

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CAPITALISM

In 2014, the Internet researcher danah boyd (2014) published the book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* that analyses the implications of teenagers' uses of social media. The focus is on topics such as identity, privacy, crime, safety and security discourses, and bullying. For boyd, capitalism is an irrelevant topic for the study of social media:

I also take for granted, and rarely seek to challenge, the capitalist logic that underpins American society and the development of social media. Although I believe that these assumptions should be critiqued, this is outside the scope of this project. By accepting the cultural context in which youth are living, I seek to explain their practices in light of the society in which they are situated. (boyd 2014, 27)

According to statistics, 28 per cent of those in the age group 65+ and 93 per cent of those aged 16–24 in Britain had at least one social media profile in autumn 2014 (Ofcom 2015a). In 2015, 90 per cent of young US adults used social media and 35 per cent of those aged 65 and older (PewResearchCenter 2015). Children and teenagers spend substantial amounts of their free time online, predominantly on commercial platforms. They are not just young people, but also young consumers growing up in consumer capitalism, in which they are almost constantly confronted by commodity consumption and advertising. Given the amount of time young people stay on social media, advertisers are particularly interested to present ads and sell commodities to them via such platforms. Young people who leave school or finish studying at university need to find paid labour in order to survive in a capitalist system. It is a tendency that they find work in the media, cultural and digital industries very attractive, but that such labour is, although often self-fulfilling, frequently so-called precarious labour: labour that is low paid, insecure, irregular, can involve working long hours, and is often freelance work.

One situation that young people particularly frequently report as feeling uncomfortable about is when employers or potential employers access employees' and applicants' social media profiles (Fuchs 2009b). A capitalist market for the online surveillance of job applicants has emerged (Allmer 2015, 91–92). In a survey of young Internet users, 53.1 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that it is okay that companies screen job applicants on the Internet and on social networking sites, whereas only 23.1 per cent agreed or totally agreed (Kreilinger 2014, 81). Labour and commodity culture are two fundamental aspects of capitalism and of the life of young people (and others) in contemporary society. Given the importance of labour and commodity culture in young people's lives, it is striking that boyd is not interested in their analysis. Young people do not just grow up and form identities; in doing so they are also confronted with consumer capitalism, the logic of competitive individualism, and the imperative to acquire skills to be employable for the capitalist labour market. Capitalist production, markets, and commodity culture in complex ways contextualize social media use. Under neo-liberal conditions, these imperatives play a particularly important role. Karl Marx's works still today in the age of social media help us to understand the role the logics of capitalism, class and commodities play in everyday life.

HOW CAN ONE DEFINE CRITICAL THEORY?

Ben Agger (2006, 4–5) argues that critical social theory is based on seven foundations:

- It is a critique of positivism and of the assumption that theory is value free.
- It argues for the possibility of a better future without domination and exploitation.
- It sees domination as a structural phenomenon.
- It shows how humans, who live in structures of domination, tend to reproduce these structures in false consciousness.
- It is interested in everyday life such as the workplace and the family.
- It conceives structure and agency as dialectical.
- It sees liberation as a process that must be accomplished by the oppressed and exploited themselves.

Relating these aspects to Marx's works, we can identify six dimensions of a critical theory:

- 1 critical ethics;
- 2 critique of domination and exploitation;
- 3 dialectical reason;
- 4 struggles and political practice;
- 5 ideology critique;
- 6 critique of the political economy.

1 CRITICAL THEORY HAS A NORMATIVE DIMENSION

Criticism “measures individual existence against essence” (Marx 1997, 61–62). This means that critical theory is normative and realistic, it argues that it is possible to logically provide reasonably grounded arguments about what a good society is, that the good society relates to conditions that all humans require to survive (the essence of humans and society), and that we can judge existing societies according to the extent they provide or fail to provide humane conditions.

2 CRITICAL THEORY IS A CRITIQUE OF DOMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

Critical theory questions all thought and practices that justify or uphold domination and exploitation. Domination means that one group benefits at the expense of others and has the means of violence at hand that they can use for upholding the situation where the one benefits at the expense of others. Exploitation is a specific form of domination, in which one group controls property and has the means to force others to work so that they produce goods or property that they do not own themselves, but that the owning class controls.

An example is a slave-owner who owns a slave as property and owns all products that the slave creates; it even allows killing her/him if s/he refuses to work. A somewhat different example is Facebook Inc., a company controlled by private shareholders who own the Facebook platform. Facebook's users create data whenever they are online that refers to their profiles and online behaviour. This data is sold to Facebook's advertising clients who are enabled to present targeted advertisements on users' profiles. Without Facebook users,

there would be no profit. So, one can say that users create the monetary value and profit of Facebook. But they do not own this profit, which is rather controlled by Facebook's shareholders. So, also, Facebook users are exploited.

Marx formulated the categorical imperative of critical theory "to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being" (Marx 1997, 257–258). Critical theory wants to show that a good life for all is possible and that domination and exploitation alienate humans from achieving such a society. Marx therefore identifies the "task of philosophy [...] to unmask human self-alienation" (Marx 1997, 251). In deconstructing alienation, domination and exploitation, critical theory also makes demands for a self-determined, participatory and just democracy. Participatory democracy is a society in which all decisions are made by those who are concerned by them and all organizations (workplaces, schools, cities, politics, etc.) are controlled by those who are affected by them. Such a society is not only a grassroots political democracy, that is a society controlled by all people, but also an economic democracy in which producers control the production process and the means and outcomes of production. Critical theory wants to make the world conscious of its own possibilities. The "world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality" (Marx 1997, 214).

3 CRITICAL THEORY USES DIALECTICAL REASONING AS A METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Dialectical reasoning is a philosophical method for understanding the world. The dialectical method identifies contradictions. Contradictions are "the source of all dialectics" (Marx 1867, 744). Dialectics tries to show how contemporary society and its moments are shaped by contradictions. A contradiction is a tension between two poles that require each other to exist, but have opposing qualities. Basic contradictions are, for example, those between being and nothingness and life and death: all things have a beginning and an end. The end of one thing gives rise to a new thing. So, for example, the music industry's trial against the Napster file-sharing platform resulted in the end of Napster, but not in the end of the filesharing technology, as the rise of related technologies such as Kazaa, Napster, BitTorrent and the PirateBay platform has shown.

Contradictions result in the circumstance that society is dynamic and that capitalism assures the continuity of domination and exploitation by changing the way these phenomena are organized. Dialectics "regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspects as well" (Marx 1867, 103). The "movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions" (Marx 1867, 103). In a contradiction, one pole of the dialectic can only exist because the opposing pole exists: they require and exclude each other at the same time. In a dominative society (such as capitalism), contradictions cause problems and are to a certain extent also the seeds for overcoming these problems. They have positive potentials and negative realities at the same time.

Marx analysed capitalism's contradictions, including those between the following: non-owners/owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists, use value/exchange value, concrete labour/abstract labour, the simple form of value/the relative and expanded form of value, social relations of humans/relations of things, the fetish of commodities and money/fetishistic thinking, the circulation of commodities/the circulation of

money, commodities/money, labour power/wages, subject/object, labour process/valorization process, subject of labour (labour power, worker)/the object of labour (the means of production), variable capital/constant capital, surplus labour/surplus product, necessary labour time/surplus labour time, single worker/co-operation, single company/industry sector, single capital/competing capitals, production/consumption and productive forces/relations of production.

The tension between opposing poles can be resolved in a process that Hegel and Marx called "sublation" and "negation of the negation". Sublation is a difficult concept that helps us to understand how change happens. For example, it can be used for explaining what is new and old about the contemporary form of social media. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel first introduced this concept. It is difficult because its meaning is not intuitively clear. This has to do with the fact that the term comes from the German word *Aufhebung*, which cannot be directly translated to English. It has three meanings: (a) to eliminate, (b) to preserve and (c) to lift up. Hegel used this notion as a language game in order to express that change of something means that (a) the current state is eliminated, (b) some aspects of the old state are preserved in the new state and (c) a new quality emerges in the new state. Marx applied the concept of sublation to society in order to explain how it changes.

Take the example of Facebook. It is a sublation of earlier Internet platforms: (a) It eliminated the dominance of other Internet technologies, such as guest books on websites. Nowadays it is much more common that users write on the walls of their Facebook friends. But (b) the guest book has also been preserved on Facebook: the wall is a kind of guest book. And (c) Facebook is more than just a guest book for commenting; it also includes features such as email, photo and video sharing, discussion forums, fan pages and the friends list.

Marx was concerned with dialectical relations in society. So, for example, there is a dialectical relation between labour power and wages: labour power is the capacity to work; work is the transformation of nature by human activity so that goods emerge. In capitalism, a lot of labour power is organized as wage labour. So wages exist only in relation to labour power (for paying labour power), and capitalism forces workers to earn wages in order to have money for buying goods. Labour and wages cannot exist without one another in capitalism. Workers, however, do not have the power to determine their wages. Marx (1867) argued that the power of the owners of firms that employ workers results in the circumstance that they only pay parts of the work the labourer performs, only a certain number of hours a day, whereas the other part is unpaid. The work that is performed unpaid is called surplus labour and the unpaid work time (measured in hours) surplus value. Surplus labour is a specific form of labour that emerges from the relation of labour power and wages in capitalism. The production of surplus value is the source of profit. For example, if workers in a company produce goods that are sold for €10,000, but their wages are only €5000, then there is an unpaid surplus labour that has produced a profit/surplus of €5000. Marx considers the unpaid production of surplus by workers and the appropriation of this value by capitalists to be the main scandal and injustice of capitalism. He therefore argues that there is a class relation (contradictory interests) between workers and capitalists.

Capitalism's class relation is another dialectical contradiction. Marx says that its sublation is not possible within capitalism, but requires to overcome this type of society and to build a new society. We will come back to the concept of surplus value in Chapter 5.

There are contradictions in capitalism that are persistent and not frequently sublated. They are at the heart of human misery in capitalism. Their sublation can only be achieved by political struggle and means the end of capitalism. These are especially the antagonisms between productive forces/relations of production, owners/non-owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists, dominated groups/oppressors. The contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is partly sublated in crisis situations, but reconstitutes itself right in the crisis. Its true sublation can only be achieved by the overthrow of capitalism. If, in capitalism, an important contradiction is the one between the owning class that exploits the non-owning class, then the goal of critical theory is the representation of the interest of oppressed and exploited groups and the overcoming of class society. "It can only represent a class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat" (Marx 1867, 98).

In formulating a critique of exploitation and domination, critical theory develops "new principles for the world out of the principles of the world" (Marx 1997, 214). Dialectical thinking argues that the foundations of a classless society develop already within capitalism; that capitalism, on the one hand, produces new forms of co-operation that are, on the other hand, within class relations, forms of exploitation and domination. In capitalism, the forces of production are at the same time destructive forces.

4 CRITICAL THEORY IS CONNECTED TO STRUGGLES FOR A JUST AND FAIR SOCIETY: IT IS AN INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION OF STRUGGLE

Critical theory provides a "self-understanding [. . .] of the age concerning its struggle and wishes" (Marx 1997, 315), it can "show the world why it actually struggles" and is "taking sides [. . .] with actual struggles" (Marx 1997, 214). This means that critical theory can help to explain the causes, conditions, potentials and limits of struggles. Critical theory rejects the argument that academia and science should and can be value-free. It rather argues that political worldviews shape all thought and theories. There are deeply political reasons why a person is interested in a certain topic, aligns himself/herself with a certain school of thought, develops a particular theory and not another one, refers to certain authors and not others because modern society is shaped by conflicts of interests, and therefore, in surviving and asserting themselves, scholars have to make choices, enter strategic alliances and defend their positions against others. Critical theory holds not only that theory is always political, but also that critical theory should develop analyses of society that struggle against interests and ideas that justify domination and exploitation.

5 IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE: CRITICAL THEORY IS A CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

Ideologies are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence, especially those having to do with domination, that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable. In *Capital*, Marx argued that capitalism is inherently ideological because in it, social relations tend to appear as things such as money and commodities sold on markets. This creates the impression that capitalism is a natural state of affairs, has always existed and cannot be changed. He termed this phenomenon the fetishism of commodities: the social relations between workers' labour appear not "as direct social relations between persons in

their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1867, 166). A commodity is a peculiar thing that is "strange" (Marx 1867, 163), "metaphysical" (163), "mystical" (164) and "mysterious" (164) because its value "transcends sensuousness" (163) so that the commodity "stands on its head" and "grotesque ideas" (163) about the nature of the commodity can emerge. Many ideologies are a form of fetishism: they make social relations appear as unchangeable, fixed and determined by static laws.

It is possible, for example, to claim that there is no alternative to Facebook and that the organizational model of Facebook, which uses targeted advertising, is the only possible form of a social networking site. Facebook is so dominant and has more than a billion users. Many of its users have several hundred contacts. It is difficult to imagine that there could be an alternative to Facebook because we are afraid to lose the possibility of communication with these contacts. But what if one could import all these contacts to another platform that does not have complex privacy policies, does not use targeted advertising and where all Facebook contacts are available? Ideologies claim that things cannot be changed, have always been or need to be the way they are now. Marx, in contrast, argued that everything in society is social, which also means that it can be changed by humans and that all things have a beginning and an end.

Ideology critique wants to remind us that everything that exists in society is created by humans in social relationships and that social relationships can be changed. It wants to bring "problems into the self-conscious human form" (Marx 1997, 214), which means that it wants to make humans conscious of the problems they are facing in society and the causes of these problems. Arguments like "there is no alternative to capitalism, neoliberalism, competition, egoism, racism, etc. because man is egoistic, competitive, etc." forget about the social character of society and create the impression that the results of social activity are unchangeable things. Critical theory provides an "analysis of the mystical consciousness that is unclear about itself" (Marx 1997, 214).

6 CRITICAL THEORY IS A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Critical theory analyses how capital accumulation, surplus value exploitation and the transformation of aspects of society into commodities (commodification) work and what the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are. A commodity is a good that is exchanged with other goods in a certain quantitative relationship: x amount of commodity A = y amount of commodity B. "In the critique of political economy, therefore, we shall examine the basic categories, uncover the contradiction introduced by the free-trade system, and bring out the consequences of both sides of the contradiction" (Engels 1843/1844, 175). Critical political economy is concerned with how resources are produced, distributed and consumed, and which power relations shape these resources. These resources can be physical productions, such as a car, but also non-physical goods, such as information. The information uploaded to Facebook is produced by users, but not owned and controlled by them: Facebook obtains the right to sell data about the uploaded information and your usage behaviour to other companies. It controls the profits derived from this process. Also, attention has its own political economy on the Internet: not everyone has the same power to be heard, seen and read on social media. Powerful actors such as CNN or *The New York Times* have much more visibility than a single political blogger. George Orwell was describing an animal kingdom, in which some animals are "more equal than others" (Orwell 1945, 85). On capitalist social media such as Google,

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, some users are more equal than others – which means that there is inequality. Marx's political economy is not just a critique of the commodity form. It is also a critique of commodity fetishism, that is of ideologies associated with capitalist society, and an intellectual form of social struggle for a fair, just and participatory democracy.

1.4 CRITICAL THEORY APPROACHES

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL: NOT A SAUSAGE, BUT A CRITICAL THEORY

The Frankfurt School is a tradition of critical thinking that has its origins in the works of scholars like Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (for introductions see Fuchs 2016a, Held 1980, Wiggershaus 1995). All six dimensions of Marx's theory can be found in the Frankfurt School's understanding of critique and can be exemplified by studying Marcuse's (1988, 134–158) essay "Philosophy and Critical Theory", Horkheimer's (2002, 188–252) essay "Traditional and Critical Theory", Marcuse's (1988, 43–87) article "The Concept of Essence" and the section "The Foundations of the Dialectical Theory of Society" in Marcuse's book *Reason and Revolution* (1941, 258–322). These texts are apt because they describe the fundamentals of how the thinkers of the Frankfurt School thought one should study society.

Critical theory is *ethical*. It has a "concern with human happiness" (Marcuse 1988, 135). It is a *critique of domination and exploitation*. It holds that "man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society" (Marcuse 1988, 153). The goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole (Horkheimer 2002, 219) so that a "society without injustice" (221) emerges. Like Marx, critical theory makes use of *dialectical reason*. It argues that concepts that describe the existence of capitalism (profit, surplus value, worker, capital, commodity, etc.) are dialectical because they "transcend the given social reality in the direction of another historical structure which is present as a tendency in the given reality" (Marcuse 1988, 86). Critical theory wants to advance *struggles and political practice*. "The materialist protest and materialist critique originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle" (Marcuse 1988, 141). It advances a *critique of ideology* by trying to show that capitalism's central phenomena in many presentations of reality "do not immediately appear to men as what they are 'in reality', but in masked, 'perverted' form" (Marcuse 1988, 70). Critical theory bases its ideas on Marx's *critique of the political economy* (Horkheimer 2002, 244).

Jürgen Habermas built his approach on the classical Frankfurt School and at the same time worked out the concept of communicative rationality, by which he went beyond the classical tradition (Fuchs 2016a). Habermas (1984, 285–286) distinguishes between instrumental (non-social, success-oriented), strategic (social, success-oriented) and communicative action (social, oriented on understanding). Habermas (1971, 53) conceives instrumental action and communicative action as the two fundamental aspects of social praxis.

Communication is certainly an important aspect of a society free of domination. It is, however, in capitalism also a form of interaction, in which ideology is, with the help of the mass media, made available to dominated groups. Communication is not automatically progressive. Habermas differentiates instrumental/strategic reason and communicative reason,

whereas Horkheimer draws a distinction between instrumental reason and critical reason (Horkheimer 1947) and, based on that, between traditional and critical theory (Horkheimer 2002). Habermas splits off communication from instrumentality and thereby neglects that, in capitalism, the dominant system uses communication just like technology, the media, ideology or labour as an instrument for defending its rule (for a critique of Habermas's critical theory of communication, see Fuchs 2016, chapters 1, 6 and 7). Communication is not pure and left untouched by structures of domination; it is antagonistically entangled into them. For Horkheimer (based on Marx), critical theory's goal is man's "emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer 2002, 249) and "the happiness of all individuals" (248). Horkheimer has in mind the emancipation of communication just like the emancipation of work, decision-making and everyday life. His notion of critical rationality is larger than Habermas's notion of communicative rationality which risks becoming soaked up by non-critical approaches that use Habermas's stress on communication for instrumental purposes. The concept of communication can be critical, but is not necessarily critical, whereas the concept of a critique of exploitation and domination is necessarily critical.

CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION: STUDYING THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION CRITICALLY

Dwayne Winseck (2011) provides a map of the landscape of Political Economy research in Media and Communication Studies by identifying four approaches and speaking of Political Economies of Media:

- Neoclassical Political Economy of the Media;
- Radical/Marxist/Critical Political Economy of the Media;
- Schumpeterian Institutional Political Economy of the Media;
- The Cultural Industries School.

Speaking of Political Economies of Communication and the Media in the plural, as Winseck does, creates the impression that all these approaches are equally important and desirable. There is, however, a big political difference between, for example, neoclassical political economy that favours capitalist ownership of the media and Marxist political economy that opposes it. In media and communication research, radical/Marxist/critical political economy has historically and up until today been the most important approach. Winseck's pluralization of the political economy of the media and communication downplays the political and academic importance of Marx and Marxist theory.

In his seminal introduction to the field, Vincent Mosco defines the Political Economy of Communication as the "study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (Mosco 2009, 2). Marxian Political Economy of Communication decentres the media by "placing in the foreground the analysis of capitalism, including the development of the forces and relations of production, commodification and the production of surplus value, social class divisions and struggles, contradictions and oppositional movements" (Mosco 2009, 94). Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (2005) argue that the Critical Political Economy of Communications analyses "the interplay between the symbolic and the

economic dimensions of public communications" (60) and "how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the structured asymmetries in social relations" (62). For Jonathan Hardy (2014, 3–4), the Critical Political Economy of the Media is a

tradition of analysis that is concerned with how communication arrangements relate to goals of social justice and emancipation. [...] I take the critical political economy approach to encompass studies that consider political and economic aspects of communications and which are critical in regard to their concerns with the manner in which power relations are sustained and challenged.

A critical political economy of social media is particularly interested in the power relations that govern the production, distribution and use of information of platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Weibo, QQ, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Blogger/Blogspot, Wordpress, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, Snapchat, Instagram, Vine, Youku, RenRen, Douban, Tudou, WeChat, WhatsApp, Baidu, Vk, Reddit and Imgur.

The following terms have been used for naming this field: (Critical) Political Economy of Communication (Mosco 2009), (Critical) Political Economy of Communication(s) (Wasko 2004; Wasko et al. 2011), Political Economy of Culture (Calabrese and Sparks 2004), Political Economy of Information (Garnham 2011; Mosco and Wasko 1988), Political Economy of Mass Communication (Garnham 1990) and (Critical) Political Economy of the Media (Golding and Murdock 1997b; Hardy 2014; McChesney 2008). All of these approaches refer mainly to Winseck's second approach.

The Critical Political Economy of Communication studies media communication in the context of power relations and the totality of social relations and is committed to moral philosophy and social praxis (Mosco 2009, 2–5). It is holistic, historical, cares about the public good and engages with moral questions of justice and equity (Murdock and Golding 2005, 61). Golding and Murdock (1997a) mention five characteristics of the Critical Political Economy of the Media:

- holism;
- historicity;
- realist and materialist epistemology;
- moral and philosophical foundations;
- a focus of the analysis on cultural distribution and on the distribution between the private and public control of communications.

Important topics of the Critical Political Economy of Communication include: media activism; media and social movements; the commodification of media content, audiences and communication labour; capital accumulation models of the media; media and the public sphere; communication and space-time; the concentration of corporate power in the communication industry; the media and globalization; the media and imperialism; the media and capitalism; media policies and state regulation of the media; communication and social class, gender, race; hegemony; the history of communication industries; media commercialization; media homogenization/diversification/multiplication/integration; media and advertising; and media power (Garnham 1990, 1995/1998, 2000; Hardy 2010, 2014; Mosco 2009; Wasko 2004).

Dallas Smythe (1981, xvi–xviii) identified eight core aspects of a Marxist political economy of communications: materiality, monopoly capitalism, audience commodification and advertising, media communication as part of the base of capitalism, labour power, critique of technological determinism, consciousness, arts and learning.

CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL ARE TWO CRITICAL THEORIES, BUT DO WE REALLY NEED TWO OF THEM?

There are connections between Critical Political Economy and the Frankfurt School's stress on ideology. For Murdock and Golding (1974, 4), the media are organizations that "produce and distribute commodities", are the means for distributing advertisements, and they also have an "ideological dimension" by disseminating "ideas about economic and political structures". The approaches of the Frankfurt School and of the Critique of the Political Economy of Media and Communication should be understood as being complementary. There has been a stronger focus on ideology critique in the Frankfurt School approach for historical reasons. For Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), the rise of German fascism, the Stalinist praxis and American consumer capitalism showed the defeat of the revolutionary potentials of the working class (Habermas 1984, 366–367). They wanted to explain why the revolutionary German working class followed Hitler, which brought up their interest in the analysis of the authoritarian personality and media propaganda. The Anglo-American approach of the Political Economy of the Media and Communication was developed by people like Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller in countries that did not experience fascism, which might be one of the factors that explain the differences in emphasis on ideology and capital accumulation. Whereas North American capitalism was based on pure liberal ideology and a strong consumer culture, German capitalism after 1945 was built on the legacy of National Socialism and a strong persistence of authoritarian thinking.

Horkheimer's (1947) notion of instrumental reason and Marcuse's (1964) notion of technological rationality open up connections between the two approaches. Horkheimer and Marcuse stressed that in capitalism there is a tendency that freedom of action is replaced by instrumental decision-making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected to only react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in Georg Lukács's (1923/1972) notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx's (1867) concept of fetishism. Reification means "that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (Lukács 1923/1972, 83).

Capitalist media are modes of reification in a double sense. First, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements and commodities. Second, culture is, in capitalism, to a large degree connected to the commodity form: there are cultural commodities that are bought by consumers and audience commodities that the media consumers become themselves by being sold as an audience to the capitalist media's advertising clients (see the debate about audience commodification: Murdock 1978; Smythe 1977). Third, in order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic. The first and second dimensions constitute the economic dimension of

instrumental reason, the third dimension the ideological form of instrumental reason. Capitalist media are a means of advertising and commodification and spaces of ideology. Advertisement and cultural commodification make humans an instrument for economic profit accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling the belief in the system of capital and commodities into humans' subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. It is of course an important question to what extent ideology is always successful and to what degree it is questioned and resisted, but the crucial aspect about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation.

A critical theory of media and technology analyses "society as a terrain of domination and resistance and engages in critique of domination and of the ways that media culture engages in reproducing relationships of domination and oppression" (Kellner 1995, 4). It is "informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation" (Kellner 1989, 1; see also Feenberg 2002; Kellner 2009).

CRITICAL THEORY AND CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the Critical Political Economy of Media/Communication have both developed critiques of the role of media communication in exploitation, as means of ideology and potential means of liberation and struggle. Both traditions are valuable, important and complementary approaches for studying social media critically. The approach presented in this book is methodologically grounded in a combination of Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the Critique of the Political Economy of Media/Communication/Information/Culture (for this approach see also Fuchs 2009a, 2011b).

Marx developed a Critique of the Political Economy of Capitalism, which means that his approach is:

- (a) an analysis and critique of capitalism;
- (b) a critique of liberal ideology, thought and academia;
- (c) transformative practice.

The globalization of capitalism, its new global crisis, the new imperialism and the role of knowledge and communication in capitalism (anticipated by Marx's notions of the means of communication and the General Intellect) have resulted in a renewed interest in Marx that should also be practised in Media and Communication Studies (Fuchs 2011b). To a certain extent, the German tradition of the Critique of the Political Economy of Communication has engaged with Marx and connected these works to the analysis of the role of communication in capitalism (see e.g. Holzer 1973, 1994; Knoche 2005). The problem is that these approaches, due to limited resources, have hardly been translated into English, which has left their impact limited to national levels and has resulted in a lack of international diffusion (for a recent English translation of one of Knoche's key works, see Knoche 2016). Horst Holzer (1994) spoke of Marxian analysis as the forgotten theory of communication in the German world (Holzer 1994).

Holzer (1973, 131, 1994, 202ff.) and Manfred Knoche (2005) distinguish four functions of the media in capitalism that are relevant for the Marxist Critique of the Political Economy of the Media and Communication:

- 1 capital accumulation in the media industry;
- 2 advertising, public relations and sales promotion for other industries;
- 3 legitimization of domination and ideological manipulation;
- 4 reproduction, regeneration, and qualification of labour power.

Holzer and Knoche have provided a good framework that could add the dimension of social struggles.

A more complete task for a Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, Culture, Information and the Media is to focus on the critique and analysis of the role of communication, culture, information and the media in capitalism in the context of

- processes of capital accumulation (including the analysis of capital, markets, commodity logic, competition, exchange value, the antagonisms of the mode of production, productive forces, crises, advertising, etc.),
- class relations (with a focus on work, labour, the mode of the exploitation of surplus value, etc.),
- domination in general,
- ideology (both in academia and everyday life)

as well as the analysis of and engagement in

- struggles against the dominant order, which includes the analysis and advancement of
- social movement struggles and
- social movement media that
- aim at the establishment of a democratic socialist society that is based on communication commons as part of structures of commonly owned means of production. (Fuchs 2011b)

The approach thereby realizes that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation (Fuchs 2008a, 2011b).

Based on the methodological combination of Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy with a special interest in Karl Marx's works and dialectical philosophy, this book presents a critical theory of social media, which means that it outlines the predominant forms of capital accumulation of social media, the class relations and modes of surplus value exploitation underlying these capital accumulation models, and analyses the ideologies underlying capitalist social media and the potentials and limits for alternative social media and struggles for a just society that enables commons-based digital media.

"Philosophy is preserved in science as critique" (Habermas 1971, 63). If we want to conduct a critical analysis of social media, then we require a critical philosophy as a foundation. The tradition that goes back to Hegel and Marx is the most suitable critical philosophy tradition for such a project. Dialectical philosophy can provide a strong philosophical and theoretical grounding of Critical Media and Communication Studies (Fuchs 2011b,

Chapters 2 and 3). It is well suited for helping to bridge gaps in the field of Critical Media and Communication Studies (between the focus on structure and agency, subject and object, reason and experience, technology and society, economy and culture, pessimism and optimism, risks and opportunities, work and pleasure/joy, alienation and self-actualization, etc.) and for avoiding one-sided approaches.

Critical theory “never simply aims at an increase of knowledge as such” (Horkheimer 2002, 249). The task of this book is therefore not simply to produce new knowledge about social media, but to enable critical insights into the potentials and limits of social media that can enter into struggles for a just society. Critical theory wants to bring “to consciousness potentialities that have emerged within the maturing historical situation” (Marcuse 1988, 158). It analyses “the tension between potentiality and actuality, between what man and things could be and what they are in fact, [since this] is one of the dynamic focal points of this theory of society” (Marcuse 1988, 69). This book analyses the actuality of social media in contemporary capitalism and the potentials and limits for overcoming the corporate character of social media and for establishing a truly participatory Internet within the context of a participatory democracy.

Economic theory becomes critical theory by the insight that capitalism’s “natural objectivity is mere semblance” and that it “is a specific historical form of existence that man has given himself” (Marcuse 1941, 281). This book wants to contribute to the insight that the capitalist character of social media, that is their grounding in profit logic, commodity logic, (targeted) advertising and exploited labour, is not a necessity, but a historical consequence of the commercial and capitalist organization of the Internet. Deconstructing the semblance of the necessity of corporate social media wants to contribute to the formation of consciousness about and struggles for a public, commons-based Internet.

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND EXERCISES

If you want to understand social media in a critical manner, it makes sense to start with foundational readings in critical theory. Therefore readings recommended in this section include works by Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and a debate between Adorno and Karl Popper on what the notion of the critical means in the social sciences.

Marx, Karl. 1843. Toward the critique of Hegel’s philosophy of law: Introduction. In *Writings of the young Marx on philosophy and society*, 249–265. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

In this famous work Marx introduces his concept of ideology and argues that religion is the “opium of the people”. Ask yourself:

- What does Marx mean by ideology? What are its characteristics?
- Give some examples of ideologies.
- What are important ideologies today?
- Where have social media merged with ideologies? Provide some examples. What exactly is the content of these ideologies? What claims are they making? What does reality look like and how can you determine what reality looks like in contrast to the claims made by social media ideologies? Search for examples and discuss them.

Marx, Karl. 1844. *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

This is one of Marx’s earliest works on labour, capital, private property, estranged/alienated labour and communism. It is generally considered as his most important work for grounding a humanist critical theory that wants to create a society in which all humans live a good life. Questions for discussion and consideration:

- What is, for Marx, the most fundamental problem of capitalism?
- What does Marx mean by alienation (note: a synonymous term is estrangement)?
- How does Marx understand the term “communism”?
- How can Marx’s concepts of capitalism, labour, alienation (and alternatives) be used for understanding social media critically?

Marcuse, Herbert. 1932. New sources on the foundation of historical materialism. In *Heideggerian Marxism*, 86–121. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Although written in 1844, Marx’s *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* were only published in 1932 (in German, later in English and other languages). Marcuse’s text is one of the first reviews. It helps you to better understand Marx’s philosophical text. Read first Marcuse and then Marx. Discuss in groups and compare the results:

- What do Marx and Marcuse (based on Hegel) mean by the essence of a thing? Try to give some examples of the essence of something.
- What is the difference between the essence and the existence of something in society? Try to give some examples.
- What is the essence of social media? What is the existence of social media? Is there a difference between the essence and the existence of social media?

Horkheimer, Max. 1937. Traditional and critical theory. In *Critical theory: Selected essays*, 188–243. New York: Continuum.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1937. Philosophy and critical theory. In *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, 134–158. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

These two articles are two foundational texts of the Frankfurt School. They try to explain what critical theory is. Exercises:

- Every person in the classroom writes down how s/he defines “being critical”. Compare the answers and make a list of which elements of criticism were identified.
- Discuss in groups and compare the results: How do Horkheimer and Marcuse define critical theory? What are the important elements of critical theory?
- Compare your own definitions of critique in the initial exercise to Horkheimer’s and Marcuse’s understandings. Argue what commonalities and differences there are.
- Discuss: What are purposes and tasks of a critical theory of the Internet and social media?

(Continued)