Book Review

Culture and Digital Capitalism – A Review of *Digital Lethargy* by Tung-Hui Hu

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Zachariah Tailor [1]

[1] Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA) at the New University of Lisbon; tailorzach5@gmail.com

The digital is almost inescapable today. As the digital sphere develops in new forms, human life is becoming completely immersed within it. The need to understand or even merely cope with these confusing and at times nauseating phenomena inevitably leads to creative and academic responses. Tung-Hui Hu's *Digital Lethargy* provides a lens through which to make sense of digital capitalism's kaleidoscopic maelstrom of networks, social relations, expressions and oppressions. Hu fluidly takes the reader through aspects of digital life that have infiltrated 'normal' everyday life. The book's perceptive depth in its analyses of contemporary artistic works and responses to digital capitalism permits a glimpse beneath the surface of the seemingly digital commonplace, revealing an intricate interior hidden in plain sight. Hu, through six evocative synopses of diverse artistic expressions, delves into some essential themes for any analysis of capitalism, including labor, race, and time. The three are meshed together in the monograph as in empirical reality, inextricably wound and reproduced in perpetuity by the ceaseless and unsleeping drive of capitalism.

In-depth research, an approachable style and Hu's choice of cultural responses to digital capitalism mean that his central concept is fully embellished. Whilst evidently multifaceted and imbued with several meanings, this does not detract from Hu's precise presentation of lethargy. Hu demonstrates how lethargy underwrites the operation of network technology. The idea of lethargy expresses the effect of digital capitalism on human beings as much as it comes to define interactions between people (online and offline). The book covers the concept of lethargy as an attitude, behaviour, practice and relation. At once a response to the anxieties of digital capitalism and a way of enduring its disorientations, lethargy embodies a political act of doing nothing. When facing a world that demands constant attentiveness and activity, with apps scrambling for our attention and an overload in sensory stimulus influencing our every move, doing nothing is respite and repose from the clutches of digitalization. That's not to say that the digital is in and of itself a necessarily bad thing. Within the frameworks and logics of capitalism, however, digitalization implies a commodification and extractive process and relation, both of which are having a drastic impact on human and democratic well-being.

Lethargy, as Hu theorizes it, is more than merely doing nothing. Hu makes the case for the radical subversive potential of lethargy. Yes, the term is colloquially understood as a sense of exhaustion, fatigue and necessary sedentariness. Yet, on the other hand, it also implies restorative latency - latency being the etymological twin of lethargy (p. 164) – an engagement in rest, thought and critique, crucial at the origins of a social mobilization. The notion of critical idleness is also invoked (p.91), rounding out what is perhaps a slightly over-optimistic embrace of inactivity as resistance.

Digital lethargy, first and foremost, develops as a result of what must certainly be perceived as an ensemble of new categories of labour. Or, if not entirely novel, then at least fundamentally reshaped by the digitalization of capitalism. The author's choice of departure aptly situates the reader at the forefront of this reformulation of labour under digital capitalism and sets the tone for the rest of the book. Heike Geissler's *Seasoned Associate*, the lightly fictionalized memoirs of a worker in an Amazon warehouse, highlights the unbearable working conditions and blatant racial undertones of the employment practices at Amazon. Through Hu's analysis of Geissler's work, moreover, a new model of labour is explored – that of protean labour. A worker today is expected to embrace limitless flexibility and versatility. Further still, they are expected to give everything for a faceless enterprise at the dire cost of personal and familial well-being, privacy and agency. Accounts like Geissler's are crucial because they help bring to light a persistent assault of organised labor, or even the laborer conceived as a worker in and of themselves. Casualizing the labour relationship from the employer side is dangerous territory since formal employee protections can be circumvented. Employment practices and the conditions of labor under digital capitalism, as the experience of Amazon workers suggests, renders the worker individualized, exhausted and facing unbelievable extents of precarity.

Arguably the most frightening point that Hu evokes is the ability of digital capitalism to absorb employee subversion. Just as the advent of neoliberalism battered the political foundations of organised labour, the marginalization, individualization and precarious casualization of Amazon employees is but one example of how digital capitalism continues the neoliberal mission to erode the very category of the worker. What's more, much of the labour that supports the servers, services and digital ways of existing and interacting are in fact invisible. Take, for example, the 'microworkers' who populate servers, feed the algorithms (commonly taken to be produced by AI), and perform other menial tasks on the internet, such as manufacturing 'likes', mining gold for people in videogame scenarios and producing click-bait ads and websites. As Hu makes abundantly clear, it is increasingly difficult to recognise human work in the digital economy as it is concealed evermore behind the image of the robotic. These roles also highlight the racial division of labour of capitalism reproduced in the digital expanse.

The monograph stands as an incredibly timely and pertinent exploration of the intersection between digitalized capitalism and racism. There exists within digital capitalism a similar division of labour along racial divides that has characterised almost every phase of capitalism. In the examples listed above, Hu notes that the working conditions of 'microworkers' are akin to a digital sweatshop. These workers tend to be South Asian and allow platforms such as social media networks and online video games to function for the improved experience of Western users. The lethargic nature of this kind of work (sitting for hours in front of a computer carrying out tedious, repetitive tasks) summarises one particular way that Hu's concept can be understood.

It is in the critique of race that Hu manages to ground this reappropriation of lethargy. Previously, stigmas and stereotyping have depicted immigrants and people of colour as vagrants, lazy and idle. Vagrancy has a deep history of criminalization, particularly in former imperialist colonies. There also exists the racialized image of the couch potato and welfare scrounger, doing and contributing nothing to society. Such exaggerated narratives consistently support and are reflected in capitalist social relations. In the current digital age, however, the ability to almost constantly access the internet coupled with society's addiction to smartphones and other smart devices means that even when pursuing leisure, people are monitored, tracked and proverbially switched-on. With perhaps the shoddiest notion of consent, and largely unwittingly,

human activity, not just online but in every other sphere, is being recorded and transformed into data to be stored and sold to advertisers. Even sleep can be subjected to monitoring, surveillance and data extraction, providing information that can be sold to advertisers to inform them about one's various habits. As Shoshana Zuboff has argued, instead of only engaging in work to produce surplus value for the capitalist class, humans increasingly figure as the raw material from which "behavioural surplus" is from themselves extracted (2019). In response, Hu's concept does well to reappropriate idleness.

By embracing the restorative latency in lethargic inaction, Hu attempts to reclaim a fundamental part of our lives from the clutches of digital capital. Instead of leisure and down-time continuing to be yet another sphere for extraction and appropriation of surplus value, even more personal now than ever, digital lethargy can assert a rejection of digital capitalism. Furthermore, from the numerous cases cited in *Digital Lethargy*, Hu exposes the contradictory racial logics of capitalism that reproduce harmful stigmas surrounding vagrancy and idleness whilst simultaneously exploiting those very spheres and (in)activities that were previously criticized and penalized. The vagrant couch-potato is now a source of profit in the extractive model of digital capitalism. But, as Hu's concept suggests, embracing lethargy is both an important starting point for resisting digital capitalism and an act of resistance in and of itself. It could act as a way to stop, even temporarily, being a user of digital platforms.

The figure of the user has become a universal standing for "authentic" subjecthood (p. 143). So entwined are we digitally that to escape the user profile becomes a very existential issue. To some extent, in a world increasingly defined by the digital, those without an online presence and digital profile can all too easily fade into obscurity. It can be seen, for example, through the social pressures to maintain a social media presence in younger generations. Such social attitudes from a young age reflect an ongoing shift in subjectivity that is inextricably linked with the digital. People conceived as users, as opposed to political beings, is becoming, and perhaps has already become, a more intelligible point of reference for understanding subjecthood. All the more alarming, then, that to be a user, to be configured and perceived by the capitalist class as the source of surplus value, is literally to be unwittingly and perpetually doing work. The data output which is harvested and stored every second that someone uses a smart device, or is in proximity to one – the behavioral surplus (Zuboff, 2019) – reconstrues humans in the eyes of capital as land to be pillaged, a resource to be exploited in its necessary drive for profit.

Examples such as those given above and throughout Hu's book are prime illustrations of what Antonio Negri defines as the world of real subsumption. According to this theory, the relation of capital (a relation of exploitation) spreads inexorably due to the nature of capitalist development. All of society becomes productive in the world of real subsumption (Negri, 2004, 44). Zuboff's analysis of behavioural surplus is one demonstration of the drastic extent of societal subsumption by capital. When faced with the materialization of the conditions of real subsumption, exemplified in the digital phase of capitalism, another way that digital lethargy realizes its subversive potential is through its unique interpretation of time. As Hu states, "Lethargy is the unwinding of normative bonds of time that constitute an individual" (130). It can be asserted that the aim of digital lethargy is simultaneously to overcome the liveness, animation and ceaseless activity that digital capitalism requires *and* to embrace and reclaim the need and right to do nothing. Being lethargic as a response to the work required of digital capitalism alters how subjective time is perceived. But, on the flip side, indulging in lethargy by choice - actively engaging in inactivity - can constitute a subterfuge to be outside of digital capitalism's timescape.

Thus, standing outside of the timescape of digital capitalism appears to be a crucial pivot for resistance. Various notions of time are comprised within understandings of social phenomena. The time of change, for example, is drastically different to the logics of temporal persistence of the current capitalist order. The former presents an opening for radical potentialities to take hold and novel modes of organisation in society to develop. Emphasizing the centrality of an understanding of time is essential. Lethargy is the starting point for a subversive approach geared towards social change. However, it remains a strategy of deferral, not a solution. What Hu means by this is that being lethargic can allow for other perceptions to develop in the state of critical idleness or at least open up time where such perceptions could occur (92). Hu's concept is timely and commendable. However, it cannot (and I don't think that the author ever intended for it to) stand alone as a subversive or even insurrectionary strategy struggling against digital capitalism. It can only be considered a starting point, a grounding phase for the persons resisting the encroachments of digital capitalism. That function is highly important and should not be overlooked. There is, therefore, great value in the concept that Hu develops. Alone, I fear an embrace of lethargy as the development of subversive latency risks stasis and passivity, maybe even descending into apathy. Taken to be a latent springboard for flowing away from the mainstream of digital capitalism, one can appreciate the true subversive potential of lethargy. Hu's book is a timely contribution which sets a compelling example for the further enrichment of the body of literature that must develop in response to the looming shroud of digital capitalism.

References

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