

Tech Labor, Entrepreneurial Life & Precarious Creativity

SI 710 – Prof. [Silvia Lindtner](#), University of Michigan

Winter 2018

Thursdays, 1-4pm

“if capital interweaves technology and power, then this weaving can be undone, and the threads used to make a different pattern.” –Dyer-Whiteford, *Cyber-Marx*, 1999

“the ability – to manufacture ‘local or global’ at will – is a huge advantage. That simple menu option compresses three centuries of industrial revolution into a single mouse click. If Karl Marx were here today, his jaw would be on the floor. Talk about ‘controlling the tools of production’: you (you!) can now set factories into motion with a mouse click.” –Chris Anderson, *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*, 2012

Course Description

This graduate readings seminar provides a comprehensive introduction to some of the major themes that cut across studies of tech labor, power, civic engagement, neoliberal technology, and governance. Drawing from core readings in science and technology studies, feminist and autonomous Marxist studies, labor process theory, anthropology, critical computing, and digital studies, students will gain a critical vocabulary to unpack historically contingent and changing formations of work, labor, resistance, power, governance, and control. From low-wage and micro work on Amazon Mechanical Turk to social media platforms like Facebook that mine data from users for ad revenue and the normalization of risk taking in the creative and tech industries, precarious work has become a condition shared by many. Across professions and domains, individuals are called upon to turn themselves into self-entrepreneurializing actors capable to harness individual life as productive machinery of technological and economic futures. As automation and artificial intelligence once again fuel fears over loss of control, peer production, platform cooperatives, and localism are presented as possible solutions to this rise in precarious work conditions brought about by the post-industrial economy and platform capitalism. Often these alternatives, however, share the same neoliberal underpinnings of the systems they are claiming to challenge.

In the course we will explore questions such as: What are the analytical and theoretical toolkits to make sense of this seeming capitalist surround? How do the promises of tech activism, feminism, and peer production butt against the rise of unemployment and socio-economic disparity? How do we have to rethink what counts as resistance and alternative to the status-quo?

This course does not require any particular prior expertise.

Students from other programs (not SI or STS) are welcome. The course grants credit for the graduate certificate in Science, Technology, & Society. This course is intended for doctoral students. Other graduate students may enroll by instructor permission if there is a good reason to do so.

Required Readings

All required readings except the books listed below will be available for download through the course Canvas site, or through the library's subscription to [ebrary](#).

Angela McRobbie. 2016. *Be Creative. Making a Living in a new culture industry*. John Wiley & Sons.

Michelle Murphy. 2017. *The Economization of Life*. Duke University Press

Aiwah Ong. 2016. *Fungible Life: Experiment in the Asian City of Life*. Duke University Press.

Trebor Scholz. 2016. *Überworked and Underpaid: How Workers are Disrupting the Digital Economy*. Polity.

Anna Tsing. 2017. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.

Robert Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second Edition, 1978.

Class Requirements

- a) **Weekly reading responses:** are due every week and should be a ~500 words long response to the readings. These will be electronically submitted at 8am the day of the seminar. Weekly responses will not be graded.
- b) **Seminar paper:** Your seminar paper will be 2500-3500 words in length. The choice of topic and format is up to you, but has to incorporate readings of the seminar. You must receive approval of the topic and format you choose from the instructor. You will submit a proposal due midway through the term and submit the final seminar paper at the end of the term.
- c) **Discussion lead:** twice during the term, you will help lead class discussion. This involves the preparation of a 15 minutes introduction and high-level summary of the weeks readings. You can (optional) include additional readings and references that might facilitate class discussion. You are responsible for facilitating the following 30 minutes of class discussion. You will bring a one-page handout (and/or other supporting material of your choice) to facilitate the discussion. A successful discussion ranges broadly over the readings and topic; relates the week's readings to earlier readings and the larger issues of the course as a whole; involves all the students in the class; and gives all students time and encouragement to express their views and raise the issues they find important. The instructors may occasionally intervene during this period, but the goal is for the students to engage with each other to discuss some of the important issues raised by the readings.

Grading Breakdown

Participation: 35%

Discussion lead: 30%

Final Paper: 35%

All assignments must be turned in on time. No exceptions (without cause).

Seminar Schedule & Weekly Readings

Week 1 Introduction

Trebor Scholz. 2016. *Uberworked and Underpaid: How Workers are Disrupting the Digital Economy*. Polity.

Paul N. Edwards, "[How to Read a Book](#)"

["Reading a Scholarly Monograph"](#)

no reading response this week.

Week 2 Tech Labor, Capital & Feminization of Work

Christian Fuchs. *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*.

Judy Wacjman. 2008. *The Feminisation of Work in the Information Age?* In M.F. Fox, D. Johnson and S. Rosser (Eds.), *Women, Gender, and Technology*, 8097.

University of Illinois Press, 2006. Reprinted in D. Johnson and J. Wetmore (Eds.) *Technology and Society: Building our Sociotechnical Future*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

Excerpts: Karl Marx. *Wage Labor and Capital & Capital*, Volume I, from: Robert Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second Edition, 1978.

Week 3: Labor, Capital & Development

Select Chapters: Harry Braverman. 1998 (new edition) *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*.

Select Chapters: Ananya Roy. 2010. *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*. Routledge.

Excerpts: Karl Marx. *The German Ideology, Crisis Theory*, from: Robert Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Second Edition, 1978.

Recommended (Optional):

Baran and Sweezy. 1966. Monopoly Capital. An Essay on the American economic and social order.

Michael Burawoy. Foundations of Sociological Marxism: The complementary convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi.

Zuboff, S. 1984. *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. NY: Basic Books.

Week 4: Feminist Critiques of Labor, Tech & Capital

Select Chapters: Judy Wajcman. 1991. *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Penn State Press.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the community. A Womens Place*. The Falling Wall Press.

Rose M. Brewer. 1999. Theorizing Race, Class, and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's Labor. In: *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 29-47.

Tine Kleif and Wendy Faulkner. 2003. "I am No Athlete [but] I can Make This Thing Dance!" -- Men's Pleasure in Technology. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 28, No. 2.

Select Chapters: Nancy Fraser. 2013. *Fortunes of Feminism. From Stage-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso.

Watch: [She is beautiful when she is angry \(2014\)](#)

Recommended (Optional):

Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition.

Week 5 Neoliberal Technology & Post-Soviet Capitalism

Select Chapters: Nikolas Rose. 1998. *Inventing our Selves. Psychology, Power and Personhood*. Cambridge University Press.

Select Chapters: Aiwah Ong. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Duke University Press.

Select Chapters: Stephen Collier. 2011. *Post-soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*.

Recommended (Optional):

Chumley. Creativity Class.

Wendy Brown. Edgework. Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics.

Joseph Schumpeter. 1942. Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy. 3rd Edition

Week 6: Social Media, Digital Labor, & Neoliberalism

Wendy Chun. 2016. *Updating to Remain the Same. Habitual New Media*. MIT Press.

Tiziana Terranova. 2000. Free Labor. Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy. Social Text, 63 (Volume 18, Number 2).

Trebor Scholz. Digital Labor. Introduction.

Melissa Gregg. 2011. Do your homework: New media, old problems. Feminist Media Studies, 11 (1), 73-81.

Week 7: Precarious Creativity and techno-optimism

Angela McRobbie. 2016. Be Creative. Making a Living in a new culture industry. John Wiley & Sons.

Sarah Ahmed. 2008. The Politics of Good Feeling. ACRAWSA e-journal, Vol. 4, Nr. 1.

Introduction: Christo Sims. 2017. Disruptive Fixation. School Reform and the Pitfalls of Techno-Idealism. Princeton University Press.

Silvia Lindtner. 2018. Laboratory of the Precarious. Women Studies Quarterly. Vol 45, Nr. 3 & 4.

Recommended (Optional):

Isabel Lorey. 2015. State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious. Verso.

Hortense Powdermaker. 2013. Hollywood. The Dream Factory. An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers. Little, Brown & Company.

David Hesmondalgh and Sarah Baker. 2011. Creative Labor. Media Work in three cultural industries.

Lauren Berlant. Cruel Optimism.

Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson. 2016. Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor. University of California Press.

Week 8: Digital Labor & Autonomous Marxists

Select Chapters: Nick Dyer-Whiteford. Cyber-Marx. Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism. University of Illinois Press.

Select Chapters: Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. The new spirit of capitalism. Verso.

Select Chapters: Sophia Roosth. 2017. Synthetic. How Life got Made. University of Chicago, Press.

Maurizio Lazzarato. 1996. Immaterial labor. In: Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds). Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics. University of Minnesota Press.

Recommended (Optional):

Nick Dyer-Whiteford. 2015. Cyber-Proletariat. Global Labor in the Digital Vortex.

Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds). *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*. University of Minnesota Press.

Week 9: Economization of Life

Michelle Murphy. 2017. *The Economization of Life*. Duke University Press.

Nerferti Tadiar. 2013. Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism. *Social Text*. Vol 31, Nr. 2, 19-48.

Introduction: James Ferguson. 1994. *The anti-politics machine. Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. University of Minnesota Press.

Recommended (optional):

Julia Elyachar. *Markets of Dispossession*.

Randy Martin. *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management*.

Judy Wajcman. *Pressed for Time*.

Week 10: Life, bodies & biocapital

Aiwah Ong. 2016. *Fungible Life: Experiment in the Asian City of Life*. Duke University Press.

Select Chapters: Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby. 2014. *Clinical Labor*. Duke University Press.

Vora, K. (2012). Limits of labor: Accounting for affect and the biological in transnational surrogacy and service work. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(4), 681-700.

Waldby, C. & Cooper, M. (2010). From reproductive work to regenerative labour: The female body and the stem cell industries. *Feminist Theory*, 11(3), 322.

Recommended (optional):

Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele Clarke. 2009. *Anticipation: technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality*. *Subjectivities* 28, no. 1 (2009): 246-65.

Kauschik Sundar Rajan 2006. *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*. Duke University Press.

Geeta Patel. 2006. *Risky Subjects: Insurance, Sexuality, and Capital*. *Social Text* 89, Vol. 24, No. 4.

Ron Eglash. 2002. *Race, Sex, and Nerds. From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters*. *Social Text*, 71 (Volume 20, Number 2), pp. 49-64.

Week 11: Design, technology & power

Bob Hughes. 2005. From Useful Idiocy to Activism: a Marxist interpretation of computer development. Aarhus Conference, 2005.

Lilly Irani. 2015. Difference and dependence among digital workers: The case of Amazon Mechanical Turk. In South Atlantic Quarterly 114, 4, 225-234.

Noopur Raval and Paul Dourish. 2016. Standing out from the crowd: Emotional labor, body labor, and temporal labor in ridesharing. In Proceedings of the ACM conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW 2016), 97-107.

SSL Nagbot (Lilly Nguyen, Sophie Toupin, Shaowen Bardzell). 2016. Feminist Hacking/Making: Exploring new gender horizons of possibility. Journal of peer Production, Issue #8.

Wallis, C. (2013). Technology and/as governmentality: The production of young rural women as lowtech laboring subjects in China. Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 10(4), 341-358.

Jack Qiu. iSlave. A Manifesto for Digital Abolition.

Recommended (optional):

Katherine Behar (ed). 2016. Object-Oriented Feminism. University of Minnesota Press.

Silvia Lindtner and Seyram Avle. 2017. Tinkering with Governance: Technopolitics and the Economization of Citizenship. CSCW.

Lilly Irani. 2015. The cultural work of microwork. In New Media and Society 17, 5, 720-739.

Bill Maurer. 2006. In the Matter of Marxism. In: Tilley, Keane, Kuechler, Rowlands, Spyer. Handbook of Material culture. Sage.

Week 12: Postcolonial Capitalism

Select Chapters: Kalyan Sanyal. 2013. Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality, and Postcolonial capitalism. Routledge India.

Select Chapters: Deborah Cowen. 2014. The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade. University of Minnesota Press

Paul Dourish and Scott Mainwaring. Ubicomp's colonial impulse. Ubicomp'12 Proceedings of the 2012 ACM Conference on Ubiquitous Computing, 133-142.

Recommended (optional):

Neferth Tadiar. 2009. Things Fall Away. Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization.

Week 13: Post-capitalism, Crisis and Life otherwise

Anna Tsing. 2017. The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. Princeton University Press.

Janet Roitman. Africa Otherwise. In: J. Obarrio, and B. Goldstone, eds. African Futures, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Select Chapters: Gibson-Graham. 2006. A post-capitalist Politics. University of Minnesota Press.

Recommended (Optional):

Scholz and Schneider. 2017. Ours to Hack and to Own: The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, A New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet. OR Books.

David Harvey. 2000. Spaces of Hope. University of California Press.

Stengers and Despret. Women Who make a Fuss. The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf.

Sarah Ahmed. 2017. Living a Feminist Life. Duke University Press.

Week 14: Wrap-up Discussion