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An In-depth Study of Time Exploitation in the Era of Digital Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

Relying on digital technologies, digital capitalism continuously deepens the exploitation of human time. It dismantles the inherent authenticity of natural time through a "digital calendar", infinitely expands the boundaries of labor time via technical means, and converts individuals' free time into productive time for unpaid digital labor, thereby constructing an all-round system of temporal control. This new form of time exploitation exhibits distinct characteristics: the boundaryless expansion of exploitation fields, the covert nature of exploitative methods, and the alienation of subjective cognition. To alleviate the problem of time exploitation under digital capitalism, efforts should be made from three dimensions: clarifying the ownership of data property rights, adhering to a people-centered development orientation, and establishing a new concept of wealth centered on free time. This not only represents a contemporary response and innovative development of Marxist labor theory, but also carries important theoretical and practical significance for advancing the sound and orderly development of the digital economy and realizing the free and all-round development of human beings.

KEYWORDS

Digital Capitalism; Digital Labor; Time Exploitation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The liberation of human labor and the expansion of individuals' free time ought to be the inherent goals of the development of digital technology. From automated production reducing physical labor intensity to remote collaboration breaking spatial constraints on work, technological progress should serve as a vital pillar for improving human quality of life. Nevertheless, reality deviates from the original intention of technological advancement. Iterative upgrades of digital technology have failed to truly realize labor liberation and the growth of free time. Instead, numerous groups are trapped in intensive time consumption, and even fall into spiritual nihilism amid endless digital labor. "Time exploitation" in the digital age has become ubiquitous. By reconstructing perceptions of time, expanding labor boundaries and alienating labor concepts, digital technologies enable time exploitation to break free from physical spatial limits and explicit coercion, penetrating deeply into individuals' daily practices across their entire life cycle. This new type of exploitation not only exacerbates the survival predicaments of digital workers, but also poses a severe challenge to the core value goal of "the free and all-round development of human beings". Against this backdrop, an in-depth investigation into the internal mechanism through which time exploitation operates in the era of digital capitalism and an exploration of practical paths to resolve digital time exploitation bear profound theoretical and practical value.Organization of the Text

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2. THE OPERATIONAL MECHANISMS OF TIME EXPLOITATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

2.1 The Deconstruction of Natural Time and the Construction of the Digital Calendar

Time constitutes the fundamental dimension of human social activities, whose inherent nature features distinctive standardization and coordination, deeply intertwined and synchronized with natural rhythms. In traditional Chinese society, based on profound understanding of natural laws, people formed a life rhythm of "working at sunrise and resting at sunset". Labor and rest schedules were arranged in accordance with the alternating cycles of day and night as well as the transition of four seasons. Meanwhile, traditional festivals and folk customs were rooted in natural rhythms. They carry millennia-old national cultural memories and build exclusive temporal spheres for individuals' emotional communication and social connections. This time system centered on natural rhythms aligns with the operational laws of human physiological functions, and serves as a critical foundation sustaining stable rhythms of social production and daily life.

However, the essential characteristic of the capitalist mode of production-capital's pursuit of infinite accumulation-strikes a fundamental blow to the traditional natural time system. To seize more surplus value and achieve self-appreciation, capital relies centrally on the appropriation and domination of labor time. This inherent nature inevitably drives it to break the natural constraints of natural time and continuously encroach on individuals' leisure free time. Especially with the popularization of digital technologies, capitalism has secured absolute dominance over the regulation of social time, and on this basis constructed a "digital calendar" completely detached from natural rhythms. "Within digital capitalism, the digital calendar shaped by digital technologies and electronic effects replaces objective natural phenomena as the new standard for time measurement."[1] This technologically constructed new temporal system erodes the intrinsic connection between time and natural laws. Submerged in this technology-dominated unnatural temporal framework, human beings are forced to cede more and more of their free time. Such reconstruction of temporal structures is not merely a product of technological transformation; it reflects capital's profound infiltration and extreme appropriation of labor time, ultimately subordinating human existential time to the efficiency logic of the "digital calendar".

2.2 Technological Expansion of Labor Time and the Dissolution of Boundaries

In Capital, Marx sharply criticized the excessive exploitation of wage workers' labor time: "Capital's relentless, blind pursuit of surplus labor [...] oversteps not only the moral maximum of the working day, but also its purely physical maximum."[2] In traditional industrial societies, capitalists extracted surplus value mainly by extending working hours and raising labor intensity. The adoption of digital technologies has furnished capital with entirely new technical avenues to expand labor time and intensify exploitation.

At present, technological progress consistently serves the core demand of capital accumulation. "Digital capital leverages intelligent algorithmic technology to build a precisely quantified digital labor monitoring mechanism, enabling it to accurately control every step of digital workers' labor processes."[3] This mechanism not only cuts the costs of capital accumulation and allows capital to capture greater surplus value, but also drastically boosts production efficiency. In daily labor processes, workers are subject to full-time digital surveillance and compelled to maintain high-intensity working states. Meanwhile, the absolute length of labor time has expanded significantly. Extreme work models such as the "996" and "007" schedules have spread across various industries, particularly prominent in internet, fintech and cross-border e-commerce sectors. According to the 2023 Report on the Protection of Digital Workers' Rights and Interests, practitioners in the internet industry work an average of 2.3 extra hours of overtime every day, and 38.7% of digital workers

enjoy less than one full rest day per week-far exceeding the legal weekly working hour cap of 44 hours stipulated in the Labor Law. More crucially, "the temporal exploitation mechanism of digital capitalism blurs the line between labor time and free time." The universal prevalence of mobile office software and smartphones means workers are required to handle work matters during off-hours at all times: replying to workplace group messages, communicating with clients, and completing urgent tasks have become commonplace. Work information invades all facets of daily life indiscriminately through digital devices, making it impossible for individuals to draw clear boundaries between work and life. Free time originally reserved for rest, social interaction and self-development is persistently encroached upon by work, with living space severely squeezed as a result. This unrestricted encroachment of labor accumulates continuous physical fatigue among workers and triggers profound psychological anxiety over time. Many individuals dare not fully disconnect from digital devices for fear of missing work notifications, ultimately falling into a state of perpetual passive standby labor.

2.3 The Commodification of Free Time and the Formation of Unpaid Digital Labor

As a new labor form emerging in the era of digital capitalism, digital labor can be divided into two categories based on employment relations and compensation attributes: paid digital labor and unpaid digital labor. Paid digital labor features clear employment contracts and remuneration systems, with a relatively transparent correspondence between labor time and labor value. By contrast, unpaid digital labor constitutes the core vehicle through which digital capital appropriates individuals' free time. Its distinctive covertness and universality mean individuals often unwittingly become tools for capital accumulation.

During individuals' free time, all internet activities including web browsing, video streaming, online shopping and posting comments generate massive volumes of user data. Collected, analyzed and processed by platform algorithms, these data are ultimately transformed into core productive materials with commercial value. Drawing on such data, platforms construct precise user portraits to deliver personalized targeted advertisements and drastically boost advertising conversion rates. They also aggregate user-generated content to attract traffic, raise platform activity levels and strengthen market competitiveness. Furthermore, standardized data trading provides vital data support and references for third-party enterprises' market layout and product research and development. This aligns with the "prosumer" model proposed by Alvin Toffler. For instance, travel guides and food reviews posted by social media users attract massive traffic to platforms, and are adopted by tourism and catering enterprises as critical marketing reference data, even directly deployed to optimize recommendation algorithms. View duration, likes and preference data of short-video users serve as the core basis for platforms to adjust content distribution strategies, substantially increasing advertisers' willingness to place ads. All commercial value created freely by users is converted into platform profits, while individuals receive no labor compensation in return—this forms the quintessential form of unpaid digital labor.

Despite appearing to involve voluntary participation, unpaid digital labor is in essence capital's uncompensated appropriation of individuals' free time, manufactured through technological dependency and the alienation of entertainment. As one scholar observes: "Users are forced by internet addiction to work for platform capital without pay."[4] Today, the internet is deeply integrated into daily life as an indispensable tool for information acquisition, social interaction and leisure entertainment, with some individuals developing psychological reliance on online networks. Against this backdrop, individuals' internet use in free time appears to be an autonomous leisure choice, yet in reality constitutes unpaid digital labor for platform capital. The pervasiveness of digital labor means individuals are almost perpetually subjected to exploitation, reducing free time to mere productive materials for capital accumulation. The longer individuals spend online, the deeper and more extensive the exploitation by digital capitalism, and the less sovereign control they retain over their own time.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF TIME EXPLOITATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

3.1 Exploitation Field: Boundarization from "Factory Society" to "Social Factory"

In the era of traditional capitalism studied by Marx, factories constituted the core site for capital to implement exploitation. Through stringent workplace regulations and coercive management measures, capitalists confined exploitative practices within the physical boundaries of factories. At that time, even as workers' free time was continuously compressed, capital exploitation remained spatially bounded: workers were only subject to capital's domination during factory working hours, and could escape direct capitalist control to a certain extent once leaving the factory premises.

The development of digital capitalism completely shatters such spatial shackles, driving a profound transformation of exploitation fields from a "factory society" to a "social factory". On the one hand, digital technologies fuel industrial iteration and upgrading, breaking the constraints of fixed time and space on value creation. Centralized traditional factory production is replaced by decentralized, remote working modes. Workers can complete tasks from homes, cafes, transport vehicles and all other social scenarios, extending work space to every corner of society and truly realizing the shift from factory socialization to the socialization of factories. On the other hand, the rise of digital gig labor further expands the scope of temporal exploitation. Acting as intermediary hubs, digital platforms split complete production processes into fragmented independent tasks. Workers accept tasks and earn corresponding remuneration via platforms, which extract a percentage of revenue as commission. This model essentially represents the digital evolution of traditional piece-rate wages, regarding which Marx long ago noted: "Piece wages are the richest source of wage deductions and capitalist fraud."[5] While workers ostensibly possess autonomy over working hours, platforms hold absolute dominance over task pricing. Workers are compelled to extend labor hours and take on extra tasks to secure sufficient income for subsistence. Meanwhile, most workers must independently bear insurance premiums and occupational risks including medical care, pensions and workplace injuries. The boundary between work and life grows increasingly blurred, and capital's temporal exploitation permeates every scenario of social life.

3.2 Exploitation Methods: Covert Infiltration Replacing Overt Coercion

Time exploitation under traditional capitalism centers on overt coercion, with clearly identifiable exploitative relationships and straightforward exploitative tactics. Workers and capitalists signed formal labor contracts specifying employment relations, working hours and labor remuneration. Capital's control over labor time was enforced through explicit means including factory physical enclosures, rigid attendance systems and direct supervision by foremen. Workers possessed an intuitive, clear awareness of their exploited status, and exploitative acts always unfolded within a well-defined framework of labor-capital relations.

By contrast, time exploitation in the era of digital capitalism abandons overt coercion entirely, shifting toward covert infiltration. Capital conceals its exploitative logic behind facades of technological neutrality and free choice, rendering exploitative acts difficult to identify and define-this stands as one of the most salient features of digital-era time exploitation. First, the integration of production and consumption obscures the essence of labor. Digital technologies erase the boundary between production and consumption, granting individuals dual identities as consumers and producers within digital spaces. When browsing webpages, watching videos or engaging in social interaction, people simultaneously enjoy platform services as consumers and generate data and content as digital laborers. This dual identity overlay prevents individuals from recognizing their labor activities, misclassifying unpaid value creation for platforms as pure leisure consumption, allowing exploitation to unfold unnoticed amid cognitive bias. Second, ambiguous labor relations mask exploitative attributes. Digital platforms deliberately evade the recognition of formal employment relations, branding themselves as "technical intermediaries" or "cooperation platforms". By signing service agreements

and partnership contracts, they categorize workers as "independent contractors" or "freelancers". While seemingly granting workers operational autonomy, this practice absolves platforms of employers' statutory responsibilities and obligations. Gig workers such as food delivery riders and ride-hailing drivers are subject to strict algorithmic scheduling and performance assessments by platforms, yet lack formal employment status and struggle to qualify as traditional laborers. The underlying exploitation of their time and value is concealed by these ambiguous relational frameworks. Third, technological discipline replaces direct coercion. Foremen are superseded by algorithms, data and rating systems. Rather than issuing explicit commands to extend working hours, platforms implement precise discipline through invisible mechanisms including data surveillance, dynamic ratings and gamified incentives. For example, delivery time assessment systems for food delivery platforms and order acceptance rankings for ride-hailing platforms appear to constitute objective performance evaluations, yet conceal the logic of capital accumulation. To maintain ratings and secure income, workers voluntarily extend online hours and cut rest intervals, entering a state of "self-exploitation". This technology-driven disciplinary mechanism renders capital's control more covert and precise. Exploitation no longer bears an identifiable perpetrator, but permeates every link of digital labor.

The shift from overt coercion to covert infiltration essentially represents an optimized and upgraded exploitative method deployed by digital capital via technical tools. It does not alter capital's inherent drive to capture surplus value, but merely renders time exploitation harder to detect and resist. Overt exploitation under traditional capitalism generates conspicuous contradictions that readily arouse workers' resistance, whereas covert infiltration in the digital age induces workers to accept temporal discipline under illusions of freedom and autonomy, making digital capitalist time exploitation more deceptive and persistent.

3.3 Perception of Exploitation: Cognitive Alienation from "Forced Endurance" to "Pseudo-Voluntariness"

Under Fordist production models of traditional industrial capitalism, workers perceived time exploitation as forced endurance, with clear antagonism and resistance consciousness. Factory labor centered on assembly line work, consisting of mechanical repetitive tasks lacking intrinsic value. Workers participated in labor solely to earn wages for basic subsistence, with labor itself experienced as an onerous external compulsion. Capitalists enforced extended working hours through explicit regulations and direct foreman oversight, granting workers an intuitive understanding of their exploited condition. The compulsory nature of labor kept conflicts between labor and capital overt, and resistance to time exploitation represented a universal worker sentiment. As Christian Fuchs argued, under Fordism "working time is a time of suffering and repression, while leisure time is the time of Eros". The binary opposition between labor and leisure sustained workers' persistent clear awareness of capitalist time exploitation.

Through the remodeling of digital technologies and platform architectures, digital capitalism achieves profound disciplinary control over workers' cognition, transforming perceptions of time exploitation from traditional forced endurance to pseudo-voluntary cognitive alienation. Within cognitive frameworks meticulously constructed by capital, workers regard exploitative acts as autonomous choices, even internalizing capital's accumulation imperatives as their own behavioral demands. This renders digital-era time exploitation far more deceptive and enduring. The formation of such cognitive alienation is not a mere technological outcome, but a precise shaping of workers' psychology and behavior by capital through multi-layered tactics, manifesting in two primary dimensions.

On the one hand, pan-entertainment scenario design embeds unpaid labor within leisure experiences. Integrating behaviorist psychology and gamified design concepts, digital platforms embed data production and time cession into leisure scenarios including entertainment, socializing and

consumption. Users derive instant gratification while unwittingly generating value for capital. Personalized recommendation algorithms on short-video platforms continuously push content aligned with user preferences, trapping users in endless time-consuming scrolling. Liking, commenting and reposting mechanisms on social media satisfy users' demands for emotional identification and social connection, yet simultaneously turn them into unpaid creators of platform traffic. Level progression, achievement unlocks and reward systems on gaming platforms immerse players in massive time and energy investment, while user data and content contributions generated by these activities are ultimately converted into platform commercial profits. Within such entertainment-oriented scenarios, individuals' internet use is labeled as "leisure" and "enjoyment", completely masking its underlying labor essence. Individuals mistake the unpaid cession of time and value creation for autonomous recreational activity, forming the cognitive illusion of "voluntary participation".

On the other hand, the universal implantation of competitive logic breeds worker self-exploitation and voluntary submission. Digital capital constructs mechanisms of performance rankings, task competition and differentiated revenue, translating capital's accumulation demands into internal competitive motivations for workers. To secure higher income and superior career prospects, workers voluntarily extend labor hours and compress free time, entering self-exploitative states. For formal platform employees, performance-oriented assessment systems fuel involution. To retain jobs and secure promotions, they are forced to "voluntarily" work overtime and devote off-hours to work. For gig workers such as delivery riders and ride-hailing drivers, platform order allocation rules, pricing mechanisms and rating systems forge intense competitive spheres. Dual pressures of low unit prices and stringent assessments compel workers to extend online durations and accept extra tasks to sustain income. Though framed as "more pay for more work" autonomous choice, this constitutes passive submission shaped by capitalist discipline. Worse still, capital propagates value doctrines of "time equals money" and "hard work guarantees success", attributing the root of time exploitation to workers' insufficient personal effort. When facing income gaps or competitive failures, workers fall into self-blame rather than reflecting on the nature of capitalist discipline. Such cognitive dislocation further reinforces the pseudo-voluntary state of exploitation.

The shift from forced endurance to pseudo-voluntary cognitive alienation represents a profound upgrade to time exploitation tactics by digital capital. It leaves intact capital's essential drive to appropriate workers' surplus value, merely transforming exploitation from external coercion into internal compliance through reshaping workers' psychology and cognition. Overt forced exploitation generates conspicuous contradictions that readily mobilize worker resistance, whereas pseudo-voluntariness in the digital age induces workers to embrace temporal discipline under illusions of freedom and autonomy, even rendering them complicit in capitalist exploitation. This cognitive alienation not only renders digital time exploitation harder to detect and resist, but also erodes workers' subjective consciousness and capacity for resistance, forming a critical ideological pillar sustaining the temporal exploitation system of digital capitalism.

4. PATHWAYS TO ADDRESS TIME EXPLOITATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

4.1 Clarify Property Rights and Improve Institutions to Consolidate the Bottom Line of Digital Labor Rights Protection

The absence and lag of institutional frameworks constitute a critical prerequisite for digital capital's unregulated encroachment on workers' time. Only through top-level institutional design to fill regulatory gaps in the field of digital labor can temporal exploitation be fundamentally curbed. First, scientifically define the ownership of data property rights. Confirm individuals hold original ownership of behavioral and content data produced in digital spaces. Mandate platforms obtain user authorization prior to collecting, processing and commercializing data, and establish a data revenue-

sharing mechanism to allocate a proportional share of commercial profits to data producers. This converts unpaid digital labor into compensated labor, reversing capital's uncompensated appropriation of individuals' free time at its source. Second, reconstruct standards for identifying digital labor relations, breaking the traditional binary framework of "employment vs. self-employment". Centering judgments on "actual labor control relations", extend labor protection coverage to new types of digital workers including delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers and platform content creators. Clarify platforms' statutory obligations as employing entities, prohibiting platforms from evading legal responsibilities for social insurance contributions, workplace injury compensation and overtime compensation by claiming status as "technical intermediaries". Third, standardize regulations governing digital labor time. Incorporate workers' standby hours and unpaid data production time into statutory working hour calculations, stipulating maximum daily labor durations and mandatory rest intervals for digital labor. Deploy rigid institutional constraints to curb extreme work schedules such as "996" and "007", while improving labor rights remedy channels and lowering workers' litigation costs, ensuring legal grounds and standardized rules for safeguarding temporal rights and interests.

4.2 Restructure Algorithmic Logic and Technological Orientation to Restore Humanistic Essence to Digital Technology

Digital technologies serve as tools for capital to implement time exploitation, yet technology itself bears no inherent value bias. Resolving time exploitation demands restructuring the developmental logic of digital technologies, freeing them from capital's singular accumulation orientation and embedding core values of humanistic care and fairness. First, advance algorithmic transparency and interpretability. Establish systems for filing and public disclosure of core platform algorithms, requiring platforms to disclose design logic and core parameters governing task allocation, performance scoring, revenue calculation and temporal scheduling. Safeguard workers' right to know and supervise algorithmic rules, preventing platforms from covertly compressing worker earnings and coercively extending labor hours through opaque algorithmic operations. Second, embed time protection mechanisms into technological design. Mandate platforms integrate functions such as mandatory rest breaks after continuous work, night-time quiet protection modes and off-hours message blocking into algorithmic and system development. Deploy intelligent reminders and restrictions for workers engaged in excessive online or high-intensity labor, erecting technical "firewalls" to protect individuals' sovereignty over their own time and eliminating unregulated expansion of labor time at the technical source. Third, strengthen the public attributes of digital technologies and multi-stakeholder co-governance. Break platform monopolies over digital technology control by introducing worker representatives, legal scholars and social regulatory authorities into algorithm design and technical evaluation processes. Establish algorithmic ethical review mechanisms to balance efficiency and equity in technological advancement, transforming digital technologies into tools for safeguarding workers' rights and reducing labor burdens rather than instruments of capitalist exploitation.

4.3 Construct a New Concept of Wealth and Temporal Cognition to Awaken Workers' Subjective Consciousness

Capital's utilitarian cognitive framework of "time equals money", alongside workers' excessive reliance on digital technologies and weakened subjective consciousness, forms the ideological foundation sustaining digital time exploitation. Only through value reconstruction and cognitive awakening can workers proactively resist capitalist temporal discipline and reclaim autonomous dominion over their own time. First, abandon utilitarian perceptions of time and establish a new wealth concept centered on free time. Critique capital's misguided doctrine that "all time must be converted into economic value". Guide society to recognize free time not merely as a medium for leisure and entertainment, but as a core resource enabling individual self-improvement, spiritual

enrichment and personality development. Free time functions as a vital metric measuring human well-being and social progress, rather than blank space for capital accumulation. Second, enhance workers' digital literacy and algorithmic awareness. Through vocational training and public social outreach, enable workers to clearly identify tactics of temporal exploitation deployed by digital capital via algorithmic discipline and entertainment-oriented design. Dispel cognitive misconceptions such as "platform freedom equals work freedom" and "more pay for more work equals unlimited overtime", cultivate rational digital labor perceptions, and encourage proactive rejection of meaningless time consumption. Third, foster workers' capacity for autonomous time management and anti-exploitation consciousness. Guide individuals to reduce over-reliance on digital platforms, rationally allocate work and free time, and actively block non-essential work notifications to escape states of perpetual passive standby. Meanwhile, advance the organizational construction of digital workers to unite scattered labor forces. Facilitate collective negotiation and bargaining with platforms over core issues including labor hours and compensation standards, empowering workers to become active defenders of their own temporal rights and interests.

5. CONCLUSION

The iteration of digital technology has reshaped traditional forms of labor. As an important labor mode in the digital economy era, digital labor unleashes its productive potential and creates social wealth, but is also swept up by capital logic, giving rise to the real problem of weakening workers' subjectivity. From a materialist historical perspective, it is clear that the impact of digital labor on workers' subjectivity is not an inherent result of technology itself, but rather a manifestation of alienation under the combined effects of privatization of digital means of production and the unjust use of technology. The dissolution of labor temporal and spatial boundaries leads to implicit discipline, covert exploitation in new labor relations, and the ongoing erosion of subjectivity and status together constitute the real dilemma of workers' subjectivity in the digital age.

To resolve the subjectivity crisis brought by digital labor, we cannot unilaterally deny the value of digital technology progress, but should base ourselves on China's current institutional context, adhere to the principle of the materialist historical materialist view of human freedom and comprehensive development, and achieve a balance between capital, technology, and human development. Using the "human-centered + intelligence-based" logic to transcend pure capital-driven profit-seeking logic, and gradually promote the public development of digital means of production through regulating capital expansion, improving distribution and rights protection systems, is the institutional foundation for reshaping the principal status of workers. At the same time, institutional constraints on digital technology tools such as algorithms and data should be strengthened, technology for good, and a digital ethical order suited to the digital age should be built, reducing the risk of labor alienation from the technological source. In addition, digital labor education can enhance workers' digital literacy and awareness of rights. Through collaborative cultivation among families, schools, and society, it awakens workers' internal sense of ownership and strengthens their ideological foundation for safeguarding their own rights and interests

In summary, the healthy development of digital labor ultimately returns to the development of people. Only by coordinating the relationship between productive force innovation and production relations adjustment, and by working together to break the dual dominance of capital and technology, can we gradually abandon the alienation of digital labor, truly safeguard workers' subjectivity, and promote the digital economy toward a fairer and more just direction

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