The Practice and Reflection of Digital Labor from the Perspective of Post-Modernism

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Abstract

With the development of information technology, digitalization has penetrated into our daily life, especially in the transcendence of time and space. People's perception of time is accelerating under the wave of informationization. Human activities have become quantifiable, virtual, and ubiquitous "digital labor" in the vast cyberspace. Based on Harvey's postmodern Marxist perspective, the deconstruction and criticism of modern rationality return to the reflection and confrontation of centrifugalized subjectivity in the framework of value rationality. The post-industrial era has entered a stage of elastic accumulation, where modernity and post-modernity, rationality and value, humanism and science are in constant conflict and collision in economic, social and cultural development. Also, the compression of space and time has expanded the production space of traditional labor that is contrary to modernity, has intensified the exploitation of private ownership under the logic of capital. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the production and practice of digital labor in the postmodernist perspective, reveal the material nature behind digital labor in the intelligent society, and look forward to the orderly governance and reflection of digital labor based on the logic of historical materialism.

Keywords: Postmodern Marxism, materiality, digital labor

1. The Appearance of Labor and the Explanation of Digital Labor

The term "labor" originally meant the activity intentionally performed by human beings. At the philosophical level, it is regarded as the aggregate of subject, object and meaningful connotations. Labor has different manifestations in different social systems and can reflect the social relations between human beings and their development with nature. As a basic human activity, the concept of labor could be traced back to Aristotle's classification and definition of the types of human activities, which can be divided into theoretical contemplation, practice and production. The so-called "production" is what we call "labor" in our daily life, which is the production of material means of living. The positive changes and affirmation of the attitudes toward labor appeared

just during the Protestant Reformation.

In modern times, with the development of the Industrial Revolution ushering in the capitalist market-oriented economic system, the advancement of science and technology facilitated the acceleration of the division of labor in society. Labor was incorporated into the starting point of modern economic theory. "The classical school of economics", represented by Adam Smith, elevated the social significance of labor to a theoretical value. It discussed the essence of the national economy, defining "labor" as the fundamental quality of social wealth, thus highlighting the value of labor in the study of political economy. (Newbert, Scott L., 2017) Marx's understanding and discussion of labor further inherited and criticized the concept of the essence of labor in Hegel's philosophical discourse. In his philosophical thought, Hegel's discussion of the relationship between human beings, nature, society, and the self through labor goes beyond the definition of the "materiality" of labor in the classical school of economics, giving labor a metaphysical and philosophical dimension; so that labor is embedded in the "absolute spirit". Marx criticized Hegel's interpretation of labor and found its dilemma. From the standpoint of discursive conceptualism, "The only work Hegel knew and acknowledged was abstract spiritual work." (Karl Marx, 1959) In the classical labor scene described in Karl Marx's Capital Theory, on the contrary, he scientifically pointed out from the perspective of historical materialism: "Labor is first of all a process between man and nature, a process by which man by his own activity causes, adjusts and controls the material transformation between man and nature." (Karl Marx, 1887) From this conceptual definition, Marx analyzed the basic elements of labor, i.e., labor, the object of labor, and the materials of labor. Labor is the transformation of nature by man with his initiative, and also the materialization of human nature.

With the evolution of information technology of human production and great changes of human's lifestyle, we live in the digital norm, where the network has become an essential medium for people's daily interactions. Digital technology has been embedded in the fabric of social development like capillaries, as "we will live in

computers, wear them on our bodies, and even feed on them." (Negroponte Nicholas, 1995) Also, in the era of "mobile bits", the information world and the real world are seamlessly integrated and can even be switched at will, with the barriers of space and time are broken. Labor in the digital society is no longer limited to the traditional scenario, and the digital revolution has promoted changes in productivity and production methods; thus, giving rise to a new labor model of digital labor. The interpretation and definition of digital labor is still not settled, but there are several representative scholars who propose it. First, Joathan Burston argues that "digital labor" is a category that blurs the boundaries between labor and life, work and entertainment. It is used to analyze many different aspects of the daily lives of digital media users, as well as a kind of labor that blurs the boundaries between the different social roles of "workers, authors, and citizens". (Burston Jonathan, Nick Dyer-Witheford & Alison Hearn, 2010) From a critical perspective of postmodernity, Fox develops a more systematic critical theory of Marxist digital labor, pointing out that "digital work is the experience produced with the help of the brain, digital media and voice, and the creation of new products based on it." Robert Hassan, on the other hand, continues David Harvey's postmodern Marxist theory. He reflects on the economic, cultural and ontological meanings and implications inherent in the process of development and change of digital technology under the discourse of postmodernity, the re-definition of digital economy, and digital labor in the process of modern capitalist production and globalization.

Postmodernism differs from modernity in that it begins to think about the dependence from the capitalist system, focusing more on the humanistic and ecological civilization, which is the "cage" of modernity and opposes the instrumental rationality in modern society according to Marx Weber. The digital labor under postmodernism does not release the problem of labor alienation as Marx said but accelerates the exploitation of capitalist privatization in a more obscure and unnoticeable way, and digital labor wears a mask of disguise under the shell of technology. The study explores how we can look forward to the development of digital labor and how to get out of

the dilemma that digital labor faces.

2. The Dispelling Behind Digital Labor: The Practice of Returning to the Materiality

At the beginning of the 21st century with the development of electronic information technology and the advent of the digital age, Hart and Negri argue that the traditional labor-intensive industries in developed Western countries have shifted to digital technology-led intellectual industries. So, they argue that the emergence of immaterial or digital labor is replacing material labor, criticizing Marx's theory of the political economy of material production. They see the first trend as the hegemony or dominance of immaterial production in the process of capitalist value multiplication… For example, images, information, knowledge, feelings, symbols, and social relations have overtaken the materiality of tangible goods and commodities in capitalist value multiplication. (Antonio Negri & David Harvey, 2010) However, Negri and others only see the perception and definition of digital labor floating on the surface for digitization and virtuality, but ignore the essential phenomena behind digital labor, such as the infrastructure building behind ICT products and the labor groups trapped behind the algorithmic logic of the platform. To unveil the essence of digital labor, it should be based on the philosophical roots under Marx's historical materialism. That is, digital labor should not be simply understood as virtual and immaterial, but return to the essence of labor, based on the material labor carried out digitally under commodity production, exchange, and distribution.

In the era of "digital displacement" proposed by Negroponte, the traditional concept of "labor" has changed radically, both in terms of its definition and development form. Based on the perspective of platform society, the media development under the platform society has highly digital and intelligent characteristics and deconstructs the structure system of traditional media industry. The boom of e-commerce through live streaming and other means by the platforms behind short videos is a digital extension of offline commodity transactions; professional players of e-sports games playing online with them is also a form of labor; the regulation behind the health code under the epidemic breakout is also labor; the

knowledge payment and other behaviors behind social networking sites are also labor. There are digital footprints behind the traces we leave in the cyberspace, and the behaviors and patterns behind these footprints are inseparable from the behaviors of physicality. Christian Marx has questioned the "immateriality" of digital labor. In his book Digital Labor and Karl Marx, he cites the capitalist exploitation of labor and alienation of products in the modern ICT industrial value chain, such as the miners behind the harvesting of computer parts in Africa, the unpaid digital labor of social media, and the labor of workers recycling electronic waste. High-intensity work, unpaid digital labor in social media, and the labor of workers recycling electronic waste reveal the complete Western Marxist critical theory of digital labor behind the phenomenon. The fetishism of technology constructed under digital labor today requires a reflection on this and unveils the materiality of meaning and practice behind digital labor.

3. Digital Displacement: Spatio-Temporal Compression

With the advent of the intelligent media era, people's perception of time is associated with the medium, with the metric of time is more precise, digital, and synchronized. Cyberspace allows the rise of data tribalism. The data tribe in the network era breaks the bonds of physicality and reality, where people can participate in the discussion of social and current affairs hotspots in real-time through digital platforms or focus on the interaction of live streaming and short videos in real-time through bullet screen. The order of time is broken while bringing the problem of time asynchrony. Through the media and time, the rhythm of contemporary life is closely nested, people also feel the "sleeplessness" and "acceleration" of time in an invisible way. According to Latour, modern temporality is throwing more and more humans and non-humans together into the void of the past, which is the only way to produce the fundamental impression of accelerated time. (David Morley, 2007)

Postmodern Marxist integrationist David Harvey argues that social change under the postmodern era is no longer simply the "elimination of space by time". In his view, the most important cultural

change in the transition from modern to postmodern is the change of human time and space. Its "general trend is toward the acceleration of turnaround time and the reduction of spatial paradigms", i.e., the changes in the space-time dimension under digitalization is called time-space express. (David Harvey, 1992) Under the compression of space-time digital labor, the phenomena of alienation, contradiction and conflict are more insidious, people's perception of time is constantly compressed, but the time spent working in Internet space is invisibly prolonged.

German philosopher Byung-Chul Han believes that time is becoming disordered and undesirable in the present. He proposed a concept called "life gazing" and confronted the crisis of modernity. (Byung-Chul Han, 2017) Media technology has intelligently blurred people's perception of time; time has lost its discursive tension in the space of disorder; people feel more strongly about the passing away than before. Jonathan Clary points out that the expansion of capitalism has created a 24/7 system (i.e., 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), so that sleep is the last line of defense, and this line of defense is also shaky. Digital labor, which is not limited by time and space, can be seen as the liberation of hands and freedom of the body, but it has become a new invisible mechanism of exploitation due to the perceived disruption of the time order.

4. Body and Emotion: The Digital Cage of Cyberspace

In Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, he describes the disciplinary society produced under the panoramic open prison, "the gaze that can illuminate everything is enveloped in this huge machine, and no tiny detail can escape his gaze." (Foucault, 1978) The evolution of intelligence has intensified the atomization of society. The digital laborers in the platform society are trapped in the cybernetic "digital prison" just like the individuals in the prison, who are enslaved by the logic of capital behind the digital platform, leading to the essential crisis of modernity.

Since people are emotional and social, media technology connects people with virtual socialization through virtual space where they are not physically present. In the digital space, people rely more on electronic devices and the feedback

and satisfaction in the virtual space but ignore face-to-face communication in the real world. For instance, the virtual digital human industry chain has emerged, forming a sense of identity and satisfaction through fans' emotional attachment and projection of digital human beings. Then it extends its cultural value chain, becoming a new type of rice circle capital and further exploiting and expanding the digital labor in fan culture. The algorithmic logic and intelligent recommendations of digital platforms provide users with personalized services through constant optimization and prediction, further enhancing users' dependence on platform information; thus, forcing digital laborers to adapt to the platform logic to obtain more revenue, and intensifying social conflicts and ideological. This will intensify social contradictions and emancipation of ideas, allowing digital laborers to be trapped in digital rules.

5. Conclusion

With the advent of the intelligent era, the ensuing digital labor has changed the logical structure of production and the lifestyleof the whole society. The new labor relations under the technological development are not separated from the material practice of social reality. The material production and circulation that exist behind digital labor and its hidden exploitation of digital labor in the mediated society should be criticized from the perspective of political economy. Consequently, we should reflect on the alienation of digital labor, focusing on all the labor in the digital technology and information communication industry chain.

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