

# Chapter 4

## Who Creates Value? Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and (Advertising) Work

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In February 2024, the guild of Spanish advertising illustration declared war on artificial intelligence (AI), concerned about a phenomenon that had been consolidating for months: replacing its work with generative tools. In response, the Federation of Professional Illustrators Associations (FADIP) expressed the need to regulate AI to ensure its deontological use. This chapter aims to demonstrate that, beyond any ethical considerations, the debate about advertising work and AI is rooted in structural reasons. A practical application of the Marxist labor theory of value is employed to reach this conclusion. This theory is the most influential critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the one that best allows us to understand the discontent we have been discussing.*

Nature does not construct machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraph, self-acting mules...  
(Karl Marx, Economic Manuscript of 1857–1858).

### **INTRODUCTION**

In February 2024, the Spanish illustration guild launched a campaign against artificial intelligence (AI) applied to the advertising industry. In an uncoordinated and unorganized manner, they used their personal social media accounts to denounce a phenomenon that had been solidifying for months: the recurring participation of specific individuals in poster design contests, submitting designs produced by AI. They identified a select group of “professional contestants” who had been awarded hundreds of times, always using the same concept and automated technique. These advertisers were simultaneously

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awarded in various municipal contests, accumulating thousands of euros from public funds (Cid, February 10, 2024).

Just two days later, under pressure from illustrators, the Ministry of Youth and Childhood of the Government of Spain had to withdraw an advertising campaign. The campaign consisted of a series of banners for the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, depicting Disney princesses working in scientific professions, which were generated using AI. The Ministry's subsequent statement stated that “this debate deserves deep reflection, and the sector, an apology. The Government supports creators and will listen to and incorporate their demands to regulate AI” (Aguilera, February 12, 2024).

Since both state and municipal administrations were involved in these cases, it might seem that the complaints were focused on the complex relationship between public institutions and private technological appropriation (Mazzucato, 2013). Still, nothing could be further from the truth. Although this debate figured into the arguments of the protest, there were also complaints against private businesses. Thus, at the beginning of that month, several bookstores removed a book published by Grupo Planeta from their catalogues because its cover featured an AI-designed illustration of Joan of Arc in solidarity with traditional illustrators (Ruvenal, February 2, 2024). Likewise, for the same reason, that week the Catalan rumba music group Estopa was forced to apologize for the cover of their latest album, which had been generated by AI (Guerra, February 13, 2024). This debate also spread to the United States, where more and more companies are including “anti-AI” clauses in their contracts with advertising agencies (Sloane, March 26, 2024).

The discontent in the advertising sector was evident, but its reasons were diluted in a whirlwind of tweets, retweets, trends, and quotes. In 280 characters, that, at best, hinted at the existence of a problem: somehow, a (new?) contradiction between work and technology was revealed but left unclear. In response to the controversy, the Federation of Professional Illustrators' Associations (FADIP) sought to channel the demands and published a statement calling for respect for intellectual property laws. Was that what it was all about, then? An ethical or deontological dilemma? Another movement from the cultural sector against piracy, like in the music and film industries at the start of the century? Or was there something more that went beyond the scant fifteen lines of the statement?

As of the time of writing, the Advertising Code of Conduct of Autocontrol, the leading self-regulatory body for advertising in Spain, has not included any recommendations regarding AI. However, the Official College of Advertising and Public Relations of the Valencian Community has become the first to include a set of guidelines on generative tools. This brief guide offers a more nuanced view of the situation, providing interesting insights. The document accuses individuals outside the advertising profession of “intrusiveness” when they replace work with AI. Beyond corporate protectionism, the College seems to hit the nail on the head by highlighting the anxiety with which many advertising professionals are experiencing the possibility that creativity could also be automated. This is a more distant, long-term anxiety that affects everyone. Can a machine replace the intelligence that defines human work? Is work losing its central role? If so, what consequences would this have? Is capitalism compatible with the disappearance of human work?

Aiming for a definitive answer to these questions here is unrealistic; however, not all conjectures have the same solidity. To establish robust hypotheses, this will attempt to analyze advertising work and its potential replacement by AI through the Marxist labor theory of value, one of the most prolific and critical scientific theories (Cockshott & Cottrell, 1997) for explaining the nature of work under the current mode of production.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this theory is compatible with the author's conviction in the dialectical approach to enhancing knowledge about phenomena, in this case, advertising work under the

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