

**CRITICAL THEORY  
OF COMMUNICATION AS  
CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE  
IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM  
A RESPONSE TO JAN LØHMANN STEPHENSEN'S  
REVIEW ESSAY ON CULTURE AND ECONOMY  
IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

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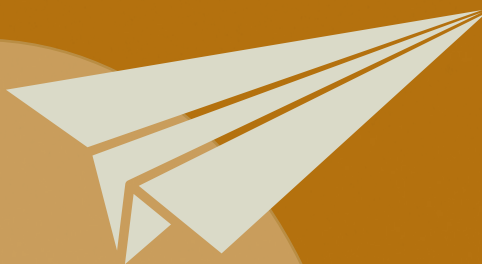
**CITATION: CONJUNCTIONS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION, VOL. 3, NO. 1, 2016.  
DOI: [HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG/10.7146/TJCP.V3I1.23632](http://dx.doi.org/10.7146/TJCP.V3I1.23632)**

# KEYWORDS

CRITICAL THEORY; DIGITAL MEDIA; COMMUNICATIONS; CULTURE; CRITICAL MEDIA SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE; CRITICAL DIGITAL SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE; KARL MARX; HERBERT MARCUSE; RAYMOND WILLIAMS; DALLAS SMYTHE; FRANKFURT SCHOOL

# ABSTRACT

THIS ESSAY IS A REFLECTION ON JAN LØHMANN STEPHENSEN'S REVIEW ESSAY ON MY BOOK CULTURE AND ECONOMY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA (CONJUNCTIONS, VOL. 2, NO. 2). IT CONTRASTS CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL PRODUCTION IN MARX'S THEORY, CLARIFIES MY RELATIONSHIP TO BOLTANSKI AND CHIAPELLO'S APPROACH, REFLECTS ON THE INFLUENCE OF HUMANIST MARXISM ON MY THOUGHT, AND ARGUES FOR GROUNDING MEDIA/COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND DIGITAL MEDIA RESEARCH IN CRITICAL THEORY, UNDERSTOOD AS A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE THAT COMBINES SOCIAL THEORY, EMPIRICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH AND ETHICS.



## Introduction

Review essays are attempts to make sense of the thought presented by an author. It is certainly difficult to classify my work. I would not accept any classification of it except that it is influenced by Marx's works. Often I do not read reviews of my books and works because a significant share of the reviewers read my works selectively, have not read what I have written about specific topics, claim that I am either not a Marxist (if they are orthodox Marxists) or that I am an orthodox Marxist (if they are heterodox Marxists) or that Marx is outdated (if they oppose Marxism), that I disregard X although I am writing about Y and about X in other works, etc. And many are not interested in a genuine discussion, but just want to draw attention to their own works. Dealing with such one-dimensional criticism is cumbersome and leads nowhere, which is why in most cases it is best to just move on and focus on more interesting and important work.

Jan Løhmann Stephensen's discussion of my book *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* in *Conjunctions* (Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 155-171) is of a different nature. It is an intelligent and informed reading of my work, and he is interested in arguments, asks interesting questions, and has made me think about some specific aspects of the key question of how we today should best conceptualise a critical theory of society and communications. So I want to respond to these reflections, because I think he made an important intervention into debates about the critical theory of culture and communication. At the same time, writing this response allows me to reflect on my own conception of critical theory on a meta-level.

In this essay, I reflect on Marx's understanding of social production (section 2), creativity (section 3), Boltanski and Chiapello (section 4) and humanist Marxism (section 5). These thoughts contribute to methodological and theoretical foundations of a critical theory of communication and digital media. I draw some conclusions in the final section.

## Marx' stress on social production

Jan Løhmann Stephensen argues that in my book, "Marx' theory of alienation is brought into play, and the contrasting ideal, creativity is introduced" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 156). Such a "definition of Man as a creatively productive being" would be "a position which actually is mostly in line with young, romantic and/or philosophical Marx" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 159).

One can certainly not argue that Marx overstressed the term creativity. And it is also not my intention to foreground the concept of creativity in Marx or in critical theory in general. Instead, Marx stressed that humans are active, conscious, sensual, societal beings, who have to engage in social production in order for society to exist. So, for example, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx (1844b) never uses the term "creativity" and employs the word "creative" only once, namely when he writes that "money is the truly creative power" (Marx, 1844b, p. 139). For instance, Marx writes:

*Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being. [...] The individual is the social being. His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a communal life carried out together with others – is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life. Man's individual and species life are not different, however much-and this is inevitable-the mode of existence of the individual is a more particular, or more general mode of the life of the species, or the life of the species is a more particular or more general individual life (Marx, 1844b, p. 105).*

This passage shows quite well that Marx foregrounds human production and the social character of humans when speaking of society. When he uses the term "to create", he means social production. One key point I make in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs, 2015), a book that is grounded in Raymond

Williams' interpretation of Marx, is that communication, ideology, and the use of language are not immaterial or part of a cultural superstructure, but are specific forms of social production. The increased relevance of information work, i.e. the social production of information, underlines the particular importance of non-dualist, materialist understandings of information and communication. In contemporary thought about communications and digital media, there is often a dualist separation of technology/content, non-creative/creative, production/circulation, productive/unproductive, labour/ideology, work/communication, etc.

So I cannot agree with the understanding that for Marx the species-being is the ideal of creativity. I also do not agree with the assumption that there is an epistemological break in Marx's works that allows a distinction between the young, romantic, esoteric Marx and the mature, realist and scientific Marx. Althusser speaks of this "epistemological break" as a dividing line that splits "Marx's thought into two long essential periods: the 'ideological' period before, and the scientific period after, the break in 1845" (Althusser, 1969, p. 34). The problem is that Althusser never read Marx. He wrote in his autobiography that he only knew "a few passages of Marx" (Althusser, 1993, p. 165) and that his method of getting to know philosophy was "all done by 'hearsay'". He described himself as "a trickster and deceiver and nothing more, a philosopher who knew almost nothing about the history of philosophy or about Marx" (Althusser, 1993, p. 148). After having read Marx, in contrast to Althusser, my position is that throughout his life Marx held a consistent theoretical and political position, and his later works are critical political-economic applications of his general critical theory concepts that he developed in his early works.

For example, the notion of the species-being cannot just be found in the early Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, but also in later Marxian works, such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1857/1858, p. 496) argues: "But human beings become individuals only through the process of history. He appears originally as a species-being". In *Capital*, Marx continues his early idea that co-operation is a human species activity, but he makes clear that the species-being is not a static metaphysical category, but rather that the human species-being capacities (such as co-operation) develop historically and take on specific forms under particular societal circumstances: "When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species" (Marx, 1867, p. 447).

Also, the notion of alienation is not limited to Marx' early works, but can be found in later works as well, including *Capital* (for a more detailed discussion of Marx's concept of alienation, see Fuchs 2016c, chapter 7): "Since, before he enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [entfremdet] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [fremdes Produkt]" (Marx, 1867, p. 716).

## Creativity, creative industries, anti-work

Jan Løhmann Stephensen argues that, inspired by Marxist humanism, I focus on stressing creativity for all as an ideal and a political demand. Marxist humanists would argue that "labour minus alienation equals creativity (plus a lot of other things that were found warranted under capitalism, such as autonomy, sociality, community, participation, democracy, etc.)" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 160). I would focus on arguing for the replacement of "alienated labour with unalienated work, which is something that involves Man's creative powers" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 161) and the demand to "'install' creativity in work" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 162), etc. Stephensen is critical of the "extent to which the author associates creativity with freedom" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 162) and questions the demand of "creativity of all" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 162, p. 165).

Stephensen's point is that creativity is not automatically a progressive political concept, because it has become an ideological "pivotal keyword" in what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) term "the new spirit of capitalism" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 163). Also, management gurus and consultants, such as Gary Hamel, Richard Florida, Gary Vaynerchuk, Don Tapscott, Chris Anderson, Kevin Kelly, etc. use concepts like creativity, making, participation, sharing, the gift, etc. They do so in an ideological manner that reifies capitalism, and they try to subsume such concepts and the demand that everyone can lead a self-controlled and self-fulfilling life under the logic of

capitalism. Such notions thereby become expressions of instrumental reason.

I agree with Boltanski & Chiapello (2005) that counter-cultural ideas have become subsumed under capitalist ideology and that critical theory therefore needs to re-think what terms it uses. It is not at all my intention to fetishise the term creativity or to use it as a political demand. In *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*, I use the term creativity almost exclusively in chapter 2, which is a heavily theoretical chapter that focuses on the relationship between culture and work. In contrast, the book's fourth part (chapters 8 and 9) is much more focused on the question of how we can struggle for political alternatives. In these chapters, I do not use the term creativity a single time. So it is a misrepresentation to evoke the impression that I see creativity as a political vision, ideal or political demand. I rather use it in chapter 2 against two specific theoretical tendencies: a) the notions of creative industries and creative labour, and b) anarchistic and autonomist theories of anti-work and zero-work.

I have problems with the terms creative industries and creative labour, because they imply a separation between creativity/non-creativity. Artistic work is typically seen as creative and all other work as non-creative. Such a dualism suggests an Arnoldian elitist celebration of artists' work as a form of morally higher activity. It ties in with ideologies of the creative class. I have problems with the anti-work philosophy, because it tends to imagine a free society as a society that is based on idleness and the right to be lazy. I certainly do not deny that we live in a capitalist society of hyper-activity and immense acceleration, in which many people are so preoccupied with labour that they do not find time to rest, which in turn poses threats to their health and lives. But this circumstance does not imply that we need a society without productive activity. People in a society of idleness would soon be bored, and boredom can be a source of depression and aggression.

I use the notion of creativity against both these theoretical and political tendencies in order to stress that, as such, all humans are creative, active beings. Creativity is not an ideal or a political demand, but rather a fundamental human reality. Marx pinpoints this understanding when *Capital Volume 1* he says:

*A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally (Marx, 1867, p. 284).*

Human work is creative in a double sense: all work creates a use-value that satisfies human needs. And all work requires imagination so that humans consciously plan the result of their activities. All work is in this double sense creative work, and all industries are creative industries. In a participatory democracy, humans do not stop working, but because of their inherent drive to be active and create something, they will continue to work, albeit under very different conditions, under which class rule has been abolished.

Chapter 2 is deliberately written partly in a quite provocative manner. Whereas some will find the example of the toilet-cleaning robots (pp. 45-46) funny, others will read it with disgust. Stephensen (2015, pp. 170, note 1) observes this ambivalence. All good polemics polarise. And chapter 2 certainly intends to do so. When I speak of "the becoming-art of the economy" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 48) or the "creativity of all" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 50), I do not make political demands and do not formulate ideals, but stress against anti-work philosophy that all humans have creative potentials and are creators. Against the ideas of idle anti-work philosophy and elitist creative industry ideology, I want to foreground that creativity is a fundamental human necessity and desire.

At the same time, such passages also point towards the fact that not all work today is pleasurable and toil has not yet ceased to exist in the world. Information work is the production of information. Not all information work is highly demanding and requires skill; there is also monotonous and repetitive information labour, such as the labour of call centre agents. Highly skilled and educated information workers tend to be among those who find

their labour pleasurable, self-fulfilling and fun. At the same time, they often work under precarious conditions (often as freelancers), so that there is often a divergence between the experience of the contents and the conditions of their work. This contradiction is a nucleus of potential political organisation.

The share of routine occupation in all occupation has increased from 36.0% in 1991 to 37.1% in 2016 (ILO 2015). These are occupations that tend to be monotonous, repetitive and mentally exhausting. In 2016, the share of non-routine cognitive work in worldwide occupation was just 18.3% and the share of non-routine manual work 37.1% (ILO 2015). These data show us that we should not overestimate the importance of information work in total global occupation. There continues to be a very significant share of the world's population that conducts exhaustive, monotonous, repetitive labour that is not at all considered to be self-fulfilling. The phenomenon of the new spirit of capitalism, as described by Boltanski and Chiapello, is certainly a relevant tendency. It would, however, be a mistake, Western-centric and a neglect of the reality of labour in many developing countries to see the new spirit of capitalism as the world economy's dominant tendency. Toil continues to be an important reality in the capitalist world economy. And given this fact, the demand to abolish hard, exhaustive, repetitive, monotonous, dangerous, harmful and unnecessary labour remains very important today. In respect to the critique of actually existing toil, the combination of the artistic critique (the critique of the lack of self-realisation and pleasure in work) and the social critique (the critique of inequalities and exploitation that shape such labour) of capitalism is certainly important.

What I term the international division of digital labour (IDDL) is a global manifold system of exploitation that underpins our use of digital media in everyday life (see Fuchs, 2014b; Fuchs, 2015, chapter 6; Fuchs, 2016b). A critical theory of digital media therefore has to be a critique of relations of exploitation taking place in this international division, a critique of forms of domination that are articulated with the IDDL, a critique of ideologies trying to justify such exploitation and domination, an analysis of associated contradictions, and an analysis of potential struggles and alternatives.

Labour minus alienation does indeed not equal creativity. A society, in which humans control their conditions and products of work and life, is a democratic commons-based society. The appropriate political demand is therefore "democratic commons for all". On the one hand, "communism" is one of the terms that gained problematic connotations, because of the Stalinist realities of the 20th century. It is therefore important to prefix democracy so that we can stress that another, different communism is possible today. On the other hand, communism is one of the few terms that is not easily subsumable under capitalist ideology and can signify the need for true alternatives. Labour minus alienation means society minus capitalism and class plus the commons. It means commonism.

When I speak about concrete political alternatives in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*, I tend to invoke the idea of a democratic-commons-based media system in a democratic-commonist society (see Fuchs, 2015, p. 234). I do not speak of creativity. "Alternative, non-commercial, non-profit platforms need to be constructed as economic alternatives" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 380). "Commons-based social media and public service social media are possible, needed, and necessary" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 380).

## Boltanski and Chiapello: Sociology of critique, critical sociology, or critical sociology of critique?

Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello (2005) have formulated a compelling critique of the ideological subsumption of counter-cultures under the logic of capitalism. They show that the spirit of 1968 has turned into a new ideology of capitalism.

The artistic critique of capitalism criticises "capitalism as a source of disenchantment and inauthenticity" and "a source of oppression, inasmuch as it is opposed to the freedom, autonomy and creativity of the human beings" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 37). The social critique of capitalism criticises "capitalism as a source of poverty among workers and of inequalities on an unprecedented scale" and "capitalism as a source of

opportunism and egoism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 37).

Boltanski & Chiapello (2005) argue that "themes from the artistic critique were integrated into the discourse of capitalism, so that this critique might seem to have been partially satisfied" (p. 346). The "artistic critique opened up an opportunity for capitalism to base itself on new forms of control and commodify new, more individualized and 'authentic' goods" (p. 467). "Of the two forms of critique that were constructed in the nineteenth century – the artistic critique, which elaborates demands for liberation and authenticity, and the social critique, which denounces poverty and exploitation – it is the latter that is showing a new lease of life, however hesitant and modest it may currently be" (p. 346).

Boltanski and Chiapello's critique of the new spirit of capitalism is an important contribution to contemporary ideology critique. In my own work, inspired by their insights, I have criticised the subsumption of specific categories under the ideology of digital capitalism: Stephensen remarks briefly that chapter seven of *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (Fuchs, 2015) contains a critique of what I term the engaging/connecting/sharing-ideology. Other of my works have featured for example a critique of the ideology of labour as play (Fuchs, 2014b, pp. 122-127), the ideology of playbour (play labour) at Google (Fuchs, 2014b, chapter 9) and other Google ideologies (that I term Googology, see Fuchs, 2014c, pp. 132-141). The book *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* includes a critique of participatory culture and the participatory web as ideology (Fuchs, 2014c, chapter 3; see also Fuchs, 2011a, chapter 7). The second edition of this book will feature a new chapter on the concept of the sharing economy as ideology. I have also criticised the network enterprise and participatory management as neoliberal ideology (Fuchs, 2008, pp. 148-153), the use of the concept and the theory of self-organisation – an idea that especially appeals to grassroots activists, anarchists, neoliberal tech entrepreneurs and gurus, and Internet users – as neoliberal ideology that conceives capitalism as self-organising system that is harmed by state regulation (Fuchs, 2008, chapters 2.3 + 3.1). In most of these works, I have explicitly acknowledged the importance of Boltanski and Chiapello, so one cannot say that I do not take the relevance of their work for ideology critique seriously. My key point in conducting such analyses is that progressively sounding concepts, like participation, creativity, sharing, network, self-organisation, the gift, etc., are ideologies that help justify and deepen exploitation in digital capitalism. In this context, Eran Fisher (2010) speaks of the new spirit of networks (see also Fuchs 2011b for a discussion). But there are also other forms of digital ideology that need to be analysed and that I have covered in my works, such as right-wing law and order ideology and the surveillance ideology (that is inspired by law and order politics), techno-optimistic visions of Twitter revolutions and Internet protests, techno-pessimistic hatred of the Internet, etc.

Boltanski and Chiapello's book certainly is of huge importance for digital ideology critique, but it also has certain limits and problems. For example, they assume in a quite deterministic manner that the demand for creative work almost necessarily has to advance the ideological subsumption of the highly-skilled knowledge workers' consciousness: "The demand for creativity, voiced primarily by highly qualified wage-earners, engineers or cadres, has received greater recognition than could have been hoped for thirty years earlier, when it became obvious that an ever growing share of profits derived from the exploitation of resources of inventiveness, imagination and innovation developed in the new technologies, and especially in the rapidly expanding sectors of services and cultural production. Among other effects, this has led to a fading of the opposition, on which the artistic critique had been based for a century, between intellectuals and businessmen and production, between artists and bourgeois" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 326).

It is certainly true that a specific share of highly skilled digital workers share neoliberal entrepreneurial ideologies. At the same time, such liberalism is also contradictory, as can be observed in the liberalism characteristic for WikiLeaks (Fuchs 2014c, chapter 9) or Anonymous (Fuchs 2014a, 2014b). And given that many digital workers either face precarious working conditions or are socially poor in terms of their private relations or leisure time, because labour takes up so much of their lifetime, there is real potential for politicisation. Actual developments into this direction are the emergence of freelancer unions as well as of cultural and digital co-operatives. These phenomena are in themselves contradictory, the same applies to all social phenomena in a class society.

But they are nonetheless interesting developments.

Boltanski and Chiapello also misinterpret Marx's concept of alienation by reducing it to a purely subjective dimension. They argue:

- "The concepts of alienation and exploitation refer to two different sensibilities. What is denounced in alienation is, in the first instance, oppression, but also the way in which capitalist society prevents human beings from living an 'authentic' existence, a truly human existence, and renders them alien to themselves in a sense – that is to say, to their deepest humanity. The critique of alienation is therefore also a critique of the new world's lack of authenticity" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005, p. 52, note 77).
- The students of the 1968 generation "had simultaneously seen their conditions deteriorate and their expectations of obtaining autonomous, creative jobs diminish, instead developed a critique of *alienation*. It adopted the main themes of the artistic critique (already pervasive in the United States in the hippie movement): on the one hand, the disenchantment, the inauthenticity, the 'poverty of everyday life', the dehumanization of the world under the sway of technicization and technocratization; on the other hand, the loss of autonomy, the absence of creativity, and the different forms of oppression in the modern world" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 170).

Boltanski and Chiapello fall into the Althusser trap: Althusser saw alienation as an esoteric, purely subjectivist concept of the young Marx. And like most of the time, Althusser also got it wrong here: alienation is a concept that Marx used and developed throughout his life. Based on Althusser's interpretation, Boltanski and Chiapello limit the notions of alienation and de-alienation to the artistic critique. I cannot provide a detailed analysis here of Marx's use of the term and have to refer the reader therefore to chapter 7 in the book *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on "Capital Volume I"* (Fuchs, 2016c). Marx uses the term alienation to signify the worker's compulsion to sell her labour-power and the lack of ownership of the objects and products of labour. In *Capital*, he writes: "Since, before he [the worker] enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [entfremdet] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [fremdes Produkt]" (Marx, 1867, p. 716).

Bertell Ollman (1976, p. 193) argues that *Capital* "is a treatise on the law of value, and as such could only be a work about alienation": "When, in *Capital*, Marx speaks of 'alienating' any commodity, he does not simply mean the act of selling it; he means giving up all control over its use-value. And, as we have shown, this transaction could only take place because the workers, who create all value, engage in alienated activity on a product from which they are all alienated and on behalf of a capitalist from whom they are alienated" (p. 193).

The implication of Marx's concept of alienation is that even if you experience your labour as pleasure and fun, it is still alienated if it takes place in capitalist relations of production or results in precarity. Even if labour feels like fun (for example digital labour on corporate social media or the digital labour of freelance designers or software engineers), it can still be exploitation. It may just become more difficult to question it and struggle against exploitation, because capital's fetish and forms of reification take on an inverted form so that the social appearance of de-alienation hides the deepening of exploitation as a form of economic alienation.

Marx's concept of alienation is, however, broader than exploitation: exploitation is the economic form of alienation. But there are also political and cultural forms of alienation. Alienation is a category that signifies domination in general and all its sub-types, whereas economic alienation is a category that signifies the economic form of domination in class societies, namely exploitation.

But alienation is not a purely objective social form of domination and exploitation. Alienation is also experienced in specific forms that are not causally determined. Some slaves may love their master, whereas others may deeply hate him. There is a complex, non-linear relation between the conditions and the experience of alienation. In contemporary critical theory, authors such as Rahel Jaeggi, Hartmut Rosa and Axel Honneth have



discussed how we can use the notion of alienation today. I will give an overview of these debates in chapter 5 of the forthcoming book *Critical Theory of Communication: Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet and Social Media* (Fuchs, 2016c). The chapter will explore how we can use the notion of alienation in the context of digital media today. I especially found Axel Honneth's interpretation of Georg Lukács helpful, and, based on Honneth and Lukács, I have identified three forms of reification (economic, political and cultural reification) that each have an objective, a subjective and an inter-subjective dimension, which results in a general matrix of reification that can be related to the realm of digital media. The alternative to reification is appropriation. A similar matrix can be constructed for processes of appropriation and be used for discussing alternatives and struggles in the context of digital media (see Fuchs, 2016c, chapter 5).

I much agree that one should engage with "different readings of Marx especially throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s – when this theoretical corpus stood at the centre of huge cultural, philosophical, societal, economic, and political transformations and debates" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 167) as a foundation for critical theories of communications and digital media. Such readings do, however, at the same time need a profound understanding of Marx. I personally try to do both, namely to engage with Marx and the history of Marx's reception. I have my own preferences in terms of specific theorists in this respect (e.g. Lukács, Frankfurt School, Raymond Williams, Dallas Smythe), but it is of course a much needed, welcome and encouraged endeavour that scholars explore foundations of different Marxist approaches in order to improve their critical understanding of contemporary communications.

There has been an interesting and insightful debate about how to conduct critical theory between Axel Honneth and Luc Boltanski. Honneth invited Boltanski to give the 2008 Adorno lectures in Frankfurt. In these lectures, Boltanski (2011) distinguished his approach of a pragmatic sociology of critique from critical sociology. In France, Pierre Bourdieu especially would have taken the latter approach. But in this view, the Marxist tradition can generally be described as being close to critical sociology, which tries to unmask domination, exploitation and oppression as well as ideologies justifying these phenomena (Boltanski, 2011, p. 6). Boltanski describes his approach of the pragmatic sociology of critique as "rigorous empirical sociology" (p. 23), which does not assume an asymmetry between the sociologist and ordinary people and aims to describe the reality and experiences of the oppressed. It would make use "of the point of view of the actors [...], their ordinary sense of justice, to expose the discrepancy between the social world as it is and as it should be in order to satisfy people's moral expectations" (p. 30). Boltanski criticises that critical sociology in his view has an "overarching character" and a "distance at which it holds itself from the critical capacities developed by actors in the situations of everyday life" (p. 43). The pragmatic sociology of critique would fully acknowledge "actors' critical capacities and the creativity with which they engage in interpretation and action en situation" (p. 43) for "denunciations of injustice" (p. 37).

In a conversation with Honneth (Boltanski & Honneth, 2009), Boltanski points out that his approach is not to denounce Marxism, as Bruno Latour does, but to take it in a new direction. Accordingly, Boltanski says that, in his view, Bourdieu's approach saw domination everywhere and did not see the immanent contradictions of society. Honneth argues that Habermas, whom he considers as his main influence, has seen Horkheimer and Adorno's approach as a total critique where everything is domination. The conversation makes clear that Boltanski takes an explicitly empirically grounded approach, whereas Honneth has developed a moral philosophy. Honneth argues that the reality of actors who use critical capacities would be unequally distributed so that critical sociology would have to analyse the limits that social conditions pose for humans (pp. 105-106).

Boltanski argues that his approach does not use moral philosophy and normative critique, but assumes that there are immanent contradictions in reality. He says that there is always something in the world that "goes beyond reality" (Boltanski & Honneth, 2009, p. 107). Boltanski writes that ideologies are something that only those in power need, whereas everyday people make many experiences that go beyond ideology (p. 108).

Boltanski (2011) terms normative critical theory "meta-critical theory" (p. 8) or metacritique (p. 6), because it would need an exteriority in order for us to be able to judge what is good and bad. He argues for a purely

immanent critique that is grounded in the empirical observation of how humans experience suffering and thereby criticise society. Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique is purely immanent. Honneth, in contrast, is more sceptical and does not see critical capacities developing with necessity in society. He stresses the need for a normative critique and a critical theory grounded in immanent transcendence (for a more detailed discussion of immanence, transcendence and immanent transcendence as epistemology in critical theory, see Fuchs, 2011, section 2.2: pp. 34-43).

I am not convinced that critical research can operate purely as an empirical sociology of critique that only observes experiences of injustice. We cannot take for granted that an empirical sociology can always show how the oppressed denounce oppression and that such an observational and experiential analysis is sufficient for a critique of society. We also require a critical moral philosophy that grounds and provides principles of what injustice is all about and informs empirical studies. And such epistemological, ontological and ethical foundations of critical theory have to start with, but do not end with, Marx. This insight also answers Stephensen's (2015, p. 167) question regarding why I consider "theoretical elaborations" so important and why my work is so heavily theoretical. It would, however, be a mistake for critical theory to stop at philosophy. Social philosophy needs to be combined with empirical research that critically studies human consciousness. My own work is a combination of theory, empirical research and ethics. I have always used this approach in larger research projects (see for example <http://www.sns3.uti.at>, <http://www.projectpact.eu>, <http://netcommons.eu>). The problem in most funded social research projects and a lot of empirical research today is that it is too positivist and specialised and lacks a broader engagement with social philosophy. We should return to Horkheimer and Adorno's understanding of critical theory and practice it as interdisciplinary social research that is grounded in philosophy.

It is certainly true that to a specific degree ideology is "often keenly embraced" and "often actively re-endorsed by digital workers themselves" (Stephensen, 2015, p. 168). One must, however, be careful in analysing consciousness in class societies in order not to overlook how ideology is in itself often contradictory. In the research project "Social Networking Sites in the Surveillance Society" (see <http://www.sns3.uti.at>), we found that although most interviewed social media users at first sight shared an enthusiastically positive assessment of social media's potentials, they are much more ambiguous and critical about the exploitation of digital labour when the foundations of this class relation are explored with the help of participatory action research (see Sevignani, 2016; Allmer, Fuchs, Kreilinger & Sevignani, 2014).

In media and communication studies (as in other parts of the social sciences), we find a kind of polarisation between theoretical approaches that focus on theorising communication and the media and empirical approaches that are engaged in the observation and interpretation of the world through data collection and analysis. On the one hand, this situation reflects different traditions, but on the other hand, it is an expression of the fragmentation, individualisation and neoliberalisation of the university. The university has increasingly been seized by the logic of capital, accelerated by the logic of performance measurement, and scholars are activated to act as individuals and not so much as groups or collectives of scholars. As a consequence, there is little space, time and social possibility for the critique and interdisciplinarity, which, as suggested and practiced by the Frankfurt School, combine philosophy and empirical research in critical studies. Critical media and communication studies could, under ideal circumstances, operate as a critical sociology of critique that combines critical sociology and the sociology of critique for studying media and communication in society with the help of a philosophically grounded normative critical theory that grounds empirical social research of experiences of mediated and communicative inequalities and struggles for equality that in turn inspire new theoretical knowledge.

## Critical theory and humanist Marxism

Jan Løhmann Stephensen (2015, pp. 166-167) asks: "Why Marx? Why now? [...] Why is it, from a contemporary perspective that explicitly focuses on analysing culture and economy in the age of social media, so important what Marx (and subsequently also Raymond Williams) said? What is the purpose of this

book? Is it, as the title says, to study the cultural and economic embeddedness of social media? Or is it to argue for a specific theoretical position through which our contemporary time could/should be analysed (Karl Marx, Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, Herbert Marcuse, and in the last chapter Jürgen Habermas)? These are important epistemological questions that really go to the heart of media and digital studies and ask a more fundamental question: what is a critical theory of communications and digital media?

Communications has contemporary society as its context. So in order to understand communications phenomena (such as social media, mobile media, big data, etc.), we need to understand contemporary society. But contemporary society is a specific societal formation and historical organisation of capitalism and class society.

So in order to understand contemporary society, we need to understand capitalism and class society. And both are particular forms of society that we can only understand if we know what the general features of societies are. My own approach to media and digital studies is based on the insight that most work is inadequately grounded in social theory and therefore fails to understand how communications and society interact in a dialectical way. Most theorising in our field is the rather simplistic application of single concepts in an eclectic manner. Systematic theories of society and the role of communications phenomena are largely missing. So to a certain extent I also try to fill a gap by developing a critical theory of society and a critical theory of communications phenomena at the same time. Adequately understanding concrete phenomena requires us to abstract from the concrete to the more general dimensions that the concrete entails, which then can inform an understanding of the historical specificities of social phenomena, commonalities and differences in respect to other phenomena, their continuous and discontinuous dimensions, etc. Marx called this dialectical method of thought the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete (see Marx, 1857, pp. 37-45). The lack of social theory foundations and of engagement with the dialectics of the abstract/the concrete, continuity/discontinuity, object/subject, structures/agency, etc. often results in ideological conceptualisations that either present certain communications phenomena as completely novel and revolutionary or disregard how domination has to change at specific levels of society's organisation in order to reproduce itself on more fundamental levels.

Why Marx as a starting point? Because his dialectical thought, his analysis of capitalism, labour, class, ideology, social struggles and alternatives, are an excellent and important foundation for a critical theory of society and communication. Because Marx was not just a critical theorist, but also a prototypical and inspiring critical journalist and public intellectual. Why Raymond Williams, Herbert Marcuse and Dallas Smythe? Because all three of them were truly dialectical and materialist thinkers, whose works can still help us avoid dualism and idealism in contemporary academic analyses and political praxis. Williams, Marcuse and Smythe were not just critical theorists, but also critical cultural theorists, which is why their thought is of special interest for a critical theory of communication. Importantly, all three of them were socialists, and socialists who thought about alternatives to capitalist media: Williams says he is a socialist, because this means to demand "the destruction of capitalist society", "the need to supersede" capitalist society and "to go beyond" it "so that a socialist society" is established (Williams 1975, 72). For Marcuse (1967, 82), socialism means "the abolition of labour, the termination of the struggle for existence – that is to say, life as an end in itself and no longer as a means to an end – and the liberation of human sensibility and sensitivity, not as a private factor, but as a force for transformation of human existence and of its environment."

Williams imagines "cable systems of a different kind, genuinely run by and serving local communities, with access to a full range of public programmes for which the necessary resources had been specifically provided, could indeed democratise broadcasting" (Williams, 1974/1990, 146). He understands alternative media as "tools of the long revolution towards and educated and participatory democracy" (Williams 1974/1990, 156). Smythe argues in a similar manner for a "two-way system in which each receiver would have the capability to provide either a voice or voice-and-picture response" (Smythe 1994, 231-232). Marcuse argues for the "collection of large funds for the operation of effective counter-institutions", which includes the idea of establishing "radical, 'free' media" as counter-institutions (Marcuse 1972, 55-56).

I am certainly not opposed to, but much favour an engagement with and reconstruction of the history of Marxist and Marxian concepts. My next book *Critical Theory of Communication: Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet and Social Media* (Fuchs, 2016a) focuses on specific aspects (often less well-known writings such as Lukács' [1986a, 1986b] *Ontology of Social Being*) of some of the Frankfurt School thinkers' works and brings them into dialogue with concepts elaborated by other critical theorists (such as Raymond Williams, Valentin Vološinov, or Ferruccio Rossi-Landi) in order to establish foundations for a critical theory of communication and digital media communication that goes beyond Habermas.

Jan Løhmann Stephensen has correctly analysed that my thought is among other traditions influenced by humanist Marxist theory, including Marx's philosophical works and works by later thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Raymond Williams. I do, however, not think that humanist Marxism fails at a time when the artistic critique has been incorporated into capitalist ideology. The political importance of humanist Marxism has always been that it questioned all forms of authoritarianism and argued for a democratic form of socialism. I find this version of Marxism ontologically and epistemologically interesting, because, in contrast to many other forms of Marxist theory, it is grounded in a profound understanding and reading of Hegel's dialectics. And it challenges moral relativism and cynical reason that is so typical for poststructuralist and postmodern thought. It does so by putting the human being and human interests at the centre of critical theory. With respect to dialectical and humanist thinking, Marcuse's (1941) book *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* has had a very important influence on my line of thought.

Postmodernism lacks a moral philosophy and therefore cannot answer important questions such as: what is wrong about fascism? It does not have an adequate philosophical concept that allows for a distinction between moral rights and wrongs and in a nihilistic, solipsistic and relativistic manner tends to consider all moral judgments as forms of domination. In contrast, Humanist Marxist thought uses Hegel's dialectic of the essence and the existence of humans and society for establishing a critical moral philosophy and Hegel's dialectic of the essence and the appearance for establishing an ideology critique (for a more detailed discussion, see Fuchs, 2011, chapter 2).

My starting point for establishing a critical theory is not the concept of creativity, but the concept of human sociality. Marx's most fundamental general sociological insight is that in society, everything is a social relation. Social relations are the key foundation in and through which society and humans exist and reproduce themselves. And in all societies, humans have to co-operate to a certain degree in order for humans and society to survive. This insight allows for a grounding of a moral philosophy of co-operation. This approach runs through all of my books as a philosophical foundation (the basic argument has been most directly expressed in Fuchs, 2008). It is certainly inspired by humanist Marxist thought.

Soldiers certainly also co-operate in order to kill their enemies, and capitalists co-operate in strategic alliances in order to try to destroy their competitors. In these and related phenomena that are so constitutive of class and dominative societies, co-operation is subordinated to instrumental logic and competition. Domination and exploitation mean conditions of incomplete sociality of society. Only a society, in which all humans benefit and lead a good life, is a society that corresponds to its very foundations. We can therefore also say that dominative, exploitative and class societies are societies that are alienated from society itself. The consequential categorical imperative resulting from these insights is a non-Kantian one, namely the Marxian categorical imperative: that "man is the highest being for man" implies "the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being" (Marx, 1844a, p. 182).

## Conclusion

I wrote *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* as a sequel to *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. So one can say that *Culture and Economy...* is the second part of *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*.

Jan Løhmann Stephensen has provided an informed reading of my book that asks important questions about

the foundations of a critical theory of communication and digital media. Engaging with his essay has allowed me to reflect on some of the meta-issues that underlie my own writing and research approach.

I have argued that not creativity, but social production and social relations are for Marx the foundation of the critical theory of society. Creativity is not a demand or ideal, but a fundamental human capacity. I have stressed the importance of Boltanski and Chiapello's ideology critique for a critical theory of communication and digital media with respect to the analysis of how seemingly progressive concepts such as networks, participation, creativity, self-organisation, sharing, the gift, etc. can be subsumed under capitalist ideology. I have, however, also stressed the limits of Boltanski and Chiapello's approach, namely their lack of focus on ideological contradictions, their reduction of Marx's concept of alienation to a purely subjective level, and their limitation of critical sociology to a sociology of critique.

I have argued for the approach of critical theory as a critical sociology of critique that combines social philosophy, empirical social research and ethics. I argue that such a critical theory of society is the foundation for a critical theory of communication and digital media, and that an adequate understanding of contemporary communications needs to start with concrete phenomena, to abstract from them, and then ascend from the abstract to the concrete in a dialectical manner. Marx should be the dialectical starting point, but not the end point of such endeavours. We need to develop and apply Marx's theory and categories and need to draw on various traditions of Marxist and critical thought for developing critical understandings of the contemporary world and its communication phenomena.

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