

# **Analysis of Non-Employed Digital Labor from the Perspectives of Marxist Political Economy Theory and Alienated Labor Theory—Textual Analysis Based on Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and Das Kapital**

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**Abstract:** With the development of social productive forces, new economic forms have been applied to people's lives. The digital economy has become an integral part of people's daily lives. Under the digital economy, non-employed digital labor has emerged, which is different from labor under traditional capitalism. Influenced by capital and technology, although non-employed digital labor differs in form from traditional wage labor, it still essentially belongs to the capitalist labor process and is an important source of forming the value and surplus value of data commodities. With the booming development of online social media, while enjoying the convenience, the vast number of users have unconsciously become free, non-employed digital laborers. Under the invisible exploitation of capitalists, this paper uses Marx's theory of alienated labor in Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the labor theory of value and the theory of surplus value in Das Kapital to analyze the labor of non-employed digital laborers.

## **1. Non-employed Digital Labor, the Theory of Alienated Labor, the Labor Theory of Value and the Theory of Surplus Value**

### **1.1 Non-employed Digital Labor**

#### **1.1.1 Definition**

Before clarifying the definition of non-employed digital laborers, let's first look at traditional wage labor. Wage labor is actually a contractual relationship. However, with the continuous development of productive forces, new forms of the digital economy have emerged. When the subject of data production is outside the enterprise's employment system, the labor for producing such data is called non-employed digital labor[1]. In the context of non-employed labor, there is no employment relationship between laborers and owners of the means of production, yet laborers unconsciously participate in the production process dominated by the owners of the means of production[1]. That is to say, every user on the Internet platform is a member of non-employed digital laborers.

#### **1.1.2 Characteristics**

Firstly, the age of non-employed digital laborers tends to be young. Research shows that the age of non-employed digital laborers is between 20 and 35 years old, and their occupations mainly include college students, corporate white-collar workers, and public servants. They are proficient in using the Internet and intelligent devices, pursue fashion trends, and can adapt to popular trends.

Secondly, the boundary between "labor" and "leisure" for non-employed digital laborers is blurred. When people open various short-video platforms every day to browse and like videos, ostensibly, they are enjoying their entertainment life, but in fact, they are providing profits and surplus value for capitalists. Because the generation of traffic in this process promotes platform dissemination, and bloggers can better promote products after becoming popular. This series of reactions makes the boundary between labor and leisure of non-employed digital laborers blurred.

Thirdly, non-employed digital laborers work without pay and are "free". The time and space of their "labor" are not restricted. Unlike traditional wage labor that requires working at specific times and places, they only need a mobile phone or other devices to "work". They consider this an entertainment item that allows them to relax after work. Moreover, since this labor is not part of the wage labor system, it is unpaid.

## **1.2 Marx's Theory of Alienated Labor**

Marx believed that alienated labor has four aspects of determination: the alienation of the laborer from his labor product, the alienation of the laborer from his labor activity, the alienation of the laborer from his species-essence, and the alienation of man from man[2]. These four determinations are logical. Briefly speaking, what a laborer gets after labor should originally belong to the laborer himself, but the products produced belong to the capitalists. The labor of laborers is forced by capitalists for the sake of survival. Workers become like machines, monotonously repeating meaningless actions. Labor is no longer free and creative but forced and self-torturing. Marx believed that a real person must engage in labor-based life on the premise of species-essence, and does not need all labor to maintain the species-essence. However, workers have to use all their labor to maintain their species-essence. They voluntarily choose to lose their human essence and are also unfree. Marx believed that the essence of man is labor. In the capitalist production process, labor becomes something external to workers, and they cannot experience the subjectivity of being human. On this basis, people are trapped in the workshop, and the relationship between people gradually becomes alienated.

Although the alienation of labor has certain temporary benefits for capitalists, for capitalists or the whole society, the ethical and moral aspects, social thoughts, and social trends of the capitalist system are reflected in the fact that capitalists think it is normal to obtain capital profits and dominate workers. In fact, this is anti-human and will deepen the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the future.

## **1.3 The Labor Theory of Value and the Theory of Surplus Value**

### **1.3.1 The Labor Theory of Value**

The labor theory of value mentioned in this article mainly refers to the two-factor theory of commodities and the dual-nature theory of labor.

Commodities are labor products used for exchange by people, and their two factors are use-value and value. Use-value is the natural attribute of commodities, which is "the usefulness of things[1]"; value is the social attribute of commodities, which is the undifferentiated human labor congealed in commodities[2]. The two-factor of commodities is determined by the dual-nature of labor. Concrete labor produces use-value, and abstract labor forms value.

### **1.3.2 The Labor Theory of Value**

#### **1.3.2.1 The Labor Process**

The labor process refers to the process in which the labor subject uses labor materials to process labor objects, changes the physical state of nature, and creates certain use-values to meet people's needs. The labor process has three elements: purposeful activities of people (labor itself), labor objects, and labor materials[3]. Marx believed that the characteristics of the capitalist labor process are that workers labor under the supervision of capitalists, and the products belong to the capitalists, not to the direct producers, the workers[4].

#### **1.3.2.2 The Surplus Value Production Process**

There are two basic ways of surplus value production: the method of producing absolute surplus value and the method of producing relative surplus value. The method of producing absolute surplus value refers to the method of producing surplus value by absolutely prolonging the working day under the condition that the necessary labor time remains unchanged. The method of producing relative surplus value refers to the method of producing surplus value by shortening the necessary

labor time and prolonging the surplus labor time under the condition that the length of the working day remains unchanged[5].

We all know that  $G-W-G'$  is the general formula of capital directly expressed in the circulation field[1]. Among them,  $G'=c + v + m$ .

### **1.3.2.3 Capital Accumulation**

In Marx's view, reproduction is divided into simple reproduction and expanded reproduction [1]. Simple reproduction means that the next round of prepaid capital is still  $G$ , and  $m$  is all used for the personal consumption of capitalists. Expanded reproduction means that a part of  $M$  is transformed into capital, used to purchase additional means of production and labor power, so that production is repeated on an expanded scale.

## **2. Analysis of Non-Employed Digital Labor from the Perspectives of Marxist Political Economy Theory and the Theory of Alienated Labor**

### **2.1 Alienation of Non-Employed Digital Labor**

Firstly, non-employed digital laborers are alienated from their labor products. When browsing videos, the likes, comments, and other traffic generated by people's invisible labor do not belong to non-employed digital laborers but to capitalists and platforms. That is to say, the data commodities on the platform are produced by users' unpaid labor that consumes physical and mental energy on the platform, but this product does not belong to the laborers themselves. Instead, enterprises and platforms finally obtain it through privacy policies and user agreements, and use it as capital to seek profits[2]. The more energy non-employed digital laborers spend, the more powerful the alienated products they create become.

Secondly, non-employed digital laborers are alienated from their labor activities. This is difficult to show in the entire non-employed digital labor process. In Marx's view, labor should be a happy thing, but under the capitalist production mode, labor has become a forced and painful event. Non-employed digital laborers seem to be free and happy when browsing videos and generating traffic for their idols, but this is not the case. Digital platforms will set a series of rules and algorithms to regulate the behavior of non-employed digital laborers. These rules may not conform to the wishes of the laborers themselves, but in order to obtain traffic and attention, they have to follow them, and the entire labor process loses its autonomy.

Thirdly, non-employed digital laborers are alienated from their species-essence. The species-essence of humans, compared with animals, is that humans are free and conscious. Under non-employed digital labor, non-employed digital laborers think that they immediately engage in entertainment and leisure activities after work, but in fact, they unconsciously fall into a closed-off revelry[3]. After escaping reality and exhaustion through endless videos, laborers have not actually escaped the control of capitalists but have instead fallen into invisible exploitation. In addition, the existence of entertainment and "palliative" content makes people gradually lose their rational judgment. Long-term "information cocoon"-style precise push will trap non-employed digital laborers in an information island, and in the information island, users' ability to distinguish the objective world and judge self-cognition will decline[4].

Fourthly, people are alienated from each other. In non-employed digital labor, the relationship between capitalists and laborers has become alienated, and the relationship between laborers has also become alienated. Many people complain that internet celebrities and live-streamers "do nothing but get high salaries", which creates opposition between users and video creators. In addition, young people nowadays are immersed in the Internet, "electronic junk food", and the virtual world. This not only estranges the relationship between people but also causes indifference among people, which is obviously not a good state for interpersonal relationships in the context of technology and the digital economy.

## 2.2 Analysis of Non-Employed Digital Labor from the Perspective of Marxist Economics

Firstly, non-employed digital labor has a dual nature. Data commodities, like ordinary commodities, have use-value and value. The digital labor of non-employed digital laborers also has a dual nature and is the unity of concrete labor and abstract labor. The data produced by their concrete labor can reflect users' preferences, habits, and demands. Platforms can then cater to users based on these data. This predictive function of labor is the use-value of data commodities; their abstract labor is the undifferentiated human labor contained in every search and click behavior.

Secondly, the non-employed digital labor process is different from the labor process of the traditional capitalist production mode. In traditional labor, such as agricultural production, the production behavior of farmers is labor. The various farming tools used in the labor process, such as hoes and plows, are labor tools. The work clothes worn and the water kettles used during labor belong to auxiliary materials, and the land used for farming is the labor object. In the non-employed digital labor process, the non-employed digital labor process is the process in which network audiences use their physical organs, information technology, Internet platforms, and other labor materials to record, store, process, handle, and transmit their emotions, attitudes, attention, etc., so as to produce digital products[1]. In the digital economy era, the internal spirits at the conscious level of Internet users, such as emotions, feelings, cognitions, experiences, and attention, are the labor objects of digital labor; the brain, nerves, muscles, hands, and other organs of laborers are the labor materials that laborers themselves possess, and the labor tools used by people, such as data platforms and various Internet-connected devices, are the extended organs and limbs of laborers, jointly constituting the labor materials[2]. In addition, the non-employed digital labor process has new characteristics. That is, the labor of network audiences to produce data is voluntary and not directly supervised by capitalists, but is indirectly supervised by digital platforms[3]. For example, when we search for a certain type of product on the platform, big data will push information about related products. The products produced by digital laborers still belong to capitalists, but the non-employed digital labor process has new characteristics. That is, audiences can learn and relax through data. They are both producers of data and consumers of data[4].

Thirdly, the way non-employed digital labor creates value is also different from the traditional production mode. Digital capitalists sell data commodities to advertisers to obtain profits, and advertisers achieve precise advertising placement through big data monitoring results, thereby obtaining sales profits. (Dong Tao, 2023) Audiences are attracted by the pushed content, further increasing their Internet-using time. The daily Internet activities of audiences are incorporated into the entire data production process. Moreover, with the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure, the labor time of non-employed digital laborers increases, the labor intensity of laborers increases, and digital capitalists obtain more and more surplus value. On the other hand, with the continuous development of the digital economy, the functions of the Internet are becoming more powerful, and algorithms are becoming more refined, and the labor productivity of digital laborers is also increasing[2].

Fourthly, in non-employed digital labor, capitalists obtain the highest profit at the lowest cost. In the formula  $c + v + m$ ,  $c = 0$ , because the constant capital is platforms or devices such as mobile phones, which are not provided by capitalists but purchased by users themselves, so  $c$  approaches 0. Originally, both constant capital and variable capital were paid by capitalists, but now capitalists only provide data terminals, platforms, and other things. We have to buy equipment from capitalists and prepare our own means of production; the labor force of non-employed digital labor is also unpaid or low-cost. Therefore, capitalists almost obtain  $m$  at zero cost. In addition, after obtaining surplus value, digital capitalists do not use all of it for personal consumption but use it as additional capital to purchase production equipment, improve digital technology, optimize digital platforms, and so on.

### **3. Enlightenments of Non-Employed Digital Labor on the Economy and Society**

#### **3.1 Rethinking Labor and Value Creation**

Many people may think that going to work is labor and browsing videos after work is entertainment. This is understandable. However, with the popularization of network platforms, entertainment also involves labor. The rise of non-employed digital labor indicates that in the digital age, the scope of value creation has been greatly expanded. Non-employed digital laborers such as social media users and online content creators, without traditional employment relationships, create huge value for platforms through their activities. For example, user-generated content attracts traffic, which is then converted into advertising revenue.

In fact, apps commonly used by young people such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu were originally created by capitalists to obtain profits, not for the leisure and entertainment of laborers. Instead, they appealed to the public to participate under the guise of leisure and entertainment. In the Internet age, humans are constantly under the exploitation and surveillance of capital. Users' likes and praises have become stepping stones for capital oppression; the sharing of videos among friends has become a sufficient condition for capital exploitation. Invisible to us, the entertainment that seems far from capitalists has secretly turned into surplus value.

#### **3.2 The Responsibility of the Platform Economy**

As the main organizers and beneficiaries of non-employed digital labor, digital platforms should assume more responsibilities. On the one hand, platforms should optimize algorithms and operation rules to avoid guiding laborers to produce inappropriate content in pursuit of traffic. On the other hand, platforms also need to enhance laborers' sense of participation and gain. For example, give laborers a certain say in the formulation of platform rules and provide skill training to promote the healthy and sustainable development of the platform economy. In addition, the state should better give play to the significant advantages of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, overcome the disadvantages that may be brought about by private capital controlling digital platforms, and ensure that digital technology serves the people and social and economic development. The state should strengthen legislation, protect the legitimate rights and interests of digital laborers through laws, and strengthen the supervision of the daily operations of digital platforms and the use of data to reduce the distribution inequality and wealth gap in the digital context, thereby promoting common prosperity.

#### **3.3 Tapping the Potential of New Economic Models**

With the development of science and technology, non-employed digital labor has given birth to new economic models such as crowdsourcing and the gig economy, showing strong vitality. These models can make full use of idle social human resources and improve the efficiency of resource allocation. Enterprises and entrepreneurs can also seek opportunities from them, innovate economic development models, reduce operating costs, and stimulate market innovation vitality.

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