

CHAPTER 4

From Accumulation to Alienation: Marx and Veblen

The previous chapter discussed some of the features of social capitalism and the nature of these flexible and mobile regimes to gain insight into the phenomenon of accumulation that occurs on social media, particularly with a view to online social capital's most readily apparent symbol: numeric counters that validate, valorise, and give some semblance of value to user production on social media. This is paired with the way social media sites accumulate and aggregate user data for its own purposes, not for the benefit of the user. Both of these forms of accumulation are not only circuits unto themselves, but are linked.

To what degree users on social media are alienated and exploited through their acts of online social capital accumulation must be answered in light of the specific affordances of social media, while also drawing from the works of Marx and Veblen. Given this chapter's focus on alienation and exploitation, appealing to the works of Marx would be an obvious choice; however, this will only represent part of the story, for there is also the institutional economic approach developed by Thorstein Veblen that may speak to social media users' conspicuous acts online. Combined, this will tell a more dynamic story about how alienation and exploitation manifest in the pursuit of online social capital. Both Marx and Veblen will agree that alienation is a major issue to be addressed and ameliorated, despite being in disagreement about its origins. For Marx, a raising of class consciousness is key to superseding alienation and exploitation, whereas for Veblen it is to wrest the power of invention and creation away from purely pecuniary interests, but also to raise consciousness in a different way: to get people to question their own conspicuous consumption and ritualistic behaviour. In the simplest of terms, the way out of alienation and exploitation leads, for Marx, to the classless society where workers own the means of production; for Veblen, to a society where education and technology will not be

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influenced or controlled by private sector interests, and instead be an available resource held in common.

There is still considerable debate as to whether social media use is increasing or decreasing exploitation, and the same for alienation. In the classic Marxist literature, exploitation exacerbates alienation, yet some authors such as Eran Fisher (2010, 2012), Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, 2006) make the compelling argument that the situation with social media today presents a very different case, whereby there is a split between exploitation and alienation, with social media increasing exploitation of its users while user alienation decreases. Whereas exploitation increases from data collection of users and user-generated labour on social media, users have more control over how they choose to express themselves and through the benefits of sharing and creativity, thus decreasing their alienation. Although the affordances of social media for creation, sharing and engagement exist, the instrumentalist logic underpinning capitalist social media pervades even these behaviours. When these benefits are geared toward, or measured by, accumulation of online social capital, this seems to bring alienation back into focus.

Subsequent to expanding upon the issues of exploitation and alienation as part of two interlinked circuits of accumulation, it can be argued that the pursuit of online social capital as expressed by the numeric counters reifies capitalist ideologies through a form of mimicry in an abstract or artificial economy within an actual economy of data collection and marketing. Furthermore, in the process of making use of social media to compete in the games of online social capital, users may in fact be producing themselves as branded digital objects, and thus can be said to be alienated from themselves as their own subjectivity is caught up in the circuit of capitalist production. As Lukács says of reification, ‘a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires “phantom objectivity,” an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.’ (Lukács 1972, 83). This phantom objectivity, core to Marx’s arguments on commodity fetishism, is present whenever labour is appropriated by another. Thus in this exploitative situation of extracting surplus value, this precipitates alienation.

Alienation

Marx’s core ideas on alienation function as an interrelated whole. There are four facets of alienation:

Alienation from One’s Labour	Alienation from other Labourers
Alienation from the Product of One’s Labour	Alienation from One’s self

Each of these facets of alienation differs in degree and expression pending the qualities and conditions pertaining to each person, productive capacities, and

labour arrangement. Marx's analysis points to how these may differ in terms of class, and he spends more of his time focusing on the proletariat as the class most negatively impacted by the conditions of alienation. It can be simplified to this: *what I do, what I make, who I relate with, who I am*.

With the division of labour, the creation of wage-labour, and the rise of the factory system, there would be a commensurate separation that would precipitate increased alienation, an end to the unity between human nature and labour through the inorganic and de-subjectifying aspects of capitalist production.

In the first of the four major separations, Marx points to a worker's separation from the work being performed, as the worker no longer has a say in what is produced, or how it is produced (Marx 1964, 13). In a traditional factory context, someone working on an assembly line is instructed to manufacture parts in a standardised fashion using techniques that are set in advance, thus enabling a kind of deskilling compared to the artisanal and craft labour more common to the pre-industrial era. This would also apply to a worker in the largely industrialised field of the fast food industry who has no choice but to prepare pre-set meals using pre-defined techniques to produce the standardised menu item. This form of alienation through routinised labour limits what the Autonomists will call the 'worker's affect' – the capacity for creation and to derive something transformative from the act of one's labour.

In the second aspect, we have the worker's separation from the product being produced. Not only does the product of the labour not belong to the worker, but the worker cannot choose to make alterations to the way the product is produced, nor can the worker decide how the product will be used (Marx 1964, 15). The product does not satisfy any need for the worker except that which is external to the productive activity: a wage. The worker's creative and cognitive potential is not permitted to develop under these conditions, and so is treated by the capitalist as something like a source of fuel for the capitalist production machine.

In the third aspect, the worker is separated from other workers by the capitalist tendency to divide and rule, pitting workers in competition against one another rather than to encourage collaboration (Marx 1964, 17). This is problematised further in our era by the advent of neoliberal economic-inspired forms of casualisation, telecommuting, zero-contract hours, and the sustained attack against unionisation – all of which are somehow touted in an optimistic fashion as providing benefits to the worker in terms of flexibility (casualisation and zero-contract hours), convenience (telecommuting) and rewarding individual merit while diminishing the value of workplace solidarity. This is exacerbated in the information economy: dividing workers spatially, temporally, and in encouraging individualist competition does not easily permit the kind of class consciousness Marx so strongly advocated, and it further seeks to increase profit upon practices that increase alienation and exploitation.

The fourth aspect binds all the other aspects together. The worker's separation and alienation from the self is the end result of this form of estranged

labour in the capitalist system (Marx 1964, 16). A life dedicated to the production of things that not only must have an immediate utility in the profit system but is also the property of others, may serve as ingredients to the further immiseration and dehumanisation of the worker. Added to this that the activity of the worker, and the worker's relation to other workers, is afflicted by this pervasive alienation, reduces the human being to subsistence activity: live to work, work to live.

The concepts of alienation and exploitation are strongly correlated given that, in Marxist analysis, the result of exploitation is alienation. So, we must ask if (i) social media users are exploited and, (ii) if, as a result of exploitation, they are also alienated. Furthermore, we must ask if the pursuit of online social capital is a feature tied to this exploitation and alienation.

Fisher (2012) splits alienation from exploitation rather than conflating the two. It might otherwise be understood that the two are complementary or entwined functions of capitalism, but Fisher independently asserts that, in social media, the increase in exploitation operates by a tacit promise of reducing the alienation of social media participants:

[T]he relations of production entailed by social media are based on an implicit social contract which allows media companies to commodify the communication produced by users (i.e. exploiting them) in return for giving them control over the process of producing communication, and expanding their opportunity for de-alienation. (180)

Social media on its own may not be alienating if we consider alienation to mean that users are somehow separated from fully realising themselves, others, their labour, or the product of their labour. In fact, there may be some reason to believe that social media may be a de-alienating force. The capacity for self-expression is limited only by the affordances of the network platform, as well as the means to connect and share information and values with others.

Fisher points to a dialectical relationship between social media exploitation and alienation; namely, that the communicative benefits of social media provide opportunities for self-expression and content sharing, etc., but this only occurs as exploitation of those users increases:

[I]n order to be de-alienated, users must communicate and socialize: they must establish social networks, share information, talk to their friends and read their posts, follow and be followed. By thus doing they also exacerbate their exploitation. (Fisher 2012, 179)

The promise of de-alienation through social media entails authentic self-expression and the cultivating of online relations which, in turn, provide the means for further exploitation by the network platform as users provide more surplus value by communicating more frequently, sharing photos, etc. As alienation decreases, exploitation increases – even if a majority of users do not

perceive themselves as being exploited. Users become ‘reconceptualised in the digital discourse as atomized nodes of entrepreneurship in the network of social production’ (Fisher 2010, 142). In this process of apparent emancipatory affordances for flexibility and creativity in this social production, Fisher makes the strong point that although this may be a ‘dealienating’ force, the turn to a form of entrepreneurial individualism and atomisation of users-as-nodes comes at the expense of more collaborative social structures as the work produced online becomes increasingly privatised. The increase in user productivity aligns with many of the touted virtues of neoliberal capitalism: workers who are adaptable, flexible, and atomised as opposed to fixed, secure and united by solidarity and collectivity. This, in turn, opens up more opportunities for the capitalist to engage in exploitative behaviour.

It would be too strong an assertion to say that social media de-alienates all its users, and particularly if we are unclear about what degree of alienation each of the users experiences prior to engaging in social media. At best, we might say that social media provides some or many with the means by which they can indulge in their positive aspects to be creative and engage in meaningful interpersonal relations not afforded them in their everyday work lives. The use of social media does not necessarily alleviate the alienation one might experience in the workplace or in offline life. Instead, social media’s emancipatory benefits may function as a creative social outlet. However, this is not always the case. For those who work exclusively on social media as their profession, their opportunities are prescribed by the demands of their employment. One example is account ownership: litigation concerning cases where an employee who operates a company social media account (whether in their own name, that of the business – or both) is terminated is still without much precedent. The company may argue on the lines of trade secrets or that the acquisition of followers was due exclusively to the employee’s connection to the company, and that those followers are the property of the company and not the employee.

Secondly, social media provides a *potential* for engaging in communicative exchanges and interpersonal relations that are meaningful and not alienating.

Thirdly, the increased integration of digital environments that augment even an offline world may also be indicative of an increase in alienation: the erosion of offline face-to-face social skills, a decrease in empathy, the unspoken demand to spend more time online to engage in instant communication feedback without being afforded the time for more meaningful reflection, an indifference to the outside world, the prospect that users become more like stimulus-response machines who react to online notifications as though thoroughly behaviourally conditioned, and the ways by which some online services augment reality by ideological means, so that a map of the landscape points almost solely to where one can consume products and services.

Lastly, there is both the structure and content of social media communication as potentially alienating. By structure, it is the network frames in which users are prompted to input their personal information, hobbies, interests and so forth for the ease of data mining; by content it is the proportion of online

communication dedicated to discussing consumer products and services, endorsement of brands, etc.

None of these objections render Fisher's argument of de-alienation insufficient, but they point to circumstances where we cannot say for absolute certainty, in all cases, that alienation decreases with the use of social media. There are numerous examples of de-alienation with the emergence of social media, but there are also counter examples.

We see further how alienation is exacerbated by the embedded and largely unseen algorithms operative in our social software. As Dyer-Witthford (1999), Terranova (2000, 2004) and Pasquinelli (2011) point out, in different ways, that our human processes become encoded as machinic form, gradually reducing our capacity to act (our affect) in the name of speed and convenience. It is not just routinised labour that is gradually displaced by the algorithms, but creative choices. Instead, we may be presented with 'recommendations' for whom to connect with, digital reminders that we have not participated for some time, and served a selective list of items in our network newsfeed at the exclusion of others that limit our capacity to act in response to only those items in the newsfeed we are presented with. Even the process of expanding our networks – itself a product of the logic that more connections is intrinsically better as it may increase our social or professional opportunities – may be facilitated by social media. A good example might be in consenting in allowing the site to access a list of contacts via one's email account, offering to send on one's behalf a batch invitation email to subscribe or connect. Sites such as LinkedIn make use of this option, and will match existing users to one's existing email contacts for a mass invite to connect. Even in those cases where one takes the time to scrutinise each potential connection, LinkedIn provides a simple and editable boilerplate invitation message.

The following table may indicate a few of the still existing alienation 'flash-points' associated with social media:

ALIENATION	SOCIAL MEDIA USERS
From One's Labour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The 'how' and 'what' partially prescribed by the framework of the social media site. 2) Automated processes that bypass creative choice. 3) Prescriptive terms of service that justify deletion of content deemed by that service to be in violation, including creative and political content.
From the Product of One's Labour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) User content is the property of the social media site with its exclusive right to modify or distribute. 2) Data as the processed 'product' of labour is a commodity sold to third parties using a model reminiscent of factorage. 3) The content of the labour having no productive labour value, only that it has been performed and can be data mined for, say, keywords.

ALIENATION	SOCIAL MEDIA USERS
From Others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Privileging competition over collaboration and cooperation. 2) Connection for connection's sake. 3) Digital reputation management in construction of self-as-representation, and as digital object. 4) Algorithms that determine visible content.
From the Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Representation of idealised self via the social media site's affordances. 2) Value migration so that offline experience is worth 'less' if not ported to the online milieu for validation by the social network. 3) Operating according to 'network time' as opposed to free time. 4) Selective exposure and self-selecting networks narrowing one's understanding of the self and world. 5) Expectations to react and respond rapidly as opposed to reflect and act at one's own pace. 6) Occupation of time spent away from personal reflection. 7) Vicarious living and social comparator activities. 8) Quantification of social activity as a measure of personal social value.

Alienation, Deskilling, and the Online Social Economy

There is yet another aspect of alienation that ought to be addressed given Marx's dire warnings over how capitalist technologies deskill workers and create the conditions for dead labour. Although not all social media users rely on social media in the classical sense of earning a wage for their labour, there is a haunting echo of work being performed and the gradual deskilling of that work transformed by convenient user experience. In tracking the rise of the world wide web, even the creation of websites may no longer require knowledge of HTML as there are several web hosting providers that make the building of a personal website possible with no coding knowledge whatsoever. In the world of social media, the freedom of design one had in such milieus as MySpace has been sacrificed for ease of use by constructing a rigid user-interface architecture where all elements share uniformity with every other social media user's account – a form of 'freedom' *from* design. This may actually serve to limit user action potentiality, prescribed by the network architecture (Papachrissi, 2009). On the one hand, the removal of barriers of specialisation required to build and maintain one's involvement in these sites has permitted more inclusive entry by the populace, whereby this specialisation is mostly undertaken 'in-house' by employees of the social media site.

If we take the accumulation of online social capital as a form of work, and one that relies on a huge social graph linked to competition, it is of some value to

recall Marx's statement: 'All improvements in the means of communication, for example, facilitate the competition of workers in different localities and turn local competition into national' (1975 [1847], 423). However, we might update the statement to reflect the expansive shift to the global scale, following the associated reification of a global economy. Users are 'plugged into' the circuits of capital, especially on social media sites where production, consumption, marketing and circulation converge.

What links online social capital accumulation to social digital alienation? To take a strictly Marxist interpretation of capital as a social relation, what mediates this relation? In the case of social capital as something that is accumulated, what is accumulated is the image of social capital through its representation: namely the numeric indicators that confer a sense of value and currency related to the general economy of users on any social media site platform. These relations among users become objectified as counters and are linked to the apparent value of the user. Already, the user in this general economy is abstracted as a representation of the self, modified as a digital object through which the user produces content in an effort to accumulate social capital.

The larger the user base or general economy of a particular platform, the larger the potential volume of transactions in this space, as well as the potential to accumulate online social capital. The more active users a site hosts, the more chances one has to sell one's productions in exchange for the approbation cues that underpin social capital. However, if the global economy is any indication of a pattern that might be applied here, a larger economy can never guarantee any one individual's wealth accumulation. Worse, it creates greater disparity due to several factors. It may also create the conditions of 'many sellers, few buyers'. This has increasingly become the case for those who produce video content for such enormously popular sites such as YouTube, being the largest single 'buyer' of user video content. This was identified by Ulises Mejias when he correctly calls this relation a form of oligopsony as opposed to an oligopoly (2013).

This feature of oligopsony is directly in play when we consider that those who engage in online self-branding in order to acquire more online social capital effectively 'sell' their labour power to the social networking site. If the goal of a user is to accumulate the largest amount of online social capital, it may seem logical to create a visible profile on a social network with a huge social graph. A network with a billion users as opposed to a thousand presents a higher potentiality for accumulating a larger amount of online social capital resources. However, the oligopsonistic nature of social media has emerged as dominant players like Facebook have either outpaced or absorbed its competitors, leading to fewer providers of social media services. It is the enormous user base that sells their labour and personal brand to these major social media sites in exchange for the services provided.

There is still one way in which the dominant social media sites retain their oligopolistic nature: by being the sellers of data. So it is in this way that major sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can operate as oligopsonists to

both users and those who seek to purchase advertising space on a site with one of the largest potential markets in the world.

Alienation and Veblen

The Marxist formulation of alienation is perpetuated by class division and capitalist exploitation, but it is far from the whole story when speaking of alienation in an online context. What Marx does not fully address is the cultural means by which institutions of power reproduce their status, and how individuals who seek advantage may emulate certain behaviours that are largely ritualistic in nature. Whereas Marx focuses on *class* struggle as part of the broader dialectic of chance and necessity, Veblen points to *status* and its forms of display as the human invariant.

Thorstein Veblen was among the first to recognise economics as thoroughly entangled or embedded in social institutions. In this age with the rise of democratised and digital forms of social institutions alongside traditional ones, it is feasible to apply the idea of an embedded economy in the social institutions of digital media, and particularly to extend the definition of social institution to such corporate entities as Facebook, Twitter and others. The very model from which all social media as private corporations follow is a distinctively market-based logic of accumulation. Veblen reminds us of the ritualistic nature of institutions, and warns against the depredations of pecuniary interest that impede true innovation.

Veblen identifies a fundamental dichotomy between an institution's more ceremonial function with its resistance to change, and the instrumental role technology can play in progress and change. Whilst he does argue to some degree about the manner in which technology can shape culture and society, his critics may be unfair to impute to him an outright technological determinist stance.

Traditional institutions in their most ceremonial aspects rely heavily on status-based hierarchies. The complexity of these institutions and the vested interests of those who occupy the power roles would characteristically be resistant to change, equating it with disruption and possibly jeopardising status. The threat of new technologies can precipitate change and disruption, be it crisis, resistance or adoption. Ideally, Veblen argues, adjustment is essential and technology should occupy a more instrumental role.

It may be argued that much of the activity on social networks has an instrumental basis, due to the nature of computerised networks operating by a network logic and epistemology. The instrumental use of social networks by the corporate hosts can be seen in the way it acquires user data for its pecuniary purposes, whereas the instrumental use for the network user may be indexed on the accumulation of online social capital that can later be leveraged for some extrinsic purpose. Both ends of the network – host and user – are caught up in a

distinctly economic instrumentality, performing a cost-benefit analysis of time spent, connections made and reputation management as a means of increasing a return on investment.

The focus here on online social goods of conspicuous production and consumption is restricted to the social behaviours that are geared toward increasing online social capital and claiming stake in the attention economy. Moreover, it is important to question whether the terms of prosumer or produser are sufficient to replace the producer-consumer distinction, even when considering user-led collaborative processes for content creation. Contrary to Bruns (2009), production and consumption may still be useful and operative terms. If we were to turn to pre-internet media, a reader who submits a letter to the editor of a newspaper or a listener who participates in a radio call-in show, could theoretically be classed under prosumption. However, the functions of production and consumption are still clear and distinct. The fanfare associated with the benefits of prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) and produsage (Bruns 2009) are said to inform a radical shift in economic models (Benkler 2006), while possibly overlooking the predatory and exploitative aspects of freely created and distributed content (Fuchs 2010).

The alliance between the emergence and rapid proliferation of ICTs and neo-liberal ideology has already been recognised by several authors (Castells 1996; Dyer-Witheford 1999; Harvey 2005; Bulut et al., 2009; Neubauer 2011). The specific context in which digital social environments may find themselves may have adopted in part some of the ideological shibboleths of informational capitalism insofar as that context represents:

[a] dialectic between forces and relations of production and consumption (that) revolves around technologies specifically designed (and marketed) to enhance, capture, transmit, and store human capacities such as creativity, communication, co-operation, and cognition' (Manzerolle 2014, 206).

Under these conditions, production itself is transformed, and social prosumption in the online environment comes ever more to resemble competitive business.

There is a great deal of contention between the Marxist and Veblenian views regarding alienation. For Marx, alienation is contingent upon the legal legitimation of private property and capitalist accumulation which alienates workers from their labour, the object of their labour, each other, and their own sense of self. For Veblen, alienation has its source in the predatory and tribal economy whereby such things as raids and acquisition were less about satisfying basic needs and more indexed on status-raising. In this movement, the instinct for workmanship is impoverished as 'work is irksome' and extravagant displays of wealth are required in Veblen's view of conspicuous consumption to explain the drive to display wealth as a status marker in societies. According to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, consumption patterns are less

indexed on durability and utility and more about status display. A silver spoon may tarnish and is a softer metal than steel, but it conveys status. Mapped onto the pursuit of accumulating social capital in an online context, there may be quite limited durability (due to novelty-effect) and utility (as it may not lead to actual wealth accumulation on the basis of the labour theory of value and that surplus value is extracted by the social media site). To be a YouTube star may not result in financial riches, but one may earn (an arguably temporary) cultural cachet.

Considering Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is in itself incomplete without contemplating that, on social media, there is also conspicuous production. If the goal of online social capital in the like economy is to be seen and raise one's status in a digital community, what one consumes in terms of content becomes conspicuous as a form of status display. Following particular online celebrities becomes part of a user's status in that they are choosing to be seen as being associated with that celebrity and that celebrity's values. Certainly not in all cases, as one can follow a politician and be disposed against her or him. In conspicuous production, the means by which users will display their status by posting images of a luxury vacation, expensive car, or some other form of luxury accessory may be performed in order to gain more likes while being seen as having good consumer taste and wealth. Such examples are plentiful on social media, such as the Instagram accounts RichRussianKids – which displays the luxurious lifestyles of the children of oligarch families – Rich Kids of Instagram, and others who use highly staged and filtered photos to portray lives of extreme wealth and privilege.

Such efforts at status display are not consigned to just that small segment of society with a great deal of wealth seeking to gain likes, but can be found emulated across social media in a variety of forms, including glamorous selfies, travel and adventure photos, professional status posts and even the popular genre of taking photos of one's food.¹⁶ Beyond conveying signs of professional status or wealth, some forms of conspicuous display can take the form of broadcasting social activist causes such as adding an awareness ribbon on an avatar or in associating one's profile with highly regarded public figures.

One may also point to some social media sites' use of specific filters for enhancing photographs that may alter the visual appearance of objects or persons in order to make them appear more glamorous than they actually are. For Veblen, such acts of reputation management and self-curation would be signs of conspicuous display in a competitive environment of seeking attention and positive status. This does not yet include other forms of conspicuous status displays such as those that clearly have a metric for easy communication of a user's 'value' in a network. A large number of friends, followers and likes attests to a display of popularity and importance to the network. Beyond what one buys, it is the conversion to what one produces in terms of content that points to conspicuous display with a goal of gaining more approbation and having a community legitimise the status of the individual.

Conspicuous forms of production that seek to enhance online social status is conspicuous when one's labour is specifically indexed on transforming the use value of a communication event into an exchange value in the 'like' economy. By optimising one's digital profile and content production with a view of increasing quantified social capital, such behaviour can be understood as opportunistic, instrumental, and conspicuous.

If large financial markets are too complex, if not chaotic, their oscillations privy to allegedly rational actors making rational choices, does the same apply to the social market and to the development of social capital? If human instrumentality as a motivation for behaviour in making choices to leverage social capital for individual gain can be viewed in Veblenian terms as infused with the broader sociological conditions of conspicuous consumption as an evolutionarily cultural invariant from the time of predatory cultures to the modern day, this in itself might serve as an indictment against the over-optimistic assumptions related to social capital.

In Veblen's technical terminology, features of the social media environment may attest to an evaluative apparatus of the invidious by which others may be compared according to quantifiable measure. How many 'likes,' or 'friends' online may be a function of reducing the subjective qualities of 'social' and 'attention' to numerical considerations alone as a measure of popularity. Mapping free market principles onto social activity has become the norm in many digital environments, and so the qualitative value is subordinate to the quantitative, more easily apprehended by a digital audience in the assigning of value. But it is the appropriation of the social by pecuniary interests that both Marx and Veblen would agree in finding deeply problematic. If social activity is more of a spontaneous one that speaks to one of the essential features of our social being, we might recall Marx: 'in degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labour makes man's species life a means to his physical existence' (Marx 1972 [1844], 73). However, in the case of our labour directed to the accumulation of social capital, this may be performed for reasons that do not have anything to do with survival. That is, making online connections and producing content on social media is not a pre-requisite for obtaining the means for our subsistence. Food, shelter, and clothing are not contingent upon n number of likes on Facebook.¹⁷

The search for status enhancement through a conspicuously economic means is portrayed as a route to self-actualisation. For Veblen, it is this desire for status that is the driving force in scaling production beyond that of simply satisfying basic needs. Just as Veblen argues, those who seek status must seek ways of providing a demonstration of their pecuniary strength, generally through acts of wasteful consumption and unproductive uses of time, the same might be said with respect to the online social venues whereby it is not explicitly material wealth that is being generated and displayed for status enhancement, but a particularly social variety that is also measured in much the same manner as material wealth.

Veblen and Competitive Accumulation

At the heart of egocentric or instrumentalist online social capital is the drive toward accumulation strategies. In search of virtual goods as a marker of social class, actions directed to accumulation and conversion lead steadily to becoming the 'accepted badge of efficiency' whereby the 'possession of goods, whether acquired aggressively by one's own exertion or passively by transmission through inheritance from others, becomes a conventional basis of reputability' (Veblen 2010, 19). Accumulation should not be thought in strictly material terms or the goods that are trafficked on social media. Instead, accumulation takes on an objectivising approach to the myriad subjects who are subscribers to social media in that they can be accumulated as a sum of connections that further enhance the perceived status of the central 'node' (in a social network, each node is central to itself as an egocentric access point). Moreover, social approbation markers on social media linked to a quantity constructs the appearance of value of the posted content of a user on the basis of a number, which in non-economic terms represent affinity and approbation, but function as a standardised measure of social wealth: The higher the number, the higher the perceived value of the user, and so, 'the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength' (Veblen 2010, 20). In this case, the competitive nature of said environments is not linked to money, but according to the premium attributed to quantifiable social wealth.

Although digital environments appear to conform to an economy of abundance due to the ease of duplication of immaterial goods trafficked online as endemic to the nature of digital information flows, both the acquisition of meaningful social capital and the attention economy are still indexed on an economy of scarcity, and hence the requirement for competition to acquire these resources. The comparative and competitive drive among users may be technically defined, with reference to Veblen, as invidious insofar as the grading or rating of others is based on relative worth or value (Veblen 2010, 22). This invidiousness pervades social media as part of the evaluative framework by which others may be said to be judged against a measure of peculiar markers that are quantitative in nature.

Social wealth, earned or inherited by association with reputable or popular persons, is not yet social capital. In the games of online social capital, social wealth must be first transferred to the digital milieu in some measurable way whereby said wealth can be leveraged for producing capital. In other words, the truly social and qualitative must be transubstantiated as something quantitative that reduces or effaces the subjectively social. As the socially rich offline may have a higher probability of being socially rich online according to Social Enhancement Theory (Merton 1968), this transfer or exchange may prove of some facility to those who already enjoy a large number of social connections in the offline world. These must be reiterated and formalised in the online milieu

by way of invitations to connect, thus mapping offline social wealth online as evidence of social wealth. One of the unique aspects of social media is that social connections and interactions become, pending privacy settings, visible to a spectator audience, perhaps in a similar way as ‘Society Pages’ in the past detailed the lives and gossip circulating about members of the upper classes. Social wealth may be seen as intrinsic use value, whereas its mediatisation and commodification in online social networks gives it a new status as exchange value in the form of social capital. What is being traded and gained, generally at a perceived profit, is the commodity form of the digital self and its associated productions. Investment occurs through conspicuous production, and later management, of the personal profile. This ‘property’ of the user, which is in effect subject to the rent paid to the host in non-monetary forms, is a trading area where is housed all the ‘goods’ of the user. These goods may take the simple form of preferred tastes in music or film. Or, it may also be the images that associate the user with some popular product, or a marker of affluence and the means of disposable income in the form of travel pictures of Europe. One of the distinct advantages of social media environments is in the way these environments are structured: the media-rich qualities and specific arrangement of the site with a strongly visual bias encourages acts of visual display. Such displays are ideal for meeting the real purpose of conspicuous consumption: to be seen and judged as being of higher status and thus worthy of more attention. All the while, the tireless algorithm in the background harvests keywords for the express purpose of monetising social interaction.

Of Social Profits to Be Made Via Conspicuous Display

Social displays, particularly of social wealth in the online venue, do not escape the cycle of commodification, which

reduces ourselves and those we encounter on the internet to glamorous and attractive personae. Commodification becomes self-commodification, but shorn of context, engagement and obligation, of our achievements and failures, of our friends and enemies, of all the features that time has engraved on our faces and bodies – without all that we lack gravity and density. (Borgmann 64).

Albert Borgmann identifies the dehumanising and marketising aspect of the internet in general, but it may also equally apply to the specific conditions of social media. The commodification of the self (and relations with others) has increased as capital has discovered new ways of inscribing market logic within these social relations, drilling down right to the level where conversations online are mined for their data value and in the behaviour of some users to pursue a quasi-capitalist agenda of accumulation. When it comes to the all-important

context of our social relations and their supporting narrative, context itself may become victim to the over-privileging of the immediate, particularly when we consider that content usually appears in reverse chronological order on social media, thus placing the responsibility on a user to seek 'below the fold' to reconstruct the context of our conversations and interactions. This privileging of immediacy and novelty is an endemic feature that feeds into our desire for stimulus through microburst gratification, the depreciation of social capital as numeric value affixed to any particular content, and the pressures or expectations of informationism.

Friends and visitors who are alerted to a user's posted content can affect that user's social marginal utility value by clicking on the 'like' button or supplying a comment. Said friends and visitors may be said to be consumers of the image produced by the user, but are presented with a means for an instant polling. Jean Baudrillard tells us that contemporary media presents objects as a form of test that minimises our contemplative time in order to prompt us to respond with a 'yes' or 'no' (Baudrillard 1993, 63), so too is the user also participating in the selective test of producing just the right content that will gain the approval of the audience. Such a production may be judged a failure if it does not provoke a response that is made public. The production may be judged subpar if it fails to reach a certain numerical threshold such as number of likes or comments. If the user seeks to maximise on their return on investment for the production-event, a certain understanding of what is considered appealing to the social network audience is required. However, this is little more than the necessary but not sufficient condition for increasing social profit; other factors play a role in determining how the market responds to the posted content, such as number of connections the user has, and how well advertised the event happens to be according to the proprietary algorithm of the SNS. This suggests that despite what efforts are made by the user to generate and disseminate content that might appeal to an audience, there are a variety of factors outside of his or her control that may have an appreciable effect on social profit. From the standpoint of the user, labour is required that aligns with variables of relevance and regularity of posted content to avoid one's production falling below the proverbial fold.

Maximising social profit in an environment where one's everyday life is relatively unknown by the connected members of one's network requires developing strategies for making it known by attracting attention to it. Veblen remarks that social situations with a higher number of participants requires tactics for increasing the visibility of conspicuous consumption (2010, 49). Such social arrangements with larger numbers of participants who, ostensibly, are also vying for recognition of status among transitory observers increases the probability and intensity of competition.

One may argue that it costs little or nothing to join social media at the user end. Participation does require the purchase of devices and internet services. The devices themselves are caught up in a rapid cycle of production-consumption-disposal, at times themselves being conspicuous fashion items. As social media

continues to increase rich media content affordances, this places more strain on hardware to keep up, and eventually necessitates the replacement of the devices themselves. The material costs of participation aside, the price to be paid in using social media may include a variety of less tangible costs such as giving the SNS permission to use one's data, as well as *time* computed as a cost in the use of social media. In some ways, using social media can be an extravagant use of personal time, and thus may be classed as a form of conspicuous consumption. Veblen makes the critical distinction that use and consumption differs from ownership, just as indolence is not a measure of leisure (Veblen 2010, 16).

The user's social media profile is the immaterial product of the user's labour. As such, it enters into an online social commodities market in a competition for attention and an increase in personal social capital. The new techno-social reality of social media emulates market logics and redefines users as micro-capitalists of the self. This occurs within a unified social economy that is global, out of which a new and virtualised form of wealth can be produced through strategic social partnerships online. Such labour, despite occurring in a space dedicated to entertainment and socialising, may be intensive when all factors that go into the production of the digital self and personal social capital are considered, such as posting new content on a regular basis, profile management, and engaging in offline activities that will have value when posted online. This emulation of marketising practices in social terms agrees with the neoliberal understanding of the citizen as consumer, and allows for the creation of a space wherein the prosumers of social media can enjoy freedoms not experienced in the offline world:

Consumer freedom was originally a compensation for the loss of the freedom and autonomy of the producer. Having been evicted from production and communal self-rule, the individual drive to self-assertion found its outlet in the market game. One can suppose that at least in part the continuing popularity of the market game derives from its virtual monopoly as the vehicle of self-construction and individual autonomy. The less freedom exists in the other spheres of life, the stronger is the popular pressure on the further extension of consumer freedom – whatever its cost. (Bauman 1988, 95)

Ideology of Social Competition

The neoliberal ideology with its aims of globally deregulated trade, flexible accumulation strategies and promotion of the arch-individual becomes the new bedrock of online social relations. Economic concerns become the spectacular enclosure and teleological purpose of social relations in a rapid feedback-based environment governed by ruthless competition. The highest values of this environment become competition and connection, all of which can be

quantified and conspicuously displayed on one's profile. Neoliberalism operates by adopting a 'strong' paternalistic discourse that attempts to naturalise economic Darwinism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). All labour – and social – relations succumb to a discourse of competition that is global in scale. Social media can prove a competitive battleground for those who seek to accumulate the most online social capital. As online social capital is visible for public display, and not only made visible to the user, this can be considered an expression of conspicuousness, for the display of such metrics play a role in proving one's status and value.

The means to access these networks may in themselves speak to the devolution of the cachet item of leisure to the range of affordability by the petty household economy. The devices themselves are also caught up in this economy that, marketed as aesthetic utility and are specifically designed to be objects that appeal to aesthetic taste, while still speaking to 'utility.' The production – and subsequent disposal at the end of the device's life cycle – is the fruit of poor working conditions in developing nations. Marx's patent truism holds that the more luxurious the product, the less likely it is that those who manufacture it will be able to afford it. What is to be retained here is the emulative process of consuming apparent luxury goods that also appeal to the conscience of the consumer as something useful and necessary, for a purely aestheticised gadgetry with no obvious utility might not result in popular adoption and thus brisk sales to justify the rapid and enormous requirements of the production and consumption cycle. Where the conspicuousness of the device is on its own not enough to convince consumers to adopt it, other means are invented by which certain features unique to the device come pre-loaded and embedded with proprietary software that cannot be ported to a competitor device.

In a time of increasing economic austerity with its knock-on effects for a steadily shrinking middle class, it might be reasonable to assume that conspicuous consumption must be seen in terms of scalar adjustments that take into consideration depressed or stagnant wages and available credit. As discretionary consumer purchasing power in North America has softened (despite a modest increase in the consumer price index since the 2008 downturn), thus having a deleterious impact on profit, consumption practices might be seen to shift or to migrate just slightly to a virtualised form, and this through consumption and production activities in the online social milieu.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri signal that, at the heart of network culture is the possibility for greater collaboration among a multitude that might subvert the aims of postmodern capital:

Cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself. This fact calls into question the old notion (common to classical and Marxian political economics) by which labour power is conceived as 'variable capital', that is, a force that is activated and made coherent only by capital, because the cooperative powers of labor power (particularly

immaterial labor power) afford labor the possibility of valorising itself. Brains and bodies still need others to produce value, but the others they need are not necessarily provided by capital and its capacities to orchestrate production. Today productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks. In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labor thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism. (Hardt and Negri 2000, 294)

The competition to increase social capital in an attention economy is precisely what grants the online social self-servicing mechanisms their justification and coherence. It does not occur in a space or milieu outside of a corporately controlled environment, and even the notion of a 'gift economy' of social reciprocity online is effectively hijacked by a numerical system that assigns extrinsic value to the immaterial labour performed online. There is still a wage system in the form of likes and other approbation cues that digitally reify social value as something quantifiable. The very plain fact that these social relations which define capital occur on networks that have a material basis at least in terms of requiring cheap manufacturing labour to produce the hardware and precarious labour for the motley services that are created by these hardware may undercut part of Hardt and Negri's argument. But, just as importantly, the online social relations on SNSs are still patterned or defined according to accumulation and competitive strategies whereby each user attempting to secure their share of the attention economy must make personal calculations of temporal investment, and that any collaboration or sharing will somehow improve the individual user's online social capital, thus consigning acts of sharing to something entirely extrinsic. While a vast number of online users are engaged in a global competitive practice of accumulating social capital, the reality is that such 'accumulation requires commitment from many people, although few have any real chances of making a substantial profit' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, 163). The 'winners' in the games of social capital exist at the expense of a multitude of 'losers.'

Although many users may be engaged in the competitive games by which they can obtain a larger share of attention, this is not always necessarily linked to a concrete purpose. That is, setting aside those who have a specific promotional agenda to market a product or service they are selling, the question of what a user hopes to gain in achieving an arbitrary high number of likes, comments or connections remains somewhat mysterious. We might speculate that the higher the number of interactive events such as likes or comments, the more the satisfaction in terms of social validation. It is in a return to Veblen that we discover that the motivations are, in fact, deliberate, and although their purposes may vary in their particulars, the end goal is to be accorded by a community with a validated status. Veblen's analysis tells us that the drive or

imperative for conspicuous consumption, either of goods or time and effort, is contingent upon the size of the audience to be impressed.

Conspicuous Prosumption

Conspicuous *prosumption* may differ only slightly from Veblen's notion of conspicuous *consumption*. In the latter, what one consumes becomes a sign of one's purchasing power. In terms of social media and the prosumption model, the signs of social approbation in high numbers become a sign of one's commodified social power. Social power, no matter how the SNS provides tools for its apparent measurement in terms of likes, does not lend itself to precise measurement at all. There is no formula by which n number of 'like-units' will produce a value that is anything but arbitrary and relative. One can measure power in terms of joules per second as watts, but social power cannot be reduced to standardised measurement. At best, the subjective notion of power – be this political, social, military, or economic – is a form of *potestas*, and can only be measured according to the relative values of more or less. With respect to social power on social media, there is no guarantee that a million likes on a post grants to the creator a special social power. Nor does having 5,000 connections necessarily mean that the user has more social capital at his or her disposal.

It might be said that there are implicit social norms on social media, and a gradual building of cultural capital that guides notions of taste, but also which guide to some degree what are the appropriate mechanisms by which to develop social capital specific to each social media environment. Software design restricts certain choices and behaviours. For example, rejected friend requests on Facebook do not result in the requester being notified of the rejection. These are intentionally designed elements to promote a positive social space that reduces the possibility of hostility and rejection, even if a determined user can find other ways of indulging in antisocial behaviour such as trolling.

The surplus production of goods beyond the necessities of life are absorbed by those who crave an increase in status, and thus can be considered the driver in the desire for economic growth, even if it may be considered derivative: 'The utility of consumption as an evidence of wealth is to be classed as a derivative growth' (Veblen 2010, 40). For Veblen, waste has a functional utility, albeit of a secondary value in the way it is leveraged to satisfy a human desire for status. Veblen, committed as he was to applying a Darwinist analogy to the field of institutional practices, largely saw acts of conspicuous consumption by a wealthy elite and leisure class – as well as those of the lower classes partaking of said behaviours as far as their means allowed, in emulation of the upper classes – as an evolutionary invariant; that is, the desire for status by material demonstration of wealth and its wasteful expenditure has only changed in its particulars while the general aspect has remained the same since the beginning of human civilisation. The reliance on some form of ceremonial and ritualistic

component of wealth display and expenditure for status enhancement can still be seen in the practices of today's institutions.

Veblen's definition of waste is that which 'does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole' (Veblen 2010, 55). Although certain acts and expenditures may be viewed as having at least some value to the individual's well-being and satisfaction, when it solely based on the relative utility of the individual, then it might be deemed wasteful. If there is an apparent preponderance of adolescents and college students posting pictures of themselves in acts of intoxication and images of their food, this attests to the display of unproductive time and leisure that marks conspicuous prosumption.

Social media provides a platform for displays of conspicuous consumption that may possess wider audience reach, and therefore the increased opportunity for receiving validation for such activities. If a person purchases a yacht as a symbol of their wealth, the circle of admirers in the offline world may be small. However, should the same person then post pictures of said yacht, and a cruise in the Caribbean, on Facebook then this may increase personal social capital.

Online social capital indexed on the province of the self, or as a collaboration of groups, when conducted on SNSs such as Facebook, serves the interests of actual capital for Facebook and its affiliated advertisers that seek to marketise and profit from mediated social exchange. It is these entities that either play host to, or leverage social data for targeted advertising, that earns monetary profit. Self-service and self-branding activities provide the appearance of autonomy that underpin the fetishistic rhetoric surrounding the 'heroic' entrepreneur, if at the very least the individual user is 'liberated' from the managerial hierarchy in their own self-determination. And yet, the subordination remains as the user swaps out a 'boss' or a rigid hierarchical system that is plainly visible in an institutional and industrial logic to a fuzzier and more ubiquitous type now occupied by the owners of the networks. The unacknowledged labour involved in profile management and the temporal investment strategies involved in increasing online social capital may simply be a redistribution effect of free labour whereby these activities conducted by a large mass of users ultimately provides benefit for the SNSs that underwrite all attempts at social capital increase, be these successful or not. The parallel case, although more monetarily clear, might be the entrepreneurs who develop apps for Apple or Android platforms: no matter the success of the app, the only cost to these companies is hosting, while the developer provides free labour in the hopes of acquiring profit. Should there be a considerable profit, the host takes a significant cut of the revenue; the risk is assumed by the individual.

Users self-publish their content, but Facebook's model is mostly a modification on earlier forms of publication. The sale of advertising space that marked traditional print was to a readership: 'The profits of publication come from the sale of advertising space' (Veblen 2005, 182), but in this case, the producer and the publisher are very distinct, for Facebook is in effect the 'publisher' and the unpaid producers of content are not hired by Facebook. It is the users themselves that produce the content that further popularises social media sites like Facebook, while the network owner acts as a data broker in selling advertising

space that is targeted to the prosumers of content. It was Veblen that acknowledged the priority of advertising space as a source of revenue, and that subscriptions were largely secondary.

For Veblen, the ideal for technical knowledge was that it would be held in common, apart from pecuniary interests. He envisioned a great Soviet of engineers (Veblen, 1921). When it comes to the productions and insights of social media users, however, this is not held in common, as the repository is entirely pecuniarily motivated, and to paraphrase Thiry-Cherques (2010), the price of inclusion in the network entails some form of subordination. In this case, Facebook extracts value from posts and profiles for the purposes of facilitating data matching between itself and paid advertisers for targeted advertising.

Social capital – that which is generated from resources held in common – would have to somehow develop a means of resisting the pecuniary interests of those who are not contributing their own capital to a specific community, and are simply profiting by what is generated. However, for as long as social relations are dominated by the predominantly neoliberal spectacle, and interactions on the social media platform are motivated with a view to enhancing status through conspicuous acts of presumption in a competitive game, the advantages of social capital would only accrue in small part to the entrepreneurial individual, and in larger part to the social media platform.

Mestrovic acknowledges that Veblen ‘would have pointed out that the Internet is most available in Western nations that exhibit the culture of narcissism he sought to unmask’ (2003, p. 14). And, perhaps just as Veblen critiqued fashion and ostentation as status-based activity that aligns with a pronounced form of cultural narcissism, it is likely that he might have viewed certain ego-based behaviours of display on social media as narcissistic. The extensive use and reliance on platforms such as Facebook among a growing number of individuals exhibits the extent to which unproductive time is spent in virtual production, and that the competitive aspects reduce social interactions to the exchange value that can be generated from said interactions for personal gain.

Veblen was a caustic critic of capitalism, laden as it is with inefficiencies and irrational behaviour culturally inherited from previous phases of production and consumption. On the other hand, there is Veblen’s view of technology, as something technical that could provide efficiency and progress, but would risk losing those qualities in being aligned with the profit motive. At the social and institutional level, Veblen’s verdict on social media might be that it is just a part of the irrational and invariant human drive for status-aggrandisement.

Veblen and Capital Assets

Veblen never explicitly mentions social capital in any of the works in his oeuvre, although it may be argued that he held a view on knowledge, skills, and practices in a community (intangible assets) that speaks to a kind of social capital in all but name that might be a fit with that of Bourdieu’s definition.

For Veblen, the predatory instinct of human beings is alive and well, whether it be through the explicit profit-oriented activities of successful capitalist industries, or at the level of individual workers who seek to improve their status appearance by conforming – via conspicuous consumption – to the tastes of the ruling classes. This aspirational emulation would seem to somewhat mute the power of labour to organise against exploitation, just so long as they are given the trappings of apparent wealth and may participate in the purchasing of digital objects, and access to the internet. If, for Marx, religion was the opiate of the masses by which an institution rationalised and attempted to justify continued exploitation of labour, it might not be too much of a stretch to say that Veblen might see the techno-optimism of the day as something similar. And, with the increased availability of credit, this may have had a slightly nullifying effect on a willingness by a majority of exploited labour to take up resistance against capitalist exploitation. The predatory instinct as emulated by the ‘common weal’ may now be expressed in truly intangible terms: the ruthless pursuit of online social capital by active participants in a ‘like economy’.

For Veblen, institutions play a pivotal role in social life: ‘[h]abitual modes of activity and relations have grown up and have by convention settled into a fabric of institutions. These institutions [...] have a prescriptive, habitual force of their own’ (Veblen 1909, 300). When this is compared to how digital networks have been empowered and lionised by various political and economic institutions in the information age, there is bound to be some degree of normalising efforts to promote a kind of habituation to social media usage. The extraction and sale of data, and the advancement of pecuniary goals by corporatised social networks, would not count for Veblen as a kind of social capital. Veblen instead would conceive of social capital as the accumulated technological/industrial experience of the community:

As items in a process of cumulative change [...] these productive goods are facts of human knowledge, skill, and predilection [...] The physical properties of the material accessible to man are constants: it is the human agent that changes—his insight and his appreciation of what these things can be used for is what develops. [...] The changes that take place in the mechanical contrivances are an expression of changes in the human factor (Veblen 1898, 387–88).

This represents a considerable theoretical divergence between Veblen and Marx. As Dorfman notes,

In Marx the productive agent in economic life is labour, in Veblen it is the accumulated expertise and initiative of the race, techniques created by man for human use. Veblen, like Marx, holds that capital goods cost nothing but labour, and that all gains to capital, aside from those going to the working community, are surplus gains, but Veblen maintained

that capital goods are instruments of production only by virtue of the technological knowledge possessed by the industrial community (Dorfman [1934] 1966, 285–6).

There may be sufficient similarities in Veblen's conceptual repertoire to at least point to operative terms that function as synonyms for social capital. As a means of preparing that ground, it is worthwhile to illustrate how Veblen conceives of capital in terms of tangible and intangible assets. For Veblen, tangible assets involve pecuniary capital goods that are owned and yield an income for said owner, and are assets insofar as they have a capitalisable value related to their serviceability as productive goods. Intangible assets are:

immaterial items of wealth, immaterial facts owned, valued, and capitalized on an appraisalment of the gain to be derived from their possession. These are also assets to the amount of their capitalisable value, which has commonly little, if any, relation to the industrial serviceability of these items of wealth considered as factors of production (Veblen 1908, 104–5).

Veblen saw the drive of businesses was to enhance their intangible assets. Examples of intangible assets today would include brand names, web domain names, customer lists, artistic products related to marketing, franchise agreements, leasing, databases, patents and proprietary formulae and processes (such as algorithms). Over time, Veblen noted that corporations focused more heavily in the pursuit and maintenance of their intangible asset classes.

So far we are only discussing the two main capital asset types of corporations, and yet it is not difficult to see how corporate social network sites continue this legacy of focusing more on their intangible assets. Tangible assets are still quite important and require the hire of technical experts such as engineers and computer scientists to develop the infrastructure. However, a recurring theme in Veblen's work is in wanting to make a critical distinction between industry and business; namely, the interests of technical or technological specialists and the pecuniary interests of corporations. Veblen saw true innovation stemming from skilled technical workers who shared their knowledge in common, while it was the role of corporations to seek profit as a primary motive even if it stifled innovation through the use of a patent system where such technical knowledge would be privatised as a possession to be carefully guarded and not shared.

Veblen saw the problem as being between profit-oriented corporations versus production-oriented industries that valued workmanship, the former type sacrificing the latter in pursuit of profit. For industry, the litmus is progress; for corporations it is property. For Veblen, human societies and the origin of private property is linked to the predatory instinct, first expressed historically through the possession of women and gradually extending to objects. Veblen says that this instinct has not been extinguished, and that it continues through

a ruthless pursuit of profit. In industrial societies, this pursuit is at odds with the principles of workmanship (skills and practices held as knowledge), and precisely because the capitalist will be biased in favour of cheaper abundance of goods as opposed to focusing on quality and innovation.

On the basis of his analysis of tangible and intangible assets, it may be possible to speculate how Veblen might have understood online social capital. Social media users are the intangible assets of a social networking site insofar as they fulfil the labour function of marketing the site and producing a valuable asset (data) that can be capitalised as value through third-party sale. Even technical knowledge can be obtained as free labour in those cases when there is a need to beta test products, or members of a public are encouraged to produce content for a community for free (such as what occurs in the gaming industry in the development of mods).

For Veblen, the accumulation of online social capital may be expressible as a numeric value, but there is no true ownership by the social media user. This form of gain is not directly capitalisable by the user, but indirectly by the owner (in this case the corporate network). It may only be converted into a more social form, such as status. There are other more circuitous routes to convert online social capital into self-branding efforts to sell products and services, or in attracting the attention of companies to hire one on as an influencer. It is likely that Veblen would view the pursuit and accumulation of online social capital as serving the interests of the social network company, while the mechanisms for capitalising on the intangible assets of so many likes and new connections that may arise is limited in terms of who owns the data, and the affordances of the platform upon which this is obtained.

Marx versus Veblen?

It will prove beneficial here to summarise a few key points of agreement and disagreement in the approaches of Marx and Veblen in this chapter.

1. Veblen recognised profit emerges out of the unfair exchange process of capitalism, whereas for Marx it is located directly in the production process itself, which generates a surplus value as a result of a distinction between labour and labour power. In other words, Veblen points to market forces and the invariant of the predatory instinct embedded in the economic basis of institutions.
2. Veblen was far more pessimistic about the prospect of the rise of labour in the creation of a classless society; instead, his view of history was that the predatory processes would continue, and that any workers' movements would be dissolved into the broader institutional apparatus, usually through some form of small concessions and the promise of attaining higher class status through consumption practices.

3. Marx understood that the contradictions of capitalism could eventually contribute to capitalism's collapse, although his view is not deterministic, and would be contingent upon nothing preventing the law of the rate of profit to fall. Veblen does not dismiss this as a possibility, but views it as unlikely. He does hold out hope that, through the discipline of mechanical technologies, workmanship prevails over pecuniary interests.
4. For Marx, class *struggle* manifests itself in the crises inherent in capitalism, but for that to happen Veblen might object, there would have to be a widespread rejection of the trappings of *status*. During the time in which Veblen was writing, the expansion of consumer markets according to the Fordist model meant that another opiate of the masses had emerged via providing enough of a wage to workers so that they could consume more products, partially easing class conflict, and allowing them to participate more in consumer society and the pursuit of status.
5. For Marx, it is the worker in general that will precipitate the revolutionary change required, whereas for Veblen it is the skilled technical class of engineers who may be the real agents of change through their invention and sharing of knowledge. In other words, Veblen places his trust in technological progress as the only viable means to eliminate many of the harms capitalism inflicts on society. Such a view may, in fact, be a bit naive – at least insofar as capitalism has been incredibly adaptive in controlling and using modern technologies to maintain its dominance.

Despite these differences, which more or less are based on their respective understandings of history and human nature, there are also points of agreement. Veblen was not a full-throated critic of Marx, although he points up parts of Marx's analysis as being somewhat naive to the institutional aspects of economics and human nature. Veblen, however, is in agreement with Marx that the plight of workers in terms of continued exploitation and alienation are very real phenomena. Veblen blames capitalism for the continued immiseration of labour, if not also actively reinforcing institutional processes that perpetuate the allure of class status attainment. For Marx, we might say that religion is the opiate of the masses that keeps labour complicit with their exploitation, whereas for Veblen it is consumption practices that are dangled as the promise of achieving higher status: an aspirational desire that can never be truly fulfilled no matter how much one consumes.

Main Points

- Marx's four aspects of alienation still apply to the mechanisms of social media, despite the absence of the wage relation.
- Although claims that social media's affordances may appear to decrease alienation is supported by the freedom of users to create, share and express

themselves, countervailing aspects also speak to an increase in alienation given that the content is not owned by the user, what is made visible is controlled by the social media site, a feeling of obligation makes participation on social media seem more like work, and the emphasis on accumulating online social capital inevitably leads to dissatisfaction as more user production is geared towards accumulation of a resource at the expense of self-reflection.

- Adopting Veblen's analysis of conspicuous consumption and considering the production side, production becomes linked to a goal of enhancing online social status by performing labour specifically indexed on transforming the use value of a communication event into an exchange value. As users are caught up in a cycle of production and consumption of class or status-based imagery, these conspicuous forms are 'rewarded' in part by a visible metric by which to display online social wealth.
- As users compete to participate in status-chasing activities, such acts are tied to Veblen's understanding of the predatory instinct in competing for power, which is expressed in possessions; in this case, the possessions to be displayed are transmuted into images for display and social approval. Competition in this artificial economy is what drives this invariant form of behaviour.
- As social media provides the means for conspicuous display, it also conceals inequalities so that those with less economic means can be enticed to participate in status-chasing pursuits rather than critique the institutional status quo apparatus of which social media is a part.