Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on “Capital,” Volume 1, by Christian Fuchs

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Review


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Since the Internet revolution of the 1990s, Marxists have steadily and productively engaged with the profound implications of the new information and communications technologies and the changing social relations they have brought with them. Principal theoretical challenges have been to critique grand claims of an entirely new world order and economy made by bourgeois theorists and to identify continuity with industrial capitalism while doing justice to new social relations. In this effort Christian Fuchs has been making important contributions for the past few years. He has made a name for himself applying Marxian theory to the information age and, in my opinion, is one of the few scholars able to take a balanced approach that acknowledges what makes this period different from the preceding industrial age while also paying due attention to the essential continuities of capitalism in terms of class, exploitation, competition, and so on. He also carefully avoids both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, offering instead a dialectical view of the relationship between technology and society. His 2007 book, Internet and...
Society: Social Theory in the Information Age, was one such attempt. Since then he has published extensively on labor in the information age, social media, and the like (Fuchs 2013, 2014).

His latest book, Reading Marx in the Information Age, is a very interesting experiment in creating a media and communications studies handbook for volume 1 of Capital (hereafter Capital). As a dense text of 375 pages, in this review I can only try to give a flavor of the kinds of issues discussed by giving a selective overview of some key chapters.

This book is not primarily a new theoretical contribution; rather, it is a textbook of sorts that introduces students to what a Marxian perspective on the information or knowledge age might look like. That the book is written primarily with a teaching purpose in view is also clear from the fact that each chapter ends with a list of exercises for students. The structure of the book exactly follows, chapter by chapter (with the exception of the last section on “So-Called Primitive Accumulation”), the structure of Capital. In each chapter Fuchs summarizes Marx’s argument and supplements the original with examples as well as theoretical perspectives coming from the field of media and communications studies. Thus, the book tries to do two things: introduce the reader to Marx’s key ideas in each chapter of Capital and demonstrate the relevance of those ideas to knowledge production, distribution, and consumption. I should say that the explication of Marx’s ideas is not standalone. That is, it will only make sense to a reader who has either already read Capital or is simultaneously reading it. The book will work great as a supplementary text alongside Capital in any course dealing with Marx, whether in economics, sociology, or communication studies.

In the very first chapter, on the commodity, Fuchs discusses the peculiarities of information as a use value and an exchange value. This is a recurring theme in many different contexts throughout the book. In almost every chapter, he articulates how Marxian theory can be used to understand contemporary phenomena such as digital piracy, outsourcing and working hours in the software industry, the political economy of media and advertising, unpaid work performed by users of social media and viewers of advertising (“audience labor”), and so on. This last concept of audience labor, a controversial one in media studies, is alluded to at several points in the book. The concept, for those not familiar with it, claims that audience labor creates an “audience commodity” that media companies sell to advertisers (see Sherman 2014). Fuchs argues that this old idea has gained new relevance with the arrival of social media because consumers perform labor that generates value for Facebook, Twitter, and so on. Without coming down on one or the other side of this issue, the book does provide a great way to engage students on such subjects that are bound to be popular in any classroom of today. They can also provide an excellent way to get students interested in Marx by linking the theoretically crucial category of “labor” to their daily experiences.

Marx’s chapter 10, on the working day, is a justly celebrated chapter from Capital, offering extensive empirical data on capitalist strategies to increase the
length of the working day or to fight against its decrease. Fuchs’s reprise of this chapter does justice to the original by nicely updating the empirical evidence to include web resources on the “factory inspectors” of today (corporate watchdog sites), unregulated labor in the Internet economy, child labor in the toy industry, internship labor, shift work in the global software industry, and so on. From a pedagogical perspective, I think this chapter would be an excellent one to use when discussing political economy of labor in the Internet economy. The juxtaposition of Marx’s original evidence and arguments with new data and sources offers a clear picture of both continuity and change as far as the laws of motion of capitalism are concerned.

As mentioned earlier, a dialectical treatment of technology is one of Fuchs’s strong points. The treatment of chapters 12–15, on relative surplus value and machinery, clearly bear this out. These are excellent chapters that situate Marx’s analysis of technology in the context of the information economy. For example, the chapter on relative surplus value and on division of labor contains small sections on unequal development between nations; unequal exchange of surplus value in the tradition of Samir Amin, Emmanuel, and so on; and on the international division of labor. Chapter 15, on machinery, has an interesting discussion on Luddism, including Marx’s arguments, E. P. Thompson’s take on the Luddite movement, and contemporary opposition to the Internet. In a section titled “Why Not to Quit the Internet,” Fuchs argues against those who push for “opting out” and says, “The Internet should not be abolished but should be transformed from a capitalist Internet to a socialist Internet ... which requires qualitative changes of both society and the Internet.” This is of course unexceptionable as a general comment, but even as Fuchs demonstrates sensitivity to avoiding technological determinism and a blind faith in the “productive forces” of capitalism, he nevertheless adopts the orthodox Marxian position on technology as far as the Internet goes. What happens to the exploitative system of the international division of labor (design and creative labor versus mining and manufacturing) that sustains the physical infrastructure on which the Internet rests? What happens to the ecological sustainability of the Internet? It feels like an important chance was missed to discuss such difficult issues.

Also in chapter 15 is a section entitled “Information Technology and the Antagonism between the Productive Forces and the Relations of Production.” Here Fuchs discusses Marx’s well-known concept in the context of the contradiction between the nonrival nature of information and the attempt to create private property. While the section itself is short, it can offer a good way to raise the issue in the classroom and have students discuss how private property can impede the free flow and creation of new knowledge. While not strictly relevant to a media-studies reading, chapter 16, on “Absolute and Relative Surplus Value,” includes a very important section on reproductive labor and Marxism-feminism that briefly discusses important thinkers such as Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Maria Meis, and others. This discussion on unpaid work then leads to an account of
unpaid work in a media and communications sense, where Fuchs returns to the concept of audience labor alluded to earlier.

Two more interesting things from a pedagogical perspective are worth mentioning, both in the chapters on primitive accumulation. One is the extension of the concept to the enclosure of the knowledge and cultural commons via patents, along with lawsuits against open-source and file-sharing programs, and the other is a discussion of the correspondence between Marx and the Russian activist and thinker Vera Zasulich on whether all societies need to follow Western Europe’s historical trajectory. I was pleasantly surprised to see this discussed. It is an important but all too often neglected aspect of the debate on historical materialism. Both of these are vital debates that are bound to create much discussion in the classroom.

As will be clear from the above list, it is not always the case that Fuchs is attempting any new theorization or even bringing new examples to bear. Rather, the strength of the book lies in fitting many disparate issues that arise in contemporary information economies into a Marxian framework and showing the link between these new phenomena and older ones theorized by Marx. The strong points of the book are Fuchs’s solid grounding in dialectics and Marxist philosophy (of the Frankfurt School type) and his extensive knowledge of the new information economy and media studies.

Before ending, I do have a few minor quibbles. Since Fuchs is also well versed with Marx in the original German, he spends a fair amount of time, especially in the earlier chapters, discussing the shortcomings of existing popular English translations of Marx. In some cases, such as the discussion on “work” versus “labor,” these discussions on translation issues are useful. But at times this does get a bit tedious to read since he extensively quotes Marx in the original German and in the English translations in order to point out problems and to offer his own suggestions. While Marxologists may be interested in this, it is unlikely to be of much interest to scholars and students who are concerned with applying Marx’s ideas to their own work.

Another recurring feature of several chapters is a diagrammatic representation of the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (or subject, object, and subject-object) in different contexts: for example, between essence, appearance, and actuality, or between variable capital, constant capital, and the valorization process. But I did not find these representations too helpful beyond the verbal descriptions in the text.

In a few places, Fuchs also ventures into economic analysis using data sources such as OECD STAN as well as AMECO\(^1\) to make some calculations on profit

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rates, the organic composition of capital, and the rate of surplus value in information-related industries of various OECD countries. While this is useful to give some indication of how quantitative work can be done in the Marxian tradition, it is not Fuchs’s strong suit. The analysis consists only of some simple evaluations of trends. Indeed, there are now a variety of more substantial studies out there on doing rigorous quantitative work using Marxian categories and national accounts or other macro data.²

On the whole, however, this is an excellent addition to the literature on Marxian political economy of the information age. I plan to use it myself in the classroom and would recommend it to others without hesitation.

References


² See Basu (2017) for a recent review of this literature.