Working From Home, Exploitation, and Alienation: Thinking the Future of Work in Digital Spaces
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I

Much ink has been spilled on the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the face of contemporary work. This is especially true when it comes to the prevalence of working from home (WFH). The sustained lockdowns and social distancing measures established during large parts of 2020 made WFH using digital communication infrastructures a “new normal”. What I am bringing forward here are mostly already widely known and accepted ideas, but I want to point out some of the ways in which these could be redirected and examined in the context of late capitalist configurations of the digital workspace and labor. Given this panel’s topic, my focus lies on the impact of certain properties of digital spaces and communication mediums as part of these developments.

Central to my argument is the idea that Covid, in fact, did not change much about the socio-economic structures of the present. More precisely – as the common consensus goes – the global response to the pandemic laid bare already existing imbalances and inequalities of societal power structures and exacerbated certain tendencies of post-Fordist economies. Naomi Klein (2020) even goes as far as to cynically propose a “Pandemic Shock Doctrine”, claiming Covid was capitalized as an “opportunity” to speed along developments already underway before the pandemic.

II

While pre-pandemic an estimated 4.8% of working days in the US were spent WFH, this number surged to 61.4% in the early phase of social distancing but is projected to settle at about 24.8% over time, a study by Barrero et al. (2021) suggests. Research also shows that employees would favor to continue to work (at least partially) from home, even after the pandemic. Even employers seem to embrace these measures and plan for an increase in hybrid models including WFH for at least some days of the week after the pandemic (ibid.).

Initially, the workers’ benefits of WFH seem obvious. To name just a few: some studies on WFH (such as Bloom et al. 2013 or Manokha 2020) suggest increases in worker satisfaction and performance as workers appear to have more self-control over time- and task-management and therefore are freer and more flexible in balancing private and work-related responsibilities. However, much could be said about the societal blind spots of such a line of argument. Dingel & Neiman (2020) suggest that only a share of 37% of jobs in the US meaningfully qualifies for WFH, excluding mainly less educated workers and women as Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) add. Also, the lack of ideal working conditions (e.g. crowded or noisy premises, insufficient supply of digital devices, poor internet connection), seems to have a disproportional negative impact on lower income households (ibid.), intensifying pre-existing socio-economic fault-lines.

One of the most pervasive criticisms of WFH is that the boundaries between work and non-work are increasingly hard to maintain. Thus, as Manokha (2020) points out, the freedoms gained through WFH might – paradoxically – contribute to the development of a “24/7 work pattern” further increasing the temporal stress on workers through irregular working patterns and constant availability, even outside of working hours. But again, this is nothing historically new. The colonization of the private sphere by the instrumental logic of work has already been discussed extensively.
III

Therefore, I want to focus on a different aspect of the limits of telework and indicate some of the ways in which a potential digital “no-touch future”, as Klein (2020) calls it, could impact both the material and social relations of labor. It seems important to clarify, that my argument is not supposed to criticize digital communication technologies per se, but rather their implementation in our everyday life with only a limited sense of their effects on social conditions and human interaction which arise if we merely think of them as the digital equivalent of physical, real-world spaces and relations. My critique aims at the idiosyncrasies of digital spaces as they relate to the physical world and some of the consequences that disregarding the gap between these two spheres might overlook.

As one of the main critiques of WFH relates to the concept of privacy, I will start from there. I want to suggest that the subsumption of the private by work is accompanied by its very negation in dialectical fashion: in a digitalized “transparency society” (Han 2015), the voyeuristic expansion of privacy (e.g. through social media) is not equal to a new public sphere; instead, as Zizek claims, individuals “remain in their private space and are just expanding it to include others” (2014, 178). It is this dynamic of a (digitally supported) “panoptic isolation” of the individual, that is endemic in our digital present. I want to focus on this dynamic in the context of labor, especially as it pertains to matters of exploitation, surveillance, and alienation in relation to formal features of digital communication.

For employers, the absence of workers from the workplace and their increased autonomy necessitates new models of surveillance. Through digital solutions of workplace monitoring (e.g. constant observation, mandatory screen share and keylogging applications, productivity tracking etc.), the “gaze” of the employer extends into workers private spaces in hitherto unprecedented manner, thus worsening the potentials for overwork and other exploitative practices (Manokha 2020). Manokha (2020) observes a unique mode of alienation as a result of this: the fluid and borderless nexus of private and professional life effaces the negative properties of the private, leading to an alienation from the very privacy of the own home. Altering Marx’ well-known formula of the private in the “Paris Manuscripts” (“[The worker] is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working” (qtd. in Manokha 2020)) accordingly, Manokha states that “the worker is at home, but, because he is working, he is also not at home” (2020, 284). Vaujany et al. (2020) also add that with this comes the danger of “surveillance creep”, i.e. the continuous normalization of surveillance technologies which might justify an increase in implementation both inside and even outside of the workplace in the future.

Paradoxically then, the consequence of more freedom and self-determination in the professional realm (under the current mode of production) leads to increased restrictions of our freedom through the very technologies that allow them. This I see as a basic property of digital communication technologies and therefore digital capitalism as such.

Said “communication” technologies primarily promise to bridge distances and bring us closer together in order to alleviate isolation and loneliness (themselves associable with the conditions of late capitalism). In similarly dialectical fashion they can also be accused of amplifying the very isolation they claim to counter, as the precondition of digital connection is the individually isolated use of digital devices. This, however, is not a flaw of existing applications, but a design feature of the very digital infrastructures they are relying on. The
Digital is necessarily isolating and atomizing by its very nature; it reproduces and even intensifies the social conditions which led to its conception, as the alienation of the individual translates spatially into the virtual isolation of the body.

With regards to work, this continues the already existing trend of increasing atomization among the work force. While some large corporations already routinely engage in efforts of “union busting” and the suppression of worker organization, with most of the work force WFH, this isolation of workers from each other gained a new quality. While workers could still relatively freely socialize and engage in (figurative) “watercooler talk” when on site together (i.e. in breakrooms, before or after work etc.), digital communication while WFH is mostly relayed through company-internal platforms, thus integrating most of social interactions entirely into the production process.

Workers are isolated from each other also with regards to their own experience as workers. There is only a limited capacity to communicate grievances among each other or to form collective experiences as a unified body of workers. In other words, communication and social interaction tend to be reduced entirely to functions, i.e. the efficient exchange of information in the production process. Thus, this privatization of experience also gives way to exploitative practices, since symptoms of stress and overwork are easily personalized and not as readily grounded in the collective experience of a work force (i.e. overwork is now more likely to be blamed on a lack of personal resilience and not an abusive practice of the employer all workers suffer from more or less equally). Incidentally, in most video-call applications (as an exemplary case of digital communication), the individual participants are presented in isolated and independent tiles, representing more a “collection” of individuals than a “collective”.

This paradoxical atomization through digital mediums of connection has not only isolating effects on the individual but also contributes to a sort of self-alienation which, although already thoroughly theorized (I will mostly rely upon the work of Jean Baudrillard and Byung-Chul Han), should be re-contextualized in the thematic nexus of Covid-19.

Central to this self-alienation is the concept of the “gaze” or “look” as a moment of intersubjectivity: the gaze allows the individual to self-assert itself as a subject as it looks/gazes at another individual making it (the other) the object of its gaze. As an intersubjective concept, this necessarily involves the dialectics of mutual recognition, i.e. the interplay of subjectivation and objectivization of two individuals. The digital screen undermines this process, since whatever is shown on there, as Baudrillard puts it, is merely “processed” or “registered” (1989, 120-1)¹. When it comes to digital communication with another person, the relationship between the two interlocutors becomes a matter of “data processing”, a mechanistic “tactility” that does not involve “touch” in a corporal or organic sense (ibid.). Drawing from Heidegger, Byung-Chul Han (2021) clarifies this by introducing the differentiation of “hand” and “finger”. While the hand interacts with the material object, the thing it reaches towards, making it an extension of the objectifying capacity of the gaze; the touch involved in navigating a touch display merely involves a finger, thus constituting a constant pointing at “non-things” [Undinge] – nodes of information without any material dimension – only indicating, never reaching the object it attempts to interact with. Interaction for the finger is only possible on the basis of processing information but not by physically coming into contact with material objects, therefore limiting the effect of the subject on the world, effectively isolating it in a detached “infosphere”.

¹ If not noted otherwise, direct quotes from this text are always my translation.
Baudrillard observes a similar phenomenon when discussing the paradoxical closeness of the image on the screen: although digital communication can circumvent the limitations of physical distance, the image brought close to us by the screen remains always “lightyears away” (1989, 122); it appears at a “peculiar distance, […] insurmountable for the body” (ibid., 121), therefore “unreachably close”, only allowing for this “relentlessly abstract form of exchange, which is called communication” (ibid., 122). In a way, then, virtual presence always indicates physical absence, constituting the empty promise of a potential exchange which is always aborted by the infinitesimal distance of the image. Returning to the example of video-calls, these reflections on distance add clarity the aforementioned experience of isolation from others.

This also means that through the lens [Objektiv] of the webcam the subject is always seen, always object to its gaze without the possibility of mutual recognition. The image on the screen does not look back, it can only be registered. This, however, applies to all participants of the video call. Thus, the participants become objects without a subject, objects for an intentionless, algorithmic machine. Baudrillard explains the fundamentals of this by means of the effacement of the other through the digital interface, as “[t]he machine (the interactive screen) transforms the process of communication, i.e. the relationship of someone to another, into a process of commutation, i.e. the interchangeability of the similar” (1989, 129). The subject is therefore not only isolated from others but also alienated from its own “Wirklichkeit”, its subjective Lebenswelt, constituted by its basic capacity to exert influence on the world making this experience the digital pendant to the early Marx’s fundamental concept of alienation and the current digital transformations of work a direct extension and intensification of capitalist exploitative dynamics.

IV

What we must not ignore when dealing with the Digital as a socio-cultural and economic phenomenon is the fact that by now digital devices have stopped being mere utility or tools, used to extend our abilities; instead, we enact entire social relations through them. They became not only extensions but integral constituents of our bodies and psyches, not only aiding but actively shaping our social (and material) relations. Hence, it would be a mistake to treat them as mere utility when it comes to work and labor relations. In societies organized according to what Wendy Brown (2015) fittingly termed “neoliberal reason”, the assumed flexibility and self-determination digital labor promises must always be reflected within the existing social relations of labor; they need to be critically examined for new ways to organize labor and protect individual workers and their labor rights. But to do so, requires an understanding of the Digital which recognizes its unique challenges (and opportunities). The narrative concerning the digital sphere (currently still mainly dominated by discussions of big tech) needs to be mapped by a discourse around the digital aspects of contemporary labor, acknowledging the difference between communication as a productive function and human social exchange, a difference the current digital “Pandemic Shock Doctrine” attempts to – at least partially – override.
Bibliography


