Characteristics of Digital Capitalist Ideology and Its Implications

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Abstract: With the tremendous rise and advancement of digital technology, capitalism has completely entered the digital age, giving rise to the ideology of digital capitalism. Compared with the traditional capitalist ideology, the ideology of digital capitalism is characterized by several key aspects that are newly generated, including the illusion of "freedom of labor," the use of the Internet for political activities, and the manipulation of individual lifestyles and emotional attitudes. The characteristics of the ideology of digital capitalism mentioned above make the further ideological work of China face a series of new risks and challenges. In response to this, China should fully understand the essential attribute and evolution trend of the ideology of digital capitalism, guide the digital economy toward a people-centered development approach, emphasize the role of digital technology—especially the Internet—in ideological struggles, and help individuals escape the "algorithmic dilemma" to ultimately counter the ideological challenges posed by digital capitalism.

Keywords: digital capitalism, digital capitalist ideology, ideological struggle

1. Introduction

In 1999, the American scholar Dan Schiller noted that "the Internet is driving a political and economic shift toward what has been called digital capitalism, under the influence of an expansive market logic" [1]. This suggests that capitalism has evolved into a new historical stage after hundreds of years due to the development of digital technologies and the Internet. At the same time, the deep integration of digital technology and capitalism has "turned it into a real force for dominating people and changing them" [2], bringing the ideology of digital capitalism to the forefront of history.

The ideology of digital capitalism refers to the conceptual framework of capitalism in the digital era, the essence of which lies in maintaining capital's control over digital technology and the means of digital production while attempting to obscure individuals' labor dilemmas and existential challenges through the promotion of ideologies such as consumerism and individualism. For more than two decades, digital capitalist ideology has preserved the characteristics and essence of traditional capitalist ideology while extending its influence—and even control—over people's labor, political participation, and lifestyles in a more covert and seductive manner. At present, the rise of artificial intelligence, platform algorithms, and various emerging technologies has further entrenched the environmental space shaped by the ideology of digital capitalism, making it increasingly difficult to break free. It must be acknowledged that only by fully recognizing the hypocrisy of digital

capitalist ideology and critically analyzing its core can one hope to find a way out of the digital dilemma.

2. Characteristics of the Ideology of Digital Capitalism

2.1. Promotion of the Illusion of "Freedom of Labor"

Whether they are production workers on assembly lines or white-collar employees in offices, all have traditionally operated within stable workplaces and fixed employment relationships. For a long time, the perception of work and labor remained grounded in this conventional employed labor structure. However, the rise of emerging technologies such as networked communications, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence has dramatically transformed the nature of labor.

First, data—now a crucial factor of production—has become deeply integrated into modern economic activities. Consequently, a new class of workers has emerged, relying on digital technology to engage directly in digital labor, such as software developers in the IT industry and data analysts in the financial sector. Second, the expansion of online platforms has introduced new employment pathways: professions such as ride-hailing drivers and food delivery workers operate based on tasks assigned by digital platforms, accepting orders independently and earning income on a per-task basis.

It follows that the most striking feature of labor in the digital network age is the increasing shift of individuals toward non-fixed wage labor relationships. Through this transformation, digital capitalism seeks to create the illusion that workers are no longer constrained by the traditional employment system and are instead free to choose the time, place, and nature of their work—that is, that they have full autonomy over their labor. In this way, the "apex of the slave state" [3] that Marx described as a consequence of alienated labor appears to have disappeared with the advent of digital capitalism. However, blinded by this ideology, many people believe they have greater control over their labor, failing to recognize the precariousness of their employment situation and their subjugation to algorithmic manipulation.

2.2. The Internet as a Forum for the Rationalization of Capitalist Domination

Since the establishment of the capitalist system, the bourgeoisie has regarded "democracy" and "freedom" as its core values, tirelessly promoting them and attempting to achieve ideological dissemination and infiltration by packaging them as "universal values." The emergence and expansion of digital capitalism have transformed digital networks into powerful tools for shaping both the internal institutional operations of capitalism and its external propaganda efforts. In this context, the science and technology underpinning digital capitalism are no longer merely tools but have "become the basis for the legitimacy of domination" [4].

On one hand, the ideology of digital capitalism continues to position itself in stark opposition to socialism. Since the onset of the Cold War confrontation in the 1950s, the capitalist bloc, led by the United States, has consistently engaged in political propaganda and ideological infiltration targeting socialist societies. Before the widespread adoption of Internet technology, capitalist nations primarily conducted these efforts through newspapers and broadcasting. Notably, government-managed radio stations such as Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) played key roles in this ideological campaign. With the advent of the Internet era, capitalism has fully leveraged the digital network's advantages, not only by controlling numerous official media outlets to produce and disseminate content aimed at discrediting socialism but also by allocating funds to a vast number of so-called "independent media" outlets. These efforts seek to manipulate public opinion and incite social division on issues such as human rights and gender.

On the other hand, the ideology of digital capitalism has subtly reshaped the mechanisms of capitalist power. In 1960, the televised debates between Nixon and Kennedy made the public aware

of the mass media's significant influence on election outcomes. Entering the 21st century, the rise of digital networks, particularly social media, has dramatically transformed the electoral landscape in capitalist countries. As Marcuse observes, "When campaign leaders and politicians utter the great words of liberty and perfection on television, radio, and the stage, these words become meaningless sounds that gain meaning only in propaganda, commerce, training, and pastime" [5]. Consider the recent U.S. elections as an example. In 2016, Hillary Clinton faced a series of negative reports, including the "Emailgate" controversy and concerns about her health. These stories spread widely across online platforms, creating a highly unfavorable situation for her campaign, ultimately leading to her loss to Donald Trump despite strong polling numbers. In 2024, Trump received substantial backing from tech mogul Elon Musk, who leveraged his recently acquired social media platform, X, to extensively promote Trump's image and campaign. This overwhelming digital support contributed to Trump's decisive victory over Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, with a margin of more than 300 electoral votes. The relationship between digital networks and political participation continues to deepen.

2.3. Manipulation of Individual Lifestyles and Emotional Attitudes

Technology has had a significant impact on people's lives long before the advent of the Internet. As noted, "Technological advances have made it possible for the control of people in advanced industrial societies to invade their leisure time pervasively through communication media such as television and radio, thus occupying their private space" [5]. In the decades following the popularization of the Internet, the space for people's interactions and activities has expanded even further, and the real world is increasingly challenged by the virtual world. It must be recognized that the ideology of digital capitalism has influenced and permeated all aspects of people's lives, including consumption and emotions.

From the perspective of daily life, people have become almost entirely dependent on network information and mobile devices. Work, study, and communication now rely on social platforms such as QQ, WeChat, and others. In terms of political developments, even the most basic information—such as changes in oil prices—must be accessed through news sites. E-commerce platforms continuously launch live streaming and discount promotions, further attracting consumers and gradually making online shopping a dominant force, overtaking the real economy. It is no exaggeration to say that in this day and age, individuals must rely on digital networks to survive; otherwise, their basic survival would become increasingly difficult. At the same time, the widespread dissemination of digital networks has long since cultivated an ideology of digital living.

Compared to the traditional media era, the digital capitalism era is characterized by "algorithmic control." Internet platforms use powerful big data analysis to accurately assess users' interests, behaviors, and consumption needs, ultimately pushing personalized information to users through a mechanism known as "personalized push." This phenomenon is not limited to consumer shopping but extends to information consumption and emotional communication. Over time, people become trapped in the "information cocoon" created by platform algorithms, gradually losing the ability to think independently and judge rationally, while adopting emotional and one-sided views on social issues. Ultimately, individuals are "trapped by algorithms," losing their autonomy as independent thinkers.

3. Implications of the Ideology of Digital Capitalism for China

3.1. Properly Understanding and Managing the Relationship Between Capital and Labor in the Digital Economy

Marx once stated in *Capital*, "Capital is dead labor; it is like a vampire, it only lives by sucking living labor, and the more living labor it sucks, the more it lives" [6]. Throughout centuries of capitalist development, the exploitation of labor by capitalists has never ceased, and the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has remained unresolved. This reality is not obscured or justified by digital capitalism.

Today, the widespread use of the Internet and the development of data platforms, particularly the emergence of artificial intelligence, have led to a gradual reduction in jobs in certain industries. At the same time, the compensation received for labor is insufficient to sustain even the basic survival of individuals, let alone promote the free and comprehensive development of human potential. As capitalist society enters the "digital age," an increasing number of people are awakening to the illusion of the so-called "freedom of labor" and are calling for social change and institutional innovation. Donald Trump's success in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was largely due to the support of working-class voters.

The key issue is to adjust the relationship between capital and labor, efficiency and equity.The development of China's socialist market economy must pay close attention to this issue.After the reform and opening up, China has adhered to the basic economic system with public ownership as the mainstay, alongside the common development of multiple ownership economies, and has allowed the private economy to exist and develop moderately. The private economy can, to a certain extent, activate market dynamics and promote the development of productive forces. However, as the private economy emerges, capital begins to function according to its own characteristics, leading to situations in which workers' basic rights and interests are violated and their legitimate claims are ignored. This suggests that the development of a socialist market economy should regulate the relationship between efficiency and fairness, and between capital and labor, to ensure the socialist nature of the market economy's development in both direction and system.

On the one hand, the country must guide the healthy development of the digital economy. The practical experience of reform and opening up has fully demonstrated that capital and labor are not inherently antagonistic, but that a balance must be struck and adjustments made. In fact, capital is not uncontrollable. As long as its dynamic virtues are recognized and its exploitative and oppressive negative characteristics are restricted through laws, regulations, and institutional policies, it can be harnessed to promote the development of productive forces and mobilize labor. Similarly, China's development of the digital economy must address the issue of the target audience and the forces upon which it relies. Therefore, on the other hand, the country must consistently adhere to the 'people-centered' development ideology during the vigorous expansion of the digital economy. On 5 July 1994, China adopted the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China, which stipulates at the legal level that "the State respects and protects the lawful rights and interests of workers." Moving forward, China needs to fully leverage the advantages of the socialist system and continue to prioritize the living conditions of workers in the digital age. China should not only actively resolve the various problems faced by workers in the course of their labor, creating an environment of equal competition and comprehensive development, thereby safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests, but also make labor an activity through which every worker can truly realize their personal and social values.

3.2. Paying Attention to the Role of the Internet in the Ideological Struggle

In 2024, China will mark the 30th anniversary of its full-featured access to the international Internet. At a time when the Internet is constantly evolving, a virtual space is shared with the capitalist state, characterized by 24/7 communication. The insidious and seductive nature of the ideology of digital capitalism makes it difficult for people to fully grasp the boundaries of its influence. This situation underscores that the Internet has become a key area of ideological struggle in various countries. In the face of unprecedented changes, China must recognize both the positive role of the Internet and the potential pitfalls of Internet communication, while firmly maintaining the ideological position of Marxism on Internet platforms.

First, in the context of the new media transformation, mainstream media must effectively utilize the Internet as a resource to promote positive publicity and guidance. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "we must insist on consolidating and strengthening mainstream ideological opinion, promoting the main theme, spreading positive energy, and stimulating the powerful force of unity and progress in the whole society." [7] Mainstream media, as the most authoritative, comprehensive, and influential source among news dissemination channels, plays an immeasurable role in shaping the mindset and ideology of society. Therefore, mainstream media must take on the responsibility of promoting mainstream ideas and guiding positive, rational public opinion. On one hand, the mainstream media should be guided by Marxism, actively publicizing the innovative theories and major decisions of the CPC, and continuously promoting the excellent traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, mainstream media should uphold correct positions and viewpoints on major social issues, always aligning with the Party and the people, and guiding public opinion in a positive and healthy direction.

Secondly, online information platforms must strengthen their regulatory efforts to ensure citizens' orderly participation in online life and prevent the proliferation of false information and ideological infiltration by external forces. There is no doubt that the Internet is a double-edged sword. It can accelerate the dissemination of information, ushering in the era of "everyone has a microphone." However, it can also flood cyberspace with all kinds of information, making the sources of many messages unclear and making it difficult to distinguish between the real and the fake. Therefore, it is crucial to create a clear and harmonious online environment. On one hand, while reasonably protecting citizens' right to freedom of expression, it is necessary to increase supervision and punishment for behaviors such as spreading false information and making malicious remarks. On the other hand, it is important to vet the content of published information sources and be cautious of the use of so-called "self-media bloggers" by external forces to distort public opinion on online platforms, stir up social confrontation, and create division by labeling groups. At the same time, attempts to conduct ideological infiltration through the Internet and promote the so-called capitalist liberal democracy and other "universal values" should be vigorously curbed.

3.3. Guiding Individuals Out of the 'Algorithmic Dilemma'

For a long time, there has been a general consensus that digital networks have brought convenience and progress to people. However, many focus only on the favorable aspects of digital networks, overlooking their one-sided techno-optimism and the negative effects they bring. The development of digital networks has, in fact, produced several drawbacks. One of the most significant negative impacts is the disruption of an individual's state of mind and behavior: when people are constantly connected to the Internet and mobile phones, their independent thinking is continuously eroded by digital intrusion, leaving them with little space for the real world. In the face of such a situation, individuals cannot simply sit back and do nothing; they must deeply reflect on their lifestyle and strive to break free from the 'algorithmic dilemma.'

From the perspective of individual thinking ability, people should not only strive to break out of the 'information cocoon,' but also seek to understand the world within the context of the real world. In order to pursue user engagement and maximize business benefits, information platforms make extensive use of algorithmic analyses based on users' interests for subsequent targeted recommendations. Although such browsing behavior brings excitement and continuity to people's access to information, it also traps them in the 'information cocoon,' which can lead to cognitive limitations and thinking paranoia after exposure to large amounts of highly homogenized content. In the data-driven world, individuals must constantly remind themselves not to lose their way or fall into a vicious cycle within the online world. This involves not only breaking the 'information cocoon' to enhance rational thinking, but also engaging with daily life and reflecting on one's position to enrich personal knowledge.

Regarding consumption patterns, people must make an effort to free themselves from irrational behavior induced by the 'digital illusion.' Baudrillard once noted in *The Consumer Society* that "people never consume the real use value of objects in today's capitalist consumption, but only consume an imagery that is consumed, that illusion of symbolic value created by glossy advertising." [8] This means that what is marketed as entertainment and consumption is actually an 'illusion' of individual consciousness, and this illusion has been amplified by the expansion of the digital network, influencing people's behaviors. Algorithmic recommendations based on browsing history and preferences deepen the stereotype of the so-called 'right choice' for consumers; social media recommendations and sharing transform consumer entertainment into a tool for strengthening group identity; and marketing interactions on live streaming platforms lead people to lose themselves in impulsive consumption. Therefore, individuals must wake up and realize that behind the algorithm-controlled online life lies the maze of digital capitalism, with concepts such as 'consumer supremacy' and 'entertainment to death.' Only by striving to break free from its control can people return to a truly meaningful life as human beings.

4. Conclusion

Holding on to ideological ground is crucial to the destiny of a nation. We must acknowledge that although capitalism has emerged and tended to stabilize and solidify over the centuries, the renewal and dissemination of its ideology has never ceased. The rise of artificial intelligence in recent years has accelerated this process. As a socialist country, the only way for China to resist the potential risks and challenges of digital capitalism's ideology and ensure that China is on the right track in dealing with and resolving anything is to identify the essence of digital capitalism's ideology, analyse and critique it continuously, and adhere more firmly to the guiding position of Marxism in the ideological field.

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