

SOCIAL  
MEDIA

‘In the fast-changing world of social media, it is imperative to have a text that changes with the times. With several new chapters covering Big Data, Trump, the challenge from China, platform capitalism and more, this thoroughly revised third edition of *Social Media* does just that, even as it retains a strong commitment to critical theory, democratic values, and digital activism.’

Vincent Mosco, author of *The Smart City in a Digital World*

*CHRISTIAN FUCHS*

*SOCIAL  
MEDIA*

*A CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION*

*THIRD EDITION*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian Fuchs is a critical theorist of communication and digital media. He is the author of many works about the roles of media, communication, and the Internet in society.

His books include *Marxist Humanism & Communication Theory* (2021), *Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory* (2020), *Marxism: Karl Marx's Fifteen Key Concepts for Cultural & Communication Studies* (2020), *Nationalism on the Internet* (2020), *Rereading Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism* (2019), *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (2018), *Critical Theory of Communication* (2016), *Reading Marx in the Information Age* (2016), *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (2015), *OccupyMedia!* (2014), *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (2014), *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies* (2011), and *Internet and Society* (2008).

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# PREFACE

The first edition of this book was published in English in 2014. Work on it began in April 2011, and the original book plan of nine chapters has now been transformed into a comprehensive textbook with 15 chapters, now in its third edition. The second edition was published in 2017, and the second English edition, translated into German by Felix Kurz, was published as the first German edition in 2019.

The world of social media and the Internet is changing rapidly along with society. In view of this rapid change, the third English edition is a radical revision and expansion of the second edition. All chapters have been thoroughly revised and changed and several new chapters have been added. German, Turkish and Chinese translations of the book are also available (Turkish translation: Diyar Saraçoğlu, Chinese translation: Wendan Zhao, German translation of the second German edition: Felix Kurz, German translation of the third German edition: Christian Fuchs).

When I started working on the first edition of this book in 2011 it was not clear whether social media were just another Internet hype and a buzzword that would soon disappear. Almost ten years later, the term “social media” has become part of everyday language and social networks, microblogs, wikis, blogs, user-generated photos and videos, and apps have become an integral part of everyday life. Whereas ten years ago people were often looked upon with astonishment when talking about digital work, today there is a constant public and political debate on this topic. Hardly a week goes by without headlines about one or the other event related to social media. The social media phenomenon has become an integral part of today’s society. This book deals with the connection between social media and society.

Big data has become an important phenomenon in today’s society and capitalism. Big data is often understood to mean the immense volume, velocity, and variety of digital data (‘3 Vs’), so that dealing with this data exceeds purely human capacities. But big data is not only about quantitative increases, but also about qualitative changes of society. The new chapter ‘Big Data Capitalism’ deals with these qualitative changes and their implications.

While I was working on the 2011 version of this book everyone was talking about the Arab Spring. It was often claimed to have been about Twitter rebellions and Facebook revolutions. The role of technology in society was overestimated and the assessments were often too techno-euphoric. The majority of studies’ discussion and analysis of the Internet in social movements was at that time limited to progressive political movements. Today, nationalism, racism, right-wing demagoguery, false news, post-factual politics, and authoritarian ideology are

omnipresent in social media and on the Internet. In 2020, Donald Trump's Twitter account had the seventh largest number of followers. In many parts of the world, there are authoritarian leaders, individuals, movements, and parties that use the Internet and social media as new forms of propaganda tools, using networking, commentary features, likes, personalised advertising, user-generated content, etc.

In the new edition of this book these developments are present in the form of the new chapter 'Right-wing Authoritarianism on Social Media'. It deals in particular with Donald Trump and Twitter, and the question of how authoritarianism, racism, and nationalism are communicated on social media.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal is characteristic of the interaction between right-wing ideology, false news, surveillance, capitalist platforms such as Facebook, and neoliberalism. The Facebook chapter of this book has been thoroughly revised and now focuses on 'Facebook and WhatsApp: Surveillance in the Age of Fake News'.

Influencers are an important phenomenon on social media, especially YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Young people, in particular, are followers of influencers. New hopes of users becoming famous via the Internet have been raised. However, only a few, and mostly only those who get the support of brands, talent agencies, and talent networks, are able to achieve this goal of becoming online celebrities. For many, the hopes of becoming famous on the Internet are disappointed and they remain proletarian platform workers. The chapter 'Influencer Capitalism: Reified Consciousness in the Age of Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat' focuses on this topic.

Many of the Internet platforms with the highest number of users are Chinese companies. This is why the term 'BAT' is often used for Chinese social media. It is an acronym for the search engine Baidu, the online shopping group Alibaba (Taobao, TMall), and Tencent (QQ, WeChat). Therefore, a chapter on Chinese social media was added to the second English edition. In the new edition, this chapter has been revised and a discussion of the Chinese social credit system has been added.

Everyone is talking about the sharing and platform economy and the associated 'gig economy'. Uber and Airbnb are characteristic of this development. In reality, the hopes for new prosperity often mean precarious platform labour. In this edition, the chapter on Airbnb and Uber (from the second edition) has been revised and further developed into the chapter 'The Sharing Economy of Airbnb, Uber, and Upwork'. I have also added a new chapter on 'Platform Capitalism'.

The question arises as to what are the alternatives to capitalist social media, digital capitalism, Big Data capitalism, influencer capitalism, and platform capitalism. This is the focus of three chapters in this book. The analysis is particularly interested in perspectives for a public service Internet and platform co-operatives. The chapter 'Wikipedia: A New Democratic Form of Collaborative Work and Production?' has been revised. The two chapters 'Capitalist Social Media's Major Problems and Alternatives' and 'A Manifesto for Truly Social Media' are new additions.

The introduction, as well as the chapters on 'What are Social Media?', Google, Twitter, and 'The Power and Political Economy of Social Media' have been revised and updated.

As the topic of social media becomes more and more diverse, a book about social media that is much longer than the one at hand could certainly be written. As the third English edition is a fundamental revision of the previous editions, in order to take up the new topics and

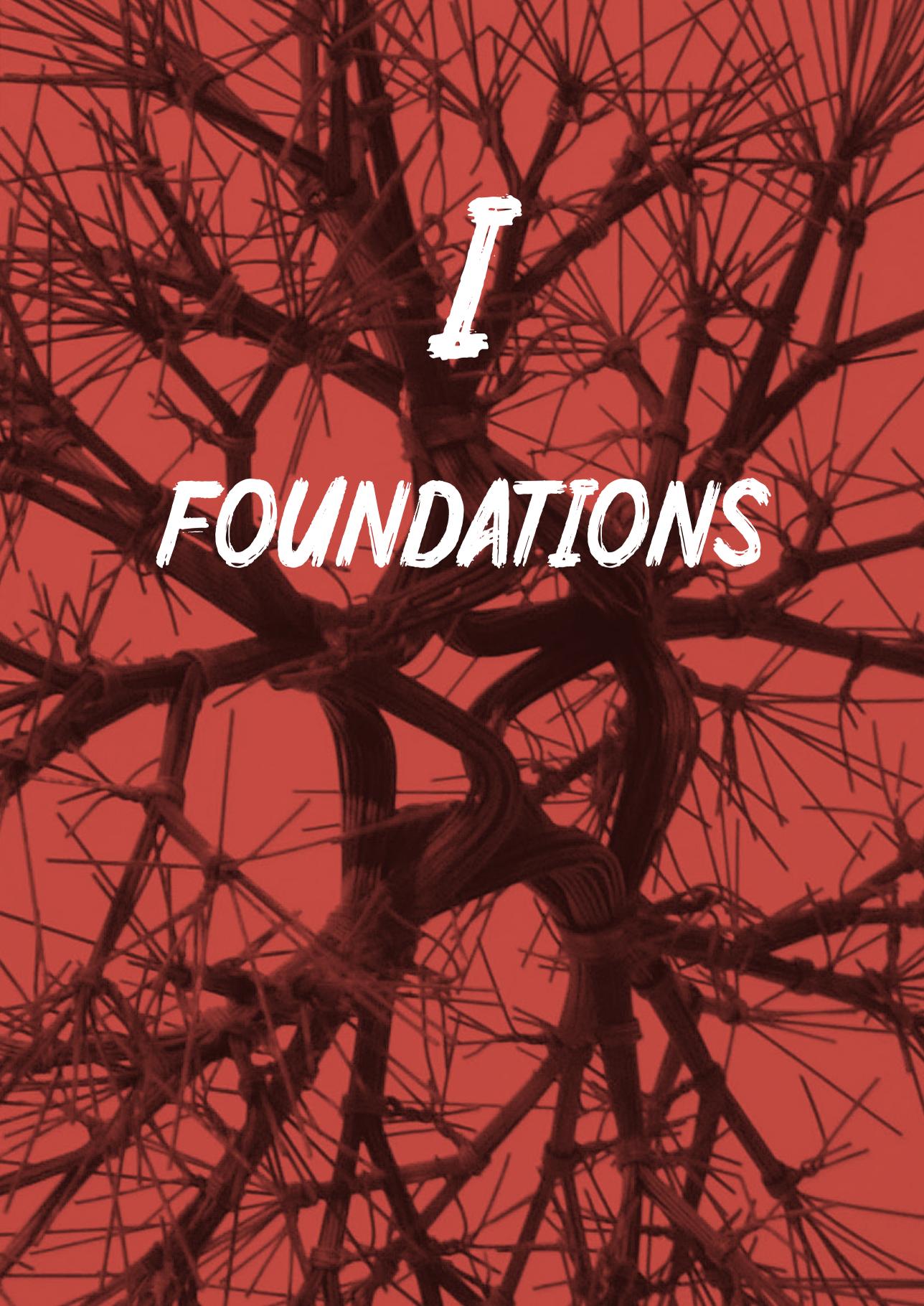
to keep the book accessible, I have also had to delete some chapters. The chapters on Manuel Castells ('Social Media and Communication Power') and Henry Jenkins ('Social Media as Participatory Culture') have been removed, but can still be read in the second English edition. They remain up to date and worth reading. In the first English edition from 2014, there is a chapter on WikiLeaks ('WikiLeaks: Can We Make Power Transparent?'), a topic that is also still relevant today.

The problems of society can be experienced, observed, analysed, and criticised on the Internet and on social media, which have themselves become part of these problems and of society. We live in a capitalism that is full of global problems that threaten humanity. In recent years, the field of critical Internet research has grown steadily. It makes me somewhat optimistic – at least for the social sciences – that there is such a great interest in critical research on the digital and that there are a substantial number of excellent studies that belong to the field of critical Internet research covering a variety of important topics.

As long as exploitation and domination exist, these phenomena will interact in many ways with the Internet, social and digital media, and digital communication. Critical Internet, media, communication, and social research is therefore highly topical and important. The present textbook is a contribution to the foundations of this field of research.

Gmunden, 22 June 2020  
Christian Fuchs





I

*FOUNDATIONS*



# 1

# WHAT IS A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA?

## KEY QUESTIONS

- What is social about social media?
  - What does it mean to think critically?
  - What is critical theory and why is it relevant?
  - What is the difference between administrative theory and critical theory?
  - How can we approach critical theory?
  - How can we use critical theory for studying digital and social media?
- 

## KEY CONCEPTS

Social media  
Critical theory

Marxist theory  
Critical political economy

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## 1.1 OVERVIEW

What is social about social media? What are the implications of social media platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Instagram, Weibo, Wikipedia, and Twitter for power, the economy and politics? This book gives a critical introduction to studying social media. It engages the reader with the concepts needed for critically understanding the world of social media by asking questions such as:

- Chapter 2: What is social about social media?
- Chapter 3: What is big data? What is big data capitalism?
- Chapter 4: How does the business of social media work?
- Chapter 5: What is good and bad about Google, the world's leading Internet platform and search engine?
- Chapter 6: What is the role of privacy, surveillance, and fake news on Facebook, the world's largest social networking site?

- Chapter 7: What are social media influencers? How do these influencers impact the political economy and ideology in the context of YouTube and Instagram?
- Chapter 8: What is the role of Twitter in the new forms of politics and democracy? What are its potentials and limitations in the revitalisation of the political public sphere?
- Chapter 9: How is right-wing authoritarianism communicated on social media?
- Chapter 10: What are the features of the political economy of Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo in the context of the development of the Chinese economy and Chinese society?
- Chapter 11: What is the role of online sharing in contemporary capitalism, including the ideology of sharing, sharing platforms such as the commercial flat-sharing platform Airbnb, and the taxi-location sharing app Uber?
- Chapter 12: What is platform capitalism? What are platform co-operatives and platform socialism?
- Chapter 13: What forms and principles of collaborative knowledge production are characteristic of Wikipedia, the world's most widely accessed wiki-based online encyclopaedia?
- Chapter 14: What are social media's main problems and what alternatives are there?
- Chapter 15: How can we achieve social media that serve the purposes of a just and fair world, in which we control society and communicate in common? What are truly social media?

This book introduces a theoretical framework for critically understanding social media that is used for discussing social media platforms in the context of specific topics: being social (Chapter 2), (big data) capitalism (Chapter 3), the political economy (Chapter 4), political ethics (Chapter 5), surveillance and privacy (Chapter 6), ideology critique (Chapter 7), democracy and the public sphere (Chapter 8), the critical theory of the authoritarian personality and right-wing authoritarianism (Chapter 9), global capitalism (Chapter 10), the gift- and the sharing-economy (Chapter 11), capitalism and socialism (Chapter 12), power and collaborative work (Chapter 13), digital alienation, the digital commons, and digital alternatives (Chapter 14), and digital/communicative socialism (Chapter 15).

The book consists of three parts:

I. Foundations (Chapters 1–3)

II. Applications (Chapters 4–13)

III. Futures (Chapters 14 and 15)

The “Foundations” part introduces critical theory and an analysis of capitalism. We require these foundations in order to understand social media critically. The “Applications” section presents case studies of specific social media platforms and themes. It applies the book's theoretical foundations to particular cases, such as Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, Weibo, Airbnb, Uber, and Wikipedia. The “Futures” part proposes a vision of what the Internet and social media could look like in order to overcome the problems that capitalist social media and the capitalist Internet face.

Social media are often understood as having to do with user-generated content, comprising a network of contacts and followers, the sharing of texts, images, and videos,

possibilities for online re-sharing and the spreading of content, the expression of agreement and disagreement in the form of emoticons and “likes”, and online communication possibilities. The “social” is a complex term. It can mean that our action is shaped by what is happening in society, that we communicate and interact with others, that we co-operate and form communities, etc. But the “social” also has to do with social problems. Some observers argue that social media have themselves become part of social problems. “Social media” is first and foremost a term that makes us think about how Internet platforms are interacting with society. A more detailed engagement with the question of how to define social media will be given in Chapter 2.

## 1.2 WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

When discussing the question “What does it mean to be critical?” with academic colleagues, many have the immediate reaction: we are all critical because we ask critical questions and criticise the work of our academic colleagues. Scholars who characterise themselves as critical thinkers or critical theorists often question these claims. They emphasise the term “critical” and the need for being critical in order to stress that in their view not everyone is critical and that a lot of thought (academic or not) is uncritical. Their basic argument is that not all questions really matter to the same extent for society and that those whom they call uncritical or administrative researchers often focus on questions and research that is irrelevant, or even harmful, for improving society in such a way that all can benefit. They are concerned with questions of power.

### Power

Power is a complex concept. It has to do with who controls society, who is taking important decisions, who owns basic resources, who is considered as being influential, who has the reputation to influence and change society, who is an opinion maker, or who defines dominant norms, rules, and values. The question “Who is in power?” immediately begets the question “And who lacks the capacity to influence and change things?”. Power asymmetries mean that there are groups of people who benefit in society at the expense of others, by using them for their own ends and deriving advantages that do not benefit society as a whole or those who are being used.

It makes a difference whether one asks questions about society with a concern for power or not. Let’s come back to the topic of social media. One can ask a lot of questions that ignore the topic of power. For example:

- Who uses social media?
- For what purposes are social media used?
- Why are they used?
- About what do people communicate on social media?
- What are the most popular social media?
- How can politicians and parties best use social media for obtaining more votes in the next elections?

- How can companies use social media for improving their advertisements and public relations so that they make more profits?
- How much average profit does one click on a targeted ad that is presented on Facebook or Google bring to a company?
- How can a company make profit by crowdsourcing work to users and employing free and open-source software?

Media and communication studies emerged as an academic field in the early twentieth century at the time of the rise of consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism is based on the mass production and mass consumption of commodities. Two basic approaches to studying communication emerged: administrative research and critical research. Administrative research investigates what role communication plays for making the administration of society easier and more efficient and effective. Critical research asks questions about power and the power of communication, and deals with the question of how society and communication can benefit the many and not just the few. Also, in the age of social media, we find more administrative communication and more critical research about communication.

Harold Lasswell (1902–1978) was an influential US-American administrative communication scholar who formulated the Lasswell Formula, which he describes as a “[c]onvenient way to describe an act of communication”, by asking the following question:

“Who  
Says What  
In Which Channel  
To Whom It May Concern:  
With What Effect?” (Lasswell 1948/2007, 216)

Based on this definition, Lasswell distinguishes between communicator analysis (who?), content analysis (what?), media analysis (which channel?), audience research (to whom?), and effects research (with what effect?). The example questions listed above illustrate the application of the Lasswell Formula to social media. They ask: Who says what on which social media/online platforms, to whom, with what effect?

The social researcher Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901–1976) terms the asking and answering of such questions as “administrative research”. He argues that there are economic and political organisations interested in studying such questions in order to increase their profits and power. “Studies of this kind are conducted by the major publishing organizations and radio networks and partly by academic agencies supported by universities or foundations” (Lazarsfeld 1941, 3). Administrative research is “carried through in the service of some kind of administrative agency of public or private character” (8). Lazarsfeld argues that Max Horkheimer developed the idea of “critical research” (9) that embeds the analysis of social phenomena such as communication in broader contexts in society and assesses them based on basic human values.

Administrative questions have three problems. First, many of them ignore the topic of power. They do not ask the questions who benefits and who is disadvantaged by the use

of social media, the Internet, and ICTs (information and communication technologies), and how the benefits of some are based on the disadvantages of others. Second, such questions are based on a particularistic logic: they are concerned with how certain groups, especially companies and politicians, can benefit from social media and ignore the question of how this use benefits or harms others and society at large. Uncritical questions ask, for example, how *companies* can benefit from social media, but do not discuss the working conditions in these companies. Third, such administrative questions ignore focusing on how society as a totality acts as context and shapes communication. They ignore asking big questions about society that have to do with class, capitalism, domination, social struggles, globalisation, the state, ideology, in/equality, power, etc.

Studying social media and the Internet in society deals with three broad issues: the economy, politics, and culture. The digital economy is about the production, distribution, and consumption of digital goods. Digital politics deals with the role of digital and social media communication in democracy and collective decision-making. Digital culture is focused on how humans make meaning of society and express these meanings on the Internet and social media. This book covers all three aspects. The three areas of digital society are interlinked. Think, for example, of Google. In respect to the economy, Google is a monopoly in the search engine market that makes money from targeted ads. In the realm of politics, Google has been criticised for avoiding to pay taxes and advancing a surveillance society. And in the realm of culture, Google is often seen as advancing a culture of superficial and high-speed engagement with information, where algorithms determine how we perceive reality. Whenever you study social media yourself, you can think about how a concrete social media platform or phenomenon is related to the economy, politics, and culture.

## Digital Authoritarianism

In order to start thinking about social media, it is good to engage with an example. Let us consider the example of digital authoritarianism and what it means to ask critical questions about it.

Right-wing authoritarians, such as Donald Trump or Narendra Modi, both have more than 50 million followers on Twitter and have millions of followers on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The far right is a danger to democracy. Given its growth and the following it achieves on the Internet, the question arises as to what makes the far right so effective in using social media.

Donald Trump's use of Twitter has been one of the most widely discussed social media topics in the past years. Frequently, news media report about what he tweeted. His tweets are often insulting, aggressive, or make fun of his opponents. Consider the following example:

I am in Japan at the G-20, representing our Country well, but I heard it was not a good day for Sleepy Joe or Crazy Bernie. One is exhausted, the other is nuts – so what's the big deal? (Twitter: @RealDonaldTrump, 28 June 2019)

Trump here psychologises two of his major political opponents, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. He tries to present them as people with mental disabilities. He says negative things about his opponents in order to appeal to voters. This is an ideological strategy that is part of what political scholars call "authoritarianism". Authoritarianism is a mindset, ideology,

and form of politics that disrespects other human beings, especially political opponents, believes in hierarchies, top-down power, law-and-order politics, warfare as political means, and advocates nationalism. In contemporary society, authoritarianism is often expressed on the Internet and social media.

An example of how we can study social media is the question “How is right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism communicated on social media?” In the book *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, I analysed how Donald Trump uses social media, especially Twitter (Fuchs 2018b). My book *Nationalism 2.0: The Making of Brexit on Social Media* examined user comments on the profiles of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson on the day after the Brexit referendum (Fuchs 2018c). *Nationalism on the Internet: Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News* outlines the foundations of a critical theory of nationalism that are applied in an empirical analysis of right-wing parties’ use of social media in the 2017 federal elections in Austria and Germany (Fuchs 2020c).

## Asking Critical Questions about Digital Authoritarianism

So what does it mean to ask critical questions in the context of digital authoritarianism? Here are some examples:

- What is authoritarian capitalism and why has it emerged?
- How does authoritarian capitalism shape and influence the communication of authoritarianism and nationalism on social media?
- Why do particular right-wing movements, parties, and groups exist in contemporary capitalism?
- What are the political and economic interests that certain individuals, movements, and parties try to enforce by communicating authoritarianism and nationalism on social media?
- How do right-wing actors communicate, represent, and express ideology on social media and how do they thereby distract attention from the real causes of society’s problems and aspects of class, capitalism, and domination?
- How do right-wing actors communicate authoritarian leadership on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?
- How do right-wing actors communicate nationalism on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?
- How do right-wing actors communicate racism and xenophobia on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?
- How do right-wing actors communicate the friend/enemy-scheme on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?
- How do right-wing actors communicate militarism and law-and-order politics on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?
- How do right-wing actors communicate patriarchal values and sexism on social media? How does this ideological element enforce particularist political-economic interests?

- How do users who share right-wing authoritarian ideology react to online ideology? Why do they buy into right-wing prejudices, claims, and ideology?
- What is the role of capitalist companies in authoritarian capitalism and the communication of authoritarian capitalism?
- How is right-wing ideology challenged and questioned on social media?
- How do anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, humanist, and socialist actors opposed to right-wing ideology assess right-wing authoritarian and nationalist social media communication? How do they think such content can best be challenged? In what practices are they involved that challenge nationalism and authoritarianism online? How does anti-fascist communication work? How can it in the best possible way challenge fascism, nationalism, and authoritarianism?
- What are the communicative and online aspects of anti-fascist struggles and how do they work?
- What framework of society and communication do we need so that authoritarian capitalism, far-right ideology, and the communication of authoritarianism on the Internet and social media are overcome? What are the first steps that should be taken for establishing alternatives to authoritarian digital communication?

The list of questions is exemplary and far from complete. It shows that many critical questions can be asked about social media and need to be asked. Thinking critically about society and the media is concerned with creating structures of society and the media where everyone can benefit.

### 1.3 WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY?

Critical theory is a specific form of critical thinking. Why is it relevant for understanding computer technologies?

The history of communication and transport technologies is not a progressive success story. Although many people today benefit in mutual ways from using books, telephones, trains, cars, television, radio, computers, the Internet, or mobile phones, the history of these technologies is deeply embedded in the history of capitalism, colonialism, warfare, exploitation, and inequality. Winseck and Pike (2007) show, with the example of the global expansion of cable and wireless companies (such as Western Union, Commercial Cable Company, Atlantic Telegraph Company or Marconi) in the years 1860–1930, that there was a distinct connection between communication, globalisation, and capitalism.

Edwin Black (2001) has shown in his book *IBM and the Holocaust* that by selling punch-card systems to the Nazis, International Business Machines (IBM) assisted them in their attempt to extinguish the Jews, ethnic minorities, communists, socialists, gay people, the handicapped, and others. The Nazis used these systems for numbering the victims, storing and processing where they should be brought to, what should happen to them, and for organising their transport to extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Majdanek, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, or Sachsenhausen. IBM made an international business out of mass murder (*I-B-M*) by accumulating profits from selling data storage and processing machines to the Nazis. The punch cards covered information on where a victim would be deported, the type of victim he/she was (Jew, homosexual, deserter, prisoner of war, etc.) and his/her status.

Code status 6 was “*Sonderbehandlung*” (special treatment), which meant death in the gas chamber. Black has shown that the system was delivered and maintained by IBM and that IBM New York and the German Nazi state made rental contracts. Black (2001, 9) says that there was a “conscious involvement – directly and through its subsidiaries –” of IBM “in the Holocaust, as well as [...] in the Nazi war machine that murdered millions of others throughout Europe”. The computer and the Internet have their origins in the military-industrial complex and were later commercialised. They both first served the interest of war before companies discovered the profitability of these technologies. The examples show that corporate, military, or state interests often stand above the communicative interest of humans.

This book is based on a concern for human interests and for overcoming the global problems of society. We live in turbulent times that are shaped by worldwide inequality, global economic crisis, global ecological crisis, war and terrorism, high unemployment, precarious living and working conditions, rising poverty levels, etc. In this situation, can all benefit from social media? Or is it likely that only some benefit at the expense of others? In this book, I ask questions about power and (in)equality in contemporary society. I want to stress that it is important to be concerned about alleviating inequality and creating a society of equals, in which all benefit and lead a good life. The book is based on the normative assumption that we need a society and social media that benefit not just some of us, but all of us. This universal concern makes this book a critical book. Therefore, it is called *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

Critical theory is especially connected to one name: Karl Marx.

## You Want Me to Read Karl Marx? Are You Crazy? Why Should I Do That?

Karl Marx does not need much introduction. He was a thorough theorist and fierce critic of capitalism, a public intellectual, a critical journalist, a polemicist, a philosopher, economist, sociologist, political scientist, historian, Hegelian, author (with Friedrich Engels) of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Capital* (1867, 1885, 1894), a leader of the Communist League and the International Workingmen’s Association, and one of the world’s most influential political thinkers, whose work has shaped the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

But wasn’t Marx responsible for the horrors of Stalin and the Soviet Union? Marx did not live in the 1930s, when Stalin organised show trials and killed his opponents. So he cannot really be blamed for what happened more than 50 years after his death. Furthermore, in many of his writings Marx was deeply concerned with humanism and a democratic form of socialism, whereas Stalin and his followers were arguably not (for a thorough discussion of why prejudices against Marx are incorrect, see Eagleton 2018).

The capitalist crisis that started in 2008 has made clear that there are huge gaps between the rich and the poor, the owners and non-owners of capital, and that there are big problems with capitalism. The Occupy movement has made class an important topic. Occupy Wall Street argues that there is a “corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process” and that “the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse [...] has caused the greatest recession in generations”.<sup>1</sup> Occupy movements emerged

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1 <http://occupywallst.org/about/>, accessed on 17 October 2019.

in many parts of the world. Anti-austerity protests such as 15-M in Spain, the Indignant Citizens Movement in Greece, UK Uncut, the People's Assembly against Austerity, the new socialist movements supporting Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the USA, the 2015 anti-austerity student protests in Montreal, the contemporary labour protests in China and other countries that demand better working conditions, and the environmental protests such as Extinction Rebellion that stress the connectedness of capitalism and the destruction of nature, etc., have shown the limits of capitalism. Such developments have come along with an increased interest in Karl Marx's works, which remain very topical in the twenty-first century because capitalism creates crises and inequalities. But isn't Marx a nineteenth-century thinker? Why should I read him if I want to understand social media? Obviously, Marx did not use Facebook. So why should I care about his works today?

## So, You Tell Me that Marx Invented the Internet?

Some communication scholars have said that Marx never commented on networked media or that his approach is outdated and therefore not suited for analysing contemporary media and communication. Marx discussed the implications of the telegraph for the globalisation of trade, production, and society, was one of the first philosophers and sociologists of technology in modern society, anticipated the role of knowledge labour and the rise of an information society, and was himself a critical journalist. This shows that somebody who cares about the analysis of media and communication has many reasons to engage with Marx. Marx stressed the importance of the concept of the social: he highlighted that phenomena in society (such as money or markets and, today, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) do not simply exist, but are the outcome of social relations between human beings. They do not exist automatically and by necessity because humans can change society. Therefore, society and the media are open for change and contain the possibility of a better future. If we want to understand what is social about social media, then reading Marx can help us a lot.

In his work the *Grundrisse*, Marx described a global information network, in which "everyone attempts to inform himself" about others and "connections are introduced" (Marx 1857/1858, 161). Such a description not only sounds like an anticipation of the concept of the Internet, it is also an indication that Marx's thought is relevant for Media/Communication Studies and the study of the Internet and social media. This passage in the *Grundrisse* is an indication that although the Internet as a technology was a product of the Cold War and Californian counter-culture, Marx already anticipated its concept in the nineteenth century – *Karl Marx invented the Internet!*

## How Can One Define Critical Theory?

We can identify six dimensions of a critical theory:

1. Critical ethics
2. Critique of domination and exploitation
3. Dialectical reason
4. Struggles and political practice
5. Ideology critique
6. Critique of the political economy.

## 1 Critical Theory has a Normative Dimension

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

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

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

An example is a slave-owner who owns a slave as property and owns all products that the slave creates; slavery even allows killing her/him if s/he refuses to work. A somewhat different example is Facebook Inc., a company controlled by private shareholders who own the Facebook platform. Facebook’s users create data whenever they are online that refers to their profiles and online behaviour. These data are sold to Facebook’s advertising clients, who are enabled to present targeted advertisements on users’ profiles. Without Facebook users, there would be no profit. So, one can say that users create the monetary value and profit of Facebook. But they do not own this profit, which is rather controlled by Facebook’s shareholders. So, also, Facebook users are exploited.

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

## 3 Critical Theory Uses Dialectical Reasoning as a Method of Analysis

Dialectical reasoning is a philosophical method for understanding the world. The dialectical method identifies contradictions. Contradictions are “the source of all dialectics” (Marx

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

Contradictions result in the circumstance that society is dynamic and that capitalism assures the continuity of domination and exploitation by changing the way these phenomena are 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" (103). In a contradiction, one pole of the dialectic can only exist because the opposing pole exists: they require and exclude each other at the same time. In a dominative society (such as capitalism), contradictions cause problems and are to a certain extent also the seeds for overcoming these problems. They have positive potentials and negative realities at the same time.

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

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

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

Marx was concerned with dialectical relations in society. So, for example, there is a dialectical relation between labour power and wages: labour power is the capacity to work; work

is the transformation of nature by human activity so that goods emerge. In capitalism, a lot of labour power is organised as wage labour. So, wages exist only in relation to labour power (for paying labour power), and capitalism forces workers to earn wages in order to have money for buying goods. Labour and wages cannot exist without one another in capitalism. Workers, however, do not have the power to determine their wages. Marx (1867) argued that the power of the owners of firms that employ workers results in the circumstance that they only pay parts of the work the labour performs, only a certain number of hours a day, whereas the other part is unpaid. The work that is performed unpaid is called surplus-labour and the unpaid work time (measured in hours) surplus-value. Surplus-labour is a specific form of labour that emerges from the relation of labour power and wages in capitalism.

The production of surplus-value is the source of profit. For example, if workers in a company produce goods that are sold for €10,000, but their wages are only €5,000, then there is unpaid surplus-labour that has produced a profit/surplus of €5,000. Marx considers the unpaid production of surplus by workers and the appropriation of this value by capitalists to be the main scandal and injustice of capitalism. He therefore argues that there is a class relation (contradictory interests) between workers and capitalists.

Capitalism's class relation is another dialectical contradiction. Marx says that its sublation is not possible within capitalism, but needs to overcome this type of society and to build a new society. We will come back to the concept of surplus-value in Chapter 4.

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

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

## **4 Critical Theory is Connected to Struggles for a Just and Fair Society: It is an Intellectual Dimension of Struggle**

Critical theory provides a "self-understanding [...] of the age concerning its struggle and wishes" (Marx 1997, 315); it can "show the world why it actually struggles" and is "taking sides [...] with actual struggles" (214). This means that critical theory can help to explain

the causes, conditions, potentials, and limits of struggles. Critical theory rejects the argument that academia and science should and can be value-free. It rather argues that political worldviews shape all thought and theories. There are deeply political reasons why a person is interested in a certain topic, aligns himself/herself with a certain school of thought, develops a particular theory and not another one, refers to certain authors and not others because modern society is shaped by conflicts of interests, and therefore, in surviving and asserting themselves, scholars have to make choices, enter strategic alliances, and defend their positions against others. Critical theory holds not only that theory is always political, but also that critical theory should develop analyses of society that struggle against interests and ideas that justify domination and exploitation.

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

Ideologies are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence, especially those having to do with domination, that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable. In *Capital*, Marx argued that capitalism is inherently ideological because in it, social relations tend to appear as things such as money and commodities sold on markets. This creates the impression that capitalism is a natural state of affairs, has always existed, and cannot be changed. He termed this phenomenon the fetishism of commodities: the social relations between workers' labour appear not "as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1867, 166). A commodity is a peculiar thing that is "strange" (163), "metaphysical" (163), "mystical" (164), and "mysterious" (164), because its value "transcends sensuousness" (163) so that the commodity "stands on its head" and "grotesque ideas" (163) about the nature of the commodity can emerge. Many ideologies are a form of fetishism: they make social relations appear as unchangeable, fixed, and determined by static laws.

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

Ideology critique wants to remind us that everything that exists in society is created by humans in social relationships and that social relationships can be changed. It wants to bring "problems into the self-conscious human form" (Marx 1997, 214), which means that it wants to make humans conscious of the problems they are facing in society and the causes of these problems. Arguments like "there is no alternative to capitalism, neoliberalism, competition, egoism, racism, etc. because man is egoistic, competitive, etc." forget

about the social character of society and create the impression that the results of social activity are unchangeable things. Critical theory provides an “analysis of the mystical consciousness that is unclear about itself” (Marx 1997, 214).

## 6 Critical Theory is a Critique of the Political Economy

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

## 1.4 CRITICAL THEORY APPROACHES

### The Frankfurt School: Not a Sausage, but a Critical Theory

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

Critical theory is *ethical*. It has a “concern with human happiness” (Marcuse 1988, 135). It is a *critique of domination and exploitation*. It holds that “man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society” (153). The goal of critical theory is

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

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

Communication is certainly an important aspect of a society free of domination. It is, however, in capitalism also a form of interaction, in which ideology is, with the help of the mass media, made available to dominated groups. Communication is not automatically progressive. Habermas differentiates instrumental/strategic reason and communicative reason, whereas Horkheimer draws a distinction between instrumental reason and critical reason (Horkheimer 1947) and, based on it, between traditional and critical theory (Horkheimer 2002). Habermas splits off communication from instrumentality and thereby neglects that, in capitalism, the dominant system uses communication just like technology, the media, ideology, or labour as an instrument for defending its rule. Communication is not pure and left untouched by structures of domination; it is antagonistically entangled into them (for foundations of a Marxist-humanist theory of communication, see Fuchs 2020f). For Horkheimer (based on Marx), critical theory’s goal is man’s “emancipation from slavery” (Horkheimer 2002, 249) and “the happiness of all individuals” (248). Horkheimer has in mind the emancipation of communication just like the emancipation of work, decision-making, and everyday life. His notion of critical rationality is larger than Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality, which risks becoming soaked up by non-critical approaches that use Habermas’s stress on communication for instrumental purposes. The concept of communication can be critical, but is not necessarily critical, whereas the concept of a critique of exploitation and domination is necessarily critical.

## Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication: Studying the Media and Communication Critically

In his seminal introduction to the field, Vincent Mosco defines the Political Economy of Communication as the “study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including

communication resources” (Mosco 2009, 2). Marxian Political Economy of Communication decentres the media by “placing in the foreground the analysis of capitalism, including the development of the forces and relations of production, commodification and the production of surplus-value, social class divisions and struggles, contradictions and oppositional movements” (94). Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (2005) argue that the Critical Political Economy of Communication analyses “the interplay between the symbolic and the economic dimensions of public communications” (60) and “how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the structured asymmetries in social relations” (62). For Jonathan Hardy (2014, 3–4), the Critical Political Economy of the Media is a

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

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

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

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

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

## Critical Political Economy and the Frankfurt School are Two Critical Theories but Do We Really Need Two of Them?

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

Horkheimer's (1947) notion of instrumental reason and Marcuse's (1964) notion of technological rationality open up connections between the two approaches. Horkheimer and Marcuse stressed that in capitalism there is a tendency that freedom of action is replaced by instrumental decision-making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected only to react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in Georg Lukács's (1971) notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx's (1867) concept of fetishism. Reification means “that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács 1971, 83).

Capitalist media are modes of reification in a double sense:

First, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements and commodities. Culture is, in capitalism, to a large degree connected to the commodity form: there are cultural commodities that are bought by consumers and audience commodities that the media consumers become themselves by being sold as an audience to the capitalist media's advertising clients (see the debate about audience commodification: Murdock 1978; Smythe 1977).

Second, 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 a means of advertising and commodification and spaces of ideology. Advertisements and cultural commodification make humans an instrument for economic profit accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling the belief in the system of capital and commodities into humans'

subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system, and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. It is of course an important question to what extent ideology is always successful and to what degree it is questioned and resisted, but the crucial aspect about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation.

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

## Critical Theory and Critique of the Political Economy of Social Media

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

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

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

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

“Philosophy is preserved in science as critique” (Habermas 1971, 63). If we want to conduct a critical analysis of social media, then we require a critical philosophy as a foundation. The tradition that goes back to Hegel and Marx is the most suitable critical philosophy tradition for such a project. Dialectical philosophy can provide a strong philosophical and theoretical grounding of Critical Media and Communication Studies (Fuchs 2011b, chapters 2 and 3). It is well suited for helping to bridge gaps in the field of Critical Media and Communication Studies (between the focus on structure and agency, subject and object, reason and experience, technology and society, economy and culture, pessimism and optimism, risks and opportunities, work and pleasure/joy, alienation and self-actualisation, etc.) and for avoiding one-sided approaches.

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

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

## RECOMMENDED READINGS AND EXERCISES

Watch the video “Political Theory – Karl Marx”. It can be found at [www.openculture.com/2018/01/a-short-animated-introduction-to-karl-marx.html](http://www.openculture.com/2018/01/a-short-animated-introduction-to-karl-marx.html) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSQgCy\\_ilcc&t=81s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSQgCy_ilcc&t=81s). The video gives a brief introduction to Marx’s analysis of capitalism.

After watching the video, ask yourself/discuss:

- In what respects is Marx’s analysis and critique of capitalism relevant in the age of the Internet and social media?
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Organise a panel or group discussion on the following topic:

- What does it mean to be critical?

The point of the discussion is to outline different understandings of what it means to be critical. Nobody wants to be or to be called “uncritical”. But there is no agreement on what it means to be critical. Some understand critique to mean the capacity to form an independent opinion. Others argue that critique means to take a sceptical attitude towards any knowledge. Others think critique means the questioning of dominant

*(Continued)*

opinions in public debates. A third position is that critique means the critique of society, power structures, domination, and exploitation, and the struggle for a classless society. Make sure you represent and discuss different positions on what it means to be critical in the discussion.

- The task of the audience is that they join the discussion and afterwards each write a blog post about the debate and its different arguments. Publish these comments online (e.g. on medium.com) and disseminate them via social media. Try to start an online discussion on what it means to be critical based on the blog posts and by using hashtags such as #critique, #criticaltheory, #criticism, etc.
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In media and communication studies, the interest in Marxist political economy has resulted in some important publications. I have myself contributed to the Marxist study of media and communication, which resulted in a number of books. *Marxism: Karl Marx's Fifteen Key Concepts for Cultural and Communication Studies* (Fuchs 2020b) is a student-friendly introduction to Marx for media, communication, and cultural studies. The chapters are written in such a manner that they can be read independently from each other. Read the following chapters in this book. If you are in a group or class, then individuals or groups can present the content of single chapters to the others.

Chapter 4: Commodities, Capital, Capitalism

Chapter 5: Labour and Surplus-Value

Chapter 7: Alienation

Chapter 9: Ideology

Chapter 11: Class Struggles.

Discuss:

- How do the concepts introduced in these chapters help us to critically understand social media and the Internet?
  - How can they be applied to the realm of digital communication on the Internet and social media?
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Horkheimer, Max. 1937. Traditional and critical theory. In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 188–243. New York: Continuum.

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

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

- Every person in the classroom writes down how s/he defines “being critical”. Compare the answers and make a list of which elements of criticism were identified.
  - Discuss in groups and compare the results: How do Horkheimer and Marcuse define critical theory? What are the important elements of critical theory?
  - Compare your own definitions of critique in the initial exercise to Horkheimer’s and Marcuse’s understandings. Argue what commonalities and differences there are.
  - Discuss: What are purposes and tasks of a critical theory of the Internet and social media?
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Marx, Karl. 1844. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Mineola, NY: Dover.

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

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