Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

Illusion of Empiricism under the Stance of Resistance: Reflection on "Digital Labour" Theory

Yihao Wu

Department of Philosophy, Peking University, Beijing, China
yihao_wyh@163.com

Abstract. With the rise of internet-based social platforms, Christian Fuchs's "digital labour" theory has effectively developed the "audience commodity" theory in the political economy of communication. Yet scholars mainly assess its political-economic strengths and weaknesses, without asking why Fuchs vehemently rejects the "cognitive rent" theory and staunchly defends his flawed theory. Subjectively, Fuchs sacrifices theoretical rigour and scientific validity to maintain a stance of resistance against Western digital capitalism. Objectively, the stance-theory conflict reveals an illusion of empiricism: an inability to scientifically understand essence and appearance, and the concept of "matter". Only by delving into this resistance stance as subjective motivation and the empiricist illusion as objective cause can we conduct a comprehensive reflection on the digital labour theory and thereby advance our understanding of social reality in the era of digital capitalism.

Keywords: Digital labour, audience commodity, Christian Fuchs, stance of resistance, illusion of empiricism

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, internet-centred digital technology has become indispensable to capitalism, making "digital capitalism" a reality [1]. Western critical political economy, following Marxist concerns, critiques its social relations. Prominent among these is Christian Fuchs's "digital labour" theory, which applies the "audience commodity" theory to the internet, arguing that users' unpaid online leisure activities ("digital labour") are exploited by digital capital, thereby deepening capital's domination over labour [2].

Although the theory has gained influence [3-5], scholars rarely ask why Fuchs, aware of its flaws, vehemently rejects the rival "cognitive rent" theory and defends his own. This paper examines both the subjective motivation and the underlying philosophical error. It proceeds in four parts: the first discusses the contradictions of the "audience commodity" theory and Fuchs's attempt to resolve them; the second summarises the political-economic flaws of "digital labour"; the third explores the subjective motivation—Fuchs's stance of resistance as a Western radical leftist; and the fourth analyses how the stance—theory conflict reflects a deep immersion in the illusion of empiricism.

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

2. The self-contradiction of the "audience commodity" theory

Fuchs openly traces his "digital labour" theory to Dallas Smythe's "audience commodity" theory. Smythe, studying newspapers and magazines, argued that mass media produce a special commodity —the audience—and sell it to advertisers [6]. Audiences, during the time they are sold, work to create demand for advertised goods, thereby establishing the paradigm. Sut Jhally and Bill Livant later extended this to television, redefining the commodity as "watching-time" [7]. They distinguished two processes: the audience sells "watching-power" to media, which then sells "watching-time" to advertisers. This allowed quantitative analysis (e.g., of a 12-hour programme with 8 hours of ads, 4 hours are necessary watching-time and 8 hours surplus watching-time). Crucially, they viewed this as part of surplus-value realisation, with media capital receiving a portion of industrial surplus value in the form of rent.

However, this paradigm contained two self-contradictions. It analogised the audience commodity to surplus-value production while insisting the system was merely the realisation of surplus-value, and it used "rent"—a monopoly-based appropriation unrelated to production—to describe media profits. As Jakob Rigi of the rival "cognitive rent" theory stressed, profit arises from production and circulation, rent from monopoly; media capital cannot receive both simultaneously [8].

After the internet disrupted mass media, the audience commodity theory faded until social platforms revived it. In response, critical political economy developed the "digital labour" theory. Influenced by autonomist "immaterial labour", Tiziana Terranova proposed "free labour", arguing that unpaid online activities are value-creating labour [9]. Fuchs then systematised this: internet users ("prosumers") perform unpaid digital labour on social platforms, producing "data commodities" (uploaded data, social networks, interests, browsing behaviour, etc.). Platforms own and sell these data commodities to advertisers; surplus value is realised when users click ads. Thus platforms profit by exploiting both paid employees and unpaid users. Fuchs concludes that internet users are productive labourers exploited by capital.

The digital labour theory revises the earlier paradigm of "audience commodity" in three ways. First, it separates active online content generation (value production) from ad-clicking (value realisation), rather than treating audiences as passive viewers. Second, it moves the audience commodity from the sphere of realisation into the sphere of surplus-value production. Third, it redefines platform earnings as profit, with advertisers merely realising the surplus value, instead of treating them as rent.

Yet, despite this apparent resolution, a closer examination of Fuchs's positive arguments and his defences reveals that the digital labour theory still suffers from undeniable flaws at the level of political economy.

3. The flaws of the "digital labour" theory at the level of political economy

Fuchs's "digital labour" theory has involved constant questioning and rebutals. His arguments proceed on two levels: positively, that non-wage digital labour can create surplus value; negatively, refuting the "cognitive rent" theory.

In his positive argument, Fuchs first attempts to show that non-wage labour can produce surplus value. According to Marx, surplus value arises from the difference between the value of labour power and the value it creates. After being purchased, labour power becomes wage labour. Yet digital labourers have no employment relationship with platforms or advertisers. To overcome this, Fuchs expands Marx's concept of "productive labour", claiming Marx offers three definitions: (1) labour producing use-value; (2) labour producing surplus value for capital; (3) labour as part of the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

collective worker producing surplus value [10]. Fuchs argues that only the second restricts productive labour to wage labour, while the third does not imply that only wage labour is productive labour, because the collective worker includes unpaid activities serving capital. Internet users, he claims, fall under this third definition. However, this interpretation is strained. Marx does state that one need only be an organ of the collective labourer, but immediately adds that the concept of the productive worker includes a specific, social, historically produced relation of production—the capitalist wage relation [11]. Fuchs never explains what relation of production obtains between users and platforms.

Even if non-wage labour could produce surplus value, Fuchs's second step is to argue that digital labour actually does so for platforms. His "proof by contradiction" is remarkably simplistic: without users, Facebook would have no profits; therefore users must produce that profit. But "no A, hence no B" only shows B is a sufficient condition for A, not that A produces B. As Carchedi notes, being a condition for value production is not the same as producing value [12]. Fuchs's positive case thus rests on a forced expansion of "productive labour" and a logical fallacy.

In direct opposition, the "cognitive rent" theory represented by Rigi tries to resolve the audience commodity's contradictions differently [8]. Using empirical research, it contends there is no "audience commodity" online; platform earnings are rent, appropriated through monopoly, while user activity is unrelated to surplus-value production and is not productive labour.

Fuchs treats the "media-audience" process as surplus-value production and the "media-advertiser" process as its realisation. Rigi insists these are separate. Regarding the production of the so-called data commodity, Marx held that a commodity's value is determined by the socially necessary labour-time for its reproduction. Since data reproduction costs are virtually zero, the priced "data commodity" has no value; users cannot congeal human labour in it. If surplus value arises during data processing, its source is platform employees, not unpaid users. As for the sale of the data commodity, Rigi's advertising data show no statistical correlation between advertisers' payments and user activity on platforms. Platform income is surplus value transferred by advertisers in exchange for renting ad space. Rigi identifies four revenue sources: renting ad space, selling information, selling information-processing services, and financial speculation. What Fuchs construes as production and realisation of surplus value are simply two forms of rent.

Fuchs claims his theory needs Marx's concepts of value, productive labour, and rent. He expands "productive labour" for his positive case, but when refuting "cognitive rent", he avoids addressing its core challenge and instead accuses it of violating Marx's definition. Yet Marx's rent theory primarily concerns ground rent, and the cognitive rent theory's extension is no bolder than Fuchs's own expansion of "productive labour". As we all know, ground rent derives from historically specific relations, and Marx offers no general theory of rent; applying conclusions from one context to another automatically is unsound. Fuchs's charge is therefore unfair.

A fundamental logical flaw in Fuchs's approach is a double standard: he freely stretches the definition of "productive labour" without clear textual warrant, yet criticises his opponents for allegedly violating the definition of "rent", concluding that the cognitive rent category is useless and that the prosumer commodity concept is superior. Consequently, Fuchs cannot effectively respond to the cognitive rent theory's direct negation, and his own questioning of its premises remains unconvincing. Both in positive exposition and negative refutation, his "digital labour" theory exhibits significant political-economic flaws.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

4. The subjective motivation for adhering to a flawed theory: a stance of resistance

Most scholarly treatments of Fuchs merely point out the political-economic flaws in his theory [3-5], without asking why he and his supporters, aware of these problems, still reject the "cognitive rent" theory and cling to "digital labour". A genuine reflection requires examining both the subjective motivation and the objective causes.

Subjectively, Fuchs's insistence reflects his uncompromising stance of resistance against digital capitalism. Throughout his arguments, he persistently moves beyond political economy to invoke real-world struggle. Whether digital labour qualifies as "productive labour" becomes central. Although seemingly a theoretical dispute, Fuchs revealed its political implications, in which he said Marx's concept of "productive labour" is a political concept, meant to point out who possesses the power and capacity to launch a revolutionary struggle against capitalism [13]. He reiterated in another paper that the labour theory of value is a theoretical tool for political struggle, identifying who is exploited and thus "actual or potential revolutionary subjects" [10]. This explains why Fuchs insists digital labour must be productive labour.

Positively, Fuch believes that treating digital labour as productive labour combats so-called "wage labourfetishism", which only sees traditional wage workers as exploited [14]. Since capital dominates both work and leisure, all dominated groups—including digital labourers—must be recognised as producers of surplus value to gain legitimacy and capacity for resistance, even the power to paralyse social media through strikes. Negatively, the cognitive rent theory's classification of digital labour as unproductive is politically harmful: it portrays users as parasitic non-producers, undermines solidarity with wage workers, and denies them the status of revolutionary subjects. Fuchs thus concludes that only his theory offers a vision of user solidarity, while the rent theory slanders users as non-entities in class struggle.

This demonstrates why Fuchs so vehemently rejects cognitive rent. For him, that theory is incompatible with resistance and cannot mobilise users; only "digital labour" can validate them as agents of struggle. No matter the theoretical counterarguments, he can accuse opponents of "repeating bourgeois ideology" that sees no exploitation and presents social media as unproblematic.

Fuchs's commitment to Marxist analysis and his resistive stance are sympathetic, but sympathy does not mean agreement. Sacrificing rigour for stance prevents a scientific grasp of digital capitalism and cannot guide actual struggle. This conflict between stance and theory originates in the illusion of empiricism. Despite noting global exploitation and calling for political solidarity, Fuchs remains trapped in a West-centred empiricism, focusing narrowly on Western internet users and calling them revolutionary subjects simply because they appear as the visible face of digital capitalism. Theoretically, he cites Marx extensively but applies 19th-century categories of "productive labour" and "exploitation" unreflectively to digital capitalism, a move Marx himself would have rejected as an ahistorical generalisation. This empiricism encourages distortion rather than serious exploration.

In sum, Fuchs's adherence to the flawed theory is driven by a resistant stance that clashes with theoretical rigour, a clash rooted in the illusion of empiricism. Only by examining his philosophical errors at epistemological and ontological levels can we fully grasp this empiricism and the objective reasons behind his theoretical commitments.

5. The objective cause for adhering to a flawed theory: the illusion of empiricism

At the epistemological level, the illusion of empiricism appears as Fuchs's inability to distinguish essence from appearance in the Marxist sense. Marx noted that if appearance and essence coincided,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

science would be superfluous; yet Fuchs's theory, like vulgar economics, stays at the surface. As Vincent Mosco observes, the audience commodity tradition has always thought in terms of the "media-audience-advertiser triad" [15]. Fuchs likewise presents a single circuit: users produce data commodities, platforms sell them to advertisers, ads are placed, and users click—apparently a complete capital circuit. The cognitive rent theory reveals that this triad is mere appearance; the data commodity and the ads placed are unrelated. What appears as one circuit is actually two separate circuits coinciding on the same three actors.

The first circuit involves the production and sale of data commodities, undergoing the metamorphosis from productive to money capital. The second, unconnected circuit involves an advertiser renting ad space and users clicking. In the first, the triad are subjects of one circuit; in the second, they are merely participants in distributing surplus value from another capital. Fuchs mistakenly equates the surplus value produced in the first circuit with the surplus value distributed in the second, falling into what Marx called "personification"—treating economic roles as independent agents rather than as bearers of economic relations. This empiricist epistemology reduces both users and platforms to personified appearances: users appear to generate data and click ads in a single activity, but actually play different roles in two circuits; platforms appear to receive a unified payment, but actually act as commodity sellers and space renters in separate circuits. Because neither users nor platforms experience this duality, a theory staying at the surface must invent contrivances to merge them. Marx lamented that vulgar economics merely systematises the conceptions of agents trapped in bourgeois relations. Likewise, the digital labour theory's triad is only a systematic expression of surface experience, an error already identified by Lebowitz in 1986 regarding the audience commodity theory [16].

At the ontological level, the illusion manifests as Fuchs's one-sided grasp of "matter". His attitude toward "immaterial labour" reveals this. Negri and Hardt defined immaterial labour by its product's immateriality while insisting the labour itself is material [17]. Sean Sayers criticised this by arguing all labour products are ultimately material—marks, sounds, electronic pulses [18]. Fuchs similarly rejects "immaterial labour", claiming it wrongly suggests a detachment from matter. For him, digital labour is material simply because it is brain activity, a material system.

While this criticism has some validity, it exposes a narrow understanding of materiality as mere physicality. As Kaan Kangal argues against Sayers [19], Marx's concept of materiality has two dimensions: one linked to concrete labour and use-value (physical appearance), where some products may be termed immaterial; another linked to abstract labour and value, denoting the objectivity of the social production process, which is wholly material. The immaterial is merely an appearance form of material reality. Fuchs's error is identical: he recognises only physical materiality and misses the materiality of social relations. Consequently, he remains trapped in personified appearances—visible, physical interactions—and cannot grasp the invisible but objective economic relations that determine whether users produce surplus value. This ontological limitation explains why he casually expands the definition of productive labour based on experiential appearances, instead of analysing the historically specific relation of production that truly matters.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Fuchs's "digital labour" theory sacrifices theoretical rigour and scientific validity to maintain a stance of resistance. Subjectively, this explains his vehement rejection of the "cognitive rent" theory and defence of a flawed theory. At a deeper level, the conflict between stance and theory reveals a philosophical illusion of empiricism: epistemologically, an inability to scientifically

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35524

understand essence and appearance; ontologically, an inability to grasp the concept of "matter". This constitutes the objective cause for producing and persisting with a flawed theory.

Reflection does not mean mere negation. The theory is highly innovative, has advanced Marxist political economy, and deserves affirmation. Two points must be noted. First, as a self-understanding within Western capitalist society, the theory's stance—theory conflict reflects capitalism's irresolvable tensions. Second, its philosophical errors are not an isolated case; many Western radical left-wing theories have likewise fallen into the illusion of empiricism. Only by grasping Marxist scientific epistemology and accurately understanding "matter" can we better comprehend the social reality of digital capitalism.

References

[1] Schiller, D. (1999). *Digital capitalism: Networking the global market system*. The MIT Press.
[2] Fuchs, C. (2013). *Digital labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge.
[3] Bolaño, C. R. S. (2015). Digitalisation and labour: A rejoinder to Christian Fuchs. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique, 13*(1), 79-83. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v13i1.666
[4] Garnham, N. (2016). Book review: Digital labour and Karl Marx. *Media, Culture & Society, 38*(2), 294-300. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715612543
[5] Kangal, K. (2016). The Karl Marx problem in contemporary new media economy: A critique of Christian Fuchs' account. *Television & New Media, 17*(5), 416-428. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415622266
[6] Smythe, D. W. (1977). Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory, 1*(3), 1–27.
[7] Jhally, S., & Livant, B. (1986). Watching as working: The valorization of audience consciousness. *Journal of Communication, 36*(3), 124–143.
[8] Rigi, J., & Prey, R. (2015). Value, rent, and the political economy of social media. *Information Society, 31*(5), 392–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2015.1069769
[9] Terranova, T. (2000). Free labour: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text, 18*(2), 33–58.
[10] Fuchs, C. (2015). *Culture and economy in the age of social media*. Routledge.
[11] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1996). *Collected works, volume 35*. Lawrence & Wishart Publishers.
[12] Carchedi, G. (2014). Old wine, new bottles and the Internet. *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation, 8*(1), 69–87. https://doi.org/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.8.1.0069
[13] Fuchs, C. (2015). Against divisiveness: Digital workers of the world unite! A rejoinder to César Bolaño and Eloy Vieira. *Television & New Media, 16*(1), 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414528053
[14] Fuchs, C. (2015). The digital labour theory of value and Karl Marx in the age of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Weibo. In E. Fraser & C. Fuchs (Eds.), *Reconsidering value and labour in the digital age*. Palgrave Macmillan.
[15] Mosco, V. (2009). *The political economy of communication*. Sage Publications Ltd.
[16] Lebowitz, M. (2009). *Following Marx: Method, critique and crisis*. Brill.
[17] Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2005). *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. Penguin Books.
[18] Sayers, S. (2007). The concept of labor: Marx and his critics. *Science & Society, 71*(4), 431–454.
[19] Kangal, K. (2017). Sean Sayers' concept of immaterial labor and the information economy. *Science and Society, 81*(1), 124–132. https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2017.81.1.124