

Work That Doesn't Pay Off

About: Maud Simonet, *Travail gratuit : La nouvelle exploitation ?*, Textuel

by Anne Jourdain

Free labour takes a wide variety of forms today: charity work, civic service, internships, digital labour... Taking as her starting point the teachings on domestic labour put forward by feminists many years ago, the sociologist Maud Simonet provides an updated analysis of these contemporary forms of exploitation.

Now here is a thought-provoking little book. It takes the form of a 152-page essay on what Maud Simonet calls “free labour”. She uses this expression to refer to charity work, workfare (a quid pro quo arrangement in which the recipients of state benefits must provide some kind of labour in return), but also volunteering, civic service, internships or even digital labour (work carried out online by individuals, e.g. publishing on a blog or recognising words that are indecipherable to robots in “recaptchas”). This book undertakes to bring together these diverse experiences under one and the same label in order to highlight what they have in common. In so doing, Maud Simonet gives a sense of coherence to the whole of her research, throughout which she has examined these different types of activity. This coherence is revealed in the definition she offers for them: “forms of labour that are not recognised as such, carried out outside of labour law and with little or no monetary compensation or welfare rights” (p. 10). This book also puts forward a powerful argument: contrary to what current debates surrounding digital labour might have us believe, free labour is nothing new. Above all, it has already largely been analysed over forty years ago by feminists in relation to women’s domestic labour. Maud Simonet thus suggests we return to these already old analyses to think about current forms of free labour.

Returning to Domestic Labour to Think About Free Labour

By coining the term “domestic labour” to refer to a form of work that had until then rarely been thought of as such, feminist intellectuals and activists made visible a kind of labour that was carried out for free, mainly by women, and produced an analysis of it. The concept of “free labour” used by Maud Simonet has similar ambitions. In the first chapter, the sociologist returns precisely to the feminists’ contributions, which feed into the thinking of her book as a whole. From this perspective, her writing is extremely clear and pedagogical: thus Christine Delphy’s particularly complex texts appear perfectly accessible when described by Maud Simonet.

One fundamental lesson we can draw from feminist works is to think of free labour as a “denial of labour” carried out “in the name of” values (p. 45). Just like domestic labour, free labour is not just unpaid labour: it is also characterised by being invisible as labour, because it is carried out in the name of values different to monetary value. Domestic labour is thus all the less perceived as labour for being carried out in the name of love (of a mother for her children, for example). In other words, love justifies its non-consideration as labour and therefore its non-remuneration. This outcome is then reworked by Maud Simonet, who reveals the different types of rhetoric related to free labour that exist today. Her second chapter thus examines charity work, workfare and the civic service, which are carried out in the name of citizenship. In this chapter, the author analyses the development of policies encouraging free labour that resort to this kind of rhetoric, in the United States and in France, based in particular on the study she carried out together with John Krinsky into the maintenance of New York City’s parks and gardens.¹ These policies are part of what she evocatively refers to as the “civic face of neoliberalism” (p. 77), since they contribute to the “making free” of labour (« *gratuitisation* » *du travail*). If anything is new, it is thus not so much the fact that these contemporary forms of labour are performed for free, but rather that public policies have been developed that promote unpaid labour.

Defining Exploitation Beyond Theoretical Divides

It is essentially in Chapter 3 that Maud Simonet puts forward her definition of the exploitation that is at the heart of free labour. This chapter examines digital labour, and starts by reviewing the vast amount of literature dealing with this subject. It thus opens up onto the notion of “free labour” put forward by Tiziana Terranova, an Italian media expert who first highlighted the issues surrounding free online labour in an article she wrote in 2000. “Free”

¹ John Krinsky, Maud Simonet, *Who Cleans the Park? Public Work and Urban Governance in New York City*, The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

should be understood in two ways: “free labour” is at once unpaid, exploited labour, but also labour that is liberated, enjoyed in and of itself. These two meanings could define the main theoretical divide as far as digital labour is concerned: on the one hand, some neo-Marxist theoreticians like Antonio Casilli emphasise the objective exploitation of workers, their creativity and affects by digital platforms; on the other hand, authors like Dominique Cardon take the view that we would do better to take seriously the subjective experience of Internet users who might enjoy publishing content on their blogs or social networks.²

Drawing on the lessons of feminism, Maud Simonet suggests we move beyond through this theoretical divide by taking the view that it is not necessary to “choose between the pleasure you take and the exploitation you are the object of” (p. 97). In the same way that mothers can be exploited and happy to take care of their children, bloggers and other digital workers can at once be exploited and happy to add their personal contribution to the Internet. In their case, the exploitation is not taking place in the name of love, but of passion or pleasure.

Maud Simonet’s analysis of the concept of “exploitation” does not stop here. Drawing on her study of the case of the *Huffington Post* bloggers, Maud Simonet defines exploitation as being indistinguishable from free labour through appropriation. The case in question was the takeover of the online newspaper by AOL in 2011 for 315 million dollars: the thousands of bloggers who had contributed for free to the operation of the newspaper since its creation in 2005 then asked for a third of the profit gained to be retroceded to them. The main problem posed by this takeover and by the profit generated for the managers of the newspaper lies, according to the statements of the leaders of the bloggers’ class action, which Maud Simonet has analysed, in the appropriation of the bloggers’ labour by an institution that has been redefined as being a for-profit enterprise. Here again the author draws from the teachings of feminism this concept of exploitation as appropriation (rather than as alienation). This definition has the advantage of being operational and of covering all of the different forms of labour described above.

The Articulation between Free Labour and Employment

The reach of Maud Simonet’s book also lies in the fact that she manages to convince us that free labour is not an epiphenomenon situated at the margins of employment: it insinuates itself into all the nooks and crannies of employment, so that studying it appears crucial in order to understand how labour and employment are currently being transformed. Chapter 4 is specifically concerned with the articulation between free labour and employment.

² Dominique Cardon, Antonio Casilli, *Qu’est-ce que le Digital Labour ?*, INA, 2015.

Free labour is first and foremost located “at the heart of employment” (p. 116): as is shown by contemporary feminist research into the “feminisation of labour” (in particular that of Donna Haraway)³, the immaterial labour or emotional labour that used to mainly be required in types of jobs viewed as typically female now extends to the majority of jobs. It is indeed free labour, denied as labour and extending beyond the framework of the work contract as such. Free labour is thus carried out “in the name of the job (to come)” (p. 123). Drawing on Anglo-Saxon studies of “hope labour”, “sacrificial labour” or “aspirational labour”, the author demonstrates that free labour is viewed today as a springboard towards employment or an investment in one’s career. This is the case of charity work, volunteering or internships, which are part of a route to employment and of the normalised operation of the labour market. Finally, free labour is also a “substitute for employment” (p. 132). According to Maud Simonet, we have thus moved, over the course of twenty years, from jobseekers being banned from doing any charity work to recipients of the RSA (the minimum welfare benefits in France) being encouraged to get involved in charity work. The idea of a springboard to employment appears once more to be central here. Finally, Maud Simonet rereads a great number of texts (in particular Anglo-Saxon ones) on the world of contemporary work in light of free labour, and it seems that this lens does indeed allow her to shed new light on vast swathes of our current social reality.

So what is to be done? Maud Simonet makes the effort of answering this difficult question in a final, prospective chapter. Of the five chapters, this is the shortest. The two scenarios she puts forward (dissolving free labour into wage labour and the opposite) are thought-provoking, but would be worth investigating in more depth in order for us to understand all their implications. But the author does warn us at the beginning of the chapter that she does not intend to provide an exhaustive answer on the issue, which we can only too easily understand.

For anyone familiar with the literature quoted by Maud Simonet, reading her essay sometimes echoes theoretical propositions made by other authors. Her central proposition of rereading contemporary forms of free labour in light of old feminist teachings is for example similar to that of Kylie Jarrett’s 2016 book *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*⁴. This book is in fact mentioned by Maud Simonet. Nevertheless, the work Maud Simonet has done in terms of bringing together different literatures that are not aware of each other, her efforts to clarify the theories she mentions and her use of her own research contribute to making this essay into a genuinely original piece of work. In fact, the discussion with other theories could be pushed even further, into other spaces or other texts: the logics she describes are in many ways reminiscent of those of giving, which has been the object of numerous analyses in economic sociology, in particular from a Bourdieusian perspective that

³ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborg, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991.

⁴ Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*, Routledge, 2016.

highlights a “denial of the economic”⁵ that is quite close to the “denial of labour” revealed by Maud Simonet.

While many current studies are concerned with the increasing commodification of everything that is external to labour—in particular through the sale of goods or services between individuals on digital platforms⁶—Maud Simonet takes the opposite approach, since she observes forms of labour being made free. While these former studies interrogate the possibilities of emancipation through commodification, Maud Simonet provides an analysis of exploitation through free labour. And yet the mechanisms observed are similar. How can we explain this divergence in the analyses? In fact, while the starting point may be different, these analyses converge in many ways. Indeed, anyone who studies instances of non-labour being commodified reveals forms of free labour (for example the publication of content on social networks with a view to selling goods or services, without this labour receiving any substantial remuneration). Conversely, Maud Simonet shows very well how free labour for its part develops in parallel to forms of intentional commodification and profitability. It ultimately seems pertinent to analyse commodification and making free (*gratuitisation*), the extension of the market and the extension of free labour, at the same time. No doubt Maud Simonet’s essay will thus help numerous researchers to better (re)analyse their objects of study, while her subject and her prose also make this book likely to appeal to readers beyond the academic sphere.

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⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Anthropologie économique. Cours au Collège de France 1992–1993*, Paris, 2017.

⁶ Sarah Abdelnour (ed.), *Les Nouveaux travailleurs des applis*, PUF, 2019 (forthcoming); Thomas Beauvisage, Jean-Samuel Beuscart, Kevin Mellet, “Numérique et travail à-côté. Enquête exploratoire sur les travailleurs de l’économie collaborative”, *Sociologie du travail*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2018; Sidonie Naulin, Anne Jourdain (ed.), *The Social Meaning of Extra Money: Capitalism and the Commodification of Domestic and Leisure Activities*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 (forthcoming).