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Critical Theory

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1. Introduction

One could say that all contemporary academic thought and therefore also all media and communication studies is critical because it questions opinions of other scholars. This understanding of critique stands in the tradition of Kantian enlightenment. Kant argued that modern society is an age of criticism. In contrast to Kant's general understanding of critique, Karl Marx formulated a categorical imperative of critical theory—the “categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being” (Marx, 1997, p. 257f.). For Marx, the “task of philosophy ... is to unmask human self-alienation” (Marx, 1997, p. 251). Marx points out a more specific understanding of being critical, namely the questioning of power, domination and exploitation, and the political demand and struggle for a just society. Critical theory is for him a critique of society. Scholars who refer to critical theory often mean this second understanding of the notion of critique. They employ the term “critical” in order to stress that not all science is critical, but that a lot of it has a more administrative character that takes power structures for granted, does not question them, or helps legitimize them.

2. What is critical theory?

Some introductory books to critical theory provide lists of different approaches such as the following: Marxist criticism, the Frankfurt School, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, new criticism, reader-response criticism, structuralist criticism, deconstructive criticism, new historical and cultural criticism, lesbian, gay, and queer criticism, African American criticism, postcolonial criticism, cultural studies, etc., structuralism/poststructuralism, feminism, post-foundational ethics/politics.

Critical theory is, by other scholars, understood as the works of the Frankfurt School, a tradition of critical thinking that originated with the works of scholars like Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno. Its starting point is the work of Karl Marx. For Horkheimer and his colleagues, critical theory “was a camouflage label for ‘Marxist theory’” (Wiggershaus, 1995, p. 5) when they were in exile from the Nazis in the United States, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed. There are definitions of critical theory that couple the usage of this term exclusively to the Frankfurt School or Habermasian Frankfurt School.

<2:> The entry for “Kritische Theorie” (critical theory) in the *Europäische*

Enzyklopädie zu Philosophie und Wissenschaften (European Encyclopaedia of Philosophy and Science), a four-volume Marxist encyclopedia of philosophy edited by Hans Jörg Sandkühler (1990), only provides a cross-reference to the entry Frankfurter Schule (Frankfurt School), which means that here one assumes an association of the terms “critical theory” and the “Frankfurt School.” A second Marxist encyclopedia has taken a different approach. Gerhard Schweppenhäuser and Frigga Haug wrote the entry “Kritische Theorie” in the *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism), the largest encyclopedic project of Marxism (see <http://www.inkrit.de/hkwm/hkwm-index.htm>), and defined critical theory as

emancipatory social philosophy. It tries to unite in *one* movement of thought the analysis and critique of forms of practice as well as types of reason and rationality of bourgeois-capitalist societies since the middle of the 19th century until today. Its starting point is Marx’s theory of the law of value as the foundation of commodity-producing societies that is derived from the analysis of the value-form. This theory is at the same time critique of the political economy, i.e. demonstration of the capability and limit of this science for the explanation of the value-form with its social and ideological consequences. (Schweppenhäuser & Haug, 2012, p. 197)

The two authors stress the status of critical theory as critical philosophy and critical economics. They understand it as a broad approach that is grounded in Karl Marx’s thought and works. However, they also acknowledge that the Frankfurt School introduced the term and therefore draw a distinction between critical theory as the more general approach and critical theory as the Frankfurt School approach.

An approach taken that neither lists approaches nor identifies critical theory only with persons associated with the Frankfurt School is to identify dimensions of critical theory at the content level. We can identify six dimensions of a critical theory:

- critical ethics;
- critique of domination and exploitation;
- dialectical reason;
- ideology critique;
- critique of the political economy;
- struggles and political practice.

For grounding an understanding of critical theory that specifies dimensions of the critique of society, some foundational texts of the Frankfurt School are helpful: Marcuse’s essay *Philosophy and Critical Theory* (1988, 134–158), Horkheimer’s essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* (2002, 188–252), Marcuse’s article *The Concept of Essence* (1988, 43–87), and the section *The Foundations of the Dialectical Theory of Society* in Marcuse’s book *Reason and Revolution* (1941, 258–322).

Critical theory has a “concern with human happiness” (Marcuse, 1988, p. 135) and uses the Hegelian method of comparing essence and existence because in capitalism “what <3:> exists is not immediately and already rational” (136). This essence can be found in man’s positive capacities (such as striving for freedom, sociality, co-operation) and it has the ethical implication that universal conditions should be created that allow all humans to realize these capacities:

That man is a rational being, that this being requires freedom, and that happiness is his highest good are universal propositions whose progressive impetus derives precisely from their universality. Universality gives them an almost revolutionary character, for they claim that all, and not merely this or that particular person, should be rational, free, and happy. (Marcuse, 1988, p. 152)

Critique of domination and exploitation

Critical theory holds that “man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society” (Marcuse, 1988, p. 153). The goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 219) so that a “society without injustice” (221) emerges that is shaped by “reasonableness, and striving for peace, freedom, and happiness” (222), “in which man’s actions no longer flow from a mechanism but from his own decision” (229), and that is “a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression” (241).

Dialectical reason

In Marx’s works, concepts that describe the existence of capitalism (profit, surplus value, worker, capital, commodity, etc.) are dialectical because they “transcend the given social reality in the direction of another historical structure which is present as a tendency in the given reality” and represent the essence of man (Marcuse, 1988, p. 86):

If, for instance, it is said that concepts such as wages, the value of labor, and entrepreneurial profit are only categories of manifestations behind which are hidden the “essential relations” of the second set of concepts, it is also true that these essential relations represent the truth of the manifestations only insofar as the concepts which comprehend them already contain their own negation and transcendence—the image of a social organization without surplus value. All materialist concepts contain an accusation and an imperative. (Marcuse, 1988, p. 86)

Marx’s categories “are negative and at the same time positive” (Marcuse, 1941, p. 295).

The concepts of contradiction (negation) and negation of the negation are crucial for critical theory: In capitalism, every fact is “a negation and restriction of real possibilities” (282). “Private property is a fact, but at the same time it is

a negation of man's collective appropriation of nature" (Marcuse, 1941, p. 282).

The historical character of the Marxian dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity as well as its negation. ... the negation of the negation ... does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men. (Marcuse, 1941, p. 315)

The dialectic of capitalism has a structural-objective part: capital accumulation's contradictions result in crisis. These contradictions can only be overcome by the subjective force of dialectic: political struggle (Marcuse, 1941, pp. 316–319).

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Ideology critique

"Basic to the present form of social organization, the antagonisms of the capitalist production process, is the fact that the central phenomena connected with this process do not immediately appear to men as what they are 'in reality', but in masked, 'perverted' form" (Marcuse, 1988, p. 70). There are different definitions of ideology. Whereas ideology theories define ideology in a relatively general sense as worldviews or contested worldviews, ideology critique sees it as practice and strategy of those in power for trying to guard their interests by presenting reality in a manipulated or distorted manner. For the Frankfurt School, a critical concept of ideology requires a normative distinction between true and false beliefs and practices. It understands ideology as thoughts, practices, ideas, words, concepts, phrases, sentences, texts, belief systems, meanings, representations, artifacts, institutions, systems, or combinations thereof that represent and justify one group's or individual's power, domination, or exploitation of other groups or individuals by misrepresenting, one-dimensionally presenting or distorting reality in symbolic representations. Domination means in this context that there is a system that enables one human side to gain advantages at the expense of others and to sustain this condition. It is a routinized and institutionalized form of asymmetric power, in which one side has the opportunity to shape and control societal structures (such as the production and control of wealth, political decision-making, public discussions, ideas, norms, rules, values), whereas others do not have these opportunities and are facing disadvantages or exclusion from the opportunities of others. Exploitation is a specific form of domination, in which an exploiting class derives wealth advantages at the expense of an exploited class by controlling economic resources and means of coercion in such a way that the exploited class is forced to produce new use-values that the exploiting class controls. Ideology presupposes and comes along with the existence of class societies. Put in Hegelian terms, one can say that ideologies claim the class reality of society is its natural essence.

Critique of the political economy

Kant's fundamental philosophical questions about man and his knowledge, activities, and hopes (What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is the human being?) were treated by Marx in the form of a philosophy and theory that "demonstrate the concrete forces and tendencies that prevented and those that promoted" the goal of a society that benefits all (Marcuse, 1941, p. 321). So Marx's reformulation of Kant's question was his categorical imperative—the critique of domination and exploitation.

Struggles and political practice

"The materialist protest and materialist critique originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle" (Marcuse, 1988, p. 141). "The philosophical ideal of a better world and of true Being are incorporated into the practical aim of struggling mankind, where they take on a human form" (Marcuse, 1988, p. 142).

<5:> Jürgen Habermas built his approach on the classical Frankfurt School and at the same time worked out the concept of communicative rationality, by which he went beyond the classical tradition. Habermas distinguishes between instrumental (nonsocial, success-oriented), strategic (social, success-oriented), and communicative action (social, oriented on understanding). Habermas (1987, p. 333) argues that Horkheimer and Adorno did not take the discussion of communication into account, "failed to recognize the communicative rationality of the lifeworld." For Habermas, critical theory questions that steering media (money, power) attack communicative action in the lifeworld. He conceives instrumental action and communicative action as the two fundamental aspects of social praxis. What Habermas wants to express is that the human being is both a laboring and a communicating being and says that the reproduction of life depends on work and interaction/communication. Dallas Smythe expressed the same idea as foundation of a Marxist theory of media and communication.

For Habermas, emancipatory interest is reflective and enables liberation from dogmatic dependence. In those passages where Habermas tries to define what critical theory is all about, his formulations remain often rather abstract and vague; he mainly points out the emancipatory role of communication and that the goal is undistorted communication. He thereby falls behind the concreteness of Horkheimer's, Adorno's, and Marcuse's notion of critical theory. These thinkers left no doubt that such a theory is all about questioning all structures of domination.

Communication is certainly an important aspect of a dominationless society. However, communication is, in capitalism, also a form of interaction in which ideology, with the help of the mass media, is made available to the dominated groups. Communication is not automatically progressive. For Habermas, the differentiation is between instrumental/strategic reason and communicative reason, whereas for Horkheimer the distinction is between instrumental reason and critical reason and, based on that, between traditional and critical

theory. For Habermas communication is an emancipatory concept confined to the lifeworld that is not distorted and not shaped by the steering media money and power. Thus Habermas splits off communication from instrumentality and thereby neglects the fact that in capitalism communication, just like technology, the media, ideology, or labor, is an instrument that is used by the dominant system to defend its rule. Communication is not pure and untouched by structures of domination; it is antagonistically entangled with them. For Horkheimer (based on Marx), critical theory's goal is man's "emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 249) and "the happiness of all individuals" (248). Horkheimer has in mind the emancipation of communication just like the emancipation of work, decision-making, and everyday life. His notion of critical rationality is larger than Habermas's notion of communicative rationality that risks becoming soaked up by noncritical approaches that use Habermas's stress on communication for instrumental purposes. The concept of communication can be critical, but is not necessarily critical, whereas the concept of a critique of domination is necessarily critical.

Whereas communication is not necessarily critical and a critical concept, there is a tradition of critical theory within media and communication studies: Robert T. Craig (1999) points out seven approaches in communication theory. Critical theory is one of them, the others are rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, <6:> sociopsychological and sociocultural approaches. He stresses that critique here means the criticism of domination and ideology as well as attempts to change the world for the better by political praxis.

Marxist theory and politics was in the 1920s dominated by structuralist approaches that underestimated the importance of class struggle. Young radicals were looking for philosophical inspiration in order to renew Marxist theory and politics. Some of them, including Herbert Marcuse and Günther Anders, felt that Martin Heidegger's philosophy could help make Marxist theory a concrete philosophy. They therefore became his students in Freiburg. Heidegger's book *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] in particular influenced these scholars' thinking and works. Heidegger became a member of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in May 1933 and stayed a member until the NSDAP was dissolved in 1945. For critical theorists like Marcuse and Anders, who were communist and came from Jewish families, Heidegger's entry into the Nazi Party was a big disappointment. Intellectually, they completely turned away from Heidegger and argued that his philosophy was only pseudo-concrete and that the revolution it promised was a Nazi society built on nationalism, racism, Führer-ideology, anti-Semitism, and a militant anti-Marxism suppressing the labor movement. In the introduction to his 1932 thesis, *Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit* [*Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*] that he was unable, due to the rise of National Socialism, to defend, Marcuse thanked Heidegger. After Marcuse had fled from Germany to the United States, he worked on another book about Hegel that was published in 1941: *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. In this book, Marcuse mentioned Heidegger only once in a list of National Socialist philosophers. This shift in perspective is an indication of how Marcuse's assessment of Heidegger as philosopher and political person had changed. When Marx's

Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 were published in 1932, they deeply impressed Marcuse. He discovered that a truly revolutionary concrete Marxist philosophy could be grounded in the philosophical works of the young Marx and did not need Heidegger at all. The question how deeply influenced Heidegger's thought was by National Socialism remained a disputed question. On the one hand, there were apologists such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, or Richard Rorty who felt inspired by Heidegger and defended and took up the content of his philosophical works. On the other hand, critical theorists, especially Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, argued that Heidegger was a fascist and that National Socialism also shaped his philosophy. This controversy remains topical even today. New insights were gained by the 2014 publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*. In these notebooks, Heidegger wrote that Jews were calculating profiteers, and would have lived based on the principle of race but resisted the Nazis applying this principle to them. He wrote that the Nazis would only practice manner what the Jews would have practiced long before them. World Judaism would be uprooted and abstract and would not want to sacrifice the blood of Jews in wars, whereas the Germans would only have the choice to sacrifice what Heidegger describes as the best blood of all—German blood—in warfare.

Many commentators have argued that these notebooks show once and for all that Heidegger was a convinced Nazi, an anti-Semite, and a Nazi apologist. They criticize Heidegger for arguing that the Jews were themselves to blame for the Shoah. Critical <7:> theory can today only be critical without Heidegger. Critical theory is only possible against and in opposition to Heidegger and Heideggerians. Those who continue to refer positively to Heidegger or argue that these were just unpublished minor remarks become apologists for a fascist and anti-Semitic thinker themselves. Questions concerning racism, fascism, and anti-Semitism are not minor matters, but are for critical theory questions about the totality. Heidegger's works on technology and philosophy continue to influence scholars studying media, communication, information, and technology today. A critical theory of these phenomena is today also only possible without Heidegger.

3. Critical theory and Karl Marx

The six dimensions of a critical theory of society can also be found in Karl Marx's works, which shows the importance of his thought for any critical theory.

Critical theory has a normative dimension

Criticism "measures individual existence against essence" (Marx, 1997, p. 61f.). This means that critical theory is normative and realistic; it argues that it is possible to logically provide reasonably grounded arguments about what a good society is, that the good society relates to conditions that all humans require to survive (the essence of humans and society), and that we can judge existing societies according to what extent they provide humane conditions or not.

Critical theory is a critique of domination and exploitation

Critical theory questions all thought and practices that justify or uphold domination and exploitation. Marx formulated the categorical imperative of critical theory as the need to overthrow conditions that enslave and alienate human beings (Marx, 1997, p. 257f.). Critical theory wants to show that a good life for all is possible and that domination and exploitation alienate humans from achieving such a society. Therefore, for Marx, the “task of philosophy ... is to unmask human self-alienation” (Marx, 1997, p. 251). In deconstructing alienation, domination, and exploitation, critical theory also makes demands for a self-determined, participatory, and just democracy. Such a society is not only a grassroots political democracy, but also an economic democracy, in which producers control the production process, and the means and outcomes of production. Critical theory wants to make the world conscious of its own possibilities. The “world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality” (Marx, 1997, p. 214).

Critical theory uses dialectical reasoning as method of analysis

The dialectical method identifies contradictions. Contradictions are “the source of all dialectics” (Marx, 1867, p. 744). Dialectics tries to show how contemporary society and <8:> its moments are shaped by contradictions. Contradictions result in the circumstance that society is dynamic and that capitalism ensures the continuity of domination and exploitation by changing the way these phenomena are organized. Dialectics “regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspects as well” (Marx, 1867, p. 103). The “movement of capitalist society is full of contradictions” (ibid.). In a contradiction, one pole of the dialectic can only exist by way of the opposed pole; they require and exclude each other at the same time. In a dominative society (such as capitalism), contradictions cause problems and are to a certain extent also the seeds for overcoming these problems. They have positive potentials and negative realities at the same time.

Marx analyzed capitalism’s contradictions, for example, the contradictions between non-owners/owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists, use-value/exchange-value, concrete labor/abstract labor, the simple form of value/the relative and expanded form of value, social relations of humans/relations of things, the fetish of commodities and money/fetishistic thinking, the circulation of commodities/the circulation of money, commodities/money, labor power/wages, subject/object, labor process/valorization process, subject of labor (labor power, worker)/the means of production (object), variable capital/constant capital, surplus labor/surplus product, necessary labor time/surplus labor time, single worker/cooperation, single company/industry sector, single capital/competing capitals, production/consumption, productive forces/relations of production.

The tension between opposing poles can be resolved in a process that Hegel and Marx called “*Aufhebung*” (sublation) and “negation of the negation”: a new/third quality or a new system emerges from the contradiction between two poles. Sublation can take place at different levels of society, either relatively frequently in order to enable a dynamic of domination or infrequently in situations of revolution when domination is questioned. So, in capitalism, there is for example a contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. The use-value of a commodity is a quality that satisfies human needs; for example, movies’ use-value is that they satisfy our need to be informed, entertained, and educated. But in capitalism many use-values can only be obtained if we pay money for access to them. We can only get access to them via the commodities’ exchange-value: we have to enter an exchange of use-values for money so that a certain quantity of a commodity equals a specific sum of money: $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ amount of money M}$. Exchange-value in capitalist society dominates use-value. So the dialectic of use-value and exchange-value in capitalism is that many use-values cannot be accessed without exchange-value and the exchange-values mediate use-values; for example, Hollywood wants to sell movies in the form of cinema displays and DVDs in order to accumulate capital. There are, however, strategies that people use to try to resist commodification: for example, a commodity like education can be turned into a public service that is funded by taxes and is made available to all without payment. Movies in digital format are often “pirated” and spread online, so they become pure use-values: hackers sublimate the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. At the same time, those working for a wage in the production of films, music, and other cultural goods means that cultural work is a commodity and depends on revenues. Therefore cultural workers do not always see downloading <9:> favorably and may fear that it deprives them of income. So a new contradiction is created between cultural wage work, downloading, and the industry’s monetary profits and exploitation of cultural workers. Different forms of sublation have been suggested for this contradiction such as the introduction of a cultural flat rate for the use of the Internet and culture, royalty systems, or the introduction of a basic income for cultural workers. The problem is that capitalism is contradictory as such. Therefore Marx sees communism as a society without exchange-value that is based on high productivity, automation, free distribution of all use-values, and voluntary engagement in the creation of use-values. It is a society of use-values that have sublated exchange-values. Everyone gets what s/he needs and works according to his/her abilities.

There are also contradictions in capitalism that are persistent and not frequently sublated. They are at the heart of human misery in capitalism. Their sublation can only be achieved by political struggle that would mean the end of capitalism. These are the antagonisms between productive forces/relations of production, owners/non-owners, the poor/the rich, misery/wealth, workers/capitalists. The contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is partly sublated in crisis situations, but reconstitutes itself in the crisis. Its true sublation can only be achieved by the overthrow of capitalism. If in capitalism an important contradiction is the one between the owning class that exploits the non-owning class, then the goal of critical theory is the representation of the interest of oppressed and exploited groups

and the overcoming of class society. "It can only represent a class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes—the proletariat" (Marx, 1867, p. 98).

In formulating a critique of domination and exploitation, critical theory develops "new principles for the world out of the principles of the world" (Marx, 1997, p. 214). Dialectical thinking argues that the foundations of a classless society are already developing within capitalism; that capitalism produces new forms of cooperation that are within class relations forms of domination. The forces of production in capitalism are at the same time destructive forces.

Ideology critique: Critical theory is a critique of ideology

Ideologies are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable. Ideology critique wants to remind us that everything that exists in society is created by humans in social relationships and that social relationships can be changed. It wants to bring "problems into the self-conscious human form" (Marx, 1997, p. 214), which means that it wants to make humans conscious of the problems they are facing in society and the causes of these problems. Arguments like "there is no alternative to capitalism, neoliberalism, competition, egoism, racism, etc. because man is egoistic, competitive, etc." forget about the social character of society and make it appear as though the results of social activity are unchangeable things. Critical theory provides an "analysis of the mystical consciousness that is unclear about itself" (Marx, 1997, p. 214).

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Critique of the political economy: Critical theory is a critique of the political economy

Critical theory analyzes how capital accumulation, surplus value exploitation, and the transformation of aspects of society into commodities (commodification) work and what the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are. "In the critique of political economy, therefore, we shall examine the basic categories, uncover the contradiction introduced by the free-trade system, and bring out the consequences of both sides of the contradiction" (Engels, 1843/1844, p. 175).

Critical theory is connected to struggles for a just and fair society; it is an intellectual dimension of struggles. Critical theory provides a "self-understanding ... of the age concerning its struggle and wishes" (Marx, 1997, p. 315); it can "show the world why it actually struggles" and is "taking sides ... with actual struggles" (Marx, 1997, p. 214). This means that critical theory can help to explain the causes, conditions, potentials, and limits of struggles. Critical theory rejects the argument that academia and science should and can be value-free. It rather argues that all thought and theories are shaped by political worldviews. The reasons why a person is interested in a certain topic, aligns himself/herself

with a certain school of thought, develops a particular theory and not another, refers to certain authors and not others, are deeply political because modern society is shaped by conflicts of interests and therefore, in order to survive and assert themselves, scholars have to make choices, enter strategic alliances, and defend their positions against others. Critical theory holds not only that theory is always political, but also that critical theory should develop analyses of society that struggle against interests and ideas that justify domination and exploitation.

4. Critical political economy of media and communication

Critical political economy is an approach within media and communication studies that has given special attention to what it means to study society, the media, and communication critically, that is, in the context of capitalism, class, power and domination, and social struggles. Dwayne Winseck (2011) provides, in the introduction to the collected volume *The Political Economies of Media*, a mapping of the landscape of political economy research in media and communication studies by identifying four approaches and speaking of “political economies of media”:

- neoclassical political economy of the media
- radical political economy of the media;
- Schumpeterian institutional political economy of the media;
- the cultural industries school.

Within Winseck’s second approach, there is no consensus on how to name this field. In his seminal introduction to the field, *Political Economy of Communication*, Vincent <11:> Mosco defines it as the “study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (2005) argue that the critical political economy of communications analyzes “the interplay between the symbolic and the economic dimensions of public communications” (2005, p. 60) and “how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the structured asymmetries in social relations” (62). Terms that have been used for naming this field have been “political economy of communication,” “political economy of communications,” “political economy of culture,” “political economy of information,” “political economy of mass communication,” and “political economy of the media.”

The political economy of communication studies media communication in the context of power relations and the totality of social relations and is committed to moral philosophy and social praxis (Mosco, 2009, pp. 2–5). It is holistic, historical, cares about the public good, and engages with moral questions of justice and equity (Murdock & Golding, 2005, p. 61).

Important topics of the critical political economy of communication include, for example, media activism, media and social movements; the commodification of media content, audiences and communication labor; capital accumulation models of the media, media and the public sphere, communication and

space-time, the concentration of corporate power in the communication industry, the media and globalization, media policies and state regulation of the media; communication and social class, gender, race; hegemony; the history of communication industries, media commercialization, media homogenization/diversification/multiplication/integration, media and advertising, media power.

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 and thinkers like Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, Ure, and others that Marx studied, sublated, and was highly critical of in his works. His main point of criticism of 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, p. 175). They postulate that categories like commodities, money, exchange-value, capital, markets, or competition are anthropological features of all society, thereby ignoring the categories’ historical character and enmeshment into class struggles. Marx showed the contradictions of political economy thought and took classical political economy as 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, p. 103), which 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, p. 103). Marx developed a critique of the political economy of capitalism, which means that his approach is (a) an analysis and critique of capitalism, (b) a critique of liberal ideology, thought, and academia, and (c) transformative practice. Given Marx’s stress on the critique of the political economy of the media, it is best to speak of the critical/critique of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media if a critical approach is meant (as opposed to one grounded in liberalism, neoclassical economics, institutionalism, etc.).

Horkheimer’s notion of instrumental reason and Marcuse’s notion of technological rationality open up connections between the two approaches of the Frankfurt School and the critical political economy of the media. Horkheimer and Marcuse stressed that in capitalism there is a tendency for freedom of action to be replaced by instrumental decision-making on the part of capital and the state so that the individual is expected only to react and not to act. The two concepts are grounded in Georg Lukács’s notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx’s 1867 concept of fetishism. Reification means that social relations take on the character and are reduced to the status of things so that the fundamental social nature of society gets concealed behind things (such as commodities or money).

The media in capitalism are modes of reification in a double sense. 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. And third, in order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and 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 the ideological form of instrumental reason. Capitalist media are necessarily means of advertising and commodification and spaces of ideology. Advertisement and cultural commodification make humans an instrument for economic profit accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling belief in the system of capital and commodities into humans' 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 what extent ideology is always successful and to what 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.

5. Cultural studies, political economy, and critique

Some cultural studies scholars (like Lawrence Grossberg) argued that both the Frankfurt School and political economy have a simple model of culture in which people—audiences and consumers—are seen as passive, stupid, manipulated cultural dupes. Scholars who say that the Frankfurt School and the critical political economy of media and communication are pessimistic and elitist and neglect audiences have a simplified understanding of these two approaches. Dallas Smythe, for example, had a very balanced view of the audience: capital would attempt to control audiences, but they would have the potential to resist the powerful and the system of capitalism.

<13:> Some forms of cultural studies have, by rejecting Marxism, faced new problems. There is the danger that consumer choice, liberal pluralism, consumption as resistance, and commercial culture are affirmed and celebrated. If resistance lies in consumption and entertainment and is a cultural automatism, then why should people engage in collective political action in social movements or political parties? The danger of culturalism is that it rejects the importance of the analysis and critique of capitalism and class and the interactions of class and domination. The active audience hypothesis resulted in the assumption that the media in capitalism create a pluralistic society. The limit of this assumption is that there are dominant discourses and unequal access to discourses and skills needed for producing information and making it visible in the public. The aftermath of the 1968 social rebellions resulted not just in the emergence of a new left, but also in a new radicalism in the social sciences and humanities. The rise of neoliberalism weakened the political left and critical social sciences and humanities. It was accompanied by a culturalistic turn and the rise of postmodern thought, which were intellectual reflections of a new flexible regime of accumulation coupled with neoliberal ideology. Both cultural studies

and critical political economy were influenced by the radicalism of 1968. With the rise of the commodification of everything, rebellious ideas too became commodities, fashion, and entertainment. The radical character of cultural studies was weakened, which is one of the reasons why the late Stuart Hall called for a more radical cultural studies that engages with capitalism and Marx.

The logic of determinism that some cultural studies proclaims as being characteristic of critical theory and political economy is in fact at the heart of the approaches of some of its main representatives. There is no automatism that makes humans resist, there is no automatism that culture is interpreted in a politically progressive way, there is no automatism that people struggle. There is, however, the continuity of capitalism's attempts to commodify culture and of attempts to impose dominant worldviews on people. Both critical theory and critical political economy show these tendencies that are largely left out of the analysis by many cultural studies scholars. At the same time, critical theory and critical political economy see the potential of alternative media production and the role of media in struggles and point out the problems and limits that alternative media use and that interpretation is facing in capitalism.

6. Critical theory and critique of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media

Frankfurt School critical theory and the critical political economy of media/communication have both developed critiques of the role of media communication in exploitation, as means of ideology and potential means of liberation and struggle. The largest difference is that the Frankfurt School is profoundly grounded in philosophy, especially Hegelian philosophy and social theory, whereas the Anglo-American tradition of the critical political economy approach has less affinity with philosophy and more grounding in economic studies and sociology. Both traditions are valuable and important, and are complementary approaches for studying social media critically.

<14:> The globalization of capitalism, its new global crisis, the new imperialism, and the role of knowledge and communication in capitalism (anticipated by Marx's notions of the means of communication and the general intellect) have resulted in a renewed interest in Marx that should also be practiced in media and communication studies (Fuchs, 2016; Fuchs, 2011; Fuchs & Mosco, 2012).

The task for a critical theory and critique of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media is to focus on the critique and analysis of the role of communication, culture, information, and the media in capitalism in the context of: (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, labor, the mode of the exploitation of surplus value, etc.); (c) domination in general; (d) ideology (both in academia and everyday life) as well as the analysis of and engagement in (e) struggles against the dominant order, which includes the analysis and advancement of (f) social movement struggles and (g) social

movement media that (h) aim at the establishment of a democratic socialist society that is based on communication commons as part of structures of commonly owned means of production (Fuchs, 2011). The approach thereby realizes that in capitalism all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation (Fuchs, 2011).

7. Three debates in and about contemporary critical theory

There have been interesting debates in recent years about how to best conceptualize critical theory today that will now be introduced: one focuses on the relationship of redistribution and recognition, one on the relationship of critical sociology and the sociology of critique, and the third on the renewal of the critique of capitalism in critical theory.

Fraser and Honneth: Recognition and redistribution

Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003) engaged in a debate about the role of recognition and redistribution in critical theory. The encounter between the two philosophers was published as a dialogic book. It focuses on the relationship between identity politics and class politics and how critical theory should position itself on this question. Nancy Fraser is professor of philosophy at the New School in New York City. She has been a leading intellectual who has had a major influence on the development of a feminist critical theory. Axel Honneth is professor of philosophy and director of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. Some consider Honneth to be the successor of Habermas as the leading intellectual figure in German critical theory.

Both Fraser and Honneth question the uncoupling of political demands for the recognition of identities from demands for redistribution. For Fraser, gender-, race-, and class-domination are two-dimensional categories that have economic and cultural aspects. For her, all three categories are processes of malrecognition of status and maldistribution. Fraser treats economy and culture, maldistribution and malrecognition, <15:> as two equal levels of society and domination. She sees the two poles as impinging on one another (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 64). Honneth argues that with the exception of Habermas and Gramsci, critical theory has had a tendency to anti-normativism (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p.128f.). Whereas Fraser wants to base critical theory on two equal dual categories, redistribution and recognition, Honneth looks for a normative monism that is based on one central category, the one of recognition. He bases his theory on the assumption that humans are psychological beings that strive for self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect, and suffer if they are disrespected. Honneth subdivides recognition into three forms: love, equality, achievement. Distribution struggles are for Honneth “a specific kind of struggle for recognition, in which the appropriate evaluation of the social contributions of individuals or groups is contested” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 171).

Christian Fuchs (2011, chapter 2) argues for a third version of moral philosophy that differs from Fraser’s dualism and Honneth’s monism.

Redistribution would be the process of establishing a more participatory society by redistributing economic resources, power, and definition-capacities from dominant groups to oppressed groups. Recognition would be a cultural redistribution process of definition-capacities and reputation. For understanding recognition, a cultural materialist approach would be needed that sees that there can be no recognition without economic redistribution and the other way round. Fuchs argues neither for a separation of the concepts of recognition and redistribution (Fraser), nor for the subordination of the redistribution concept under the recognition concept (Honneth), but for a moral philosophy that is based on the notion of redistribution and considers recognition as a cultural form of redistribution.

Honneth and Boltanski: Critical sociology and sociology of critique

A second contemporary debate about how to conceptualize critical theory has involved Axel Honneth and Luc Boltanski. Boltanski is professor of sociology at the

École des hautes études en sciences sociales (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences) in Paris. Boltanski was invited by Honneth to give the 2008 Adorno lectures in Frankfurt. In these lectures Boltanski (2011) distinguished his approach of a pragmatic sociology of critique from critical sociology. In France, Pierre Bourdieu in particular would have taken the latter approach. But the Marxist tradition can in Boltanski's view in general be described as being close to critical sociology that tries to unmask domination, exploitation, and oppression as well as ideologies justifying these phenomena (Boltanski, 2011, p. 6). Boltanski describes his approach of the pragmatic sociology of critique as "rigorous empirical sociology" (23) that does not assume an asymmetry between the sociologist and ordinary people and aims to describe the reality and experiences of the oppressed. It would make use "of the point of view of the actors ... , their ordinary sense of justice, to expose the discrepancy between the social world as it is and as it should be in order to satisfy people's moral expectations" (2011, p. 30, italics in original). Boltanski criticizes the fact that critical sociology, in his view, has an "overarching character" and a "distance at which it holds itself from the critical capacities developed by actors in the situations of everyday life" (43). The pragmatic sociology of critique would fully acknowledge "actors' critical capacities and <16:> the creativity with which they engage in interpretation and action *en situation*" (43) for "denunciations of injustice" (37).

In a conversation with Honneth (Boltanski & Honneth, 2009), Boltanski points out that his approach is not to denounce Marxism, as Bruno Latour does, but to take it in a new direction. Just as Boltanski says that in his view Bourdieu's approach saw domination everywhere and failed to see the immanent contradictions of society, Honneth says that Habermas, whom he considers as his main influence, saw Horkheimer and Adorno's approach as a total critique where everything is domination. The conversation makes clear that Boltanski takes an explicitly empirically grounded approach, whereas Honneth has developed a moral philosophy. Honneth argues that the reality of actors using critical capacities would be unequally distributed so that critical sociology would have to analyze the limits that social conditions pose for

humans (Boltanski & Honneth, 2009, p. 105f.). Boltanski argues that his approach is not to use moral philosophy and normative critique, but to assume that there are immanent contradictions in reality, that there is always something in the world that “goes beyond reality” (107). Boltanski argues that ideologies would be something that only those in power needed, whereas everyday people would create many experiences that go beyond ideology (108).

Boltanski (2011) terms normative critical theory “meta-critical theory” (8) or metacritique (6) because it would need an exteriority in order to judge what is good and what is bad. He argues for a purely immanent critique that is grounded in the empirical observation of how humans experience suffering in society and thereby criticize society. Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology of critique is purely immanent. Honneth, in contrast, is more skeptical and does not see critical capacities developing with necessity in society. He stresses the need for a normative critique and a critical theory grounded in immanent transcendence.

Honneth distinguishes between a constructive, transcendental critique, a reconstructive, immanent critique, and a Foucauldian genealogical critique. Critical theory would combine all three forms. In the debate with Fraser, he characterizes this combination as immanent transcendence. Transcendence

must be attached to a form of practice or experience which is on the one hand indispensable for social reproduction, and on the other hand—owing to its normative surplus—points beyond all given forms of social organization. ... “transcendence” should be a property of “immanence” itself, so that the facticity of social relations always contains a dimension of transcending claims. (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 244)

Fraser sees the immanent element of contemporary society that can transcend it in social movements that engage in political struggles (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 205), whereas Honneth is very critical of new social movements (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, pp. 114–125), considers them as rather affirmative, and sees immanent transcendence in an objective morality that should be legally implemented in the form of laws.

Dörre, Lessenich, Rosa: Sociology, capitalism and critique

A new development in German critical theory is the emergence of a Jena School of critical theory at the University of Jena’s Department of Sociology, where three professors <17:> (Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, and Hartmut Rosa) understand their work to stand in the tradition of the Frankfurt School and Marx’s critique of capitalism. They want to renew this tradition by giving specific focuses to the critical analysis of society.

In a dialogue that was published as the book *Soziologie—Kapitalismus—Kritik* [*Sociology—Capitalism—Critique*], Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa (2009) point out the commonalities and differences of their approaches. They stress that

commonalities of their approaches are that “overcoming the system is the centre of our critique” (14), that they argue for a critical sociology and want to go beyond Boltanski’s sociology of critique (15), and that the sociological critique of capitalism would have to be renewed. Their central categories are land seizure (Dörre), acceleration (Rosa), and activation (Lessenich).

Klaus Dörre argues that capitalism uses primitive accumulation for the seizure of internal and external territories in order to expand. His work is influenced by Rosa Luxemburg and David Harvey’s versions of the Marxist theory of imperialism. Precarious labor and precarious life would be the consequences of a finance-dominated regime of accumulation, which would express itself clearly in the austerity measures taken after the tax-financed bailout of banks and corporations that happened in 2008 and the years following.

Hartmut Rosa says that sociology’s real subject would be the question about what constitutes or harms a good life. Capitalism would be based on the logics of growth and acceleration. Modern society would be based on three logics of acceleration: technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the speed of life. Social struggles would today be struggles about performance, that is, to achieve more in less time. Acceleration would undermine capitalism’s promise to guarantee and increase autonomy. The logic of acceleration would result in ecological crisis, social exclusion, and disruption of systems that do not function based on the logic of acceleration (such as education, the legal system, and the welfare system).

Stephan Lessenich argues that the state mobilizes and activates humans for the purposes of capitalism. There would be a late-modern dialectic of mobility and control. He argues for a combination of Marx and Foucault in order to understand this phenomenon. He sees it as a crucial task of critical theory today to bring the analysis of the state back to social theory. The state would, in Fordist capitalism (a form of capitalism based on mass production and mass consumption of standardized commodities that was the dominant form of capitalism in the 20th century up until the 1970s), have provided absorption mechanisms in the form of the welfare state that curbed the negative effects of capitalism. Neoliberalism would have reduced these mechanisms and resulted in an activating state that defines responsibility in individualistic terms as self-care and thereby privatizes the management of social risks.

The three authors mutually criticize each other by focusing on a discussion of the approaches’ implications for society and politics. Lessenich argues that Dörre formulates a classical social critique by focusing on the critique of exploitation, whereas Rosa would formulate an artistic critique by focusing on the critique of alienation from others, society, work, nature, things, and one’s own body, and that both need to be united.

Lessenich hereby makes use of Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) distinction between artistic critique—the critique of alienation that calls for authenticity, creativity, <18:> freedom, and autonomy—and social critique—the critique of class that calls for equality and overcoming capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the new spirit of capitalism characteristic of the neoliberal

turn of capitalism has incorporated the anti-authoritarian claims of the 1968 movement into capitalism so that the outcome was network capitalism.

Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa have different sociological perspectives, from which they draw differing political conclusions. Yet they stress that what unites them is the commitment to critical theory, and that seizure is the spatial, acceleration the temporal, and activation the social dimension of “a single economic, cultural and political process, whose foundation is constituted by the logic of capital movement” (Dörre, Lessenich, & Rosa, 2009, p. 297). They conclude that “capitalism does not *have* a pathology, it is one” (300).

8. Conclusion

Habermas once wrote that “philosophy is preserved in science as critique” (Habermas, 1971, p. 63). If we want to conduct a critical analysis of the media and communication then we require a critical philosophy as foundation. The most important critical philosophy tradition is the one that goes back to Hegel and Marx. This entry has shown that there are multiple ways of establishing a critical theory of society and applying such an approach to the study of media and communication. No matter which approach one takes, Marx’s insights that class and domination interact and are foundational phenomena of modern society should lie at the heart of any attempt that sees itself as a critical approach for studying contemporary society and communication in contemporary society.

The three contemporary debates in critical theory that were introduced focused on the roles of recognition and redistribution, the sociology of critique and critical sociology, and the critique of capitalism today. All three debates matter for studying media and communication critically.

Fraser and Honneth’s discussion is one about the relationship between identity politics and class politics today. This question has shaped the conflict between cultural studies and critical political economy in media and communication studies. In light of the first world economic crisis in the 21st century, it became difficult to ignore the importance of capitalism and class. This has led to a return of the economy in cultural studies, although in quite different ways that embrace either evolutionary economics, heterodox economics without Marx, or Marx (Fuchs, 2014, chapter 3). The crisis has shown that inequality is shaping the world today and denies people material, political, and cultural recognition that they can only obtain via a redistribution of wealth, decision-power, and status. The question of how power, power inequalities, and power struggles shape and are shaped by the media is one about distribution and redistribution that entails the demands for equality, participation, and recognition.

The debate between Honneth and Boltanski, critical sociology and the sociology of critique, is one between a more normative and a more empirical sociological approach. In media and communication studies (as in other parts of the social sciences), we find <19:> a kind of polarization between theoretical approaches that focus on theorizing communication and the

media, and empirical approaches that engage in the observation and interpretation of the world through data collection and analysis. On the one hand, this situation reflects different traditions, but on the other, it is an expression of the fragmentation, individualization, and neoliberalization of the university. The university has increasingly been *seized* by the logic of capital, *accelerated* by the logic of performance measurement, with scholars *activated* to act as individuals and not so much as groups or collectives of scholars. As a consequence, there are few space, time, and social possibilities for critique and interdisciplinarity that, as suggested and practiced by the Frankfurt School, combines philosophy and empirical research in critical studies. Critical media and communication studies could under ideal circumstances operate as a *critical sociology of critique*. Such an approach combines critical sociology and the sociology of critique. It could be applied for studying media and communication in society with the help of a philosophically grounded normative critical theory. It could also be used for grounding empirical social research into human experiences in the context of mediated and communicative inequalities and struggles for equality. Such empirical studies could in turn inspire new theoretical knowledge.

Dörre, Rosa, and Lessenich show the fruitfulness of debate between colleagues as well as the relevance of critically questioning capitalism. If we think of the media and communication, then capitalism is an all-present reality in the form of transnational media, communication and cultural corporations, media concentration, advertising and consumer culture, the information economy, and ideologies. Yet capitalism is only one existing political economy of the media. There is also a strong tradition of public service media in parts of the world and alternative media connected to social movements and activists who want to create a world of communicative, digital, and cultural commons. The question of capitalism is a core task for critical media and communication studies today. Studies of media and communication inspired by critical theory focus on the analysis of information phenomena in the context of Marxian topics such as dialectics; capitalism; commodity/commodification; surplus value, exploitation, alienation, class; globalization; ideology/ideology critique; class struggle; commons; public sphere; communism; aesthetics (Fuchs, 2011, 2012, 2014).

SEE ALSO: Adorno, Theodor W.; Class; Gramsci, Antonio; Marxism; Media Sociology; Philosophy; Political Economy; Psychoanalysis; Public Sphere; Social Criticism; Social Theory; Sociology of Knowledge; Williams, Raymond

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