

Kylie Jarrett, **Digital Labor**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022, 247 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

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As a latest addition to the Digital Media and Society series of Polity Press, Kylie Jarrett's **Digital Labor** is a thought-provoking book that asks how Marxists and feminists can understand the drastic transformation that digital technology brought to work and labor issues. Like other books in this series, *Digital Labor* is relatively short; unlike others, it covers a vast area rather than one single technology. The author accomplishes this challenging task by offering typologies of three types of labor—unpaid “playbor” (Fuchs, 2011), freelance and platform labor, and waged labor—and five key Marxist concepts—exploitation, process, alienation, commodification, and struggle.

In chapter 1 Jarrett attempts to conquer the impossible feat of defining digital labor. Initially, scholars coined it to describe unpaid labor performed by consumers online during leisure time. However, this term has become too commonplace, as it is now used to describe all work—paid and unpaid, salaried and contract—where digital technology plays a part. This difficulty was also faced by Bell (1973) when he attempted to define jobs in a postindustrial society. While Bell eventually focused on the type of jobs where workers can adapt knowledge from one industry to another, Jarrett restricts her inquiry to “digital media industries” rather than all that produce and use digital technology. She further excludes indentured laborers who harvest metals for electronics and factory workers who make the devices (Fuchs, 2014). The precise definition of digital labor is: “the work of users, platform-mediated workers, and formal employees that generates value within the digital media industries” (p. 28). She wonderfully illustrates these three types of work at the beginning of the book by recounting the story of a food delivery worker killed on the job, her learning of this news on social media, and well-paid workers who engineer apps on social platforms. She shows that the lives of digital laborers are more connected than they appear to be. However, establishing this connection also means she chooses not to compare work conditions in nonmedia sectors, thus creating an illusion that media workers face a discrete set of challenges (Goodwin, 2022).

Each of the next five chapters focuses on one Marxist concept: exploitation, process, alienation, commodification, or struggle. These chapters follow a similar structure: definition and explanation of the key concept, how this concept explains the work of the three types of digital workers, and what new concepts may be drawn on to enhance this Marxist concept. For example, in chapter 2, Jarrett defines “exploitation” as the process of capitalists capturing the value produced by workers. However, in digital work, the class relations between workers and capitalists vary. For example, platform workers, who are classified as contract workers, are said to be their own bosses yet experience little freedom and autonomy. Jarrett thus proposes to shift the attention from exploitation to the dual problem of precarious labor and unstable income.

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In chapter 5, Jarrett enriches Marx's concept of commodification with assetization. Commodification is an objectifying process where workers' time is sold to the owners of the means of production. In addition, workers produce goods that have no meaning to themselves. Digital laborers do not produce tangible goods, instead they commodify their subjectivities and emotions for the market (Hochschild, 2012). For example, influencers share their personal selves to be "likeable," share ride drivers offer additional help to passengers. Assetization goes beyond commodification. It captures workers' "value-added" quality (such as creativity and curiosity) for a company's future growth and competitiveness. Jarrett brings in a gender perspective to critique the creative workplace as being a guise of a misogynistic culture that is unfriendly to non-White, non-cis-male workers.

As implied above, Jarrett has brought three innovations to a discussion of digital labor. First, she uses updated examples that resonate with readers, in particular undergraduate students who have all performed unpaid "playbor," such as conducting Google searches and uploading pictures to Instagram. Some readers may perform freelance or platform labor by being online content producers or delivering food. These experiences help readers reflect on the question of value creation in capitalism. Second, Jarrett brings in a feminist framework to show that "old" problems (sexual harassment, gender- and race- based job segregation, emotional work) also plague many jobs in the creative and digital economies. Third, Jarrett introduces new concepts to enrich Marxist ones, such as exploitation and commodification. The concepts of "cheap labor" and "assetization" provide vivid illustrations of how labor is imagined in the digital media industry. They are useful at critiquing some current discourses such as technology reducing labor costs and workers increasing their human capital.

Like most short books written on big topics, readers cannot help but wonder why some issues are missing. I will point out two that currently confront digital labor in the spirit of initiating discussion rather than suggesting that Jarrett has overlooked them. The first issue is the feminization of labor globally and how this feminized labor may allow for cross-class, cross-race, and cross-gender coalition. The notions of cheap labor and emotional labor are not new; they had been associated with work that women perform, such as housework done by unpaid homemakers, menial jobs by women of color, and front office work by White, working-class women (Glenn, 1992). What is new though is that global immigration has shuffled the hierarchy of workers. In the United States, it is not unusual to see newly arrived male immigrants cleaning houses or female immigrants staffing front offices. Rather than seeing this reordered hierarchy as an example of equal opportunities, it is better to characterize it as the feminization of labor: Whoever can perform the work at the cheapest rate and with the least bargaining power will be hired. When cheap work is not merely segregated by gender and race, will coalition be easier to establish across classes, races, and genders?

The second issue implied but not explicitly raised in this book is the archenemy of digital labor. In some instances, the enemy is the platform company who refuses to compensate for a worker's death; in some, the faceless algorithm. In some, Silicon Valley programmers; in some others, body-shaming online audiences. Unlike the easy target in industrial time, it is harder to identify the capitalists in the digital economy. Power is not embodied by the factory owner in a network that is weaved from stock markets, corporate and individual shareholders, investment bankers, hedge-fund managers, and start-up investors. This ecosystem deems human labor to be a liability rather than wealth. The current layoff in hi-tech firms based in the United States is a good example to show that staff reduction is not the result of owners going

bankrupt or the companies having no cash flow, but investors' fear of hi-tech stocks losing value because of how much companies pay workers. Marxist concepts can be further enriched if the archenemy of digital labor can be identified.

All in all, Jarrett's *Digital Labor* is a quick read for those who have a foundational knowledge of critical studies of media. However, this book could be challenging for those with no background knowledge to connect the dots. Although Jarrett does a wonderful job at defining each of the concepts, she often skips to others without adequately preparing readers. In addition, the prose can get confusing when the same examples are used to illustrate different concepts. The frequent mentions of some companies make readers wonder why they are reading the same case in a different chapter. Lastly, there is not a uniformed balance between summaries of others' writings and the author's examples. For example, chapter 4, "Alienation," consists of mostly summaries with few examples; in contrast, chapter 6, "Struggle," consists of mostly examples with barely any theoretical discussion. For these reasons, scholars and students who have previous exposure to a critical understanding of digital labor are more likely to find this book enjoyable.

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