



## The political economy of attention: Capitalist extraction of human time

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### Abstract

Late capitalism is no longer centered on factories, machinery, and wage labour alone. It has entered a new regime where attention—the most intimate resource of human consciousness—has become the critical site of extraction. This paper argues that contemporary digital capitalism has transformed human time into a commodity through persistent surveillance, algorithmic manipulation, and data-driven monetization of behaviour. Drawing from Marx's theory of surplus value and the concept of alienation, the paper explains how platform corporations convert everyday cognitive activity into profit. By reorganizing labour into fragmented, invisible, and unpaid forms—scrolling, liking, watching—Big Tech creates a new class condition: the proletariat of attention. Through case studies from India's platform economy, the article highlights how leisure is no longer free but a domain of exploitation where emotional states, relationships, and desires become commercial assets. This shift represents a decisive mutation in capitalism—one that colonizes mental time and blurs boundaries between labour and life. The paper concludes by suggesting that reclaiming attention is foundational to reclaiming autonomy in the twenty-first century, positioning attention politics as the heart of future struggles against capitalist domination.

**Keywords:** Attention economy, marxist political economy, digital capitalism, surplus value extraction, algorithmic labour, data commodification, alienation, platform economy

### Introduction

Every epoch transforms the fundamental resource from which capital extracts value. Industrial capitalism extracted muscle; post-industrial capitalism extracted knowledge. But twenty-first century digital capitalism has shifted exploitation into the domain of consciousness. Human attention — the very capacity to notice, feel, and think — is now the essential raw material of accumulation. When we scroll through a feed, watch a video, or click a link, we are not merely consuming digital content; we are producing value through the micro-labours of attention. These unnoticed actions generate data, shape algorithmic decisions, and yield profit for platform corporations. Time which once belonged to life itself has become a commodity. This shift raises profound Marxist questions: if labour creates value, how do we understand labour that is invisible, unpaid, and constant? What happens when leisure becomes labour? When desire becomes a site of extraction? Marx never saw the smartphone or the social media feed, but his theory of surplus value provides the sharpest lens for analysing this new mode of exploitation. Capitalism has entered the cognitive domain, turning attention into surplus value, and turning individuals into workers without contracts.

The struggle of our time, then, is not waged on the factory floor but in the mind. It is a struggle to reclaim mental time — a struggle to protect autonomy from a system that profits by fragmenting it.

### From Industrial Labour to Cognitive Extraction

Marx defined labour as the process through which humans transform nature and, in turn, transform themselves. Under capitalism, this creative power is captured and exploited. What has changed today is not exploitation, but its location. Shoshana Zuboff describes contemporary capitalism as a regime where “experience itself becomes free raw material for translation into behavioural data” (Zuboff, 2019) [7].

Capital is no longer interested only in what the worker does but in what the worker notices.

With the rise of digital platforms, a new kind of worker has emerged: the always-on user. This worker is not paid a wage yet produces immense surplus. The scrolling thumb becomes the new conveyor belt, continuously generating the data that fuels algorithmic accumulation. The workplace has dissolved into everyday life. Leisure is monetized; sleep is a frontier of extraction; desire is privatized into purchasable attention units. In this transformation, attention is the commodity, the user the unpaid labourer, the platform the capitalist.

Herbert Marcuse warned that capitalism seeks to colonize consciousness, turning freedom into consumption (Marcuse, 1964) [2]. Today, this colonization is complete. Even boredom becomes productive — algorithms exploit it by feeding distraction. The mind has become the factory.

### Surplus Value and the Commodification of Time

Marx argued that exploitation lies in the difference between the value labour produces and the wage paid for it. But what happens when no wage is paid? In the attention economy, audiences are monetized as products. The user's time and behavioural data create profit, while the user receives none of the value generated. Dallas Smythe's theory of the audience commodity, formulated for television, has reached its absolutist form in digital platforms. The commodity is no longer merely the viewer but the viewer's full temporal and emotional engagement.

Capital has achieved a new level of parasitism. Time that once belonged to family, imagination, silence, dreaming — the time of being human — has been turned into a revenue stream. Marx's critique of capitalist alienation now extends into the realm of attention: we no longer own our time, and thus no longer own ourselves.

When algorithms dictate what we must notice, we lose the power to shape our own consciousness. Alienation becomes internal: estrangement from our thoughts.

### **The Emotional Factory: Monetising Feeling**

In this new political economy, capitalism no longer demands physical energy; it harvests emotional reaction. Outrage, desire, envy, admiration — each becomes economic input. Social media platforms optimize for amplification of feelings that keep users hooked. The economy of attention is therefore an economy of emotion: what we love, what we fear, what we hate — these have become productive forces.

Antonio Gramsci saw ideology as a tool of consent (Gramsci, 1971) <sup>[1]</sup>. Today, algorithmic feeds produce consent unconsciously. Instead of forcing belief, they curate reality. Ideology becomes personalized: every individual inhabits a custom-built worldview designed to escalate consumption and deepen dependency. The result is not merely emotional manipulation but emotional commodification.

When feelings become profitable, vulnerability becomes currency. The most human parts of us are no longer our own.

### **Platform Capitalism and the Gigification of Life**

The gig economy is often presented as a flexible alternative to traditional labour markets. But from a Marxist standpoint, it represents capitalism's dream scenario: labour without responsibility, productivity without protections, output without contracts. Workers bear all risk; capital claims all value. What is less recognized is that gig work and attention labour are intimately connected. The same algorithmic architecture that extracts data from digital users also extracts labour from gig workers, tracking their every movement and minute.

In India, this transformation is stark. Over 7.7 million workers participate in platform-based livelihoods as of 2022 (NITI Aayog Report, 2022) <sup>[4]</sup>. They inhabit a new precariat — lacking security, benefits, and collective bargaining. Their labour is quantified in ratings and stars, not dignity.

Capitalism has perfected fragmentation: workers have no workplaces, users have no free time, and society has no protected commons. Everything becomes a transaction. Everything becomes labour.

### **India's Attention Marketplace: A New Arena of Class Politics**

India, with its 1.4 billion people and rapidly expanding digital penetration, has become one of the world's largest attention markets. Over 820 million internet users (TRAI, 2023) <sup>[6]</sup> contribute daily to a vast pool of behavioural data that fuels profit for a handful of global and domestic corporations. This digital expansion is framed as empowerment; yet beneath the narrative of innovation lies a quieter truth: while Indian users produce enormous value, that value is captured elsewhere.

This asymmetry reflects classic imperial arrangements. The Global South supplies raw materials; the Global North accumulates capital. Today the raw material is attention. When users in Delhi, Jaipur or Guwahati spend hours scrolling through global platforms, they strengthen Silicon Valley monopolies. The economic geography of attention reproduces colonial flows: extraction from the periphery, profit to the core.

For Marx, capital must constantly seek new territories for accumulation. The attention economy represents capitalism's ultimate conquest — colonizing the interior of

consciousness itself. In India, where high youth population and economic precarity converge, susceptibility to digital exploitation increases. A generation is being shaped not by curriculum or community, but by algorithms optimized for distraction.

Digital India is producing a new working class — not in factories, but in feeds.

### **The “Proletariat of Attention”: A New Class Condition**

Capital constantly reinvents the proletariat to preserve exploitation. Today's workers are not only drivers, delivery riders, or freelancers; they are users whose interrupted glances and scattered moments generate economic value. They do not clock in or clock out; they exist permanently at work.

This creates a historically unprecedented condition:

People are labouring every moment they are awake — without wage, without recognition.

This is the proletariat of attention.

This new class confronts two forms of dispossession:

1. Loss of time — stolen by endless engagement loops
2. Loss of self — consciousness shaped by profit-driven filters

Marx argued that in capitalism, labour becomes external to the worker — something not owned by them. Today, even one's inner time becomes external. The result is a kind of alienation that Marx could not have foreseen: estrangement from one's own attention, one's own capacity to choose where the mind rests.

The worker becomes not merely exploited but internalized as a market.

### **Surveillance Capitalism and Control of Behaviour**

Industrial capital exploited labour.

Digital capital exploits behaviour.

Platforms measure every micro-action: how long the eye dwells on a post, what emotions intensify scrolling, which colours trigger pleasure, which words produce anger. This data feeds surveillance capitalism — a system where capital predicts and influences behaviour to guarantee profit.

Zuboff calls this “instrumentarian power,” where freedom is not taken away but quietly redesigned (Zuboff, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>.

The citizen becomes governable not through law but design.

The feed decides what matters. The recommendation engine chooses what is desirable. An invisible machine scripts attention, and therefore priority, and therefore power.

The politics of attention becomes the politics of belief.

When algorithms curate our perceptions, ideology is no longer disseminated; it is injected.

### **Alienation 2.0: The Loss of Undisturbed Being**

Marx saw alienation as separation of the worker from the product of their labour, from their nature, from other humans. In the attention economy, alienation takes a deeper form:

We are separated from our own presence.

Solitude becomes intolerable. Silence becomes unsettling.

Every moment unmediated by a screen feels like waste. This psychological shift is not accidental; it is engineered.

Capital makes demand on the mind's restfulness, converting peace into potential profit.

In India, this shift is visible in public spaces where attention is never idle: metros, queues, dinner tables. Screens occupy

the mental commons that once belonged to imagination, conversation, and wonder.

A culture that cannot look up from its phone cannot look inward.

Alienation has escaped the factory and entered the soul.

### **Labour Without Leisure: The Exhaustion of Constant Connectivity**

The classical distinction between labour time and leisure time collapses under digital capitalism. What appears to be leisure — watching reels, scrolling through posts — is monetized as labour. The worker never truly stops working; they simply switch modes of productivity.

This blur of boundaries produces a condition of global fatigue. When the brain is constantly responding to impulses, its cognitive resources are depleted. This is not merely psychological strain; it is economic exploitation of attention as a finite commodity.

Marx warned that capitalism aims to occupy the entire day of the worker. Today, that ambition is realized not through extended factory shifts but through perpetual connectivity — the worker becomes productive even in bed.

When time itself is colonized, where is freedom left to breathe?

### **Decolonizing the Mind: India's Philosophical Resistance**

India's civilizational philosophies have long asserted that mastery of attention is mastery of self. Yogic and Buddhist traditions treat attention not as a commodity but as a path to liberation. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras define dharana (focused attention) as a foundation for self-realization. The Bhagavad Gita warns against attachments that hijack awareness. Sikh philosophy emphasizes Naam Simran — a mindful focus that resists worldly fragmentation.

These teachings now gain political significance.

The struggle for attention becomes the struggle for sovereignty — sovereignty over consciousness.

When capitalism intrudes into the inner world, the resistance must be both external and internal. Reclaiming attention becomes resistance against domination. Protecting silence becomes protection of autonomy. Rest becomes rebellion.

India's philosophical heritage offers a vocabulary for cognitive freedom that Marxism alone did not articulate. The synthesis of Marxist political economy and Indic philosophies could form a powerful framework for liberation from digital exploitation.

A revolution of mind may be the revolution that capitalism fears most.

### **Class Struggle in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism**

Marx believed that class struggle follows the organization of production. When production becomes cognitive, class struggle shifts into the realm of consciousness. The proletariat of attention may appear fragmented, individualized, isolated — but shared exploitation creates latent solidarity. When billions experience the same exhaustion, distraction, and manipulation, they become a class-in-formation.

But unlike industrial workers who could unite physically, digital labourers are atomized by design. Algorithms prevent collective awareness by isolating users in personalized content bubbles. Capital's greatest triumph is convincing each individual that their struggle is private. Yet

within this fragmentation lies the potential for new forms of resistance:

- Digital unions to defend cognitive rights
- Collective refusal of addictive design
- Demands for fair compensation for data labour
- Legal recognition of "attention rights"

As Marx insisted, exploitation always generates its own contradiction:

the greater the capture of attention, the stronger the demand for mental autonomy.

Class consciousness today is literally consciousness of consciousness.

### **The Indian State and The Politics of Data Sovereignty**

India stands at a pivotal junction. The State increasingly recognizes that data and attention are strategic assets. The Personal Data Protection Bill and Digital India Act are attempts to assert regulation, but they remain limited in confronting platform capitalism's deeper ideological power. If attention is a national resource, then its extraction by foreign platforms represents a form of digital colonialism. This demands a post-colonial Marxist response — one that connects class struggle with sovereignty. India must develop policies that:

- Recognize users as data labourers with rights over the value they produce
- Enforce platform transparency in algorithms
- Protect mental health by regulating addictive design
- Create public digital spaces not governed by profit

The struggle over attention is therefore the struggle over who shapes India's future:

democratic citizens or corporate algorithms.

### **Attention as the New Commons**

Historically, capital has enclosed the commons — land, water, and knowledge — to convert public wealth into private profit. Today, the mental commons are being enclosed. Silence, focus, daydreaming — once free resources of the human mind — are being privatized.

Reclaiming attention means restoring the commons.

This requires cultural awakening. Education that values contemplation. Community that nurtures presence. Technology that enables dignity rather than dependency. Parents, teachers, activists, and policymakers must recognize that attention is a sacred social resource that sustains democracy itself. A distracted citizen cannot deliberate. A fatigued mind cannot resist.

Attention is not merely a cognitive function; it is the foundation of freedom.

### **The New Alienation: Forgetting Ourselves**

The deepest crisis created by the political economy of attention is not economic but existential. When the mind is colonized, the person forgets their own potential. As Marx stated, alienation is the loss of the ability to recognize oneself as a creative being. Digital capitalism replaces self-creation with self-consumption. Identity becomes performance. Value becomes validation.

This crisis affects the youth most severely. Over 65% of India's population is under 35. A generation whose inner world is shaped by invisible profit motives risks losing the

capacity for independent thought. Democracies bereft of critical thinking are democracies at risk.

The question is not whether we are exploited, but whether we know we are exploited.

### **Hope in the Reflexive Mind: Seeds of Cognitive Liberation**

Marx always believed that material conditions create resistance. The same technology that captures attention can also mobilize it, educate it, empower it. Awareness of exploitation becomes the first act of revolt.

Students who question addictive apps.

Workers who demand digital rights.

Communities that reclaim silence.

Governments that regulate platform power.

These are forms of cognitive liberation — small acts of resistance that protect the dignity of time. A society that guards attention becomes a society that guards thought. In that act lies democratic survival.

Capitalism conquered our attention because we did not protect it.

We can reclaim our attention because now we understand it.

### **Conclusion: Time as the Last Battlefield**

The political economy of attention reveals capitalism's boldest move:

to not only own labour time but to own life-time.

Marx located freedom in the time beyond labour — the time for art, love, and contemplation. Digital capitalism invades that very space, making the worker productive every second, turning human experience into unpaid labour.

This article has traced how Big Tech exploits attention through emotional capture, behavioural engineering, and algorithmic enclosure. It has shown that a new proletariat emerges — exploited not by factories but by feeds. In India, where youth and digital dependency converge, the stakes are particularly high. Consciousness becomes the new class frontier.

The battle of our era is not for wages alone but for the right to own our minds.

A revolution today begins by reclaiming the ability to think without manipulation, to feel without commodification, to be without surveillance. In defending attention, we defend autonomy. In reclaiming time, we reclaim humanity.

Capital stole the worker's daylight; digital capital steals their dreams.

The struggle for political freedom now passes through the liberation of attention.

The future will belong not to the power that controls our screens, but to the people who reclaim their gaze.

To protect attention is to protect the human soul.

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