

## **Marx's *Capital* in the Information Age**

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that a media and communication studies perspective on reading Marx's *Capital* has thus far been missing, but is needed in the age of information capitalism and digital capitalism. Two of the most popular contemporary companions to Marx's *Capital*, the ones by David Harvey and Michael Heinrich, present themselves as general guidebooks on how to read Marx, but are actually biased towards particular schools of Marxist thought. A contemporary reading of Marx needs to be mediated with contemporary capitalism's structures and the political issues of the day. Media, communications and the Internet are important issues for such a reading today. It is time to not just see Marx as a critic of capitalism, but also as a critic of capitalist communications.

### **Keywords**

*Capital Volume 1*, communications, digital capitalism, information capitalism, Internet, Karl Marx, Marxist theory, media, media and communication studies, political economy of communications and the media

### **Introduction**

<1:> The general interest in Marx's works has since the start of the new world economic crisis in 2008 significantly increased. Whereas before it was easier to dismiss the relevance of capitalism and class, their crucial relevance can hardly be ignored today. In this situation, also the question arises of how to read Marx. This concerns especially Marx's most widely read book, *Capital Volume 1* that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) together with the *Communist Manifesto* inscribed on the Memory of the World Register in 2013. Whereas the German edition of *Capital* that the publisher Dietz distributes as part of the Marx Engels Works (MEW) had <2:> annually sold around 500-750 copies in the years 1990-2007, this number increased to 5,000 in 2008 and stands now regularly at about 1,500-2,000 (Meisner 2013). In times of digital capitalism, in which billions use Facebook, Google, Twitter, Weibo, iPhones, Spotify, online banking, online news sites and other media at work, in politics and everyday life, the time has come to read Marx's *Capital* from a media and communication studies perspective.

### **Reading Marx's *Capital Volume 1* in the information age**

One can wonder how important media and the Internet are today and whether a media- and communications-oriented reading of Marx's *Capital Volume 1*, as offered in the book *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital, Volume 1* (Fuchs 2016), is really justified. Often it is claimed that all this talk about the digital and media revolution is a pure ideology that

wants to convince us that we have entered an information society that has substituted capitalism.

In the 2015 Forbes list of the world's largest 2,000 transnational corporations, one can find a total of 243 information companies, which amounts to 12%. They are located in the sectors of advertising, broadcasting and cable, communications equipment, computer and electronic retail, computer hardware, computer services, computer storage devices, consumer electronics, electronics, Internet and catalogue retail, printing and publishing, semiconductors, software and programming, and telecommunications services. The information economy constitutes a significantly sized part of global capitalism. But in the same list, one finds for example 308 banks (15%) that account for the majority of the 2,000 largest TNCs' capital assets. So one can easily argue that more than a media and communication studies perspective, we need a companion with the title *Reading Marx's Capital Volume 1 in the Financial Age*. Capitalism is however not homogenous, but a differentiated dialectical unity of diverse capitalisms. We do not have to decide between information capitalism or finance capitalism (or other capitalisms, such as hyper-industrial capitalism, mobile capitalism, etc.), but rather have to see capitalism's manifold dimensions that mutually encroach each other (Fuchs 2014a, chapter 5). The information economy is itself highly financialised, as for example the 2000 dot-com crisis and the constant flows of venture capitalism into Silicon Valley show. And information technology is one of the drivers of financialisation, as indicated by algorithmic trading, credit scoring algorithms, or digital currencies such as Bitcoin. The computer is a universal machine that as networked information technology has affected all realms of everyday life, not just industry, labour and the economy. It is a convergence technology that has together with other societal developments advanced social convergence tendencies of culture and the economy, work time and leisure time, the home and the office, consumption and production, productive and unproductive labour, the public and the private (Fuchs 2015a). Reading *Capital* from an information perspective can therefore not be limited to the realm of media technologies and media content, but has to be extended to communication in society at large.

### <3> Communications: Still the blind spot of Marxist theory

It is a positive development that media and cultural theorists have recently published books that remind us of the importance of Marx's works (see for example: Eagleton 2011; Fornäs 2013; Fuchs 2014a; Jameson 2011). Terry Eagleton (2011) in his book *Why Marx Was Right* deconstructs ten common myths and prejudices about Marx. He concludes: 'Marx saw socialism as a deepening of democracy, not as the enemy of it. [...] There has been no more staunch champion of women's emancipation, world peace, the fight against fascism or the struggle for colonial freedom than the political movement to which his work gave birth. Was ever a thinker so travestied?' (Eagleton 2011: 238-239). In a time of high unemployment and high levels of precarious work, especially among young people, Frederic Jameson argues in his book *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* that *Capital* 'is not a book about politics, and not even a book about labor, it is a book about unemployment' (Jameson 2011: 2). He concludes that Marx today helps us to 'be recommitted to the invention of a new kind of transformatory politics on a global scale' (Jameson 2011: 151). The Marxist cultural analysis of both Eagleton and Jameson has predominantly focused on literature. They have not much engaged in the analysis of other popular forms of

culture and on mediated culture, i.e. the media's role in society. Eagleton (2013) has explicitly written about the fact that he does not use e-mail and the Internet: 'I shall soon be the only EMV (email virgin) left in the country. I have never sent an email, though I've occasionally cheated and asked my teenage son to do so for me. Nor have I ever used the internet. [...] In my view, the internet is really an anti-modern device for slowing us all down, returning us to the rhythms of an earlier, more sedate civilisation'. Johan Fornäs, a Swedish media and cultural studies scholar, has in contrast to Eagleton and Jameson analysed youth cultures, music scenes, and other forms of popular and mediated culture. Like Jameson and Eagleton, he has recently published a book about Marx: *Capitalism: A Companion to Marx's Economy Critique* provides an introduction to all three volumes of Capital. Fornäs concludes: 'Marx's dialectical critique of commodity fetishism and capitalist class relations remains a prime model for also understanding other late-modern contradictions in social life' (Fornäs 2013: 306; for a detailed discussion of Fornäs' book, see Fuchs 2013). It is an important development that media and cultural analysts write books about Marx and remind us of the importance of his works. It is however also a bit surprising that Jameson, Eagleton and Fornäs in these books do not profoundly draw on their knowledge about media and culture. All three books are rather general introductions to or interpretations of Marx's critique of the political economy, which creates the impression that the economy and culture are independent realms. There remains a need for reading Marx from a media, communication and cultural studies perspective, which can help us to better understand <4:> the dialectic of culture and the economy: Culture and economy are identical and non-identical at the same time. All culture is produced in specific work processes. But culture is not just an economic phenomenon, but has emergent qualities; its meanings take effect all over society.

The dimensions of media, communication, culture, the digital and the Internet are often not taken seriously enough in Marxist theory, although they are significant phenomena of contemporary capitalism. In Marxist volumes, companions, journals, conferences, panels and keynote talks, such issues often feature not at all, rarely, or only as exceptions from the rule that they are ignored. An example: The titles of articles published in the journal *Historical Materialism* in the years 2006-2014 mentioned communication-related keywords<sup>1</sup> only three times. This situation is certainly slowly changing, but it is still a way to go until the majority of Marxist theorists consider communication no longer as a superstructure and secondary. Raymond Williams' insight that 'modes of consciousness', such as language, information, communication, art and popular culture, 'are material' (Williams 1977: 190), has thus far not adequately diffused into Marxist theory. Dallas W. Smythe, who developed the first political economy of communication university module in the late 1940s, argued in 1977, the same year as Raymond Williams published *Marxism and Literature*, that the 'media of communications and related institutions' represent 'a blindspot in Marxist theory' (Smythe 1977, 1). Almost forty years later, the situation has not fundamentally changed.

### **The political economy of communication**

There is, however, a longer tradition of Marxist political economy of communication that has established itself within the academic field of media and communication

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<sup>1</sup> Communication, communications, computer, cyberspace, digital, ICT, ICTs, information, Internet,

studies along with textbooks (Mosco 2009; Hardy 2014), institutions such as the International Association of Media and Communication Research's Political Economy of Communication Sections (<https://www.iamcr.org/s-wg/section/political-economy-section>), handbooks (Wasko, Murdock & Sousa 2011), collections (Mattelart & Siegelau 1979, 1983; Golding & Murdock 1997; Fuchs & Mosco 2012), or journals such as *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (<http://www.triple-c.at>) or *The Political Economy of Communication* (<http://www.polecom.org>).

The political economist of communication Janet Wasko (2014, 261) concludes in a review of the field's development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: 'Studying the political economy of communications is no longer a marginal approach to media and communication studies in many parts of the world'. Marxism has after many decades had important impact on the field of media and communication studies, which is good news. The bad news is however that this circumstance has hardly been recognised and acknowledged within Marxist theory at large. Whereas Marxist theorists' works are regularly read, cited and applied by Marxist communication scholars, the opposite is not true. I want to illustrate this fact with an example.

In Britain, Marxist political economy of media, communication and culture goes back to a seminal article by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1973) published in 1973. They defined as the starting point for such analyses 'the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and <5:> distribute commodities' (Murdock & Golding 1973: 205-206). They stress that the media 'also disseminate ideas about economic and political structures. It is this second and ideological dimension of mass media production which gives it its importance and centrality and which requires an approach in terms of not only economics but also politics' (Murdock & Golding 1973: 206-207).

In 2013, 40 years later, Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013) published the book *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Putting Culture in its Place in Political Economy*. It aims to introduce culture to political economy approaches such as the Regulation School that has traditionally ignored this dimension of society and focused on the interaction of regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation. The book is therefore part of a project to go beyond the regulation approach. The two authors completely ignore and obviously have no knowledge of the existence of the British tradition in the Marxist study of the political economy of communication, culture and the media. The works of Murdock, Golding and related scholars from this field are not mentioned once.

Raymond Williams is an exception: Sum and Jessop discuss some of his works. Williams' Cultural Materialism is situated on the border between Marxist Cultural Studies that originated in the humanities and Marxist Media and Communication Studies that has traditionally been more situated in the social sciences. It is however obvious that Jessop and Sum have read Williams only superficially. They argue for example that Williams 'placed culture "inside" the economic base and, indeed, whether Williams recognized it or not, marked a return to the Marx and Engels of *The German Ideology*' (Sum & Jessop 2013: 117). One gets the impression that Sum and Jessop assume that Williams has an interesting approach, but did not engage enough with Marx's works. Such an assumption is however based on a reading of Williams

that is not thorough enough. Works such as *Marxism and Literature* (Williams 1977) and *Marx on Culture* (Williams 1989: 195-225) are among the most thorough discussions of Marx's ideas on culture, including the *German Ideology*. These works show that Williams was not only a thorough reader of Marx, but that he profoundly engaged with the meanings of Marx's works sentence-by-sentence. Williams discusses in detail the specific meanings terms such as ideology and culture take on in Marx's writings. Sum and Jessop mention neither of these two works. They also overlook (Sum & Jessop 2013: 120, table 3.1) that Williams not just used Gramsci for introducing the notion of the structures of feeling, but that he also used Gramsci's concept of hegemony for conceptualising culture's role in society (Williams 1977: 108-114).

The title *Towards a Cultural Political Economy* implies that such an approach has not-yet been established, which only makes things worse: Decades of Marxist scholarship in the political economy of communication and culture are indirectly declared as being non-existent. One wonders how such a lack of engagement is possible. The only answer is that Sum and Jessop do not take media and communication studies seriously. And this circumstance is a more general pattern within Marxist theory. The media, communication and cultural studies fields are often seen as being soft, superstructural, secondary and not real parts of Marxist theory. This is one of the reasons why we need a media and <6:> communications-oriented companion to *Marx's Capital Volume 1*. Such a book wants to suggest to people interested in Marx that communication and communications matter for understanding capitalism just like capitalism matters for understanding communication(s).

### **The political economy and critical theory of the Internet and digital media**

Since the rise of the WWW in the mid-1990s, Internet Studies has become a distinct interdisciplinary field of studies (Consalvo & Ess 2012) that analyses the mutual shaping of the Internet on the one hand and humans in society on the other hand. Internet Studies is overall a fairly positivist and administrative field of research. There has however especially in the past 15 years been an increasing number of critical and Marxist theorists and researchers, who have engaged in analysing digital media and the Internet's role in capitalist society.

In 1999, Nick Dyer-Witford published the book *Cyber-Marx*, in which he shows the importance of Marx's theory for critically understanding the Internet's contradictions in capitalism and struggles in the digital age. Dyer-Witford (1999: 2) proposes a 'Marxism for the Marx of the Difference Engine'. Digital media are in digital capitalism highly contradictory. For understanding the complex relations of the old and the new, opportunities and risks, continuities and discontinuities, agency and structures, production and consumption, the private and the public, labour and play, leisure-time and labour-time, the commodity and the commons, etc. in the age of the, Marx's dialectical theory is well suited as foundation. It may therefore be no coincidence that Marx has been an important reference in theories of the Internet. In his works, Marx elaborated a dialectical analysis of technology in capitalism, analysed the new media of his time (such as the telegraph), pointed out the importance of the means of communication in the organisation, acceleration and globalisation of capitalism, discussed the freedom of the press and its limits in a capitalist society, anticipated the emergence of an information economy and society

in his analysis of the General Intellect, and was himself a practicing investigative journalist, whose sharp criticisms and polemics can still inspire critical writings today. Marx was himself not just a critic of capitalism, but also a critical sociologist of the media and communications, which is another reason why critical theorists of the Internet have found interest in his works.

In his work the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973: 161) described a global information network, in which ‘everyone attempts to inform himself’ about others and ‘connections are introduced’. Such a description not only sounds like an anticipation of the concept of the Internet, it is also an indication that Marx’s thought is relevant for Media/Communication Studies and the study of the Internet and social media. This passage in the *Grundrisse* is an indication that although the Internet as technology was a product of the Cold War and Californian counter-culture, Marx already anticipated its concept in the nineteenth century: *Karl Marx invented the Internet!*

When Vincent Mosco and I put together a call for a special issue of the journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* with the title “Marx is Back: The Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today”, we not only received a large number of submissions of abstracts, but a share of them focused on Marxist studies of the Internet and digital media. The issue was published in 2012 (Fuchs & Mosco 2012). In 2016, we published revised version of the special issue contributions combined with additional articles as two books with a total of 1,200 pages: *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media* (Fuchs & Mosco 2016a) and *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism* (Fuchs & Mosco 2016b). 16 of the 34 chapters focus on the Marxist analysis of digital media. They make up the entire second volume, which is an indication that digital media is a predominant topic in the Marxist analysis of media and communications.

Important topics in the Marxist analysis of digital media and the Internet include (see Fuchs 2012 for a detailed discussion): 1. the dialectics of the Internet, 2. digital capitalism, 3. commodification and digital media’s commodity forms, 4. labour, surplus value, exploitation, alienation and class in the digital age, 5. globalisation and the Internet, 6. ideologies of and on the Internet, 7. digital class struggles, 8. the digital commons, 9. the digital public sphere, 10. digital media and communism, and 11. digital media aesthetics. Book-length example studies in digital Marxism include analyses of online surveillance (Andrejevic 2007), the history of the computer and the Internet (Barbrook 2007), Internet ideologies (Dean 2010, Fisher 2010, Mosco 2004), computer games (Dyer-Witford & De Peuter 2009), the cybertariat (Huws 2003), digital capitalism (Schiller 2000), hacking culture (Söderberg 2008; Wark 2004), social media (Fuchs 2014c, 2015a), digital labour (Fuchs 2014a; Dyer-Witford 2015; Huws 2015), cloud computing (Mosco 2014), digital peer production (Moore & Karatzogianni), etc.

A range of Marxist theory approaches has been used for studying digital media, including autonomous Marxism, British cultural studies, Marxist crisis theories, cultural materialism, the Frankfurt School, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, humanist Marxism, labour-process theory, Freudian Marxism, Hegelian Marxism, labour theory of value, Marxist feminism, Marxist geography, monopoly capitalism theory, post-colonialist theory, post-Marxism, Smythe’s theory of audience labour, Situationism,

structural Marxism, theories of imperialism and new imperialism, etc. The point is that there is not one best-suited interpretation and reading of Marx for critically understanding the Internet and digital media. One should rather in an open approach cherish the diversity of digital and communications-Marxism and foster solidarity and mutual aid between its representatives because being a Marxist scholar often means having to face various forms of repression (Lent & Amazeen 2015).

The Marxist study the Internet and communications is certainly a vivid field that is however often not taken serious enough in Marxist theory and politics at large. Media, communications, culture and the digital are therefore at best side notes or completely ignored in the majority of Marxist publications. I will next discuss two prominent examples.

### **Communications in Harvey and Heinrich's companions to Marx's "Capital"**

Marx (1976: 89) acknowledged the difficulties reading *Capital* may provide: 'Beginnings are always difficult in all sciences. The understanding of the first chapter, especially the <8:> section that contains the analysis of commodities, will therefore present the greatest difficulty'. It is easier to read and discuss *Capital* in a group and to use a companion that guides the reading. Companions to Marx's *Capital* serve a quite practical purpose. They are intended to be read together and to support the critical understanding of capitalism that Marx develops step by step.

Two recent guides to Marx's *Capital* are David Harvey's (2010, 2013) *Companion to Marx's Capital* and the English translation of Michael Heinrich's (2012) *An Introduction to the Three Volume of Karl Marx's Capital* that was first published in German in 2004. Heinrich's book is a short introduction consisting of 12 chapters that focus on key categories such as capitalism, critique of political economy, value/labour/money, capital/surplus-value/exploitation, profit, crisis, communism, etc. The problem of this structure is that most readers engage with Marx's *Capital* in a sequential way, reading it chapter-by-chapter. A companion is therefore only helpful if it is written as a chapter-by-chapter reading guide.

Harvey in contrast to Heinrich partly discusses *Capital* chapter-by-chapter. There are however unnecessary diversions from this approach: He discusses *Volume 1*'s chapters 8 and 9 in one section, which makes it impossible to see which categories and discussions belong to which of the two chapters. He does the same for chapters 19-22. He skips over chapters 17 and 18 with the remark that they 'do not pose any substantial issues' (Harvey 2010: 240). This remark is formulated in an objective manner as if it were a universal law that there are no substantial issues in them. It would be more correct if Harvey said: For my particular interpretation of Marxist theory, these chapters do not pose any substantial issues. In my own reading guide to *Capital Volume 1*, I in contrast point out that these chapters are helpful for illustrating how to think about the rate of profit, the rate of surplus-value, paid and unpaid labour in the information industries.

Different readings of *Capital* have different priorities, which arise from the fact that Marxist theory is a broad approach uniting different schools and traditions that foreground different aspects of the critique of capitalism and class. One should however not dress up one's own approach as a universal reading of Marx. Harvey

summarises chapters 26-33 as part of one chapter. In this specific case, this move seems rather appropriate because in the German edition, Marx treats chapters 26-32 as one long chapter on primitive accumulation that has seven sections. In his *Companion to Marx's Capital Volume 2*, Harvey summarises between 2 and 11 chapters of Marx's book in single chapters. Overall, Harvey just like Heinrich falls short of providing a chapter-by-chapter guide to *Capital*.

Both Harvey and Heinrich's books are particular interpretations of Marx's *Capital*. Harvey's lifetime achievement is that he has opened up Marxist theory to the engagement with issues of geography. Space, the global, land and the urban have today become thanks to Harvey and others mainstream topics in Marxist theorising. Harvey has created a sensitivity that for a Marxist understanding of capitalism and society, not just issues related to time, such as labour-time and the labour theory of value, but also space and geography are of fundamental importance. Space and time are dialectically connected. Harvey's companion to *Volume 1* relatively frequently discusses aspects of geography and space, which reflects his own position as a Marxist geographer. Space is an important category for a critical theory of capitalism. But so are communication and the <9:> means of communication. Contemporary means of communication, such as the Internet, the WWW, social media and mobile media, are not mentioned once in Harvey's companions to *Capital's* volumes 1 and 2. An exception is a passage, where Harvey asks, 'do you really need a mobile phone nowadays?' (Harvey 2010: 106). The answer for around 5 billion people in the world is: Yes, definitely! Given such widespread adoption, Harvey's techno-sceptical dismissal of mobile phones conveys the image that he thinks the large majority of the world population have manipulated needs and false consciousness and therefore use mobile phones. The point is not to challenge the mobile phone as such, but the capitalist organisation of mobility that makes people conduct productive labour nearly anytime from everywhere and collapses the boundaries between leisure and labour as well as the exploitative production conditions of mobile phones in capitalism's international division of labour. The convergence of work and free time is not automatically a problem in itself if it means that work becomes more playful, social and self-determined. The problem under neoliberalism and capitalism is, however, that productive labour tends to enter and soak up leisure time, resulting in absolute surplus-value production, not the other way round.

When Harvey discusses means of communication in Marx's works in general terms, he tends to reduce them to being attributes of space. An example: Harvey comments on Marx's remark that the 'transformation of the mode of production in one sphere of industry necessitates a similar transformation in other spheres' (Marx 1976: 505). Harvey remarks that this passage 'introduces one of the other themes that I find extremely interesting in Marx: that is the importance of what he calls in the *Grundrisse* the "annihilation of space by time"' (Harvey 2010: 206). This interest has in Harvey's own work been reflected in the discussion of information and communication technologies as means of time-space-compression (Harvey 1990). Information and communication technologies, including the computer, certainly play a key role in accelerating the circulation of commodities in space-time. This is however not their only role. Media also communicate ideologies, such as political ideologies and commodity ideology in the form of commercial advertisements. Computers and computer networks are not only organisers of the circulation of commodities, but also the means of production for the creation of information

products. They are furthermore the platforms for companies' internal and external communication. While trains, buses, automobiles, ships, lorries, and airplanes transport people and physical goods, computer networks transport information, information products, and flows of communication. The computer is a universal machine that is simultaneously a means of production, circulation, and consumption.

Communication cannot be reduced to an attribute of space-time. Social relations create, reproduce and organise social spaces, which means that human communication produces and reproduces social space and social space conditions, i.e. enables and constrains, communication through which social space is further reproduced, created, etc. For Harvey, communication is an attribute of space. He neglects the dialectic of social space and communication. Harvey's dismissal of communications becomes also evident in a comment on the role of social media in the Arab spring and the Occupy movement. Countering the techno-determinist and techno-optimist assumption that these rebellions were Facebook revolutions and Twitter revolts, he comments that the Arab spring and the Occupy movement show that 'it is bodies on the street and in the <10:> squares, not the babble of sentiments on Twitter or Facebook, that really matter' (Harvey 2012: 162). Empirical studies (Fuchs 2014b) have, however, shown that both techno-determinist and techno-ignorant accounts of the role of social media in social struggles are one-dimensional: It is not true that activists in occupations tend to either communicate face-to-face or via social media. They do both. There is no binary between online and offline protest communication. And even more than this, there tends to be a reinforcing dialectic of face-to-face and social media-communication: The more active protestors are in occupations and demonstrations, the larger their social network among activists tends to be, the more they engage face-to-face with other activists, which is also an incentive to take protest communication, organisation and mobilisation to social media. Occupied squares are social spaces that are constructed, reproduced, developed and defended in and through communicative social relations that take place offline and online and as dialectical entanglement of both. Harvey's neglect of the Internet in the analysis of contemporary social protest spaces is no better than the techno-determinism of the "Twitter and Facebook revolution"-euphoria's techno-determinism. Both theoretical positions miss to understand the complex dialectic of communication and society.

Michael Heinrich argues in his companion that his book 'stands within the substantive context of this 'new reading of Marx' (Heinrich 2012: 27) established by the works of Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt. 'The differences between this new reading and traditional Marxist political economy will become clearer throughout the course of this work' (Heinrich 2012: 27). Heinrich did not intend to write an introduction that helps reading Marx from a specific topical perspective, such as communication or space, but one that uses one particular approach, the New Reading of Marx-school of thought. 'My presentation thus builds on a particular interpretation of Marx's theory, while others are dismissed' (Heinrich 2012: 10).

Heinrich in this introductory book to Marx's three volumes of *Capital* claims that 'Marx's value theory is rather a monetary theory of value' (Heinrich 2012: 63). This assumption is a particular and certainly not a universally valid interpretation of Marx's value concept. It argues for a monetary theory of value, whereas another possible interpretation is to set out a value theory and critique of money that is

grounded in the labour theory of value. The problem is that Heinrich's book may deceive readers and create the impression that a specific interpretation of Marx – the one advanced by Backhaus, Reichelt, Heinrich and their colleagues – is Marx's original and own version of the labour theory of value.

Heinrich argues that 'value also first exists in exchange' and that the 'substance of value' is 'not inherent to individual commodities, but is bestowed *mutually* in the act of exchange' (Heinrich 2012: 53). The problem that I see is that Heinrich's approach implies that no exploitation has taken place if a commodity is not sold. Let us assume that a company employs 100 employees, who work 16,000 hours per month and produce during this time 16,000 television sets as well as a marketing and branding strategy and campaign. They are not doing well in competition because the average industry standard is a production of 16,000 sets in 8,000 hours. Therefore the company does not sell a single television and the workers do not get paid. They however still produce television sets. According to Heinrich, all of these workers are not exploited and the TV sets do not contain value because they are not sold and so not transformed into the money form. An alternative interpretation is to distinguish between two forms of value as average labour-time and monetary value. In the example, the average labour time that is socially <11:> necessary in the television industry to produce one TV set is 30 minutes. A TV's average value at the company level is 1 hour, which constitutes competitive disadvantages in the realisation of monetary value. No matter if the manufacturing and advertising workers in the example get paid or not and no matter if the commodities they produce are sold or not, their labour has produced commodities that objectify their labour time and that they do not own. They are therefore productive and exploited workers. Heinrich's understanding of value underestimates the difficulty of conceptualising productive labour, class and exploitation.

Marx's *Fragment on Machines* in the *Grundrisse* has in the past years especially in Autonomist Marxism resulted in discussions about information work and technology. Heinrich (2014) is sceptical about the *Fragment* and argues about a formulation of the general intellect: 'With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis' (Marx 1973: 705). This formulation has again and again resulted in controversies. Heinrich (2014: 197) interprets it as meaning that Marx in the *Grundrisse* had a 'one-sided conception of crisis' (Heinrich 2014: 197) and predicted that the employment of machinery in capitalism 'should have the consequence that capitalist production [...] collapses' (Heinrich 2014: 207). But one must see that with the formulation 'with that' Marx means in reference back to the preceding sentence a condition, where the 'surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth' (Marx 1973: 705). So when he speaks of a breakdown in the *Fragment*, Marx does not mean an automatic collapse of capitalism, but rather that exchange value collapses within communism and that the rise of knowledge work and automation bring about a fundamental antagonism of necessary labour time and surplus labour time. The establishment of communism however presupposes a conscious revolutionary sublation of capitalism. The *Fragment* does not formulate an automatic breakdown of capitalism.

Heinrich not only dismisses the *Fragment* and its relevance for understanding the information economy today. In his introduction to *Capital*, he mentions means of

communication only once very briefly (Heinrich 2012: 206), the Internet one time in a footnote (Heinrich 2012: 237, footnote 68), the mobile phone and the WWW never. Just like David Harvey, Heinrich does not seem to consider information, communication and culture as important dimensions for a Marxian critique of the political economy.

There has also been a controversial discussion of Heinrich's approach in respect to crisis theory and the law of the tendency of the profit rate to fall. Heinrich (2013) argues that this law is flawed and that Marxist theory needs to explain crises without it. 'In contrast to Marx, we cannot assume a "law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall"' (Heinrich 2013, 153). Others argue against Heinrich that such a law is consistent on Marx's own terms, is crucial for understanding the capitalist economy's contradictions, and that Heinrich attempts to eliminate Marx's crisis theory (see for example: Kliman, Freeman, Potts, Gusey & Cooney 2013). No matter which position one takes in this debate, it shows that Heinrich advances just like Harvey a particular interpretation of Marx.

Given that diverse interpretations of Marx are possible and needed, Harvey and Heinrich's particularisms as such are unproblematic and welcome. The problem is however the aura of universality that their books evoke by using the titles *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* and *A Companion to Marx's Capital*. More appropriate titles would be *Michael Heinrich's New Reading of Karl Marx's Three Volumes of Capital* and *David Harvey's Marxist-Geographical Interpretation of Marx's Capital*. My guide to *Capital Volume 1* (Fuchs 2016) does not claim to be a universal or the only valid interpretation and does not use a particular school of Marxist thought such as Marxist spatial theory or the New Reading of Marx School. It rather sets out to help the reader use Marx's categories as tools of thought for critically understanding media, communication, culture, technology and the Internet today. The title *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital Volume 1* sets out in contrast to Harvey and Heinrich that the book does not want to be a general introduction, but one that is concretely mediated with one of the important contemporary political-economic challenges, namely the media and communication system's role in capitalism. It foregrounds the importance of a specific topic, not particular schools or approaches. Marx's own thought was historical and dialectical, which means that reading Marx today should best be done in a historically specific way, relating it to 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism, which requires us to think about how to dialectically update Marx's categories based on a dialectic of continuity and emergent properties. Digital media did not exist at the time of Marx, but nonetheless his works are a powerful foundation for understanding the role of the computer and communication(s) in capitalism today.

### **In which respect does Marx matter for understanding communications?**

Marx was not just a critical theorist, but also a critical journalist, politician and polemicist. His interventionist and critical style of argumentation is something that today is often missing in the news media and can therefore serve as good example for critical writing. Marx was a dialectical thinker. Dialectics as an instrument of complex thinking allows us to understand the contradictions of the media in capitalism. Think for example of the contradiction between users, who like to

download digital content without payment online, and media corporations that use intellectual property rights, policing, censorship and surveillance for trying to limit online file sharing. Profits and wages are however dialectically mediated in capitalism, which adds another contradiction so that also some artists perceive file sharing as a threat. Another contradiction in the culture industry is one between the two class factions of the content industry and the openness industry: The first commodifies content, the second lives from open content on the Internet that it combines with other accumulation strategies, such as targeted advertising. The likes of YouTube and Facebook do not necessarily oppose file sharing of copyrighted content because openness benefits their businesses. Openness in this context means the availability of digital content online without payment. The openness industry uses other ways to accumulate capital, especially advertising. The contradiction between the openness industry and the content industry shows that the online economy is dialectical: It is full of contradictions.

The commodity is capitalism's 'elementary form' (Marx 1976, 125). Marx's commodity analysis and critique allows us to understand the media's forms of commodification. Information is a peculiar commodity: It is not used up in consumption, can easily and quickly be copied and distributed, has high initial production costs and low copy costs, involves high risks and uncertainty about whether it is saleable or not, is non-rivalrous in consumption and requires special protective measures to be turned into a scarce good from whose consumption others can be excluded. Capital accumulation in the information economy therefore requires special strategies, such as the commodification of content along with intellectual property rights and copyrights, the commodification of access to content (e.g. subscriptions), the commodification of production, distribution and consumption technologies, the commodification of audiences in advertising, the multiplication of media formats and the re-use of content, or the commodification of users and the data they generate in targeted online advertising.

Class is a key category in Marx's analysis. It is related to concepts such as exploitation, surplus-value, the working class/proletariat, and productive labour. The 'proletarian is merely a machine for the production of surplus-value, the capitalist too is merely a machine for the transformation of this surplus-value into surplus capital' (Marx 1976, 742). In the age of the Internet and the culture industry, class is still a crucial category, but has become more variegated. We have to consider the class status and interests of unpaid interns, online freelancers, unremunerated users of Facebook and Google who create economic value, different forms of knowledge workers, a new young precariat that is attracted to work in the culture industry, Foxconn workers in China who assemble mobile phones and laptops, miners in Africa who extract minerals that form the physical foundation of digital media technologies and who work under slave-like conditions, software engineers who are highly paid and work very long overtime hours, etc. There is what can be called an international division of digital labour (Fuchs 2014a; Fuchs 2015a: chapter 6).

Ideology naturalises domination and exploitation. Such naturalisation is according to Marx immanent to the commodity form itself as commodity fetishism. Media are key tools for the production, dissemination and consumption of political and corporate ideologies. The 'definite social relation between men themselves' assumes 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1976: 165). Advertising makes use

of the void that commodity fetishism leaves by rendering the social relations of production invisible in the commodity itself. Advertising fills this void by product propaganda. If you think of Facebook, then the commodity status is not immediately visible because you do not pay for access: Your immediate experience is the sociality you enjoy on the platform with others. The social veils Facebook's commodity form. Commodity fetishism takes on an inverted form on Facebook (Fuchs 2014a: chapter 11): In regular commodity fetishism, things (commodities, money) veil social relations. On corporate social media, social relations are the immediate and concrete experience, whereas the commodity form only indirectly confronts the users. The social character of these platforms veils the commodity form of these platforms. Facebook and Google do not sell access or communication, but are the world's largest advertising companies.

Marx stresses that communication technologies are medium and outcome of economic and societal globalisation. There is a dialectic of globalisation and communication. Marx also develops a dialectical understanding of technology in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. He analysed the contradictions of technology in capitalism. From Marx's analysis of technology we can learn that communication and other technologies are not evil or good as such, but that their effects depend on how they are constructed, designed and used within society. At the same time, technologies can have unpredictable consequences, especially if they are highly complex systems. Marx anticipated the emergence <14:> of an information economy by arguing that with the development of the productive forces, the role of knowledge, technology and science in production increases. His notion of the general intellect is of particular importance in this context. He argued that technology also socialises labour, which comes into a contradiction with class relations. Today we can observe this contradiction in a new form, as antagonism between the digital, networked productive forces and class relations. An example is that digitisation can turn knowledge into a gift that is distributed online. But in a capitalist society, people depend on wages for survival so that the online gift economy under capitalist class relations does not bring about a democratic communism, but rather poses mere alternative potentials. It enforces the precarisation of digital and cultural labour in capitalism. It is a contested question in the Left how to react to this contradiction. Some see the Internet as an enemy they oppose, others celebrate it as taking communism online as digital gift economy. A more nuanced assessment is that there are potentials to turn knowledge into a digital commons, but that within capitalism it is also important that cultural producers can survive based on a wage, which opens up new ideas, for example the need for introducing a universal basic income or a participatory media fee that is funded by corporate taxation and that via participatory budgeting allows citizens to donate to non-commercial media companies (Fuchs 2015b).

Capitalism's contradictions again and again result in crises. The Internet economy has for example been hit by a deep crisis in 2000, the so-called dot-com crisis, in which many Internet companies went bankrupt. It was already back then highly financialised. Financialisation is another concept that Marx discusses in detail, especially in *Capital* Volume 3, where he introduces the concept of fictitious capital. He also stresses that capitalism has an inherent concentration and monopoly tendency. Information industries are highly prone to concentration because of mechanisms such as the advertising-circulation-spiral: Media with a large number of readers, viewers,

listeners and users tend to attract more advertising revenues, which allows them competitive advantages that can result in a further expansion of their audiences and more market concentration. In the media world, concentration not only has to do with economic power, but due to the nature of information also with ideological power, the concentration of the power to disseminate ideas.

Marx foregrounded the importance of social struggles for a just and fair society, i.e. a participatory democracy. As long as class societies exist, class struggles remain a reality. Activists communicate among themselves and to the public. Communication technologies, such as social media, the mobile phone or e-mail, are therefore key organisation tools in social movements and political parties. Marx allows us to better understand the nature of social struggles in modern society. Last, but not least, Marx had a vision of an alternative to capitalism. It often seems today that the Internet or the media are best organised as corporations. There are however also alternative traditions. Think of public service broadcasters that do not use advertising, knowledge as commons on Wikipedia, the free software movement, free public WiFi initiatives, not-for-profit online sharing platforms such as Freecycle or Streetbank.

Marx's idea of communism reminds us that the commodity form is inappropriate for basic human aspects of society such as love, education, knowledge and communication. If the commodity form implies inequality, then a truly fair, democratic and just society must be a commons-based society. For the communication system, this means that <15:> communication systems as commons correspond to the essence of humanity, society and democracy. Commons such as knowledge are not produced by single individuals, but have a social, historical and co-operative character. They are produced by universal work: 'Universal labour is all scientific work, all discovery and invention. It is brought about partly by the cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work' (Marx 1981, 199)<sup>2</sup>. Whenever new information emerges, it incorporates the whole societal history of information, that is, information has a historical character. Hence, it seems to be self-evident that information should be a common good, freely available to all. But in global informational capitalism, information has become an important productive force that favours new forms of capital accumulation. Information is today often not treated as a public good and common, but rather as a commodity. There is an antagonism between information as a common good and as a commodity.

### **For a communication revolution in Marxist theory!**

Marxist theory too often treats communication as a superstructure. Such analyses are contradicted by the fact that knowledge and communication have not only become important commodities, but are also shaped by a 21<sup>st</sup> century antagonism between the communication commons and communication commodities. The time has come for a media and communication-oriented revolution of Marxist theory. Communication is still one of Marxism's blind spots, on which only a media and communication studies-oriented reading of *Capital* can shed light.

Marx discussed the implications of the telegraph for the globalisation of trade, production and society, was one of the first philosophers and sociologists of

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 3*, London 1981, 199.

technology in modern society, anticipated the role of knowledge labour and the rise of an information society and was himself a critical journalist. This shows that somebody who cares about the analysis of media and communication has many reasons to engage with Marx. He stressed the importance of the concept of the social: he highlighted that phenomena in society (such as money or markets and, today, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) do not simply exist, but are the outcome of social relations between human beings. They do not exist automatically and by necessity because humans can change society. Therefore, society and the media are open for change and contain the possibility of a better future. If we want to understand what is social about social media, then reading Marx can help us a lot.

Today there is much talk about ‘social media’, although the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Google are privately owned corporations listed on the stock market and therefore expressions of possessive individualism (Fuchs 2014c). Marx reminds us that capitalism is incompletely social. True social media can only exist in a common-based participatory democracy. Marx’s works are key intellectual tools for the inspiration of struggles for a commons-based society and commons-based media.

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