

Original Paper

The Subjective Essence of Wealth in Marx and the Critique of Digital Alienation

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Abstract

The essence of wealth in a capitalist economic form is reduced by political economy to the source of value—labor; thereby presenting it as a subjectivity. With the development of private ownership, labor shifts from being special to general and, upon contact with capital, becomes alienated abstract labor. Marx, through his critique of abstract labor, demonstrates from historical, social, and subjective dimensions that the subjective essence of wealth is the realization of human needs, abilities, and creativity through free and conscious labor under the conditions of the abolition of private property. This provides a solid theoretical foundation for critiquing the alienation of digital labor in digital capitalism, such as the historical continuation of abstraction, the algorithmic restructuring of labor-capital relations, and the obscuring of labor subjectivity and emotions.

Keywords

Marx, Subject essence of wealth, Abstract labor, Alienation of digital labor

1. Introduction

Marx, through his critique of the national-economics theory of the subject-essence of wealth, subsequently proposed that the subject-essence of wealth lies in "subjective existence." What "subjective existence" means is not stated directly in a single work or passage; its theoretical content is scattered across his relevant monographs and sections. In order to study Marx's subject-essence of wealth in depth, scholars have approached the issue from different dimensions and arguments, and research on the subject-essence of wealth centered on "subjective existence" has achieved certain results. So far, the academic community mainly relies on Marx's classic texts from different periods, especially those in political economy, and explains the subject-essence of wealth from the perspectives of the unity of wealth, humanity and history, as well as from the angles of human productive forces, human labour, and the human being itself. First, some scholars argue that the formation of the subject-essence of wealth is a

historical necessity whereby humanity evolves from a natural being to a "self-determined class being." "As human social history develops, the pursuit of wealth inevitably moves from a purely material dimension to a dimension of social relations and then to a dimension of human subjectivity" (Liu Rongjun, 2009). Second, other scholars hold that "by grasping wealth from the subject-dimension, Marx discovered the essential content of wealth, namely 'the true wealth is the developed productive forces of all individuals'" (Mao David, 2010). Third, labour, as the external manifestation of an individual's developed productive forces, "wealth is the materialisation and objectification of human labour. Marx maintains that 'the essence of wealth lies in the subject-existence of wealth,' and that 'the essence of wealth... is general labour.' The wealth that people produce and possess is the objectification, concretisation and materialisation of humanity's essential power" (He Dihua, 2020). Therefore, the essence of wealth is labour; its realisation consists in reproducing humanity through labour and treating labour itself as an end. The "objectified labour"—i.e., material wealth that becomes the object of consumption—is the basis for humanity to regain its capacity to labour (Liu Zongbi, 2011). Finally, because labour has ontological significance in the production of wealth, the labouring subject (both the individual and the "class") points to the essence of wealth. "'Things' (such as wealth) possess only instrumental value; 'people' (individuals and classes) constitute ultimate value. 'Things' are merely means to the end of 'people.' Humanity validates itself within the objectified world of wealth, and the development of wealth aims at the free and comprehensive development of people" (Tang Haiyan, 2022).

The above studies provide new perspectives and dimensions for analysing the subject-essence of wealth, yet they have not delved into a critique of abstract labour to reveal the deeper implications of Marx's conception of the subject-essence of wealth. Therefore, based on the existing research, this paper first focuses on Marx's core critique of national economics. Under the capitalist mode of production, human labour, although the source of wealth (i.e., wealth exhibits its subject-essence), is abstracted by national economics into "general labour," which theoretically establishes it as the sole subject of wealth, while in practice it is reduced to a tool for capital accumulation. This form of the subject-essence of wealth superficially acknowledges humanity but actually denies it. Critiquing this "abstract labour" is the key to understanding Marx's discussion of the subject-essence of wealth. Secondly, on the basis of the critique of abstract labour, the paper integrates the historical, social, and subject dimensions to jointly grasp the essential content of Marx's view on the subject-essence of wealth. This synthesis holds important theoretical significance for critiquing the alienation of contemporary digital labour.

2. National Economics and Marx's Concept of the Subject-Essence of Wealth

In capitalist modes of production, national economics—acting as the representative of capital interests—treats abstract labour as the subject-essence of wealth. While it ostensibly acknowledges the essence of humanity, it in fact negates it. Marx takes this premise as a starting point; by critiquing the subject-essence of wealth as conceived by national economics—that is, abstract labour—he gradually develops and establishes his own theory of the subject-essence of wealth.

2.1 The Subject-Essence of Wealth in National Economics: Abstract Labour

Marx holds that national-economics scholars, to varying degrees, proclaim that the essence of wealth resides in its subject-existence, i.e., labour, which represents a considerable advance. First, in the physiocratic tradition of Quesnay, "all wealth is reduced to land and cultivation (agriculture)" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:291), and the subject-essence of wealth is only partially recognised, and in a particular manner. On the one hand, physiocracy asserts that land functions only when combined with the labour of cultivation; consequently, the essence of wealth shifts partially from an objective existence to a subject-existence embodied in the farmer's labour, because the natural particularity of land can exert its effect only through labour—cultivation—thus "the subject-essence of wealth has already been transferred into labour" (ibid.). On the other hand, although physiocracy affirms the role of the subject's labour, this labour remains a special, naturally prescribed agricultural labour that is subordinate to land. As Marx notes, "labour is still not understood in terms of its universality and abstraction; it is still coupled with a particular natural element that serves as its material, and therefore it is recognised only within a special, naturally prescribed mode of existence" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:291-292). Hence, Marx concludes that physiocracy "only partially, and in a special way, acknowledges that the essence of wealth lies in the subject-existence of wealth" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:292).

Second, this physiocratic view provided a necessary step for later thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who "identified the universal essence of wealth and, consequently, elevated labour—possessing complete abstraction—to a principle" (ibid.). This abstract labour, as the universal essence of wealth, is not a particular kind of labour nor a labour tied to a specific factor; it is a universal, general labour. The transition of the subject-essence of wealth from a specific agricultural labour to an abstract general labour results from the shift from land-based to industrial production, because "for the physiocrats, labour first appears merely as the subject-essence of land"(ibid.), whereas the opposite of land is industry, whose subject-essence is abstract general labour. As Marx explains, "labour initially appears only as agricultural labour, and only later is it recognised as general labour. All wealth becomes industrial wealth, becomes labour's wealth, and industry is the completed labour" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:293). The historical evolution of wealth's essence—from objectivity to sociality, and finally to subjectivity—clearly shows that each transformation of the mode of production pushes humanity's understanding of wealth to a deeper level. Yet, while capitalism establishes the subject-essence of wealth, it also realizes it in a distorted and alienated manner.

The capitalist mode of production, on the one hand, allows "people" as the subject-essence of wealth to be manifested; on the other hand, through its distinctive social form—abstract labour—it utterly negates this subjectivity. Marx's critique of national economics revolves around this core contradiction. He reveals how national economics enshrines "abstract labour" as a dogma, thereby concealing the substantive nature of capitalist exploitation in theory, while in practice alienating the subject-essence of wealth into a tool for capital accumulation, ultimately forming a genuine conception of the subject-essence of wealth.

2.2 The Basis for the Formation of Marx's Subject-Essence of Wealth: A Critique of Abstract Labour in National Economics

In Marx's view, the so-called subject-essence posited by national economics is actually the subject-essence of private property. This subject-essence centers on abstract human labour; it appears to acknowledge people but in fact denies them. The transformation of private property's essence from an external, objectified nature to an internal, subject-essence is the achievement of Adam Smith, and Marx therefore agrees with Engels in likening Smith to the religious reformer Luther. Marx points out that supporters of the monetary-ist and mercantilist systems are typical fetishists and Catholics, because they regard private property for humans merely as an external, objectified essence. Hence "Engels has reason to call Adam Smith the Luther of national economics. Just as Luther regarded religion and faith as the essence of the external world and therefore opposed Catholic idolatry, he turned religious devotion into the inner essence of man" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:289-290). National economics treats abstract labour as the essence of wealth, which effectively means treating the person themselves as the essence of private property. Since private property is embodied in the person, the person is set as the essence of private property, just as Luther set religion as a rule; "therefore wealth that exists outside the person and does not depend on the person—wealth that should be preserved and maintained only externally—has been abandoned" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:290). From this we can see that "national economics, which takes labour as its principle, ostensibly acknowledges the person, but in reality it fully realizes the denial of the person, because the person is no longer in a tense external relation with the outward essence of private property; rather, the person itself becomes that tense essence of private property"(ibid.).

Finally, Marx labels this wealth view of national economics—one that ostensibly acknowledges the person while actually denying them—as a thorough "Xenicism." "From Smith through Say to Ricardo, Mill, and others, the Xenicism of national economics not only grew relatively—because the consequences of industrialisation appeared before these later thinkers in a more developed and contradictory form"(ibid.). They make privately owned property, which has an active form, into the subject; even when the person becomes the essence, they also turn a being that is a "non-existent thing" into an essence, so that the contradictions of reality fully correspond to the contradictory essence they conceive. In national economics, the person as the subject of wealth exists merely as the bearer of abstract labour. Labour is treated as a factor of production, placed alongside land and capital, and is regarded as a cost or expense. This theory seemingly acknowledges the person's subject status, but in practice reduces a rich, concrete, fully developed individual to a one-dimensional, purely quantified supplier of labour. Marx further reveals the contradictory nature of this essence through the opposition between labour and capital. First, in the labour-capital relationship, abstract labour is taken as the subject-essence of private property; abstract labour becomes alienated, separating the worker from his own labour activity and ultimately reducing him to a "purely abstract existence of the labouring person." "The wealth-creating mode based on private ownership—labour, simply put, is explained by Marx with the term 'alienated

labour' to articulate the 'subject-essence of wealth'" (Wang Wencheng & Liu Fang, 2013). Production thus becomes an alien activity toward oneself, others, nature, consciousness and life; labour ceases to embody the essential power of the person and becomes an external coercive act. In this alienated labour, the worker is reduced to "the pure abstract existence of the labouring person, so that each day his fulfilled 'nothingness' may turn into absolute nothingness, becoming the non-existence of his society and, consequently, of reality" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:283). The "pure labouring person" possesses only labour power: "The worker's labour capacity is the only commodity he can sell; the worker exists merely as labour capacity in opposition to the actual wealth of objects" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1998:45). Thus, they appear to have the "fulfilled nothingness" of private property, but this property can at any moment be reduced to "absolute nothingness" through unemployment or exploitation. Second, the universal abstraction of labour ultimately leads to the loss of the human class essence. As the capitalist mode of production develops, the degree of labour's abstraction deepens. Marx observes that "labour increasingly becomes a purely abstract activity" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:255). Concretely, the specific skill character of labour gradually disappears, becoming "capable of any specification." This shift makes the labour-capital relationship "develop ever more purely," i.e., ever more in line with the essential demands of capital. Labour, as the use-value opposed to capital, is not a particular kind of labour but labour itself—abstract labour; it is independent of any special specification, yet it can manifest in any specification. Of course, for a particular capital formed by a specific entity, a corresponding special labour is required; however, because capital itself is unrelated to any particularity, it is both the totality of all particularities and the abstraction of those particularities. Consequently, labour opposed to capital also contains the same totality and abstraction in its essence (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:254). The universalisation of abstract labour erases the individuality and richness of concrete labour, flattening the worker's personality; people can no longer confirm their class essence through labour, but instead lose their class characteristics within labour.

Thus, under capitalist production conditions, the opposition between labour and capital manifests as a complete totality and abstraction, unrelated to any concrete labour or capital entity. This universally abstracted labour-capital relation frees labour from the concrete constraints of guild and artisanal labour in history; it "erases the sacred aura that once surrounded and commanded respect for professions. It turns doctors, lawyers, clergy, poets and scholars into wage-labourers hired with money" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2012:403), becoming a purely universal possibility for value increase. "Labour opposed to capital is a purely abstract form, the pure possibility of value-creating activity; this activity exists only as talent, as capacity, within the worker's body. Yet, through contact with capital, it becomes actual activity—it cannot act on its own because it is object-less—and thus becomes the concrete productive activity that creates value" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:255). Because this absolutely abstract labour has lost its object, it can survive only through contact with capital. Consequently, it cannot fully realise the talent residing in the worker's body, loses the ability to act independently, and becomes an abstract tool for value creation, leading to the loss of the worker's free self-consciousness.

2.3 The Establishment of Marx's Subject-Essence of Wealth: A Three-Dimensional Grasp of Abstract Labour in National Economics

The above alienation phenomena indicate that, in order to deeply understand Marx's thought on the subject-essence of wealth, one must begin with Marx's critique of the "abstract labour" that national economics treats as an eternal category transcending history, and grasp it from three dimensions: its historical, social, and subject-related aspects. National economists regard "abstract labour" as an eternal economic category beyond history; in fact, this accomplishes a double theoretical concealment: on the one hand, it extracts human labour from its universality and abstraction, turning labour that "can take any specification" into a purely potential value-creating activity; on the other hand, this abstracting theoretical operation masks the fact that abstract labour itself is the subject-essence of private property, thereby cloaking the antagonistic relation between labour and capital with the veil of equivalent exchange, both serving the legitimization of capitalist reification logic. Consequently, only by piercing the fog of "abstract labour," critiquing it from its historical, social, and subject dimensions, can one grasp Marx's true subject-essence of wealth:

First, the historical-generation dimension. Marx points out that the understanding of the subject-essence of wealth is always formed within the corresponding historical conditions and processes. When capitalism makes wealth the purpose of production, it actually treats "wealth as value, a pure right of domination over others' labour—not for the purpose of rule, but for private enjoyment and the like" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:479). To abandon this alienation, it is crucial to recognize that the essence of wealth is always situated in a mutable historical process that changes with the mode of social production and is the product of each historical stage. Abstract labour becomes the subject-essence of private property through the historical process in which labour continuously merges into the sphere of production and is gradually abstracted. This historical abstraction does not manifest as the labourer's own possession, but as the process by which capital appropriates others' labour. To realize the genuine subject-essence of wealth, abstract labour must be abandoned, its alienation prevented, and a historical process be established in which labour gradually returns to the labourer himself; only then can labour become a need, talent, enjoyment, and productive force of the labourer, i.e., the true subject-essence of wealth.

Second, the dimension of social relations. Abandoning abstract labour also requires the abandonment of capitalist private ownership at the level of social production relations. The alienation of abstract labour gave rise to capitalist private property, and this private property in turn intensifies the alienation of abstract labour. Thus, abstract labour becomes an element of capital, causing the productive vitality of living beings to be seized by capital, "the full actualization of the inner essence of man manifests as complete emptiness" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:480). The genuine subject-essence of wealth demands breaking through this alienated state, allowing labour activity to once again become a free expression of human life. This requires rebuilding new social production relations and abandoning private property: "A positive abandonment of private property, as the appropriation of human life, is a

positive abandonment of all alienation, thereby returning man from religion, family, state, etc., to his own existence—that is, to the existence of society itself" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:298).

Finally, the dimension of subject-capacity realization. Since the subject-essence of private property—abstract labour—is a negation of the person, after overcoming capitalist private ownership the capacity of labour as a subject can be fully exercised. Marx states, "If we discard the narrow bourgeois form, then isn't wealth precisely the universality of individual needs, talents, enjoyment, productive forces, etc., generated in universal exchange? Isn't wealth the full development of man's domination over natural forces—both the so-called 'natural' forces and man's own natural forces? Isn't wealth the absolute realization of man's creative endowment? This realization, apart from prior historical development, has no other prerequisite" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:479). Here, the "prior historical development" refers to ancient views that always treated man as the purpose and premise of wealth production; under such a premise, productive labour does not appear as alienated abstract labour, and therefore this labour becomes the universality of man's needs, talents, enjoyment, productive forces, etc., fully expressing man's natural forces and creative endowment. In the modern, capitalist world, however, private ownership restricts labour: lacking its own object, labour as talent is confined to the human body, cannot become a need, let alone be fully realized. Moreover, Marx argues that the persons who can turn labour into a capacity and fully realize it are not a privileged bourgeois minority but every social individual who performs labour. He notes: "The great foundation manifested as production and wealth is neither the direct labour completed by the person nor the time the person spends labouring, but the possession of the person's general productive forces, the person's understanding of nature, and the domination of nature through the person's existence as a social being—in short, the development of social individuals" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1998:100-101).

Thus, integrating the three dimensions, we can understand Marx's subject-essence of wealth as follows: under conditions in which private property has been abandoned, social individuals, through freely conscious labour, historically realize the full development of their needs, talents, and creative abilities. This essence contains three key theoretical links: (1) after abandoning private property, labour is no longer merely owned by the labourer in an alienated form but returns to free, conscious activity, and its objectified products become confirmation of the person's essential power rather than objects of domination. "The abandonment of alienated labour means the realization of free labour as free conscious activity, and free labour means the free expression of the person's essential power, the full satisfaction of the person's creative needs, and the realization of social relations among persons—not merely the satisfaction of material needs and the possession of wealth" (Wang Jiansong, 2012); (2) it takes "the absolute realization of man's creative endowment" as its value core, breaking the capital-bound constraints of abstract labour. In the labour-capital relation, labour is not exercised as an intrinsic human value but as an external tool for capital's value increase; (3) it continuously proceeds as a subject-labour that repeatedly overcomes alienation, moving toward a more free and conscious dynamic historical process. Understanding Marx's subject-essence of wealth in this way avoids the simplification of

technological determinism that places productive forces at the core, and also overcomes the vacuity of a purely anthropocentric humanism centered on needs. On the solid foundation of historical materialism, it reconstructs a theoretical picture of human liberation. Marx's profundity lies not in purely abstract theoretical deduction, but in the analysis of the real contradiction between productive forces and production relations, revealing the inner content of the subject-essence of wealth—as a historical process of human self-realization that is always "in the absolute motion of change" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:480). Marx insists that the subject-essence of wealth must be examined within concrete historical relations.

3. Marx's Critique of the Alienation of Digital Labor in the Subject-Essence of Wealth

In the digital economy era, "digital labor as a new form of labor in the digital economy refers to labor performed by workers who take digitized knowledge and information as the object of labor and use digital information technology as labor material" (Liu Haixia, 2020:16). The emergence of digital labor does not depart from Marx's framework of labor analysis; Marx's critique of abstract labor and alienation still retains remarkable explanatory power in the 21st century dominated by information technology and digital platforms. Digital capitalism, in a more covert and comprehensive manner, transforms human subject activity into extractable value, deepening the alienation of the wealth subject-essence. The alienation of digital labor has become "a new characteristic of contemporary capitalist development" (Su Peng, 2025). The alienation of digital labor mainly manifests as: the commodification of digital labor, the alienation of labor products, the essential alienation of workers, and the resulting social class differentiation (Liu Haixia, 2020:17-18). These alienated manifestations cause concrete digital labor—which should be a powerful lever for liberating human creativity—to likewise become a new form of abstract labor that adds value to capital and distorts the wealth subject-essence. "Marx's writings and Marxist theory provide a rich categorical system that can be used to critically understand digital labor and other forms of labor" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:11). Accordingly, we conduct a systematic critique of the alienation of digital labor from Marx's three-dimensional view of the wealth subject-essence, revealing that its alienation is rooted in the distortion of the digital wealth subject-essence by capitalist private ownership across three dimensions: the deepening abstraction in the historical-generation dimension, the algorithmic reconstruction in the social-relation dimension, and the alienation in the subject-capacity dimension.

3.1 Historical Dimension: The Alienated Upgrade of Abstract Labor from a Value Entity to a Life Code

Digital technology, although it has dramatically boosted social productive forces, has not eliminated the historical domination of abstract labor over people within the framework of capitalist private ownership. Instead, in the process of abstraction, digital labor is rendered as a measurable, tradable, and accumulable "life code." When all of a user's online behaviors are forcibly detached by digital capital from their concrete social forms and lived experiences and transformed into quantifiable, tradable, and accumulable "behavioral data packages," the earlier practice of national economists abstracting labor as a value entity

finds a new expansion in digital space—the category of abstraction extends from traditional production fields to the entirety of human life activities. This implies that the bourgeois notion, criticized by Marx, of treating abstract labor as an "eternal category" now has a more precise manifestation in today's algorithm-driven era: labor abstraction is no longer confined to the factory sphere but permeates all aspects of daily life through data-collection mechanisms, encompassing personal hobbies, social-relationship graphs, sleep duration, and even emotional fluctuations, turning human existence itself into material for digital-capital value augmentation.

The situation in which platform capital privatizes data is presented as an inevitable result of technological progress, yet in reality it represents a double deviation from the historical logic of labor development. On the one hand, digital technology, which could have become the material basis for "the full realization of human creative potential," is now twisted into a tool for tight capital control. The surveillance system analyzed by Fox exemplifies this: "Enterprise network platform operators and third-party advertisers continuously monitor and record personal data and online activities. They store, merge, and analyze the collected data, enabling them to create detailed user profiles and gain extensive knowledge of users' personal interests and online behavior" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:136). On the other hand, when most digital-technology resources are employed for precise advertising rather than supporting holistic human development, such technology deviates from its core goal of liberating labor potential. Consequently, Rosa keenly perceives the extreme degree of the digital paradox: technology that should foster interpersonal connections instead leads to "an increasing disjunction between social proximity and physical proximity. Those with intimate social relationships are not necessarily physically close, and vice versa" (Hartmut, 2018). These alienations are especially pronounced in the realm of labor products. Users' spontaneously generated social relationships, emotional support, and cultural creativity are ultimately appropriated without compensation by platform capital, becoming what Fox terms "Internet producer-consumer commodities" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:136). This confirms Marx's observation that "the full actualization of a person's inner essence manifests as complete emptiness" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:480). The more digital workers invest in creative activities, the more their labor outcomes become alienated forces of domination. Moreover, in the consumption sphere, algorithmic manipulation systems enable "targeted advertising that allows internet companies to present multiple ads to users simultaneously, thereby increasing the total advertising time presented to users" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:135). Platforms fabricate "imagined desires" through user profiling (e.g., pushing luxury watch ads to unemployed youths), luring individuals into unconscious consumption obsession and activating Marx's prophecy: "Each new product generates new potential forces of mutual deception and mutual plunder" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 2002:339).

3.2 Social Dimension: Digitized Labor-Capital Relations Reshaped by Algorithms

At the social level, algorithms reconstruct a new labor-capital relationship—digital labor and platform capital—by alienating data value that should belong to the social collective into privately owned capital and exploiting it through a novel "digital ground rent" mechanism, thereby overturning the essence of

wealth as "the common, social productive capacity of individuals" (Marx Karl & Engels Friedrich, 1995:107). Under the guise of "technological neutrality," platform capital cleverly disguises and reshapes labor-capital relations via algorithms. It converts substantive employment or covert exploitation into "pure market transactions" or "voluntary user participation," cloaking exploitation with rhetoric such as "free order taking" and "sharing economy." "Commercial media forces individuals to use them; the more monopolistic they become, the easier they can coerce media consumers and users" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:124). This disguise continuously strengthens capital's control over the labor process (e.g., gig riders are monitored and directed in real time by algorithmic routing systems), while labor-capital contradictions are concealed by an "de-labor" ideology. At the macro labor-market level, algorithms exacerbate the polarization between "primary and secondary labor markets": on one side are the "data aristocrats" who control algorithm design, data analysis, and traffic allocation; on the other are gig riders, content-farm workers, and other precariously employed "crowd proletariat" (Lan Jiang, 2022). If we understand digital labor broadly, "this understanding is based on industry rather than occupation, aiming to emphasize the commonality of exploitation and that capital is the enemy of the vast working masses" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:6).

The privatization of data value resulting from this alienation fundamentally reflects an extreme inequality in data ownership. First, platform capital extracts "digital ground rent" by monopolizing user data: "The time users spend on enterprise platforms constitutes the value created by their unpaid digital labor. Their digital labor generates social relationships, personal data, user-generated content, and transaction data—a data commodity provided by internet firms to advertisers" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:130). The exploitation mechanism follows: users generate raw data unpaid → platforms monopolize data access → advertisers pay "data rent," with the rent-to-unpaid-labor-time ratio far exceeding that of traditional industries. Second, advertisers, by paying "data rent," acquire ownership of user data and then exploit users through both traditional advertising and targeted advertising to extract absolute and relative surplus value. In traditional advertising, advertisers obtain absolute surplus value by broadcasting to undifferentiated human audiences—the broader the audience (e.g., on public television), the higher the profit margin. With digital technology, advertisers target differentiated labor clusters (e.g., young women, middle-class men) on social media, thereby extracting relative surplus value. As Sut Jhally notes, "re-organizing audiences demographically" is a form of relative surplus-value production; "the more targeted the advertisement, the greater the likelihood that users will recognize and click it. The user's 'click-to-purchase' process is the realization of the advertising company's surplus value" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:134-135). In the process of "digital land-ification," raw data are produced by countless users' unpaid labor, while platforms and advertisers, possessing digital technology and capital, appropriate these data as private property. They lack ownership of the data commodities they create and do not reap the monetary profits generated (a poverty relative to labor products). Digital workers experience multiple layers of poverty, yet this poverty itself becomes a source of wealth. As producers of online wealth, their time on platforms constitutes productive labor and capital-value-adding time, which is appropriated by

capital; the monetary capital created by users cannot be owned by them (Christian Fuchs, 2020:345-346). This completely contradicts Marx's core principle that wealth should be a common, social productive capacity belonging to society, reducing digital labor once again to a mere adjunct of capital accumulation.

3.3 Subjective Dimension: Cognitive and Emotional Alienation as the Source of the Hidden Nature of Digital Labor Exploitation

The reverse fetishism of digital commodities obscures the commodity nature of digital labor, leading social-media users into cognitive blindness. This blindness, reinforced by the platform's objective conditions that alienate emotional structures, transforms users' communicative abilities and creativity into tools for capital value addition, deepening the concealment of digital-labor exploitation. When users claim that "'Facebook' does not exploit me because I connect with other users and benefit from it" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:344-345), they are actually expressing a new reverse form of the commodity fetishism that Marx identified for the digital age: traditional fetishism objectifies social relations as "relations between things," whereas the "reverse fetishism" characteristic of digital goods disguises the exploitative relationship as social interaction. The core of this cognitive blindness lies in the wealth subject's inability to discern the dual use value created by digital labor—the "social use value" that satisfies communicative needs and the "commercial use value" that generates service capital (targeted advertising space) (Christian Fuchs, 2020:344). Crucially, this cognitive blindness underpins emotional-structure alienation: when users misjudge the essence of digital labor, their emotional structures become more susceptible to regulation by platform-imposed objective conditions such as ownership structures, data processing, usage and privacy policies, thereby fully alienating Marx's notion of wealth as "the absolute full development of human creative talent" into a gear within the data-production chain. This composite cognitive-emotional alienation ultimately hides the capacity of the wealth subject within capital's exploitative relations.

The objective conditions of social media—platform market conditions, monopolies, ownership structures, data processing, usage and privacy policies, advertising formats, etc.—manipulate users' emotional structures and confound cognition, forming a systemic alienation loop. Social media first manipulates emotional structures through these objective conditions; drawing on Williams's concept of "emotional structure" (Christian Fuchs, 2020:347), the platform, leveraging alienated "objective conditions," reshapes specific users' experiences and emotional make-up. Subsequently, users, confused cognitively, interpret this manipulation as autonomous choice. The hidden nature of this alienation loop lies in the fact that the more users strive to enhance emotional expression, the more they reinforce the platform's emotional-analysis models; the algorithm's precise grasp of emotional patterns, in turn, deepens users' misperception of exploitation. Because users lack an independent platform for emotional expression, they rely on free platforms; these platforms, using objective conditions to restrict users, manipulate emotional structures so that alienated experiences (e.g., loneliness, self-alienation) are taken as inevitable aspects of contemporary life, thereby masking the essence of capital exploitation. Consequently, emotional creativity becomes an unseen assistant of digital-labor exploitation. Although theoretically

there are emancipatory pathways—such as users migrating from one platform to another—the cognitive and emotional alienation makes the subject's capacity to create wealth in the digital age encounter a more sophisticated form of alienation: exploitation is not only hidden but also sustained by users' own optimized emotional practices, providing enduring motivation.

4. Conclusion

This paper systematically examines the historical evolution logic of the essence of Marx's wealth subject, and, using this as a theoretical foundation, conducts a critical analysis of the alienated forms of digital labor under contemporary digital capitalism. By theoretically tracing the nature of wealth from its "objectivity" in natural economies, through its "sociality" in commodity economies, to its "subjectivity" in capitalist economies, the study reveals a core proposition: the inquiry into "what wealth is" inevitably leads to a philosophical level concerning "what humans are and how they ought to exist." Marx's great contribution lies in his profound insight and critique of the alienated form of the wealth subject under the capitalist mode of production—abstract labor—thereby providing the most penetrating theoretical tool for understanding the true relationship between wealth and humanity.

Marx's critique of the national economics view of wealth is not a simple conceptual distinction but a deep dialectical sublation. National economics first liberated the source of wealth from land or specific products, directing it toward human labor as the subject, which undoubtedly marked a historical advance. However, the "subject" it acknowledges is a "laboring person" that has been completely abstracted, instrumentalized, and de-humanized within private property relations, possessing only a nominal subjectivity. Through a three-dimensional analysis encompassing historical generation, social relations, and the realization of subject capacities, Marx pierces the false universality of abstract labor and reconstructs the genuine connotation of the wealth subject's essence: it is not the labor potential extracted under the logic of capital accumulation, but rather the social individual's re-appropriation of both the object of labor and labor itself after the sublation of private property. Consequently, the labor process transforms from a coercive means of subsistence into a freely conscious life activity, thereby fulfilling one's needs, affirming one's talents, and propelling the historical process of comprehensive human development. This process-oriented theory of the wealth subject, with human emancipation as its ultimate aim, constitutes the core value of Marxist political economy's critique.

From hand-driven mills to steam engines, and now to algorithms and artificial intelligence, the alienation logic of the wealth subject under capitalist private ownership remains continuous. With the rise of digital capitalism, labor has not been liberated; instead, the alienation of the wealth subject's essence has been perpetuated and deepened. By employing Marx's three-dimensional analytical framework for the wealth subject to conduct a critical examination, the study uncovers the three-dimensional distortion mechanisms of digital labor alienation, thereby demonstrating that Marx's theory of the wealth subject and its alienation holds even greater contemporary relevance and explanatory power in the digital age.

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