

Critical Theory

CHRISTIAN FUCHS

University of Westminster, UK

Introduction

Critical theory is an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analyzing political economy, domination, exploitation, and ideologies. It is a normative approach that is based on the judgment that domination is a problem, that a domination-free society is needed. It wants to inform political struggles that want to establish such a society.

The question of what it means to be critical is of high importance for political communication. 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 to legitimate them.

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, born in Germany in 1898, who fled Nazi Germany to the United States 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 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. Horkheimer and Adorno also emigrated, together with the Institute, to the United States, but unlike Marcuse they returned to Germany after the end of World War II. 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 United States, 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 the Habermasian Frankfurt School.

A different approach is to identify dimensions of critical theory at the content level. There are six dimensions of a 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 organized. Ontology is a theory of being, it deals with the question how reality is organized and develops. Praxeology is the study of human action, especially political action and ethics. The six dimensions of critical theory may be illustrated in the following way:

- 1 *Epistemology*
 - A. Dialectical reason.
- 2 *Ontology*
 - A. Critique of the political economy.
 - B. Critique of domination and exploitation.
 - C. Ideology critique.
- 3 *Praxeology*
 - A. Critical ethics.
 - B. Struggles and political practice.

Epistemology

Dialectical reason is an epistemological dimension of critical theory: In Marx's works, concepts that describe the existence of capitalism (profit, surplus value, worker, capital, commodity, etc.) are dialectical because they go beyond the reality of class societies and point toward a transcendental reality beyond class. So for example, in a Marxian framework the concept of class always has the horizon of a classless society, private property has the horizon of the commons, the division of labor has the horizon of a society of well-rounded individuals, and the concept of alienation has the horizon of self-determination. Marxian concepts are negative and positive at the same time; they are an accusation of that which exists in class society and an imperative for changing these conditions. The concepts of contradiction (negation) and negation of the negation are crucial for critical theory: In capitalism, every fact is a negation of human possibilities. The dialectic of capitalism has a structural-objective part: The crisis tendencies of capitalism form an objective structure of contradictions. A specific characteristic of the modern economy is that it is based on the imperative that companies continuously increase their monetary capital by several percent each year. Marx describes this process as capital accumulation. Capital accumulation's contradictions result in crisis. The subjective dialectical force of political struggle is the only way for overcoming these contradictions.

Political communication has a dialectical character: In antagonistic societies the contradictions between groups who have competing interests are expressed through language and on various media.

Ontology

Critique of the political economy forms an ontological dimension of critical theory: Marx treated Kant's fundamental philosophical questions about human beings and their knowledge, activities, and hopes (What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is the human?) in the form of a critical philosophy/theory and critical political economy. Marx's reformulation of Kant's question was his categorical imperative—the critique of domination and exploitation. Critique of the political economy of communication means to study how power relations shape and are shaped by the production, diffusion, and consequences of mediated and unmediated communication.

The critique of domination and exploitation is critical theory's second ontological dimension: Critical theory holds that man can be more than a class individual. The goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole so that a just society with peace, wealth, freedom, and self-fulfillment for all can be achieved. A precondition for such a society is the abolition of classes, exploitation, and all forms of domination. Communication is embedded in manifold ways into domination and exploitation. Examples are: that media are forms of communicating and challenging ideology, that communication labor is in contemporary society an important form of surplus-generating labor, that communication is part of the organization of production, distribution, and consumption, that communications have increasingly been turned from common goods into commodities, that class and power relations are sustained and organized with the help of communication, that social struggles make use of media for communicating protest, and so on.

Ideology critique is critical theory's third ontological dimension: In dominative societies, domination tends to be masked by ideologies that present reality not as it is, but in mythologized, inverted, and distorted ways. Given that in antagonistic societies, political contradictions are expressed in speech acts, it is possible to study ideologies that manifest themselves in such speech and the linguistic and visual strategies political actors use for presenting themselves and those whom they consider as enemies or opponents.

Praxeology

Critical ethics forms a praxeological aspect of critical theory: Critical theory wants to increase and maximize human happiness. It uses the Hegelian method of comparing essence and existence because in class societies an appearance is not automatically rational. This essence can be found in man's positive capacities (such as striving for freedom, sociality, cooperation) and it has the ethical implication that universal conditions

should be created that allow all humans to realize these capacities. For political communication studies critical ethics matters because it needs criteria for judging what are positive and negative aspects of specific media.

Another praxeological dimension is the focus on struggles and political practice: Critical theory feels associated with actual and potential social struggles of exploited and oppressed groups. It maintains a stress on the importance of a better world. Its philosophy is a reflection of realities, potentials, and limits of struggles. Critical political communication scholars understand themselves as public intellectuals who do not just write books and conduct analyses, but connect their knowledge to political debates and struggles.

Critical theory and Jürgen Habermas

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. He distinguishes between instrumental (nonsocial, success-oriented), strategic (social, success-oriented), and communicative action (social, oriented on understanding). For Habermas (1987, p. 375), critical theory questions that so-called steering media (money, power) attack “the communicative infrastructure of largely rationalized lifeworlds.” (Habermas speaks of money and power as “steering media” because he argues that these are structures that elites use for trying to control and dominate society.) He conceives instrumental action and communicative action as the two fundamental aspects of social praxis. What he wants to express is that the human being is both a laboring and a communicating being. 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 labor can be so strictly separated from communication in a dualistic way. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen a rising importance of communicative and cultural work in the economy. But if such activity takes on value-generating form, then culture and communication must be part of the economy themselves, base and superstructure become integrated, and labor and communication cannot be separated.

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 organizing 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 labor power as commodity. In this sense culture has been economized, or, to be more precise commoditized, that is, put under the influence of the commodity logic.

Communication is certainly an important aspect of a domination-free society. Under capitalism, it is however also a form of interaction, in which ideology is with the help of the mass media 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. Habermas splits off communication from instrumentality and thereby neglects to understand that in capitalism the dominant system uses communication just like technology, the media, ideology, or labor as an instrument to defend its rule. Structures of domination do not leave communication untouched and pure, they are rather antagonistically entangled with communication. Habermas's stress on communication is not immune against misuse 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.

Critical theory and Karl Marx

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

Critical theory uses dialectical reasoning as method of analysis: The dialectical method identifies contradictions. Contradictions are the basic building blocks of all dialectics. Dialectics tries to show that and how contemporary society and its moments are shaped by contradictions. 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 organized. In a contradiction, one pole of the dialectic can only exist by the 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 analyzed capitalism's contradictions, for example: the contradictions between nonowners/owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists, use value/exchange value, concrete labor/abstract labor, 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, labor power/wages, subject/object, labor process/valorization process, subject of labor (labor power, worker)/the means of production (object), variable capital/constant capital, surplus labor/surplus product, necessary labor time/surplus labor 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, contradictions are frequently sublated in order to enable capital accumulation: use value/exchange value → value, concrete labour/abstract labor → productive force of labor, the simple form of value/the relative and expanded form of value → the money form, social relations of humans/relations of things → fetishism (the fetish of commodities and money/fetishistic thinking), the circulation of commodities/the circulation of money → the circulation of capital, commodities/money → capital, labor power/wages → surplus labor, subject/object → product, labor process/valorization process → the production process of commodities, subject of labor (labor power, worker)/the means of production (object) → labor process/products, variable capital/constant capital → profit, surplus labor/surplus product → surplus value, necessary labor time/surplus labor time → absolute surplus value production + relative surplus value production + class struggle for reduction of the working day, single worker/cooperation → surveillance and control in the production process + alienation, single company/industry sector → capital concentration/monopoly, single capital/competing capitals → capital concentration + monopolies, production/consumption → crisis, subject of labor (humans) + object of labor (technology) → technologies of means of exploitation.

But 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 and means the end of capitalism. These are especially the antagonisms between productive forces/relations of production, owners/nonowners, 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 nonowning class, then the goal of critical theory is the representation of the interest of oppressed and exploited groups and the overcoming of class society.

Dialectical thinking argues that the foundations of a classless society develop already within capitalism, that capitalism on the one hand produces new forms of cooperation that are on the other hand forms of domination within class relations. The forces of production are in capitalism at the same time destructive forces.

Hegel and Marx’s concept of dialectics can help scholars to understand the fundamentally contradictory character of political communication in modern society: Political communication does not just communicate interests, but communicates such interests due to the antagonistic structure of modern society in opposition to somebody. Critical scholarship analyzes political communication by identifying political contradictions and the ways in which these contradictions are communicated in public or ideologically masked and distorted.

Critical theory is a critique of the political economy: Critical theory analyzes 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. Analyzing the media and communication in modern society from a political-economic perspective means to connect these phenomena to an analysis of capitalism, commodities, labor, power structures, ideologies, concentration tendencies, advertising, space and time, the interaction of exploitation and domination, crises, history, social struggle, and the moral quest for a good society.

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: It is the “categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being” (Marx, 1997, pp. 257f.). 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. 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. One can therefore interpret Marxist approaches and critical theory as a form of political communication: They communicate fundamental deformations of society and humanity and potentials for political change and struggles by which humans can overcome these deformations.

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 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, p. 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 that the results of social activity are unchangeable things.

In modern society, political communication regularly takes on ideological forms. Such ideologies try to advance specific interests by communicating in ways that present certain groups positively, opponents and enemies negatively, play down or conceal negative realities about specific groups, and overstate or invent negative dimensions of opponents and enemies.

Critical theory has a normative dimension: For Marx, critical theory is a normative realism. 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 one can judge existing societies according to the extent that they provide humane conditions or not. Marx found it important not just to analyze capitalism academically, but also to communicate this analysis politically. This explains his own practice as journalist and political actor.

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 a society's self-understanding, struggles, and wishes. It can "show the world why it actually struggles" and is "taking sides [. . .] with actual struggles" (Marx, 1997, p. 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 world-views. 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 one, refers to certain authors and not others, are deeply political because modern society is shaped by conflicts of interests and therefore, for surviving and asserting themselves, scholars have to make choices, enter strategic alliances, and defend their positions against others. In conflict-based and antagonistic societies, academic writing and speaking, scholarship and science are therefore always forms of political communication: They are not just discovery, knowledge construction, or invention, but besides knowledge creation also a production and communication of knowledge about knowledge—the political standpoints of the scholars themselves. Critical theory holds not only that theory is always political, but also that it should develop analyses of society and concepts that assist struggle against interests and ideas that justify domination and exploitation.

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. Political economy of communication is a more general approach that consists of various approaches: the neoclassical approach, the radical/critical approach, the Schumpeterian/institutional approach, and the cultural industries approach (Winseck, 2011).

In his seminal introduction to the field of the critical political economy of communication, the Canadian communication scholar 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, p. 2). Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (2005) were founding figures of the critical political economy of communication approach in the United Kingdom. They argue that the critical political economy of communications analyzes "the interplay between the symbolic and the economic dimensions of public communications" (p. 60) and "how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the structured asymmetries in social relations" (p. 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, or political economy of the media.

The political economy of media and 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. Important topics of the critical political economy of communication include: media activism, media and social movements; the commodification of media content, audiences, and communication labor; 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 globalization, media policies and state regulation of the media; communication and social class, gender, race; hegemony; the history of communication industries, media commercialization, media homogenization/diversification/multiplication/integration, media and advertising, media power.

Karl Marx (1867) titled his magnum opus 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, that Marx studied, sublated, and was highly critical of in his works. His main point of criticism of political economy is that it fetishizes capitalism, its thinkers “confine themselves to systematizing 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, p. 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 thinking 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 analyzes how “the movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions” (Marx, 1867, p. 103), which calls for the “development of the contradictions of a given historical form” by political practice (p. 619) and means that Marx’s approach is “in its very essence critical and revolutionary” (p. 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, (c) transformative practice. Given Marx’s stress on the critique of the political economy of the media, 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.).

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.

Cultural studies is an approach that has a contested relationship to Marxist thinking. So whereas its founding figures such as Raymond Williams and Edward P. Thompson were profound knowers of Marx's works and built a Marxist theory of culture, many later writers distanced themselves from Marxism. Raymond Williams was a cultural theorist and novelist who founded the approach of cultural materialism. Edward P. Thompson was a Marxist historian who studied the history of working-class culture. Contemporary cultural studies on the one hand has a critical strand, taking seriously its own roots in Marxist thought, and on the other hand a revisionist strand that often celebrates capitalist culture without adequately taking the insights of critical theory into account.

Cultural studies and critique

Cultural studies scholars who say that Frankfurt School and the critical political economy of media and communication are pessimistic, elitist, and neglect audiences have a simplified understanding of these two approaches. Some forms of cultural studies have by rejecting Marxism faced new problems. Revisionist cultural studies that have conceived the audience as resisting and active and the media as a source of pleasure have constituted a celebration of "semiotic democracy" that has crossed over into liberalism and has abandoned the Marxist critique of class. 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. The positioning of revisionist cultural studies against Marxist media studies would have resulted in an unchallenged growth of liberal media/communication studies (Curran, 2002, pp. 120f., 146). Cultural studies had its roots in the revolt of the 1960s. Conservatives took up many rebellious ideas (e.g., antistatism, individualism, distance from parliamentary politics) so that the emancipatory character of cultural studies was weakened. Political economy scholars have argued that revisionist cultural studies lacks an engagement with how the economy interacts with culture and the media.

The logic of determinism that revisionist cultural studies proclaims as being characteristic for 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 potentials of alternative media production and the role of media in struggles and point out the problems and limits that alternative media use and interpretation is facing in capitalism.

Frankfurt School critical theory and critique of the political economy of communication 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. Both traditions are valuable, important, and complementary approaches for studying social media critically.

The globalization 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, 2011; Fuchs & 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, labor, 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. The approach thereby realizes that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation.

If one wants to conduct a critical analysis of media, one requires a critical philosophy as foundation. The most important critical philosophy tradition is the one that goes back to Hegel and Marx. There are multiple ways for establishing a critical theory of society and applying such an approach for studying political communication (and

other phenomena). 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.

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 labor, which culminated in a new global economic crisis that started in 2008. Coming to grips with class, inequality, and 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 in general and media and communication studies in particular. Critical theory is an approach that is of crucial importance for understanding contemporary society and political communication.

SEE ALSO: Capitalism; Cultural Studies; Historical Materialism; Ideology; Manipulation; Political Economy; Political Sociology; Propaganda

References

- Curran, J. (2002). *Media and power*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2011). *Foundations of critical media and information studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C., & Mosco, V. (Eds.). (2012). Special issue: Marx is back: The importance of Marxist theory and research for critical communication studies today. *tripleC: Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10(2), 127–632.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action: Vol. 1*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *Theory of communicative action: Vol. 2*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital: Vol. I*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1997). *Writings of the young Marx on philosophy and society*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Mosco, V. (2009). *Political economy of communication* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Murdock, G., & Golding, P. (2005). Culture, communications and political economy. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (pp. 60–83). London, UK: Hodder.
- Winseck, D. (2011). The political economies of media and the transformation of the global media industries: An introductory essay. In D. Winseck & D. Y. Jin (Eds.), *The political economies of media* (pp. 3–48). London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Further reading

- Adorno, T. W. (1993). *Hegel: Three studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Agger, B. (2006). *Critical social theories: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Feenberg, A. (2002). *Transforming technology: A critical theory revisited*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Garnham, N. (1990). *Capitalism and communication*. London, UK: Sage.

- Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (Eds.). (1997). *The political economy of the media*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Held, D. (1980). *Introduction to critical theory*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Critical theory*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Kellner, D. (1989). *Critical theory, Marxism, and modernity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1941). *Reason and revolution: Hegel and the rise of social theory* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Marcuse, H. (2007). *The essential writings*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Smythe, D. W. (1981). *Dependency road*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Smythe, D. W. (1994). *Counterclockwise*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Wiggershaus, R. (1995). *The Frankfurt School: Its history, theories and political significance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Christian Fuchs is professor at the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI), UK. His research interests are in critical theory, critical political economy of the media and communications, critical Internet research, and critical information society studies. He is editor of *tripleC: Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, chair of the European Sociological Association's Research Network 18, Sociology of Communications and Media Research, cofounder of the ICTs and Society Network, and vice chair of the EU COST Dynamics of Virtual Work.