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CHAPTER 8

Through the Reproductive Lens: Labour and Struggle at the Intersection of Culture and Economy

Kylie Jarrett

1. Introduction

The intersection of the digital with our work and leisure, and the blurring of these two categories, has become an increasingly significant field of inquiry in Big Data capitalism. Digital labour studies – in which this nexus is explored – is fast becoming a field of its own, incorporating analyses of workers in the platform-mediated gig economy, users of social media, social media influencers, and the ways in which various work practices are being re-shaped by digital technologies. The importance of this field lies in how the dynamics it traces – such as the centrality of immaterial/affective labour, precarious and exploited work conditions and the social factory – are emblematic of wider trends in contemporary capitalism.

In early 2016, I published *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*, which contributes to this debate by arguing a case for using Marxist

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feminist theories of domestic work to explain the economic and cultural logics of consumer labour in digital media. By ‘consumer labour,’ I mean the myriad ways in which our cultural products are expropriated and alienated from us when we upload them to platforms, but also how our data is the cornerstone of surplus value generation for digital media companies. The book sought to address what I considered a fruitless debate about whether such work is alienated and exploited or socially meaningful and a site for self-actualisation. In *The Digital Housewife*, I argue that domestic work, as conceptualised by Marxist feminists, gives us a model of work that is both these things – integral to capitalism for its productive and reproductive capacity, but always potentially outside these same dynamics. Domestic work is labour that straddles the cultural and the economic, and thus, I argue, it gives us a mechanism for understanding forms of digital labour that perform the same feat of gymnastics.

My book is quite narrowly targeted at a particular theoretical concern – and personal bugbear – and focuses on only a limited range of digital labour practices in making its case. Nevertheless, the central principles from which its arguments are drawn have begun growing in importance in the study of digital labour and capitalism more broadly. In this chapter, I want to move away from the specific argument in my book and instead focus on this wider context. I will engage with wider conversations about activism, struggle and critique into which its argument has entered, and attempt to identify contexts where the emphasis on alternative labour histories and the politics of social reproduction that animates my book brings important critical insight. Along the way, I’ll describe some elements of *The Digital Housewife*, but mostly as a means of illustrating what bringing reproductive work into view can do for our understanding of contemporary capitalism and its sites of struggle. I will do this by focusing on three key areas: history, value and subjects.

2. History

One of the orienting feminist concepts in my book is that the social factory has a longer history than is usually ascribed to it in studies of digital capitalism. The argument is often made that we live in times marked by a peculiar saturation of the whole of existence with the dictates of capital – the real subsumption of life that constitutes Mario Tronti’s (1973) social factory. This is often attributed to the conditions of post-Fordism and the information-intensive industries of Big Data capitalism. There is often an implicit assumption that the circumstances of the social factory are new.

However, for anyone who is not a white, cis-, het- man, it is difficult to see precisely what is novel about the conditions in which all of life is subsumed into capital. Private domestic space and interpersonal relations, including sexual activity, have historically been considered outside capital, providing arenas in which autonomous self-making could happen, and where Marx’s species-being

could be realised. In white hetero-patriarchal contexts this has long been equated with the private, domestic space of the nuclear family (Berlant and Warner 1998; England 1993; Osucha 2009). Yet women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ have never experienced such contexts as places of autonomy or agency but rather as venues of (en)forced and uncompensated work, as well as situations of domination and surveillance. Moreover, as Marxist feminists such as Dalla Costa and James (1975), Federici (2004), Mies et al. (1988) and Davis (1983) assert, gender, raced and sexed being and the organisation of labour are intimately related, placing human subjectivity at the core of capitalist accumulation. Taking these perspectives into account, the absorption of the whole of life – the existence of a social factory – is a fundamental, if not foundational, part of the capitalist narrative.

An example of this longer history of the social factory that I have explored (Jarrett 2017) is the effective slave labour system of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland between 1922 and 1937. These laundries were carceral institutions where women believed dangerous to the middle-class ‘stem-family system’ (Inglis 1997, 13) through sexual activity outside of patriarchal marriage, deemed ‘unproductive’ through poverty (Buckley 2016), or otherwise considered unruly by behavioural norms of the day were sent for penance and re-education into domestic labour discipline. Women slaved in abject conditions in these nun-run commercial, but non-profit, laundries for no pay, typically for years.

The Magdalene Laundries, though, are not merely an aberration of Irish Catholicism, but must be read as part of a society-wide social, cultural, legal and political machinery supporting a state economic agenda to get men – but specifically men – back to work in a very weak economy (Daly 1995). This was achieved through an aggressive re-instatement of the gendered division of labour, both materially – in the forms of regulations controlling women’s labour and political rights – and culturally, through sermonising, cultural products and the disciplining effect of institutions like the Laundries. These sites enforced women’s domesticity by disciplining and policing women’s bodies, sexuality and ‘souls,’ exacting penance to ensure alignment with their constrained economic roles. Based on a ‘thematic of sin’ (Inglis 1997) and regimes of shame, the cultural logics that animated these institutions and which gave legitimacy to their economic effects did not end at the Laundry gate. They were also articulated in the sensibilities of all in Irish society, as evidenced by claims that key advocates of the Magdalene system were women (Crowley and Kitchen 2008). The Laundries, and their embedding in everyday Irish society, exemplify the idea of the social factory – a society, a cultural fabric and individual embodied subjectivities formed by an economic agenda.

Such examples of the long history of capitalist logics manifesting in non-market contexts suggest that if we are to understand labour in Big Data capitalism, it is vital to recover and incorporate labour histories that do not belong to white men in industrialised labour (see also Fuchs 2017). As Alan Sears (2016, 139) summarises, different members of the working class ‘face different

forms of autonomy and coercion based on their location within dominant divisions of labour organised around differentiated processes of dispossession. To understand capitalism holistically we therefore need to know more about the histories (and present experiences) of women, people of colour, trans or LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, whose experiences in capital are marked by saturated regimes of precariousness and oppression. The overt relationship of these subaltern labour conditions to the immersive politics of the social factory suggests that they usefully map the experiences of oppression found in the precarious social factories of Big Data capitalism.

One suite of labour experiences we need to engage with more effectively and extensively is that of paid and unpaid sex work, which Morgane Merteuil (2017) has argued offers valuable insight into contemporary labour relations in Big Data capitalism. Using camming – webcam-based sex work – as her example, she describes a relationship between the dynamics of sex work and platforms such as Uber or Taskrabbit. Platforms, Merteuil argues, function similarly to pimps in that they broker exchanges between worker and client, take a cut of any profits, and also provide certain rules for how labour is to be performed. Merteuil argues that rather than the digital housewife that I propose, it is the digital whore that provides the best model for understanding labour in platform economies.

But the analogy runs deeper than the neat comparison between platforms and pimps. If we examine the long history of sex work, in particular by women and women of colour, we see very blurry distinctions between intimacy and economy, between paid and unpaid work, between agency and control. When your core business is to ‘marry well,’ then even unpaid sex with your life partner has an economic logic. It is the common and ongoing negotiations of these boundaries in interpersonal, legal, political and economic contexts that may reveal much about the politics of labour in the digital economy, in which distinctions between what we consider legitimate commodification are similarly unfixed and mutable. The unequal power relations that shape heterosexual marriage and which make unpaid sexual labour, like much labour for platforms, an effect of non-market social and economic coercion, may also be useful to consider in unpacking the dynamics of exploitation in Big Data capitalism.

Another issue raised by recognising this wider context of the social factory is the question of what precisely is new about labour in Big Data capitalism. If it is not the case that it uniquely requires and/or produces the saturation of life by capitalist principles, then what is its particularity? Is it a question of an increased intensity or extensity of capitalism’s exploitative and alienating tendencies? Is it merely a matter of enhanced visibility as new mechanisms of quantification, such as the workplace tracking technologies explored by Phoebe Moore (2017), materialise existing practices of capture? Or is there some other substantive difference in how labour is manifested in Big Data capitalism? We must know more about the particular qualities of contemporary work if we are

to properly critique this labour and, more importantly, identify sites into which we may intervene.

I reiterate, though, that in tracing this difference we must not found our distinction in the work of white cis-, het-, men working in industrialised labour, but look to sexed, raced, gendered and sexualised labour practices as well. It is in these ‘alt’ labour histories that we find not only difference but continuity with how work is constructed today, and so they may provide fruitful avenues for critique but also models for struggle. As Isabell Lorey suggests, we need to not only interpret precarity as a mechanism for securing domination, but also take ‘subjective experiences of precaritization [as a] starting point for political struggles’ (2015, 6). Understanding how women, people of colour, people in the Global South, trans, queer or disabled people have laboured in, but also resisted, conditions of oppression can tell us much. In survival – in what Rema Hammami calls ‘the politics of subaltern persistence’ (2016, 172) – we may find the forms of action we need today.

3. Value

Working with a longer history of the social factory, and with histories of work that are marked by their apparent non-market and cultural dimensions, also shifts focus in relation to what is valuable in capitalism. This is part of what I am calling ‘the reproductive turn’ in digital labour studies, where emphasis is not only on processes of commodification but also on how value, or things that are *of value* to capitalism, are generated through uncommodified dimensions of capitalist exchange. It is a direction that explores, as Nancy Fraser (2014, 61) has advocated, the ‘indispensable background condition for the possibility of capitalist production.’

The key model for understanding consumer labour that I have advocated is that described by Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) in *The Arcane of Reproduction*. Fortunati insists that domestic work is integral to capitalism and not a mere subsidiary – reproducing workers is a necessary part of the production cycle. She argues, though, that the work of unpaid domestic labour is not directly exploited but instead involves a multi-phased process of incorporation involving the production of inalienable goods. Fortunati describes how the unpaid housewife’s labour generates uncommodified or non-fungible products such as food and healthcare that are consumed by the paid worker. At this point, these products are transformed into labour-power and only then can they be converted into something with exchange value (labour-time). In this model, domestic labour is at a step removed from commodity production. This does not mean, however, that the uncommodified phase is outside capitalism; it remains an integral part of its long value chain. Fortunati’s argument allows us to see how value can be extracted from labour even without its abstraction

and commodification. When applied to forms of labour in Big Data capitalism, this model requires consideration of a greater range of activities that produce commodifiable outputs but also allows for multiplicity and contradiction in the nature of goods produced across that value chain.

A growing body of studies of digital labour, particularly those concerned with gendered or racialised activity, also look simultaneously at the economic and non-economic dimensions of digital labour, emphasising dimensions of subject formation alongside the economic frameworks of digital platforms. What is important, though, is that these studies do not assume that the social relations and uncommodified dimensions of these exchanges of labour and/or goods are somehow outside capitalism. Rather they emphasise how they interact, in particular noting the disciplining functions of the uncommodified exchanges of these sites – for instance, how affectively charged interactions between users can be valuable to capitalism in providing normative pressures that underpin the desire to contribute this labour.

This focus on longer value chains and the possibilities of contradiction and multiplicity along them is prevalent in the work of Julia Velkova (2016), who has explored the politics of gift and commodity relations in the open source animation community, Blender. Her work (Velkova and Jakobsson 2015; see also Jarrett 2015a) draws on the biography of objects (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), and suggests tracking how the economic relations associated with a cultural good change over time and as it circulates in different social relations. Velkova notes this multiplicity using the example of Blender, describing how exchanges of labour and software between the company and the open source community were sometimes conceived and construed as gifts, and at other times as commodity exchanges. What Velkova also notes, though, is that at all times, and regardless of their form, these exchanges were entrenching the hierarchical structures that sustained and supported the capitalist enterprise at the core of Blender. In effect, she usefully describes how the practices of gifting, both from producers and the open source user community, demonstrate multiplicity, but also the conservative, reproductive qualities of non-market exchanges within capitalism.

As I have noted before (Jarrett 2015b), what I refer to as ‘the reproductive turn’ is arguably not a turn at all, but really a *return* to the frameworks that guided early Cultural Studies, particularly as it emerged out of the Birmingham School, where economics and culture or identity were always conceived as mutually informing. As Velkova’s study emphasises, it is important to a full critique of digital labour and contemporary capitalism to grasp this inter-relationship, to refuse the false binary between culture/society/identity and economics, and to explore the idea of value in broad terms.

Beyond my field of Internet research, the renewal of this perspective is crucial as we try to understand contemporary politics such as the ‘aggrieved entitlement’ (Kimmel 2013) of the alt-Right in the US (and arguably Donald Trump’s election). Just as we cannot understand historical race relations in the

US without due consideration of its economic basis and its social and personal impacts, we cannot grasp the contemporary politics of online misogyny, renewed European fascism or Islamophobia without exploring the intersections of precarity economics with the historic privileges of masculinity and whiteness. It has certainly not been helpful – as was the tenor of my social media in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election – simply to denounce others as 'liberals' for their emphasis on identity politics, or to reduce everything to questions of class. The two cannot be so simply differentiated, and simplistic and unproductive binaries cannot move our critique toward positive change. Struggles for equality and justice are better served when we integrate our economic and identity critiques, examining how these dimensions of society intersect in politicising, valorising and exploiting difference (Alcoff 2006; Fraser 2014). In the contemporary moment, unless we look at the longer immaterial value chains of capitalism where the entitlement of certain actors is produced and reproduced, and where that promise has been betrayed and made unstable, we cannot come to grips with Trump, the growing threat posed by fascist and racist political parties, or even with Brexit.

A focus on the economic logics of social reproduction and the reproduction of economic logics is also important if we are to identify points of struggle most relevant to the precarious conditions of Big Data capitalism. Silvia Federici (2012) says that the ways we produce and reproduce consciousness – identity politics and ideological critique in the reproductive sphere – become point zero for political activism. Because social reproduction is both the production of desired human qualities and an accommodation to the market, this means reproductive work is always in tension, involving a 'potential separation, and it suggests a world of conflicts, resistances, and contradictions that have political significance' (2012, 99). It is in cracking open and moving between and against these contradictions – in refusing to reproduce regressive embodied interpretive horizons (Alcoff 2006) – that resistant political consciousness may develop.

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2016) argue that an old-fashioned Gramscian counter-hegemonic project is essential to challenging the politics of platform capitalism. Intervention in ideology happens, they say, through transforming mediated political discourse and the material instantiations of those ideas: culture and economics. Physical infrastructures such as housing and urban design, as well as reproductive institutions such as the education system or the family, need to be rethought and remade in order to challenge consent to the neoliberal hegemony. Fundamentally, this project requires changing our suite of tools for self-making, including, and especially, how we articulate the concept and practices of work and living. This suggests that rather than opposing identity politics to capitalist and economic critique, the task is to mobilise these politics to articulate new critical subjects, drawing on the affective and economic excess that inheres to reproductive work to articulate awareness of oppression and alternative modes of being, thinking and doing.

By digging deep into and transforming reproductive activities we can forge a counter-hegemonic project.

4. Subject

This leads directly into the final point that emerges from applying reproductive lenses to labour in Big Data capitalism, which is how this application changes our conceptualisation of the labouring subject and, in doing so, changes our modes of politics. If we assume that the social factory has a long history – and, as feminists have argued, one that precedes the origins of capitalism – then our critique cannot end when we identify the real subsumption of life. We must assume that this is a feature of all of life in capitalism, albeit differently articulated across social groups. But we must also recognise that this capitalist-inflected activity doesn't necessarily reproduce capitalism. This means we need to move our critique of labour in Big Data capitalism away from the alienation of species-being – one of the four forms of alienation described by Marx (1961/2013) in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* – which has become almost a default critique in studies of digital labour, at least in media studies (Jarrett 2016b).

Not only does this emphasis on the impact of digital media on self-making reproduce the framework of false consciousness, it is also predicated on a subject that is gendered, raced and sexed. The concept of alienation from species-being is not universally applicable. Arguably it relies on a humanist subject – a self-possessed, singular individual for whom the alienation generated by capitalism is a formative tragedy (Eisenstein 1979; Braidotti 2013). But for women, and all other people constituted as 'other,' such a state of autonomy and singularity has never been attributed nor achieved either within capitalism or without. The entrenchment of power relations and systems of domination based in dimensions other than class has historically delimited the capacity to articulate 'species-being' for certain actors. For many subjects, alienation *is* the condition of existence – hybrid, queer, trans subjectivities, for instance – so a politics that seeks simply a return to, or seats its political subjectivity in, a coherent, pre-lapsarian species-being becomes exclusive and potentially genocidal.

This critique has two implications. It suggests, as James Reveley (2013) has argued, the need to focus more on the more material dimensions of alienation – products, other workers, nature – in our critiques of Big Data capitalism. This draws attention to how digital labour practices may have negative impacts on other workers or citizens, reproduce cycles of waste and obsolescence, or perpetuate other inequalities or social and environmental damage typical of the capitalist system. Shedding a critique of digital labour based in self-possession, and instead focusing on the dimensions of material dispossession and degradation, would manifest a more useful and nuanced critique of digital labour.

Secondly, this critique allows for the mobilisation of the subjects of Big Data capitalism in terms of their relationality and multiplicity, rather than their autonomy. This, in turn, enables politics that are intersectional and fluid. I am continually drawn back to Chela Sandoval's description of the tactical, liminal and differential subjectivities of US third-world feminism 'with the capacity to de- and recenter, given the forms of power to be moved' (2000, 58). This is the 'methodology of the oppressed', whose locus of possibility is not any one ideology but works with and through these differences, adapting tactically to power. These are also the dynamic politics of queer discomfort— of not fitting — described by Sara Ahmed (2004), that has long been the activist terrain of the subaltern. Rather than seeking remedy in a return to a mythic unified form of agency or by acting against a singular experience of class oppression, refusing the primacy of the humanist subject allows for this kind of engagement through points of difference and commonality, including that of class location.

Eschewing the singular coherence of the political and economic subject allows us to generate coalitional action directed at the ways in which we are all made vulnerable (Butler 2004; Butler et al. 2016; Fotopolou 2016) by Big Data capitalism, building temporary unions across race, gender, class, ability, sex and sexuality to resist those politics. Such a focus on how alliances are built through shared feelings of precariousness not only explains the generation of the political action of multitude (Hardt and Negri 2005), but also offers a mechanism for activating those politics.

We may also use the excessive effects of Big Data capitalism to achieve this activation. A moment in my social media use while preparing the preliminary paper that lead to this chapter illustrates how activism and precariousness can walk hand in hand. In the space of three minutes on my Facebook feed, I received three updates that spoke of shared struggle and the capacity to use social media within a counter-hegemonic project. The first, shared by a friend in France, showed the story of Fatima Hajiji, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl shot and killed by Israeli forces in Jerusalem. Appearing directly below this were Irish media reports of Dublin and Sligo City Councils voting to fly the Palestinian flag over their offices in solidarity with the Palestinian people. A few moments later, an Italian friend shared a link to the 'When I See Them, I See Us' video, which links the US Black Lives Matter cause to that of people in Occupied Palestine. The histories and present experiences of Palestinian, Irish and African American people are fundamentally different, but they intersect through respective vulnerabilities to colonial imperialism and capitalist necropolitics. In this example we can see alliances being established, not from singularity but in a solidarity based in shared precariousness. We also see the (potential) activation of critical political subjects aided by the visibility and networks provided by Big Data capitalism. Even though the mechanisms of capture enrolled by Facebook are encompassing and exhaustive, there remain gaps in the reproductive logics of the interface that can be exploited to speak back to power.

It would be absurd, though, to claim that such sharing of ideas through a commercial platform is tantamount to real political change – my likes do not impact lived conditions in the Gaza strip, for instance – or to claim that social media created these alliances. These are not my points. What this example does articulate, though, is the capacity to document, distribute and amplify the existence of counter-politics in ways reminiscent of the consciousness-raising activities of second-wave feminist activism or the abolitionist meetings of earlier periods. We can see similar disruptions in reproductive patterns in Jack Qiu's (2016, this volume) descriptions of the use of social media by Chinese Appconn workers to articulate discursive change and then to organise material, oppositional practices and solidarity amongst workers. These are all interventions that refuse the easy reproduction of class and identity status and are, in part, about building new subjectivities.

In my own politics, similar uses of social media are found in the Irish Repeal movement – a broad coalition of over 100 groups campaigning for a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution that denies bodily autonomy to pregnant people. Among many material actions, the expression of this movement's politics across various media also seeks to produce new critical subjects by making abortion visible as a lived experience in Ireland, breaking apart the reproduction of silence and shame with which abortion is associated on the island, and uniting groups with disparate politics through shared recognition of the ways in which the Constitution and Irish laws render certain bodies – female, trans, raced, LGBTQ+, asylum seeker bodies – more vulnerable than others. Despite the varied political and ideological positions of each group or individual, the movement comes together under the badge 'Repealers,' as evidenced in the moving, grassroots hashtag campaign #knowyourrepealers that trended in September 2016. If, as Srnicek and Williams contest, both the immaterial and material dimensions of hegemony need to be systematically challenged to bring about effective political change, the Repeal movement shows how the reproductive capacity of digital media – its ability to (in)form critical subjects and shape actions – can be enrolled in the articulation, building and mobilisation of alliances to effect social change.

5. Conclusion

There are a lot of threads in this chapter, and they seem to have taken us very far from my short book. Little more than a theoretical framework for understanding digital users' labour, *The Digital Housewife* seems removed from the broad political concerns raised in this chapter. However, just as digital labour has a greater analytical importance because it exemplifies trends associated with Big Data capitalism, so too do the ideas and frameworks upon which my book draws. The more I (and others) reflect upon the political and economic circumstances of contemporary capitalism, the more resonance is found in the

cultural economy of the reproductive sphere. This perspective suggests that labour and life are entwined in complex ways in Big Data capitalism, but articulates this complexity in a manner that is productive for thinking and acting in resistance. It allows for work, paid and unpaid, to be simultaneously cultural and economic – to be neither fish nor fowl – and to see in this hybridity the means through which to understand it better – a crucial preliminary step in breaking it apart to use for other ends.

To achieve this, though, requires proper attention to both the arenas of social reproduction and the stratification of capitalist dispossession. Only by eschewing the false binary between productive and reproductive labour can we generate a holistic picture of how Big Data capitalism organises us as economic units and as individual subjectivities; this is the mechanism through which we can adequately envision the dialectic (Ferguson 2016; Fraser 2014). This in turn gives us the political ground from which to generate a critique of capitalism that does not merely reproduce inequalities and exclusions. From an understanding of the differential distribution of labour and how that is reproduced across all social systems we can see more clearly the labour processes that are of value to capitalism and how these may not only exist in formal labour settings. Different places and modes for intervention into capitalism – such as articulating the politics of reproductive rights as an identity marker – can subsequently open up.

The politics, concepts and framework that I am articulating here are not new. Indeed, much of this paper – and indeed the point of the *Digital Housewife* book itself – is merely foregrounding long-standing queer, feminist, decolonial and Cultural Studies' critiques of economic determinism. The call to focus on social reproduction that is at its core merely echoes the crucially important work of feminist, queer and race activists in expanding the nature of class composition. However, this is really the point. Big Data capitalism may be new, but capitalism and inequality are not. Valuable critiques from feminists, race and queer theorists or activists addressing the complexity of a culturally saturated economic system already exist and demand centrality in our responses to Big Data capitalism. In drawing on these experiences – on these differential labour histories and the insight of a reproductive lens – we may also find valuable tools for today's struggle.

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