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Citation:

Till, C (2024) Digital Capitalism and Distributive Forces: book review. Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews, 53 (4). pp. 364-366. ISSN 0094-3061 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00943061241255860bb>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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*Digital Capitalism and Distributive Forces*, by **Sabine Pfeiffer**. Beilefeld, DE: transcript Verlag, 2022. 282 pp. \$60.47 paper. ISBN: 978-3-8376-5893-4.

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Communication and Information Technologies, Economic Sociology, Theory

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00943061241255860bb>

Sabine Pfeiffer's book *Digital Capitalism and Distributive Forces* represents a substantial intervention in the scholarly debates around the concept and impacts of "digital capitalism". In such literature it is rare to encounter a genuinely original take, such as this book, which identifies a key aspect of contemporary capitalism which has been largely overlooked. Moreover, Pfeiffer's intervention is one which is simultaneously strongly empirically informed but with significant theoretical insights which even sheds new light on older sociological analyses of pre-digital capitalism.

Partly because of the freshness of the analysis in this book there is relatively little engagement with even some of the more prominent interventions into this topic. The book is emphatically not an introduction to existing work on digital capitalism or an extensive survey of the different forms it takes. It is, rather, a detailed and focused analytical intervention. This does mean that the book's main theoretical interlocutors may seem

somewhat idiosyncratic, or even underdeveloped, as the analysis is situated predominantly in conversation with Dan Schiller, Michael Betancourt and, of course, Karl Marx.

For the most part Pfeiffer does not engage in some of the now quite well trodden debates in this field instead prioritizing her own reading. Notably, debates around the role of so-called “digital labor” (e.g. whether social media and other online interactions can be considered as “labor” for their perceived role in generating value for platform owners) are not addressed. Indeed, the role of labor in value generation appears to be axiomatic for the author. While Pfeiffer’s decision to shift her focus elsewhere is certainly justifiable given the extent of the new ground which is broken but on occasion the differences between some other authors’ positions are somewhat smoothed over. For instance, Shoshana Zuboff’s (2019) influential analysis of “surveillance capitalism” is aligned with other critics who emphasize “digital labor” (p. 41), a position which Zuboff (2019, 69-70) rejects in favor of such interactions being seen as “raw materials” rather than “labor”.

For their analysis Pfeiffer encourages us to return, once again, to Marx and in the process makes a strong case for seeing the era of the digital as not bringing a new form of capitalism but one which places a significantly greater emphasis on what they call “distributive forces”. That is, that the realization of value (selling commodities to “realize” their value) has come to be much more significant in capitalist enterprise and it is this with which the most prominent digital capitalist corporations are predominantly engaged. These distributive forces, the identification and elaboration of which form a central contribution of the book, are advertising and marketing, transport and warehousing and control and prediction.

Digital technologies are significant to contemporary capitalism on a structural level for their capacity to address the central crisis of contemporary capitalism; namely that consumer power is always lower than productive power (p. 117). This crisis of overproduction has always been present within capitalist enterprise but has been exacerbated through the innovation of organizational and technological efficiencies in the production process. One key example cited by Pfeiffer is the shipping container which has been heralded for the efficiencies it brings to global transportation of goods. Although when considering individual commodities, it is seemingly cheaper than ever to move goods great distances around the world, hence the flooding of global markets with cheap goods produced in China, the headline costs of sailing a freight ship are still very high. As it is only economical for such vessels to sail at full capacity, goods must be produced at sufficient volume to fill container ships rather than to fulfil consumer demand. Similarly, many production lines are expensive to run so only profitable when working at full capacity. This means that demand must be generated through marketing; transportation and warehousing must be accelerated and streamlined to ensure manufactured demand is met when it is at its most fervent; and the demand must be controlled and predicted as accurately as possible. It is in the management of these factors of distributive forces, Pfeiffer claims, where the most significant structural effects of digital technologies have been felt.

Many previous theorizations of digital capitalism have, misguidedly Pfeiffer claims, focused on digital media and the shift to immaterial commodities leading them to focus on the perceived changes to productive forces (e.g. the move from physical to digital media) and therefore overestimate the novelty of these changes. For Pfeiffer immaterial commodities are neither specific to digital capitalism nor characteristic of it. The company she proposes

as the paradigmatic example of digital capitalist enterprise, Amazon, is centrally concerned with the distribution of physical commodities to end consumers. That is, with the realization of values produced elsewhere. Amazon's biggest impact has not been in delivering digital media, although they do this as well, but in providing consumers for producers to realize the value of commodities. Pfeiffer is keen to point out that this does not mean that such enterprises are merely a delivery system and add no value in themselves as reducing the delay between production and realization is itself productive of value because it enables further production to occur and value may decrease during any delay.

The book is primarily focused on structural and economic factors rather than their consequences (in this sense it is most closely aligned with the "mature Marx" of *Capital*). Therefore, considerations of alienation or the impact of structural inequalities wrought by capitalism are not prominent. However, there is discussion of environmental impacts scattered throughout the book and more prominently in the concluding chapter considering whether digitalization is simply a distributive or a destructive force. The book's structure nicely draws the reader in giving context and recaps for those who may not be immersed in discussions of digital capitalism from a theoretical level and while not presenting an introduction to Marx's analysis of capitalism it does provide a restricted entry point into his theory. Moreover, the more abstract theoretical engagements are highlighted as optional for more practically minded readers. Pfeiffer's prose style is highly engaging and makes hopping between complex, occasionally abstract, theoretical debates and empirical applications (which are copious) seem easy.

The book is an original and important analysis which should prove essential for anyone who wants to understand what is truly unique about contemporary capitalism and what merely hype. By identifying the new developments as well as continuities with well-established social and economic forms Pfeiffer helps us to see more clearly why capitalism persists, how capitalist power functions and how it might be challenged.

### **References**

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books, 2019.