Digital Proletariat: The Spectacle of the "Internet" and Labor's Dispossession

by MICHAEL PEPI

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Think, for a moment, of the real estate broker in the age of Craigslist. In real estate, there are buyers and sellers. These two parties have, from the very beginning, needed a forum to meet each other. Given the high barrier to entry as well as the high price point of the transaction, a market developed in order to "broker" these transactions. These brokers took a fee, of course, since there was no way around them. Today, when you perform a direct search for owners listing their properties online (for free), you still find brokers listing their client's properties on Craigslist. The clearest indicator of an industry in its death throes arrives at that moment where it is forced to utilize the tool of its own dispossession to stay alive. During this period, the worker can only hope that few notice its total disintermediation.

Today, new, lighter digital frameworks quickly make redundant a large segment of the employed— specifically those who derive their value as "information service" workers: individuals whose value previously lay in their privileged access to information in an otherwise asymmetrical system of distribution. The real estate broker, bank tellers, travel agents, and even news editors now come in app form; securities traders are an equation, a set of rules, or an algorithm. Nonetheless, an enchanting ideology of digital emancipation and "connectedness" cloaks this threat to the eroding middle class.

In his 1975 essay *Off to the Exhibition: The Worker, his Wife and the Machines*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière investigates an early example of new technology forming a spectacle for the industrial proletariat. Rancière studies the discourse inspired by the Paris Exhibition Universelle of 1867, a type of "world's fair" where industrial capitalists offered up the prospect of "rapid, cheap, and effortless production of quality articles." Parisian worker's coalitions were invited in to review the machines. Here the workers assessed the displays of the mechanization of their formerly skilled trades. What they found, according to Rancière, was "labor becoming foreign to itself,"—more specifically, they saw the "knowledge of the worker broken by the division of labor, reorganized against him in the machine in the hands of the employer."[1]

Rancière focuses his analysis on the "moment at which the workers perceive [the machines] as a product of their dispossession." For Rancière, the worker's discourse was a new weapon of class consciousness. While the Exhibition was designed as a forum to "contemplate the wonders of industry"—His Majesty's machines as a marvel of industrial progress—it was the workers' reactions that were formative to their identity as labor

vis-à-vis the changing forms of industrial capital.

Construction De La Grande Galerie Des Machines, Paris Universelle, 1876

Engineering the spectacle of the industrial capitalist's machine at the Exhibition served much the same purpose as our contemporary tech utopianism. The "killer app," the "more open and connected world," the start-up's digital manifesto about democratizing content and information —all perform the same task. All operate in the same ideological space. How else can the bank teller carry with her (on her way to work no less) the very device that performs her daily labor for a fraction of her wage? A device, of course, that she pays handsomely to use. It is only through such methods that we tolerate a present day version of, as one Hamburg author described the 1867 Exhibition, "the separation of the worker from the intellectual forces of production."[2]

The consumer consciousness of the "new social norm of production," as Rancière terms it, has in our own time also been delayed, fragmented, and controlled. Mechanization did for the industrial laborers of 1867 what digitization is now doing for the information service workers of the 21st century. Yet this segment of the labor force seems unable to perceive the rising Internet-centered solutionism or digitization as an instrument of its own dispossession. In re-examining Rancière's worker's coalition reports, one might chart several persistent themes from the proletarian discourses of 1867 that are still structured into our current ideologies about labor, class, and the "rights of the worker" in relation to capital.

Evgeny Morozov, author of *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (2013), is among the most vocal critics of the constant, intellectually lazy, neomaniac quest for innovative digital problem solving tools—particularly those that exist solely to display a digital tool's capacity for "disrupting" an existing inefficiency of pre-digital man. Morozov mocks start-ups such as BinCam, the maker of a "smart" trash bin that monitors user's recycling habits. Such companies aim to "gamify" or "make social" aspects of daily life with the intention of transforming societal ills into positive outcomes. Morozov refers to this ideology as solutionism, which is connected to "Internet centrism," his

other major precept. “Internet centrism” is Mozorov’s term for the West’s deep infatuation with advancements in personal technology. Consumer services powered by algorithms, cloud computing, and innovations in mobile communication (not to mention the combination of all three of these relatively recent developments into affordable, fashionable devices) are arguably the singular subject for the intellectual historian in the 21st century. These ideologies have long motivated Silicon Valley—but in the last decade they have colonized nearly every facet of Western society as well. This subject might only be rivaled by the exponential growth of data and data utilization frameworks—the often discussed advent of the era of “big data.”

Roughly a century after the implementation of Leninist Marxism, we have found ourselves engrossed by yet another world-historical vanguardist social theory, one that is rapidly and bullishly re-organizing the political economy. Morozov does the unpopular work of reminding us that “smart technologies are not just disruptive” but that “they can also preserve the status quo.” In the most egregious cases, this ideology is “revolutionary in theory” and “reactionary in practice.” Our deep enchantment with digital technology relies on its inherent spectacle. From there it devolves into futuristic techno-utopianism, served up cold by way of “hacker superiority” or the hagiography of tech visionaries. TED Talks, the valorization of start-up culture, and the blind worship of the technology entrepreneur often cloak those basic and hard-won assumptions about middle class prosperity. We are left to speculate on what repercussions continued rapid digitalization will have on the economy, specifically the closely guarded class of white-collar information service workers. Given how fiercely well-harnessed digital technology can be applied and scaled, this question is central to the next phase of capitalism.

The Exposition Universelle was not only symbolic of the industrial capitalist’s appropriation of the new machines, or of new technology, but also of the careful establishment of the ideological relation to the workers’ identity as an association of highly skilled tradesmen. From the workers’ correspondence we learn how a discussion of the merits of the new, mechanically produced shoe were “directly linked with certain political demands and a discourse on the future of the worker.” These were the machines that would mechanize their labor, replace jobs, and introduce new competition, thus driving down wages and increasing hours. The skeptical stone-carvers viewed such mechanical spectacle as ultimately “written against the dramatic background of a working-class defeat.” That the Internet has its own sort of logic or “special place” provides the ideological groundwork for society to conveniently ignore the way digital ecosystems merely reflect existing inequalities and power relationships. Morozov’s book reminds us how a discrete social space known as the “Internet” does not exist quite the way we imagine it. In fact, “it” is a “highly regulated proprietary system.”[3]

Unlike the Luddites, the Parisian worker’s delegations—though directly threatened by the machines—did not physically resist. Forcefully breaking these machines would do more harm than good, they reasoned. Destruction was rationalized away as the “infantilism of revolt.” Instead they launched into a discourse on how these machines would displace, de-skill, or re-orient their position in society. Likewise, today few dare resist assimilation into the regime of the digital, even as these technologies re-write the rules of labor seemingly each month. At issue in both eras is the extent to which

society internalizes the frameworks for such industrial production: there is a significant dissonance between the moral imperative of labor and capital's shared ideology (of both mechanization and of the digital) and the practical implementation and execution of its infrastructure. There is a broad gap from the nature of the crafted utopian marketing pitches and the resulting structure of the labor market: ultimately they both are powered by capital, which quickly shakes off the emancipatory intentions of technocratic utopia.

For Jaron Lanier, author of the recent book *Who Owns the Future?* (2013), the current trajectory of our growing reliance on technology as everyday information tools will result in "demise of democracy, mass unemployment, the erosion of the middle class, and social chaos." If we accept "computers as passive tools" rather than "machines that real people create" we reach an irreconcilable cultural disconnect. What, then, prevents us from coming to such an ideological peace with the technology we use? Can we share the optimism of Rancière's shoemakers who wondered aloud: "Is machinery not also the work of all? Have not millions of workers been involved in this? Is it not contrary to justice and equity that it should become a monopoly for the benefit of a few?" In our own time, are we to view the work of software engineers as fellow workers creating "machines" that are to be shared by the laborers they replace?

Jean Gagnon

Though they were skeptical about their effects on labor, some Parisian workers viewed the new machines as part of the equation of labor. However, the realization that such efficiencies reduced them to a specialized, unskilled worker was the first concern: Rancière notes the complaints of the stone masons, who felt that:

> Responsibility for the mediocrity into which our country has fallen should not weigh on the workers alone, for their desire to work well has had to yield to the necessity of working fast. The first thing now asked of them is to produce in bulk; good work is only a secondary concern; because immense competition that has been established, sale prices have sunk so low that the labor put in has had to be reduced.[4]

Despite the vast spectacle of the new machines, the Parisian workers were cognizant and articulate about the threats of mechanization. For our

contemporary information service workers, perhaps this realization comes more slowly due to the fact that the end product is always data or knowledge in some form; they are both the consumers and the producers of their industry's output. For them, no clean separation exists between the materials of their labor and everyday life. As Lev Manovich points out in *The Language of New Media* (2001), it is the unique situation of the post-industrial information laborer wherein "increasingly the same metaphors and interfaces are used at work and at home, for business and for entertainment… ."[5] Thus the comprehension of separate fields of production and habitation are for the information service worker unclear and untenable. Anywhere information is brokered by a human, an aggregation and subsequent algorithm for data search will be the ultimate "competition," not only driving down wages, but replacing an entire segment of the labor force.

One central tenet of the present tech utopianism is the belief that more seamless completion of tasks will emancipate us from our busy schedules. As Marshall McCluhan presaged, "for tribal man, space was the uncontrollable mystery. For technological man it is time that occupies the same role."[6] New efficiencies will create time for other pursuits, and ultimately engineer a happier, healthier, more liberal society. The market logic states that due to the premium that we all assign to our personal lives, consumers will be driven to time-saving products and services. Thus an internal hyper-competition for digital tools to reduce time spent on nearly every task is the "steam engine" of digital capitalism. Yet the common complaint about the e-commuters, the networked office, and the 24-hour news cycle is that such acceleration of convenience in practice creates more work, lengthens the day, and puts greater demands for productivity on the information service worker. Likewise, Rancière considers the chair makers, who warned against the new conditions of their mechanized labor. Their dreams of passing their backbreaking bodily effort down to the new machines were dashed. In effect, mechanization "intensified" the effort on the part of their workers: "this tool, designed to render them great service by relieving them of the mind-numbing part of their labours, has become nothing more than a means of struggle against them."[7]

The shoemakers went further, noting that "whereas it should by this very fact give the worker more time to perfect his labor, the attempt is made on the contrary to make man himself…a kind of machine, depriving him of his intelligence, and this in order to produce a bit more, to produce regardless."[8] Rancière explains that "far from re-skilling labor by freeing more time to perfect its execution, mechanization became the paradoxical instrument of deskilling."[9]

Today this grand scale disenfranchisement and deskilling of the worker has even more surreptitious methods of altering the discourse about labor and capital. Consider the example provided by Jaron Lanier to the *Guardian* regarding the automated loom:

> [O]ne of the earliest computers was an automated loom. Let us suppose in the future there is some sort of automatic loom that can just turn out clothing for you. Where does the design for the clothing come from? Somebody might say: from an artificial intelligence algorithm, running on cloud software, using big data. But this data actually comes from a large number of people who have been anonymized and disenfranchised. If there was proper counting of where the data came from we would see that even in this highly advanced hypothetical automated loom, there would be real people who make the data possible to create a design."[10]

The crowd that supplied this data sees almost no compensation or rights to their contribution. The framework, or rather, the ideology behind this system of (digital) labor never begins to acknowledge the underlying class that powers its content.

The narrative of Nicholas Carr's 2008 essay "Is Google Making Us Stupid?", now ingrained in critiques of our digital existence, was concerned with the "sea change in the way we read and think."[11] Yet there are vastly more pernicious effects resulting from information technology in that it now confines most information service workers to highly specialized, software-dependent roles. Rancière's workers recognized their moment of dispossession as soon as their roles became so specialized that they themselves became "living machines." These workers "often know no more than a tiny part of their trade, which makes them unfit for any complete and conscientious work, and makes it impossible for them to obtain a remuneration in relationship to the prices established by workers truly worthy of this name."[12] Today, a software program or platform, once written and deployed, relegates its user to simple read/write tasks, with little use for changing the structure of the platform, and no ability or rights to do so. Thus, widespread adoption of such programs reconstitutes the skills of a labor force, rewarding the machine (or platform or system) that requires the least human capital investment to operate. Simultaneously, the coordination of immensely esoteric skillsets are required to design and implement such platforms, consolidating power and capital with a small class of systems builders who may manifest their control in virtually any industry.

For some time there has been a clear gap between the employment outlook of the software architects and those who are merely dependent on such technology to implement their soon-to-be-automated roles. Most simplistically, there is a division between those "who can code" and those who cannot: a new level of digital literacy has emerged that perhaps even the prescient worker's coalitions of 1867 could not imagine. To diffuse such dualistic simplicity, Rancière reminds us that the Parisian workers did not "oppose machinery to labor as dead labor to living," but rather wished that the workers could guard against the one-sided appropriation of the machines as a tool of pure exploitation. In essence, today we are tasked with the same: to subject the digital labor economy to an already existing moral code, as opposed to embalming it in its own autonomous logic. This is perhaps one of Morozov's central tenets, and the most sinister side effect of Internet centrism. However, the tech-utopians will point out that "anyone can learn" such digital skills, and turn this claim into yet another pillar of their classless society of digital emancipation. Such "collective appropriation" by the digital "workers" seems still in some way impossible given the distribution of digital resources. Servers, broadband, hardware… the infrastructure of the digital economy is still closely guarded and accumulated by a shrinking roster of private interests. The Internet centrism of which Morozov speaks, specifically capital's fervent digital "solutionism," stifles the moral appeals made by the 21st century heirs to the Parisian worker's call for "collective appropriation." In the years to come it will likewise be critically dependent on the ways in which capital structures the means of production of these digital tools.

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replaced by a machine.

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[1] Rancière, Jacques. "Off to the Exhibition: The Worker, His Wife, and the Machines" in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*. 64.

[2] Ibid. 64.

[3] Vaidhyanathan, Siva. "Rage Against the Machine: A Digital Heretic Decries the Spread of 'Solutionism.'" *Bookforum* Apr/May 2013.

[4] Rancière, *Op. Cit*. 68.

[5] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of the New Media.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 215.

[6] McLuhan, Marshall. "Magic that Changes Mood" in *The Mechanical Bride* (1951). 85.

[7] Rancière, *Op. Cit*. 68.

[8] Ibid. 68.

[9] Ibid. 67.

[10] O'Malley, J.P.. "Interview with a Writer: Jason Lanier." *The Spectator* [London]. 22 March 2013.

[11] Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic.* July/August 2008.

[12] Rancière, *Op. Cit*. 71.

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