CHAPTER 11

Foxconned Labour as the Dark Side of the Information Age: Working Conditions at Apple’s Contract Manufacturers in China

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Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have played a double role in the restructuring of capitalism since the 1970s. On the one hand they enable fast transnational communication that is needed for organising international markets and value chains. On the other hand the production of these technologies is itself based on an international supply network (Dyer-Witheford 2014; Hong 2011, 9). Nick Dyer-Witheford therefore describes the value chain as “the dirty secret of the digital revolution” (Dyer-Witheford 2014). Part of this “dirty secret” is that “the global information economy is built in part on the backs of tens of millions Chinese industrial workers” (Zhao and Duffy 2008, 229).

The clean, immaculate and advanced surface of modern computer products hides the dirty reality of their production process. Concepts such as “digital sublime” (Mosco 2004) or “technological sublime” (Maxwell and Miller 2012, 7) suggest that certain myths and utopian ideals are attached to media and communication technologies. Maxwell and Miller argue that this has as a consequence that the “way technology is experienced in daily life is far removed from the physical work and material resources that go into it” (Maxwell and Miller 2012, 7).

The tendency even of critical scholarship to focus on how the usage of ICTs as production technologies is transforming work, perpetuates the technological sublime rather than unmasking it. In this vein Hardt and Negri for example highlight that the “contemporary scene of labour and production […] is being transformed under the hegemony of immaterial labor, that is labor that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledge, ideas, images, relationships, and affects” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 65). Even if they recognize that the rise of “immaterial labour” does not lead to the disappearance of industrial labour the term tends to mystify the actual impact of ICTs and digital technologies on work and workers on a global scale. Before and after ICTs serve as the instruments of the mental labour of software developers, journalists, designers new media workers, prosumers etc. their production and disposal is shaped by various forms of manual work such as the extraction of minerals, the assembly of components into the final product and the waste work needed for their
disposal. Conceptualizing digital labour only as mental and immaterial labour misrepresents the character of ICTs and digital technologies as it tends to downplay the physical and manual labour that goes into them.

The notion of immaterial labour only focuses on the bright side of the expansion of communication, interaction and knowledge, while leaving its dirty counterpart in the dark. What is rather needed is demystification by fostering "greater transparency in working conditions throughout the ICT/CE supply chain" in order to shed light on the work and life realities of "workers who disappear in the twilight zone of the technological sublime" (Maxwell and Miller 2012, 108). As Vincent Mosco argues, only if computer technologies "cease to be sublime icons of mythology [...] they can become important forces for social and economic change" (Mosco 2004, 6).

This chapter contributes to this task of demystification as it looks at the working conditions in Chinese assembly plants of one of the world's most dominant and most admired computer companies: Apple Inc. Studying Apple is important because the company represents both the mental and the manual side of digital labour: For many years Apple's products have been known as the preferred digital production technologies for the knowledge work of designers, journalists, artists and new media workers. iPhone, iPod and Co are symbols for technological progress that enables unprecedented levels of co-creation and sharing of knowledge, images and affects as well as interaction, communication, co-operation etc. At the same time during the past years Apple has become an infamous example for the existence of hard manual labour under miserable conditions along the supply chain of consumer electronics. In this chapter I therefore use the example of Apple for highlighting that an adequate conceptualization of digital labour must not ignore its physical and manual aspects.

In the first section I give a brief overview of the developments that led to the rise of China as the “workshop of the world.” In Section 2 I contrast Apple's business success with allegations from corporate watchdogs regarding bad working conditions in the company's supply chain. In order to examine these allegations in greater detail I then introduce a systematic model of working conditions (Section 3) and apply it to Apple's contract manufacturers in China (Section 4). Finally, I discuss Apple's response to labour rights violations (Section 5) and conclude with some reflections on solidarity along the global value chain (Section 6).

1 The Rise of China as “Workshop of the World”

The rise of neoliberal globalization and international value chains is generally considered as a reaction to the crisis of Fordist capitalism in the 1970s (Fröbel,