Labour and value in corporate social media

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Abstract

The research aims at answering the following question. How to explain the origin of value in the sphere of social media, where companies like Google and Facebook act? Firstly, I will present the *digital labour* approach proposed by Christian Fuchs as an answer to the problem. According to him, all the activities that belong to the production chains of digital technologies are classified as digital labour. Fuchs' framework draws on the Marxian concepts of productive labour and collective labour. In his effort to apply Marx's thoughts to the realm of the Internet, the author includes in the notion of digital labour the act of surfing the web and using social media. He takes this activity as exploited labour that produces value and surplus-value. Notwithstanding the great merits of Fuchs' approach, his perspective departs quite significantly from some central principles of the Marxian framework since: (i) he blurs the difference between labour and leisure; (ii) he eliminates the difference between necessary labour time and exceeding labour time; and (iii) he accepts the possibility of extracting surplus value and the concept of productive labour out of the wage relation. As an alternative for Fuchs' conception, I propose an interpretation of the dynamics of value in social media which is based on the categories rent and monopoly rent adopted by Marx, as well as on the differentiation of value and price established by the German thinker. According to this proposition, the data commodity that is sold in the market of personalized advertising has value and price. Its value comes from the wage labour of those who, directly or indirectly, work in social media production chains, such as hardware and software designers required to create and maintain these technological platforms. This heterogeneous collective worker produces not only value but also surplus value. However, the price of this kind of data commodity, which is much higher than its value, is, in fact, a monopoly price that generates surplus profit above the average profit of sectors characterized by full competition. This surplus profit has its origin in the monopolistic control of users' data and information which are massively captured by companies of the internet realm. Therefore, a significant portion of wealth arisen in the social media sphere does not come from the immediate production of value, but from a rentier strategy. Notwithstanding the fact that wage workers of the production chains of social media produce value and surplus value, the wealth created in this context comes mainly from rents extracted by big players of corporate social media from others capitalist sectors. Companies that do not have primary access to the databases of users' profiles and behaviours are compelled to pay for this strategic asset, which is becoming increasingly important nowadays.

Keywords: value, rent, social media, labour, digital labour.

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