

# On the alienation and sublation of digital labor from the perspective of Marx's labor theory of value

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**Abstract.** As a typical symptom of digital capitalism, digital labor alienation perpetuates the logic of alienation revealed by Marx while forming a more concealed exploitation system through data monopoly, algorithmic control, and platform hegemony. Analyzing the dual character of digital labor commodities and its new forms of alienation based on the labor theory of value reveals that capital achieves comprehensive domination over the labor process through technological empowerment, causing laborers to lose their subjectivity under the illusion of "free labor". To sublimate this alienation, practical efforts must unfold across three dimensions: promoting open-source technology and data commonization to dismantle capital's monopoly of the means of production, breaking platform discursive hegemony to reconstruct the cultural ecology of labor, and awakening the class consciousness of the digital proletariat to transform them from technological objects into historical subjects. This path of liberation constitutes both a contemporary development of Marx's theory of alienation and reveals the socialized potential of digital technology—only when algorithms and data return to the community of laborers can digital labor achieve its essential return from a "means of livelihood" to a "free conscious activity", opening new historical possibilities for the comprehensive development of the person.

**Keywords:** digital labor, alienation mechanism, labor theory of value, capital platforms

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technology and the widespread rise of the platform economy, "digital labor", as an emerging form of labor, has profoundly altered the spatiotemporal organization of work. Digital labor refers to productive activities conducted relying on digital technology and network platforms, encompassing various forms such as data entry and content creation. However, beneath the cloak of freedom and flexibility, the "digital economy" conceals an intensification of capital's control over labor, presenting traditional labor theories with unprecedented challenges and possibilities for reconstruction. Academia has achieved numerous results regarding the multidimensional manifestations of digital labor alienation and the critique of capital logic. Xu and Qin point out that current digital labor alienation exhibits a "totalizing" characteristic; capital extends labor processes from the sphere of production to all spatiotemporal dimensions, including consumption and leisure, through technological means, plunging laborers into a state of unconscious alienation through "playbor" and "data production" [1]. Yu emphasizes that artificial intelligence does not change the essence of labor creating value, and all falsifications stem from a confusion between concrete labor and abstract labor. However, capital, leveraging "symbolic consumption" and "data fetishism", obscures the essence of exploitation, rendering alienation more concealed [2]. Nevertheless, current research suffers from a dual deficiency: the generalized use of the "digital labor" concept weakens the precision of theoretical analysis, and explorations of the liberation path for digital labor often remain at the level of ethical critique. In this context, re-examining Marx's labor theory of value, particularly its critical analysis of alienated labor, holds significant practical importance for understanding the logic of labor under contemporary capitalism and awakening the class consciousness of the digital proletariat.

## 2. The theoretical core of Marx's labor theory of value

### 2.1. Basic content and theoretical logic of the labor theory of value

British classical political economists, represented by Adam Smith, systematically explained the labor theory of value as early as the 18th century, pointing out that all productive labor collectively forms the basis of national wealth. David Ricardo, building on Smith, developed the view that labor time determines commodity value, laying the theoretical foundation for the modern labor theory of value. However, classical political economy failed to distinguish the dual character of labor, confusing value and exchange value, preventing them from grasping the core tenets of the labor theory of value.

Marx, inheriting from classical political economy, established a more scientific labor theory of value based on the relationship between labor and commodity value. In *Capital*, Marx pointed out: labor is the sole source of value creation. "All labor is, on the one hand, expenditure of human labor-power in the physiological sense; as regards its character of being value-creating abstract human labor, it forms commodity value [3]". The commodity is the cell form of the capitalist economy, and its dual character—value and use-value—constitutes the starting point for understanding the labor theory of value. Value is the most fundamental; it is the socially necessary labor time required for production, created by the congealed, undifferentiated human labor, i.e., abstract labor. Use-value refers to the property of the labor product to satisfy human material needs; it is the direct result of labor. Classical political economy equated exchange value directly with value itself, whereas Marx pointed out that exchange value is merely the social form of appearance of value, the quantitative relationship in which one commodity is expressed in terms of another commodity or money. In a commodity economy, the labor of producers is private labor; only through exchange can it become part of the total social labor. In other words, value is not a natural property of commodities but a social property, a reflection of the relationships between laborers.

This "social character" is not manifested as explicit, direct exchange behavior but through the market mechanism. Marx termed this social relationship realized through the market "commodity fetishism", where social relations are reconfigured as a network of materialized things. The social character of labor is expressed through commodity exchange, not the production process itself. In other words, the network of materialized things causes concrete labor to be abstracted into a comparison of value magnitudes, the direct social connection between laborers is mediated into exchange relations between commodities, the social character of labor is alienated into a property of commodities, and individual labor products acquire the identity of commodities, possessing "value". Furthermore, the theoretical logic of the labor theory of value does not stop at explaining the mechanism of value formation but extends deeply into fundamental issues like capital accumulation and surplus value. Through analyzing the value production mechanism, Marx discerned that the basic contradiction of capitalist society is the contradiction between the socialization of production and the private appropriation of the means of production. In this process, labor is stripped of the possibility of self-realization and instead becomes a means for capital appreciation.

### 2.2. The fourfold characterization of alienated labor

Marx's theory of alienation reveals the dissolution of the truly free and conscious attribute of human labor under capitalist relations of production, leading to the one-sided development of laborers within the field of alienated labor. Marx takes actually existing individuals as the logical starting point, defines practice as the core path for humans to achieve self-liberation, and on this basis explores the comprehensive development of the person. This theoretical construction profoundly demonstrates the spiritual core of Marx's humanistic thought. Only by relying on social practice can the leap from a state of human alienation to the actual essence be achieved, thereby realizing the thorough transcendence of alienation and ultimately accomplishing human self-liberation and sustainable development.

Labor alienation from the perspective of critiquing capital power presents a fourfold dialectical structure. The alienation of the labor product is its initial stage: the product created by the laborer not only fails to confirm their essential power but becomes an alien force dominating them. This reified relationship imprisons people in a compulsory cycle of making a living. The alienation of the labor activity is the deepening stage: originally free creative activity is reduced to a means of livelihood driven by physical needs. Under the dual pressures of spatiotemporal control and physical consumption, laborers lose their subjectivity; in the labor process, the laborer does not affirm themselves but denies themselves. The alienation of species-being marks the collapse of the ontological dimension of human existence. When labor degenerates into animal-like survival activity, humans break from their creative essence and become instrumental existences within the logic of capital appreciation. Finally, the comprehensive reification of social relations is the inevitable result of the first three forms of alienation, manifesting as: the proletariat losing genuine communal connections through mutual reification, while the bourgeoisie alienates interpersonal relationships into mediators for capital appreciation. "Each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker" [4]. This cognitive model based on production relations inevitably leads to interpersonal estrangement, ultimately making man's social essence his own antithesis.

### 2.3. Labor and human essence: from "species-being" to "free conscious activity"

Marx's interpretation of labor always revolves around the human essence. In *the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (hereinafter referred to as *the Manuscripts*), he points out that labor is not only the basis of human existence but also the fundamental feature distinguishing humans from animals. Marx regards labor as the core embodiment of human "species-being", emphasizing that as a species-being, the human essence lies in transforming nature and confirming their own existence in a free and conscious manner. This theory gains new explanatory and critical power in contemporary society with the rise of digital labor, providing an important analytical framework for understanding the alienation of modern labor forms.

Starting from human "species-being", Marx defines labor as free conscious activity. In *the Manuscripts*, he absorbed Feuerbach's concept of "species-being" but endowed it with practical connotation, pointing out that "free, conscious activity is precisely the species-character of man" [5]. This activity not only satisfies human material needs but also embodies human subjectivity and creativity. Unlike animals passively adapting to nature, humans can purposefully transform nature through labor, turning the "inorganic body" into "humanized nature", thereby confirming their essence in objective activity. The freedom of labor is manifested in the human autonomous choice of activity; Marx believed humans can produce "in accordance with the laws of beauty", realizing self-value through labor. The consciousness of labor is embodied in human purposiveness; in the labor process, humans can preset goals and realize them through practice. This characteristic of being free and conscious constitutes the core of the human essence, the fundamental feature of being human.

However, in capitalist society, the free and conscious essence of labor is obscured by alienation. Labor is downgraded from a "free conscious activity" to a "means of livelihood"; humans are no longer the subject of labor but are enslaved by it. Marx discerned that the contradiction between socialized large-scale production and private appropriation inevitably leads to the self-dissolution of capital relations, thus proposing a practical solution: replacing capital's rule with an association of laborers collectively controlling the means of production. This is not a simple return to private ownership but achieving labor liberation through establishing public ownership of the means of production, eliminating the domination of alienated labor over humans through cooperative labor and planned regulation.

Marx's ontological understanding of labor allows the labor theory of value to transcend the discussion of value within the economic sphere and further expand into the broad field of human emancipation. Labor not only produces commodities and value but also shapes the human mode of existence. Marx's analysis from "alienated labor" to "species-being" provides a profound framework for understanding the relationship between labor and the human essence. The digital age, despite profound changes in labor forms, does not surpass this framework; instead, it highlights its contemporary value. Re-examining the free and conscious essence of labor is not only an inheritance of Marx's theory but also a reflection on the human condition in digital society. Only by sublating alienation can labor achieve its return from a "means of livelihood" to the "human essence", ultimately promoting the comprehensive liberation of the person. This theoretical perspective not only helps us understand the essential characteristics of contemporary labor forms but also provides intellectual resources for constructing fairer and more reasonable labor-capital relations.

## 3. Analysis of the alienated forms of digital labor under capital logic

### 3.1. Conceptual definition of digital labor

With the rapid development of information technology and the strong rise of the digital economy, digital technology is comprehensively penetrating all levels of social production, circulation, distribution, and consumption, reshaping the economic structure and cultural ecology of human society. Following industrial capitalism and financial capitalism, a new form of capitalism has emerged in the current era: digital capitalism. In the era of digital capitalism, a form of labor that leaves digital traces—"digital labor"—has emerged [6]. "Digital labor" refers to productive activities conducted by laborers in the network field, relying on digital technology tools for producing information products, data generation, content creation, and other forms of immaterial labor. Unlike traditional physical labor and material production, the products of digital labor typically exist in non-physical forms such as data, information, and traffic. Although these products lack material carriers, they remain tradable within the digital economic system and become an important source of capital accumulation. Theoretically, the concept of digital labor can be traced back to the "immaterial labor" theory proposed by Italian Marxist thinker Maurizio Lazzarato. Lazzarato believed that modern labor is no longer confined to the production of material goods but extends to the realms of knowledge, language, and affect. Digital labor developed within this theoretical framework, representing the concrete manifestation of "immaterial labor" in the context of digital capitalism. British scholar Fuchs also argues that all forms of labor within the digital industry chain supported by information and communication technologies should be classified as digital labor. Through in-depth analysis of the operational mechanisms of social media enterprises under the capitalist production mode, he further revealed the "play" characteristic of digital labor, where all network users are unconsciously exploited while participating in "play". This "exploitation", as a social relationship, is concealed within the structure of "playbor" [7].

From the perspective of historical materialism, digital labor is essentially still the conscious, purposeful practical activity of humans, an extension and expansion of traditional labor forms into digital space. Any form of labor related to the digital economy can be seen as a component of digital labor, reflecting the new development of labor in the digital field [8].

### 3.2. The two factors of the digital labor commodity

In *Capital*, Marx proposed that commodities have two factors: use-value and value. Academia holds different opinions on whether Marx's labor theory of value still applies to digital labor. However, starting from the basic logic of Marx's labor theory of value, this theoretical framework is equally suitable for explaining the commodity characteristics of digital labor within the modern capitalist system. Marx pointed out that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time expended in its production. In the context of digital labor, although the product appears in an immaterial form, the labor time expended by the laborer in its production process can still be abstracted as the source of value. Whether it's software developed by programmers, content written by creators, or the interactive behaviors of ordinary users on platforms, as long as these labor activities are incorporated into the production system of digital capital and transformed into data resources capable of valorization, they possess value-creating function. The use-value of digital products in contemporary times is manifested as convenience and entertainment experience, becoming an important means to attract users. To enhance use-value, enterprises continuously promote content innovation, making products attractive; in terms of value valorization, enterprises increase profits without raising costs by compressing labor remuneration and extending online time, thereby expanding surplus value.

In the context of digital labor, the extraction of surplus value exhibits more concealed characteristics. In traditional commodity relations, laborers typically receive wages or means of subsistence that embody their labor value; whereas in digital labor, laborers often unconsciously participate in value creation but cannot enjoy corresponding economic compensation. This phenomenon of "unpaid labor" is a new manifestation of labor alienation under digital capitalism. Digital platforms use intelligent algorithms for precise management and scheduling of laborers, forming a quantified control over their life-time, keeping them in a high-intensity labor state of being continuously online and on call ready. The boundary between work and rest is blurred, and laborers become fuel for capital valorization under spatiotemporal discipline.

### 3.3. New forms of digital labor alienation

The ruling logic of capital power manifests in two aspects. Labor alienation transforms human essential powers into instruments for capital valorization, and the capitalist private property system solidifies the structure of exploitation. Marx pointed out the fourfold chain of alienation formed by the separation of the laborer from the product of labor. From the alienated appropriation of labor fruits to the comprehensive reification of social relations, this systematic distortion reduces human species-being to a means of livelihood. In the cyclical relationship between private property and alienated labor, capital achieves substantive domination through the false equality of the wage contract, making surplus value exploitation a self-reinforcing mechanism of rule.

Following Marx's critical path, in the development of contemporary digital capitalism, digital labor, as a new form of labor, essentially remains within the category of alienated labor critiqued by Marx in *Capital*. Marx insightfully pointed out that the alienation of labor means that labor turns itself against itself, i.e., the abstract aspect of labor dominates and rules over its concrete aspect; its real aspect is that capital dominates and rules over the laborer. Digital labor follows this same logic, always subordinated to the fundamental purpose of capital valorization. Although digital labor appears highly autonomous on the surface, this very "freedom" obscures the deep control digital capital exerts over the labor process. Digital capital not only comprehensively dominates the production activities of employed laborers but also transforms the daily consumption behaviors of users into objects of concealed exploitation. Digital labor is increasingly becoming an everyday practice people unconsciously participate in, even originally non-productive activities are incorporated into the circuit of capital accumulation. In this process, the immaterial characteristic of digital labor does not change its essence of being dominated by capital; instead, it makes the reproduction of capital relations more concealed.

Under digital capitalism, capital's mechanism for appropriating the fruits of labor exhibits new characteristics. Data, as the core means of production, is generated through a fusion of the direct production of platform-employed laborers and the indirect labor of platform users—every act of digital consumption invisibly becomes a source of value creation. Platform employees, through specialized labor, endow data with practical functions, realizing its use-value, while also shaping its market exchange value; whereas the various digital consumption behaviors of ordinary users continuously produce data resources, providing raw materials for capital accumulation. Platforms can efficiently process user-generated raw data, transforming it into new types of digital commodities available for trade. This special field where "consumption is production" once again confirms that the digital economy still follows the law of the two factors of commodities revealed by Marx. The core contradiction of digital capitalism lies in the fundamental inequality in the ownership of the means of production: digital laborers are always excluded from ownership of the digital means of production, while capital platforms firmly control these key resources. This relation of

appropriation exhibits characteristics different from traditional capitalism—in the industrial era, capitalists dominated production by owning material means like factories and machines; once a commodity was sold, ownership was clearly transferred, and the spatiotemporal boundaries between production and consumption were relatively clear. However, in the digital realm, the non-excludability and fluidity of data make property rights difficult to define, and user consumption behavior itself constitutes reproductive activity, rendering the binary division between production and consumption meaningless. It is precisely this specific form of ownership movement that allows digital capital to appropriate the production fruits of laborers with unprecedented convenience. The digital mode of production not only fails to eliminate the opposition between labor and capital but, through technological means, pushes this opposition to a more concealed and profound level, ultimately constructing a more sophisticated yet equally cruel exploitation system in the digital age.

#### 4. The path to sublating digital labor alienation

Digital labor alienation is not an unchangeable destiny but the result of capital power's manipulation of technology, labor, and social relations under specific historical conditions. Faced with this reality, only by seeking paths of sublation based on critique can the reconstruction of laborer subjectivity be achieved, moving towards the return of the human essence.

##### 4.1. Open source technology: promoting technological democratization and data commonization

Marx pointed out in *the Manuscripts* that to sublimate alienation and achieve free and comprehensive human development, the relations of production must be fundamentally transformed, establishing public ownership of the means of production. One root of digital labor alienation similarly lies in the transformation of the technological form of the means of production, where data and algorithms become new core instruments of control, yet their ownership is highly concentrated in the hands of capital. To sublimate alienation, the current system of private data ownership must be broken, promoting the social sharing of technology and the public governance of data, thereby achieving democratic control by laborers over the new means of production.

Achieving joint construction and sharing of data resources by laborers is first manifested as technological democratization. Under the current technological logic, algorithmic systems are not only tools for scheduling labor processes but also arenas of power struggle in labor-capital relations. To change this structure, the decentralization of digital technology use must be promoted, breaking the monopoly of control arising from technological enclosure. The core of decentralization lies in increasing public investment in scientific research, reducing dependence on private capital for technological development, and establishing national or community-level public data repositories to exercise public supervision and redistribution of data generated by platform labor, thereby laying the foundation for building a technology system oriented towards public interest. Secondly, data, as the direct product of digital labor, should be regarded as a public resource rather than a private asset. Currently, platforms achieve the privatization of socially produced labor fruits through user behavior data, large-scale labor data, etc. This not only exacerbates the injustice of value distribution but also constitutes secondary exploitation of laborers. Therefore, data commonization should become an important direction for digital economic governance.

##### 4.2. Process control: breaking the discursive hegemony of capital platforms

In the operation of contemporary digital capital, internet space is filled with cultures such as "entertainment above all", attempting to distort people's beliefs, values, and moral spirit, severely poisoning their spiritual world. The public is inundated by massive amounts of fragmented information in internet activities, unable to preserve their own spiritual world. On the one hand, netizens overdraw their health and future under the guidance of capital; on the other hand, they meaninglessly waste their time in the virtual world [9]. Fundamentally, the discursive domination of capital platforms is the primary culprit. Platforms promote specific cultural ideologies, influencing and guiding laborers to participate in online activities, collect raw data, and reprocess and reproduce this data. To overcome the potential negative impact of this platform discourse on laborers, the defense line of network ideology must be strengthened and consolidated, seizing the discursive high ground, and enhancing the dissemination of mainstream ideology. Since the reform and opening up, China has always faced ideological infiltration and challenges from the West. Against the backdrop of the digital era, we must innovate ways to disseminate socialist core values, making them more adaptable to the needs of the new era. Simultaneously, there is a need to improve public cultural services, enhance the construction of infrastructure related to the cultural industry, and strive to create diverse physical spaces for cultural activities. By organizing and carrying out various forms of cultural and educational activities with rich content, the public can be guided to return from the virtual world to a more substantive real life. Participating in high-quality cultural practice activities elevates the spiritual realm of the people, creating favorable conditions for achieving the comprehensive development of the person.

### 4.3. Subjectivity return: awakening the class consciousness of the digital proletariat

The mature form of class consciousness is manifested as the re-appropriation of the status of historical subject. The digital proletariat must recognize that they are not merely objects of algorithms but also builders of the digital world; not just sources of extracted data but also potential revolutionary forces capable of seizing the "digital means of production". This recognition will give rise to concrete practical proposals: from demanding platform data transparency and algorithmic democratization to promoting the public transformation of digital infrastructure; from establishing laborer-led data cooperatives to fighting for fundamental reforms of digital copyrights. In this process, cultural struggle holds special significance—it is necessary to deconstruct the individual myth of the "digital artisan", expose the survivor bias of the "influencer economy", thereby dismantling capital's spiritual domination at the symbolic level. When the digital proletariat recognizes their situation through the critique of political economy, tests their strength through collective action, and reshapes their subjectivity through cultural struggle, the sublation of alienation ceases to be a philosopher's speculative topic and becomes a living historical movement. The ultimate goal of this movement is to break the digital capital's monopoly of the means of production, transform new means of production like algorithms, data, and platforms into socially shared wealth, and make digital technology truly a tool for human liberation rather than an accomplice of alienation. In this sense, the awakening of class consciousness is both the logical endpoint of the critique of alienation and the practical starting point for the construction of the realm of freedom.

## 5. Conclusion

Digital labor alienation is an inevitable product of the expansion of capital power in the era of digital capitalism, perpetuating and deepening the logic of alienated labor revealed by Marx. Based on Marx's labor theory of value, digital labor alienation presents new forms: capital reconstructs the labor process through technological means, causing laborers to fall under more concealed exploitation under the appearance of "freedom and flexibility"; the ambiguity of data property rights and platform monopoly exacerbate the separation of labor fruits from laborers. Marx's labor theory of value and theory of alienation still possess strong explanatory power; digital capitalism merely reproduces the logic of capital's domination over labor in a new technological form. Sublating alienation requires breakthroughs in three aspects: promoting open-source technology and data commonization to dismantle the foundation of capital's private ownership; implementing process control to break platform discursive hegemony and reshape the spiritual autonomy of laborers; and facilitating the return of subjectivity by awakening the class consciousness of the digital proletariat to achieve democratic control over the means of production. Digital technology both intensifies alienation and contains emancipatory potential; the key lies in transforming the relations of production, making algorithms and data serve laborer cooperation rather than capital valorization. This transformation requires both the deepening of theoretical critique and reliance on the practical struggle of the digital proletariat. Only through collective action can digital labor return to its essence of being "free and conscious", ultimately achieving the comprehensive liberation of the person.

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