Scene: between two ferns in Lullwater Park

Fuchs: My dear Henry, whence come you, and whither are you going?

Jenkins: Hello, Christian. I am on my way to give a lecture and I thought I would take the scenic route to campus.

F: It is a splendid day for a walk indeed. What is it that you are going to teach?

J: I am to give a talk about the rise of the digital age and the social implications of the participatory culture of our society.

F: I see. Tell me, what exactly do you mean by “participatory culture?”

J: Well, a society with low barriers to civic engagement, a culture which emphasizes creativity and sharing, and a population that feels socially connected with one another and believe their contributions matter, to name a few things. You see, the Internet has greatly facilitated all the characteristics I just mentioned, and now more people than ever before are engaged in consumer participation.

F: Hmm. You seem to focus entirely on the cultural aspects of digital age participation. However, I think when one talks of “participation,” it is necessary to also consider the tenets of participatory democracy theory. This way, you are forced to consider other aspects of society like economics and politics. Where do these topics fit in your model of modern society?

J: Well, because so many people nowadays have the capability to spread media, consumers have more power than ever before. Through the advent of label design competitions, for example, the average person is now an integral part of a product’s success and hold more decision making power than ever before in large corporations.

F: It’s interesting that you give the example of a campaign such as a product label design contest. Wouldn’t you agree that by committing to such an undertaking, the corporation in question has the potential to save a considerable amount of money *and* significantly increase sales?

J: I suppose if prosumers decide to share the campaign with their friends or followers that could be the case. The people would determine the success of the product.

F: That actually brings me to another point. While it may be true that the consumers have a certain degree of power in terms of spreading knowledge of the campaign to their respective networks, who initiated the spread of information?

J: The company selling the good.

F: Precisely. And who actually does almost all of the work in terms of designing the label and spreading the word about the campaign?

J: Well I suppose the prosumer does.

F: Wouldn’t you say then that the company, let’s say Pepsi, actually ended up saving a significant amount of money that they would have used to pay a design company by outsourcing this work to the people for free?

J: But usually there is a prize or other sort of compensation for the winner of the competition.

F: True, the outsourcing is not completely free, but wouldn’t you say that Pepsi has more than made up for those costs by reaping the benefit of the work of everyone who submitted a losing design?

J: Yes, they have.

F: On top of that, Pepsi doubtless generated an emotional attachment to the brand in countless consumers, thereby driving up sales and profits. You see Henry, though it may seem as though the consumers have gained an unprecedented level of economic agency in our modern society by having “more of a voice,” it is still the large corporations in our capitalist market who are in the power positions. They are often the ones who dominate the attention of consumers; the biggest media corporations are always the ones that show up at the top of search queries. Economic decision-making is in the hands of shareholders, not the consumers. The former exploit the latter, taking advantage of their unpaid labor to maximize their profits. The real question we should be asking is who owns the platforms we use and the companies we buy products from.

J: I see your point, but nobody is forced to use social media or to buy commercial products. If we return to our example of the label design contest, it is not as though all the participants were told, “start drawing” with a gun pointed at their head. You talk about exploitation, but in fact, most of those people probably are passionate about artistic expression and entered into the contest for fun. The same holds true for users of sites like Facebook or Twitter.

F: I will concede that many find such tasks to be “playlabor” and that the line between work and play has significantly blurred. But, is it not true that such companies as you mentioned make their profits through targeted advertising?

J: Well yes, of course. They have to make money somehow to maintain their staff, servers, etc.

F: So it follows that people who spend more time on social media platforms because they find it enjoyable actually earn the owners of those sites more money by adding to the collective user browsing data pool. Do such people get paid for their additional labor?

J: Well, no.

F: So the notion that some people find such activities enjoyable is irrelevant. The fact remains that consumers do unpaid work for large corporations, and that the owners of these corporations reap large profits by commodifying their consumers in selling user data for targeted advertising. For a true participatory society to exist, the consumers must have democracy in ownership as well.

J: But they provide a service at no cost to the user.

F: Can the service be considered a salary?

J: What do you mean?

F: Can the benefits of the service be converted and used to purchase something else like food?

J: I guess not.

F: So Henry, people may believe that they have more economic control in a participatory culture, but in reality this is a false ideology. They are fooled into believing that exploitation is fun and often unwittingly reinforce the concentration of capital in the hands of the powerful, which serves as the foundation of the capitalist economy. Additionally, the technology that we as a society hold so dear often comes at the cost of the blood, sweat, and lives of laborers in developing countries. Western corporations, by means of withholding wages and subjecting laborers to toxic working conditions, heavily exploit such workers. In the Congo, armed thugs resort to violence, extortion, and mass rape for control of the valuable minerals that companies like Apple use in their products.

J: Well, this has been an interesting conversation. There were many things in terms of ownership relations and exploitation that I had not fully considered. I must be going now though; my class awaits me.

F: Ah, but we haven’t even begun to talk about your thoughts on the political implications of social media!

J: Maybe another time.

F: Certainly, Henry. I look forward to it.