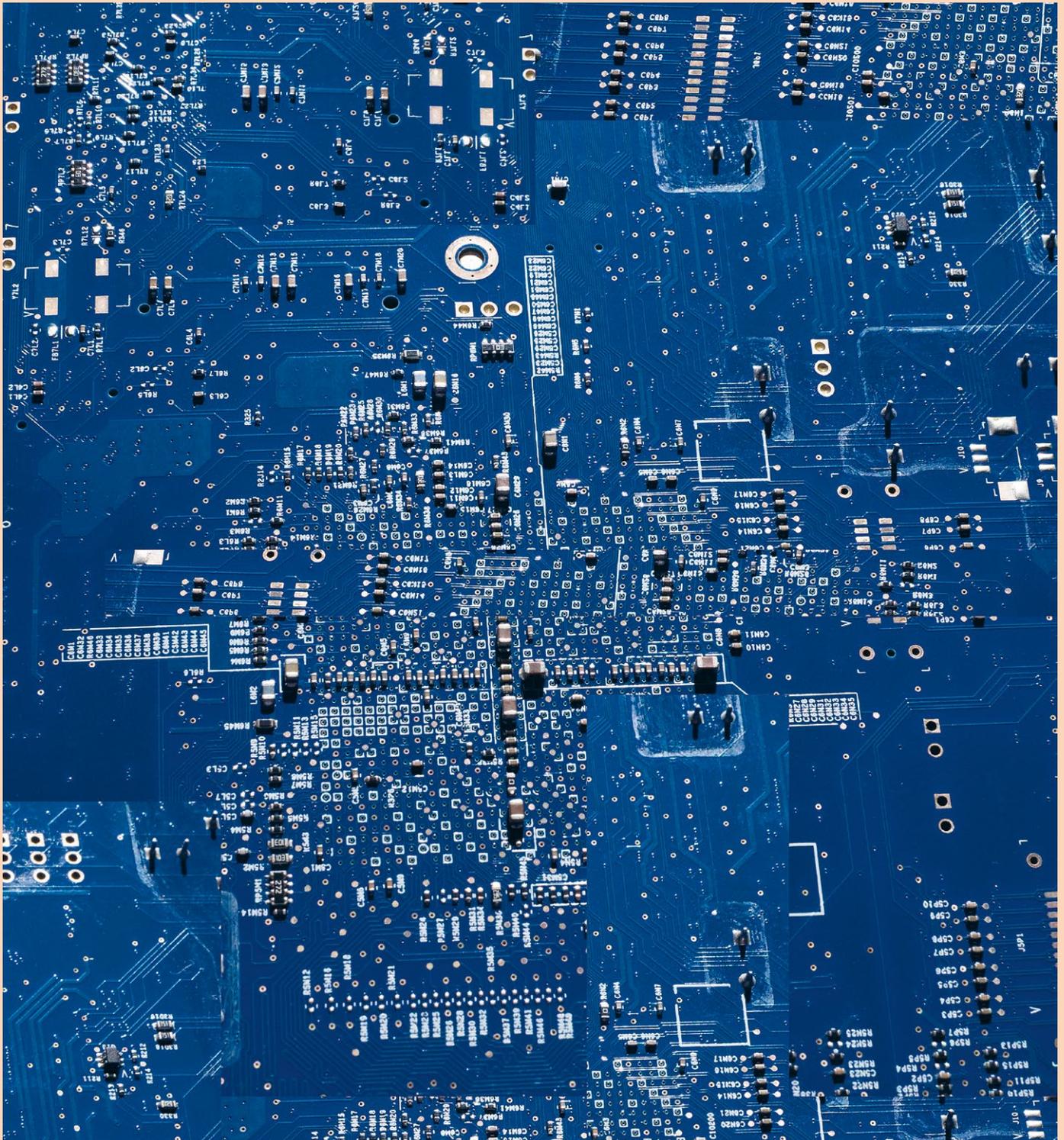


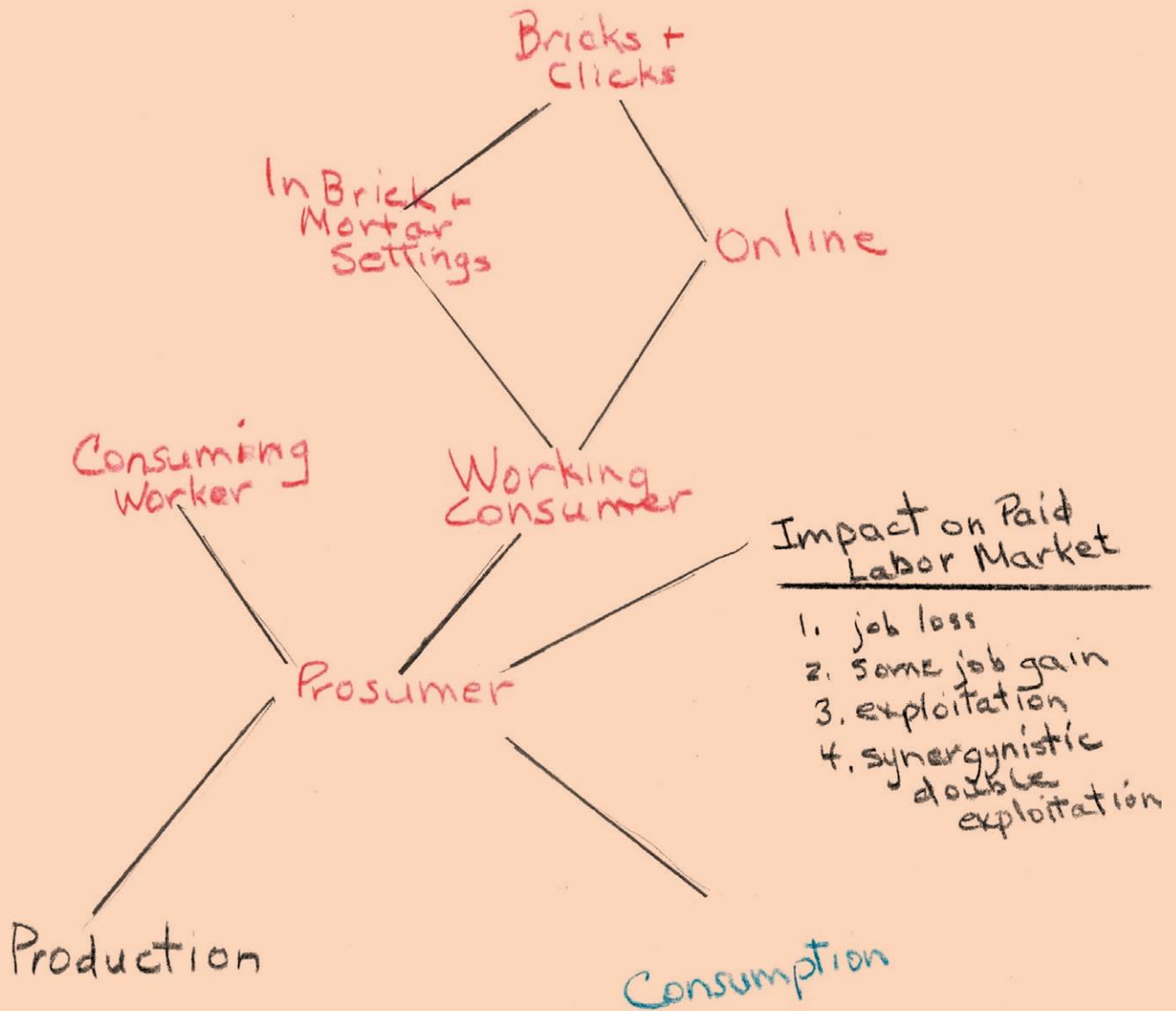
WORK IN THE AGE OF DATA

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The Increasing Importance of Working Consumers: The Impact on Paid Workers

George Ritzer

Prosumers, especially the sub-type of working consumers, are of increasing importance in various ways, including in their impact on paid employees. Working consumers are doing work traditionally done by those employees. They offer many advantages over paid employees, such as requiring little or no pay and benefits. While the increasing role of working consumers leads to the creation of many new jobs (e.g., in Amazon.com's warehouses), they constitute a bigger but little recognized threat to many paid employees.

The world of work and labor is being transformed in many different ways and by an array of well-known and well-documented forces (e.g., automation, globalization). One force that has been largely invisible and little discussed is the role played in that transformation by the increasingly omnipresent "working consumer" (Dujarier, 2016; Rieder and Voss, 2010). While consumers have always worked, a series of relatively recent changes (especially new self-service technologies; the explosion of consumption on the Internet) has served to increase the importance of the working consumer. This has even led to concern about the "overworked consumer" (Andrews, 2019). In many cases, the consumer has little choice other than to work in order to consume. As a result, workers ("consuming producers") have become less significant in those contexts in which working consumers have been of growing importance. In many cases workers have lost their jobs because of the increasing array of tasks undertaken by working consumers. The basic argument to be made here is that the increasing amount of work being done not by workers but rather by consumers is a largely invisible aspect of the "work revolution." Such consumers offer many advantages over workers, not the least of which is that they often work for little or nothing.

There are a series of senses in which consumers work. For example, they work psychologically and emotionally to produce awareness of, and desire for, various products (for example, a meal at a cafeteria; a Big Mac at McDonald's; one of Amazon.com's innumerable products) long before they ever enter the physical or digital setting in which they are able to consume them. Once the desire is created, working consumers then need to produce the actions required to get to the brick-and-mortar locations (or the Web sites) where the products are available for sale. Once there, the initial desire needs to be reproduced (or possibly altered) and translated into the steps needed to actually obtain and purchase goods and services. In many cases, especially on the Internet, consumers do not consider what they are doing as work (e.g., Googling a product or service of interest), or, even if they do, they do not consider it odious and may even regard it as fun.

The immaterial psychological work done by consumers is abundantly obvi-



Working consumption is a sub-type of the more general process of “prosumption,” or the fusion of production and consumption

Beyond the threat posed by human working consumers, there is also job loss due to the proliferation of new technologies that produce as they consume, and consume as they produce

ous in many contexts, especially in media events of all sorts. At one time there was a tendency to see audiences as passive consumers of the content being produced and promulgated by the media. However, that view has long been rejected and replaced by a view of the audience as, in the terms of this analysis, actively working to produce (define, interpret, etc.) content as they consume it. The same point can be made about brands. Brand meanings are not simply produced by marketers and advertisers; they are actively produced by the very people who consume them.

However, from the point of view of this discussion, the most important kinds of work undertaken by working consumers is the increasing number of instances in which they must now do work that in the past was done for them by paid employees. Working consumers “labor” in such bricks-and-mortar settings as supermarkets, department stores, IKEA, and in fast-food restaurants. In the latter, for example, they serve as waiters, buspersons, and, in the case of food obtained at the drive-through window, as garbagepersons taking their debris with them and then disposing of it. They also do work online, such as searching for information, products or services that, to the degree there were parallels to this work in the pre-Internet world, was done for them by paid employees. However, the vast majority of work done by consumers online is increasingly unconscious and done for them by systems of which they are largely unaware. For example, a click on something of interest online might automatically prompt the appearance of a relevant online site on one’s screen. Similarly, wearable technology (a major facilitator of working consumption, although the technology does much or all of the work) can lead to an array of prompts, not the least important of which are those from commercial interests. In addition, and more problematic, is that it might lead to the use of information about users’ actions that are invisible to them and often designed to lead them to consume.

Working consumption is a sub-type of the more general process of prosumption, or the fusion of production and consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014). Prosumption has always existed, but it is taking many new forms in the contemporary world. This is true in both bricks-and-mortar settings (e.g., the consumption

sites mentioned above), but especially in online digital sites (most notably, Amazon.com, Facebook, and Google). The fusion of production and consumption as well as of the digital and the material is even more the case in augmented settings involving both the digital and material. One example is the way in which Amazon supplements its powerful presence online with its bricks-and-mortar settings, such as its chain of Whole Foods supermarkets and its convenience stores.

While there has been some scholarly use of the term working consumer, more attention has been devoted to prosumption and the prosumer. These terms are virtually unknown in the popular literature, but many scholars have been using them, as well many others that overlap with them, for years. Further, many other scholars have dealt with the process in the past without labeling it prosumption or using similar terms. In fact, the phenomenon itself is not only *not* new, it is arguably primordial; it is undoubtedly more primordial than either production or consumption. For example, hunter-gatherers were prosumers who often both produced their own food and then consumed it; they may even have consumed it as they were producing it. People were prosumers before they were thought of, and thought of themselves, as either producers or consumers. That distinction probably gained traction with the Industrial Revolution as large numbers of people left home (or farm) to work in settings (workshops, factories) devoted to production. The more recent Consumer Revolution (Cohen, 2003) brought with it a sense of people as consumers and the development and proliferation of distinct sites where people went to consume.

As a result, scholars and laypeople have long made, and continue to make, a historical error—the tendency in analyzing the economy to focus on *either* production *or* consumption, or worker or consumer—that is in desperate need of correction. Concern with prosumers in general and working consumers in particular serves to correct that error.

While we have always been prosumers and, more specifically, working consumers, today’s increasing fusion of work (production) and consumption is abundantly obvious to the casual observer and to scholars in various fields who have created, and expanded upon, concepts that reflect this



reality. Beyond the concept of “prosumer,” others in an array of fields that deal with the same, or closely related, phenomena are “produser” (Bruns, 2008), “co-creation” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), marketing’s “service-dominant logic” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), “wikinomics” (based at least in part on the idea that businesses put consumers to work on the Internet) (Tapscott and Williams, 2008), “craft consumption” (Campbell, 2005), DIY (Fox, 2014), and, most importantly for our purposes here, the “working consumer” (or customer). While all of these ideas and others (e.g., the consumer as manager of workers on such sites as Yelp) overlap and each has its strengths, it is the idea of the prosumer that has been most influential in the social sciences and in my work.

Contemporary interest in, and usage of, the prosumer concept is traceable to Alvin Toffler’s (1980) thinking on the “rise of the prosumer,” as well his prescient later work with Heidi Toffler (2006) on the “coming prosumer explosion.” However, that work was only part of the Tofflers’ broader thinking on social change, especially the “third wave.” While that idea got a great deal of attention for a time, it was more of popular interest than one that attracted the interest of scholars and that found its way into the academic literature. Although Toffler’s work on prosumption was lost sight of by most scholars (including myself), I began writing about what was, in effect, that idea and phenomenon in my study of McDonald’s and its broader influence through the “McDonaldization of Society” (Ritzer, 1983; 1993). One of the many things that interested me about McDonald’s was the way in which it (as well as its emulators, extenders, and some predecessors [e.g. cafeterias]) put its customers to work in its bricks-and-mortar restaurants. For example, customers in those restaurants were (and are) required to “produce” their own meal by doing work that was formerly done by paid employees (and still is in higher-end restaurants). Thus, the line between consumer and worker is blurred, at least in part, in fast-food restaurants.

This is also the case in many other bricks-and-mortar settings. At one time, the traditional department store had lots of paid workers doing a wide range of tasks for consumers. However, with employees few and far between, consumers must now do much of the work themselves

(e.g., locate what they are seeking among a vast array of products, scan tags to check prices or to find missing prices, in some cases scan purchases when they leave via a self-service lane). Supermarkets still have many employees, but they are often supplemented by self-service checkout lanes where customers are required to scan their own purchases, including, at times, even weighing their own produce and bagging their purchases. Gone are the days when there were employees available to pump gasoline in service stations. Customers now not only pump (produce) their own gasoline, but they are likely to pay for it by scanning their credit cards. Customers also increasingly check themselves in at hotels and airports. They are more and more likely to be on their own to find their cars in car rental lots, to wash their own cars at automated car washes, and to check their selections out of libraries. IKEA’s customers must not only trek through seemingly endless mazes largely on their own in an effort to find what they are looking for (and likely discovering and selecting other products in the course of their rambles through the store), but, in at least some cases, they must put together at home products purchased in the store (e.g. bookcases).

Perhaps the epitome, at least thus far, in the use of the working consumer in bricks-and-mortar settings is to be found in Amazon Go’s convenience stores (ten had been opened by early 2019 and as many as 2000 are planned). Amazon Go’s stores are in the forefront of efforts by bricks-and-mortar shops and malls to compete better with online sites (and to augment Amazon.com) by, among other things, further increasing the use of working consumers and reducing the number and availability of paid employees. As a result, customers are forced to perform work traditionally done by such employees. This is made possible by, among other things, Amazon Go’s “grab-and-go” system which allows consumers to enter the brick-and-mortar shop and, on their own, to quickly and easily make their selections (groceries, ready-to-eat meals, meal kits, among other products). Because of the extensive use of digital technology in Amazon Go shops, it is not necessary for customers to wait in line in order to pay for their purchases on checkout; Amazon Go offers checkout-free shopping. All shoppers need do is use the Amazon Go app on entering the store, select whatever automatically de-

tected products they want to purchase, and leave the store. (Uber has done much the same thing; since rides are prepaid through an app, passengers can exit an Uber without the need to pay or to tip.) Consumers must pick up desired items on their own without the help of employees and they are able to leave the store without pausing at the checkout station or with the involvement of those who traditionally work at those stations in conventional shops. Purchases are scanned while still in the bag by sophisticated scanners rather than by employees. Amazon Go’s “Just Walk Out Technology” is connected to the Internet and employs computer vision, sensors, and deep learning. All of this serves to make shopping at Amazon Go far more efficient than it is in traditional brick-and-mortar convenience stores or supermarkets; consumers do it all with the assistance of advanced technologies, but with little or no help from employees. Other shops and malls are likely to follow this model by, for example, recognizing customers and their preferences as soon as they enter and leading them to likely sites and products.

Amazon is likely to increasingly integrate its Amazon Go convenience stores, its Whole Foods’ supermarkets, as well as its brick-and-mortar bookstores into its far more important digital business. It might, for example, use such stores as distribution centers for digitally ordered products or as launch pads for its nascent drone-delivery system. In fact, Amazon is expanding in so many different directions and augmenting its online business in so many different ways that it has raised the fear of the emergence (it may already exist) of a modern monopoly similar to the nineteenth-century railroads that led, in their day, to the development of anti-monopoly laws.

We are clearly in the early stages of the development of augmented businesses involving ever-tighter integration of the digital and the material and the degree to which they augment one another. In addition to the use of drones, other advances being considered are shops staffed by robots that employ facial-recognition software, as well as the use of 3D printing (additive manufacturing).

The discussion of these advanced technologies leads to the point that such technologies have played a major role in enabling working consumers and in allowing them to do things (e.g. manufacturing



products with 3D printers) that in the past could only be done by paid employees.

While the working consumer is important to the existence and further development of today's bricks-and-mortar businesses as well as to those that integrate "bricks-and-clicks," the most important and complete contemporary examples of the increasing centrality of the working consumer are to be found on Internet sites, most notably Google, Facebook, Amazon.com, as well as more specific sites such as TurboTax and LegalZoom. It is nearly impossible to find and deal with human employees on most Internet sites, including those that sell goods and services. This is because the work done by humans is comparatively expensive, prone to errors and to being unreliable. The near-total absence of human employees online is also traceable to the fact that much of the online work is performed by advanced technologies. More importantly and central to this argument is the fact that online consumers must do a lot more unpaid work not required of them in bricks-and-mortar settings. In fact, they usually have no choice but to do such work. For example, on Amazon.com

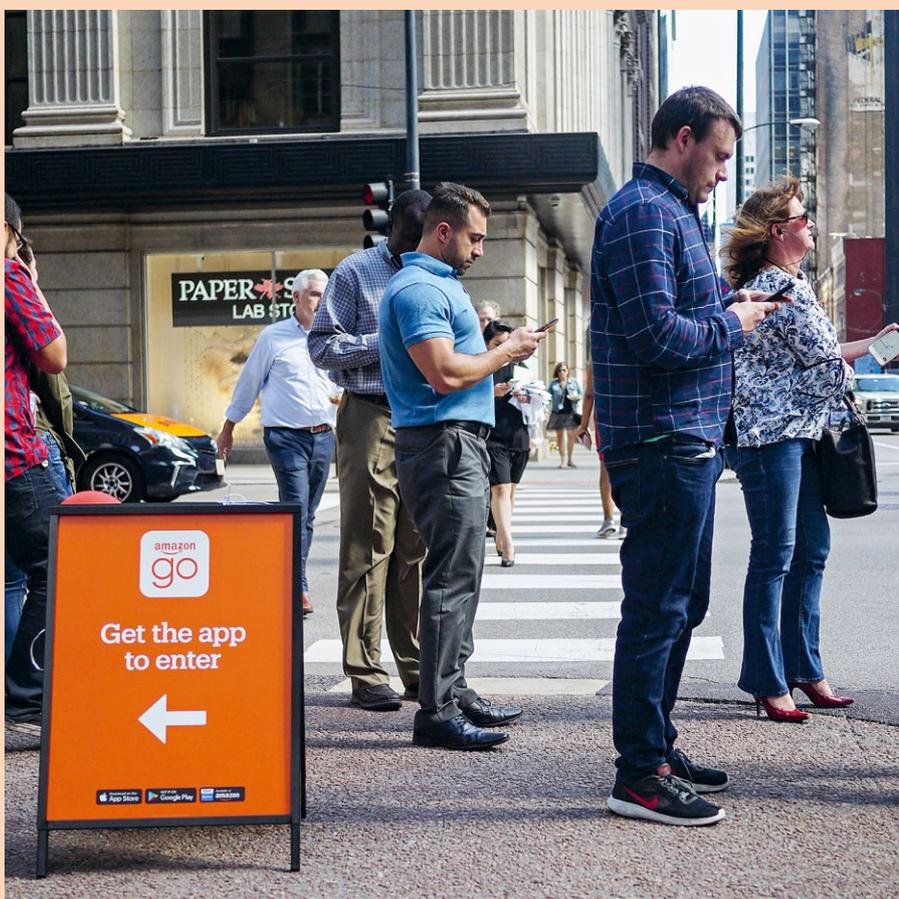
working consumers must do all of the digital work involved in ordering the myriad other products that are available on the Web site (and innumerable others like it). In the case of books, those who buy them, perhaps on the basis of online reviews produced by other working consumers, may also produce reviews of other books themselves. Increasingly, these working consumers may even author the digital books for sale on Amazon.com. As a result of all of the work being done by its working consumers, Amazon.com has little or no need for such paid employees as "clerks" and book reviewers (although it employs hundreds of thousands of people to, for example, work in distribution centers and to deliver products to its working consumers). The increasing power of Amazon.com is forcing many bricks-and-mortar shops, most notably those dealing in books, out of business with a consequent loss of jobs and an increase in unemployment in such settings.

While there is no shortage of attempts to understand the causes of unemployment, one suggested by this discussion is the heretofore unexamined role played by

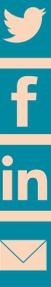
working consumers in unemployment. Beyond the threat posed by human working consumers, there is also job loss due to the proliferation of new technologies ("prosuming machines" [Ritzer, 2015b] such as additive manufacturing, wearable technologies with built-in sensors, self-driving cars) that produce as they consume; consume as they produce.

To simply state the basic argument being made here, those traditionally thought of as consumers are now doing more and more of what was once considered work (or production) *and* they are usually doing it without pay (beyond the tasks associated with self-service of all types, there are, for example, those who write reviews for Amazon, Yelp, and many other Web sites) or for little economic reward (e.g. those who do crowdsourced work on, for example, Amazon's "Mechanical Turk"). Business owners are coming (consciously and unconsciously) to understand the benefits of using working consumers in this way and, in the process, that they are reducing labor costs and the need for large numbers of paid employees in bookshops, banks, the taxi industry, and libraries, among many others. For their part, many working consumers are embracing their productive activities (such as doing all of the work in ordering books online at Amazon.com, using ATMs rather than human bank tellers, driving part-time using their own automobiles for ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Lyft). However, working consumers are also being increasingly *forced* into doing such work by, for example, the absence of readily available employees on online sites, of full-service pumps and their attendants at gasoline stations, of supermarket checkout counters staffed by employees, and of jobs in the taxi industry. While not all forms of working consumption contribute substantially to unemployment (e.g., writing reviews on Yelp), it is clear that at least some forms do cause unemployment.

The news media offer excellent examples of the relationship between technological change, automation, working consumers, and unemployment (Rusbridger, 2018). There is no question that technolog-



Pedestrians check their mobile phones near an Amazon Go sign as they wait for the lights to change, Chicago, 2018





ical change and later automation were directly involved in decimating employment in the newspaper industry by, for example, eliminating the need for typesetters and, more recently, proofreaders. On the other hand, technological advances in the news media have made possible the greater contributions of working consumers who, in turn, have played a major role in unemployment in the newspaper business. For example, computers and the Internet have made possible the development of online news sites (many people increasingly get their news from Facebook and Twitter) as well as a bewildering number and array of blogs. Fewer people read newspapers and an increasing number get their news from such online sources. These developments, among others, are contributing to the decline in the need for reporters, among others. Fewer reporters are being hired and schools of journalism are not training as many reporters, at least in traditional ways and for traditional jobs.

Much the same could be said of the need for professional photographers and videographers given the ease with which “amateurs” (or “pro-ams”) are able to do this work and upload their photos and videos free of charge. This work is made possible not only by the Internet, but also by smartphones and digital cameras that make it more likely that those with little

or no training will be able to produce (relatively) high-quality photographs and videos. Bloggers and amateur photographers have also contributed to the decline, even the demise, of many outlets for the work of journalists and professional photographers, such as newspapers and magazines. With fewer outlets for their work, there are fewer paying jobs for, among others, reporters and photographers.

In sum, because of the increasing importance of working consumers people are losing jobs, are being forced to work part-time, are otherwise underemployed, or are not getting paid jobs in the first place. Working consumers are doing what was once, or still could be, paid work. However, they are doing it, and often seemingly happily, on an unpaid or poorly paid basis. But the advantages of working consumers do not stop at being unpaid or poorly paid. Such working consumers offer the profit-making organization many other advantages in comparison to even poorly paid employees (as well as to traditional customers on whom much needs to be spent on marketing, advertising, and salespeople in order to induce them to consume).

For example, while profit-making organizations still have many short- and long-term obligations to paid workers, there are few, if any, responsibilities to working consumers and they are almost

Customers order food at a self-ordering kiosk at a McDonald's fast food restaurant in Hong Kong, 2019

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all short term, even immediate. In addition to paying a wage, the employer may be responsible, although to a decreasing degree, for various costly benefit programs for paid workers, such as health insurance, retirement programs, and paid vacations. There are no such responsibilities for working consumers.

In addition, paid workers, at least historically and to a large degree even today, must be provided with the necessary and often costly “means of production,” such as places to work (offices, factories), tools and machines (assembly lines, computers). In contrast, some working consumers pay for the purchase and upkeep on their own means of production (offices at home, utility costs associated with those offices, computers, and automobiles if they drive for a ride-sharing company, etc.). Working consumers also cost less to serve. Fewer paid personnel are needed in shopping sites (e.g. department stores) because prosumers now do much of the work themselves. There are even greater savings in terms of the increasingly important consumption on the Internet (e.g. Amazon.com, eBay, travel sites such as trivago, KAYAK, and Expedia) where paid employees are almost totally absent, at least as far as users are concerned, and the unpaid working prosumers do virtually all of the work. Other savings are derived from the fact that products are either stored by working consumers (in the case of much for sale on eBay; used books on Amazon.com) or are sold on more of a just-in-time than a just-in-case basis (Amazon.com). Amazon.com does not warehouse the vast majority of the “long tail” of books (and other products) it offers for sale, but rather obtains them as they are ordered, frequently from third-party sellers (often, themselves, working consumers).

These advantages and savings are an irresistible attraction to profit-making organizations which covet both fewer responsibilities and, most importantly, from the point of view of profits, a great reduction in costs.

It is worth noting that working consumers fit well with the reigning neoliberal philosophy. They are on their own to both produce and consume. They must make their own way in, and negotiate, the maze-like structure of the capitalist system. In contrast, the traditional employee in this system is provided an array (but declining number) of things by the business owners

and both are bound by agreements and contracts. Thus working consumers can be seen as a model for a neoliberal economy.

While we have discussed its role in job loss, working consumption also leads to job creation. As mentioned above, one of the best-known examples involves bloggers, who turn their activities into paid work by, for example, finding advertisers for their blogs or by using their success as bloggers as a springboard into becoming reporters, book authors, and so on.

More importantly, working consumption (and prosumption more generally) relies on and leads to the creation of millions of new jobs for paid employees. For example, because of the billions of dollars spent by its working consumers, Amazon employs about 600,000 paid employees. Then there are the uncountable number of workers in various companies involved in producing the systems—iPhones, ATMs, self-checkout technologies, Web sites, and so on—that make working consumption the norm. It is possible that more jobs are lost as a result of working consumption than are created by it, but of even greater importance is the fact that those who gain the new paid jobs are not likely to be the same kinds of people who lose their positions as a result of the working consumer. For example, relatively unskilled supermarket checkers and bank tellers are not likely to find their way into the high-tech industries that owe their existence, at least in part, to the increasing centrality of working consumption. Those industries often require a more advanced, or at least a different, skill set (although Amazon, among others, also employs many relatively unskilled workers such as warehouse workers).

The poorly concealed secret of classical capitalism was—and is—paying workers less, usually far less, than the value of what they produce (Marx, 1867/1967). While that continues to be the case, an even better kept secret in today’s economic system is that working consumers are paid little or nothing for what they produce. Most of the magic of early capitalism was to be found in the gap between what manufacturers charged for their products and what those who actually produced them—the workers—were paid (poorly) for their labor. Capitalism today is a far more magical economy, at least for profit-making organizations, because most working consumers work for little or nothing. Instead of a great

deal (of products, profits, and so on) emanating from very little (in terms of wages), much is now being created out of thin air; out of nothing (at least in terms of wages). Further, most working consumers do it gladly, even happily, with little of the alienation associated with paid workers and no nasty problems such as absenteeism, goldbricking, and going out on strike.

The purest example of this contemporary “magic” is to be found in the abundance of “big data” (Radford and Lazer, forthcoming) provided free of charge, often unknowingly by users, to the new digital giants of capitalism—Google, Facebook and Amazon—and aggressively harvested and used by them and many others. Even if it was possible to hire marketing firms to gather this enormous and ever-expanding body of “big data”—and it is not—it would cost companies an unfathomable amount of money. The data collected in this old-fashioned way would be minuscule in terms of quantity and quality in comparison to that provided free of charge by working consumers. Indeed, Amazon’s top executive, Jeff Bezos, has made it clear that the enormous amount of data provided, consciously and unconsciously, by those who access, click on, and buy products on the site are more valuable in the long run to Amazon than the sale of those products. The data can be used to learn more about their own consumers, better target them, predict their behavior, and sell to them in the future. In addition, they can sell that data to others. This has helped to make Amazon an economic powerhouse and Bezos the richest man in the world. Abundant and free data is even more the source of the wealth and power for, among others, Google and Facebook. After all, Google and Facebook sell no conventional products; their main resource is the tracking and using by them and others in myriad ways of information provided free of charge by their billions of prosumers.

Digital sites lend themselves easily to the collection of massive amounts of data. These data are provided, usually free of charge and often unknowingly, by users and providers. The users provide that data (e.g. preferences for various products) unknowingly and free of charge every time they click, for example, on a search item or on products available on Amazon.com. Facebook users do even more and provide even more detailed information on



themselves and their “friends” by writing on their walls, as well as those of others. Facebook and Google extract and use that data in various ways, most obviously in targeting users with ads for products related to their preferences. They use extracted search data to sell targeted ad space to advertisers. Such data are now the source of almost all Google’s (and Facebook’s) revenue. Remember that virtually all of these data come from working consumers who are not compensated for their contributions.

This is but a small part of what it, and many other entities, are doing in ushering us into the computational culture’s era of “datafication” (Couldry, forthcoming). The goal is to turn as many things as possible, even the self through self-tracking devices such as Fitbit, into data.

Amazon’s acquisition of the Whole Foods chain of supermarkets reflects the growing importance of big data provided, consciously and unconsciously, by working consumers. Supermarket chains have not been able to create, or to have access to, the abundance of big data that is available to Whole Foods now that it is under the Amazon umbrella. Such data, along with other Amazon’s advantages, could allow Whole Foods to become a much more significant player in the supermarket business, much more powerful than it heretofore has been. Larger and more established supermarket chains will need to do a better job of obtaining and using such data. Whole Foods will also enable Amazon to gather much more big data on food shopping. It can then use that not only to enhance Whole Foods’ position in the supermarket world, but also to improve Amazon’s role in the online sale of food.

In describing and theorizing about capitalism in the nineteenth century Karl Marx was clearly dealing with an economic system dominated by production (industry, manufacturing, poorly paid manual laborers, etc.). This focus was obvious in many places in his work, especially in his definitions of the two key players in the capitalist system: the capitalist and the proletariat. The capitalist was defined above all by ownership of the means of *production* and the proletariat by the necessity of selling their ability to *produce*—their labor (really their labor time)—in order to have access to the means of production. They needed that access in order

to be productive and, in so doing, to earn a wage that allowed them—and perhaps their families—to subsist.

At an abstract theoretical level of the economy in general, Marx saw production and consumption of equal importance. However, the vast majority of Marx’s work is focused on the specific economic form—capitalism—that was of growing importance in the mid-nineteenth century (and is of far greater importance today). Marx concentrated almost exclusively on production because early capitalism was dominated by it; consumption was rather primitive and of secondary economic importance. To put it another way, it was the dynamics of production that were of greatest interest to Marx (and most later Marxist and mainstream economists). Nevertheless, while capitalism was driven by production, that which was produced in capitalism had to be, at least in the main, consumed. A capitalist system in general, as well as a specific capitalist enterprise, which fails to sell what it produces in the market, or at least much of it, will fail. To put it in more Marxian terms, the “exchange values” produced by the capitalist system of production must be “use values” that meet consumers’ needs and that produce a demand for them.

Marx’s “productivist bias” was *not* inherent in his overarching theory. Rather, it was driven by the realities of the capitalism of his day. While early capitalism *was* dominated by production, it is *not* the case that later forms of capitalism would inevitably be dominated by production.

Capitalism today continues to be a system that *appears* to be dominated by production. However, as pointed out above, there was a shift in the US, especially after the end of World War II, away from an economy dominated by production to one in which consumption is predominant. The predominance of consumption has increased dramatically in the decades since the end of World War II. In fact, it is often contended that seventy percent, or more, of the US economy in the early twenty-first century is accounted for by consumption.

The key point from the perspective of this discussion is that it is possible to think of not only producer capitalism, but also consumer capitalism. The US, at least since World War II, is better seen as increasingly characterized by consumer rather than producer capitalism. While to Marx, the great source of

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the “success” of producer capitalism, at least from the point of view of the capitalist, was the ability to exploit the proletariat, it could be argued that the (or at least a) great source of success in consumer capitalism is the ability to exploit the consumer. Of course, production continues to be important, indeed essential, within consumer capitalism and the exploitation of the proletariat continues as well. However, in contrast to producer capitalism, consumer capitalism can be seen as a *doubly exploitative* economic system. In other words, the capitalist earns profits through the exploitation of people in their roles as workers *and* as consumers. However, we have moved beyond this double exploitation to *synergistic double exploitation* (Ritzer, 2015a). The exploitation of prosumers as producers used to take place mainly in settings such as factories, while that of prosumers as consumers was found primarily in, for example, grocery stores or butcher shops. Now, the exploitation of the prosumer (both as producer and consumer) is increasingly likely to take place in the same setting (in the “social factory”; see below) and at the same time. That is, the exploitation of the prosumers as producers *and* as consumers interpenetrate creating a synergy that results in a higher level of exploitation than ever before.

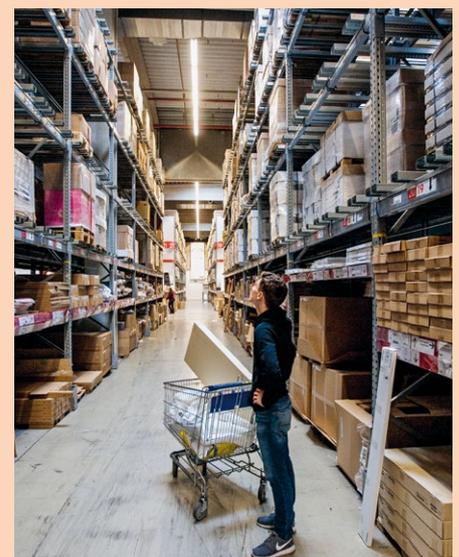
The focus here on prosumers being synergistically doubly exploited is in their role as consumers because that is where we find the most important changes leading to such exploitation. Needless to say, the best examples of synergistic double exploitation, at least in the material world, are to be found in the wide array of self-service systems already discussed. In all of these systems they are being exploited as producers, but this is occurring *at the same time* they are being exploited as consumers. Synergistic double exploitation is clearest in these cases since there is a more or less equal measure of consumption and production to be exploited and the exploitation of both is occurring more-or-less simultaneously. Furthermore, the capacity to exploit consumption and production has been honed and heightened over the years by earlier (and continuing) advances in producer and consumer capitalism. Prosumer capitalism is now making its own contributions to this by creating, refining, and heightening the ability to exploit prosumers.

In effect, those corporations that rely heavily on self-service (e.g., McDonald’s,

Walmart, Google, Amazon.com) have learned the lessons of both producer and consumer capitalism and employed the best of both, at least as far as capitalists and their profits are concerned. To this, they have added more recent advances in prosumer capitalism and those advances are likely to accelerate in the future. In bringing all of the lessons of producer, consumer, and prosumer capitalism together in one system, the leaders in prosumer capitalism have operationalized, combined, and enhanced the principles of how best to exploit prosumers as *both* producers *and* consumers, as well as in the integration of those two forms of exploitation. While most of these forms of exploitation were undertaken independently in producer and consumer capitalism, they are not only adopted together in prosumer capitalism, but they are employed in a synergistic fashion to create unprecedented levels of, and possibilities for, exploitation and therefore for the profitability of capitalist enterprises.

One way of thinking of the exploitation of consumers is the process by which they are induced to go far beyond the consumption of the basics needed for survival and to become hyperconsumers (Ritzer, 2012). They do so by buying and being sold more goods and services than they “need”; paying more, often far more, for them than the commodities are “worth”; and ideally expanding the pool of money available for consumption by going into debt (often deeply) in order to be able to pay for them.

The preceding discussion is a prelude to the argument that while producer and consumer capitalism are alive and well, a new (based, paradoxically, on the very old, if not primal, process of prosumption) form of capitalism—“prosumer capitalism”—has emerged as arguably at least one of the defining forms of capitalism in the twenty-first century (among the other candidates for names for contemporary capitalist systems are “platform,” “digital,” and “surveillance” capitalism), especially in the US and the developed West. This development has gone unrecognized by most observers as well as by those intimately involved in the system. Thus, a new “grand narrative” is evolving: producer capitalism>consumer capitalism>prosumer capitalism is being suggested here. However, all of these capitalist systems coexist today and each has elements of the others; *all*



Customer in a self-service area at an IKEA store in Cologne, 2007



involve some combination of production, consumption, and prosumption.

Much of this discussion is in accord with the perspectives of the later autonomist Marxists, especially their thinking on the social factory (Gill and Pratt, 2008). That is, from this perspective, much production is no longer derived from workers, nor does it take place in the traditional factory or office. Rather, it now occurs in both material and immaterial forms in the larger society composed, largely, of working consumers. While additive manufacturing came into existence long after the work done by the autonomist Marxists, it seems to be the ultimate example (at least so far) of the kind of development they were thinking about. Of course, those who work in order to consume in self-service settings can also be seen as existing in the social factory.

All economic systems, including all capitalist systems, are systems of prosumption involving working consumers. What, then, is so different about the situation today? First, a variety of recent social changes have served to create new forms of working consumption (as discussed above, especially on the Internet) and to give the process even greater importance in the economic system. Given the exploitation that serves to define capitalism, the nature of the exploitation of the working consumer within prosumer capitalism takes center stage. This all matters because all of us, and to an increasing degree, are working consumers. As such, as pointed out above, we are being doubly and synergistically exploited as producers and consumers. Not only are virtually all of us being doubly exploited, but we are to a large degree, if not totally, oblivious to it.

Examples of double synergistic double exploitation are found in self-service gasoline stations, self-operating kiosks in fast-food restaurants, ATMs, self-checkouts at supermarkets, self-check-ins and -outs at hotels, and especially on online consumption sites such as Amazon.com. In all of these systems work that was once done by paid employees is now performed by working consumers who do many of the same tasks, but they do them largely on an unpaid basis. In doing so, they are being exploited as producers, but this is occurring *at the same time* they are being exploited as consumers by, for example, over-paying for gasoline, hamburgers, bank services,

groceries, airplane tickets, hotel accommodations, and the myriad goods and services for sale online.

The counterargument to the idea that working consumers are exploited, if not doubly and synergistically exploited, is that they are rewarded for their “work” not by a paycheck, but in the lower prices available to them (or rooted out by them because they are “educated consumers”). That is, working consumers are simply being rewarded in a different way than they were in the past. They do the work associated with contemporary forms of consumption mainly because they believe that they are getting lower prices and that those savings are an adequate reward for the work involved. This is certainly a possibility and it would be the argument made by those who own today’s profit-making organizations increasingly reliant on working consumers.

However, the strongest and clearest evidence that working consumers do *not* ordinarily get lower prices is to be found in the cases where self-service systems coexist with older systems staffed by paid employees providing services to consumers. Typical is the case of the checkout lanes in supermarkets and in many other retail businesses. Those who use self-checkout do unpaid work that was (and is) done by paid cashiers on traditional lanes. However, those working consumers who use the self-checkout lanes pay the *same* amount for their purchases as those who use traditional lanes and have the work done for them by paid employees. More generally, supermarkets save money (and enhance their profitability) because of that free labor and the lower labor costs associated with the reduced need for paid employees. However, *the full savings (or even part of it) are not directly passed on to the working consumers who are doing the work; who are providing the free labor.*

It is possible, however, that all shoppers (those who are working consumers and those who continue to consume in the traditional way with the help of paid employees) get lower prices because of the free labor done by working consumers. In that case, working consumers would be subsidizing more traditional consumers (now “free riders”). If that was the case, there would be no net gain to the owners of those supermarkets and no economic inducement to invest in the new technology needed to enable working consumers.

The best examples of synergistic double exploitation, at least in the material world, are to be found in the wide array of self-service systems

Working consumers are simply being rewarded in a different way than they were in the past. They do the work associated with contemporary forms of consumption because they believe that they are getting lower prices



How can anything be done about this exploitation, especially given the fact that working consumers are unaware of the process in and through which the exploitation occurs? Exploitation is quite clear in the traditional case of paid workers. In fact, it was even reducible to mathematical formulae in Marx's work. Those formulae are based on the fact that workers produce a great deal, but are only paid for a small part of what they produce. Alternatively, workers labor many hours during the work day, but only a small part of that time is needed to pay their wages; the gains from the rest of the work day go to the capitalist. Some of it is used to pay expenses, but most importantly it is the source of the profits that are the goal and basis of capitalism. As a theory, exploitation obviously has a negative connotation and that is supported by the relative lack of economic success of workers, their lack of positive feelings toward their work, and even their alienation from, and rebellion against, it.

Exploitation is less clear-cut in the case of working consumers; it cannot be reduced to a simple mathematical formula. It seems clear that unpaid or poorly paid working consumers are exploited as workers, but less clear-cut is the ways in which they are exploited as consumers. However, such a multidimensional measure of the exploitation of working consumers is far more difficult than it is in the much simpler (but still highly complex) case of the paid worker. How does one calculate how much work working consumers do and how much they should be paid for it?

Working consumption is also much more difficult to think of in terms of alienation. Rather than being characterized by the frequently negative feelings of workers toward production, working consumers are generally highly positive, if not downright ecstatic, about what they do and that which they derive from it (goods and services). Put another way, it is easy to think of Marx's workers as alienated, but it is difficult or impossible to apply that term, at least in its social-psychological sense, to working consumers. (Structurally it can be argued that working consumers *are* as alienated—separated—from other consumers, the consumption process, the products they consume, and their essential being as are workers from other producers, the production process, the products they produce, as well as their being.)

This lack of alienation is clearest in the case of today's working consumers on the Internet, especially on social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). What exists on these sites, their content (writings on Facebook walls, tweets) is created by working consumers. At the same time, it is those same people, or others just like them, who consume that content. Virtually all of those involved in these processes and systems have positive feelings toward them. It is almost impossible to think of users as alienated from those sites since they are to a large extent responsible for the production and use (consumption) of the content on them.

In terms of the grand narrative being suggested here—producer capitalism>consumer capitalism>prosumer capitalism—a key issue is its practical applicability rather than merely as an abstract conceptual and theoretical point of view.

First, most people continue to think of themselves as either workers or consumers, or workers at one time and in one place and consumers at another time and place, but few, if any, think of themselves as working consumers. How could they when the concept as well as others like it (prosumers, co-creators) were (and are) known to only a very small number of scholars working in a number of diverse fields. The fact that these ideas exist in diverse fields and forms further inhibits not only academic work on this topic but also the ability of those outside of academia to have a way of conceptualizing and thinking about these new realities. Nothing else is possible, at least practically, unless people are able to begin to think of themselves and what they do as working consumers.

Secondly, and far more importantly, this constitutes a new domain that capitalists are capturing and using to further increase profits. This is not to say that capitalists are much more consciously aware of the working consumer than most others, but for quite some time they have implicitly understood the basic dynamics that undergird the utility of the working consumer. Thus, in the early twentieth century the owners of supermarkets did not understand, at least explicitly, that they were transforming consumers in grocery stores into working consumers in supermarkets, but that was the consequence of various changes designed to rationalize their operations and increase their profits.

In their roles as producers and as consumers, prosumers are doubly exploited in a synergistic fashion that leads to unprecedented levels of exploitation

It is easy to think of Marx's workers as alienated, but it is difficult or impossible to apply the term—at least in its social-psychological sense—to working consumers



The same kind of thing can be said about fast-food restaurants in the mid-twentieth century. More recently, Facebook did not fully understand that it would become a nearly hundred-billion-dollar company largely because of the content and data provided by its working consumers. The same could be said of Amazon.

As the concept of the working consumer gains greater visibility and notoriety and reaches the larger public, many more capitalists will be drawn in the direction of modifying or creating enterprises that rely more and more on them. Thus, we are likely to see the spread of this model, as well as a growing realization of the fact that there are ever-greater profits to be derived from it.

For their part, working consumers, at least in the short run, are not likely to be nearly as quick to understand that they are working consumers, that they will increasingly be working consumers, and the implications of this reality for them, especially their greater vulnerability to exploitation.

Conclusion

While what is being presented here is a highly pessimistic view of the current state, and especially the future, of working consumers in prosumer capitalism, it is possible to offer a more optimistic scenario based especially on non-profit sites (e.g., Wikipedia, Firefox, most blogs) on the Internet. Here are sites and enterprises controlled by working consumers that operate largely for their benefit rather than for the profitability of capitalists. Working consumption can be empowering because people are in control of what they both produce and consume. They do so to benefit themselves and *not* the bottom line of capitalistic enterprises. More importantly, they do so—and without pay—for many other working consumers who can use the systems they help to create at little or no cost. The collaboration that occurs on prosumption sites enables the offering of many goods and services free of charge (or close to it). Consequently, working consumption can be seen as destabilizing to traditional capitalism. Thus, working consumption is capable of producing a new economic system that is empowering, democratic, and of benefit to all (or, at least, many more) involved.

While one would like to embrace this more optimistic scenario, the fact is that

the rewards of maintaining and expanding control over this system are simply too great for capitalists to ignore. They will draw on their great resources to dominate this domain and in the process work hard to limit, if not scuttle, efforts to turn it into a more equal and democratic system oriented to the needs and interests of working consumers rather than to the profitability of capitalist enterprises.

Finally, it should be reiterated that the working consumer is a major force in revolutionizing work and labor. The consumer is not generally seen as having such a role, let alone a significant one, in the transformation of work and labor. Such a role is usually accorded to forces internal to what we have traditionally thought of as work and labor. We need to reflect on and study the changes in paid labor that are traceable to the burgeoning role for working consumers.



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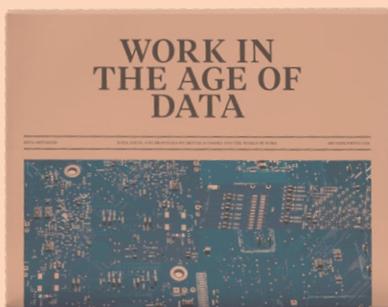
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