Greg Goldberg, **Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018, 224 pp., $27 (paperback).

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There is growing public anxiety over the unprecedented consequences of digital technologies—from exploitation of social media users' participation and data labor (Scholz, 2017) to automation and the resulting job losses (Wajcman, 2017) to the precarious labor conditions in the sharing economy (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016)—for the imagined future of work. Indeed, digital technologies seem to have disruptive impacts on the future of work.

Rather than assessing whether these transformations of work are actually occurring, Greg Goldberg succinctly questions the normative ends of the expressed anxieties that accompany and structure such discourse about technology and work in his book *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy*. He conducts textual analysis of scholarly and popular texts about "playbor" (i.e., the collapsing boundaries between work and play), automation, and the sharing economy through a "symptomatic reading." In other words, the texts examined in the book can be understood "as a window into a particular way of seeing in the world and, ultimately, of intervening in it" (p. 12). Attributing the agency to thoughts of texts, rather than individual authors of these texts, this mode of analysis helps to identify what is being revealed and concealed as well as the shared structure of feeling—anxiety—across texts. The book makes three central arguments:

> (1) that these concerns are an expression of anxiety, and that understanding them as such helps to uncover deeper, underlying concerns that have gone unstated and thus unexamined and unquestioned; (2) that these deeper, underlying concerns are not about the material well-being of workers (as they appear to be on the surface), but rather about the erosion of particular forms of relationality valued by critics . . . and (3) that framing scholarly and popular concerns surrounding these transformations as expressions of anxiety helps to illuminate how they are part and parcel of a normative project that aims to produce the very social subjects who are supposedly endangered by these transformations. (pp. 1–2)

In a nutshell, following the affective turn in social theory, Goldberg examines how anxiety polices normative demands for sociality—or what he calls a "normative project." He argues that critique of playbor, automation, and the sharing economy prescribes a responsible and communal social subject and disciplines an antisocial subject (or nonsubject). Inherent in the normative project is "an attachment to responsible forms of relationality" (p. 13).

Rooted in the antisocial thesis in queer theory as well as studies on affect and anxiety by Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, *Antisocial Media* begins by setting up its theoretical framework. In the popular and scholarly texts examined in the book, concerns about anxiety are often expressed in psychological and medicalized terms—for instance, by referring to anxiety as a psychological "disorder" that has to be restrained. Goldberg, in contrast to these approaches, conceptualizes anxiety as a productive discursive affect, with its temporal and spatial complexities. Anxiety is anticipatory in nature, and thus future-oriented. Anxiety attaches to and moves between objects. As Goldberg puts it, anxiety is "a technique of boundary management" (p. 23), conducting boundary work for normative social relationships between self and others. Norms delimit the boundaries between social subjects and antisocial nonsubjects. Invoking the antisocial thesis, Goldberg contends that normativity is germane to communal responsibility and accountability, but we must consider why collectivity is attached to social subjects. Indeed, *antisocial* does not equate to *antirelational*, nor does it bracket with *individualism*. The book probes into the unquestioned superiority of communal responsibility and sociality.

Goldberg provides evidence for this claim by scrutinizing anxieties surrounding the exploitation of workers-at-play (chapter 2), automation and technological unemployment (chapter 3), and the commodification of sociality in the sharing economy (chapter 4). Inherent in critics' concerns about technologies across these settings, Goldberg contends, are inconsistencies between the degradation of work on the surface of critics arguments and the underlying attachment to communal forms of relationality. A central question that lies at the heart of the three cases is that "if it is not (or not simply) the securing of workers' livelihoods and well-being that primarily animates critics, what are they really concerned about and to what end?" (p. 8). Taken together, his textual analysis aims to "call out" the inconsistencies internal to critics' concerns over technologies in these cases and explicate how critics' anxieties hasten an unexamined normative project about proper forms of social bonds.

In chapter 2, Goldberg reviews critiques of playbor and "creative class" employment such as texts by David Hesmondhalgh, Mark Andrejevic, and Trebor Scholz, arguing that such critiques devalue "irresponsible" forms of leisure. An underlying premise of the critiques of digital labor is that individuals' pleasure is inadequate compensation for the value they produce. On the one hand, Goldberg acknowledges that critics do not blindly see all kinds of online activities as labor. On the other hand, critics seem to prioritize a "just" workplace guided by work ethic in which self-sacrifice for the common good and collective responsibility are valued. There is a devaluation of playbor and leisure-at-work in creative employment, due to deviation from the work ethic. As such, work is a social and symbolic object, producing and delimiting responsible and irresponsible subjects.

The third chapter proposes that the anxiety surrounding automation is not just about the (imagined) resulting technological unemployment but, more important, that automation poses a threat to the production of responsible subjects. Turning to scholarly and journalistic texts, technology represents a singular cause for unemployment. While fears of technological unemployment have long existed, this wave of automation seems to be "different" (see also Wajcman, 2017) because it endangers cognitive labor—labor that is claimed to be "uniquely human." Yet critics seem to neglect the impacts of automation on other kinds of workers. Additionally, these texts entail a call for state governance and collective

governance. While critics consider state governance a legitimate means to safeguard workers from capital, collective governance renders workers self-governing subjects. A call for both forms of governance is an attempt to preserve "the social as established through the institution of work" (p. 115).

In chapter 4, Goldberg illuminates a sense of communitarianism embedded in criticism of the sharing economy. The criticism concentrates on the degradation of work and the ethos of Silicon Valley. Critics also consider the sharing economy as a threat to labor conditions. While critics seem to propose that workers are forced to work under precarious conditions, Goldberg argues that labor exploitation has long existed in other sectors such as the taxi industry, but they rarely come under close scrutiny. For Goldberg, what motivates such critiques is "a concern over the maintenance of communalism collective relations" (p. 129), rather than the mere discursive construction of the term *sharing economy*. In short, critics consider the sharing economy to be antisocial, in part because it involves monetization of desirable social activities for abysmal capitalist interests.

The book's epilogue reflects on anxiety surrounding the loosening of social bonds in an increasingly immaterial world resulting from digital technologies. As this chapter focuses on the anxiety that extends outside the workplace, the examined texts include, for example, advertising campaigns and Barack Obama's speeches. These texts carry nostalgia for materiality such as industrial production. Goldberg succinctly demonstrates that such a pang of nostalgia becomes intertwined with public anxiety over the losses of social bonds in the immaterial world. The material thus becomes "a discursive proxy for valued forms of relationality" (p. 165).

Goldberg prudently places his argument in a "position of critique" (p. 5) that makes a case for the antisocial thesis in media and communication studies. The book also aims to demur the unquestioned normative demand for work proposed by the Left, rather than propose a grand program of political resistance. *Antisocial Media* directs our attention not only to the social but also to the antisocial, or what Goldberg terms "indifference to the social" (p. 6). Yet it is especially important to cogitate how such an antisocial orientation allows us to reformulate critique of digital technologies and labor. Additionally, readers may probe into his rationale for the selection of the texts. This is not to argue that Goldberg must select a representative sample or that his interpretation of the texts is inherently biased. Yet if Goldberg explicates his methodological approach in more detail, readers may better apprehend contexts in which the shared structure of feelings emerges and changes over time.

In May 2018, activists in Amsterdam instigated the "Data Labor Union" to seek collective negotiation with Google and Facebook on behalf of users (Sterling, 2018). Indeed, public concerns about the "disruptive" power of technologies in the workplace are not new (see also Wajcman, 2017) and, predictably, will endure. Reflecting on futurist discourse on the impacts of automation on the future of work, sociologist Judy Wajcman (2017) exquisitely questions how the current wave of anxiety about automation is different from the past and the cultural significance of such anxiety and associated discourse. Against this backdrop, *Antisocial Media* presents a timely discussion of the relationship among work, technologies, and sociality. Moreover, this book offers a critical assessment of scholarly and public anxiety over the unprecedented consequences of technologies in and beyond the workplace. It also challenges the public and researchers to question power relations embedded in critiques of technologies.

As Goldberg succinctly concludes the book, "To turn away from the social does not mean to turn away from all kinds of relations, but rather from imposed relations inextricably bound up with the exercise of power" (p. 166). This book is particularly helpful for those studying anxiety, digital labor, and the digital economy, and opens up questions about the normative dimensions of the anxious affect.

References

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