

# Revisiting the Althusser/E. P. Thompson-Controversy: Towards a Marxist Theory of Communication

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## Abstract

This essay revisits the controversy between Louis Althusser's Marxist structuralism and Edward P. Thompson's Marxist humanism. It draws conclusions from this controversy for the foundations of a Marxist theory of communication. The controversy's key disagreements concern the questions of how the economic and the non-economic (the base/superstructure problem) as well as structures and agency are related. Whereas Althusser focuses on articulation and overdetermination, Thompson stresses the role of experience in society in general and class societies in particular. This essay reflects on how both these approaches relate to the role of communication in society and capitalism.

Communication is a process, in which humans produce and reproduce social relations in manners that mediate not just understanding the world and other humans, but also the dialectic of structure and agency and the dialectic of society's realms. For a Marxist theory of society, also the forgotten meaning of communication as commoning is of crucial importance.

**Keywords:** critical theory of communication, Marxist theory, Edward P. Thompson, Louis Althusser, humanism, structuralism, communication theory

## 1. Introduction

<3:> In contemporary society, there is much talk about the role of communication in society. One can hear and read a lot about social media, the information economy, the creative industry, the cultural industries, the digital economy, digital labour, the information society, the information economy, information work, etc. A critical theory of communication can guide our understanding of how communication shapes and is shaped by contemporary society's power structures. Jürgen Habermas' theory of communication takes a dualist approach that separates communication and power (see Fuchs 2016). It is therefore appropriate to explore how an alternative critical theory of communication can go beyond Habermas and for doing so draw on various traditions of critical thought. This paper makes a contribution to <4:> this task by dealing with the question: How can Louis Althusser and Edward P. Thompson's controversy on base/superstructure and structure/agency inform a critical theory of communication?

The base/superstructure problem deals with the question of how the economic and the non-economic are ontologically related. The structure/agency problem is about the relationship of human subjects and their practices to society's structures. To find answers, we need theories of society. In one way or another, all social theories have to deal with these two problems. But Marxist theories have given particular attention to these questions because they are especially concerned with the role of the capitalist economy in society, capitalism's structural contradictions, and class struggles. Althusser and Thompson have made two distinct contributions to this debate. The world of ideas and the communication of ideas have in Marxist theories especially been reflected in the categories of class-consciousness and ideology. The base-superstructure problem also poses questions about the relationship of the material and the ideational in society. One of its concerns is what role ideas have in relation to the economy and society. If we want to establish foundations of a critical theory of communication, it is therefore worthwhile to revisit discussions about the relationship of the economy and culture, the economic and the non-economic, and structure/agency.

Louis Althusser's works on Marxism are among the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential French contributions to critical theory. His most well-known works are *For Marx* (Althusser 2005 [1965]), *Reading Capital* (Althusser and Balibar 2009 [1968]), and the essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (Althusser 1971, 127-186). Althusser's approach of structuralist Marxism has influenced among others Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière, Manuel Castells, Michel Foucault, Nicos Poulantzas, Régis Debray, Stuart Hall, and Slavoj Žižek.

Edward P. Thompson is one of Britain's most well known historians and Marxist scholars. Carl Winslow, editor of *E. P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left*, a collection of important essays of Thompson, characterises this influential Marxist scholar in the book's introduction as "one of the great figures of the post-Second World War left" (Thompson 2014, 9). His best-known works are *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson 1963) and a biography of *William Morris* (Thompson 2011 [1955]). Thompson was a humanist socialist who questioned structuralism's theoretical and political implications. Given Althusser's structuralism and Thompson's humanism, we can expect these authors to approach the base/superstructure problem and the structure/agency-question in quite different ways. And this difference gave rise to a controversy expressed in Thompson's (1978) book *The Poverty of Theory*. This work became one of the most well known criticisms of Althusser. For example it inspired Perry Anderson (1980) to write a 200 page long constructive engagement that discusses the commonalities of and differences between Thompson and Althusser.

This essay proceeds by introducing the background (section 2), discussing Althusser's conception of base and superstructure (section 3), engaging with Thompson's critique of Althusser (section 4), and an outline of foundations of how a critical theory of communication can draw on and go beyond the Althusser and Thompson-debate (section 5).

Thompson is not just a historian, but is also considered as a representative of cultural studies. There is a close relationship between cultural studies and communication studies. We therefore want to briefly discuss aspects of communication in cultural studies as background to the engagement with Thompson's works.

## 2. Background

Culture is a system of meaning-making, whereas communication is the process of (re)producing social relations, sharing and co-constructing meanings. Wherever there is culture, there is communication. Whenever we communicate, we create culture. Cultural studies and communication studies are therefore two closely related fields of study. Stuart Hall (1980) argues cultural studies is based on two paradigms: The "culturalism" of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson on the one hand; and Althusserian structuralism on the other hand. Hall characterises Thompson's work as focusing on "classes as relations, popular struggle, and historical forms of consciousness, class cultures in their historical particularity" (Hall 1980, 61). Hall argues that for both Williams, Hoggart and Thompson culture is "interwoven with all social practices" and "sensuous human praxis" through which "men and women make history" (Hall 1980, 63). The "creative" and "historical agency" constitute "the two key elements in the *humanism*" (63) of what Hall terms *culturalism*. In contrast, structuralism foregrounds language, the whole, the mode of production and ideology as social structures and the human being as a bearer of structures. It stresses the "articulation of parts within a structure" (65) and "determinate conditions" (67).

Hall (1980, 72) argues that he wants to "think forwards from the best elements in the structuralist and culturalist enterprises". But in fact his own work was more influenced by Althusser's and Laclau's structuralism than by so-called "culturalism". This becomes evident in one of Hall's most read and cited works, the *Encoding/Decoding*-essay. In this essay, Hall applies Marx dialectic of production, circulation and consumption to the means of communication. "Thus – to borrow Marx's terms – circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television" (Hall 1973, 3). Hall's paper visualises the communication process as a process of encoding and decoding that consists of structures of production, technological infrastructures, knowledge frameworks, meaning structures, discourses, and programmes (Hall 1973, 4). So for Hall, communications are structures for the articulation, encoding and decoding of meanings and discourses. The human being and its work, creation and social production process are missing in this structuralist model.

Raymond Williams (1976) distinguishes between communication and communications: Whereas communication for Williams means "the passing of ideas, information, and attitudes from person to person" (9), a definition that foregrounds human beings and their relations, he sees as institutions, forms and systems, i.e. structures of communication. In Williams' terms, Hall focuses more on communications than communication.

*Policing the Crisis* is the work, where Hall's Althusserian structural Marxism comes to its height. Let us consider two brief, but typical passages: The state "organises ideologically, through the cultural sphere and the education system – once again, progressively expanded and complexified as the productive needs it serves develop; through the means and media of communication and the orchestration of public opinion" (Hall et al. 1978, 205). "Events, as news, [...] articulate what the audience is assumed to think and know about the society." (56). Hall argues here that the ideological state apparatuses of the education system and the media system organise ideology and that news events articulate ideology. The point here is that cultural structures and not humans are said to act. Hall (1989, 48) says that in communication, meaning and ideology, "discourse is articulated to power" (Hall 1989, 48). Not humans are the subjects, but discourse is a subject that acts. Hall (1982) writes that humans are positioned and languaged (80), ideological discourses win their way (80) and discourse speaks itself through him/her (88). For Hall (1997, 5), "representational systems" such as language and music "communicate feelings and ideas".

The problem with all of these formulations is that they neglect the mentioning of active human beings who communicate with each other and so produce social relations. For Hall and structuralism, it is not humans who communicate ideology, ideas, discourse, feelings, etc. through language, music, news media and other representational system. He rather assumes structures and systems language, speak, communicate, etc. Human communication is subsumed under communications, i.e. structures and systems of communication. Communication is reduced to the status of a structure. Such an approach misses that communication is a social process that connects humans and establishes and maintains relations between them. It is the social practice, in which humans produce and reproduce sociality and social relations by making sense of each other and the world. It is no surprise that the term "human" is not mentioned once in Hall's *Encoding/Decoding*-paper. Hall misses that discourses, communication, and ideology are the processes that relate humans and help constituting particular power relations.

<6:> In the 1980s and 1990s, the major theoretical influence on Hall's approach was no longer exerted by Althusser's structural Marxism, but Foucault's post-structuralism and Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism. Hall's cultural studies thereby undertook a "shift away from its encounter with marxism" (Sparks 1996, 95). What remained was the structuralist outlook, which becomes for example evident in Hall's later works, such as the 1997 book *Representation*. While Althusser is not mentioned a single time, Hall conceives of representation based on Foucault's concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge, as well as Saussure's and Barthes' semiotics. Dealing with the question of the subject, Hall (1997, 54) argues that Saussure "tended to abolish the subject from the question of representation" and that for Foucault, it is "discourse, not the subject, which produces knowledge". Just like earlier in the 1970s, Hall also here takes a structuralist position and argues that it "is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge", that the subject is merely "*produced within discourse*" and

“*subjected to discourse*”, and that the subject is “the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces” (Hall 1997, 55). In contrast to Hall, E.P. Thompson (2014) takes a socialist humanist position. He explains in his essay *Socialist Humanism* that in this approach “real people” (73) and the “creative agency of human labour” (76) form the “centre of [...] aspiration” (73) and “man is human by virtue of his culture” (59). Whereas for Thompson, the human being’s agency is at the core of attention, for Hall it is structures and not humans that act as subjects. Thompson’s approach is grounded in Marx’s “new humanism” that struggles for a society, in which every individual can fully and freely develop (Dunayevskaya 2000, 125) and where the “ultimate creation of freedom rests upon the shortening of the working day” (Dunayevskaya 2000, 89)

The analysis of structures is not unimportant, but it is insufficient to focus on how structures are articulated with each other and condition practices. There is a dialectic of structure and agency that any analysis of communication must take into account. The approach that I take is much closer to humanism, i.e. an approach that according to Marx starts from “the existence of living human individuals” (Marx and Engels 1845/46, 31) who produce in common. And to produce also means to communicate.

This approach constructs a critical theory of communication through the reading of humanist Marxist works from a communication perspective. This method also takes into account the dialectic of structure and practices, but starts from human beings and their social relations of life and production. The approach I use on the one hand focuses on more well known works, such as Raymond Williams works on communication, to argue for a communicative materialism (Fuchs 2017). On the other hand, it also tries to reconstruct lesser known works or elements in works from a communications perspective. E.P. Thompson is remembered as one of the primary historians of the English working class. He practiced history as history from below, which means that he tells the history of the working class through the analysis of workers’ everyday culture, customs, practices, experiences and struggles. By doing so, the question arises what the role is of communication in these processes. A reading of Thompson’s work and its relation to Althusser is one of several entries into and starting points for a critical theory of communication. In his discussion of Williams’ *Long Revolution*, Thompson warned of the assumption that “the central problem of society today is not one of power but of communication”. This means that communication must in a critical analysis always be related to issues of power and class.

Whereas Thompson and Williams were life-long Marxists, Hall’s relation to Marxian theory was ambivalent, “contingent and transitory” (Sparks 1996, 97). Furthermore, Thompson and Williams understood themselves explicitly as socialist humanists. These are two reasons why Thompson is one of the appropriate starting points for a critical theory that stands in the traditions of humanism and Marxism.

Given the outline of some background, we can next engage with the Althusser/Thompson-debate.

### 3. Louis Althusser

Althusser (2005) sees a social formation as consisting of various levels and instances (101) that together form an organic totality (102). He distinguishes between the economic mode of production and “the superstructures, instances which derive from it, but have their own consistency and effectivity” (100). The mode of production consists of the forces and relations of production (110) that form contradictions and are the social formation’s “*conditions of existence*” (100, 110). The superstructure includes “the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organized movements, and so on” (106). The superstructure for Althusser consists of a political and an ideological level – “the State and all the legal, political and ideological forms” (111; see also Althusser 1971, 134). “So in every society we can posit, in forms which are sometimes very paradoxical, the existence of an economic activity as the base, a political organization and ‘ideological’ forms (religion, ethics, philosophy, etc.)” (Althusser 2005, 232). In the essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (1971, 135-136) uses the metaphor of an edifice with different floors for describing the relationship of base and superstructure. It is “the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice” (Althusser 1971, 136)

In Althusser’s theory, we find a “*relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*”, but there is the “*determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*” (Althusser 2005, 111). All levels are related and influence each other, but the economy is the overdetermining factor. Althusser says there is a “mutual conditioning” of levels and contradictions (205). “The superstructure is not the pure phenomenon of the structure, it is also its condition of existence” (205). Althusser takes from Mao (1937) the idea that there is always one overdetermining, principal, dominant, leading contradiction and structure (Althusser 2005, 101, 211). It would not in advance and eternally be determined what the “determinant-contradiction-in-the-last-instance” is, but the economy would in the last instance overdetermine other levels in the selection of the structure in dominance (213)<sup>1</sup>. For Althusser, one contradiction dominates other contradictions. One level dominates other levels. Althusser speaks of the structure in dominance (200). In capitalism, the contradiction between forces and relations of economic production is for him the “principal contradiction” (208).

The problem of the Althusserian approach is not just that it makes the economic the causally determining factor of society. It simultaneously under- and overestimates the role of the economic. The separation of society into economic, political and cultural levels underestimates the economy by ignoring that it operates in all social systems in the form of human production and work. Rules and ideologies do not simply exist. Humans produce and reproduce them. The political and the cultural are economic and non-economic at the same time (Fuchs 2015, chapters 2+3). But not just are culture and politics economic, the economic is also cultural and political.

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Althusser and Balibar (2009, 251)

Althusser underestimates the operation of the non-economic in the economic realm. An example is that the ideologies of individual performance, developing the self, loving your work, etc. operate at the workplace. The cultural industries are a realm of the organisation of the economy, in which news, music, films, software, entertainment, art and other forms of knowledge are produced. These industries today form a significant part of the capitalist economy and are another example of culture operating inside of the economy. Althusser's separation of levels cannot adequately explain the dialectics of the economic and the non-economic.

That Althusser is a post-humanist philosopher becomes evident by the fact that in the language he uses (dominant structures, levels, instances, modes of production, contradictions, etc.), humans and their conscious agency are missing. Socialist humanism is a theoretical and political movement. During Soviet times, it formulated a critique of the Soviet-style regimes that aimed at the humanisation and democratisation of socialism. Its most important political moments were the 1956 Hungarian revolution and the 1968 Prague Spring. The Soviets crushed both uprisings militarily. In Marxist theory, humanism was a theory movement including the Yugoslav praxis group and writers such as C.L.R James, Erich Fromm, Georg Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karel Kosík, Lucien Goldmann, or Raya Dunayevskaya. In Britain, E. P. Thompson was the main representative.

Althusser was critical of Marxist humanism in several respects: At the time when he wrote <8:> *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, he saw humanist potentials in Chinese and Soviet socialism (Althusser 2005, 222, 236-239). Other than Marxist humanists, Althusser considered Marx's early philosophical writings as esoteric, ideological and unscientific. He propagated the existence of an epistemological break in the work of Marx that constitutes a division between an ideological Marx and a scientific Marx (Althusser 2005, 13). "In 1845, Marx broke radically with very theory that based history and politics on an essence of man" (Althusser 2005, 227). Marx would from then on have advanced a theoretical anti-humanism (229) and have focused on using "new concepts, the concepts of mode of production, forces of production, relations of production, superstructure, ideology, etc." (244).

Althusser overlooks the continuity of the notion of the human as social being in Marx's works. In the *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx speaks of the human species being a "social being" (Marx 1988, 105). Society is "the social fabric" of humans (ibid.). In class society, the exploitation of labour limits and cripples humanity, sociality and society. Only a fully developed communism "equals humanism" (102). In 1845, Marx formulated the importance of human sociality in the 6<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach when he wrote that "the essence of man" is "the ensemble of social relations" and that the species "unites the many individuals" (Marx 1845, 570). The old Marx did not, as Althusser claims, abolish this insight, but applied it to the study of capitalism. *Capital* is a critique of political economy in that it shows the social and therefore historical character of commodities, labour, money, capital and class. Marx criticises capitalism's fetishistic structure that makes capitalist society's structures appear as non-social and natural. *Capital* also criticises

bourgeois thought that reifies capitalist categories in its theories. Marx elaborated a critical theory of capitalism that is a critical theory of fetishistic society and thought. His analysis of capitalism in *Capital* is based on the insight that the majority of humans in capitalism produce goods and value that is not their property, but that the dominant class owns as capital and private property. In his early works, he for this phenomenon coined the term alienation.

The alienation of the social in capitalism is not just indirectly present in *Capital* in the form of the critique of fetishism, but also directly as the concept of alienation. Marx writes: “On the other hand, the worker always leaves the process in the same state as he entered it – a personal source of wealth, but deprived of any means of making that wealth a reality for himself. Since, before he enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [entfremdet] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [fremdem Produkt]” (Marx 1867a, 716). He also says in *Capital* that the production process is in capitalism a “pestiferous source of corruption and slavery”, but will “under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development [“Quelle humaner Entwicklung” in the German original]” (Marx 1867a, 621). Marx neither dropped the notion of alienation nor the concept of communism as humanism, but developed both as part of a critical theory of capitalism. It is simply wrong that alienation and humanism are “ideological” concepts “used by Marx in his Early Works” (Althusser 2005, 249) and that they are only the “characteristic feature of the ideological problematic from which Marx emerged” (251).

Althusser is a relational thinker. He conceives a mode of production in relational terms as a specific set of “relations between men and relations between things” and as “relations between men and things” (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 193). He coins in this context the notion of the combinatory (194) for stressing the “*combination (Verbindung)* of a certain number of elements” (193). Also society is for Althusser relational, it is an “articulation” of the “region of the economic [...] with other regions, legal-political and ideological superstructure” (198). Balibar argues that articulation means the “construction (Bau) or mechanism of ‘correspondence’ in which the social formation is presented as constituted out of different levels” – “an economic base, legal and political forms, and ideological forms” (228).

Étienne Balibar’s section in *Reading Capital* is a more thorough engagement with Marx than Althusser’s part. By and large, Balibar takes over Althusser’s basic assumptions. He describes the mode of production as a connection of two connections (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 241): the relations of production (a property connection between humans, i.e. in capitalism between capital and labour) and the productive forces (a real/material appropriation connection between humans and nature).

The Althusserian concept of articulation is always either an articulation between structures or a determination of humans by structures. This becomes evident when Althusser writes that there is “a certain *attribution* of the means

of production to the agents of production" (193). Relations of production determine "the *places* and *functions* occupied and adopted by the agents of production" (198) so that "they are the 'supports' (Träger) of these functions" (199). Humans are for Althusser not society's subjects. "*The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of production*" (199). Also for Balibar, the combination of elements forms society's subject of history (280). Humans are for Balibar "supports for the connexions implied by the structure"; they "fulfil certain determinate functions in the structure" (283).

So in Althusserianism, humans are always subordinated bearers of structures. This approach does not give attention to how structures need to be produced and constantly reproduced through human practices. Societal relations are not abstract, but lived by humans in everyday social relations. Communication is humans' concrete production and reproduction of social relations. Human communication is the process, in which humans connect societal structures to their lived experiences and these lived experiences enter societal structures. Given that humans and their practices have a subordinated role in Althusser's approach, it is no surprise that communication is not a relevant concept. In *For Marx*, the term communication is not used a single time. In *Reading Capital*, the term communication appears twice. Once in a Marx quote that mentions means of communication (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 245) and another time in respect to the question of how to read Marx (355).

In the collection *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Althusser uses the term communication for the presentation of a philosophical contribution (Althusser 1971, 23, 26-27) and in the context of ideological state apparatuses. The communications ideological state apparatus (ISA) is for Althusser one of eight ISAs (Althusser 1971, 143). It includes "press, radio and television, etc." (143). Althusser discerns communications from the cultural ISA that includes "Literature, the Arts, sports, etc." (143). Theatre, live music, sports entertainment certainly are also forms of communication just like the press, radio and television are forms of culture that communicate information that allows humans to reproduce their minds.

Overall, the notion of communication hardly plays a role in Althusser's works. In an anti-humanist approach that denies that humans are society's subject, it does not come as a surprise that there is no place for communicative practices. In the single instances where communication is mentioned in Althusser's works, it is reduced to ideological structures and is pluralised as communications (=communication systems).

In capitalism's economic mode of production, workers through communication co-operate in the production process, managers through authoritative communication command labour, money and exchange-value are the "language of commodities" (Marx 1867a, 143) that acts as means for communicating prices, etc. In the political system, parliamentary debates, election campaigns, demonstrations and programmes are specific forms of political communication. In the cultural system, an ideology communicates dominant ideas to the public in order to try to gain and secure hegemony. Production, control, exchange, politics and ideology do not simply exist as

structures, but are only possible through concrete communicative practices, in which humans relate to each other, make meaning of each other and the world, and produce and reproduce use-values and social structures. Althusser's theory remains too abstract and structuralist for making sense of communication.

#### 4. Edward P. Thompson

*The Poverty of Theory* is Thompson's (1978) more than 200-page-long critique of Althusser and Althusserianism. Thompson argues that the notion of "men as Träger", as bearers, supports and carriers of functions, was already during Marx's <10:> lifetime an ideology that "sought exactly to *impose* this structure upon the working class, and, at the same time, to convince them that they were powerless to resist these 'immutable' laws" (Thompson 1978, 147-148). "Althusser has simply taken over a reigning fashion of bourgeois ideology and named it 'Marxism'" (153). The problem is that structuralism sees humans as passive and not active beings. In this approach, humans "are *structured* by social relations" and "*thought* by ideologies" (153). Althusser overlooks the "*dialogue* between social being and social consciousness" that "goes in both directions" (9).

One should note that Marx does not exclusively use the term *Träger* (bearer) in respect to humans. He for example also writes that use-values are bearers of exchange-value (Marx 1867a, 126) and "bearers of value" (138). And he describes machinery as a "repository [Träger] of capital" (526). And Marx does indeed, as indicated by Thompson, not describe capital and labour as constituted by passive humans without subjectivity. An example is a passage, where Marx writes about the movement of capital:

As the conscious bearer [Träger] of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts, and to which it returns. The objective content of the circulation we have been discussing – the valorization of value – is his subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. Use-values must therefore never be treated as the immediate aim of the capitalist; nor must the profit on any single transaction. His aim is rather the unceasing movement of profit-making. This boundless drive for enrichment, this passionate chase after value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser (Marx 1867a, 254).

The capitalist (as well as the worker) is for Marx conscious, purposefully acting, wilful, passionate, and rational. Workers and capitalists are active subjects in the production and reproduction of capitalism. The labour contract between capitalist and worker is a structural form of violence that compels the worker to enter a relationship of exploitation. The point is that within capitalism, the worker has difficulty to escape the fact s/he has to sell her labour-power because the market is an institutionalised form of economic violence or what Marx (1867a, 899) terms the "silent compulsion of economic relations". Exchange-value and markets are principles that force the worker to actively seek to sell his/her labour-power on the market in order to be

exploited. Class society's institutionalised violence conditions the possibilities and rights of classes and their members. The key aspect is the right to private ownership of the means of production that the bourgeois state defends. Capitalism's structural violence of markets and the state results in workers' actively seeking to sell their labour-power and capitalists' actively controlling the production process: The capitalist "proceeds to consume the commodity, the labour-power he has just bought, i.e. he causes the worker, the bearer of that labour-power, to consume the means of production by his labour.. [...] First, the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs; [...] Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the worker, its immediate producer" (Marx 1867a, 291-292).

Thompson (1978) criticises two aspects of Althusser's and Althusserians' model of society: a) The dualistic separation of levels is undialectical; b) The causal reduction of levels to the economy is mechanistic, reductionist, and static. Levels are "empty of all social and historical content" (95). Instances and levels "are in fact human activities, institutions, and ideas" that humans experience (97). For the British socialist thinker William Morris, culture would in contrast to Althusser not have derived from the economy. Rather, capitalist society is "founded upon forms of exploitation which are simultaneously economic, moral and cultural" (294). Thompson here forgot to mention the political. The reduction of the social to the economy is for Thompson not society's ontology, but a capitalist strategy. He therefore speaks of "capitalism's innate tendency to reduce all human relationships to economic definitions" (294). Althusser propagates a "total collapse of all human activities back into the <11:> elementary terms of a mode of production" (97) and constructs a "conceptual prison", in which "mode of production = social formation" (163).

Perry Anderson (1980) interposes to Thompson's critique that Balibar and Althusser see a plurality in the modes of production active in a social formation (67) and that Thompson's account of society is not so different from Althusser's: Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory* would just like Althusser break down society into the regions of the economy, polity, and culture (Anderson 1980, 70). The difference that Anderson overlooks is, however, that for Althusser these realms are much more separate from each other and determined by the economy, whereas Thompson argues that they dialectically operate in each other and that the economic mode of production is not determining society. Formulated differently, we can say that a societal formation is a totality, in which human agency produces, reproduces and is conditioned by dialectically interconnected and overgrasping economic, political and cultural systems, institutions and structures. Thompson's approach comes much closer to a structure/agency-dialectic than the one of Althusser.

Thompson (1978) argues that "Althusserianism is Stalinism reduced to the paradigm of theory" (182) and "the attempt to reconstruct Stalinism at the level of theory" (131). Althusser says that when he entered the Parti communiste français (PCF), philosophy was impossible. It would have been Stalin who "reduced the madness to a little more reason" (Althusser 2005, 22)

and delivered “the first shock” (Althusser 2005, 27) so that Marxist philosophy became possible in the PCF. Thompson argues that Althusser here refers to Stalin’s (1950/1972) *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics*, a text for which Althusser “has always shown unusual respect” (Thompson 1978, 79).

Thompson was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) from 1942 until 1956 (131), Althusser a member of the Parti communiste français (PCF) from 1948 onwards (131). The CPGB suspended John Saville and E. P. Thompson after they had founded the socialist humanist journal *The Reasoner*. Its subtitle was *A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*. Thompson and Saville commented: “The Executive Committee’s statement makes it clear that a decisive factor in their action was our editorial condemning Soviet intervention in Hungary. The meaning of the Executive’s decision is this: despite our own attempt to find some way for compromise, the leadership of the British Communist Party is determined not to permit discussion to develop in the party free from their control, since they fear that such discussion might lead on to the ‘de-Stalinisation’ of the British party – the ridding of the party of authoritarian methods and attitudes, and of political subservience to the Soviet leadership. [...] We do not intend to appeal against the Executive’s decision, and we have both decided to resign from the party at once” (Saville 1994, 31).

Thompson (1978) asks: “*So where was Althusser in 1956?*” (132). In 1956, Althusser was a member of the PCF, whereas Thompson left the CPGB. “In 1956 it was, at length, officially ‘revealed’ that Stalinism had, for decades, been swatting down men like flies” (132). In 1946, the Soviet military also crushed the Hungarian uprising. PCF leader Maurice Thorez, who saw Stalin as “an eminent Marxist theoretician, a great organizer” (Thorez 1960b), argued that the Hungarian rebellion posed the threat of “fascist barbarism” (Thorez 1960a) and that Soviet military intervention was therefore needed. Thompson (1978) argues that Althusser’s reaction to 1956 would have been a critique of socialist humanism (132). Socialist humanism was “the voice of a Communist opposition, of a total critique of Stalinist practice and theory” (132). Thompson argues that at the time when Althusser denounced socialist humanism, this was a typical move in defence of the Soviet regime (128-130). Althusser would have used a trick, in which “resurgent Stalinism presents itself as anti-Stalinism” (128). In contrast to Thompson, Althusser saw human potentials in Soviet socialism under Khrushchev and Brezhnev and in Chinese socialism under Mao.

Perry Anderson (1980) defends Althusser by arguing that he was not a Stalinist, but a Maoist (107-110), and that in the 1970s he spoke out against Stalinism and was in favour of the Workers’ Defence Committee in Poland (111). Anderson misses that Thompson’s main point is about the parallels between Stalin’s and Althusser’s theoretical approaches and their political implications.

<12:> Stalin was “a mixture of Marxist theorist, pragmatist, and hypocrite” (Thompson 1978, 141). For Stalin, history is a process without subject and human agency, humans are only “supports” or “vectors of ulterior structural

determinations” (Thompson 1978, 79). Stalin (1939) describes the development of society based on Engels’ dialectics of nature in correspondence to natural laws. He sees history as a linear succession of modes of production determined by the economy. It is a “process of development from the lower to the higher” (Stalin 1939, 109). “This means that the history of development of society is above all the history of the development of production, the history of the modes of production which succeed each other in the course of centuries, the history of the development of productive forces and people’s relations of production” (121). The economic mode of production would determine the superstructure: “Whatever is the mode of production of a society, such in the main is the society itself, its ideas and theories, its political views and institutions. Or, to put it more crudely, whatever is man’s manner of life, such is his manner of thought” (121). Given the natural development of society, the October Revolution would have necessarily resulted in the establishment of a socialist society: “[T]he U.S.S.R. has already done away with capitalism and has set up a Socialist system” (Stalin 1939, 119).

The implication of these theoretical assumptions was for Stalin that anyone who was critical of him was a counter-revolutionary who opposed socialism and wanted to establish capitalism in Russia and therefore needed to be killed. This became for example evident when Stalin commented shortly after Nikolai Bukharin, one of the main Bolshevik theorists, had been arrested in 1937. Bukharin was put on trial together with others, was convicted to death for planning a conspiratorial coup, planning terrorism and for anti-Soviet espionage. He was executed in March 1938. Stalin said: “I think it is clear to everybody now that the present-day wreckers and diversionists, no matter what disguise they may adopt, either Trotskyite or Bukharinite, have long ceased to be a political trend in the labour movement, that they have become transformed into a gang of professional wreckers, diversionists, spies and assassins, without principles and without ideals. Of course, these gentlemen must be ruthlessly smashed and uprooted as the enemies of the working class, as betrayers of our country” (Stalin 1937, 277). Stalin’s mechanistic interpretation of history and society justified the killing of his opponents. Mao (1937) was in his analysis of dialectical contradictions full of praise for Stalin’s theory and politics: “Stalin’s analysis provides us with a model for understanding the particularity and the universality of contradiction and their interconnection” (330). “The history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union shows us that the contradictions between the correct thinking of Lenin and Stalin and the fallacious thinking of Trotsky, Bukharin and others did not at first manifest themselves in an antagonistic form, but that later they did develop into antagonism” (344).

Thompson was concerned about the parallels between mechanistic conceptions of society by the likes of Stalin and Mao and Althusserianism’s concept of society that for example argues that “every mode of production necessarily *induces* the existence of the (superstructural) instances that specifically correspond to it” (Althusser 2003, 23) or that the “history of society can be reduced to a discontinuous succession of modes of production” (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 229). Thompson criticised both the theoretical

homology and the political abuse that such theorising entails.

At this point it will have become evident to the reader that my theoretical and political sympathies are with humanism and not structuralism. Thompson's approach has advantages and at the same time certain limits. His key category is class experience. Experience arises because humans are rational beings who "think about what is happening to themselves and their world" (Thompson 1978, 8). Changed experience "exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness" (8). Experience includes culture, ideas, instincts, feelings, norms, obligations, values, beliefs, affects, morals (Thompson 1978, 171), needs, <13:> interests, consciousness (164), myth, science, law, ideology (9), and thought (98). Experience in relation to class has to do with class-consciousness expressed in a class' culture, traditions, values, ideas and institutions (Thompson 1963, 10). Popular culture derives from common experience and customs in common (Thompson 1993).

It is evident that some of the terms that Thompson associates with experience relate to individual subjectivity, others to collective subjectivity, and some have to do with both. Experience is both social and individual. The theoretical problem that arises is when Thompson (1978, 98) argues that experience is a "middle term between social being and social consciousness" (Thompson 1978, 98) and that "as being is thought so thought is also lived – people may, within limits, *live* the social or sexual expectations which are imposed upon them by dominant conceptual categories" (Thompson 1978, 9).

The theoretical problematic is to discern the individual's thoughts from the everyday relations, in which humans live and act. Experience certainly includes both dimensions, but a term seems to be missing that allows us to distinguish human social experience from individual experience as well as collective from individual subjectivity. Whereas cognition and thinking are always ongoing in the individual's brain, they are only possible through and at the same time constitute the foundation of communication. Through communication humans live, produce, and reproduce society's structures in everyday life and do so based on their individual subjectivity that in the communication process is symbolically externalised in mutual interaction with at least another human subject. Communication is a necessary condition for the formation of collective subjectivity (shared identities, norms and values, rules, common practices). Communication is the missing link in Thompson's work, the category that allows us to discern between individual subjectivity and collective subjectivity. Communication is the process, in which humans' individual subjectivities meet, share knowledge, and produce and reproduce a collective subjectivity.

Class is for Thompson (1963, 9) not a structure or category, but a historical and human relationship. Class happens "when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs" (Thompson 1963, 9). "Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition" (Thompson 1963, 11). Classes "arise because men and

women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to value in class ways” (Thompson 1978, 106-107). Perry Anderson (1980, 42) importantly points out that it seems that for Thompson “class = class consciousness”. Thompson’s understanding of class faces the problem that classes “have frequently existed whose members did not “‘identify their antagonistic interests’ in any process of common clarification of struggle” (Anderson 1980, 40) and that it implies the possibility of class struggle without class and of class struggle operating only with the existence of a ruling class (42). That humans’ position in the relations of production determines class status does not mean that class is an abstract structure. Rather class is lived in everyday economic relations in one’s own class and between classes. And these social relations are established in and through communicative processes. Through communication, humans (re)produce social relations, including class relations. The decisive question is if the dominated class communicates politically and consciously about its class position and based on this conscious communication organises itself politically. Class is always objective (a class structure in society) and subjective (lived through communication) at the same time (class objectivity subjectified, class subjectivity objectified), but it is not always politically organised.

Ideology is certainly not a key category for Thompson, which means that an important form of subjectivity and consciousness is rather missing in his approach. He criticises that for Althusser ideology is in the form of ideological state apparatuses “imposed upon the innocent and utterly passive, recipient, man” (Thompson 1978, 174). Thompson argues that moral values are not mechanically imposed and “hailed”, but “lived” (175). He does not reject the notion of ideology, but stresses that ideology not just works top-down, but has a bottom-up hegemonic dimension:

<14:> “This is not to say that values are independent of the colouration of ideology; [...] But to suppose from this that they are ‘imposed’ (by a State!) as ‘ideology’ is to mistake the whole social and cultural process. This imposition will always be attempted, with greater or lesser success, but it cannot succeed at all unless there is some congruence between the imposed rules and view-of-life and the necessary business of living a given mode of production” (175). Ideologies are situated in “the people’s way of life” that is “culture’s material abode” (176).

Thompson well points out ideology’s subject/object-dialectic. But the problem is that he assumes a certain determinism of resistance against ideology: “Moreover, values no less than material needs will always be a locus of *contradiction*, of struggle between alternative values and views-of-life” (175). “Conflicts of values, and choices of values, always take place” (175). Ideology is always a *communication process*, in which dominant groups try to justify and impose their moral values on others. If this attempt is (un)successful, partly (un)successful, or temporarily (un)successful depends on many factors, including the availability and distribution of power. If the dominant class can mobilise means of power (such as the mass media, public discourses, money, influence, reputation), then it can increase the likelihood to successfully

impose ideologies. The ideological communication processes' outcomes are not arbitrary, but subject to power dynamics and asymmetries that confront dominated groups.

In the 832 pages of *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson (1963) uses the terms *communication(s)* and to *communicate* less than 30 times, always in theoretically unreflected manners (see pages 24, 134, 195, 219, 378, 385, 442, 503, 516, 543, 597, 598, 609, 616, 651, 652, 684, 701, 746, 749, 758, 786, 808, 818). The one communication issue that Thompson is more interested in are militant working class movements' forms of underground communication. He speaks of an "underground chain of communication" (698), enciphered communication (169), and the Luddites' secret, masked and disguised communications (554, 565, 478). In *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*' 404 pages, Thompson (1978) mentions the words *communication*, *communications* and to *communicate* 14 times (on pages 110, 136, 174, 191, 221, 262, 266, 273, 336, 386, 391, 393). The analysis allows us to conclude that communication is a largely absent theoretical category in Thompson's works. His theoretical limit is that he ignores the role of communication in respect to experience, class and ideology.

Communication is the blind spot of both Althusser's and Thompson's approach and many other Marxist works and theories. A Marxist theory of communication is needed. What we can learn from the controversy between Althusser and Thompson is that thinking about the relationships between the economic and the non-economic and between structures and agency poses key theoretical questions for any social theory, including a Marxist theory of communication.

## **5. Towards a Critical Theory of Communication**

### **5.1. Communication in Society: Communication as the Process of (Re)Producing Social Relations within Societal Relations**

For Althusser and Balibar, articulation is an expression of society's relational character. But for them, articulation is a relation between structures, not between humans, who are for Althusserians just bearers of structures that are articulated with each other. For the two authors, the economy determines society "in the last instance". The economy in this approach determines in the last instance what a particular society's determining instance is. The problem here is not so much speaking of the last instance, but the notion of determination. Given that the social production of resources plays a role in all social systems, there can be no doubt that the economy is important everywhere in society. The notion of determination implies a too restrictive, one-sided and mono-causal relationship. In the case of Althusser, articulation not just means relations, but economically (over-)determined relations. At the same time, Althusserian relations are abstract and detached from human practices. It is therefore no surprise that communication is a blind spot of Althusser's works. That structures mediate human agency means that they enable human communication through which social relations are <15:>

produced and reproduced. At the aggregate level of society, communication produces and reproduces societal relations. Wherever there is society, there are structure/agency-dialectics. And wherever there are structure/agency-dialectics, there is mediation by structures and communication. Society's structures mediate humans' communicative practices that (re)produce structures that are society's media.

We need to start the analysis of society with humans living in social relations. A social relation is a connection between humans that allows them to make meaning of each other. This is why Max Weber defines a social relationship as "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms" (Weber 1978, 26). A social relation can be ephemeral and transient. But it can also become a structure. A structure is a regularised social relation that has some stability (the behaviour is repeated or allows repeatability) in space-time. Structures provide a social system's reproducibility in space and time. They are the recursive result of humans' social practices: Humans produce and reproduce social structures in and through their actions and these structures condition, enable and constrain human behaviour and social action in society. There is a dialectic of structures and practices in society. Giddens therefore argues that "the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens 1984, 25; see Fuchs 2003 for a discussion).

One general sociological insight that plays a key role in Marx's works is that everything in society is a social relation. In *Capital*, Marx outlines a critical sociology of capitalism and shows that commodities, value, labour, money and capital are not things, but social relations. Capitalism is constituted through the class relationship between labour and capital.

Marx for example writes:

"[...] daß das Kapital nicht eine Sache ist, sondern ein durch Sachen vermitteltes Verhältnis zwischen Personen" (Marx 1867b, 793).

Wert ist "etwas rein Gesellschaftliches" (Marx 1867b, 71).

"Die relative Wertform einer Ware" verbirgt "ein gesellschaftliches Verhältnis" (Marx 1867b, 71).

English translations of Marx are often not precise and translate *gesellschaftliches Verhältnis* as social relation and *gesellschaftlich* as social. In the Penguin-edition, the three passages above read:

"capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things" (Marx 1867a, 932).

Value is "something purely social" (Marx 1867a, 149)

“The relative value-form [...] conceals a social relation” (Marx 1867a, 149)

Marx refers to the role of the social in society and therefore speaks of capital and value as societal relations and something purely societal. Humans in their everyday life constantly enter and leave social relations. Society is the totality of humans' social relationships. Given that social systems are interconnected through humans' multiple roles, relations and activities, they are interrelated. Social relations are always societal relations because society's realms of interaction shape and are shaped by everyday practices.

Georg Lukács (1971) expresses the societal and relational character of human existence with the help of the concept of mediation. Mediation is “a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world” (162). “[O]bjects as they are given” (155) are not things-in-themselves. They are what they are only through relations and these relations are “*the real tendencies of the objects themselves*” (155). In Hegelian language, being-in-itself can only exist through being-for-another. A single individual is, as Marx says in the 6<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach “the ensemble of societal relations” (MEW 3, 6). Societal relations such as capital can continue to exist when one specific capitalist or worker dies because s/he can be replaced. This circumstance indicates the general character of societal relations. Social relations are in contrast concrete, they are the relations humans enter in their everyday life with each other; for example the workplace, where Peter meets and co-operates with his colleagues Mary and Joe and where he has a quarrel with manager Sandra over working hours, overtime and payment. Sandra may leave the company, but <16:> this may not resolve the labour disputes as a similarly ruthless manager may replace her.

These everyday relations are organised day in and day out. They take place in particular spaces at specific times. Communication is the everyday process that establishes and maintains social relations. It is the production and reproduction of social relations. Peter and his colleagues only make known that they dislike working long hours and think that their pay is too low by telling Sandra about it, who is thereby forced to somehow respond on behalf of capital. Power relations are abstract societal relations that are instantiated, lived, enacted, reproduced and potentially challenged through processes of communication in everyday life.

Humans (re)produce social structures through communication in their everyday lives and thereby (re)produce societal structures that frame, condition, enable and constrain communicative production in everyday life. Society is the totality of societal relations. And each societal relation encapsulates manifold social relations. A societal relation (such as the class relation between capital and labour) is a totality of social relations. It is framed by and framing all other societal relations. The class relation is reproduced through multiple capitalist organisations, in which workers interact with each other and interact with capital. Society is the totality that is the result of and condition for human communication. The notion of the totality should not be understood as meaning that society in general or particular societies are

totalitarian. Not just capitalism and class societies are totalities. Every society is a totality of over-grasping moments, i.e. systems that reach over into each other through human communication. Therefore we are never isolated individuals, but all phenomena in society are truly concrete. The “truly concrete is not a particular, isolated phenomenon, but an aspect or ‘moment’ of a totality” (Lukács 1971, 344). Society is a “complex of complexes” (Lukács, 1986, 155; see also 181) that help reproducing society (182).

Neither the form nor the content of communication are immaterial. Communication is a material practice, which means that it is a social process, in which humans create concrete results. Society’s materiality is that it is a realm of social production. Marx writes in this context that the “first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals” who “*produce* their means of subsistence” and thereby are “indirectly producing their material life” (Marx and Engels 1845/46, 31). Production is in society not conducted by isolated individuals, but in social and societal relations. The human capacity to communicate is a fundamental human means of production that is needed for the (re)production of society and the social. “[C]ommunication and its material means are intrinsic to all distinctively human forms of labour and social organization” (Williams 1980, 50).

Communication and the production of physical and intangible products are not two separate processes. All economic production has a symbolic dimension of human interaction. Humans relate to each other in a symbolic way when they socially produce structures in order to make sense of each other and the world. Structures symbolise society’s relations and thereby on behalf of humans something in society. Raymond Williams (1977) stresses in this context the “material character of the production of a social and political order” (93) and that culture and societies are realms of socio-material production (see Fuchs 2015, chapters 2+3). Communicative means are a “means of social production” (Williams 1980, 51) that has an “inherent role [...] in every form of production” (53). Language, books, newspapers, the telegraph, the telephone and the Internet are examples of means of mass communication that disseminate information over space and make it persistent in time. Communication technologies allow the storage (making information durable) and transmission (transferring information from one social system and context to another) of information. In a more general sense, all social structures symbolise in complex ways the human activities that create them and communicate information about wealth, influence and status. They are (general) means of communication.

For Lukács (1986), society is a complex of complexes, in which humans teleologically posit the world. By teleological positing, Lukács means the conscious, active production that is goal-oriented and realises subjective intentions in the objective world. It is a common feature of work and communication <17:> (see Fuchs 2016, chapter 2). Basic goals humans strive to achieve in society are the satisfaction of human needs (the economic positing), the management and organisation of complexity through collective decision-making (the political positing), and the recognition of subjectivity (the human body and the mind; the cultural positing). Communication is not

another type of teleological positing that stands outside economic, political and cultural production, but is an immanent feature of all social production. Through communication, humans learn to understand each other and the world. Through cognition, they try to understand themselves and communication. Cognition is the foundation and a result of communication. The economic principle of production is universal in that all human activity produces results. The base/superstructure-model is not tenable because the production of the social operates in all realms of society and constitutes also politics' and culture's economy. Politics and culture are economic and non-economic at the same time and also work within the economy.

Communication has an economic dimension in the sense that it produces and reproduces sociality. At the same time the created meanings are not restricted to the economy, but matter in different social systems and realms of society. Communicative capacities and means of communication are social means for a means, a means that by producing understanding of oneself, other humans and the world helps manage human needs, complexity and subjectivity in society.

## **5.2. Class and Domination**

In heteronomous societies, social and societal relations are organised based on power inequalities so that particular groups are privileged in the production of use-values, collective decisions, and reputation. They thereby are able to achieve more wealth, influence or reputation than others. Particularistic ownership, elitist politics and privileged status are economic, political and cultural principles of stratification that result in asymmetries and inequalities of ownership, influence and reputation. In the economy, power inequality and asymmetrical ownership are based on one class' exploitation of another class' labour. In politics and the economy, power inequalities take on the form of political and cultural domination. Domination means that a group has the means for achieving its will at the expense of others. Exploitation is the economic form of domination.

In modern society, the principle of the accumulation of money-capital has been generalised as a principle on which society is based. Modern society is a generalised form of accumulation, in which classes and social groups strive for the accumulation of economic power (money-capital), political power (influence on decision-making), and cultural power (reputation). Capitalism is not an economic mode of production, but a societal mode of production, a societal formation that is based on the principle of accumulation. The capitalist economy's principle of accumulation is a model for the organisation of capitalist society, in which the subsystems have relative autonomy and their specific forms and logics of accumulation. The logic of accumulation tends to result in power asymmetries and distributive injustices. In any heteronomous society, mediation takes on the form alienation: Specific groups control the products of teleological positings, whereas others do not exercise such control. This means that they can appropriate and own others' labour products, impose their political values on collective decisions, impose reputational hierarchies, or achieve combinations thereof. Different groups

can control differing degrees of economic, political and cultural power. In general, money is however a privileged means that can easier be transformed into political influence and cultural reputation than the other way around.

In modern society, the fetishism of power structures imposes a structure on society, in which social structures appear natural, eternal, immutable, unchangeable, and thing-like. In economic fetishism, money and commodities appear natural. In political and cultural fetishism, offices and status-positions appear natural. Society appears to talk to us through things and elite-individuals. Money, commodities, political offices and status-positions symbolise and communicate power. Reified structures hide alienation's social and societal character and that it is therefore the result of power contradictions and struggles. Workers', citizens and subjects' economic, political and cultural struggles have the potential to strive for the abolishment of alienation and the establishment of a different order.

The structure of class and heteronomous societies is inherently contradictory. Contradictions tend to result in crises. It is, however, not determined whether contradictory power relations or an economic, political or cultural crisis resulting from such contradictions or a combination of crises results in social struggles on behalf of the dominated groups. Social struggles are always possible because history is conditioned, but within this conditionality are relatively open. The results are also not pre-determined. But violent structures of domination can forestall social struggles. Violence threatens to destroy or severely impede human life. It can be physical, structural or ideological in character (Galtung 1990). It denies humans their need for survival, well-being, identity and freedom (Galtung 1990). Ideologies are a knowledge form implicated by fetishistic structures that dominant groups communicate and spread in order to try to justify and naturalise domination and exploitation. Dominated groups react in specific manners to ideologies. The reactions range on a continuum from the subjective acceptance/reproduction of ideology on the one end and rejection and resistance to ideology on the other end.

### **4.3. Communication as Societal Commoning**

Human reactions to violence, exploitation and domination are not determined. It can be that many people endure and do not resist because of conscious or unconscious fears of loss just like there can be the rapid or gradual emergence of resistance. Humans do not by nature subject themselves voluntarily and automatically to domination just like there is no automatism of social struggle. Their existential fears and needs for community, harmony, security and recognition can be channelled into the acceptance of domination, violence and ideologies. Dominated groups' social struggles mean risk-taking and acceptance of uncertainty. If a significant number of the dominated are willing to take risks and organise collectively, then collective action, protests, revolts, rebellions, or revolutions can emerge. A collective consciousness of the organisation emerges. Political organisation is a communication process, in which humans come together and interact in order to define their goals, their identity and their strategies, based on these they take actions that aim at

transforming society. Political consciousness can be, but is not necessarily and not automatically progressive in character. Individual and collective consciousness that questions domination is a possibility, but not a necessity. It can also be ideological (e.g. nationalist, racist, fascist, etc.) in character. Social struggles are not automatically politically progressive and there is no guarantee that their outcome is a better condition than before. A new social order can only emerge when objective contradictions are subjectively reflected in a collective manner so that political action aimed at societal transformation emerges.

The term communication in modern language is derived from the Latin verb *communicare* and the noun *communicatio*. *Communicare* means to share, inform, unite, participate, and literally to make something common. A heteronomous and class-divided society is a society based on particularistic control. Struggles for the commons in contrast aim at overcoming class and heteronomy and to make society a realm of common control. In a common economy, the means of production are owned collectively. In a common polity, everyone can directly shape and participate in collective decision-making. In a common culture, everyone is recognised. In such a participatory democracy, humans speak and communicate as a common voice. They own and decide together and give recognition to each other. A communicative society is not a society in which humans communicate because humans have to communicate in all societies in order to survive. A communicative society is also not an information society, in which knowledge and information/communication technologies have become structuring principles. A communicative society is a society, in which the original meaning of communication as making something common is the organising principle. Society and therefore also communication's existence then correspond to communication's essence. A communicative society is a society controlled in common so that communication is sublated and turned from the general process of the production of sociality into the very principle on which <19:> society is founded. A communicative society also realises the identity of *communicare* (communicating, making common) and *communis* (community). Society becomes a community of the commons. Such a society is a communist society.

## 6. Conclusion

Althusser's structuralist theory is anti-humanist in character, which results in a theoretical subordination of humans under structures and the assumption that economic structures determine society. As a consequence, there is no space for communicative practices in this approach. Thompson's humanist Marxist approach foregrounds the notion of human experience. It takes the structure/agency- and base/superstructure-problems into dialectical directions, but fails to differentiate between individual and collective subjectivity, faces the dangers of a subjectivist notion of class, and overestimates resistance. Communication is the missing link in this approach.

A Marxist theory of communication needs to relate the notion of communication to the study of society, class, capitalism and the commons.

Communication is the process, in which humans produce and reproduce social relations and thereby live, reproduce and potentially challenge societal relations (structures) in their everyday life by making meaning of each other and (re)producing the social and societal world. They do so based on their individual subjectivities that meet in the communication process.

Communication does not stand outside of domination, but shapes and is shaped by structures of class, violence and resistance. It is the intermediate process that organises the dialectic of objective structures and human subjects in society as well as the dialectic of individual and collective subjectivity. The communicative production of sociality explodes the base/superstructure distinction and constitutes interwoven dialectics of the economic and the non-economic. A forgotten meaning of communication is that it is the very process of commoning. Communication shares knowledge, but can as a principle of organising society also point towards a communist society.

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