

Purchasing Profiles: Facebook and Capitalism

In a letter addressed to the public meant to outline the “core values” of his company, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared that “Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission- to make the world more open and connected” (New York Times, 2012). Indeed, with over 1.3 billion users and nearly 2 million new users joining each day¹, Facebook can easily be considered the most widespread and influential social utility of this generation. However, despite its homepage slogan claiming to “connect you to friends and the world around you”, Facebook actually disconnects its users from each other and from themselves through the commodification of human relationships.

Karl Marx defines a commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants in some form or another” (Selected Writings, 421). A commodity is essentially a product of capitalism, and according to Marx, those who own the production of commodities also maintain power within a society. Referred to as the “ruling class”, these owners of production construct what Marx calls the “ruling ideas”, which are the “ideal expressions of the dominant material relationships, hence of the relationships that make one class the ruling one” (*The German Ideology*, 173). The ruling ideas function to protect and preserve the interests of the ruling class, although oftentimes these underlying implications are hidden from members of the non-ruling class. In fact, Marx argues that the success of a ruling idea lies in its ability to remain external from the

¹ <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

proletariat, while at the same time promoting the existence and status of the ruling class without the non-ruling class realizing that they are being subordinated.

Facebook is a multi-billion dollar franchise grounded in capitalism, and operates primarily by exploiting its users and producing millions of new commodities each day. In *The Fetishism of Commodities*, Marx argues that commodities are the products of human labor, with “their use value being the only thing of interest to men” (443). In the case of Facebook, the “labor” is the time, effort, and thought put into creating one’s “Facebook profile”. The “profile” is significant because it embodies how we chose to recreate and display ourselves via social media. As a result, the various aspects of one’s Facebook profile (such as friends, tagged photos, wall posts, interests, “likes”, etc.) all become manifestations of how we wish to advertise ourselves, and how we want to be perceived.

But to whom? Why should we care about who views our profiles and what they may or may not say about us? Mark Zuckerberg, as a member of the ruling class, has lead users to believe that we should care about how we display ourselves on Facebook because it is a social tool that allows us to reconnect with family and friends, and what we put on our Facebook profiles is a direct reflection of who we are as individuals. Moreover, Facebook is successful as a ruling idea because its users believe that they own the means of production, and that these cyber personas they are producing via Facebook are for their own personal benefit. In reality, Facebook is actually exploiting billions of people each day by taking their “labor” for free (in this case, the information from their profiles), selling it to adverting companies, and in turn, Zuckerberg makes a huge profit. Facebook essentially provides a platform from which human interests, likes, and dislikes

can be exchanged, taken, and sold like commodities, all while creating alienation amongst its nearly 1.4 billion users.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that as victims of living in a socially stratified environment, humans feel alienation in three ways: alienation from products, from the means of production, and from each other.² Facebook creates alienation on all three levels but most notably amongst its users, contradicting Facebook's mission statement of "bringing the world closer together" (Facebook, 2009). Users have become so distracted by recreating their image in the virtual world that they actually create divisions amongst themselves in the real one. Facebook fosters so many different outlets to advertise and promote our interests that people are judged based on what is (or isn't) on their profile rather than who they are as a person. As a result, Facebook allows for both production and consumption: it produces and advertises self-generated personas and in turn, this information is free and at the disposal of both the ruling class (advertising companies) and even other users.

So what is really happening when we "like" a picture? What does it mean to "update" a status? Our activity on Facebook is more than just a means of connection- it's an extension of the capitalist system on which Facebook itself is constructed. Each time we log into Facebook we are simultaneously strengthening the notion that Facebook thrives on what we choose to like and who we choose to associate with. By posting to our profiles and maintaining our so-called "social capital" and virtual image, in reality we are only unknowingly exploiting ourselves to those members of the ruling class, deepening

² Marx, Karl, and David McLellan. "The Fetishism of Commodities." *Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. N. pag. Print.

the division between various social groups in society, and ultimately allowing Facebook to exist as a dominant ruling idea.

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