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MARXIST THEORY

The point of departure for Marxist theory is the philosophical and political legacies of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Marxist theory provides a conceptual toolbox for understanding and explaining how humans produce and consume social wealth. As a critical approach to communication, Marxist theory participates in a political struggle against capitalism for a future beyond capitalism. As such, it investigates the myriad ways capitalism mobilizes communication through political, cultural, and economic institutions for the purpose of social control. Therefore, Marxist theory attempts to provide an alternative way of knowing, acting, and living in the world beyond the command of capitalism. Before exploring the specifics of how Marxist theory and communication have been informed by each other, it is valuable to outline the Marxist case against capitalism.

More Wealth in Fewer Hands

To explore how social wealth is produced and consumed, Marxist theory attends to the social relationships embedded within economic arrangements. Karl Marx took special care to explore the modern factory as a model for the radically new social relationships required of industrial capitalism. By investigating the modern factory, Karl Marx uncovered a peculiar contradiction: Namely, the wealth produced by industrial capitalism required more and more people to be brought into

a social relationship conducive to capitalist production, yet fewer and fewer people benefited from the wealth that was produced by capitalism. Wealth was produced by the labor of many, but was in the hands of fewer and fewer. The key to unlocking the peculiar logic of capitalism was the extraction of surplus labor from those working longer and increasingly faster in the factory. The study of industrial capitalism revealed two key antagonistic groups or classes of people: the bourgeoisie, the owners of the factory; and the proletariat, the workers brought into the factory to turn raw materials into commodities. From the standpoint of Marxist theory, the ethical and political problem of capitalism is that the bourgeoisie enriches itself at the expense of the proletariat.

Marxist theory reveals how capitalism produces social wealth through the production and consumption of commodities. The more things that can be bought and sold, the more potential there is for capitalists to generate a return on their investment. To appreciate the imbalance of power in the social relationship between capital (bourgeoisie) and labor (proletariat), Marxist theory pays close attention to how capitalism transforms labor into a commodity. This is first done by thinking of labor as an abstract capacity—what Marxist theory calls labor power, the capacity of the worker to work in a specified way and for a specified time. The capacities capitalism may need from labor are infinite, including physical capacities associated with the body, intellectual capacities associated with reasoning, cultural capacities associated with ways of living, and social capacities associated

with communication. The worker's labor power is just as much of a commodity as the commodity he or she produces in the factory. The ability of the bourgeoisie to control the social wealth produced by the factory is due to its ability to control the fruits of the worker's surplus labor. Surplus labor is the difference between the labor time it would take for the worker to earn the wages to pay for his or her daily needs and the amount of time the laborer spent producing the commodity for the owners of the factory. Since the capitalist controls the products produced by the surplus labor of the worker, it is to the advantage of capitalism to control as much surplus labor time as possible. For example, the longer the working day, the more surplus is being extracted because the worker is producing commodities that exceed what she or he can consume. Second, the faster the worker can work, the more surplus is produced because the worker is producing more commodities in the same amount of time. Ironically, as the worker becomes more productive, the factory needs fewer workers, and while the capitalist takes more social wealth, the total sum of possible workers makes less. Whether by working a longer day or by working more efficiently, surplus labor is extracted from the worker because the commodities created during this time are controlled by the owners of the factory. At the center of the working day, therefore, is a social relationship structured by exploitation. A capitalist enterprise creates an exploitative social relationship because the success of the capitalist is dependent on expanding its control over surplus labor time by limiting the cost of labor time. By focusing on surplus labor time as important to the production of social wealth, Marxist theory can begin to analyze capitalism as a global system socially organized by an international division of labor. Marxist theory was the first to provide a critique of globalization because the international division of labor revealed that the labor and resources of one part of the world (e.g., Latin America) were extracted to promote the social wealth of another part of the world (e.g., North America).

The class conflict expressed by the struggle between the proletariat and the capitalist underwrites the Marxist theory of historical materialism. Historical materialism imagines human history as a history of class struggle. The disagreements

among different schools of Marxist theory turn on the veracity of the two-class model (bourgeoisie vs. proletariat) to explain class conflict and whether the two-class model can correctly interpret the character of all political struggle. One important variation in how Marxist theory approaches class struggle has been by extending the idea of productive labor beyond the commodity production taking place behind factory walls. In particular, feminist forms of Marxist theory emphasize how the capacities associated with labor power are often nurtured by the unpaid labor of women in the home and the community. As Marxist theory enlarges the kinds of labor with which it will concern itself—for example, labor not directly governed by a wage contract—then all kinds of social relationships outside the strictly economic domain of paid labor can be included in the political and ethical judgments about how labor time contributes to the production and consumption of social wealth. Moreover, enlarging the kinds of labor necessary for producing social wealth complicates the character of classes by including new cultural, social, and economic factors fragmenting social identities and relationships. If a mother's work in caring for children can be imagined as a form of exploitation, then different forms of political resistance are required that go beyond organizing workers at the factory to resist the capitalism. Yet there is agreement among the different versions of Marxist theory that the goal of capitalism is to transform every social relationship into one that promotes the needs of capitalism.

Communication

A Marxist theory of communication insists that communication plays a key role in the production and regulation of social wealth. Two broad processes take center stage in communication scholarship: commodification and sense-making. The study of each has provided important revisions of Marxist theory by highlighting how communication affects the character of capitalist social relationships. In the first place, communication exists as a domain of commodification. Just as shirts and labor power are commodities, so too is much of what humans experience as communication. The production of communicative commodities, like all commodities, relies on a division of labor providing

another opportunity for capital to control and exploit surplus labor. For example, the production of movies needs to assemble actors, directors, script-writers, and make-up artists. Furthermore, these forms of labor need to be combined with the labor of caterers, accountants, and janitors. A blockbuster Hollywood movie is likely to extend the social relationships of production across the globe, linking London investors with Los Angeles lawyers, Australian and North American actors with digital editors in Mumbai, and Mexican directors filming on location in Sofia, with Bulgarians providing service labor to the film crew. The surplus value of all this labor is cashed out in a chain of commodity forms as the movie migrates across exhibition sites: first-run movie theatres, pay-per-view television, and DVD. By focusing on the commodification of communication at the point of production, communication scholars demonstrate how the very character of capitalism is changing due to the importance of communication as a site for producing social wealth. Marxist theory can describe more than how the commodification of communication relies on an increasingly complex international division of labor; it has also provided important insights into how labor time is harvested in the consumption of these commodities.

Participate in communicative behaviors such as reading, watching, or listening often requires one to pay for the pleasure, information, and entertainment one seeks. Even so-called free media are often made free by exposing readers to advertising, the premier genre of capitalist communication. As audiences try to avoid these advertisements, more and more advertisements are embedded in the narrative flow of the communicative commodity. The symbiotic relationship between advertising and the mass media is indicative of the ways audiences provide surplus labor in their roles as audiences. In other words, an individual not only provides surplus labor at work, but also provides surplus labor when she or he is at home consuming media products. Dallas Smythe argued that the time one spends as an audience is important to the production of social wealth because the time spent watching television, for example, was being sold to advertisers. For Smythe, an audience more often than not exists as an audience commodity, and this commodification explains how the ways people experience communication can change the temporal and spatial

coordinates of capitalism to better produce social wealth. Even when people are relaxing by watching a situation comedy, they are working for capitalism because this leisure time, time that is socially necessary to return to work the next day, is being transformed into surplus labor time for capitalism. The transformation of leisure time into surplus labor is especially beneficial to capitalism because people have to pay for the communicative commodities (television sets, cable access, movie tickets) they experience without being paid for the labor time they spend consuming these products. Thus, the idea that an audience participates in surplus labor transforms the concept of media consumption beyond merely buying communicative commodities in order to complete the circuit of market exchange. The idea of audience labor would include all the ways the audience participates in promoting the value of the media they consume, including the labor time spent with the television on, constructing fan Web sites, searching for the latest entertainment news, and trying to construct meaning out of what people watch, listen, or read.

Since a key, perhaps dominant, thread of communication theory concerns the role of communication in making the world meaningful, a process communication scholars often call sense-making, a second theme for Marxist theory is the role different ways of communicating promote capitalist social relationships. In the 21st century, it is difficult to avoid how capitalism relies on harnessing the value of communication in the workplace. The labor required to make even the most basic commodity relies on the ability of communication to promote cooperation, coordination, and command—a communicative process that increasingly stretches across the globe. Even when capitalism is not primarily concerned with the production and consumption of communicative commodities, it relies on communication to make and deliver other goods and services. For example, the coordination of mass production and mass consumption requires the communicative practices of marketing and advertising. Moreover, no firm can embrace the need for customer service without translating communication into a form of labor power, a capacity that can be integrated into the labor process so that good communication skills can support such intangible assets as the firm's reputation and the quality of its relationships. Of course, the kinds of communicative labor expressed

by advertising and customer service are likely to be distributed along an international division of labor stitched together by communication technology, language skills, communicative competencies, corporate mergers, and the costs of labor. Figuring out the best way for a firm to manage who communicates with whom in what way, at what time, and in what manner is crucial to the success of any capitalist firm. The role of communication at the very heart of any capitalist enterprise suggests a qualitative shift in the character of capitalism as different communicative technologies and purposes (mediated, interactive, affective, cultural, and rhetorical) come to determine the ability of capital to produce social wealth. As such, the capacity to communicate must be promoted and regulated inside and outside the place of work to serve the interests of capitalist social relationships. However, controlling how people communicate can be very difficult. For example, universities made tremendous capital investments in digital technologies in the hope of promoting education, but spend considerable resources trying to prevent students, faculty, and staff from using those same resources to access (legally and illegally) movies, music, and television shows.

Another way sense-making becomes an object of concern for Marxist theory concerns how social classes learn to consent or struggle against the forms of oppression and exploitation embedded in capitalist social relationships. The Marxist category of ideology provides an important conceptual lens for describing how capitalism animates the sense-making process. For example, part of the success of capitalism has been due to the ability of its advocates to frame the economic freedom of a corporation to pursue a profit as the most important precondition for democratic freedom. This ideological process of generalizing the particular interests of capitalism for the universal interests of humankind requires constant communication, debate, argument, and advocacy. How someone comes to consent to or struggle against the social relationships of capitalism is partly determined by the ability of different social classes to control the interpretations of the social world. Ideology, for Marxist theory, reveals how an important arena of the class struggle is the battle over the meaning of words, especially the meaning of such key words as democracy, freedom, equality, and liberty. The control over the

means of communication—whether those means be approached as words or as media system—is paramount to those who govern in the name of capitalism. On the other hand, any struggle against capitalism will require sensitivity to how people might wrestle communication away from serving the interests of capitalist social relationships.

As communication scholars informed by Marxist theory investigate the role of communication in the labor process of commodity production, media consumption, and sense-making, they participate in the renewal of Marxist theory as a critical tradition for understanding human experience. In the 19th century, the political slogan of Marxist theory was “Workers of the World Unite!” In the 21st century, the political slogan against the unjust character of the world economy is “Another World is Possible.” Just as communication scholars have been able to animate Marxist theory with careful attention to processes and products of communication, careful attention to communication may provide the resources for renewing a political struggle capable of providing safe passage to another world beyond capitalist control.

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See also Audience Theories; Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Rhetoric; Critical Theory; Cultural Studies; Frankfurt School; Globalization Theories; Ideology; Materiality of Discourse; Media and Mass Communication Theories; Power and Power Relations; Sense-Making

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