

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dallas Smythe Reloaded: Critical Media and Communication Studies Today

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The new capitalist crisis has resulted in a new interest in the works of Karl Marx. We take this as opportunity for discussing foundations of Marxist Media and Communication Studies and which role Dallas Smythe's works can play in this context. First, I discuss the relevance of Marx and Marxism today. Second, I give a short overview of the relevance of some elements of Dallas Smythe's work for Marxist Media and Communication Studies. Dallas Smythe reminds us of the importance of engagement with Marx's works for studying the media in capitalism critically. Third, I engage with the relationship of Critical Political Economy and Critical Theory in Media and Communication Studies. Both Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy of the Media and Communication have been criticized for being one-sided. Such interpretations are mainly based on selective readings. They ignore that in both approaches there has been with different weightings a focus on aspects of media commodification, audiences, ideology, and alternatives. Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy are complementary and should be combined in Critical Media and Communication studies today. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

Introduction

- “Marx makes a comeback” (*Svenska Dagbladet*. Oct 17, 2008)
- “Crunch resurrects Marx” (*The Independent*. Oct 17, 2008)
- “Crisis allows us to reconsider left-wing ideas” (*The Irish Times*. Oct 18, 2008)

- “Marx exhumed, capitalism buried” (*Sydney Morning Herald*. Oct 23, 2008)
- “Marx Renaissance” (*Korea Times*. Jan 1, 2009)
- “Was Marx Right All Along?” (*The Evening Standard*. March 30, 2009)

These news clippings indicate a renewed interest in Karl Marx’s works concomitant with the new global crisis of capitalism. This chapter poses the following questions: how have the crisis and the Marxist resurgence impacted Media and Communication Studies and what can we learn from Dallas Smythe in the contemporary situation?

Section 2 deals with the disappearance and return of Marx; section 3 focuses on Dallas Smythe’s importance for Marxist Media and Communication Studies today; section 4 discusses the relationship between Critical Political Economy and Critical Theory; and I draw some conclusions in section 5.

The Disappearance and Return of Marx

In 1977, Dallas Smythe published his seminal article “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” in which he argued that Western Marxism had not given enough attention to the complex role of communications in capitalism. Over the past 35 years, the rise of neoliberalism resulted in a turn away from an interest in social class and capitalism. Instead, it became fashionable to speak of globalization (e.g., Beck 1999), postmodernism (Lyotard 1984), and, with the fall of Communism, even the end of history (Fukuyama 1992). In essence, Marxism became the blindspot of all social sciences. The combination of neoliberalism with postmodernism, late-modernism, culturalism and new conservatism was anything but anti-capitalist, and all the more anti-Marxist. As a consequence, Marxist academics were marginalized, structurally disadvantaged, institutionally discriminated against and it was increasingly career threatening to take an explicitly Marxist approach to social analysis.

The declining interest in Marx and Marxism is visualized in Figure 1 showing the number of articles in the Social Sciences Citation Index that contain one of the keywords “Marx,” “Marxist,” or “Marxism” in the article topic description and were published in the five time periods 1968–1977, 1978–1987, 1988–1997, 1998–2007, 2008–2012.¹ These periods are chosen for two reasons: (1) to determine if there has been a change since the start of the new capitalist crisis in 2008; and (2) because social upheavals in 1968 marked a break that also transformed academia.

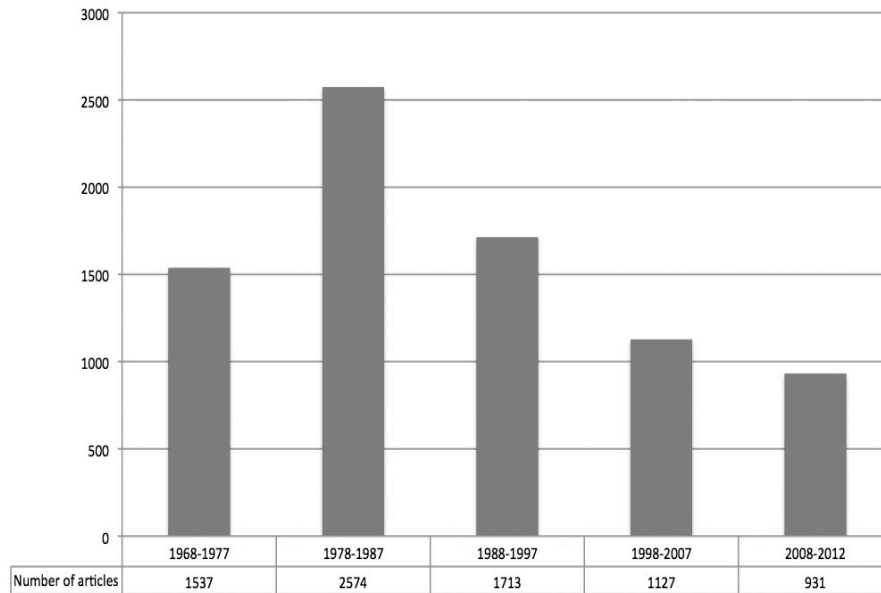


Figure 1: Articles published about Marx and Marxism that are listed in the Social Sciences Citation Index, January 22, 2013.

Figure 1 shows that there was a relatively large output of academic articles about Marx in the period 1978–1987 (2574). Given that the number of articles published increases historically, interest in the period 1968–1977 also seems to have been high. One can observe a clear contraction in the output of articles focusing on Marx, in the periods 1988–1997 (1713) and 1998–2007 (1127).

There are multiple reasons for the disappearance of Marx:

- The rise of neoliberal and neoliberal class struggle from above.
- The commodification of everything, including the commons and public universities.
- The rise of postmodernism in social science and culture.
- The lack of trust in alternatives to capitalism.
- The relatively low presence and intensity of economic struggles.
- Conducting Marxist studies was not conducive for an academic career or academic reputation in a climate of conservative backlash and commodification of academia.

“Monetary crises, independent of real crises or as an intensification of them, are unavoidable” in capitalism (Marx 1894, 649). For Marx, financial crises are not avoidable by regulating financial markets or moral rules that limit greed. Greed is, for him, a structural feature of capitalism that derives

from the necessity of capitalists to accumulate ever more capital and to increase profit rates or to perish. Competition between capitals and the need to expand accumulation result in attempts to create “financial innovations” that have a high risk, but can yield very high short-run revenues. The fictitious value signified by commercial papers stands in no direct relation to the actual value created by companies. Financial bubbles are the effect, i.e. share prices that do not reflect actual profitability and which fall rapidly once a burst of the financial bubble is triggered by events that destroy the investors’ expectations for high future returns. The new global economic crisis that started in 2008 is the most obvious reason for a resurgence of interest in Marx.

This shift is, however, multidimensional and has multiple causes:

- The new global economic crisis has resulted in an increasing interest in the dynamics and contradictions of capitalism and the notion of crisis itself.
- Neoliberalism and the precarization of work and life are consequences of class society, exploitation and commodification.
- New social movements (the anti-corporate movement, global justice movement, Occupy movement) have an interest in questions of class.
- The financialization of the economy can be analysed with categories such as the new imperialism or fictitious capital.
- New global wars bring about an interest in the category of imperialism.
- Contemporary revolutions and rebellions (such as the Arab spring) give attention to the relevance of revolution, emancipation, and liberation.
- The globalization discourse has been accompanied by discussions about global capitalism.
- The role of mediatization, ICTs, and knowledge work in contemporary capitalism was anticipated by Marx’ focus on the General Intellect.
- Many precariously working university scholars and students have a logical interest in Marxian theory.

Indicative of an increased interest in capitalism as an object of study in Media and Communication Studies, several special issues have focused on the role of communication, media, and culture in the recent capitalist crisis.²

Some Cultural Studies scholars have, in light of the crisis, admitted indirectly a lack of focus on capitalism, class, and the economy in their field. For example, in the special issue on “The Economic Crisis and After” published by the journal *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg wrote that “it is true that

the challenge of finding better ways of incorporating economic analysis into the conjuncturalist project of cultural studies has become more urgent and more visible in recent years” (Grossberg 2010a, 295). Mark Hayward wrote in the introduction that the special issue should “remind scholars working in cultural studies that the economy is, and must remain, a site of constant engagement and experimentation” (Hayward 2010, 289). Grossberg (2012, 320) says that it has become “necessary [...] that people who write about culture are taking questions of economics seriously. [...] We don’t do the work of taking what’s been written about economics seriously within the discipline [of Cultural Studies]—and that includes neoclassical, but it also includes a wide range of heterodox forms of economics. It means that it also entails doing empirical work.” An easier and more appropriate way to formulate these “reminders” and “challenges” is that Cultural Studies has to turn into or at least take up aspects of Critical Political Economy in order to adequately understand contemporary capitalism and the role of media and communication. The tradition of Critical Political Economy of Media, Communication, Information and Culture has given attention to the commodification of content and audiences, labour spatialization, class, gender, race, social movements, hegemony and ideology (Mosco 2009). Although a contemporary challenge is that “labor remains a blind spot of western communication studies, including the political economy tradition” (Mosco 2011, 358) some recent work has helped to overcome this blindspot (see: McKercher and Mosco 2007, Mosco and McKercher 2008; Burston, Dyer-Witheford, and Hearn 2010; Mosco, McKercher and Huws 2010). The latter tradition has arguably made critical-theoretical and empirical efforts to come to grips with the relationship between communication and a capitalist political economy, whereas Cultural Studies has to, as Toby Miller (2012, 322) argues, “rethink the anti-Marxism” because it is the “wrong target.”

When Grossberg (2010b, 318) says that “cultural studies does need to take questions of economics more seriously, especially because of the specific realities, relationships, and forces of the contemporary conjuncture,” then one wonders if economics was really *ever* unimportant for the study of culture, the media, and communication? Has it been unimportant for studying these phenomena during the time of neoliberal capitalism since the 1970s?

Has it been unimportant during the time of Fordist mass production and the rise of consumer culture? Has it been unimportant during the time of the war economy in the late 1930s and 1940s? Has it been unimportant during the stock market crashes dotting the twentieth century? Has it been unimportant during the time of the rise of imperialism? Has it been unimportant during the time of the rise of industrial capitalism? The answer to all of these questions is that the economy has always been relevant for the study of culture,

communication, the media, and information, but that Cultural Studies has increasingly ignored the economy, not out of societal necessity, but because of its turn away from Marxism and towards postmodernism. The problem of Cultural Studies is, as Robert Babe says, that its “poststructuralist turn [...] instigated the separation” (Babe 2009, 9) from economics. A reintegration requires first and foremost “setting aside poststructuralist cultural studies” (Babe 2009, 196) and seriously engaging with political economy. Specifically, I recommend Marxist studies, as exemplified in the work of Dallas Smythe.

Dallas Smythe and Marxist Media and Communication Studies Today

In the article “On the Political Economy of Communications,” Smythe (1960) defined the “central purpose of the study of the political economy of communications” as the evaluation of “the effects of communication agencies in terms of the policies by which they are organized and operated” and the analysis of “the structure and policies of these communication agencies in their social settings” (Smythe 1960, 564). Whereas there are foundations of a general political economy in this paper, there are no traces of Marx in it. Janet Wasko (2004, 311) argues that although “Smythe’s discussion at this point did not employ radical or Marxist terminology, it was a major departure from the kind of research that dominated the study of mass communications at that time.” Wasko (2004, 312) points out that it was in the “1970s that the political economy of media and communications (PE/C) was explicitly defined again but this time within a more explicitly Marxist framework.” She mentions in this context the works of Nicholas Garnham, Peter Golding, Armand Mattelart, Graham Murdock, Dallas Smythe, as well as the Blindspot Debate (Wasko 2004, 312–313).

Smythe (1977, 1) later argued that “western Marxist analyses have neglected the economic and political significance of mass communications systems.” Robin Mansell (1995, 51) argues that Smythe was engaged in establishing a Critical Media and Communication Studies that “had at its core the need to interrogate the systemic character of capitalism as it was expressed through the means of structures of communication.” Smythe’s focus, according to Mansell, was on exposing “through critical research the articulation of political and economic power relations as they were expressed in the institutional relations embedded in technology and the content of communication in all its forms” (Mansell 1995, 47). Smythe was not interested in developing a general political economy of communication, but a

“Marxist theory of communication” (Smythe 1994, 258) and argued that critical theory means “Marxist or quasi-Marxist” theory (Smythe 1994, 256). I therefore think that it is consequent and important to characterize Smythe’s approach not just as Critical Communication Research, but as Marxist Communication Studies, which means a unity of theoretical/philosophical, empirical, and ethical studies of media and communication. Such an approach focuses on the analysis of contradictions, structures and practices of domination, exploitation, struggles, ideologies, and alternatives to capitalism in relation to media and communication. One should not split off the importance of Marx and Marxism from Smythe’s approach and reduce him to having established a critical empirical research methodology. Janet Wasko stresses that Marx’s 11th Feuerbach thesis (“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”) applied to the work and life of Dallas Smythe: “Analyzing and understanding the role of communications in the modern world might be enough for most communication scholars. But Dallas Smythe also sought to change the world, not only by his extensive research and teaching in academia, but in his work in the public sector, and through his life as a social activist” (Wasko 1993, 1).

Smythe (1981, xvi–xviii) identified eight core aspects of a Marxist political economy of communications: materiality, monopoly capitalism, audience commodification and advertising, media communication as part of the base of capitalism, labour power, critique of technological determinism, consciousness, arts, and learning. Smythe’s works can today remind us of the importance of the engagement with Marx’s works for studying the media in capitalism critically. Marx developed a Critique of the Political Economy of Capitalism, which means that it is: a) an analysis and critique of capitalism, b) a critique of liberal ideology, thought and academia, and c) transformative practice.

Karl Marx (1867) titled his magnum opus not *Capital: A Political Economy*, but rather *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Political economy is a broad field, incorporating traditions of thinking grounded in classical liberal economic thought. Marx studied and was highly critical of such writers as Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, Ure, and others. His main criticism of bourgeois political economy is that it fetishizes capitalism. Its thinkers “confine themselves to systematizing in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one” (Marx 1867, 175). They postulate that categories like commodities, money, exchange value, capital, markets, or competition are anthropological features of all societies, thereby ignoring the categories’ historical character and enmeshment within class struggles. Marx showed the

contradictions of political economic thought and took classical political economy as a starting point for a critique of capitalism that considers “every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion” and analyzes how “the movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions” (Marx 1867, 103). Such analysis calls for the “development of the contradictions of a given historical form” by political practice (619) and means that Marx’s approach is “in its very essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx 1867, 103).

There are different forms of the political economy of media and communication. Vincent Mosco (2009) distinguishes between neoconservative, institutional, Marxian, feminist, and environmental approaches in political economy. Dwayne Winseck (2011) speaks of political economies of media and identifies a conservative/neoclassical approach, a radical approach, a Schumpeterian institutional approach, and the cultural industries approach. Applying Marx’s distinction between political economy and a critique of political economy, one can say that there are certainly Political Economies of Media and Communication, but only one Critique of the Political Economy of Media and Communication: the one grounded in Marx’s works and Marxian analysis.

Social scientists in the first half of the 20th century mapped research paradigms for communications and media. Paul Lazarsfeld (1941/2004) differentiated between traditional and critical research; Max Horkheimer (1937/2002) similarly distinguished between traditional and critical theory. Smythe took up the task of further elaborating this research agenda along relatively critical or administrative ambitions (Smythe 1981, chapter 11).³

According to Smythe, “The basis for distinguishing critical and administrative theory and research is in: (1) the kinds of problems chosen for study; (2) the kinds of research methods used in the study; and (3) the ideological predisposition of the researcher either to criticize and try to change the existing politico-economic order or to defend and strengthen it” (Smythe 1984, 205). The second type of theory would be “dialectical, historical, and materialistic” (Smythe 1984, 206).

Smythe (1994, 256ff) distinguished between administrative and critical theory and between administrative researchable problems and critical problems:

By administrative theory, I refer to the applications of neopositivistic, behavioral theory. By critical theory, I refer to applications of critical (Marxist or quasi-Marxist) theory. By administrative researchable problems, I mean how to market goods, how to improve the efficiency of media operations, etc. By critical problems, I mean research addressed to macro institutional structure and policies. (Smythe 1994, 256)

The distinction between administrative/traditional and critical research certainly is still of crucial relevance today. Several decades of neoliberal transformations have weakened the conditions for conducting critical research in the social sciences and humanities as well as in Media and Communication Studies. If one takes a comparative look at the special issues of the *Journal of Communication* that have reflected on the status of the field in 1983 (Volume 33, Issue 3) and 2008 (Volume 58, Issue 4), then these developments become strikingly clear. Whereas in 1983 there were, besides overall positivistic outlooks on the field, also papers with titles like “Emancipation or Domestication: Toward a Utopian Science of Communication”, “The Debate over Critical vs. Administrative Research: Circularity or Challenge”, “On Critical and Administrative Research: A New Critical Analysis”, “The Political and Epistemological Constituents of Critical Communication Research”, “The Critical Researcher’s Dilemma”, “Critical Research and the Role of Labor”, “Critical Research in the Information Age”, “Power and Knowledge: Toward a New Critical Synthesis”, “The Importance of Being Critical—In One’s Own Fashion.” The 2008 issue in contrast shows cleansing of engagement with critical approaches and instead features articles with titles like “Empirical Intersections in Communication Research: Replication, Multiple Quantitative Methods, and Bridging the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide“, “The Evolution of Organizational Communication“, “Transdisciplinary Science: The Nexus Between Communication and Public Health“, or “The Intersection of Communication and Social Psychology: Points of Contact and Points of Difference.” My hope is that in 2020 a special journal issue that reflects on the status of the field will hold the title “The New Rise of Marxism.” Smythe’s stress on the distinction between conventional and critical-Marxist research reminds us of the fronts of contemporary intellectual struggles.

Besides the reminder of the importance of a Marxist approach for studying communication and the stress on the distinction between administrative and critical research, a third aspect of the relevance of Dallas Smythe’s works today is the renewal of the audience commodity concept in debates about digital labour.

Janet Wasko (2005b, 29) argues that “with the increasing spread of privatized, advertiser-supported media, the audience commodity concept has been accepted by many political economists, as well as other communication theorists.” In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in Dallas Smythe’s works, especially in relation to the question: are users of commercial social media *workers* and are they exploited? Critical conferences have helped to advance the discourse on digital labour⁴. The audience commodity concept has in this context played a crucial role (see e.g., Fuchs 2011a;

2011b; 2011d; 2010b; 2009; Cohen 2008, Fisher 2012; Kang and McAllister 2011; Lee 2011; Manzerolle 2010; McStay 2011; Napoli 2010; Prodnik 2012; Sandoval 2012).

The digital labour debate is not the subject of this article, but I want to briefly point out one of its dimensions that relates to Smythe. Smythe (1981, 47) argued: “For the great majority of the population [...] 24 hours a day is work time” (Smythe 1981, 47). Sut Jhally (1987) has argued that due to the rise of the audience commodity, the living room has become a factory. Mario Tronti (cited in: Cleaver 1992, 137) has taken this idea one step further by arguing that society has become a factory, and that the boundaries of the factory extend spaces for the exploitation of wage labour. Nick Dyer-Witford (2010, 485) speaks in this context of the emergence of the “factory planet.” The exploitation of user labour on commercial Internet platforms like Facebook and Google is indicative of a phase of capitalism, in which we find an all-ubiquitous factory that is a space of the exploitation of labour. Social media and the mobile Internet make the audience commodity ubiquitous and the factory not limited to your living room and your typical space wage labour—the factory and work place surveillance are omnipresent. *The entire planet is today a capitalist factory*. The digital labour debate not only opens up a connection to contemporary debates about Dallas Smythe’s concept of the audience commodity, but also a theoretical connection between Smythe and Autonomist Marxism.

Critical Political Economy and Critical Theory of Media and Communication

Smythe argued that Gramsci and the Frankfurt School advanced the concepts of ideology, consciousness, and hegemony as areas “saturated with subjectivism and positivism” (Smythe 1981, xvii). They would have advanced an “idealist theory of the communications commodity” (Smythe 1994, 268) that situates the media only on the superstructure of capitalism and forgets to ask what economic functions they serve. For Smythe (1994, 266–291), the material aspect of communications is that audiences are exploited and sold as commodities to advertisers. He was more interested in aspects of surplus value generation within the media than the ideological effects of message content. Smythe called for analyzing the media more in terms of surplus value and exploitation and less in terms of manipulation. Nicholas Garnham (1990, 30) shares with Smythe the insight that the Political Economy of Communication should “shift attention away from the conception of the mass media as ideological apparatuses” and focus on the analysis of their “economic role” in

surplus value generation and advertising. The analysis of media as “vehicles for ideological domination” is for Garnham (2004, 94) “a busted flush” that is not needed for explaining “the relatively smooth reproduction of capitalism.”

Given the analyses of Smythe and Garnham, the impression can be created that Frankfurt School Critical Theory focuses on ideology critique, whereas the Political Economy of Media/Communication focuses on the analysis of capital accumulation by and with the help of the media. Both Smythe and Garnham criticise ideology critique and point out the need for a commodity- and surplus value-centred analysis of the capitalist media. But political economy and ideology critique are not mutually exclusive, but rather require each other. Although wide-read works of the Frankfurt School focused on ideology (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik; Levinson and Sanford 1950; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Marcuse 1964), other books in its book series *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie* dealt with the changes of accumulation in what was termed late capitalism or monopoly capitalism (Pollock 1956; Friedmann 1959). The Marxist political economist Henryk Grossmann was one of the most important members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the 1920s and wrote his main work at the Institute (Grossmann 1929). Although only few will today agree with Grossmann’s theory of capitalist breakdown, it remains a fact that Marxist political economy was an element of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* right from its beginning and had, in Pollock and Grossmann, two important representatives. After Horkheimer had become director of the Institute in 1930, he formulated an interdisciplinary research programme that aimed at bringing together philosophers and scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including economics (Horkheimer 1931). When formulating their general concepts of critical theory, both Horkheimer (2002, 244) and Marcuse (1941) had a combination of philosophy and Marx’s Critique of the Political Economy in mind.

Just as Critical Political Economy was not alien to the Frankfurt School, ideology critique has also not been alien to the approach of the Critical Political Economy of the Media and Communication. For Murdock and Golding (1974, 4), the media are organizations that “produce and distribute commodities,” means for distributing advertisements, and they also have an “ideological dimension” by disseminating “ideas about economic and political structures.” Murdock (1978, 469) stressed in the Blindspot Debate that there are non-advertising based culture industries (like popular culture) that sell “explanations of social order and structured inequality” and “work with and through ideology—selling the system” (see also: Artz 2008, 64). Murdock also argued in the Debate that Smythe did not sufficiently acknowl-

edge Western Marxism in Europe and that one needs a balance between ideology critique and political economy for analyzing the media in capitalism. Smythe also acknowledged the importance of ideology when talking about the “Consciousness Industry” (Smythe 1981, 4–9, 270–299). In contrast to the Frankfurt School, he does not understand ideology as false consciousness, but as a “system of beliefs, attitudes, and ideas” (Smythe 1981, 171). The task of the Consciousness Industry is, for Smythe, to make people buy commodities and pay taxes (Smythe 1994, 250). Its further task is to promote values that favour capitalism and the private property system (Smythe 1994, 251–253). One role of the capitalist media would be the “pervasive reinforcement of the ideological basis of the capitalist system.” For example, assumptions like “human nature is necessarily selfish and possessive. It has always been this way: You can’t change human nature” (Smythe 1994, 251). So while Smythe criticized the Frankfurt School, he did advance and confirm the importance of ideology critique. Robert Babe argues in this context that although Smythe stressed the need for a materialist theory of culture that sees audience power “as the media’s main output” (Babe 2000, 133f), his concept of the Consciousness Industry “is ‘idealist’ in Smythe’s sense of the term” (Babe 2000, 134).

A difference between Critical Political Economy of the Media and Critical Theory is that the first is strongly rooted in economic theory and the second in philosophy and social theory. Dallas Smythe acknowledged this difference: “While the cutting edge of critical theory lies in political economy, critical theory in communications has the transdisciplinary scope of the social sciences, humanities, and arts” (Smythe 1984, 211). Smythe defined Critical Theory broadly as “criticism of the contradictory aspects of the phenomena in their systemic context” (Smythe and Dinh 1983, 123) and therefore concluded that Critical Theory is not necessarily Marxist. The historical Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School has its roots in Marxist political philosophy, so the question is if one should really have a broad definition of the term “critical,” as Smythe suggests, that does not focus on a systemic critique of capitalism.

The approaches of the Frankfurt School and of the Critique of the Political Economy of Media and Communication should be understood as being complementary. There has been a stronger focus on ideology critique in the Frankfurt School approach for historical reasons. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the rise of German fascism, the Stalinist praxis and American consumer capitalism showed the defeat of the revolutionary potentials of the working class (Habermas 1984, 366f). They wanted to explain why the revolutionary German working class followed Hitler, which engendered interest in the analysis of the authoritarian personality and media propaganda.

The Anglo-American approach of the Political Economy of Media and Communication was developed by people in countries that did not experience fascism, which might be one of the factors that explain the differences in emphasis on ideology and capital accumulation. Whereas North American capitalism was, after 1945, based on pure liberal ideology, anti-communism, and a strong consumer culture, German post-war capitalism was built on the legacy of National Socialism and a strong persistence of fascist thinking.

Horkheimer's (1947) notion of instrumental reason and Marcuse's (1964) notion of technological rationality open up connections between the two approaches. Horkheimer and Marcuse stressed that in capitalism there is a tendency that freedom of action is replaced by instrumental decision making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected to only react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in Georg Lukács' (1923/1972) notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx's (1867) concept of fetishism. Reification means "that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (Lukács 1923/1972, 83). The media in capitalism are modes of reification in multiple senses. First, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements. Second, culture is in capitalism to a large degree connected to the commodity form, in the form of cultural commodities that are bought by consumers and in the form of audience and user commodities that media consumers/Internet prosumers become themselves. So citizens, on the one hand, buy newspapers, magazines, DVDs, music, computers, mobile phones, laptops, tablets etc., and, on the other hand, do not have to pay for the access to Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter because their personal usage and social relations data are sold as commodities to advertisers. Third, in order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system, and it makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic. The first and the second dimension constitute the economic dimension of instrumental reason, the third dimension is the ideological form of instrumental reason. Capitalist media are necessarily means of advertising and commodification and spaces of ideology. Advertising and cultural commodification make humans instruments for economic accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling the belief in the system of capital and commodities into human's subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. It is of course an important question to which extent ideology is always successful and to which degree it

is questioned and resisted; but the crucial aspect about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation.

“The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (Marx 1867, 125). Marx begins the analysis of capitalism with the analysis of the commodity: its use value, exchange value, value, the labour embodied in it, and the value forms of the commodity, including the money form (x commodity A = y amount of money). Next, Marx turns to the analysis of ideology as an immanent feature of the commodity. The “mysterious character of the commodity-form” is that human social relations that create commodities are not visible in the commodity, but appear as “the socio-natural properties of these things.” “The definite social relation between men themselves [take in ideologies] [...] the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1867, 165). Ideologies legitimize various phenomena, such as wage labour, by creating the impression that the latter exist always and naturally and by ignoring the historical and social character of things.

Smythe said that the “starting point for a general Marxist theory of communications is [...] the theory of commodity exchange” (Smythe 1994, 259). Adorno acknowledged that “the concept of exchange is [...] the hinge connecting the conception of a critical theory of society to the construction of the concept of society as a totality” (Adorno 2000, 32). Commodity and commodity exchange are crucial concepts for Critical Political Economy and Critical Theory. As the commodity concept is connected to both capital accumulation and ideology, both approaches should start simultaneously with the value aspects and the ideology aspects of media commodities.

Accumulation and ideology go hand in hand. An example: “social media.” After the dot.com crisis in 2000, there was a need for establishing new capital accumulation strategies for the capitalist Internet economy. The discourse on “social media” assumed this task. At the same time, investors were reluctant to invest finance capital after the crisis. Nobody knew if the users were interested in microblogs, social networking sites, etc. The rise of social media as a new capital accumulation model was accompanied by a social media ideology: that social media are new (“web 2.0”), pose new opportunities for participation, will bring about an “economic democracy,” enable new forms of political struggle (“Twitter revolution”), more democracy (“participatory culture”), etc. The rise of new media was accompanied by a techno-deterministic, techno-optimistic ideology. This ideology was necessary for convincing investors and users to support the social media capital accumulation model. The political economy of surplus value genera-

tion on social media heavily interacted with ideology in order to enable the economic and discursive rise of “social media.”

Cultural Studies scholars who tend to say that the Frankfurt School and the Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication are pessimistic, elitist, and neglect audiences, have a simplified understanding of these two approaches (see for example: Hall 1986; 1988; Grossberg 1995/1998). They say that the concept of ideology as false consciousness makes “both the masses and the capitalists look like judgemental dopes” (Hall 1986, 33). Hall (1988, 44) criticizes Lukács, whose works have been one of the main influences on the Frankfurt School. He says that the false consciousness theorem is simplistic because it assumes that “vast numbers of ordinary people, mentally equipped in much the same way as you or I, can simply be thoroughly and systematically duped into misrecognizing entirely where their real interests lie.” Cultural Studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg (1995/1998) argued that both the Frankfurt School and Political Economy have a simple “model of domination in which people are seen as passively manipulated ‘cultural dupes’” (616) and that for them “culture matters only as a commodity and an ideological tool of manipulation” (618).

In contrast to such claims, Dallas Smythe actually had a very balanced view of the audience: capital would attempt to control audiences, but they would have potentials to resist.

People are subject to relentless pressures from Consciousness Industry; they are besieged with an avalanche of consumer goods and services; they are themselves produced as (audience) commodities; they reproduce their own lives and energies as damaged and in commodity form. But people are by no means passive or powerless. People do resist the powerful and manifold pressures of capital as best they can. (Smythe 1981, 270)

Likewise, Adorno, who is vilified by many Cultural Studies scholars as the prototypical cultural pessimist and elitist, had a positive vision for a medium like TV. The German word for television, *Fernsehen*, literally means to watch into the distance. For television “to keep the promise still resonating within the word, it must emancipate itself from everything within which it [...] refutes its own principle and betrays the idea of Good Fortune for the smaller fortunes of the department store” (Adorno 2005, 57). This is indirectly a call for the creation of alternative media that question the status quo. Adorno did not despise popular culture. He was, for example, a fan of Charlie Chaplin and he pointed out the critical role of the clown in popular culture (Adorno 1996). Even in the “Culture Industry” chapter of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, the positive elements of popular culture are visible. For example, Adorno writes that “traces of something better persist in

those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 114). In his essay *Erziehung nach Auschwitz* (*Education after Auschwitz*), Adorno (1977, 680) wrote about in the positive role that TV could play in anti-fascist education in Germany after Auschwitz. If one goes beyond a superficial and selective reading of Adorno, then one will find his deep belief in the possibility of emancipation and in the role that culture can play in it. English translations of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s works are imprecise because the language of the two philosophers is complex and not easily translatable. But besides the problem non-German speakers face when reading Horkheimer and Adorno, there seems to be a certain reluctance in Cultural Studies to engage thoroughly with the Frankfurt School’s and Critical Political Economy’s origins in order to set up a straw man.

David Hesmondhalgh (2010, 280) claims that “Smythe’s account is crude, reductionist and functionalist, totally underestimating contradiction and struggle in capitalism” and that it “has totally lost its connection to pragmatic political struggle.” Similarly, in a contemporary critique of Smythe’s audience commodity theory and its application to digital media, Brett Caraway (2011) argues that “Smythe’s theory represents a one-sided class analysis which devalues working-class subjectivity” (696), gives “no discussion of wage struggles, product boycotts, or consumer safety” (700), and thereby conducts “audience commodity fetishism” in which “we are all now merely cogs in the capitalist machine” (700). Caraway’s criticism of political economy coincides with his celebration of the “creative energy residing in the new media environment” (706), which sets his analysis on par with social media determinists like Henry Jenkins, who argue that “the Web has become a site of consumer participation” (Jenkins 2006, 133) and that media are today a locus of “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006). These criticisms are based on uninformed or deliberately selective readings of Smythe that ignore his focus on alternative media as counterpart to audience commodification. Unlike certain cultural studies scholars, Smythe does not celebrate audiences as always rebelling and does not argue for social-democratic reformism that tolerates exploitation and misery; his analysis rather implies the need for the overthrow of capitalism in order to humanize society and the overthrow of the capitalist media system in order to humanize the media.

Dallas Smythe did not ignore the ability of humans to create alternative futures, which is shown by the fact that he engaged with the idea of an alternative communication system. For Smythe, subjectivity is revolutionary subjectivity that aims at fundamentally transforming society and establishing an alternative media system. Critics like Hesmondhalgh and Caraway over-

look this aspect of Smythe's approach. Mao wrote in 1957 about big-character posters (Dazibao, Tatsepao): "We should put up big-character posters and hold forums."⁵

When Dallas Smythe wrote in the early 1970s about communication in China in his article, "After bicycles, what?" (Smythe 1994, 230–244), he took up Mao's idea of the big-character posters for thinking about how to democratically organize the broadcasting system. He spoke of a "two-way system in which each receiver would have the capability to provide either a voice or voice-and-picture response. [...] a two-way TV system would be like an electronic tatzupao system" (Smythe 1994, 231f). These thoughts paralleled the ideas of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's (1970) concept of emancipatory media use, Walter Benjamin's (1934; 1936/1939) idea of the reader/writer, and Bertolt Brecht's (1932/2000) notion of an alternative radio in his radio theory.

Mao had the idea of a media system that is controlled by the people in grassroots processes, and Smythe applied this idea in formulating a concept of alternative electronic media. Yuezhi Zhao (2011) points out the relevance of Smythe's article and his ideas of a non-capitalist communication system for China. Given a world dominated by the logic of neoliberal capitalism (both in the West and China), she stresses, inspired by Smythe, the importance of establishing communications and societies that are based on non-capitalist logic.

Dallas Smythe was fundamentally concerned with processes of commodification, which is reflected in his creation of the audience commodity category. Although he was critical of some other Marxist theories of culture, important elements of ideology critique and alternative media accompany his focus on the audience commodity. He was furthermore deeply concerned about social struggles for a better world and democratic communications. Smythe's work was connected to politics, e.g., he worked with unions for improving the working conditions of communications workers, gave testimonies and conducted studies in favour of public ownership of satellites, public service broadcasting and affordable universal access to telecommunications, and against corporate media control and monopolization (Yao 2010). He also was involved in debates about the establishment of a New World Information and Communication Order and acted as public intellectual (ibid.). The claim that Smythe had no connection to political struggles is false and ideological.

Conclusion

I have stressed in this chapter that Dallas Smythe's works are helpful in at least three ways today:

- Smythe reminds us of the importance of Marxism and Marx for critically studying media and communication in capitalism.
- Smythe stressed the distinction between administrative and critical research that is a crucial line of struggle in the time of neoliberalism and the new capitalist crisis.
- Smythe's audience commodity concept informs what is called the digital labour debate.

I also discussed the relationship of Critical Theory and Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication Studies. A combination of these two approaches is fruitful and important for Marxist and Critical Media and Communication Studies today. I have shown that commonly held objections against both approaches are wrong and that the two approaches can be complementary, although there are also historical and theoretical differences.

The task for a Critical Theory and the Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, Culture, Information and the Media is to focus on:

- a) processes of capital accumulation (including the analysis of capital, markets, commodity logic, competition, exchange value, the antagonisms of the mode of production, productive forces, crises, advertising, etc.),
- b) class relations (with a focus on work, labour and the mode of the exploitation of surplus value),
- c) domination in general,
- d) ideology (both in academia and everyday life).

This task of critical research further includes the analysis of and engagement in struggles against the dominant order, which are enacted in part through social movement struggles aided by social media that aim at the establishment of a democratic socialist society—one based on communication commons as part of structures of commonly-owned means of production (Fuchs 2011c). The approach thereby realizes that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation (Fuchs 2011c).

Marxist scholarship has historically had to deal with attempts of repression. Marxist scholars are often facing surveillance, overt or hidden repression, and discrimination (in terms of promotion, applications, accep-

tance of publications, appointments and firing, resources, research funding, and so on). This has also affected and continues to affect the conditions of conducting critical communication scholarship. Dallas Smythe (1907–1992) reported in his autobiographic memories about the surveillance he was undergoing: “It is possible to distinguish five periods when I was under FBI investigation and/or surveillance. [...] an unidentified female FCC employee visited J. Edgar Hoover’s office and told his top deputy that I, along with [others] [...] were pinkos” (Smythe 1994, 41). From Smythe’s FBI file: “It is further recommended that the Springfield Office [of the FBI] be permitted to make limited discreet inquiries [...] to keep abreast of Smythe’s Communist activities” (Smythe 1994, 42). Smythe argued that he found out from his FBI file that while he was at the University of Illinois, Willbur Schramm, who is considered by some as a crucial founding figure of Media and Communication Studies, was an anti-communist FBI-informant who made claims about the political attitudes of Smythe to the Bureau (Lent 1995, Smythe 1994).

In the late 1960s, right-wing groups demanded that Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) should be fired from his professorship at UC San Diego. In August 1968, the American Legion wanted to buy his university contract for \$ 20 000 USD. A Marcuse puppet carrying a sign that said “Marxist Marcuse” was hoisted with a rope around its neck on a pole in front of San Diego City Hall on January 15, 1969, by anonymous Marcuse haters. This was not only a murder threat, but also a genuinely fascist action with symbolic value, given that Marcuse had to emigrate from anti-Semitic National Socialist Germany in the 1930s because, as a Marxist coming from a Jewish family, he would have probably be killed by the Hitler regime. Then-U.S. Vice President Spiro Agnew said that Marcuse is “literally poisoning a lot of young minds.”⁶

Horst Holzer (1935–2000), a German Critical Political Economist of Media and Communication, was one of the most prominent victims of the German *Berufsverbote* (occupational bans) for members of the DKP (German Communist Party). He was appointed to the Chair in Communication and Aesthetics at the University of Bremen by the appointment committee in 1971, but the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany)-dominated Senate of Bremen denied him the position because of his DKP membership. He was denied appointment at the University of Oldenbourg in 1972, at the Pädagogische Hochschule Berlin in 1973, the University of Marburg in 1973, and faced a denial of tenure and suspension at the University of Munich in 1974 (see Bönkost 2011).

The logic of repression against Marxists can work by the denial of resources, exclusion from decision-making, ideology, or overt violence. The latter culminates in the appeal to kill Marxists. The contemporary logic of

repression against Marxists has most directly been expressed in Anders Breivik's "A European Declaration of Independence," in which one can find 1112 occurrences of the terms Marx/Marxist/Marxism. He describes "Cultural Marxist profiles" and says that the following intellectuals are the main representatives of the cultural Marxist-worldview that he considers as his main enemy: Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno. Breivik writes in his declaration that "armed resistance against the cultural Marxist/multiculturalist regimes of Western Europe is the only rational approach." He calls for killing Marxists. The logic of repressing Marxism and Marxists leads in the last instance to this very thought, namely that culture and society are threatened by Marxism and that its representatives should therefore be annihilated. Breivik's arguments show at the same time that the logic of anti-Marxism thought to the end and in the very last instance leaves democratic grounds and enters the realm of fascism. If fascism considers Marxism as its principle antagonist, then it might precisely be the case that in order to resist fascism one has to turn towards Marxism, which illustrates the importance of being a Marxist today.

Although Marxist scholarship is facing repression, it is not impossible to conduct research based on this approach and it is in fact theoretically, academically, and politically necessary. Further support is given to conducting Marxist research of media and the Internet by the circumstance that there is a critical mass of scholars, who know each other and can support each other. Giving the existing anti-Marxist biases, Marxists have to work harder and more in order to be able to build institutional grounds for their works. But this work is worth pursuing—for political and ethical reasons.

Michael Burawoy reflects on the question of when is the right time for conducting critical/Marxist social science: "How often have I heard faculty advise their students to leave public sociology until after tenure—not realizing (or realizing all too well?) that public sociology is what keeps sociological passion alive. [...] Once they have tenure, they [...] may have lost all interest in public sociology, preferring the more lucrative policy world of consultants or a niche in professional sociology. Better to indulge the commitment to public sociology from the beginning, and that way ignite the torch of professional sociology" (Burawoy 2007, 40).

When is the right time for Marxist social science, Marxist Media and Communication Studies, and Marxist Internet Studies? Do we have to wait? We cannot wait. All times are the right times as long as injustice exists in the world. Critical social science requires networks, passion, courage, commitment, and solidarity. What Marxist communication scholars need to do is to keep up the struggle, to build research networks, operate journals, organize

conferences, practice mutual aid, engage in visible debates as public intellectuals, and connect academic struggles to other struggles.

Notes

- 1 İrfan Erdoğan (2012) has analysed 210 articles that mentioned Marx and that were published in 77 selected media and communication journals between January 2007 and June 2011. He found that “Mainstream studies ignore and liberal-democrats generally appreciate Marx,” whereas the main criticisms of Marx come from “so-called ‘critical’ or ‘alternative’ approaches,” whose “‘alternatives’ are ‘alternatives to Marx’” and critical in the sense of a “criticism directed against Marx” (Erdoğan 2012, 382). At the same time as there are sustained attempts to downplay the importance of Marx for the study of society, media, and communication, there are indicators of a certain degree of new engagement with Marx. One of them is the special issue of tripleC (<http://www.triple-c.at>) “Marx is Back—The Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today” (Fuchs and Mosco 2012) that features 29 original articles engaging with Marxist thought. Another one was the conference “Critique, Democracy and Philosophy in 21st Century Information Society. Towards Critical Theories of Social Media,” at which a sustained engagement with Marx and communication today took place, especially by and among PhD students (see Fuchs 2012d).
- 2 *tripleC—Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society: Capitalist Crisis, Communication & Culture* (2009, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 193—309, edited by Christian Fuchs, Matthias Schafranek, David Hakken, Marcus Breen).
* *International Journal of Communication: Global Financial Crisis* (2010, Vol., edited by Paula Chakravartty and John D.H. Downing) * *Cultural Studies: The Economic Crisis and After* (2010, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 283-444).
- 3 “By ‘critical’ researchable problems we mean how to reshape or invent institutions to meet the collective needs of the relevant social community [...] By ‘critical’ tools, we refer to historical, materialist analysis of the contradictory process in the real world. By ‘administrative’ ideology, we mean the linking of administrative-type problems and tools, with interpretation of results that supports, or does not seriously disturb, the status quo. By ‘critical’ ideology, we refer to the linking of ‘critical’ researchable problems and critical tools with interpretations that involve radical changes in the established order” (Smythe and Dinh 1983, 118).
- 4 Examples of conferences include, “Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens” (University of Western Ontario 2009), “The Internet as Playground and Factory” (New School 2009).
- 5 In 1958, Mao wrote: “The Tatsepao, or big-character poster, is [a] powerful new weapon, a means of criticism and self-criticism which was created by the masses during the rectification movement; at the same time it is used to expose and attack the enemy. It is also a powerful weapon for conducting debate and education in accordance with the broadest mass democracy. People write down their views, suggestions or exposures and criticisms of others in big characters on large sheets of paper and put them up in

conspicuous places for people to read.”

http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selectedworks/volume5/mswv5_65.htm

- 6 The Ku Klux Klan wrote a letter to Marcuse, saying: “Marcuse, you are a very dirty communist dog. [...] 72 hours more Marcuse, and we will kill you. Ku Klux Klan”
Source: *Herbert's Hippopotamus. Marcuse in Paradise*. A Film by Paul Alexander Juutilainen. <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5311625903124176509>.

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