



Informational Cognitive Exploitation, Digital Labour and the Double Freedom of Knowledge:

On the Capitalist exploitation of non-for profit software, contents and data producers.

ICT&S13 The Political Economy of Digital Labour:

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Extended Abstract

During the last decades, Capitalism has been undergoing a metamorphosis, resulting in a change of stage, from Industrial Capitalism to Cognitive (Boutang, 2000; Vercellone, 2012) or Informational (Castells, 1996; Fuchs, 2013) Capitalism. Within this context, the widespread opposition to the dramatic expansion of intellectual property -and particularly to the copyright transmogrification- helped to boost the diffusion and legitimacy of concepts such as “free knowledge”, “intellectual commons”, “open access”, “p2p production”. Along with the emergence and growth of the General Public License (GPL), Creative Commons (CC), and other licenses, this phenomenon has had a well-known consequence: the growth of a quasi-public sphere of non-commercial informational goods (Benkler, 2005; Ostrom and Hess, 2006; Bauwens, 2006). Nevertheless, the flows of “free knowledge” also enabled the development of a (partially) unexplored region of the private and for-profit sphere. A new kind of business method is being shaped, and the management literature has already offered a warm welcome to this novelty (Tapscott& Williams, 2005; Leadbeater, 2007; Anderson, 2009). Somehow, it is based on the disguised exploitation of unpaid *digital labour*, carried out mostly during leisure time, with non-commercial purposes. This ‘exploitation side’ has only received specific attention recently (Pasquinelli, 2008; Petersen, 2008; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009; 2006; Langlois et. al., 2009; Lovink & Rossiter, 2010; Fuchs, 2013, Scholz, 2013).

However, the critical literature has not stabilized yet a name and a definition of the phenomenon, a sound theoretical foundation and an empirical description of its varieties. Thus, this contribution tries to shed some light in these three regards by:

- i) advancing and defining the concept of *Informational Cognitive Exploitation (ICE)*, underlining the similarities and differences regarding the Marxist concept of exploitation.
- ii) anchoring the CE in the *Double Freedom of Knowledge* (not restricted/ not paid, related to Marx’s double freedom of labor power) and
- iii) analyzing three modes of inclusive appropriation, those associated with software, contents and data, respectively.

i) Cognitive Exploitation is a form of capitalist exploitation. However it is different from the traditional Marxist notion of exploitation, which depends on the appropriation of the labour time or the energy of the worker. On the contrary, cognitive exploitation is based on the appropriation of knowledge and information flows (in both labour and leisure time). In this particular presentation we are concerned just with a subtype of cognitive exploitation, which is *informational cognitive exploitation (ICE)* –that related to the exploitation of digital labour carried out in order to produce informational goods. Other forms of cognitive exploitation have been studied¹. Thus, informational cognitive exploitation refers to an appropriability mechanism by which capitalist firms exploit the double freedom of knowledge regarding informational goods (i.e., those made of digital information). Since ICE appears as an alternative to business methods based on the privative exercise of copyright, the comparison may be useful. Both mechanisms try to increase profits in a context of high sunk costs and tending to 0 marginal costs. But while the privative model fights to *pull up* the price of *outputs*, ICE focuses on pushing down (close to 0) the price of *inputs*. In other words, privative scheme rests on creating *scarcity* of knowledge flows and charging for the *access* to them. In contrast, ICE harnesses the *abundance* of knowledge, without charging directly for access, and collects money from targeted advertisement, data selling and related businesses². Whereas copyright-based production processes exploit the workers *within the labor time*, ICE is to a great extent based on the exploitation of *workers leisure time*. This, of course, agrees with one of the main thesis of Italian Autonomism and Cognitive Capitalism theory. Certainly, the privative model rests on *respecting copyright*, and its practitioners are not all ashamed of saying so. ICE, instead, depends on *circumventing* –or directly violating- copyright law. More interestingly, it resorts on *other* intellectual property rights (trademarks, patents, industrial secrets). Hiding both procedures is a part of the ICE model.

The ideological base is also different: where copyright is based on rhetoric of *individuals, property and exclusion*, inclusive appropriation talks about *communities, inclusion and freedom*.

ii) What does the aforementioned “double freedom of knowledge” mean? At a first glance, the idea is quite simple: whereas the usual voices (from management literature to hackers) emphasize *one* freedom, we think we are unwittingly discussing about *two* very different but inseparable freedoms. Here is where Marx comes back. One of the key factors for the birth of Capitalism has been what Marx called the *double* freedom of labor power. On the one hand, the worker is freed from the feudal order, free to move and free to sell his labor-power where, when and how he wants to. By the time of Marx, this had been the only freedom mentioned by Political Economy, Contractualism and Liberalism. But, on the other hand, as it is well known, the worker is also freed from the means of production. What matters for this paper is the Hegelian reasoning: Marx underlines the necessity of two contradictory freedoms. In the first case, freedom refers to empowerment; in the second, to the lack of power.

Now, we want to bring this type of reasoning by advancing the concept of *double freedom of knowledge*. Knowledge translated to digital information licensed with GPL, CC, or simply shared voluntarily without licensing is free, on the one hand, because it can be copied, modified, shared, etc. But, on the other hand, *it is also free from any obligation of paying for it*. As in the case of labor power, we see the two sides of the coin. One is widely promoted; the other is, in some cases, silently exploited³. To be sure, knowledge which has the double freedom can follow two (non-exclusive) paths: if it is not used for profit, it enlarges the quasi-public sphere. If it is used for profit, it ends up as a piece of the ICE machine.

¹ In previous work we have discussed three additional forms, based on the kind of knowledge involved: labour, traditional and scientific)

²Naturally, the difference between inclusive appropriation and the traditional business of broadcasting companies lies in the origin of the knowledge flows used to conquer an audience: in the second case, it comes from professional, better or worse paid workers; in the first, it stems from the double freedom of knowledge involved

³ Certainly, this kind of partial truth is a cornerstone of ideology (Zizek, 2003). Moreover, in both cases (double freedom of labor power and double freedom of knowledge), and by definition, capitalist exploitation implies necessarily some degree of consent of the worker.

iii) This paper presents empirical information regarding three types of ICE. The first is related to *Free Software*. We show how companies such IBM and HP have benefited from the unpaid work of thousands of workers who developed Linux. The second type concerns *contents* (music, texts, videos). Here we resort to the cases of YouTube, Flickr and some blogs to illustrate how voluntarily shared videos, pictures and texts are used as a part of a business strategy. The third type deals with *data*. Not surprisingly, we have chosen Google as the best example of collecting data of user activities freely and earning money from them. Of course, the three types of ICE have their own peculiarities. Therefore, the paper will not only describe, but also compare the various examples involved.

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