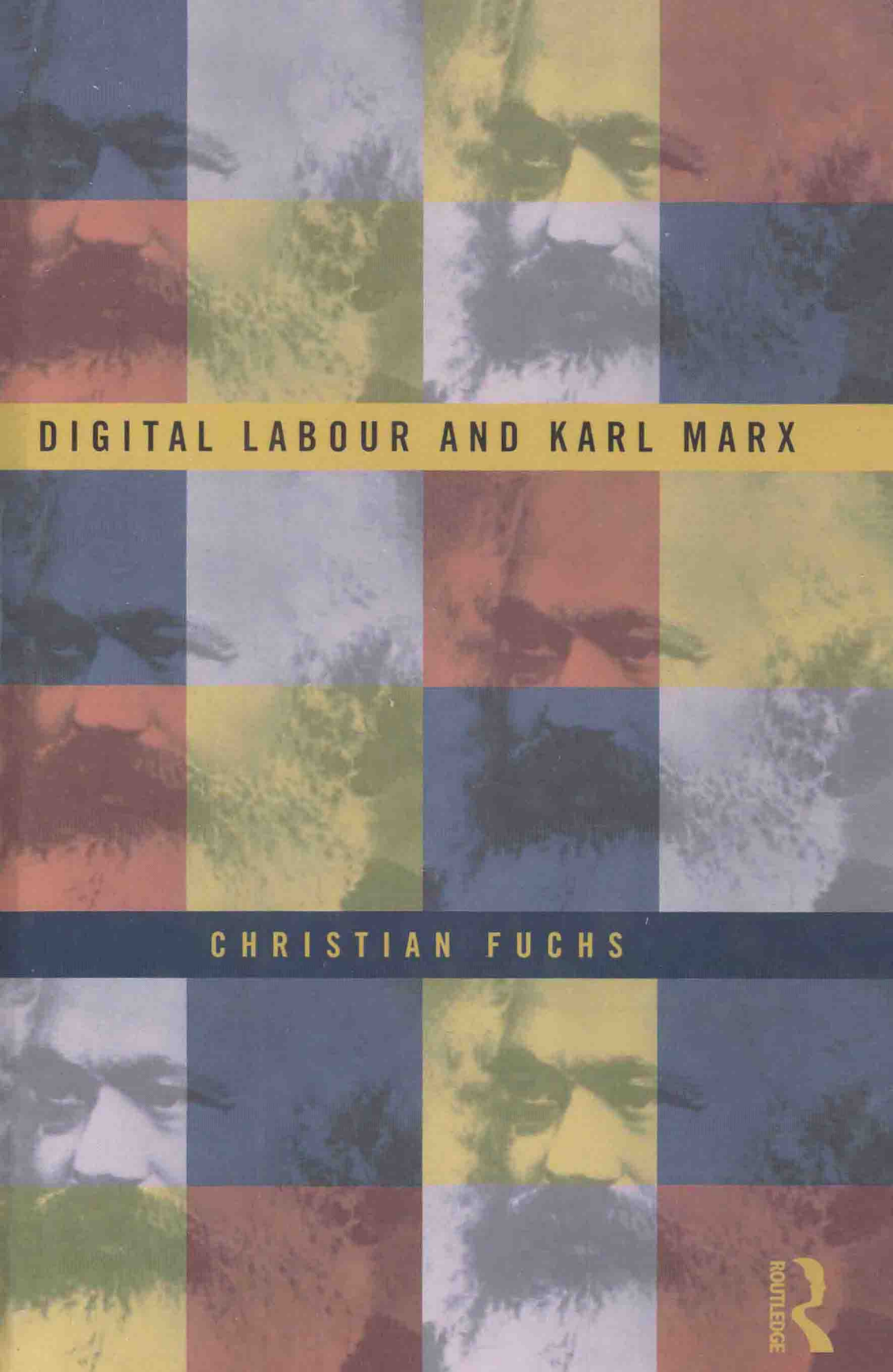
DIGITAL LABOUR AND KARL MARX
CHRISTIAN FUCHS
ROUTLEDGE

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Christian Fuchs

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2014
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fuchs, Christian, 1976-
Digital labor and Karl Marx / Christian Fuchs.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Knowledge workers. 2. Information technology—Economic aspects. 3. Information technology—Social aspects. 4. Industrial sociology. I. Title.
HD8039.K59F83 2013
335.4'12—dc23 2013017800

ISBN: 978-0-415-71615-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-88007-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

This book is dedicated to Marisol and the singularity of our non-labour of love

El amor
me dará aire, espacio,
alimento para crecer y ser mejor,
como una Revolución
que hace de cada día
el comienzo de una nueva victoria

—Gioconda Belli

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Need for Studying Digital Labour

Muhanga Kawaya, an enslaved miner in North Kivu (Democratic Republic of Congo) who extracts minerals that are needed for the manufacturing of laptops and mobile phones, describes his work in the following way: "As you crawl through the tiny hole, using your arms and fingers to scratch, there's not enough space to dig properly and you get badly grazed all over. And then, when you do finally come back out with the cassiterite, the soldiers are waiting to grab it at gunpoint. Which means you have nothing to buy food with. So we're always hungry" (Finnwatch 2007, 20). A Chinese engineer at Foxconn Shenzhen, where computers and mobile phones that are sold by Western companies are assembled, says, "We produced the first generation iPad. We were busy throughout a 6-month period and had to work on Sundays. We only had a rest day every 13 days. And there was no overtime premium for weekends. Working for 12 hours a day really made me exhausted" (SACOM 2010, 7). In Silicon Valley, a Cambodian ICT (information and communications technology) assembler exposed to toxic substances reports, "I talked to my co-workers who felt the same way [that I did] but they never brought it up, out of fear of losing their job" (Pellow and Park 2002, 139). Mohan, a project manager in the Indian software industry who is in his mid-30s, explains, "Work takes a priority. [. . .] The area occupied by family and others keeps reducing" (D'Mello and Sahay 2007, 179). Another software engineer argues, "Sometimes you start at 8 am and then finish at 10–11 pm, five days a week. And anytime you can be called. [. . .] Also you don't develop any hobbies" (ibid.). A software engineer at Google describes the working situation there: "Cons—Because of the large amounts of benefits (such as free foods) there seems to be an unsaid rule that employees are expected to work longer

hours. Many people work more than 8 hours a day and then will be on email or work for a couple hours at home, at night as well (or on the weekends). It may be hard to perform extremely well with a good work/life balance. Advice to Senior Management—Give engineers more freedom to use 20% time to work on cool projects without the stress of having to do 120% work" (www.glassdoor.com). The Amazon Mechanical Turk is a "marketplace for work" that "gives businesses and developers access to an on-demand, scalable workforce. Workers select from thousands of tasks and work whenever it is convenient" (www.mturk.com). Clients can advertise on the platform that they look for certain services for a certain wage, to which those who want to perform them can respond online. If the deal comes about, then the worker performs the task and submits the result to the client online. The work tasks almost exclusively involve informational work. A search for speech transcription tasks (conducted on November 20, 2012) resulted in three tasks that had (if one assumes that it takes on average six hours of work time to transcribe one hour of interview time) an hourly wage of (a) US$4, (b) US$4 and (c) US$3. In contrast, typical professional transcription services (e.g. www.fingertipstyping.co.uk/prices_and_turnaround.htm, www.franklin-square.com/transcription_per_line.htm) charge approximately US$15–$25 per hour.

In February 2013, the German public service station broadcaster ARD aired the documentary *Ausgeliefert! Leiharbeiter bei Amazon* (At mercy[1]! Contract workers at Amazon). The investigative reporters Diana Löbl and Peter Onneken documented that Amazon Germany employs 5,000 immigrants (from e.g. Poland, Romania, Spain, Hungary and other countries) as contract workers in its warehouse. They showed that these workers are extremely low-paid, live in groups of six or seven workers who do not know each other in small cottages, where two people share tiny bedrooms. They only get temporary contracts and are employed by temp agencies. The contracts are written in German, although many workers do not understand this language. On one day, the warehouse workers often run up to 17 kilometres, which can negatively impact their feet and skin. The workers do not see and sign the contract before they come to Germany and then often have to find out that they earn less than initially promised. One contract shown in the documentary specifies €8.52 per hour, although the worker was initially promised €9.68, which is 12% more. These workers can be hired and fired as Amazon wishes. Trade union secretary Heiner Reimann (with trade union ver.di) describes these Amazon workers as "workers without rights" (10:41–10:46). A driver said, "Temp work. [...] I am not in favour of this slave trade. [...] They earn so little money, partly they have to beg for coffee in the canteen" (14:20–14:35). Selvina, a Spanish contract worker, said, "It is like a machine. We are a cog in this machine" (17:12–17:16). The documentary presented footage that indicated Amazon's supposed evasion of paying social security taxes for their employees. The workers have to commute long distances to their workplace in overcrowded buses supplied by Amazon. Often they wait and commute for hours. If the bus arrives late, they face wage deductions. The workers can be controlled any time,

even outside of the workplace, and there are security guards patrolling the housing estates, their dining rooms, and the factory premises. The ARD investigative journalists show that there are security forces from the H.E.S.S. company and that security guards act and look like a paramilitary force, entering workers' homes while they are not there to control them by taking pictures. One worker says, "When we eat, they are always there. [. . .] They enter the houses while the people are not there and also when the people sleep or take a shower" (19:09–19:25). Another one reports that the guards argue, "This is our house. [. . .] You must do what we say. And here we are like the police" (19:25–19:38). The reporters show that some security guards wear clothes from Thor Steinar, a neo-Nazi brand. H.E.S.S. stands for Hensel European Security Services. (Rudolf Hess was Hitler's deputy.) H.E.S.S. sells, according to the ARD documentary, clothes that are considered to be right-wing extremist brands in Germany (Commando Industries). The documentary shows that some of the H.E.S.S. employees and management personnel are part of the hooligan scene or have circles of right-wing extremist friends. In the days after the documentary was aired on ARD (February 13), almost every minute somebody posted a protest message on Amazon's Facebook page. Some example comments are: "Nazis, conditions like in a modern labour camp, unlimited greed for profits. BE ASHAMED!"[2] "Modern slavery, but the main thing for you is that your profits are doing well"[3] "Shame on you, bloody bastards! you'll never have my and my friends' money! i hope you'll go on default veeeery quickly!" "Profits that are based on a new form of slavery should be confiscated just like profits from drug trafficking!"[4]

Work.Shop.Play is an online platform owned by CBS Outdoor Limited. It describes its purpose in the following way:

> We are interested in your ideas, opinions, behaviour and general feedback on a variety of topics. One week we may send you surveys asking how you feel about topics in the news at the moment. The next, we might ask you how often you drink coffee, what brands you buy and which coffee shop you prefer. The week after that, it might be a survey about new technology, which gadgets you own and why you bought them. [. . .] CBS Outdoor work with lots of big brands, telling them how to best advertise and market their products and services to consumers. [. . .] Sometimes, the research team at CBS Outdoor will use survey results to create material for our sales teams to present to these brands. Other times we'll be using the results internally, to better inform our company about urban audiences. Occasionally we may post survey results on Twitter or Facebook. [. . .] When we were setting up work.shop.play. we thought long and hard about how to reward our members. We developed a list of prizes that we think will appeal to everyone—such as cinema and theatre tickets, shopping vouchers, magazine subscriptions and guidebooks to UK cities. From time to time there will also be bigger prizes up for grabs, such as nights away at a top hotel—and

> sometimes there may be one prize, while others there may be 10 or more. (workshopplay.co.uk, accessed February 17, 2013)

Facebook has asked users to translate its site into other languages without payment. Translation is crowdsourced to users. Javier Olivan, head of Growth, Engagement, Mobile Adoption at Facebook, sees user-generated platform translation as "cool" because Facebook's goal is to "have one day everybody on the planet on Facebook" (MSNBC 2008).

> Valentin Macias, 29, a Californian who teaches English in Seoul, South Korea, has volunteered in the past to translate for the nonprofit Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia but said he won't do it for Facebook. "[Wikipedia is] an altruistic, charitable, information-sharing, donation-supported cause", Macias told The Associated Press in a Facebook message. "Facebook is not. Therefore, people should not be tricked into donating their time and energy to a multimillion-dollar company so that the company can make millions more—at least not without some type of compensation." (ibid.)

These examples outline various forms of labour associated with the ICT industry. They differ in amount in regard to the levels of payment; health risks; physical, ideological and social violence; stress; free time; overtime; and the forms of coercion and control the workers are experiencing, but all have in common that human labour-power is exploited in a way that monetarily benefits ICT corporations and has negative impacts on the lives, bodies or minds of workers. The forms of labour described in this book are all types of digital labour because they are part of a collective work force that is required for the existence, usage and application of digital media. What defines them is not a common type of occupation, but rather the industry they contribute to and in which capital exploits them. The kind of definition one chooses of categories such as digital labour or virtual work, their degree of inclusivity or exclusivity, are first and foremost political choices. The approach taken in this book advocates a broad understanding of digital labour based on an industry rather than an occupation definition in order to stress the commonality of exploitation, capital as the common enemy of a broad range of workers and the need to globalize and network struggles in order to overcome the rule of capitalism. Some of the workers described in this book are not just exploited by digital media capital, but also and sometimes simultaneously by other forms of capital. It is then a matter of degree to which extent these forms of labour are digital labour and simultaneously other forms of labour. If we imagine a company with job rotation so that each worker on average assembles laptops for 50% of his/her work time and cars for the other half of the time, a worker in this factory is a digital worker for 50%. S/he is however an industrial worker for 100% because the content of both manufacturing activities is the industrial assemblage of components into commodities. The different

forms of digital labour are connected in an international division of digital labour (IDDL), in which all labour necessary for the existence, usage and application of digital media is "disconnected, isolated [...], carried on side by side" and ossified "into a systematic division" (Marx 1867c, 456). Studies of the information economy, or what some term the creative or cultural industries, have been dominated by the capital side of the analysis, whereas the labour side has been rather missing. In this context, Nicholas Garnham already asserted in 1990 that "the bibliography on the producers of culture is scandalously empty" (Garnham 1990, 12) and that there is a focus on the analysis of media barons and their companies. Ten years later, he saw this problem as persisting: "The problem of media producers has been neglected in recent media and Cultural Studies—indeed in social theory generally—because of the general linguistic turn and the supposed death of the author that has accompanied it. If the author does not exist or has no intentional power, why study her or him?" (Garnham 2000a, 84). Again ten years later, Vincent Mosco (2011, 230) argued that "labour remains the blind spot of communication and Cultural Studies" and that therefore "labour needs to be placed high on the agenda or projects for the renewal of Cultural Studies". A particular problem of contemporary media and communication studies is the strong focus on the capital side of the creative and cultural economy and the neglect of the labour side. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller make a similar assessment: "Most writings in media studies constrict the ambit of media labor such that the industry mavens [. . .] define production. This mirrors the growth ideology and apolitical enchantment with media technologies found in most trade publications, entertainment news outlets, and fan culture" (Maxwell and Miller 2012, 16). They argue for "critical scholarship into media labor" that considers "the physical nature of work and what it does to people and the environment" (ibid.). Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell (2009, 4) speak in this context of the need for media production studies that "take the lived realities of people involved in in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture". Juliet Webster (2011, 2) observes that the study of ICT's role in society has often been

> guided by pragmatism rather than by social critique. In many countries, there is and has been for some twenty or more years, a discernible body of work which is concerned primarily with interpreting technological innovations as socially neutral processes or with the practicalities of ICT implementation. There are strong pressures on researchers, particularly in a context of economic crisis and restructuring, to retreat into this type of work. In this context, critical social research often becomes displaced by research which is driven by an over-optimistic technological agenda. Researchers find they have to survive in a world where economic growth and constant innovation are the leitmotifs underlying not only economic but social policy.