

Med-2: “Exploitation 2.0: Class and Exploitation in the Digital Age” [in English]

Sunday 16 October, 10.00–11.15 and 11.30–12.45, Sandler

Capitalism is a dynamic, dialectical system that changes in order to maintain its fundamental structures of exploitation. The rise of the computer, digitisation and the Internet’s role in the economy and society has brought about changes of class structures.

This session asks: How have class and exploitation changed in the age of digital media? How can we analyse unpaid activities on commercial platforms with the help of class and other concepts such as the multitude and exploitation? What is the role of conflicts and struggles between users and the owners of corporate Internet platforms (such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, LinkedIn, Weibo, Amazon, Pinterest, Tumblr, Flickr, etc.). Can peer production and non-commercial, alternative online media challenge capitalism? What are the implications of digital Marxism and media Marxism for Marxist theory and socialist politics?

Panel A (Med-2A, 10.00–11.15)

Derek Hrynyshyn: “The audience commodity and class consciousness”

(Ph.D. in Political Science, Department of Communication Studies, York University, Canada)

New work on the theory of audience labour has provided very powerful analyses of the political economy of social media, but what remains under-theorized are the implications of this theory for an understanding of class consciousness. This paper examines the process of production of the audience commodity in order to distinguish different forms of audience labour, and the ways that these different types of activity are related to different forms of consciousness belonging to those engaged in the work of being part of the audience for different forms of media.

By considering both the material and intellectual processes by which ‘audience labour’ is produced as commodity, and by comparing its commodification by mass media to that by social media, it is possible to identify multiple varieties of this media commodity which can co-exist simultaneously. This implies that different kinds of audience labour power are produced and set to work by capital to create value in different forms. These differences can help to understand both the varied relationships between communications media and those participating in different forms of audience labour, and the different forms that the consciousness of the workers might take. Such an analysis is a necessary part of any attempt to understand the possibilities for construction of a counter-hegemonic agency within an informational capitalist structure of social power.

Michèle Martin: “Communication as Circulation: A political economy of digital systems of communication”

(Professor emerita, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada)

In our information society, the extreme velocity of circulation of capital and commodities based on such technologies as Internet and drones, has led to an exponential accumulation of capital. The paper will use Marx’s theory of circulation of capital and that of velocity attached to it to explain the relationship between circulation and accumulation of capital, and surplus value based on new types of exploitation.

The concepts of space and time, as well of private and public interests, discussed by Marx in *Grundrisse*, will be used to explain how the development of new media and electronic systems of communication and transportation are indispensable to the acceleration of the process of circulation of capital, which, in turn, is essential to the process of realisation and accumulation. As such, these systems reproduce the characteristics of the process of circulation/exchange of the market in addition to that of the production of commodities. Accordingly, they entail the capitalist and public interest of the society. The paper will show that, in electronic systems of communication developed in capitalist society, the public is opposed to the private, and, at the same time, constitutes its complement. The paper concludes that a complementary antithesis between these public and private aspects are inherent to the systems of digital communication and shapes the modes of communication produced by them and imposed on society.

Martin Spence: “Beyond the ‘Fragment’”

(Writer and former Assistant General Secretary of the media and entertainment union BECTU, Great Britain.)

There is a current of Marxist/Marxian discussion which privileges ‘digital labour’ – whether paid workers or unpaid ‘prosumers’ - as a leading fraction within labour as a whole. While different authors within this current have different emphases, recurrent themes include the disappearance or irrelevance of the working class, and of value, as traditionally conceived; the rise of new class agencies sometimes expressed as constituting ‘the multitude’; the potential of the internet to enable new forms of non-commodified free association; and consequently, the strategic significance of digital labour. Authors working within this framework often seek theoretical ballast in the autonomist concept of ‘immaterial labour’; and in the ‘Fragment on Machines’ in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, including its discussion of value and its reference to ‘general intellect’.

My paper analyses, and rejects, this current of thought. Coming from a Marxist humanist position, and based on my experience as a trade union official representing digital workers in film, broadcasting and web design, it questions the theoretical value of the concept of ‘digital labour’; analyses ‘immaterial labour’ as a post-modern rather than Marxist concept; and argues that despite the power and originality of the *Grundrisse* overall, the ‘Fragment on Machines’ is a flawed passage, vulnerable to misinterpretation, which cannot bear the theoretical burden which some would place upon it.

Panel B (Med-2B, 11.30–12.45):

Rodrigo Moreno Marques: “Cognitive capitalism or polarization of knowledge? Voices from Silicon Valley unveil the beautified image and some myths of the immaterial production”

(Prof. Dr., FUMEC University, Belo Horizonte)

What is the role of information and knowledge in the socioeconomic dynamics of the 21st century? To face this problem, firstly, as a theoretical approach, the cognitive capitalism and the polarization of knowledge frameworks are confronted. However, the new frontiers of the Political Economy do not reveal a single path to apprehend the role of information and knowledge in the contemporary world. The lack of consensus is a stimulus to cross the limits of the theoretical universe, aiming at confronting the academic discourses with the voices of those who live the reality represented in the theories. Accordingly, during the second semester of 2012, an empirical research was developed in the Californian region of Silicon Valley, where semi structured interviews were conducted with some representatives of the local workers. The discourses of those that directly deal with the sphere of labour at Silicon Valley expose some contradictions in their educational system, where the polarization of knowledge becomes an instrument that strengthens socioeconomic inequalities. The voices from Silicon Valley unveil the beautified image and some myths of the immaterial production.

J. Z. Garrod: “The real world of the decentralized autonomous society”

(Doctoral student, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada)

Although it is still in early stages, many commentators have been quick to note the revolutionary potential of next-generation or Bitcoin 2.0 technology. While some have expressed fear that the widespread application of these technologies may engender the rise of a Terminator-style Skynet, others believe that it represents the coming of a decentralized autonomous society (DAS) in which humans are freed from centralized forms of power through the proliferation of distributed autonomous organizations or DAOs. Influenced by neoliberal theory that stresses privatization, open markets, and deregulation, Bitcoin 2.0 technologies are implicitly working on the assumption that 'freedom' means freedom from the state. This neglects, however, that within capitalist societies, the state can also provide freedom from the vagaries of the market by protecting certain things from commodification. Through an analysis of (1) class and the role of the state; (2) the concentration and centralization of capital; and (3) the role of automation, I argue that the vision of freedom that underpins Bitcoin 2.0 tech is one that neglects the power that capital holds over us in both organizing the structure of our lives, and informing our idea of what it means to be human. In neglecting these other forms of power, I claim that the DAS might be a far more dystopian development than its supporters comprehend, making possible societies that are commodities all the way down.

Arwid Lund: “A Critical Political Economic Framework for Peer Production”

(Ph.D., Library and Information Science, Uppsala University)

Peer production can, seen as a political strategy, look like a version of the autonomist Marxist's exodus. Projects of peer production constitute an *outside to capitalism* that is commons-based and built around the copyleft license. There is a difference between being useful to society and being social necessary. Value is a social relation, it is not the work that constitutes the value, but the social construction of valorisation in the in the market exchange between people. Therefore it is important how peer production is looked upon by outsiders as well as insiders, and if there exist alternative versions of valorisation.

This paper examines the relation between peer production and capitalism on a systemic and theoretical level. It helps us to contextualize peer production historically and structurally as well to gain perspectives on the conditions surrounding peer producers' perceptions and valorisations of their projects in relation to capitalism. The performative function of Marxism is here of some interest.

Terranova holds that peer production investigates the possibility of creating a commons-based economy with its mode of production, but not necessarily antagonistically in relation to capital. She stresses that the *evolutionary* idea is central to what she calls the P2P principles, which are often put up against Marxism's *antagonistic* interpretation of social production.

It will be shown how Marxism and closely related theories can improve our understanding of peer production's growth within a crisis-prone capitalism. Marxism is a more dynamic theoretical alternative than the P2P perspective and takes both antagonism and evolution into account.

Peer production projects (PPPs) like Wikipedia has been seen as an ad-free and non-commercial safe haven within capitalism, but Marxist theory points to the potential realism of other functions and interpretations that potentially are not as easy for capital to co-opt. Marxist interpretations of the relation between capitalism's inside and outside, theories of coexisting historical modes of production, analyses of cognitive capitalism, and Marxist crisis theory will be drawn on to make this point.