A REVIEW ON "THE SPIRIT OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM'' [1]

Ramazan KILIÇ [2]

Introduction: The Digital Age and Digital Capitalism

In the history of thought, as Karl Marx previously expressed, the idea that when people do not control the means and relations of production, they are exploited by those who do has continued to maintain its intellectual significance, especially as the superstructures evolve. In our era, characterized by a superstructure where benevolent and innovative technocrats dominate and internet networks are instrumentalized for the appropriation of labor, the book's central thesis argues that capitalism and the appropriation of labor persist, now encircled by digital technologies. The book's primary question focuses on what the various ideologies that sustain digital capitalism, as the new tools of capitalism, are. The author is driven by the belief that it is possible to make the world better than it is today. However, according to the author, this potential is continuously captured by the imperatives of an economic system that prioritizes profit generation over human well-being.

As Boltanski and Chiapello highlighted in their work *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Huberman, similarly conveys that if capitalism has continually expanded its empire, it is because it relies on a set of representations and justifications that allow it to appear as the reasonable and desirable order (Huberman 2022: 8). Thus, questioning the new foundations or motivations of capitalism is essential to learn what animates its spirit.

One of the significant questions the work asks is why, despite increasing economic inequalities, the current order is expressed as the only possible or the best order, and what justifications are put forward to support this claim? A study that aims to examine the ideological tools that legitimize the current state of digital capitalism reveals that the reproduction of capitalism in the digital age is not merely an economic or technological matter but requires a set of beliefs that legitimize participants' inclusion in the system. As the social and technological composition of capital changes, so too does its spirit. Thus, the work aims to discover the spirit of the new capitalism that has taken on a digital dimension. The book exposes how the spirit of digital capitalism justifies and legitimizes new forms of capital accumulation, exploitation, and domination.

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[2] Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi, İstanbul 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Felsefe Bölümü, kilicr23@29mayis.edu.tr, ORCID: 0009-0009-4635-3542

According to Huberman's findings, the primitive capitalism that emerged after the industrial era justified itself by attributing value to the spirit of competition. However, digital capitalism, in addition, presents itself with innovative visions such as contributing to the public good, improving the global system, establishing social connections, making life easier, and creating a sustainable living system, particularly finding a response in the vision of making life easier, even at the expense of values like privacy and freedom. Indeed, as Daniel Bell noted in his work *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, digital capitalism does not impose enslaving oppression as in the old logic of exploitation. Instead, it encourages pleasure and appears as a friend or savior (Huberman 2022:3). Huberman shares Bell's views, stating that the new capitalism is characterized by promoting self-realization, freedom, and hedonism.

Unlike the logic of old capitalism, which sought to restrict or deprive, the new capitalism finds a way to establish dominance by controlling freedom and competition. Leaders of the digital age continually emphasize that through digital technologies, we can express ourselves and become entrepreneurs, the bosses of our businesses. What remains unchanged between the new and the old capitalism is that digital capitalism rises on a series of contradictions. While digital capitalism promotes freedom, it simultaneously captures privacy and individuality through the surveillance regimes it creates. It markets new tools that facilitate life at the expense of freedom and privacy. The new capitalism, which employs the world's most talented people for free to develop innovative projects, thus claims to democratize opportunities. Through new technology companies, digital capitalism secures cheap labor while demonstrating its generosity in global salvation efforts through the efforts of techno-elites in areas such as impact creation and philanthropy. The last title of the book aims to explore the outcomes of these paradoxes.

The Phenomenon of the Spirit of Digital Capitalism

Digital capitalism, which does not depart from the logic of capitalism based on the win-win mentality, signifies the critical roles that digital technologies play in the win-win process and ideological justification. Huberman draws attention to Dan Schiller's observation in *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* that digital technologies and information networks like the Internet have generalized the social and cultural spheres of the capitalist economy more than ever before (Huberman 2022:5). The internet has been captured by the expanding logic of marketing. One of the key instrumental goals of the new capitalism is to develop a network that can economically support the ever-growing business processes. Thus, in digital capitalism, the secret to profit is no longer expropriating labor but rather expropriating behavior. At this point, Huberman notes, as examined in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, that the traces we leave in the digital environment have gained commercial value. Predicting and surveilling have become the new policies of capitalism (Huberman 2022:70). This policy is executed through a series of digital nudging and prompting practices.

The main point the author emphasizes is how the changes in the form of capital accumulation today have made new forms of ideological legitimization necessary. According to Chiapello and Boltanski, the spirit of capitalism, starting in the late 19th century, was a new labor pool "liberated" from the enslavement of feudal relationships in rural areas. Capitalist policies, such as replacing unpaid slavery with wage labor, providing assistance to the poor through interest-bearing loans, and improving living

conditions, increased enthusiasm and loyalty to capitalist enterprise. Thus, the belief that capitalism was aligned with the public good was strengthened. The free-market model was legitimized through the notion of competition inherent in human nature. Huberman, emphasizing that these observations about the spirit of 19th-century capitalism remain valid today, adds that today's digital capitalism, instead of advocating for the organization of human beings, encourages the development of personal success and talents to elevate the sense of security in rationality and planning. The new strategies of contemporary capitalism include portraying Silicon Valley's techno-elites, who have amassed wealth through creativity and innovation, as society's heroes, and recycling philanthropy into impact investment.

Does the digital age give rise to a new spirit of capitalism? What are the beliefs that serve to legitimize, justify, and sustain this economic order? If digital capitalism, in its relentless pursuit of profit, is inventing new tools to legitimize, justify, and promote an economic system that increasingly relies on digital technologies, what are the tools of our time? Huberman addresses these questions primarily by arguing that in the U.S., the spirit of digital capitalism is largely animated by the libertarian and innovative sensitivities of Silicon Valley technocrats.

According to this view, the phenomena that characterize digital capitalism in our era and constitute its spirit include incentive programs designed to employ individual talents with minimal reward, turning the solidarity power of the masses into profit through online platforms, filling leisure time with various games and entertainment activities, expropriating more intrinsic value under the slogan of technological convenience, and employing new strategies such as image politics under the guise of philanthropy.

The Spirit of Competition: Crowdsourcing Through Incentive Competitions

In the first chapter, Huberman explores how crowdsourcing has evolved into an economic strategy. When faced with any problem, the techno-elite turns to enthusiastic, talented, and willing crowds to solve these issues. According to Huberman, one of the ideologues and advocates of this strategy, Karim Lakhani, argues that competition should be utilized when businesses are unsure about who possesses the right knowledge to solve their problems. Competitions offer a highly cost-effective way to identify the right person and solution for the problem, supported by those invested in the project. Therefore, in this manifestation of the spirit of digital capitalism, the democratization of opportunity goes hand in hand with the glorification of new forms of intellectual discrimination. Technocrats, who present themselves as capable of solving the world's problems through incentive competitions, create an intellectual economy that provides investors with a new way to appropriate capital through the possibilities of digital capitalism.

One of the ways contemporary business experts and entrepreneurs legitimize these new exploitative practices is framing their work as part of a larger global mission of salvation. While incentive competitions in the digital age are encouraged to bring forth innovative heroes, they simultaneously provide the techno-elite with a voluntary workforce at no cost. By turning the world's biggest problems into the world's greatest opportunities, digital capitalism justifies its relentless pursuit of profit. While incentive competitions are portrayed as leveraging humanity's innate competitive nature, they maintain competition, thereby ensuring the smooth functioning of the free-market logic. However,

Huberman questions whether this democratizes innovation or exacerbates inequality.

For today's business leaders and the new pioneers of capitalism, techno-elites, crowd productivity, efficiency, and innovation are seen as economic opportunities to increase profits. What 17th-century philosophers believed could only be achieved through the embodiment of power in a social contract or an authoritarian state, today's entrepreneurs achieve through a new economic strategy called incentive competitions. Incentive competitions represent a form of exploitation that replaces the exploitation of wage labor with the distribution of a singular reward. Sponsors of these competitions benefit from the digital value created by thousands of unpaid problem-solvers working towards enrichment.

The Spirit of Collaboration and Crowdsourcing Communities

Following the discussion of crowdsourcing facilitated through competitions, the second chapter examines collaborative crowdsourcing. Here, digital technologies are used to sustain new forms of capital accumulation, continuing the exploitation and expropriation of labor. While incentive competitions offer a way to harness the wisdom of crowds, establishing communities of shared interest, working together, and serving a common cause on internet networks is a new way to exploit the labor of crowds.

Platforms that function as spaces for intellectual or artistic activity, such as the design store Threadless, attract visitors not for shopping, but to submit and rate designs, discuss them, and engage in their artistic hobbies. While the crowds rate the most popular designs, the platform sells the designs at extraordinary prices through auctions. According to Huberman, Threadless demonstrates that activities that develop outside of wage-based relationships and commodified forms of labor contribute to capital accumulation and the processes of value appropriation in the digital age. Through crowdsourcing technologies, capitalists and companies can appropriate the labor of technology enthusiasts, interconnected through digital means, in exchange for market-based prices, monetary rewards, or a series of intangible rewards measured by company market prices.

The Spirit of Game and Exploitation Through Smartphone Games

In the third chapter, Huberman examines how the growing gaming industry, powered by digital technologies, has become a new method of appropriating labor in the digital environment. Huberman argues that the gaming and entertainment sectors blur the boundaries between work and leisure, gamifying tasks and perpetuating a classic capitalist form of appropriation. He poses the question: Where should we look to uncover the secret of profit in the digital age? In this era, the exploitation of labor occurs outside the traditional factory walls.

Digital technologies are marketed as a way to make leisure time economically productive. By blurring the lines between work and leisure, tasks are often gamified, continuing a traditional capitalist form of appropriation. For example, InboxDollars transforms daily routines like checking emails into opportunities for data collection and labor extraction from users. When a user creates an account, they can earn money by participating in surveys for various brands and companies. According to Huberman, InboxDollars is just one of many digital platforms that exploit the present moment.

As people grow increasingly accustomed to the stimuli they encounter on technological devices and the internet, "free time" no longer seems appealing in the digital capitalism era.

The exploitation of labor has been replaced by a regime of positivity based on incentives and monetary rewards. To understand where the secret of profit lies in digital capitalism, Huberman argues that we must recognize that labor is now traded and marketed as freedom and opportunity within digital games or time-utilizing tasks that also generate income. Another aspect involves users contributing to behavioral science by reporting their actions and thoughts, thereby transforming behavior into a marketable commodity that techno-elites use to make life more predictable. The emergence of the gaming sector further illuminates how blurred the lines between work and leisure have become in the digital capitalism era, demonstrating that this is not a coincidence but a new strategy in capital accumulation.

The Spirit of Convenience and Surveillance Capitalism

In the fourth chapter, Huberman delves into how innovations presented as elements of convenience in the digital age are, in fact, integral to forms of exploitation and domination. Drawing on Shoshana Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism, Huberman suggests that just as the secret to profit in industrial capitalism lies in the exploitation of labor, in the age of surveillance capitalism, it increasingly lies in the appropriation of behavioral value. Companies use digital applications and AI-driven algorithms to create predictions about what we will do now, soon, and in the future, utilizing the term "behavioral surplus" to describe this reliance on behavioral data. In this context, surveillance capitalism not only markets the psychological inclinations of users but also follows a series of nudging and guiding strategies to achieve this. As a result, the digital platforms that digital capitalism turns into tools for behavior modification must now replace "soul engineering" with "behavior engineering." According to Huberman, in the digital age, data has become the new oil—a commodity or resource bought and sold to keep the wheels of profit turning.

At this juncture, Huberman emphasizes the role of the "spirit of convenience" as one of the defining spirits of digital capitalism, highlighting its significance in the appropriation of value. Convenience operates not merely as a product of consumption but as an ideology used to establish, maintain, and legitimize relationships of domination. As an ideology, convenience does not harbor inherent negativity. Companies that sustain the ideology of convenience, such as AmazonGo, make customers aware that to gain more convenience, they must sacrifice more behavioral information and privacy.

The Spirit of Gift and Techno-Philanthropy

In the fifth chapter, Huberman explores how techno-philanthropists, who have amassed their wealth through the new forms of digital capitalism, justify and legitimize their capital accumulation processes through the new trend of "impact investing." While impact investing presents itself as a combination of philanthropy and capital accumulation, it aims to create measurable social benefits alongside financial returns. Philanthropy becomes a crucial element in legitimizing capitalism in the digital age, presenting it as the "best possible system" for organizing economic and social life. In this way, the capitalists of digital capitalism not only present technology as a factor that enables

a better life through the spirit of convenience but also promise to use technology and wealth to solve social and environmental problems. In the digital age, techno-philanthropy is employed to further justify the accumulation of capital.

Techno-philanthropy in digital capitalism is a tool for techno-elites to expand their influence, legitimize their wealth, and present capitalism as the best of all possible economic systems. In this context, techno-philanthropists use the idea of social salvation rather than personal salvation to portray themselves as the most competent individuals to serve humanity's needs and interests, thereby justifying the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Innovation becomes a concept that underscores the competence of techno-philanthropists as the hyper-agents who solve problems, with only the wealthy being portrayed as capable of such feats. According to Huberman, the innovative actions of techno-elites, including their philanthropic endeavors and donations, aim to reverse the negative logic of capitalism by appearing as moral agents.

Conclusion: The Contradictions Spirit of Digital Capitalism

One of Huberman's motivations for examining this topic is the belief that, rather than living in a world where everything is instrumentalized for capital accumulation, the economy can make the world more livable for all people. While assuring individuals that work is an opportunity to use creativity, vision, and skill, digital capitalism also harnesses the naturalness of competition among communities of similarly positioned people to democratize innovation through incentive competitions. Although these competitions appear to promote equal opportunities, in reality, they reproduce and exacerbate economic inequality. Additionally, they become an efficient way for companies to reduce costs by enlisting an enthusiastic army of volunteers to work on problems without paying them.

As digital technologies are used for profit under the guise of creativity and innovation, they are also employed to better predict behaviors and nudge people toward desired commercial outcomes. The cultural contradictions of digital capitalism have formative effects when it comes to values. According to Huberman, people now face a crossroads, where they must decide whether to sacrifice freedom and privacy for convenience and connectivity. Who should be more competent in addressing global challenges; bureaucrats elected to public office to solve social problems through democratic processes and equal representation, or billionaire hyper-agents offering innovative solutions?

The cultural contradictions upon which the spirits of digital capitalism are built must be recognized as a habitual part of life. The most crucial task is to remain aware that the existing state of affairs is not the best possible one.

REFERENCES

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