

## Book Review

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Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press, 2016.

Perhaps, one of the most profound changes in media and communication studies over last couple of decades has been the phenomenal rise in Marxian theories. One of the reasons for this renewed interest is surely connected to the crisis of capitalism. But it is also a consequence of digital technologies. While Marxian approaches to Internet studies are increasingly popular, there is not much literature in media and communication studies that uses a specific Marxian School, namely, the Frankfurt School inspired critical theory, for an analysis of digital media. For this reason alone Christian Fuchs has written an important book.

The aim of the book is an exploration of a number of key theorists in the digital age. For this, Fuchs has chosen a simple but effective structure. He begins with an introduction to critical theory, highlighting the close intellectual affiliation between the Frankfurt School and Karl Marx. Then he revisits in each chapter a key concept of one theorist, of Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Axel Honneth and Jürgen Habermas. In each of these chapters, he applies the value of these concepts for an analysis of digital media.

Lukács is the first whose theory is applied. Here, Fuchs puts his emphasis on cultural and digital labour. Lukács is valid as he rejects a separation between the realm of material work and the realm of ideology and ideas. It is an analysis which is particularly relevant in the age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. While his Ontology of Social Being has not yet received much attention in media and communication studies, Fuchs points out that the reason for this might lie in the fact that large parts of the book have not been translated from German into English.

Adorno's works are an important foundation for a critical theory of knowledge. Fuchs rejects the claim that Adorno should be perceived as a media pessimist. To give an example, Adorno was convinced that media can play a crucial role in education. Adorno did not see media as an institution that undermines the agency of subjects. Instead, his theory of knowledge is dialectical; it involves both, agency and structure, the individual and the social. For Fuchs Adorno's work is a source for hope, as instrumental knowledge might not be the final form in which knowledge is produced. It can be overcome by a form of critique which does not serve economic interests.

According to Fuchs, the work of Marcuse is particularly rich for an analysis of communication in the digital age. Marcuse's dialectical and humanistic approach is very

much rooted in class struggle and focuses on the notion of ideology. As such his work connects the contradictions of capitalism with the dialectics of communication and technology. While the potential of social media points towards a more democratic and more socialist society, the reality looks rather different with more and more power and control in the hands of very few global media conglomerates. Nevertheless, Marcuse reminds us that a better type of social media is still possible. Furthermore, Marcuse focuses on domination and exploitation. His analysis of work is a useful concept to understand digital labour in various forms.

Honneth is the fourth critical theorist to be discussed. Here, Fuchs is particularly interested in Honneth's concepts of alienation and reification, which draws on the work of Lukács. It is a concept that has the notion of recognition at its centre. In the age of social media, recognition is indeed a useful concept to understand alienation. While Fuchs sees many positive aspects in Honneth's work (in particular its ability to transcend moral relativism), he disagrees with Honneth in that the concept of recognition neglects the importance of the economy and cooperation in society. Fuchs wants a more social concept of recognition and develops nine dimensions of alienation.

The final chapter is not just on Habermas but on several other theorists of communication. Here, Fuchs is interested in the relationship between labour and communication. What is the connection between the economy and society in the digital age? Fuchs discusses the work of Sohn-Rethel, Baudrillard, Habermas, Vygotsky, Rossi-Landi and Raymond Williams. He is in search of a dialectical theory of communication that is built on the fundament of various oppositions such as body and mind, individuality and sociality, agency and structure, and subject and object; in search of a theory that goes well beyond Habermas and his rather idealistic approach to communication.

*Critical Theory of Communication* is not a classical textbook but adopts many of its features. It serves as an introduction for those who are less familiar with the work of Frankfurt School theorists. I would recommend this book particularly to students in the humanities and the social sciences. It is especially relevant for readers with an interest in Marxian approaches to media and communication. The reviewer is only aware of one other book that explores the relevance of critical theory for an analysis of digital media: David Berry's monograph called *Critical Theory and the Digital*, published in 2014. However Berry's book is not an introduction. It is written for an audience with a fair amount of familiarity with the Frankfurt School.

While the structure of the book has many advantages (especially with respect to clarity and efficiency), its simplicity comes sometimes with a price. For Fuchs to link each of the theorists with one key concept, he has to neglect the fact that all the theorists he discusses have created a broad body of work, and that a good number of concepts cannot really be linked to one theorist only. Take alienation as an example: This is a concept that is not just present in the work of Lukács and Honneth but is a central category for all theorists connected to the Frankfurt School. The shortcoming of the structure is that it does not allow a more nuanced debate on the differences between, say, Adorno's concept of alienation with that of Marcuse or Fromm or Benjamin.

Overall, the reviewer has greatly enjoyed reading *Critical Theory of Communication*. It is full of arguments that make a clear and uncompromising point. His opinionated style is sometimes provocative but badly needed as an antidote to either/or reflections and

sitting-on-the-fence deliberations. The reviewer would not agree with all the claims that Fuchs is making. He does not see Adorno as a media optimist. Then again, to make such statements and defend them well is the whole point of a dialectical method. It is a book worth reading as it not merely presents key theorists but also comments on their work in a critical, refreshing, and contemporary way. Fuchs' attempt to demonstrate how old theory is relevant and significant for an understanding of new media and digital capitalism is successful and convincing. It should be expected that this book will provide a starting point for a deeper engagement with the Frankfurt School in the field of media and communication.

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## Reference

- Berry D (2014) *Critical Theory and the Digital*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.