

Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy.

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Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy

Tiziana Terranova

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Free Labor:
Producing Culture for the Digital Economy* - **[PDF]**

Tiziana Terranova

The real *not-capital* is labor.

—Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*

Working in the digital media industry is not as much fun as it is made out to be. The "NetSlaves" of the eponymous Webzine are becoming increasingly vociferous about the shamelessly exploitative nature of the job, its punishing work rhythms, and its ruthless casualization (www.dis-obey.com/netslaves). They talk about "24-7 electronic sweatshops" and complain about the ninety-hour weeks and the "moronic management of new media companies." In early 1999, seven of the fifteen thousand "volunteers" of America Online (AOL) rocked the info-loveboat by asking the Department of Labor to investigate whether AOL owes them back wages for the years of playing chathosts for free.¹ They used to work long hours and love it; now they are starting to feel the pain of being burned by digital media.

These events point to a necessary backlash against the glamorization of digital labor, which highlights its continuities with the modern sweatshop and points to the increasing degradation of knowledge work. Yet the question of labor in a "digital economy" is not so easily dismissed as an innovative development of the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation. The NetSlaves are not simply a typical form of labor on the Internet; they also embody a complex relation to labor that is widespread in late capitalist societies.

In this essay I understand this relationship as a provision of "free labor," a trait of the cultural economy at large, and an important, and yet undervalued, force in advanced capitalist societies. By looking at the Internet as a specific instance of the fundamental role played by free labor, this essay also tries to highlight the connections between the "digital economy" and what the Italian autonomists have called the "social factory." The "social factory" describes a process whereby "work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine."² Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs. Far from being an **[End Page 33]** "unreal," empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large.

Support for this argument, however, is immediately complicated by the recent history of critical theory. How to speak of labor, especially cultural and technical labor, after the demolition job carried out by thirty years of postmodernism? The postmodern socialist feminism of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" spelled out some of the reasons behind the antipathy of 1980s critical theory for Marxist analyses of labor. Haraway explicitly rejected the humanistic tendencies of theorists who see labor as the "pre-eminently privileged category enabling the Marxist to overcome illusion and find that point of view which is necessary for changing the world."³ Paul Gilroy similarly expressed his discontent at the inadequacy of Marxist analyses of labor to describe the culture of the descendants of slaves, who value artistic expression as "the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation."⁴ If labor is "the humanizing activity that makes [white] man," then, surely, humanizing labor does not really belong in the age of networked, posthuman intelligence.

However, the "informatics of domination" that Haraway describes in the "Manifesto" is certainly preoccupied with the relation between cybernetics, labor, and capital. In the fifteen years since its publication, this triangulation has become even more evident. The expansion of the Internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends toward increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as "supplementing" (bringing supplementary work home from the conventional office).⁵ Advertising campaigns and business manuals

suggest that the Internet is not only a site of disintermediation (embodying the famous death of the middle...

Free Labor

PRODUCING CULTURE FOR THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

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