalist lingo). Applying technologies blindly, without understanding the political, economic, and material context, will not get us anywhere. Or even worse: it will further entrench us in the logics of capitalist exploitation. And this perhaps is the main, critical take away from Fuchs’ book: that we in particular have to be careful with the technologies that seem to offer the greatest promises of freedom. We, the users, need to be made aware of this, and this can be done through the critical, theoretical, and analytical interventions of cultural/digital Marxism.

CRITIQUE OF THE CRITIQUE

Overall, Fuchs’ book is praiseworthy and makes a lot of relevant points and arguments. However, what really bugs this reader is the following two points: First of all, what sometimes appears to be an obsessive interest in Marx. Why is he, as an analyst, so important in this day and age? Why not rather zoom in on how specific interpretations of Marx’s oeuvre over the course of history have been materialized in new digital media (including the connective logic of social media)? This objection is mostly on the theoretical level (and will be elaborated further below), but it leads me to my second major objection (which is more political, although also conceptual and historical), namely the extent to which the author *associates creativity with freedom*, and especially the way he relates it so closely to the issues of work. Although I can see the reason why Fuchs wants to distance himself from some of the assumptions in, for instance, David Hesmondalgh & Sarah Baker’s notion of cultural/creative work within the cultural/media industries (2013 and 2011) – in order to avoid the misconception that this kind of work is emblematic of digital labour *tout court* – he obviously seems to miss the other points they are making about the harsh realities of this kind of work, and not least the problematic role the notion of ‘creativity’ has been playing in legitimizing these conditions. Points that have also been made by

Angela McRobbie (1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2004 and 2007) for quite some years now, as well as by Andrew Ross (2003), to mention a few.

What I am trying to put across is a point that is similar to the one made by Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello (2005), whom Fuchs only in passing ascribes the role of the sociologists who have pointed out the ‘projective’ character of contemporary work (precarious portfolio careers etc.), thereby missing their crucial *historical* point. That is to say, the ideological discourse that currently legitimizes this specific organization of our (work) lives is really the outcome or product of previously raised critiques against the world of work under capitalism: that it is inflexible, stifles creativity, estranges Man from his creative powers, as Fromm put it, and so on. But also, that work could become creative (once again) under the right societal, political and economic conditions. Whereas ‘creativity’ was mostly used as a critical term, raised in accusation against industrial and bureaucratic capitalism – and before that against the totalitarian mindset (Turner, 2013; Nelson, 2015) – it has now become a pivotal keyword in ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ that has recently been performatively talked into being (Fairclough, 2000; Stephensen 2015). The result of this rhetorical countermove – which has a number of similarities to what Herbert Marcuse once referred to as ‘repressive tolerance’ (1965) – has been that the idea of creative, unalienated work now also permeates the writings on the creative class/industries/economy. On the back cover blurb on management guru Gary Hamel’s book, *The Future of Management* (2007), one of the most important of these creative economy advocates, Richard Florida, claims:

“For the past century, people have worked in the management prisons of Industrial Age – which has wasted the energy, creativity, and human potential of our people. Gary Hamel outlines the limits of all of this with great clarity. But, more than that, he creates an inspiring and needed vision for the future of management that is not only more human, but can unleash the full potential in all of us.”

A full, creative potential that in Florida’s book has been – or at least the potential to be – unleashed by the invention and introduction of new technologies of communication and production.

I am, of course, not arguing that what they are talking about is the same – they obviously have quite different agendas. Florida, for instance, explicates his agenda the following way:

“The task before us is to build new forms of social cohesion appropriate to the new Creative Age – the old forms don’t work, because they no longer fit the people we’ve become – and from there, to pursue a collective vision of a better and more prosperous future for all.” (2002, p. xxx)

A future, which is that kind of post-capitalism that is mostly still capitalist. All this cultural stuff such as social cohesion, a better and more fulfilling (work) life, and so on,

which so many of us have, in fact, internalized into our identities and our daily (work) routines, is all really just means – Florida refers to them as “soft control” management tools (p. 13) – to much more important things like growth, innovation, and economic prosperity. Interestingly, these kinds of argument are typically not without references to the historical struggles within and against capitalism. Florida, for instance, notes that

“To some degree, Karl Marx had it partly right when he foresaw that workers would someday control the means of production. This is now beginning to happen, although not as Marx thought it would, with the proletariat rising to take over the factories. Rather, more workers than ever control the means of production because it is inside their heads; they are the means of production. Thus, the ultimate ‘control’ issue is not who owns the patents that may result, nor is it whether the creative worker or the employer holds the balance of power in labor market negotiations. While those battles swing back and forth, the ultimate control issue—the one we have to stay focused on, individually and collectively—is how to keep stoking and tapping the creative furnace inside each human being.” (p. 38)

So, according to Florida – who’s willing to accept that Marx had a point at the time, but still finds it necessary to add two semantic modifiers in one sentence (cf. “to some degree” and “partly”) – instead of class struggle over the means of production and subsequently over the distribution of wealth, we now have the Creative Age, in which creativity produces enough material and immaterial goods to go around. The age of creative work is simply the historical transcendence of previous conflicts; a ‘creative capitalism’ without friction as Bill Gates (2008) once described it. And a similar kind of argument can be found in numerous other key texts within the discourse of creative work, for instance in Leadbeater & Miller (2004, p. 70), in which the explicit reference is the passage from Marx’s “The German Ideology”, in which the now-come-true dream of work under post-capitalist society is briefly sketched, making Marx the “original prophet” of the Pro-Am Revolution.⁴

In contrast, the world Fuchs critically describes and analyses is a world in which – despite all the blurring and liquefaction of previous distinctions – there still seems to be one fixed, dominantly overarching dichotomy remaining, to be resolved, namely the one between capitalists on the one hand, and on the other, those marred by it. This dichotomy must be solved on the level of productive economic activity; that is, labour/work (in the expanded digital version of it). Thus in a passage in which he argues against the solution to this problem suggested in the anti-work philosophy of, especially, the so-called autonomous Marxism of Tony Negri and associates, Fuchs states that

“[the] alternative to anti-work philosophy is not Stalinist labour fetishism, but the abolition of unnecessary and harmful work, the reduction of hard work and the enablement of creative work, the becoming-art of work, and the becoming-art of society.” (2015, p. 48)

However, to rally people behind this vision, we'll need a name for it, a slogan, so that it will be easier to advance (p. 48–50); to which end Fuchs suggests the three following slogans:

1. 'refusal of toil'
2. 'reduction of unnecessary, burdensome and harmful work'
3. 'creativity of all'

It is, of course, the latter slogan, 'creativity of all', which I object to the strongest (number 1 and 2 are not problematic *per se*, they're just really not that catchy). Because the thing is, that if there is one thing we have been given from the discourse on creativity over the last decades, it is a full-blown fetishism of work as a (possibly) creative practice.⁵ It might not be an authoritarian work ethic, nor is it a protestant one, but it is nonetheless a work ethic, and a strong one at that. In fact, Florida actually even named it "the creative ethos". And this "shared work and lifestyle ethic" that powers the Creative Age is, according to Florida, an "even more powerful new work ethic" than the old, Protestant one (2002, p. 5, 192 and 211).

Given the fact that Fuchs wants to distance himself from the 'productivist' (reading of) Marx, who wants to have more work and sees sloth as a sin (2015, p. 39), evoking the term creativity in relation to work seems to be a rather unfortunate move. As pointed out by David Hesmondalgh (with whom Fuchs takes issues on another theme) as well as Andrew Ross (2003) and Angela McRobbie (who has referred to the discourse of creativity in/at work as new, neoliberal right "by stealth" (1999)), the idea that creativity should be at the centre of our productive activity has been a kind of sugar coat that has hidden the bitter taste of increasing precariousness (Standing, 2011) and exploitation in not just the cultural and creative industries, but in almost any sector of our working lives. It might be true that at the end of the day it is capitalism that is responsible for especially young labourers' current working conditions marked by precariousness. Yet, it could also be argued that a lot of those conditions are accepted as an – typically futile, it sadly turns out – investment in future relations of employment that will both grant the worker the opportunity of creative work, and a salary that s/he can actually live on; what Kuehn & Corrigan (2013) have termed 'hope labour' (see also Hope & Figiel, 2015). It is, as a music journalist put it in an interview with Hesmondalgh & Baker (2010, p. 13), a "very complicated version of freedom" that work under the banners of creativity has given us so far. In this sense, it might be the promise and the dream of creative work that helps to keep capitalism alive (and legitimate). "Unpaid work has never looked so good", as the opening remark of a special issue on "Interrogating Internships: Unpaid Work, Creative Industries, and Higher Education" (de Peuter, Cohen & Brophy, 2015, p. 329) in the online journal *tripleC* (incidentally, edited by Christian Fuchs) goes; and one of the crucial lures is the chance to make creativity your occupation. It's "the 'carrot', a 'disciplinary service'

signifying ‘the hope that we might organize our work around ‘creativity’ rather than drudgery” as the Carrotworkers’ Collective (quoted by Kompatsiaris, 2015, p. 559) puts it, thereby also pointing to the backdrop, which creativity at/in work is always framed up against, namely unpleasantly necessary, alienated labour.

Of course, the implied anthropology that generally seems to be driving contemporary capitalism – that Man could have his needs fulfilled, and perhaps even realize himself through acts of consumption – might be a gross distortion. But so is the idea that “creativity for all” will do the trick; albeit it’s a much more pleasing one, one that promises freedom – at least on the face of it – until we realize that creativity has already become compulsory (Nepper Larsen, 2014).

The thing is, that Fuchs gets this right, when he emphasizes how Web 2.0 and later social media were ideological strategies (2015, p. 377), which created a number of mostly false impressions of the Web (for instance, in order to attract new investors and stakeholders). Unfortunately, he misses how the current ideological discourses on creativity also attract ‘hope labourers’ that invest their energy and time in the search of creative occupation. So when Fuchs quotes a software engineer – a figure whom Fuchs almost glorifies as the contemporary epitome of digital creativity (2015, p. 8) – who points to the downside of the perks at work: that you are expected to work longer hours; one could perhaps argue that a lot of these concrete, material perks (free food, the mandatory foosball table, etc.) are really just symbolic markers of the true perk: that you are given the chance to perform and realize your creative species-being at work. Not that many get conned by free food or the foosball game itself, but waiving the (individual and social) identity marker ‘creative’ might be much more difficult.

In the same vein, Fuchs also points to the “engaging/connecting/sharing ideology” (2015, p. 378) that makes social media shine in a positive light and hence makes us forget the unjust, underlying global division of digital labour, user exploitation, surveillance, and so on. But he seemingly fails to recognize the completely similar part played by “creativity” in this ordeal, which has added an individualistic flavour to these more social values of participation and sharing. For creative self-realization at work, we are apparently prone to accept huge amounts of injustice.

So the point/objection is really this: even though it might make sense to give the post-capitalist condition a more catchy name for reasons of ‘strategic essentialism’, as Spivak (1987, p. 205) once put it, Fuchs’ slogan of choice, ‘creativity of all’, seems deeply problematic.⁶

WHY MARX? WHY NOW? AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF CREATIVE WORK...

This brings me back to my second objection to Fuchs’ book. Why is it, from a contemporary perspective that explicitly focuses on analysing culture and economy in the age of social media, so important what Marx (and subsequently also Raymond Williams)

said? Why should they be the ultimate authorities, our go-to guys for theoretical insights? Obviously, this is important because Fuchs uses their concepts as analytical tools. But the way it is specifically being done still raises the question: what is the purpose of this book? Is it, as the title says, to study the cultural and economic embeddedness of social media? Or is it to argue for a specific theoretical position through which our contemporary time could/should be analysed (Karl Marx, Raymond Willams' cultural materialism, Herbert Marcuse, and in the last chapter Jürgen Habermas)? Although the latter (theory) obviously is a prerequisite for the former (analysis of certain phenomena), it sometimes seems that the theoretical elaborations are by far the most important to the author.

Furthermore, one might ask, if it wouldn't be more interesting – instead of going to such lengths in order to exhume these theories (I know I'm exaggerating; I'm trying to make a point!) – to have a genuine, two-way dialectic; that is, to also look at the material impact different readings of all these Marxes have had on our technological, organisational and ideological environment (including digital media), especially post-WW2? For instance, how did different readings of Marx especially throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s – when this theoretical corpus stood at the centre of huge cultural, philosophical, societal, economic, and political transformations and debates – influence the invention and subsequent appropriation of those technologies which in time ended up as digital/social media? What different kinds of emphasis were, for instance, put upon the creative, and productive activity of Man, and how was this installed or facilitated in new technologies and the organizations, ways of doing, and – to paraphrase Raymond Willams – ways of life that (have come to) surround them? How can these technologies be perceived as the products and realizations of specific dreams, aspirations, philosophies, and political and economic agendas (cf. Streeter, 2011; Turner, 2006 and 2013)? And if they indeed are such dialectical realisations, they must certainly be so in a complex way; not just as “antagonists of human power” invented for the sole purpose of disarming labourers of the world, as Marx put it in *Capital* (1887, p. 291), but also – now paraphrasing Marx's so-called “Fragment on Machines” – as “the power of knowledge, objectified” (Marx, 1993, p. 706). Or as in this case: the urge for creativity, connectivity, and so on, objectified/materialized, which has taken the shape of both technological apparatuses (the computers), the way they are linked and organized (e.g. the Web⁷), as well as other specific soft-/hardware affordances or ‘scripts’ (cf. Akrich, 1992). In other words, as simultaneously perverted recuperations and auspicious realizations of a number of historical aspirations and agendas, that are quite mixed themselves; and which have given us both new forms of exploitation and alienation (which Fuchs convincingly argues), and new forms of freedom – albeit quite complicated ones at that.

Although there are few things as annoying as being told what an otherwise good book should really have been about instead, I nonetheless dare to insist that a truly dialectical approach would take these issues into account as well, much rather than just framing the innovation and diffusion of new technologies and media as a purely top-down

operation aiming to further colonize and exploit our life world, and then cover it all up with the ideologies of engaging/connecting/sharing (including creativity, I would insist). And this problematic issue is, in fact, not just restricted to the material level. Also ideology is described in Fuchs' book as one-way top-down communication (cf. his notion of so-called 'ideological workers'). In contrast, I would argue that not only are ideologies actually very often keenly embraced (for instance, because the world or practices they de/prescribe are perceived as states of emancipation; cf. collaboration, sharing, creativity, etc.). They are also quite often actively re-endorsed by digital workers themselves; especially by those in the so-called creative industries, of course. In that sense, the members of the quite diverse, precarious creative class act and therefore are ideological workers themselves. The reason why I point this out is to emphasize that they do not have to be part of what Nigel Thrift (2006) has referred to as the 'cultural circuit of capitalism'⁸; at least not formally, employment-wise and as part of a division of labour, which goes like this: Some produce ideology; most live and are forced to think within its boundaries (and are thus often unwarily victims of it); and a few resist it (those involved in cultural criticism). The production of ideology is much more complex than that, it seems, and in the current economic era especially those who do what is being referred to as creative work are actually also co-producers of the romanticisation of the creative bohemian lifestyle. As often unpaid/underpaid "role model workers" (de Peuter, 2014) they are leading by example, and sometimes also through discourses of, for instance, self-representation, in the economic realities that cloak themselves in a pervasive 'creativity for all' rhetoric, hence adding a certain glamorous aura to it. From a critical theoretical perspective this means, that if you want to counter-recuperate the notion of creativity and reinstate it once again as a critical concept vis-à-vis capitalism's recent use of this exact notion, an account of how capitalism's previous recuperation of earlier critiques under the same banners came down would certainly seem relevant.

In spite of these shortcomings, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* is, as already mentioned, definitely worth a read; especially since it convincingly gives the reader a thorough, critical analysis of the workings of contemporary capitalism, as well as many good theoretical tools for expanding critical research in this field.

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NOTES

- 1 As an example of this reduction of unnecessarily unpleasant labour, Fuchs over a couple of pages discusses the possibility of developing toilet-cleaning robots. An example, Fuchs himself notes some people might find stupid — and I have to admit that I tend to agree.
- 2 Since this has become a rather commonplace conception, we tend to forget the fact that it is a rather novel idea; just like we tend to forget that the word ‘creativity’ has not been around for very long either (in German, for instance, the first registered use of the noun – that is, as a word that refers to a specific human faculty – was in 1957).
- 3 Part of the attraction of Fourier to Marcuse would also have been the fact that he to a much lesser degree than Marx portrayed work as an essentially human activity (having to do with Man’s species-being) or ascribed it existential importance. Still, even though the workplace and in particular the factory was merely to be thought of as “tempered bagnos” (Marx, 1887, p. 287), the right form of organization could make work relatively attractive.
- 4 In a subchapter entitled “Working at leisure”, Leadbeater & Miller also note that the so-called ‘Pro-Ams’ (professional amateurs) “report being absorbed in their activities, yielding intense experiences of creativity and self-expression. Pro-Am activities seem to provide people with psychic recuperation from—and an alternative to—work that is often seen as drudgery” (2004: 21).
- 5 This notion of work as a (possibly) creative practice did, of course, not just grow within the critique of capitalism. Quite ironically it actually arose almost simultaneously in counterculture’s anti-capitalist critical visions of post-capitalist society and in the very powerhouse of capitalist consumer society, namely the advertising industry, which successfully managed to harvest consumer dissatisfaction to the service of more capitalist consumerism (cf. Frank, 1997).
- 6 It’s not without irony, that one of Spivak’s own primary examples of strategic essentialism is Marx’s notion of an “un-alienated practice” (1987, p. 205).
- 7 Cf. the fact that when Tim Berners-Lee, who according to many should be regarded as the Web’s “father” (because he invented the HTTP information management system which organizes the Internet), was asked what he regarded as the “essence of the Web” (2003, p. 83), his answer was none other than ‘inter-creativity’, that is: creativity among people facilitated by computers organized in networks.
- 8 Thrift describes the cultural circuits of capitalism as “the discursive apparatus [...] which, through the continuous production of propositional and prescriptive knowledge, has the power to make

its theories and descriptions of the world come alive in new built form, new machines and new bodies”, and points to the so-called new/knowledge economy of the 1990s as “the first concerted global discursive operation” (Thrift, 2006, p. 11-12) thereby implying a coherent, intentional, yet still somehow covert agenda performed on behalf of some sort of monolith capitalist entity.