



**CAPITALISM**

**SOCIALISM**

# **FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL THEORY**

**MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND  
SOCIETY VOLUME TWO**

**CHRISTIAN FUCHS**

**ROUTLEDGE**  


# Foundations of Critical Theory

Media, Communication and Society  
Volume Two

Christian Fuchs

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# Contents

Figures	vii
Tables	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 What is Critical Theory?	17
3 Friedrich Engels Today	53
4 Marx's Centenary (1918) in the Light of the Media and Socialist Thought	81
5 Reflections on Sven-Eric Liedman's Marx-Biography <i>A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx</i>	97
6 Universal Alienation, Formal and Real Subsumption of Society Under Capital, Ongoing Primitive Accumulation by Dispossession: Reflections on the Marx@200-Debate Between David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri	111
7 Critical Social Theory and Sustainable Development: The Role of Class, Capitalism, and Domination in a Dialectical Analysis of Un/Sustainability	131
8 The Relevance of C.L.R. James's Dialectical, Marxist-Humanist Philosophy in the Age of Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter, and Digital Capitalism	157
9 Cornel West and Marxist Humanism	191
10 Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Marx	227
11 Conclusion	245
Index	259

# Chapter Two

## *What is Critical Theory?*

2.1 Introduction

2.2 What is Critical Theory?

2.3 Critical Theory and Karl Marx

2.4 Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication

2.5 Cultural Studies, Political Economy, and Critique

2.6 Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy of  
Communication, Culture, Information, and the Media

2.7 Four Debates in and about Contemporary Critical Theory

2.8 Conclusion

References

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## 2.1 Introduction

One could say that all contemporary academic thought is critical because it questions opinions of other scholars. This understanding of critique stands in the tradition of Kantian enlightenment. Kant argued that modern society is an age of criticism. In contrast to Kant's general understanding of critique, Karl Marx formulated a categorical imperative of critical theory – the “categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being” (Marx 1997, 257–258). For Marx, the “task of philosophy [...] is to unmask human self-alienation” (Marx 1997, 251). Marx points out a more specific understanding of being critical, namely the questioning of power, domination and exploitation, and the political demand and struggle for a just society. Critical theory is for him a critique of society. Scholars who refer to critical theory often mean this second understanding of the notion of critique. They employ the term “critical” in order to stress that not all science is critical, but that a lot of it has a more administrative character that takes power structures for granted, does not question them, or helps legitimise them.

Critical theory is an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analysing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies. It is a normative approach that is based on the judgment that domination is a problem, that a society free from

domination is needed. It wants to inform political struggles that want to establish such a society.

All contemporary political communication is in a specific way critical because it consists of speech acts that normally question political opinions and practices of certain actors. Modern politics is a highly competitive system, in which elections and warfare are ways of distributing and redistributing power. This understanding of critique stands in the tradition of Kantian enlightenment that considered the enlightenment as an age of criticism. In contrast to Kant's general understanding of critique, Karl Marx and the Marxian tradition understands the categorical imperative as the need to overcome all forms of slavery and degradation and to unmask alienation. This school of thought points out a more specific understanding of being critical, namely the questioning of power, domination, and exploitation, the political demand and struggle for a just society. Critical theory is understood as a critique of society. Scholars in the Marxian-inspired tradition employ the term "critical" to stress that not all science is critical, but that a lot of it has a more administrative character that takes power structures for granted, does not question them or helps legitimatising them.

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## 2.2 What is Critical Theory?

Some define critical theory as the Frankfurt School's works, a tradition of critical thinking that originated with the works of scholars like Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno. Herbert Marcuse was a philosopher who lived in Germany from 1898 and fled Nazi Germany to the USA in 1934, where he spent the rest of his life. Max Horkheimer was director of the University of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research in the years 1930–1959. This institute was the institutional home of what came to be known as the Frankfurt School. Theodor W. Adorno was one of the Institute's Directors from 1953 until his death in 1969. Also Horkheimer and Adorno emigrated together with the Institute to the USA, but other than Marcuse returned to Germany after the end of the Second World War. Critical theory's starting point is the work of Karl Marx. Critical theory was used as a camouflage term when the Frankfurt theorists were in exile from the Nazis in the USA, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist and Marxian thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed. Some definitions of critical theory couple the usage of this term exclusively to the Frankfurt School or Habermasian Frankfurt School.

Some introductory books to critical theory provide lists of different approaches such as the following: Marxist criticism, the Frankfurt School, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, new criticism, reader-response criticism, structuralist criticism, deconstructive criticism, new historical and cultural criticism, lesbian, gay, and queer criticism, African American criticism, postcolonial criticism, cultural studies, etc., structuralism/poststructuralism, feminism, post-foundational ethics/politics.

Critical theory is, by other scholars, understood as the works of the Frankfurt School, a tradition of critical thinking that originated with the works of scholars like Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno. Its starting point is the work of Karl Marx. For Horkheimer and his colleagues, critical theory “was a camouflage label for ‘Marxist theory’” (Wiggershaus 1995, 5) when they were in exile from the Nazis in the United States, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed. There are definitions of critical theory that couple the usage of this term exclusively to the Frankfurt School or Habermasian Frankfurt School.

The entry for “Kritische Theorie” (critical theory) in the *Europäische Enzyklopädie zu Philosophie und Wissenschaften* (European Encyclopaedia of Philosophy and Science), a four-volume Marxist encyclopaedia of philosophy edited by Hans Jörg Sandkühler (1990), only provides a cross-reference to the entry Frankfurter Schule (Frankfurt School), which means that here one assumes an association of the terms “critical theory” and the “Frankfurt School”. A second Marxist encyclopedia has taken a different approach. Gerhard Schweppenhäuser and Frigga Haug wrote the entry “Kritische Theorie” in the *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism), the largest encyclopaedic project of Marxism (see <http://www.inkrit.de/hkwm/hkwm-index.htm>), and defined critical theory as

emancipatory social philosophy. It tries to unite in *one* movement of thought the analysis and critique of forms of practice as well as types of reason and rationality of bourgeois-capitalist societies since the middle of the 19th century until today. Its starting point is Marx’s theory of the law of value as the foundation of commodity-producing societies that is derived from the analysis of the value-form. This theory is at the same time critique of the political economy, i.e. demonstration of the capability and limit of this science for the explanation of the value-form with its social and ideological consequences.

(Schweppenhäuser and Haug 2012, 197)

The two authors stress the status of critical theory as critical philosophy and critical economics. They understand it as a broad approach that is grounded in Karl Marx's thought and works. However, they also acknowledge that the Frankfurt School introduced the term and therefore draw a distinction between critical theory as the more general approach and critical theory as the Frankfurt School approach.

An approach taken that neither lists approaches nor identifies critical theory only with persons associated with the Frankfurt School is to identify dimensions of critical theory at the content level. We can identify six dimensions of a critical theory:

- Critical ethics;
- Critique of domination and exploitation;
- Dialectical reason;
- Ideology critique;
- Critique of the political economy;
- Struggles and political practice.

These six dimensions can be grouped into three overarching dimensions of critical theory. The first concerns its epistemology, the next three its ontology and the latter two its praxeology. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge, it deals with how the very concepts that constitute a theory are constituted and organised. Ontology is a theory of being, it deals with the question how reality is organised and develops. Praxeology is the study of human action, especially political action and ethics.

EPISTEMOLOGY:

- A) Dialectical reason;

ONTOLOGY:

- B) Critique of the political economy;
- C) Critique of domination and exploitation;
- D) Ideology critique;

PRAXEOLOGY:

- E) Critical ethics;
- F) Struggles and political practice.



For grounding an understanding of critical theory that specifies dimensions of the critique of society, some foundational texts of the Frankfurt School are helpful: Marcuse's essay *Philosophy and Critical Theory* (1988, 134–158), Horkheimer's essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* (2002, 188–252), Marcuse's article *The Concept of Essence* (1988, 43–87), and the section *The Foundations of the Dialectical Theory of Society* in Marcuse's book *Reason and Revolution* (1941, 258–322).

Critical theory has a “concern with human happiness” (Marcuse 1988, 135) and uses the Hegelian method of comparing essence and existence because in capitalism “what exists is not immediately and already rational” (136). This essence can be found in man's positive capacities (such as striving for freedom, sociality, co-operation) and it has the ethical implication that universal conditions should be created that allow all humans to realise these capacities:

That man is a rational being, that this being requires freedom, and that happiness is his highest good are universal propositions whose progressive impetus derives precisely from their universality. Universality gives them an almost revolutionary character, for they claim that all, and not merely this or that particular person, should be rational, free, and happy (Marcuse 1988, 152).

### 2.2.1 Dialectical Reason

In Marx's works, concepts that describe the existence of capitalism (profit, surplus value, worker, capital, commodity, etc.) are dialectical because they “transcend the given social reality in the direction of another historical structure which is present as a tendency in the given reality” and represent the essence of man (Marcuse 1988, 86):

If, for instance, it is said that concepts such as wages, the value of labor, and entrepreneurial profit are only categories of manifestations behind which are hidden the “essential relations” of the second set of concepts, it is also true that these essential relations represent the truth of the manifestations only insofar as the concepts which comprehend them already contain their own negation and transcendence – the image of a social organization without surplus value. All materialist concepts contain an accusation and an imperative.

(Marcuse 1988, 86)

Marx's categories "are negative and at the same time positive" (Marcuse 1941, 295).

The concepts of contradiction (negation) and negation of the negation are crucial for critical theory: in capitalism, every fact is "a negation and restriction of real possibilities" (282). "Private property is a fact, but at the same time it is a negation of man's collective appropriation of nature" (Marcuse 1941, 282).

The historical character of the Marxian dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity as well as its negation. [...] the negation of the negation [...] does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men.

(Marcuse 1941, 315)

The dialectic of capitalism has a structural-objective part: capital accumulation's contradictions result in crisis. These contradictions can only be overcome by the subjective force of dialectic: political struggle (Marcuse 1941, 316–319).

### 2.2.2 Critique of the Political Economy

Kant's fundamental philosophical questions about man and his knowledge, activities, and hopes (What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is the human being?) were treated by Marx in the form of a philosophy and theory that "demonstrate the concrete forces and tendencies that prevented and those that promoted" the goal of a society that benefits all (Marcuse 1941, 321). So Marx's reformulation of Kant's question was his categorical imperative – the critique of domination and exploitation.

### 2.2.3 Critique of Domination and Exploitation

Critical theory holds that "man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society" (Marcuse 1988, 153). The goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole (Horkheimer 2002, 219) so that a "society without injustice" (221) emerges that is shaped by "reasonableness, and striving for peace, freedom, and happiness" (222), "in which man's actions no longer flow from a mechanism but from his own decision" (229), and that is "a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression" (241).

### 2.2.4 Ideology Critique

"Basic to the present form of social organization, the antagonisms of the capitalist production process, is the fact that the central phenomena connected with this process do not

immediately appear to men as what they are ‘in reality’, but in masked, ‘perverted’ form” (Marcuse 1988, 70). There are different definitions of ideology. Whereas ideology theories define ideology in a relatively general sense as worldviews or contested worldviews, ideology critique sees it as practice and strategy of those in power for trying to guard their interests by presenting reality in a manipulated or distorted manner. For the Frankfurt School, a critical concept of ideology requires a normative distinction between true and false beliefs and practices. It understands ideology as thoughts, practices, ideas, words, concepts, phrases, sentences, texts, belief systems, meanings, representations, artifacts, institutions, systems, or combinations thereof that represent and justify one group’s or individual’s power, domination, or exploitation of other groups or individuals by misrepresenting, one-dimensionally presenting or distorting reality in symbolic representations. Domination means in this context that there is a system that enables one human side to gain advantages at the expense of others and to sustain this condition. It is a routinised and institutionalised form of asymmetric power, in which one side has the opportunity to shape and control societal structures (such as the production and control of wealth, political decision-making, public discussions, ideas, norms, rules, values), whereas others do not have these opportunities and are facing disadvantages or exclusion from the opportunities of others. Exploitation is a specific form of domination, in which an exploiting class derives wealth advantages at the expense of an exploited class by controlling economic resources and means of coercion in such a way that the exploited class is forced to produce new use-values that the exploiting class controls. Ideology presupposes and comes along with the existence of class societies. Put in Hegelian terms, one can say that ideologies claim the class reality of society is its natural essence.

### 2.2.5 Struggles and Political Practice

“The materialist protest and materialist critique originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle” (Marcuse 1988, 141). “The philosophical ideal of a better world and of true Being are incorporated into the practical aim of struggling mankind, where they take on a human form” (Marcuse 1988, 142).

### 2.2.6 Jürgen Habermas’s Critical Theory

Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) built his approach on the classical Frankfurt School and at the same time worked out the concept of communicative rationality, by which he

went beyond the classical tradition. Habermas distinguishes between instrumental (nonsocial, success-oriented), strategic (social, success-oriented), and communicative action (social, oriented on understanding). Habermas (1987, 333) argues that Horkheimer and Adorno did not take the discussion of communication into account, “failed to recognize the communicative rationality of the lifeworld”. For Habermas (1987, 375), critical theory questions that steering media (money, power) attack “the communicative infrastructure of largely rationalized lifeworlds”. He conceives instrumental action and communicative action as the two fundamental aspects of social praxis. What Habermas wants to express is that the human being is both a labouring and a communicating being and says that the reproduction of life depends on work and interaction/communication. Dallas Smythe expressed the same idea as foundation of a Marxist theory of media and communication.

In a way, Habermas retains the classical Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, but inverts it by putting the stress on communication. Doubts arise if labour can be so strictly separated from communication in a dualistic way. The 20th and 21st century have seen a rising importance of communicative and cultural work in the economy. But is such activity takes on value-generating form, then culture and communication must be part of the economy themselves, base and superstructure become integrated and labour and communication cannot be separated.

For Habermas, emancipatory interest is reflective and enables liberation from dogmatic dependence. In those passages where Habermas tries to define what critical theory is all about, his formulations remain often rather abstract and vague; he mainly points out the emancipatory role of communication and that the goal is undistorted communication. He thereby falls behind the concreteness of Horkheimer’s, Adorno’s, and Marcuse’s notion of critical theory. These thinkers left no doubt that such a theory is all about questioning all structures of domination.

Communication is one of the crucial foundations of the economy: the latter is not just a system of the production of use-values and in class societies of exchange values. It is also a social system because production in any society takes on complex forms beyond individual self-sustenance. The only way for organising the relational dimension of the economy is via communication, in the form of symbolic interaction and/or anonymous forms of indirect communication (as for example via money, markets, the price system, etc.). Human thought is a precondition for human communication and existence. When humans produce in the economy, they do so with a purpose in mind, which means that they anticipate the form of the object and how it will be put to use. The economic

existence of man requires anticipative thinking just like it requires communication. It is in these two specific senses – the importance of communication and thought – that the economy is always and fundamentally cultural. Capitalism has had a history of the commodification of culture and communication, especially since the 20th century. This is not to say that culture and communication necessarily take on the form of a commodity, but that in capitalism they frequently do so in the form of content commodities, audience commodities, and cultural labour power as commodity. In this sense culture has been economised, or, to be more precise commoditised, i.e. put under the influence of the commodity logic.

Communication is certainly an important aspect of a society that is free from domination. However, communication is, in capitalism, also a form of interaction in which ideology, with the help of the mass media, is made available to the dominated groups. Communication is not automatically progressive. For Habermas, the differentiation is between instrumental/strategic reason and communicative reason, whereas for Horkheimer the distinction is between instrumental reason and critical reason and, based on that, between traditional and critical theory. For Habermas communication is an emancipatory concept confined to the lifeworld that is not distorted and not shaped by the steering media money and power. Thus, Habermas splits off communication from instrumentality and thereby neglects the fact that in capitalism communication, just like technology, the media, ideology, or labour, is an instrument that is used by the dominant system to defend its rule. Communication is not pure and untouched by structures of domination; it is antagonistically entangled with them. For Horkheimer (based on Marx), critical theory's goal is man's "emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer 2002, 249) and "the happiness of all individuals" (248). Horkheimer has in mind the emancipation of communication just like the emancipation of work, decision-making, and everyday life. His notion of critical rationality is larger than Habermas's notion of communicative rationality that risks becoming soaked up by noncritical approaches that use Habermas's stress on communication for instrumental purposes. The concept of communication can be critical, but is not necessarily critical, whereas the concept of a critique of domination is necessarily critical.

Whereas communication is not necessarily critical and a critical concept, there is a tradition of critical theory within media and communication studies: Robert T. Craig (1999) points out seven approaches in communication theory. Critical theory is one of them, the others are rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, and sociocultural approaches. He stresses that critique here means the criticism of domination and ideology as well as attempts to change the world for the better by political praxis.

Marxist theory and politics was in the 1920s dominated by structuralist approaches that underestimated the importance of class struggle. Young radicals were looking for philosophical inspiration in order to renew Marxist theory and politics. Some of them, including Herbert Marcuse and Günther Anders, felt that Martin Heidegger's philosophy could help make Marxist theory a concrete philosophy. They therefore became his students in Freiburg. Heidegger's book *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] in particular influenced these scholars' thinking and works. Heidegger became a member of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in May 1933 and stayed a member until the NSDAP was dissolved in 1945. For critical theorists like Marcuse and Anders, who were communist and came from Jewish families, Heidegger's entry into the Nazi Party was a big disappointment. Intellectually, they completely turned away from Heidegger and argued that his philosophy was only pseudo-concrete and that the revolution it promised was a Nazi society built on nationalism, racism, Führer-ideology, anti-Semitism, and a militant anti-Marxism suppressing the labour movement. In the introduction to his 1932 thesis, *Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit* [*Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*] that he was unable, due to the rise of National Socialism, to defend, Marcuse thanked Heidegger. After Marcuse had fled from Germany to the United States, he worked on another book about Hegel that was published in 1941: *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. In this book, Marcuse mentioned Heidegger only once in a list of National Socialist philosophers. This shift in perspective is an indication of how Marcuse's assessment of Heidegger as philosopher and political person had changed. When Marx's (1844) *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* were published in 1932, they deeply impressed Marcuse. He discovered that a truly revolutionary concrete Marxist philosophy could be grounded in the philosophical works of the young Marx and did not need Heidegger at all. The question how deeply influenced Heidegger's thought was by National Socialism remained a disputed question. On the one hand, there were apologists such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, or Richard Rorty who felt inspired by Heidegger and defended and took up the content of his philosophical works. On the other hand, critical theorists, especially Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, argued that Heidegger was a fascist and that National Socialism also shaped his philosophy. This controversy remains topical even today. New insights were gained by the 2014 publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*. In these notebooks, Heidegger wrote that Jews were calculating profiteers, and would have lived based on the principle of race but resisted the Nazis applying this principle to them. He wrote that the Nazis would only practice manner what the Jews would have practiced long before them. World Judaism would be uprooted and abstract and would not want

to sacrifice the blood of Jews in wars, whereas the Germans would only have the choice to sacrifice what Heidegger describes as the best blood of all – German blood – in warfare.

Many commentators have argued that these notebooks show once and for all that Heidegger was a convinced Nazi, an anti-Semite, and a Nazi apologist. They criticise Heidegger for arguing that the Jews were themselves to blame for the Shoah. Critical theory can today only be critical without Heidegger. Critical theory is only possible against and in opposition to Heidegger and Heideggerians. Those who continue to refer positively to Heidegger or argue that these were just unpublished minor remarks become apologists for a fascist and anti-Semitic thinker themselves. Questions concerning racism, fascism, and anti-Semitism are not minor matters, but are for critical theory questions about the totality. Heidegger's works on technology and philosophy continue to influence scholars studying media, communication, information, and technology today. A critical theory of these phenomena is today also only possible without Heidegger.

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## 2.3 Critical Theory and Karl Marx

The six dimensions of a critical theory of society can also be found in Karl Marx's works, which shows the importance of his thought for any critical theory.

### 2.3.1 Critical Theory Uses Dialectical Reasoning as Method of Analysis

The dialectical method identifies contradictions. Contradictions are "the source of all dialectics" (Marx, 1867, 744). Dialectics tries to show how contemporary society and its moments are shaped by contradictions. Contradictions result in the circumstance that society is dynamic and that capitalism ensures the continuity of domination and exploitation by changing the way these phenomena are organised. Dialectics "regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspects as well" (Marx, 1867, 103). The "movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions" (ibid.). In a contradiction, one pole of the dialectic can only exist by way of the opposed pole; they require and exclude each other at the same time. In a dominative society (such as capitalism), contradictions cause problems and are to a certain extent also the seeds for overcoming these problems. They have positive potentials and negative realities at the same time.

Marx analysed capitalism's contradictions, for example, the contradictions between non-owners/owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists, use-value/exchange-value, concrete labour/abstract labour, the simple form of value/the relative and expanded form of value, social relations of humans/relations of things, the fetish of commodities and money/fetishistic thinking, the circulation of commodities/the circulation of money, commodities/money, labour power/wages, subject/object, labour process/valorisation process, subject of labour (labour power, worker)/the means of production (object), variable capital/constant capital, surplus labour/surplus product, necessary labour time/surplus labour time, single worker/cooperation, single company/industry sector, single capital/competing capitals, production/consumption, productive forces/relations of production.

The tension between opposing poles can be resolved in a process that Hegel and Marx called "*Aufhebung*" (sublation) and "negation of the negation": a new/third quality or a new system emerges from the contradiction between two poles. Sublation can take place at different levels of society, either relatively frequently in order to enable a dynamic of domination or infrequently in situations of revolution when domination is questioned. So, in capitalism, there is for example a contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. The use-value of a commodity is a quality that satisfies human needs; for example, movies' use-value is that they satisfy our need to be informed, entertained, and educated. But in capitalism many use-values can only be obtained if we pay money for access to them. We can only get access to them via the commodities' exchange-value: we have to enter an exchange of use-values for money so that a certain quantity of a commodity equals a specific sum of money:  $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ amount of money M}$ . Exchange-value in capitalist society dominates use-value. So the dialectic of use-value and exchange-value in capitalism is that many use-values cannot be accessed without exchange-value and the exchange-values mediate use-values; for example, Hollywood wants to sell movies in the form of cinema displays and DVDs in order to accumulate capital. There are, however, strategies that people use to try to resist commodification: for example, a commodity like education can be turned into a public service that is funded by taxes and is made available to all without payment. Movies in digital format are often "pirated" and spread online, so they become pure use-values: hackers sublimate the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. At the same time, those working for a wage in the production of films, music, and other cultural goods means that cultural work is a commodity and depends on revenues. Therefore cultural workers do not always see downloading favorably and may fear that it deprives them of income. So a new contradiction is created between



cultural wage work, downloading, and the industry's monetary profits and exploitation of cultural workers. Different forms of sublation have been suggested for this contradiction such as the introduction of a cultural flat rate for the use of the Internet and culture, royalty systems, or the introduction of a basic income for cultural workers. The problem is that capitalism is contradictory as such. Therefore Marx sees communism as a society without exchange-value that is based on high productivity, automation, free distribution of all use-values, and voluntary engagement in the creation of use-values. It is a society of use-values that have sublated exchange-values. Everyone gets what s/he needs and works according to his/her abilities.

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

In formulating a critique of domination and exploitation, critical theory develops "new principles for the world out of the principles of the world" (Marx 1997, 214). Dialectical thinking argues that the foundations of a classless society are already developing within capitalism; that capitalism produces new forms of cooperation that are within class relations forms of domination. The forces of production in capitalism are at the same time destructive forces.

### 2.3.2 Critique of the Political Economy: Critical Theory is a Critique of the Political Economy

Critical theory analyses how capital accumulation, surplus value exploitation, and the transformation of aspects of society into commodities (commodification) work and what the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are. "In the critique of

political economy, therefore, we shall examine the basic categories, uncover the contradiction introduced by the free-trade system, and bring out the consequences of both sides of the contradiction" (Engels, 1843/1844, 175).

Karl Marx (1867) titled his opus magnum not *Capital. A Political Economy*, but rather *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Political Economy is a broad field, incorporating also traditions of thinking grounded in classical liberal economic thought and thinkers like Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, Ure, etc. that Marx studied, sublated and was highly critical of in his works. His main point of criticism of Political Economy is that it fetishises capitalism, its thinkers "confine themselves to systematising in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one" (Marx 1867, 175). They postulate that categories like commodities, money, exchange value, capital, markets, or competition are anthropological features of all society, thereby ignoring the categories' historical character and enmeshment into class struggles. Marx showed the contradictions of political economy thought and took classical political economy as starting point for a critique of capitalism that considers "every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion" and analyses how "the movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions" (Marx 1867, 103), which calls for the "development of the contradictions of a given historical form" by political practice (619) and means that Marx's approach is "in its very essence critical and revolutionary" (Marx 1867, 103).

Marx developed a Critique of the Political Economy of Capitalism, which means that his approach is: a) an analysis and critique of capitalism, b) a critique of liberal ideology, thought and academia, and c) transformative practice.

### 2.3.3 Critical Theory is a Critique of Domination and Exploitation

Critical theory questions all thought and practices that justify or uphold domination and exploitation. Marx formulated the categorical imperative of critical theory as the need to overthrow conditions that enslave and alienate human beings (Marx 1997, 257–258). Critical theory wants to show that a good life for all is possible and that domination and exploitation alienate humans from achieving such a society. Therefore, for Marx, the "task of philosophy [...] is to unmask human self-alienation" (Marx 1997, 251). In deconstructing alienation, domination, and exploitation, critical theory also makes demands for a self-determined, participatory, and just democracy. Such a

society is not only a grassroots political democracy but also an economic democracy, in which producers control the production process, and the means and outcomes of production. Critical theory wants to make the world conscious of its own possibilities. The “world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality” (Marx 1997, 214).

### 2.3.4 Ideology Critique: Critical Theory is a Critique of Ideology

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

### 2.3.5 Critical Ethics: Critical Theory Has a Normative Dimension

Criticism “measures individual existence against essence” (Marx 1997, 61–62). This means that critical theory is normative and realistic; it argues that it is possible to logically provide reasonably grounded arguments about what a good society is, that the good society relates to conditions that all humans require to survive (the essence of humans and society), and that we can judge existing societies according to what extent they provide humane conditions or not.

### 2.3.6 Critical Theory is Connected to Struggles for a Just and Fair Society; it is an Intellectual Dimension of Struggles

Critical theory provides a “self-understanding [...] of the age concerning its struggle and wishes” (Marx 1997, 315); it can “show the world why it actually struggles” and is

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

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## 2.4 Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication

Critical political economy is an approach within media and communication studies that has given special attention to what it means to study society, the media, and communication critically, that is, in the context of capitalism, class, power and domination, and social struggles. Dwayne Winseck (2011) provides, in the introduction to the collected volume *The Political Economies of Media*, a mapping of the landscape of political economy research in media and communication studies by identifying four approaches and speaking of “political economies of media”:

- Neoclassical political economy of the media;
- Radical political economy of the media;
- Schumpeterian institutional political economy of the media;
- The cultural industries school.

Within Winseck’s second approach, there is no consensus on how to name this field. In his seminal introduction to the field, *Political Economy of Communication*, Vincent Mosco defines it as the “study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (Mosco 2009, 2). Murdock and Golding (2005) argue that the critical political economy of communications analyses “the interplay between the symbolic and the economic dimensions of public communications” (2005, 60) and “how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the

structured asymmetries in social relations” (62). Terms that have been used for naming this field have been “political economy of communication”, “political economy of communications”, “political economy of culture”, “political economy of information”, “political economy of mass communication”, and “political economy of the media”.

The political economy of communication studies media communication in the context of power relations and the totality of social relations and is committed to moral philosophy and social praxis (Mosco 2009, 2–5). It is holistic, historical, cares about the public good, and engages with moral questions of justice and equity (Murdock and Golding 2005, 61).

Important topics of the critical political economy of communication include, for example, media activism, media and social movements; the commodification of media content, audiences and communication labour; capital accumulation models of the media, media and the public sphere, communication and space-time, the concentration of corporate power in the communication industry, the media and globalisation, media policies and state regulation of the media; communication and social class, gender, race; hegemony; the history of communication industries, media commercialisation, media homogenisation/diversification/multiplication/integration, media and advertising, media power.

Given Marx’s stress on the *critique* of the political economy of, it is best to speak of the critical/critique of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media if a critical approach is meant (as opposed to one grounded in liberalism, neoclassical economics, institutionalism, etc.).

Horkheimer’s notion of instrumental reason and Marcuse’s notion of technological rationality open up connections between the two approaches of the Frankfurt School and the critical political economy of the media. Horkheimer and Marcuse stressed that in capitalism there is a tendency for freedom of action to be replaced by instrumental decision-making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected only to react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in Georg Lukács’s notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx’s (1867) concept of fetishism. Reification means that social relations take on the character and are reduced to the status of things so that the fundamental social nature of society gets concealed behind things (such as commodities or money).

The media in capitalism are modes of reification in a double sense. First, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements. Second, culture is, in capitalism,

to a large degree connected to the commodity form, in the form of cultural commodities that are bought by consumers and in the form of audience and user commodities that media consumers/Internet prosumers become themselves. And third, in order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic. The first and the second dimensions constitute the economic dimension of instrumental reason, the third dimension the ideological form of instrumental reason. Capitalist media are necessarily means of advertising and commodification and spaces of ideology. Advertisement and cultural commodification make humans an instrument for economic profit accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling belief in the system of capital and commodities into humans' subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. It is, of course, an important question to what extent ideology is always successful and to what degree it is questioned and resisted, but the crucial aspect about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation.

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## 2.5 Cultural Studies, Political Economy, and Critique

Some cultural studies scholars (like Lawrence Grossberg) argued that both the Frankfurt School and political economy have a simple model of culture in which people – audiences and consumers – are seen as passive, stupid, manipulated cultural dupes. Scholars who say that the Frankfurt School and the critical political economy of media and communication are pessimistic and elitist and neglect audiences have a simplified understanding of these two approaches. Dallas Smythe, for example, had a very balanced view of the audience: capital would attempt to control audiences, but they would have the potential to resist the powerful and the system of capitalism.

Some forms of cultural studies have, by rejecting Marxism, faced new problems. There is the danger that consumer choice, liberal pluralism, consumption as resistance, and commercial culture are affirmed and celebrated. If resistance lies in consumption and entertainment and is a cultural automatism, then why should people engage in collective political action in social movements or political parties? The danger of culturalism is that it rejects the importance of the analysis and critique of capitalism and class and the interactions of class and domination. The active audience hypothesis

resulted in the assumption that the media in capitalism create a pluralistic society. The limit of this assumption is that there are dominant discourses and unequal access to discourses and skills needed for producing information and making it visible in the public. The aftermath of the 1968 social rebellions resulted not just in the emergence of a new left but also in a new radicalism in the social sciences and humanities. The rise of neoliberalism weakened the political left and critical social sciences and humanities. It was accompanied by a culturalistic turn and the rise of postmodern thought, which were intellectual reflections of a new flexible regime of accumulation coupled with neoliberal ideology. Both cultural studies and critical political economy were influenced by the radicalism of 1968. With the rise of the commodification of everything, rebellious ideas too became commodities, fashion, and entertainment. The radical character of cultural studies was weakened, which is one of the reasons why the late Stuart Hall called for a more radical cultural studies that engages with capitalism and Marx.

The logic of determinism that some cultural studies proclaims as being characteristic of critical theory and political economy is in fact at the heart of the approaches of some of its main representatives. There is no automatism that makes humans resist, there is no automatism that culture is interpreted in a politically progressive way, there is no automatism that people struggle. There is, however, the continuity of capitalism's attempts to commodify culture and of attempts to impose dominant worldviews on people. Both critical theory and critical political economy show these tendencies that are largely left out of the analysis by many cultural studies scholars. At the same time, critical theory and critical political economy see the potential of alternative media production and the role of media in struggles and point out the problems and limits that alternative media use and that interpretation is facing in capitalism.

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## 2.6 Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, Culture, Information, and the Media

Frankfurt School critical theory and the critical political economy of media/communication have both developed critiques of the role of media communication in exploitation, as means of ideology and potential means of liberation and struggle. The largest difference is that the Frankfurt School is profoundly grounded in philosophy, especially Hegelian philosophy and social theory, whereas the Anglo-American tradition of the critical political economy approach has less affinity with philosophy and

more grounding in economic studies and sociology. Both traditions are valuable and important, and are complementary approaches for studying social media critically.

The globalisation of capitalism, its new global crisis, the new imperialism, and the role of knowledge and communication in capitalism (anticipated by Marx's notions of the means of communication and the general intellect) have resulted in a renewed interest in Marx that should also be practiced in media and communication studies (Fuchs 2016; Fuchs 2011; Fuchs and Mosco 2012).

The task for a critical theory and critique of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media is to focus on the critique and analysis of the role of communication, culture, information, and the media in capitalism in the context of: (a) processes of capital accumulation (including the analysis of capital, markets, commodity logic, competition, exchange value, the antagonisms of the mode of production, productive forces, crises, advertising, etc.); (b) class relations (with a focus on work, labour, the mode of the exploitation of surplus value, etc.); (c) domination in general; (d) ideology (both in academia and everyday life) as well as the analysis of and engagement in (e) struggles against the dominant order, which includes the analysis and advancement of (f) social movement struggles and (g) social movement media that (h) aim at the establishment of a democratic socialist society that is based on communication commons as part of structures of commonly owned means of production (Fuchs 2011). The approach thereby realises that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation (Fuchs 2011).

The tradition of the Frankfurt School stresses the notions of technological rationality and instrumental reasons. These concepts open up connections between the two approaches of the Frankfurt School and the Critical Political Economy of the Media: in capitalism there is a tendency that freedom of action is replaced by instrumental decision-making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected to only react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in the notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx's (1867) concept of fetishism. The media in capitalism are modes of reification in a manifold way: first, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements. Second, culture is in capitalism to a large degree connected to the commodity form, in the form of cultural commodities that are bought by consumers and in the form of audience and user commodities that media consumers/Internet prosumers become themselves. Third, in order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its



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

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## 2.7 Four Debates in and about Contemporary Critical Theory

There have been interesting debates in recent years about how to best conceptualise critical theory today that will now be introduced: one focuses on the relationship of redistribution and recognition (Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth) an, one on the relationship of critical sociology and the sociology of critique (Luc Boltanski, Axel Honneth), one on the renewal of the critique of capitalism in critical theory (Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, Hartmut Rosa), and one on the question of what is capitalism (Nancy Fraser, Rahel Jaeggi).

### 2.7.1 Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth: Recognition and Redistribution

Fraser and Honneth (2003) engaged in a debate about the role of recognition and redistribution in critical theory. The encounter between the two philosophers was published as a dialogic book. It focuses on the relationship between identity politics and class politics and how critical theory should position itself on this question. Nancy Fraser is professor of philosophy at the New School in New York City. She has been a leading intellectual who has had a major influence on the development of a feminist critical theory. Axel Honneth is professor of philosophy and director of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. Some consider Honneth to be the successor of Habermas as the leading intellectual figure in German critical theory.

Both Fraser and Honneth question the uncoupling of political demands for the recognition of identities from demands for redistribution. For Fraser, gender-, race-, and class-domination are two-dimensional categories that have economic and cultural aspects. For her, all three categories are processes of malrecognition of status and maldistribution. Fraser treats economy and culture, maldistribution and malrecognition, as two equal levels of society and domination. She sees the two poles as impinging on one another (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 64). Honneth argues that with the exception of Habermas and Gramsci, critical theory has had a tendency to anti-normativism (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 128–129). Whereas Fraser wants to base critical theory on two equal dual categories, redistribution and recognition, Honneth looks for a normative monism that is based on one central category, the one of recognition. He bases his theory on the assumption that humans are psychological beings that strive for self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect, and suffer if they are disrespected. Honneth subdivides recognition into three forms: love, equality, achievement. Distribution struggles are for Honneth “a specific kind of struggle for recognition, in which the appropriate evaluation of the social contributions of individuals or groups is contested” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 171).

Christian Fuchs (2011, chapter 2) argues for a third version of moral philosophy that differs from Fraser’s dualism and Honneth’s monism. Redistribution would be the process of establishing a more participatory society by redistributing economic resources, power, and definition-capacities from dominant groups to oppressed groups. Recognition would be a cultural redistribution process of definition-capacities and reputation. For understanding recognition, a cultural materialist approach would be needed that sees that there can be no recognition without economic redistribution and the other way around. Fuchs argues neither for a separation of the concepts of recognition and redistribution (Fraser) nor for the subordination of the redistribution concept under the recognition concept (Honneth), but for a moral philosophy that is based on the notion of redistribution and considers recognition as a cultural form of redistribution.

### 2.7.2 Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth: Critical Sociology and Sociology of Critique

A second contemporary debate about how to conceptualise critical theory has involved Axel Honneth and Luc Boltanski. Boltanski is professor of sociology at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (School for Advanced Studies in the Social

Sciences) in Paris. Boltanski was invited by Honneth 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 in particular would have taken the latter approach. But the Marxist tradition can in Boltanski's view in general be described as being close to critical sociology that tries to unmask domination, exploitation, and oppression as well as ideologies justifying these phenomena (Boltanski 2011, 6). Boltanski describes his approach of the pragmatic sociology of critique as "rigorous empirical sociology" (23) that 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" (2011, 30, italics in original). Boltanski criticises the fact 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" (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*" (43) for "denunciations of injustice" (37).

In a conversation with Honneth (Boltanski and 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. Just as Boltanski says that in his view Bourdieu's approach saw domination everywhere and failed to see the immanent contradictions of society, Honneth says that Habermas, whom he considers as his main influence, saw 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 using critical capacities would be unequally distributed so that critical sociology would have to analyse the limits that social conditions pose for humans (Boltanski and Honneth 2009, 105). Boltanski argues that his approach is not to use moral philosophy and normative critique, but to assume that there are immanent contradictions in reality, that there is always something in the world that "goes beyond reality" (107). Boltanski argues that ideologies would be something that only those in power needed, whereas everyday people would create many experiences that go beyond ideology (108).

Boltanski (2011) terms normative critical theory “meta-critical theory” (8) or metacritique (6) because it would need an exteriority in order to judge what is good and what is bad. He argues for a purely immanent critique that is grounded in the empirical observation of how humans experience suffering in society and thereby criticise society. Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology of critique is purely immanent. Honneth, in contrast, is more skeptical 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.

Honneth distinguishes between a constructive, transcendental critique, a reconstructive, immanent critique, and a Foucauldian genealogical critique. Critical theory would combine all three forms. In the debate with Fraser, he characterises this combination as immanent transcendence. Transcendence

must be attached to a form of practice or experience which is on the one hand indispensable for social reproduction, and on the other hand – owing to its normative surplus – points beyond all given forms of social organization. [...] ‘transcendence’ should be a property of ‘immanence’ itself, so that the facticity of social relations always contains a dimension of transcending claims.

(Fraser and Honneth 2003, 244)

Fraser sees the immanent element of contemporary society that can transcend it in social movements that engage in political struggles (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 205), whereas Honneth is very critical of new social movements (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 114–125), considers them as rather affirmative, and sees immanent transcendence in an objective morality that should be legally implemented in the form of laws.

### 2.7.3 Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, Hartmut Rosa: Sociology, Capitalism, and Critique

A new development in German critical theory is the emergence of a Jena School of critical theory at the University of Jena’s Department of Sociology, where three professors (Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, and Hartmut Rosa) understand their work to stand in the tradition of the Frankfurt School and Marx’s critique of capitalism. They want to renew this tradition by giving specific focuses to the critical analysis of society.

In a triologue that was published as the book *Soziologie – Kapitalismus – Kritik [Sociology – Capitalism – Critique]*, Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa (2009) point out the

commonalities and differences of their approaches. They stress that commonalities of their approaches are that “overcoming the system is the centre of our critique” (14 [translated from German by CF]), that they argue for a critical sociology and want to go beyond Boltanski’s sociology of critique (15), and that the sociological critique of capitalism would have to be renewed. Their central categories are land grabbing (*Landnahme*, Dörre), acceleration (Rosa), and activation (Lessenich).

Klaus Dörre argues that capitalism uses primitive accumulation for grabbing, appropriating, and subsuming internal and external territories in order to expand. His work is influenced by Rosa Luxemburg and David Harvey’s versions of the Marxist theory of imperialism. Precarious labour and precarious life would be the consequences of a finance-dominated regime of accumulation, which would express itself clearly in the austerity measures taken after the tax-financed bailout of banks and corporations that happened in 2008 and the years following.

Hartmut Rosa says that sociology’s real subject would be the question about what constitutes or harms a good life. Capitalism would be based on the logics of growth and acceleration. Modern society would be based on three logics of acceleration: technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the speed of life. Social struggles would today be struggles about performance, that is, to achieve more in less time. Acceleration would undermine capitalism’s promise to guarantee and increase autonomy. The logic of acceleration would result in ecological crisis, social exclusion, and disruption of systems that do not function based on the logic of acceleration (such as education, the legal system, and the welfare system).

Stephan Lessenich argues that the state mobilises and activates humans for the purposes of capitalism. There would be a late-modern dialectic of mobility and control. He argues for a combination of Marx and Foucault in order to understand this phenomenon. He sees it as a crucial task of critical theory today to bring the analysis of the state back to social theory. The state would, in Fordist capitalism (a form of capitalism based on mass production and mass consumption of standardised commodities that was the dominant form of capitalism in the 20th century up until the 1970s), have provided absorption mechanisms in the form of the welfare state that curbed the negative effects of capitalism. Neoliberalism would have reduced these mechanisms and resulted in an activating state that defines responsibility in individualistic terms as self-care and thereby privatises the management of social risks.

The three authors mutually criticise each other by focusing on a discussion of the approaches' implications for society and politics. Lessenich argues that Dörre formulates a classical social critique by focusing on the critique of exploitation, whereas Rosa would formulate an artistic critique by focusing on the critique of alienation from others, society, work, nature, things, and one's own body, and that both need to be united.

Lessenich hereby makes use of Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) distinction between artistic critique – the critique of alienation that calls for authenticity, creativity, freedom, and autonomy – and social critique – the critique of class that calls for equality and overcoming capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the new spirit of capitalism characteristic of the neoliberal turn of capitalism has incorporated the anti-authoritarian claims of the 1968 movement into capitalism so that the outcome was network capitalism.

Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa have different sociological perspectives, from which they draw differing political conclusions. Yet they stress that what unites them is the commitment to critical theory, and that *Landnahme* is the spatial, acceleration the temporal, and activation the social dimension of “a single economic, cultural and political process, whose foundation is constituted by the logic of capital movement” (Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa 2009, 297 [translated from German by CF]). They conclude that “capitalism does not *have* a pathology, it is one” (300 [translated from German by CF]).

#### 2.7.4 Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi: What is Capitalism?

In a book organised as a conversation, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi (2018) discuss the question of what is capitalism. Their starting point is the fact that since the world economic crisis that started in 2008, there has been a rising interest in the analysis of capitalism. In contrast, during the time from the 1980s until the start of the crisis, capitalism and class were often ignored and their importance were downplayed.

As a consequence, there was little focus on “grasping society as a totality” (5) and more interest in micro-sociological analyses. At the same time, there was the rise of postmodern thought that just like liberalism ignored “the problematic of political economy” (6). Fraser and Jaeggi agree that the turn against economic reductionism enabled a focus on “gender, race, sexuality, and identity” (7) but say that this focus

went too far by ignoring class. Fraser says that a “both/and” (7) approach is needed. She writes that in the 1980s, capitalism shifted from state-managed capitalism to financialised capitalism.

Fraser conceives of capitalism as an institutionalised social order, Jaeggi as a form of life. They agree that core features of capitalism are a) the private property of the means of production and the class relation between producers and owners, b) the labour market, c) capital accumulation, d) markets and the commodity form (15, 19, 28). The engine that drives capitalism is “the exploitation of labor” that “generates surplus value” (19). Fraser argues based on Karl Polanyi that capitalism contains both commodified and non-commodified spheres. Jaeggi adds that the totalisation of commodification creates contradictions and “real social conflicts” (23). For Fraser, class struggles emerge from the economy and boundary struggles from the points where production meets reproduction, economy meets polity, and humans meet nature (167). Such struggles against expropriation include struggles in the context of racism, imperialism, sexism, nationalism, and citizenship (165–166). Fraser’s expanded notion of capitalism also implies an expanded notion of class struggle that includes struggles by unpaid workers beyond wage-labour, including reproductive labour, labour that cultivates resources, and labour that sustains habits and nature (166).

Jaeggi and Fraser agree that capitalism extends beyond its economic core. For Fraser, capitalism is “an *institutionalized social order*” (52). The “economic foreground” has a “non-economic background” (29). Among those conditions of possibility of capitalism is social reproduction or what is also called reproductive labour. Fraser: “Wage labor could neither exist nor be exploited, after all, in the absence of housework, child-raising, schooling, affective care, and a host of other activities that produce new generations of workers, replenish existing generations, and maintain social bonds and shared understandings” (31). Besides social reproduction, the appropriation of nature as tap and sink, state power that operates as legal framework of private property and markets, imperialism, and racial oppression are background conditions of capitalism. For Fraser, expropriation means the confiscation of nature, sexual and reproductive capacity, human beings, and territory. She says that expropriation enables exploitation. Expropriation is for Fraser ongoing primitive accumulation, which is a parallel to Rosa Luxemburg and David Harvey (43). Capital benefits from expropriation by appropriating gratis resources, which allow increasing profit rates. Fraser argues that the background arenas of capitalist society are based on logics different from the commodity logic (49). Fraser talks about the background arenas’ “divergence from the values associated with capitalism’s foreground, such as growth, efficiency, equal exchange, individual choice,

negative liberty, and meritocratic advancement” (50). For Fraser, capitalism is based on four dualisms: production/reproduction, economy/polity, nature/human, exploitation/expropriation (52–53). She argues that there are class struggles in the economy and boundary struggles in the non-economic spheres (69). She thinks of society and capitalist society as consisting of “a plurality of” spheres, “each of which has its own ‘inner logic’ of development” (68).

Jaeggi argues for a “monistic social theory” (51) based on the concept of practices. Social practices congeal into institutions. For Jaeggi, there are economic and non-economic practices and institutions. She rejects the separation between action/lifeworld and system. Jaeggi conceives of capitalism as a form of life. Forms of life are “forms of human coexistence shaped by culture”, “orders of human coexistence” that include an “ensemble of practices and orientations” and “their institutional manifestations and materialization” (Jaeggi 2018, 3), “ensembles of practices *marked by a certain form of inertia*” (Jaeggi 2018, 55), “*clusters of practices* that are *interconnected* and interrelated” (Jaeggi 2018, 41), “*collective formations*” that involve “socially shared practices” (Jaeggi 2018, 42), passive and active which means they are “pregiven and laid out in advance” and simultaneously created by human practices (Jaeggi 2018, 42).

Just like when Fraser speaks of capitalism as an institutionalised social order, speaking of capitalism as a form of life implies for Jaeggi that capitalism goes beyond the economy and “leaves its imprint not only on economic structures but also on how we conceive the world, on our relation to space and time, and on our relationship to nature in ways that affect our lives as a whole, without individuals even being aware of this as a specific imprint” (Jaeggi 2018, 4).

Forms of life are “social formations constituted through what I call ‘ensembles’ of practices, and these include economic practices as well as social and cultural ones. The whole point of a ‘form of life’ approach in this context is to understand economic practices as social practices – in a continuum with the other practices together and in connection to each other” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 137). For Jaeggi, capitalism combines social, economic, and cultural practices (137).

Jaeggi is interested in an immanent crisis critique of capitalism that integrates ethical, functionalist and moral critiques of capitalism and analyses why “life under capitalism is ‘bad’ or an alienated life”, “impoverished and meaningless” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 127). For Jaeggi, alienation means “powerlessness” and “relations of relationlessness”, an inability of humans to establish relations to other humans, things, and social



institutions (134). Fraser argues that capitalism restricts human participation, democracy, and autonomy (131, which is a critique of capitalism centred on political in/justice (132).

The debate between Fraser and Jaeggi is important in several respects:

- **Capitalism:** The two social theorists ascertain the actuality of capitalism and argue that the debate on capitalism needs to be renewed. From the 1980s until the time of the start of the new world economic crisis in 2008, neoliberalism and postmodernism continuously undermined and destroyed the focus on class and capitalism, arguing that such analyses are outdated, economic reductionist, deterministic, totalitarian, etc. At the political level, these forces gave rise to neoliberal and postmodern identity politics. They discredited socialism as viable alternative to capitalism and Marx's theory. The rediscovery of class and capitalism underpins attempts to renew left-wing (anti-)class politics and the idea of socialism.
- **Capitalist society:** Both Fraser and Jaeggi argue that we live in a capitalist society. Such a stress is a countertendency to claims that we live in a radically new society and that everything has fundamentally changed. In this context, notions such as network society, information society, modern society, second modernity, reflexive modernisation, global society, etc. underestimate and downplay the importance of capitalism. Such terms sound very positive and affirm domination, whereas capitalism and capitalist society are inherently critical concepts of society.
- **Alienation:** Both theorists give attention to some version of Marx's concept of alienation. The focus on alienation allows to ground critical theories of society that stress capitalism and class, non-economic domination, and the dialectical mediation of both.

There are also limits and problems of the approaches that Fraser and Jaeggi advance. *First*, both approaches end up with multifactor analyses of society that cannot answer the question of what unites the different realms of capitalist society. Nancy Fraser advances a "perspectival dualism" (57) where multiple logics operate in parallel. What is missing is an answer to the question of what unites the different arenas of capitalist society. The result is a multi-factor analysis that is based on diversity of logics without unity. Fraser cannot explain what it is that makes non-economic spheres part of a *capitalist* society, which implies that capitalism is the key feature of society and is therefore not simply limited to the economy but shapes in a variety of ways also the non-economic spheres.

With an abstract notion of practices as “habitual, rule-governed, socially significant complexes of interlinked actions that have an enabling character and through which purposes are pursued” (Jaeggi 2018, 29), Jaeggi stresses the importance of both the economic and the non-economic in society. Both Fraser and Jaeggi have too much adopted the theoretical language of postmodernism that focuses on plurality and are too much giving in to this approach, which weakens their approach. They cannot explain what unites the diversity of realms in society and end up with ascertaining that there is a plurality of practices (Jaeggi) and arenas (Fraser) in society.

*Second*, both Fraser and Jaeggi cannot explain what is capitalist about the non-economic realms in capitalist society. They postulate multiple logics of alienation and domination operating in parallel that interact. It remains unclear what is the common denominator of these logics.

Third, both the approaches of Fraser and Jaeggi do not adequately incorporate the Marxian notion of society as capitalist totality. Fraser speaks of capitalism as an institutionalised social order and Jaeggi of capitalism as form of life. The concepts of “institutional social order” and “form of life” sound too much situated at the micro- and meso-levels of society. Critical theory needs to operate at the macro-level of society and dialectically mediate that level with the level of institutions, organisations, groups, and individuals. In order to make clear that capitalism is a totality, or what Marx calls *Gesellschaftsformation* (societal formation/formation of society), it is best to simply speak of capitalist society and not to coin notions such as institutional social order and form of life that relativise the focus on society as totality.

The present author has in contrast to dualist approaches advanced dialectical models of society and capitalism where social production is the practice that unites all spheres of society so that all of them are at the same time economic and have specific relative autonomous logics (Fuchs 2020). Marxist-Humanist approaches stress the importance of asking not just what society and capitalism are, but what the human being is and what its role is in society and in capitalist society. They are based on Marx’s insights that humans are both social beings and producing beings. Social production is the materiality of humans and society. Social production is grounded in the economy, namely in the logic of human work processes, but goes beyond the economy in that it shapes all spheres of society and everyday life. Social production is the process of teleological positing by which humans produce and reproduce society through conscious, goal-oriented work processes by which humans transcend their individuality by producing together with and for others. In non-economic spheres, human production

results in the creation and sustenance of structures that have their own logics and are dialectically mediated with the economy. Non-economic realms and practices are at the same time economic and non-economic. There is a dialectic of the economic and the non-economic in society.

Fraser and Jaeggi leave open the answer to the question of what exactly it is that unites and brings together the different realms of capitalist society. The present author has argued that the logic of accumulation unites the spheres of capitalist society (Fuchs 2020). It originates in the capitalist economy and shapes the spheres of capitalist society where accumulation takes on relatively autonomous logics that are based on and mediated with the logic of capital accumulation. The non-economic spheres of capitalist society are at the same time economic and non-economic, realms of production and accumulation and realms that have emergent qualities that go beyond capital accumulation and are dialectically mediated with capital accumulation.

Capitalist society is a society that is shaped by the logic of accumulation and instrumental reason. In the economy, accumulation means the accumulation of capital. In the political system, accumulation means the accumulation of decision-power. In the cultural system, accumulation means the accumulation of reputation and attention. Accumulation results in alienation that creates structures that cause injustices. Injustice means that humans are denied a good life, the realisation of their potentials, and control of the conditions that shape their lives. Accumulation and alienation are forms of inhumanity. Table 2.1 provides a brief overview of some aspects of the present author's model of society.

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## 2.8 Conclusion

Habermas once wrote that "philosophy is preserved in science as critique" (Habermas 1971, 63). If we want to conduct a critical analysis of the media and communication then we require a critical philosophy as foundation. The most important critical philosophy tradition is the one that goes back to Hegel and Marx. This entry has shown that there are multiple ways of establishing a critical theory of society and applying such an approach to the study of media and communication. No matter which approach one takes, Marx's insights that class and domination interact and are foundational phenomena of modern society should lie at the heart of any attempt that sees itself as a critical approach for studying contemporary society and communication in contemporary society.

**TABLE 2.1** Some foundations of a Marxist-Humanist, dialectical model of society

Sphere	General features	Structure	Process	Antagonism	Injustice
Economy	production of use-values	class relation between capital and labour	capital accumulation	capital vs. labour	Capitalist exploitation: capital's private ownership of the means of production, capital, and created products implies the working class' non-ownership and exploitation
Politics	production of collective decisions	nation-state	accumulation of decision-power and influence	bureaucracy vs. citizens	Domination: citizens' lack of influence on political decisions as consequence of the asymmetric distribution of decision-power
Culture	production of meanings	Ideologies	accumulation of reputation, attention and respect	ideologues and celebrities vs. everyday people	Invisibility, disrespect: lack of recognition as consequence of an asymmetric attention economy and ideological scapegoating

The three contemporary debates in critical theory that were introduced focused on the roles of recognition and redistribution, the sociology of critique and critical sociology, and the critique of capitalism today. All three debates matter for studying media and communication critically.

Fraser and Honneth's discussion is one about the relationship between identity politics and class in cultural studies, although in quite different ways that embrace either evolutionary economics, heterodox economics without Marx, or Marx (Fuchs 2014, chapter 3). The crisis has shown that inequality is shaping the world politics today. This question has shaped the conflict between cultural studies and critical political economy in media and communication studies. In light of the first world economic crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it became difficult to ignore the importance of capitalism and class. This has led to a return of the economy today and denies people material, political, and cultural recognition that they can only obtain via a redistribution of wealth, decision-power, and status. The question of how power, power inequalities, and power struggles shape and are shaped by the media is one about distribution and redistribution that entails the demands for equality, participation, and recognition.

The debate between Honneth and Boltanski, critical sociology and the sociology of critique, is one between a more normative and a more empirical sociological approach.

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 engage 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, 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, with scholars *activated* to act as individuals and not so much as groups or collectives of scholars. As a consequence, there are few space, time, and social possibilities for critique and interdisciplinarity that, as suggested and practiced by the Frankfurt School, combines philosophy and empirical research in critical studies. Critical media and communication studies could under ideal circumstances operate as a *critical sociology of critique*. Such an approach combines critical sociology and the sociology of critique. It could be applied for studying media and communication in society with the help of a philosophically grounded normative critical theory. It could also be used for grounding empirical social research into human experiences in the context of mediated and communicative inequalities and struggles for equality. Such empirical studies could in turn inspire new theoretical knowledge.

Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa, show the fruitfulness of debate between colleagues as well as the relevance of critically questioning capitalism. If we think of the media and communication, then capitalism is an all-present reality in the form of transnational media, communication and cultural corporations, media concentration, advertising and consumer culture, the information economy, and ideologies. Yet capitalism is only one existing political economy of the media. There is also a strong tradition of public service media in parts of the world and alternative media connected to social movements and activists who want to create a world of communicative, digital, and cultural commons. The question of capitalism is a core task for critical media and communication studies today. Studies of media and communication inspired by critical theory focus on the analysis of information phenomena in the context of Marxian topics such as dialectics; capitalism; commodity/commodification; surplus value, exploitation, alienation, class; globalisation; ideology/ideology critique; class struggle; commons; public sphere; communism; aesthetics (Fuchs 2011, 2012, 2014).

Fraser and Jaeggi point out the relevance of asking and discussing the question of what capitalism is. While talking about capitalism and class was ignored for a long time, the Fraser/Jaeggi-debate is symptomatic of a new interest in Marx and the

analysis of capitalism and class. Fraser and Jaeggi stress that the society we live in is a capitalist and class society, which helps countering affirmative claims that we live in a postmodern society, knowledge society, network society, information society, modern society, society of reflexive modernisation, second modernity, risk society, global society, etc. Both Fraser and Jaeggi point out specific versions of the concept of alienation, which confirms the relevance of this Marxian notion.

Critical theory was a dominant approach in the social sciences in the years after the 1968 student protests. The rise of neoliberalism and postmodernism in the 1980s transformed universities in such a way that critical theory became less prevalent. This development was intensified after 1989 because many scholars saw the fall of the Soviet system as the historical victory of capitalism and were disillusioned about the feasibility of socialist alternatives. At the same time, the neoliberal mode of capitalism resulted in worldwide dramatic rises of inequality and precarious life and labour, which culminated in a new global economic crisis that started in 2008. Coming to grips with class, inequality, capitalism again became a crucial dimension of the social sciences. This development has resulted in a rising importance of critical theory-approaches both in the social sciences. Critical theory is an approach that is of crucial importance for understanding contemporary society.

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