

Analysis on Labour Alienation in Internet Economy

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Abstract: The development of Internet economy did not solve problems in the capitalist mode of production. The emergence of new tools and new occupations even intensified the alienation of workers, making them feel that they have lost control of their own labour, and completely become the tools of capital.

1. Introduction

At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the Internet has become one of the foundations of world economic development. At first, the Internet quickly occupied the space of traditional information acquisition platform because of its transparency, instantaneity and low access. At the same time, many new economic forms appear: online shopping, online taxi-hailing, online live broadcast, and so on. The emergence of these new industries is the result of the further refinement of social division of labour. While promoting economic development, the Internet also causes many problems, one of which is the labour alienation of workers in the Internet economy.

2. Labour Alienation of White Collar Workers in Internet Economy

“Labour is external to workers” [1]. Similar to the situation discussed by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, white-collar workers today have encountered similar problems with workers in the 19th century: new equipment, as labour tools, did not reduce their burden; the improvement of productivity level made the competition even more intense. Presenting a false appearance of peace and prosperity does not really ease the pain of society. From literature and art works to related research, the alienation of urban white-collar workers is described and discussed through analyzing social phenomena like “ant tribes”, “Beijing drifters” and “mortgage slaves”. In Internet economy, white-collar labour alienation is reflected from following three aspects.

First, the labour behaviours of white-collars are alienated from themselves. With the popularization of computer and Internet, mechanical and repetitive jobs do not need so much manpower any longer. For example, data statistics, mechanical drawing, text editing, data search and other positions that used to require a large number of white-collar workers are decreasing. A large part of these jobs can be completed by servers and search engines. White collar workers only need to set programming operation like operators of numerically-controlled machine tools. At the same time, there are increasing number of professional practitioners like network video auditors, online game painters and grassroots programmers. These new jobs are still characterized by low creativity and long working hours. In essence, these new jobs only change the labour object, but they cannot change the nature of white-collars' work. Problems in old white-collar occupations still exist in these new occupations, and even get worse.

Second, the labour products of white-collars are alienated from themselves. The application of new tools such as big data and the emergence of new assessment methods such as key performance indicators (KPI) make the work of white-collars more stressful. They not only need to deal with the increasingly detailed KPI assessment indicators, but also need to further study so that they would not be eliminated from the competition. In other words, white-collar workers are alienated from their labour products, because the product of their labour is out of their control. Their personal value realization is also alienated into non autonomous and meaningless things in the process of labour.

Third, the class nature of white-collar workers is alienated from itself. Different from white-collar workers in the 20th century, white-collars in the 21st century have higher education level, better ability and conditions to receive information, and more comprehensive personal consciousness. But they are all facing the same survival crisis of rising resource prices and insufficient demand for talents. Therefore, contemporary white-collar workers have stronger sense of social pain and deeper understanding of their own labour alienation. They feel that they have been alienated into tools of capital in labour, lost their initiative in living expenses, securities investment, education and training, and lost even interests and hobbies; they have become the control object of the arbitrary capital.

Public opinion and some researchers hold that the reason of white-collars' labour alienation is the enrolment expansion of colleges. However, the expansion of enrolment is only an inevitable social phenomenon in the process of China's economic development. The change of social demand brought by the rapid development of Internet economy is the root cause of white-collar surplus and alienation. [2] At the same time, the rising prices of resources and the imbalance of social wealth and income redistribution have intensified the alienation of white-collar labour. In a word, the Internet economy does not help white-collar workers solve the problem of labour alienation, but makes the survival crisis of white-collar workers even more serious.

3. Labour Alienation of Online Car-Hailing Drivers in Internet Economy

Online car hailing is an emerging industry after the development of Internet economy; it is a part of Internet sharing economy. Different from the traditional taxi industry, online car hailing service platform does not sign traditional employment contract with taxi drivers. Instead, it adopts a voluntary, free and low threshold “cooperation” mode. Drivers do not need to drive unified vehicles, wear uniforms, or be responsible for the fixed amount of labour (commonly known as the “whip-round”). The driver can engage in online car hailing service after registration. The service platform only provides the source of customers, and the right of evaluating drivers is handed over to passengers. The platform and drivers divide income according to a certain proportion.

On the surface, online car hailing drivers and the service platform have equal and cooperative relations. The labour tools of online car hailing drivers are their own cars; the service platform has no rigid labour indicators; the right of evaluating drivers' labour products belongs to the labour object, passengers. However, due to the huge differences in social resources they control, online car hailing drivers and their labour are seriously alienated, which is reflected from following aspects.

Firstly, labour behaviours of online car hailing drivers are alienated from themselves. Different from the traditional taxi industry, online taxi drivers can not directly complete the labour process of “search for passengers - pick-up - passengers pay service fees - search for the next passenger”. Instead, they need to complete the labour process of “order allocation - pick-up - passengers pay service fees - sharing with the service platform” through the service platform. In other words, the labour objects of online car hailing drivers are allocated by the service platform; the labour space of drivers is provided by the service platform. The labour products of online car hailing drivers are shared by the service platform. Although drivers do not sign employment contracts with the service platform, the fact of employment labour still exists.

Secondly, the labour products of online car hailing drivers are alienated from themselves. This alienation does not only mean that the labour remuneration of drivers needs to be shared with the service platform, it also includes the evaluation of their labour products which is restricted by the service platform. As mentioned above, the right to assess the professional skill of online car hailing drivers has been transferred to passengers. Service platforms often use systems such as “star rating” to refine the assessment standards of drivers' labour products. Passengers can score drivers' driving skills, service attitude and route planning ability. The more favourable comments a driver gets, the easier he can receive more orders. His income will also increase accordingly. It seems that the quality of drivers' labour products is no longer directly related to the service platform. But in fact, the ratings of passengers are often quite subjective. Sometimes, passengers even make bad comments because they do not like the songs played by the driver. At that time, the driver has to

actively communicate with passengers and appeal to the platform to cancel the bad comments. In other words, the possibility of conflict in the process of labour is transferred to passengers by the service platform [3]. However, to solve these contradictions, the service platform needs to intervene. Moreover, the star rating of a driver on one platform cannot be applied to another platform; the driver is still not free. As a result, their labour products are still limited by the service platform both in practice and in evaluation.

Thirdly, the nature of online taxi hailing drivers is different. Although drivers can provide online car hailing service after registration, the price standard of service is formulated by the service platform, and the evaluation standard of online car hailing service is also formulated by the platform. In other words, although there is formal equality between the driver and the platform, the driver is still not free in the process of online car hailing service, because they need the platform to finish their job. Although their labour starts from spontaneity, it is carried out in a limited way. In addition, the service platform often encourages drivers to extend their working hours through the “incentive system”, which encourages excessive labour, so as to obtain more labour remuneration. However, man should not be the tool of capital. Forced by the pressure of life, in the infinitely prolonged working hours, online car hailing drivers gradually lose their labour freedom. Their labour is alienated into a way of making profits by capital; drivers are also alienated to become cheap labour sellers controlled by capital.

Fourth, there is mutual alienation among drivers of online car hailing. Online car hailing drivers usually sign agreements with the service platform alone, so it is difficult for isolated drivers to form a labour organization that can speak for their rights and interests. Moreover, there is actually a competitive relationship between online car hailing drivers. The “incentive system” and “star rating evaluation” of the service platform have intensified the competition and differentiation. The relationship among online car hailing drivers has also been alienated from “co-workers” to “non-contact competitors”.

In a word, the labour of online car hailing drivers is completely alienated into a capital led capital appreciation process under the aura of “sharing economy”. The atomized online car hailing drivers are subject to the service platform in their labour behaviours; their labour products need to pass the assessment of the service platform. They are alienated from free people to puppets of capital. These workers even lack the organizational conditions of unity. In the Internet economy, taxi drivers at the bottom are undoubtedly poor slaves exploited by capital.

4. Labour Alienation of Network Anchor in Internet Economy

After entering the 4G era, mobile Internet and smart phones have become indispensable production and living tools in daily life; they provide the material basis for the popularization of network broadcast. Different from traditional media, the threshold of online live broadcasting is low, and practitioners do not need to receive long-term formal training. They can start live broadcasting after registration on the live broadcast platform. From 2013 to 2018, dozens of webcast platforms developed in mainland of China, and many of the poor Internet anchors became rich overnight. However, due to the particularity of online live broadcast, the labour of network anchor is also alienated.

First, the network anchor's labour behaviour is alienated from itself. Different from traditional art performance, live network has the characteristics of openness. Live viewers can watch the broadcast that they are interested in at will in each live broadcast platform without paying the viewing fee in advance. On one hand, this form can make it easier for the anchor to show himself and gain popularity; on the other hand, this form actually puts forward higher requirements on the personal charm and professional ability of the anchor. The audience, as the object of his labour, can enter and leave his direct broadcasting room at any time. This unprotected labour process gives the anchor a deep sense of crisis. In order to attract more viewers, some anchors used sensationalism to enhance popularity. For example, some “king of eaters” attracts audiences by overeating. Many of them admitted that their bodies had been hurt. In fact, these labour behaviours are not voluntary; the final reason is the pressure of life. In fact, the physical and mental injury they suffered in live broadcast

is the result of the alienation of the hosts' labour behaviours and themselves.

Second, the labour products of network anchors are alienated from themselves. This alienation is mainly manifested in two aspects: one is the acquisition of labour remuneration, the other is the ownership of labour products. Under the restriction of relevant laws and regulations, network anchors cannot directly accept the money from audiences, through audiences are the objects of their labour. The live broadcast platform usually uses different levels of tokens as the labour remuneration. The tokens need to be purchased by the audience; this process is called as “reward”. Moreover, the token obtained by the anchor needs to be distributed through complex sharing rules, and then the live broadcast platform pays the anchor in the form of salary. In short, the labour products of network anchors are not controlled by themselves; they are completely subject to the live broadcast platform, which is alienated into its opposition.

Thirdly, the class nature of network anchor is different from itself. Internet economy has the characteristics of information explosion; individuals, as the smallest economic entity, need unique features if they want to stand out in the fierce competition. They even need to play these unique features to the extreme. For network anchors, it is the continuous optimization of the role of host in the live broadcast. In the process of watching the live broadcast, in order to get physical and mental pleasure, the audience often asks the anchor to do various things. [4] Therefore, the anchor's labour is not out of his own will; it is alienated and becomes a way of living.

Similar to the problem of labour alienation faced by white-collar workers and online car hailing drivers, the labour of network anchors is also alienated to its opposition. Moreover, the insecurity and fierce competition of online live broadcasting industry also make the labour alienation of network anchor more serious. They are also people oppressed by capital in the Internet economy.

5. Conclusion

Due to the limited space, this paper only selects three kinds of labourers' experience to discuss the labour alienation in Internet economy. Generally speaking, the emergence and development of Internet economy has not improved the situation that workers are losing control over their jobs. Labour is just a way to maintain livelihood. Compared with the previous era, some problems even get worse. Of course, the development of society is never smooth; it is impossible to only rely on technological progress to solve problems of the large-scale socialized production. The solution of these problems requires the long-term and joint efforts of all people in the whole society.

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