



DIGITAL CAPITALISM

MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY

VOLUME THREE

CHRISTIAN FUCHS



Digital Capitalism

This third volume in Christian Fuchs's Media, Communication and Society book series illuminates what it means to live in an age of digital capitalism, analysing its various aspects, and engaging with a variety of critical thinkers whose theories and approaches enable a critical understanding of digital capitalism for media and communication.

Each chapter focuses on a particular dimension of digital capitalism or a critical theorist whose work helps us to illuminate how digital capitalism works. Subjects covered include: digital positivism; administrative big data analytics; the role and relations of patriarchy, slavery, and racism in the context of digital labour; digital alienation; the role of social media in the capitalist crisis; the relationship between imperialism and digital labour; alternatives such as trade unions and class struggles in the digital age; platform co-operatives; digital commons; and public service Internet platforms. It also considers specific examples, including the digital labour of Foxconn and Pegatron workers, software engineers at Google, and online freelancers, as well as considering the political economy of targeted-advertising-based Internet platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Instagram.

Digital Capitalism illuminates how a digital capitalist society's economy, politics, and culture work and interact, making it essential reading for both students and researchers in media, culture, and communication studies, as well as related disciplines.

Christian Fuchs is a critical theorist of communication and society. He is co-editor of the journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*. He is author of many publications, including the books *Foundations of Critical Theory* (2022), *Communicating COVID-19: Everyday Life, Digital Capitalism, and Conspiracy Theories in Pandemic Times* (2021), *Marxist Humanism and Communication Theory* (2021), *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (3rd edition 2021), *Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory* (2020), *Marxism: Karl Marx's Fifteen Key Concepts for Cultural & Communication Studies* (2020), *Nationalism on the Internet: Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News* (2020), *Rereading Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism* (2019), *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (2016), *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (2014), and *Internet and Society* (2008).



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Volume Three

Christian Fuchs

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Adorno and the Media in Digital Capitalism

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4.1 Introduction

In 2019, there was the 50th anniversary of Theodor W. Adorno's death. On this occasion, there have been 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 these events, namely at the conference "Adorno and the Media" that took place on 13 December and 14 in Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and its Center for Art and Media (ZKM). The chapter asks: how relevant is Adorno for the critical understanding of digital capitalism? It situates Adorno in the context of contemporary media and communication study, especially the analysis of the interaction of digital media and society.

Section 4.2 focuses on why dismissals and vilifications of Adorno are wrong. Building on Adorno, section 4.3 analyses the digital culture industry. Section 4.4 deals with digital authoritarianism, a phenomenon that it is highly relevant in times when authoritarians such as Donald Trump have almost 70 million followers on Twitter. Section 4.5 asks Adorno whether we live in a capitalist or a digital/informational society.

4.2 Adorno's Demonisation

There is a lack of engagement with Adorno in communication, media, and cultural studies, where Adorno is regularly demonised and dismissed with one-line prejudices

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”.

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”. John Fiske (1989, 183) argues that the “Frankfurt School have no room in their scenario for resistant or evasive practices” and represent “a left-wing elitism”. Henry Jenkins (2006) 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!”. Du Gay et al. (1997, 87) argue that Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry hypothesis, “citizens are turned into a passive mass of consumers” and “all is false and inauthentic”. Storey (2006, 55) claims that the “Frankfurt School perspective on popular culture is essentially a discourse from above on the culture of other people”. Hesmondhalgh (2019, 30) writes that “there is a constant sense in Adorno and Horkheimer that the battle has already been lost, that culture has been already subsumed”.

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 (Adorno 1996) and was a “fan” of the clown of all clowns – Charlie Chaplin. In the *Culture Industry*-chapter of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, positive elements of popular culture are visible. For example, Adorno writes that “traces of something better persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 114). 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 antidote to its own lie. No other plea could be made for its defence. (Adorno 1991, 181)

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", "the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded", "the real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion", "a society, whose inherent contradictions persist undiminished, cannot be totally integrated even in consciousness", "a chance of maturity (*Mündigkeit*)" remains (Adorno 1991, 196–197).

Third, Adorno didn't see capitalist society and the culture industry as having no alternatives, which means that he wasn't a political and cultural pessimist. Adorno stressed the potentials for alternative media. He stresses 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. (Adorno 1998, 57)

Adorno argued for the use of TV in anti-fascist education in order to reach "the nerve centres" of the authoritarian personality (Adorno 1967, 24). Adorno certainly would have supported the Maximilian-Kolke-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 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 ads.

Adorno was a public intellectual who effectively used broadcast media for discussing contemporary political issues. He especially gave lectures on the radio and participated in discussions broadcast on radio and television. Today, there are Adorno-CDs and many Adorno broadcasts are available on YouTube.

Adorno's 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, therefore, gives based on Adorno attention to the digital culture industry.

4.3 The Digital Culture Industry

The culture industry is a particularly 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” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 118). “[U]se value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value” (128).

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 4.1 gives an overview of commodities in the digital culture industry. In the digital culture industry, 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.

The digital culture industry faces 11 problems (Fuchs 2020a, 2020b): 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 agreement to individual profiles and postings as well as *anti-social social*

TABLE 4.1 Commodities in the digital culture industry

Model	Commodity	Example
Digital labour model	Labour-power	Miners who extract minerals out of which components are created, Foxconn assemblage workers, software engineers, crowd workers/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)
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 Telecom, 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

media that pose a threat to democracy. In the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Cambridge Analytica paid Global Science Research 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 nationalism and new authoritarianism, a culture has emerged that results in the publication and spread of *false online news*, *post-truth politics* where

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 11 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. [...] it merges with the advertisement” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 131). He argues that advertising is the culture industry’s “elixir of life” (131). In the digital culture industry, advertising has taken on a new form.

Smythe (1977) analysed advertising’s political economy. 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” (3). He argues that audiences of advertising-funded media conduct audience 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 produce online attention, big data, and online social relations that are the foundations of targeted ads. Whereas audiences produce meanings of content, users of Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc. also produce big data, content, and social relations. They are prosumers (producing consumers). There is constant real-time surveillance of online behaviour that is used for targeting ads. Ads are personalised. Predictive algorithms predict users’ interests in commodities. 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.

Marx pointed out that commodity fetishism means that the commodity form and the money form conceal 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” (Marx 1867, 168–169). 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, that is the social relations and functions enabled by platform use. The object status of users, that is 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” (Williams 1983, 101).

Adorno created foundations of a theory of the authoritarian personality and fascism. After the new world economic crisis 2008, new forms of nationalism and authoritarianism proliferated. Their proponents have also made use of digital authoritarianism, that is 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.

4.4 Digital Authoritarianism

The digital humanities and computational social science are the dominant approaches in the empirical analysis of social media. They focus on big data analytics, that is 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” (Pollock and Adorno 2011, 20). 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 (Fuchs 2019, 2017). 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 (Fuchs 2020a, 2018). 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.

Fromm (1936) argues that authoritarian societies, including capitalism, foster sado-masochistic personalities (117–118) who feel pleasure in both submission to authority

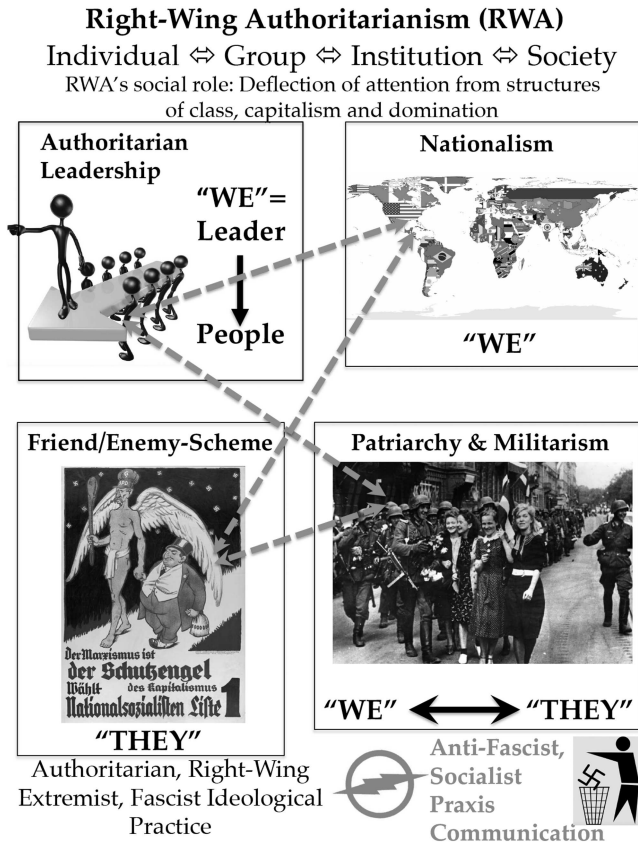


FIGURE 4.1 A model of right-wing authoritarianism

and the subjection of underdogs/scapegoats. In their book *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. (1950) developed the F scale that measures the authoritarian personality. 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 4.1).

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 that is bounded by defining outside enemies who are seen as not belonging to and threatening the nation. Militant patriarchy advocates law-and-order policies and violence as means for solving conflicts.

Taken together, right-wing authoritarianism is an ideology that distracts attention from the complex problems of society's problems and the role that class plays in society.

A critical social media discourse analysis of Donald Trump's tweets allows us to show the importance of Adorno's theory today (see Fuchs 2018 for an in-depth analysis).

4.4.1 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 (Uz 2014). I conducted an analysis of pronouns of 1,815 tweets by Donald Trump (see Table 4.2). First-person singular pronouns were 28% more frequent than first-person plural pronouns, which provides indications that Trump has a narcissistic personality.

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 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 reality TV programme *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump as host showed that in 47.3% of eliminations of candidates Trump used the argument "You have no leadership capacities!" (Fuchs 2018, 183–190). Reality TV and Twitter are Trump's preferred two contemporary

TABLE 4.2 Occurrences of pronouns in the Trump-Twitter-dataset, source: Fuchs 2018, 210

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: $(562 - 317) / (562 + 317) = 0.2787$

formats of public communication. Both support narcissism and that Trump can present 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” (Adorno 1951, 142). Trump constructs himself as the great little man on Twitter and reality TV. Trump’s 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 a reality TV entertainer. He brings populism in the form of popular culture and authoritarianism into politics. Trump appeals to the working class by his direct, rude manners, behaviour, and language. He is a billionaire who likes McDonald’s culture. The focus on the latter distracts attention from the antagonism between billionaires and workers. In reality, Trump is not working-class but someone who appeals to the working class but is a rich billionaire whose interests are opposed to working-class interests. Trump is a figure for projection that allows 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” (Adorno 1951, 140).

4.4.2 Nationalism

Second, nationalism is an important feature of right-wing authoritarianism. Let us have a look at a video that Trump posted on Twitter (Figure 4.2).

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, then 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:

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



FIGURE 4.2 Nationalist tweet by Trump, source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/772798809508372480>

- 3) He identifies other nations such as Mexico and China as enemies of the USA that threatens its national interest;
- 4) 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" (Adorno 1991, 146).

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.

4.4.3 The Friend/Enemy-Scheme

Let us have a look at a tweet by Boris Johnson (Figure 4.3):

This tweet implies works with a combination of the topos of numbers, the topos of weighing down, and the topos of danger (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 77–79): it is claimed



FIGURE 4.3 Tweet by Boris Johnson about immigration, source: <https://twitter.com/borisjohnson/status/1198905666905100289>, posted on 25 November 2019

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 weighs 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 of council housing. Johnson promises tough immigration laws in the form of an “Australian-style points-based system”.

The friend/enemy-scheme not just takes on the form of racism and xenophobia, but is frequently also expressed as the scapegoating of political opposition and investigative media. Figure 4.4 shows an example.

In his 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 is presented as anti-American and directed against the American people. Trump, therefore, presents media that have reported critically about him, namely New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN, as “the enemy of the American People!”.



FIGURE 4.4 Tweet by Donald Trump, source: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/832708293516632065>, posted on 17 February 2017

Trump claims that criticisms of him are “fake news” although he himself has spread false stories such as the one that Barack Obama a Kenyan Muslim who never attended Columbia University, the one that Hillary Clinton was very ill and therefore couldn’t have served as US president, etc. (see Holloway 2017).

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. (Adorno 1960, 253–254, translation from German)

Right-wing authoritarians construct out-groups 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 out-group allows emotional release (Adorno 1975, 16–20). Such a release of aggression encourages “excess and violence” (17). Violence is the fourth characteristic of right-wing authoritarianism.

4.4.4 Violence and Law-and-Order Politics

Donald Trump frequently expresses his admiration of the US army on Twitter and considers armament and nuclear weapons as appropriate means of political communication (see the examples in Figure 4.5).



FIGURE 4.5 Donald Trump on military affairs, sources: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/776842647294009344>, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/811977223326625792?lang=en>

Trump sees violence as an appropriate means for solving conflicts. He is a militarist who worships soldiers and the army. Armies fetishise male military strength. As a consequence, militarism is closely entwined with patriarchy. In militarist and patriarchal ideology, to the male soldier as an ideal citizen who takes up arms to defend the nation corresponds 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” (Trump and Zanker 2007, 199).

As a teenager, Donald Trump attended New York Military Academy, which partly explains why he is so fond of the army and hierarchies. From a psychoanalytical perspective, one can speculate about whether a feeling of a lack of parental love may have resulted in love of the army and military drill as attempted flight and compensation mechanism.

Adorno argues that there is a logic that connects the friend/enemy-scheme to violence: the right-wing authoritarian “cannot help feeling surrounded by traitors, and so continuously threatens to exterminate them” (Adorno 1975, 78). Trump sees war, violence,

weapons, and guns as a generally appropriate means of handling conflicts. The “model of the military officer” is “transferred to the realm of politics” (Adorno 1975, 49). Love to the leader is an “emotional compensation for the cold, self-alienated life of most people” (Adorno 1975, 37). 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” (Adorno 1991, 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 digital capitalism.

4.5 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?

Theodor W. Adorno (1968/2003) argued that the “fundamental question of the present structure of society” is “about the alternatives: late capitalism or industrial society” (111). He asked if society was a capitalist society or an industrial society. Today, Adorno’s question can be reposed in a slightly altered form: do we live in capitalism or an information/digital society?

The information society debate’s dominant narrative is that a radically new society has emerged. For example, Daniel Bell (1974) 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” (15). This is a subjectivist view with a focus on radical change: for Bell, information/knowledge work constitutes “a vast historical change” (37).

Adorno 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 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 (Adorno 1968/2003, 117).

Paraphrasing Adorno, we can give a similar answer to the question "Do we live in a capitalist or 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 19th century. Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit and for achieving this end it to a certain extent makes use of knowledge and information technology in production.

In 2018, 26.5% of the world population in employment lived on less than US\$3.10 (PPP).¹ The United Nations considers them as working poor. According to ILO estimates, in the year 2018, there were 3.3 billion employed people in the world.² 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 corporations³ 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 a data example that deepens the engagement with the question of what character contemporary society has. Table 4.3 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.

1 Data source: UNDP. 2018. *UNDP Human Development Indices and Indicators 2018 Statistical Update*. New York: UNDP.

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

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

TABLE 4.3 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)

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
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

Let us have a closer look at the structure of the structural distribution of profits of the world's 2,000 largest corporations according to the data in the table. Finance capital controls 33.7% of these corporations' profits, the culture and digital industry 17.7%, manufacturing and construction 13.1%, energy and utilities 9.8%, and the mobility and transport sector 9.4%.

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" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 96). 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 relation is antagonism between digital capital and the digital commons. It becomes evident in phenomena such as intellectual property rights VS. digital gifts/non-commercial Creative Commons, for-profit open access VS. non-profit open access, ad-funded for-profit Internet platforms VS. non-profit Internet platforms, capitalist platforms VS. 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” (Marx 1857/58, 263). With digitalisation, “the commodity becomes increasingly transparent” (Negri 2017, 25), “there begin to emerge sectors that are increasingly sensitive to the autonomy of social cooperation, to the self-valorisation of proletarian subjects” (Negri 2017, 25).

4.6 Conclusion

Scholars in media/communication/cultural studies have often vilified Theodor W. Adorno, which has hampered engagement with the complexity of his works and theory. This chapter has shown some aspects of why Adorno is relevant today for a critical understanding of digital capitalism. Based on Adorno, it has outlined the following aspects:

- 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” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xvi). We today experience a surge of new nationalism and new authoritarianism. 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” (Adorno

1968/2020, 9). They are the result of the negative dialectic of neoliberal capitalism and the new imperialism.

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 created a fruitful ground for new nationalism, right-wing extremism, and new fascism.

How can nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism be counteracted? Adorno stresses that one should point out that authoritarianism's consequences mean disasters 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" (Adorno 1968/2020, 17).

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" (Adorno 1968/2020, 49–50).

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 60) speak about the "ambiguity of laughter":

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.

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 should be part of 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.

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