

Judith-Frederike Popp, Lioudmila Voropai (Hg.)



ADORNO UND DIE MEDIEN

Kritik, Relevanz, Ästhetik



καδμος

Theodor W. Adornos Denken war Zeit seines Lebens von einem ebenso fruchtbaren wie zwiespältigen Verhältnis zu den Medien durchdrungen. Dabei verstand er es, seine gesellschaftskritischen Überlegungen an ihnen ebenso zu schärfen wie sie für die Vermittlung seiner Analysen an ein breites Publikum zu nutzen. Auch wenn er diese ambivalente Haltung an damaligen Medien entwickelte, erweist sich der Ansatz als vielversprechend, sie an der heutigen Medienlandschaft in ihrem Einfluss auf Gesellschaft, Politik und Kultur zu erproben.

Die Fragen nach der Relevanz von Adornos kritischer Theorie in der zeitgenössischen Reflexion der digitalen Kultur sowie nach der Bedeutung seiner Medienkritik für Philosophie, Kunstwissenschaft und Kulturtheorie der letzten Jahrzehnte stehen im Mittelpunkt dieses Bandes. Unterschiedliche Positionen und methodologische Ansätze zu Adornos intellektuellem Nachlass öffnen neue interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf aktuelle Medienphänomene und kulturelle Prozesse und setzen die Tradition einer philosophisch informierten und soziologisch fundierten Medienkritik fort.

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und Lioudmila Voropai (Hg.)

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Adorno and the Media in Digital Capitalism¹

CHRISTIAN FUCHS

1. Introduction

2019 saw the 50th anniversary of Theodor W. Adorno's death. On this occasion, there were new publications by and about Adorno and events asking how relevant Adorno is today. This chapter was presented as a keynote talk at one of those events, namely at the conference "Adorno and the Media" that took place on December 13 and 14 at Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and the Center for Art and Media (ZKM). The keynote addressed the question: How relevant is Adorno for the critical understanding of digital capitalism? It situates Adorno in the context of contemporary Media and Communication Studies, especially the analysis of the interaction of digital media and society.

In the following section, I will first focus on why dismissals and vilifications of Adorno are not valid. Section 3 analyses the digital culture industry. Section 4 deals with digital authoritarianism, a phenomenon that is highly relevant in times when authoritarians such as Donald Trump are able to reach almost 70 million followers on Twitter. Section 5 asks with Adorno whether we live in a capitalist or a digital/informational society.

2. Adorno's Demonisation

There is a lack of engagement with Adorno in Communication, Media and Cultural Studies, where Adorno is regularly demonised or dismissed with prejudiced one-liners that ignore the complexity and totality of his works. The typical argument goes like this: "Adorno was a pessimist who saw humans as passively manipulated. He considered instrumental society to be without alternative and thought political change was hopeless. His theory is false and outdated".

¹ This article was first published as the chapter "Adorno and the Media in Digital Capitalism" in the following book: Christian Fuchs: *Digital Capitalism. Media, Communication and Society Volume Three*, London: Routledge 2022, pp. 105–125. Reproduced based on the permissions granted in the publishing agreement between the author and the publisher.

Here are some examples from Cultural Studies. David Morley (2019) claims that the Frankfurt School “guys were past their sell-by date when Jeremy Corbyn was a nipper”.² John Fiske argues that the “Frankfurt School have no room in their scenario for resistant or evasive practices” and represent “a left-wing elitism”.³ Henry Jenkins writes that Adorno “doesn’t know anything about popular culture, he’s never consumed any popular culture – in fact, it seems like he’s never even spoken to anybody who’s ever consumed any popular culture!”.⁴ Authors like du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus argue that Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry hypothesis is that “citizens are turned into a passive mass of consumers” and “all is false and inauthentic”.⁵ Storey claims that the “Frankfurt School perspective on popular culture is essentially a discourse from above on the culture of other people”.⁶ Hesmondhalgh writes that “there is a constant sense in Adorno and Horkheimer that the battle has already been lost, that culture has been already subsumed”.⁷

Such prejudices keep students, scholars, and citizens from engaging with Adorno. They are false in at least three respects. First, Adorno did not despise popular culture as such, but its commodity form. He pointed out the critical role of the clown in popular culture and was a *fan* of the clown of all clowns – Charlie Chaplin.⁸ In the *Culture Industry*-chapter of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, we also find positive elements of popular culture. For example, Adorno writes that “traces of something better persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus”.⁹ Adorno’s fondness of Chaplin, the figure of the clown, and the circus shows that he was not opposed to entertainment as such. He rather despised capitalism and therefore the commodity form.

Second, Adorno wasn’t a determinist and fatalist. He stressed the antagonistic character of culture and saw active potentials of resistance and liberation. For example, he wrote about the culture industry’s antagonisms: “In its attempts to manipulate the masses the ideology of the culture industry itself becomes as internally antagonistic as the very society which it aims to control. The ideology of the culture industry contains the

² Morley: “Comment”.

³ Fiske: *Reading the Popular*, p. 183.

⁴ Jenkins: “Behind the Scenes”.

⁵ du Gay/Hall/Janes/Mackya/Negus: *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, p. 87.

⁶ Storey: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 55.

⁷ Hesmondhalgh: *Cultural Industries*, p. 30.

⁸ See Adorno: “Chaplin Times Two”.

⁹ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 114.

antidote to its own lie. No other plea could be made for its defence.”¹⁰ He also argued that audiences consume and accept the culture industry’s products “with a kind of reservation” so that “it is not quite believed in”, that “the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded”, that the real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion”, that “a society, whose inherent contradictions persist undiminished, cannot be totally integrated even in consciousness”, and that “a chance of maturity (*Mündigkeit*)” remains.¹¹

Third, Adorno didn’t see capitalist society and the culture industry as having no alternatives. He wasn’t a political and cultural pessimist. Adorno stressed potentials for alternative media. He stressed that television/*Fernsehen* literally means to watch into the distance. True television would enable humans to watch into society’s future. Therefore, “to keep the promise still resonating within the word [television], it must emancipate itself from everything within which it – reckless wish-fulfilment – refutes its own principle and betrays the idea of Good Fortune for the smaller fortunes of the department store”.¹²

Adorno argued for the use of TV in anti-fascist education in order to reach “the nerve centres” of the authoritarian personality.¹³ Adorno certainly would have supported the Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk’s project that has since 2010 organised meetings of young journalists and Media Studies students with survivors of the Nazis’ extermination camps. The students create and publish videos, interviews, written and audio reports, blog postings, etc. that they then spread via various media, including social media such as YouTube. Adorno would welcome using social media and user-generated content platforms for anti-fascist education but would advise against combining such content with advertisements.

Adorno was a public intellectual who effectively used broadcast media for discussing contemporary political issues. In particular, he gave lectures on the radio and participated in discussions broadcast on radio and television. Today, there are CDs of his radio talks and many of these Adorno radio broadcasts are available on YouTube.

Adorno’s academic works are complex and multi-layered. They are of key importance today for understanding contemporary society, including the interaction of capitalism and digital technologies. The next section

¹⁰ Adorno: *The Culture Industry*, p. 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 196–197.

¹² Adorno: *Critical Models*, p. 57.

¹³ Adorno: “Education After Auschwitz”, p. 24.

therefore gives, based on the engagement with Adorno, attention to the digital culture industry.

3. The Digital Culture Industry

The culture industry is a capitalist form of mediation where culture and the economy interlock and culture is mediated by the commodity form. As a consequence, the culture industry “is interested in human beings only as its customers and employees and has in fact reduced humanity as a whole, like each of its elements, to this exhaustive formula”.¹⁴ “[U]se value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value.”¹⁵

The culture industry subjects human meaning-making to the commodity form in multiple respects:

- Cultural workers sell their labour-power in order to produce culture.
- Culture takes on the form of cultural commodities.
- Advertising propagates the sale of commodities.
- Consumer culture advances an environment and lifestyles of commodity consumption.

In digital capitalism, the commodity form dominates everyday life in digital culture as a multitude of digital commodities. Table 1 gives an overview of commodities in the digital culture industry, in which digital labour-power, digital content, online services, computing hardware, access to digital networks, digital ads, access to digital resources, and digital content libraries are sold as commodities. There are also capital accumulation models that combine the sale of various digital commodities.

Model	Commodity	Example
Digital labour model	Labour-power	Miners who extract minerals out of which components are created, Foxconn assembly line workers, software engineers, crowdworkers/platform workers, online freelancers, e-waste workers
The digital content as commodity model	Digital content, digital code, software	Microsoft, Adobe, Oracle, SAP, Electronic Arts (computer games)
Digital finance model	Financial services sold online	eBanking, PayPal, Google Checkout, Amazon Payments, cryptocurrency and digital currency exchanges (e.g. Bitstamp, Coinbase, Coinmama, Kraken)

¹⁴ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Hardware model	Computing hardware	Apple, HP, Dell, Fujitsu, Lenovo
Network model	Access to digital networks	Telecommunications and Internet service providers: AT&T, Verizon, China Mobile, Deutsche Telekom, Orange, BT
The online advertising model	Targeted ads	Google, Facebook, Twitter
The online retail model	Various commodities ordered online	Amazon, Alibaba, Apple iTunes, eBay
The sharing economy-pay-per-service model	Services organised via an online platform	Uber, Upwork, Deliveroo
The sharing economy-rent on rent model	Renting of goods via an online platform	Airbnb, Hiyacar, Drivy
Digital subscription model	Access to a collection of digital resources	Netflix, Spotify, Amazon Prime, Apple Music
Mixed models	Combination of various digital commodities	Spotify, online newspapers, Apple

Table 1: Commodities in the digital culture industry

The digital culture industry faces eleven problems¹⁶:

There is

- 1) the exploitation of *digital labour*;
- 2) *digital surveillance*;
- 3) transnational digital corporations' *monopoly power*;
- 4) a *digital attention economy* where corporations and celebrities control lots of online visibility, voice and attention;
- 5) a digital commerce culture where the dominant social media platforms are *digital tabloids* dominated by tabloid entertainment and advertising. Political and educational content ("public service content") is minority content.
- 6) *Digital acceleration* results in information flows and communication that are processed at very high speed on social media. The attention-span given to information is very short.
- 7) There is a *lack of time and space* for complex and deep analysis and discussion.
- 8) There are *unsocial/individualistic social media* focused on the accumulation of attention and likes to individual profiles and postings as well as *anti-social social media* that pose a threat to democracy. In

¹⁶ See Fuchs: *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*; Fuchs: *Nationalism on the Internet. Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News*.

the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Cambridge Analytica paid Global Science Research (GSR) for conducting fake online personality tests in order to obtain personal Facebook data of almost 90 million users (first assumed to be 50 million) that were used for targeting political ads and fake news during election campaigns. The scandal showed how anti-social social media combine far-right ideology, digital capitalism, and the neoliberal mode of regulation: Far-right activists use all means necessary for manipulating information. Online corporations see data generation as a way of achieving profits. The lack of legal regulation of corporate social media platforms invites data and content commodification that does not care about whether targeted ads sell fascism or chocolate cookies.

- 9) In the age of new nationalisms and new authoritarianism, a culture has emerged that results in the publication and spread of *false online news*, *post-truth politics*, whereby citizens distrust facts, and the emotionalisation of politics.
- 10) In *automated algorithmic politics*, automated computer programmes (“bots”) replace human activities, post information, make “likes”, etc. As a consequence, it has become more difficult to identify if information and dis/agreements stem from humans or machines.
- 11) On the Internet, there are *fragmented publics* that take on the form of filter bubbles.

These eleven tendencies have resulted in a public sphere that is characterised and divided by economic, political and cultural power asymmetries.

Targeted online advertising is the capital accumulation model that dominates the Internet and social media platforms. Adorno stresses the importance of advertising in the culture industry: “Culture is a paradoxical commodity. It is so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged. [...] [I]t merges with the advertisement.”¹⁷ He argues that advertising is the culture industry’s “elixir of life”.¹⁸ In the digital culture industry, advertising has taken on a new form: it is targeted, algorithmic, personalised, based on mass surveillance of individual Internet usage, etc.

Dallas W. Smythe analysed advertising’s political economy¹⁹. He stresses that in advertising-funded media, it is not the content that is the commodity. It is the “time of the audiences, which is sold to advertisers”.²⁰ He argues that audiences of advertising-funded media conduct audience

¹⁷ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 131.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁹ Smythe: “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism”.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

labour that produces the audience commodity. The larger the number of viewers, listeners, readers of such media, the higher ad rates can be set.

On social media, the audience commodity takes on a peculiar form. It is a big data commodity created by digital labour: Users of commercial social media produce online attention, big data, and online social relations that are the foundations of targeted ads. Whereas audiences of traditional media produce meanings of content, users of Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc. also produce big data, content, and social relations. The latter are prosumers (producing consumers). There is constant real-time surveillance of online behaviour that is used for targeting ads. Ads are personalised, that is, predictive algorithms predict users' interests in commodities and ad prices are often set based on algorithmic auctions that use the pay-per-view- or the pay-per-click-mode. Facebook and Google are not communications companies, but the world's largest advertising agencies.

For Marx, commodity fetishism is the commodity form's and the money form's concealment of the "social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly".²¹ The commodity hides the social relations that produce it. It thereby empties out the meaning of commodities. Advertising uses this void and fills it with commodity ideology. The social media commodity inverts commodity fetishism. The commodity character of Facebook data is hidden behind the social use-value of Facebook, i.e. the social relations and functions enabled by platform use. The object status of users, i.e. the fact that they serve the profit interests of Facebook, is hidden behind the social networking enabled by Facebook. Social activity veils digital labour and its digital commodity. What some call the sharing economy is in fact platform capitalism. A true "sharing society" has to "begin by really sharing what it has, or all its talk of sharing is false or at best marginal".²²

Adorno created foundations of a theory of the authoritarian personality and fascism. After the global economic crisis of 2008, new forms of nationalism and authoritarianism proliferated throughout the world. Their proponents have also made use of digital authoritarianism, i.e. the use of the Internet and social media for spreading authoritarian ideology. Thinking about the relevance of Adorno today must therefore encompass thinking about digital authoritarianism.

²¹ Marx: *Capital Volume 1*, pp. 168–169.

²² Williams: *Towards 2000*, p. 101.

4. Digital Authoritarianism

The digital humanities and computational social science are the dominant fields in the empirical analysis of social media. They focus on big data analytics, i.e. the quantitative analysis of vast amounts of data collected online. The danger of big data analytics is that the “convergence of social-scientific methods toward those of the natural sciences is itself the child of a society that reifies people”.²³ In neoliberal capitalism, first the business school’s logic colonised the university. Today, computer science in combination with the logic of the business school has started to colonise the social sciences and humanities.

Critical digital and social media research is the alternative to big data analytics.²⁴ It combines critical theory, qualitative empirical research, and political praxis. Critical Social Media Discourse Analysis is a form of critical digital and social media research that is focused on the analysis of online ideology.²⁵ It allows us to conduct analyses that focus on the question: How is nationalism and authoritarianism communicated online and on social media? Such analyses can be grounded in the theory of the authoritarian personality.

Erich Fromm argues that authoritarian societies, including capitalism, foster sadomasochistic personalities who feel pleasure in both submission to authority and the subjection of underdogs/scapegoats.²⁶ In their book *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. developed the F scale that measures the authoritarian personality.²⁷ There were four versions that consisted of 78, 60, 45, and 40 questions organised along nine dimensions. For qualitative research, a comprehensive model of right-wing authoritarianism that has four dimensions can be developed (figure 1).

Right-wing authoritarianism is an ideology and organisational model of society. It integrates top-down leadership, nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme, and militant patriarchy. Top-down leadership is right-wing authoritarianism’s organisational principle. Nationalism forms its internal identity by defining outside enemies who are seen as not belonging to and threatening the nation. Militant patriarchy advocates law-and-order-policies

²³ Pollock/Adorno: *Group Experiment and Other Writings*, p. 20.

²⁴ See Fuchs: “What is Critical Digital Social Research?”; Fuchs: “From Digital Positivism and Administrative Big Data Analytics Towards Critical Digital and Social Media Research!”.

²⁵ See Fuchs: *Nationalism on the Internet: Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News*; Fuchs: *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*.

²⁶ See Fromm: “Sozialpsychologischer Teil”, pp. 117–118.

²⁷ See Adorno et al: *The Authoritarian Personality*.



Figure 1: A model of right-wing authoritarianism

and violence as means for solving conflicts. Taken all together, right-wing authoritarianism is an ideology that distracts attention from the complex problems of society’s and the role that class plays in these problems.

A critical social media discourse analysis of Donald Trump’s tweets allows us to show the importance of Adorno’s theory today.²⁸

4.1. Top-Down Leadership

First, let us have a look at the dimension of top-down leadership. The relative use of first-person singular pronouns (“I”, “me”) over first-person plural pronouns (“We”, “Us”) in American English is 0.173, which means that on average the use of the first-person singular is 17.3% higher in written American English than the use of the first-person plural.²⁹ I conducted an analysis of pronouns of 1,815 tweets by Donald Trump (see table 2). First-person singular pronouns were 28 percent more frequent than first-person plural pronouns, which provides indications that Trump has a narcissistic personality.

First-person singular pronouns	Absolute frequency	First-person plural pronouns	Absolute frequency
“I”	363	“We”	252
“I’ll”	4	“We’ll”	1
“I’m”	3	“We’re”	4
“I’ve”	4	“We’ve”	3
“Me”	188	“Us”	57
	$\Sigma = 562$		$\Sigma = 317$
Trump’s relative use of first-person singular over first-person plural pronouns: $(562 - 317) / (562+317) = 0.2787$			

Table 2: Occurrences of pronouns in the Trump-Twitter-dataset, source: Fuchs: Digital Demagogue: *Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, London 2018: Pluto, p. 210.

Twitter is a me-centred medium that lives through the accumulation of followers, likes, and re-tweets. The custom of liking and re-tweeting on

²⁸ For an in-depth analysis, see: Fuchs: *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*.

²⁹ Uz: “Individualism and First Person Pronoun Use in Written Texts Across Languages”.

Twitter appeals to Trump's narcissism. Trump makes use of Twitter for broadcasting 280-character long sound bites about what he likes and dislikes.

An analysis of the elimination scenes in 201 episodes of the reality TV programme *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump as the host showed that in 47.3 percent of eliminations of candidates Trump used the argument "You have no leadership capacities!".³⁰ Reality TV and Twitter are Trump's preferred contemporary formats of public communication. Both Twitter and reality TV support and amplify Trump's narcissism so that he uses social media for presenting himself as a strong leader. Trump conducts first-person singular politics via Twitter.

The "great little man" is, according to Adorno, "a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks".³¹ Trump constructs himself as the great little man on Twitter and Reality TV. His demagogic, aggressive, attack-oriented, offensive, proletarian language and style make him appear as a great little man who is on top, but at the same time is an ordinary person. He acts as a politician just like he acts as reality TV entertainer. His populism combines popular culture and authoritarianism. Trump appeals to the working class by his direct, rude manners, behaviour, and language. He is a billionaire who likes *McDonaldised* culture. The focus on populism distracts attention from the antagonism between billionaires and workers. In reality, Trump is not working class but someone who appeals to the working class. He is a rich billionaire whose interests are opposed to working class interests. Trump is a figure suited for disappointed citizens' political-psychological projections. As a consequence, there is a collective narcissism that results in the "enlargement of the subject: by making the leader his ideal he loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self".³²

³⁰ Fuchs: *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, pp. 183–190. See also: Fuchs: *Digital Fascism*.

³¹ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda", p. 142.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 140.



Figure 2: Nationalist tweet by Trump, source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/772798809508372480>

4.2. Nationalism

Second, nationalism is an important feature of right-wing authoritarianism. Let us have a look at a tweet that Trump posted (figure 2).

In the video, Trump says about the American Labor Day:

The American worker built the foundation for the country we love and have today. But the American worker is getting crushed. Bad trade deals like NAFTA and TPP, such high and inexcusable taxes and fees on small businesses that employ so many good people. This Labor Day, let's honour our American workers, the men and women who proudly keep America working. They are the absolute best anywhere in the world. There is nobody like 'em. I'm ready to make America work again and to make America great again. That's what we are going to do on November 8.

There are four ideological features of Trump's tweet:

- Trump constructs the US-Americans as a mythic collective;
- he claims that there is a unified national interest of US capital and US labour;

- he identifies other nations such as Mexico and China as enemies of the USA that threaten its national interest;
- he constructs political economic conflict as a conflict of nations and disregards actual class conflicts.

In reality, US capital exploits labour both inside and outside of the USA. Trump's nationalism distracts attention from the class antagonism. Adorno helps us to understand nationalism by arguing that demagogues make use of the logic of repressive egalitarianism as featured in nationalist ideology. "They emphasize their being different from the outsider but play down such differences within their own group and tend to level out distinctive qualities among themselves with the exception of the hierarchical one."³³

Nationalism constructs national identity. It is inherently repressive because it defines the nation's inner identity against outside enemies. It makes use of the friend/enemy-scheme.

4.3. The Friend/Enemy-Scheme

Let us discuss and analyse a tweet by Boris Johnson.

Johnson's tweet shown in figure 3 works with a combination of the topos of numbers, the topos of weighing down, and the topos of danger³⁴: It is claimed that a Labour Party government would vastly increase immigration ("uncontrolled", "unlimited"). The formulation of a "huge pressure" on housing and public services implies that immigrants are a danger that would weigh down the social system. Immigrants are constructed as outsiders who only have a negative function and threaten the nation's welfare and social cohesion. It is not mentioned that they also pay taxes, pay for housing, etc. The NHS wouldn't exist without immigrant nurses and doctors because there is a shortage of both. The friend/enemy-scheme here plays the ideological role of distracting attention from the neoliberal politics of Thatcher, the Conservatives, and New Labour whose austerity politics have limited and cut investments into public services and have resulted in various privatisations, including council housing. Johnson promises tough immigration laws in the form of an "Australian-style points-based system".

The friend/enemy-scheme takes on not just the form of racism and xenophobia, but is also frequently expressed as the scapegoating of political opposition and investigative media. Figure 4 shows an example.

³³ Adorno: *The Culture Industry*, p. 146.

³⁴ See Reisigl and Wodak: *Discourse and Discrimination*, pp. 77–79.



Figure 3: Tweet by Boris Johnson about immigration, source: <https://twitter.com/borisjohnson/status/1198905666905100289>, posted on 25 November 2019



Figure 4: Tweet by Donald Trump, source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/832708293516632065>, posted on 17 February 2017

In this ideological logic, Trump identifies himself with the US people. It is a frequent claim of populists that they alone authentically and absolutely represent the people and the nation. Based on this logic, criticism of Trump in the media is presented by Trump as anti-American and as directed against the American people. Trump therefore only defines media that have reported critically about him, namely *The New York Times*, *NBC*, *ABC*, *CBS*, and *CNN*, as “the enemy of the American People!”.

Trump claims that criticisms of him are “fake news”, although he himself has spread false stories such as the claim that Barack Obama is a Kenyan

Muslim who never attended Columbia University, the claim that Hillary Clinton was very ill and therefore couldn't have served as US president, etc.³⁵ Adorno explains the ideological logic of the friend/enemy-scheme:

So, the group to which they count themselves – and it does not matter which people it is – is presented as being endowed with all kinds of good qualities and is counted among those who can be saved, while the others that they reject as negative and whom they either have to psychologically foreclose or at least do not want to have there, are considered as the wretched. This is the outgroup or at least the minority in their own area with which they are currently dealing.³⁶

Right-wing authoritarians construct outgroups such as illegal immigrants, Mexico, China, Muslims, oppositional politicians, and critics. They are presented as threatening the greatness of the nation. According to Adorno, identification with the leader and hatred against the outgroup allows emotional release.³⁷ Such a release of aggression encourages “excess and violence”.³⁸ Violence is the fourth characteristic of right-wing authoritarianism.

4.4. Violence and Law-and-Order-Politics

Donald Trump frequently expresses his admiration of the U.S. Army on Twitter and considers armament and nuclear weapons as appropriate means of political communication (see the examples in figure 5).

Trump sees violence as an appropriate means for solving conflicts. He is a militarist who worships soldiers and the army. Armies fetishize male military strength. As a consequence of this fetishization, militarism is closely entwined with patriarchy. In militarist and patriarchal ideology, the male soldier as the ideal citizen who takes up arms to defend the nation, is accompanied by the female role model of the housewife who gives birth to and brings up new soldiers. Trump expresses his belief in violent retaliation: “When somebody screws you, screw them back in spades. [...] When someone attacks you publicly, always strike back. [...] Go for the jugular so that people watching will not want to mess with you.”³⁹

As a teenager, Donald Trump attended New York Military Academy, which partly explains why he is so fond of the army and hierarchies. From

³⁵ See Holloway: “14 Fake News Stories Created or Publicized by Donald Trump”.

³⁶ Adorno: “Die autoritäre Persönlichkeit”, pp. 253–254, translated by the author from German to English

³⁷ See Adorno: “The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses”, pp. 16–20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁹ Trump/Zanker: *Think Big: Make It Happen in Business and Life*, p. 199.



Figure 5: Donald Trump on military affairs, sources: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/776842647294009344>, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/811977223326625792?lang=en>

a psychoanalytical perspective, one can speculate about whether a lack of parental love may have resulted in his love for the army and the military drill as an attempted fight and compensation mechanism.

Adorno argues that there is a logic that connects the logic of the friend/enemy-scheme to violence: The right-wing authoritarian “cannot help feeling surrounded by traitors, and so continuously threatens to exterminate them”.⁴⁰ Trump sees war, violence, weapons, and guns as generally appropriate means of handling conflicts. The “model of the military officer” is “transferred to the realm of politics”.⁴¹ Love of the leader is an “emotional compensation for the cold, self-alienated life of most people”.⁴² In Trump’s world, survival, toughness, strength, and the willingness to fight, lead, and compete are moral norms. Any “reference to love is almost completely excluded”, and the “traditional role of the loving father” is replaced “by the negative one of threatening authority”.⁴³

⁴⁰ Adorno: “The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses”, p. 78.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁴² Ibid., p. 37.

⁴³ Adorno: *The Culture Industry*, p. 137.

Adorno helps us to critically understand top-down-leadership, nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme, and militant patriarchy as principles of right-wing authoritarianism and as ideological moments that distract attention from the complexity of society's problems and from their aspects of capitalism and class. Next, we will have a look at how Adorno helps us to answer the question of whether we live in an information/digital society or in digital capitalism.

5. Digital Society or Capitalism?

The main question of the information society debate is: In what kind of society do we live? Is it an information and digital society? Or a capitalist society? Or something different?

Adorno argued that the “fundamental question of the present structure of society” is “about the alternatives: late capitalism or industrial society”.⁴⁴ He asked if society was a capitalist society or an industrial society. Today, Adorno's question can be posed again in a slightly altered form: Do we live in capitalism or in an information/digital society?

The information society debate's dominant claim is that a radically new society has emerged. For example, Daniel Bell spoke of the emergence of a post-industrial information society that “is based on services” in “health, education, research, and government” and where what “counts is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information”⁴⁵. This is a subjectivist view with a focus on radical change: For Bell, the emergence of the dominance of information/knowledge work constitutes “a vast historical change”.⁴⁶

Adorno rejected the argument that the development of the productive forces produced a new society. He gave an answer to the question of whether society was, at the time he lived, capitalist or industrial:

In terms of critical, dialectical theory, I would like to propose as an initial, necessarily abstract answer that contemporary society undoubtedly is an industrial society according to the state of its *forces* of production. Industrial labor has everywhere become the model of society as such, regardless of the frontiers separating differing political systems. It has developed into a totality because methods modelled on those of industry are necessarily extended by the laws of economics to other realms of material production, administration, the sphere of

⁴⁴ Adorno: “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society”, p. 111.

⁴⁵ Bell: *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

distribution, and those that call themselves culture. In contrast, however, society is capitalist in its *relations* of production. People are still what they were in Marx’s analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century [...] Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit.⁴⁷

Paraphrasing Adorno, we can give a similar answer to the question “Do we live in a capitalist or a digital/information society?”. Contemporary society is an information society according to the state of its *forces* of production. In contrast, however, contemporary society is capitalist in its *relations* of production. People are still what they were in Marx’s analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century. Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit and, to achieve this end, it makes use of knowledge and information technology to a certain extent.

In 2018, 26.5% of the world population in employment lived on less than US\$3.10 (PPP)⁴⁸. The United Nations considers them as the working poor. According to ILO estimates, in the year 2018 there were 3.3 billion employed persons in the world.⁴⁹ The absolute number of poor employees was around 875 million. Together, these workers earned less than US\$990 billion per year, whereas the total revenues of the world’s largest information corporations⁵⁰ were 2.2 times as large as the total sum of these poverty wages. Whereas a small number of companies yields huge profits, billions of humans have to live in poverty. Digital society is first and foremost a global class society.

Let us have a look at data that deepens our engagement with the question of what character contemporary society has. It illustrates that the information society is a capitalist class society. Table 3 gives an overview of the size, share of sales, profits, and assets of the world’s largest 2,000 transnational corporations. The data are ordered by industries.

Industry	No. of Companies	Share of Sales	Share of Profits	Share of Assets
Conglomerates	36	2.0%	1.1%	0.9%
Culture & Digital	260	14.6%	17.7%	5.1%
Energy & Utilities	199	14.3%	9.8%	5.7%
Fashion	26	1.0%	0.9%	0.0%

⁴⁷ Adorno: “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society”, p. 117.

⁴⁸ Data source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): *UNDP Human Development Indices and Indicators 2018 Statistical Update*, New York 2018.

⁴⁹ See Data source: ILO Statistics, <https://www.ilo.org/ilostat>, accessed on 18 May 2019.

⁵⁰ Data source: Forbes 2000 List of the World’s Largest Public Companies, year 2018.

FIRE (finance, insurance & real estate)	634	22.5%	33.7%	74.8%
Food	86	3.6%	5.8%	1.2%
Manufacturing & Construction	352	15.2%	13.1%	5.4%
Mobility & Transport	169	11.6%	9.4%	3.6%
Pharmaceutical & Medical	105	7.2%	4.9%	1.9%
Retail	86	6.9%	2.5%	0.9%
Security	1	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Various Services	46	1.1%	1.1%	0.4%

Table 3: Share of specific industries in the profits, revenues and assets of the world's largest 2,000 transnational corporations (data source: Forbes 2000 List of the World's Largest Public Companies, year 2018)

A closer look at the structural distribution of profits of the world's 2,000 largest corporations in table 3 shows that finance capital controls 33.7 percent of these corporations' profits, the culture and digital industry 17.7 percent, manufacturing and construction 13.1 percent, energy and utilities 9.8 percent, and the mobility and transport sector 9.4 percent.

These data show that it is an exaggeration to claim that digital capitalism is capitalism's dominant moment. There are multiple, intersecting, and interacting capitalisms. Capitalism's "individual sectors [...] are themselves economically intertwined".⁵¹ Digital capitalism is linked to finance capitalism via venture capital investments into digital start-ups and the listing of digital corporations on stock markets. Digital and cultural capitalism requires energy inputs, which links to classical resources and hyper-industrial capitalism. Global communication advances the increased transportation of people and goods, which is why the digital/culture industry and the mobility/transport industries are interacting. Contemporary capitalism is at the same time finance capitalism, digital capitalism, hyper-industrial capitalism, mobility capitalism, etc. All of these dimensions interpenetrate.

Adorno's insight that we need to look at society from the perspectives of the productive forces and the relations of production is complicated by what Marx termed the antagonism between the productive forces and the relations of production. There is an antagonism between the informational, networked productive forces and the digital and informational class relations. This antagonism is also an antagonism between digital

⁵¹ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 96.

capital and the digital commons. It becomes evident in phenomena such as intellectual property rights *versus* digital gifts/ non-commercial Creative Commons, for-profit open access *versus* non-profit open access, ad-funded for-profit Internet platforms *versus* non-profit Internet platforms, capitalist platforms *versus* platform co-operatives, etc.

Digital capitalism at the same time deepens exploitation and creates new foundations for autonomous realms that transcend the logic of capitalism. Marx argued that the “material conditions for the existence” of “new superior relations of production” mature “within the framework of the old society”.⁵² With digitalisation, however, “the commodity becomes increasingly transparent”,⁵³ and “there begin to emerge sectors that are increasingly sensitive to the autonomy of social cooperation, to the self-valorisation of proletarian subjects”.⁵⁴

6. Conclusion

Scholars in Media/Communication/Cultural Studies have often vilified Adorno, which has hampered engagement with the complexity of his works and theory. This article has shown why Adorno is relevant today for a critical understanding of digital capitalism. It has outlined the following aspects of his continued relevancy:

- Digital capitalism is based on a complex culture industry.
- We are experiencing the rise of authoritarian capitalism. Right-wing authoritarians use the Internet to communicate nationalism, leadership ideology, the friend/enemy-logic, and militarism.
- Contemporary society is a digital society at the level of the productive forces and a capitalist society at the level of the relations of production.
- There is an antagonism between the digital commons and digital capital.

Capitalism entails the tendency of the “self-destruction of enlightenment”.⁵⁵ We today experience a surge of new nationalisms and new authoritarianisms. Far-right movements and new nationalisms are the “wounds, the scars of a democracy that, to that day, has not yet lived up to its own concept”.⁵⁶ They are the result of the negative dialectic of neoliberal capitalism and new imperialism.

⁵² Marx: “Economic Manuscripts of 1857/58”, p. 263.

⁵³ Negri: *Marx and Foucault*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

⁵⁶ Adorno: *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, p. 9.

The commodification of everything – entrepreneurialism, privatisation, deregulation, financialisation, globalisation, deindustrialisation, outsourcing, precarisation, and the new individualism – have backfired. These are developments that have extended and intensified inequalities and crisis tendencies, which have created a fruitful ground for new nationalisms, right-wing extremism, and new fascism.

How can nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism be counteracted? Adorno stresses that authoritarianism spells disaster for everyone, including war: One should “warn the potential followers of right-wing extremism about its own consequences, to convey to them that this politics will lead its own followers to their doom, too”.⁵⁷ The current, highly polarised political situation of the world has already resulted in wars such as the one in Ukraine that have the potential to trigger a new World War. Adorno’s warnings are still highly relevant today.

Adorno also mentions that reason and facts should be used to counter ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’. Anti-fascism and anti-nationalism should not “fight lies with lies”, but “counteract it with the full force of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth”.⁵⁸

Laughter is another element in the resistance to fascism. Horkheimer and Adorno speak about the “ambiguity of laughter”⁵⁹: “If laughter up to now has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind, obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains the opposite element, in that through laughter blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence.”⁶⁰ Authoritarianism online and offline is emotional and irrational, which is why authoritarians often do not listen to rational arguments. Making fun of right-wing authoritarianism can aid in its deconstruction.

Contemporary digital technologies such as social media should be used for advancing the anti-fascist strategies that Adorno had in mind, namely reminders about authoritarian capitalism’s consequences, rational arguments opposing it, and satire that deconstructs its logic.

Adorno’s theory allows us to understand why neoliberalism has backfired and turned into authoritarian capitalism. These changes are mediated by and expressed in digital means of communication. The struggle for defending and extending the democratic public sphere is key to resisting authoritarian capitalism.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 49–50.

⁵⁹ Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

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