

## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

This book presents an introduction to the critical theory of communication. It asks:

What is communication?

What are communication's roles in society?

What does it mean to study communication critically based on a materialist approach (communicative materialism)?

What are the roles of communication in capitalism?

What alternatives are there to capitalist communication?

### 1.1. Marxist Theory

At the time of and in the years after the student rebellions of 1968, socialist politics and radical theory were flourishing. Activists and especially young people were seeking alternative ways of life and perspectives that pointed beyond capitalism and imperialist wars. The New Left was a movement for socialism that strongly influenced politics and culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Reading and interpreting Marx's theory was back then an important part of academia and activism. Activists tried to put Marx's theory into praxis.

But the 1970s also saw a major economic crisis and as a consequence the rise of neoliberal politics that aimed at the commodification of everything! Thatcherism and Reagonomics put the neoliberal theory of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman into practice and became the world's dominant political paradigm. Under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, society as a whole turned into a capitalist business and universities increasingly turned into business schools

---

<sup>1</sup> See: David Harvey. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

#### How to cite this book:

Fuchs, C. 2020. *Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory*. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book45>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

operating under the control of neoliberal managers who have seen students as fee-paying customers yielding profits, knowledge as an instrument of capital, and academics as machines producing outputs, impacts, and grants. Under these conditions, Marx's approach was over decades presented as a failed theory and socialism as a failed model of society corresponding to Marxist theory.

The rise of new social movements, individualism, neoliberal pressures on the humanities and social sciences, the long legacy of Stalinism, a flexible regime of accumulation, globalisation, and informatisation all influenced the emergence of postmodern and post-structuralist theory. David Harvey argues that postmodernism is the ideology of a capitalism that has a flexible regime of accumulation.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Marxist theory's focus on solidarity, class, modes of production, the economy, matter, labour, macro-analysis, totality, production and the dialectic, postmodern theory stresses difference, identity, networks, culture, language, micro-analysis, contextualisation/specificity, consumption, and articulation. Knowledge and communication have since the middle of the 20th century played an increasingly important role in the economy and society, which any theory of society must take into account. In his last interview, Stuart Hall said that the problem of the various versions of postmodern theory has been, however, that 'in its attempt to move away from economic reductionism, it forgot that there was an economy at all'.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, postmodern theory has had an anti-Marxist bias.

In 2008, a new world economic crisis started. It suddenly became evident that capitalism is not the end of history. The consequence was a renewed interest in Marx's theory and in socialist politics. More and more people became convinced that Marx's theory has something important to tell us about contemporary society. Marx was not just a theorist of capitalism, but also a critical theorist of communication and technology.<sup>4</sup> Marx's thought is therefore an excellent starting point for a contemporary critical theory of communication and communication technology. A Marxist theory of communication aims at showing how capitalist communications work and what antagonisms such communication systems have, and it seeks to inform praxis that points beyond capitalist communications towards socialist communication. This book makes a contribution to such theoretical foundations.

---

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall and Sut Jhally. 2016. Stuart Hall: The Last Interview. *Cultural Studies* 30 (2): 332–345. p. 337.

<sup>4</sup> See: Christian Fuchs. 2016. *Reading Marx in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge. Christian Fuchs. 2016. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press. Christian Fuchs. 2019. *Rereading Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press. Christian Fuchs. 2020. *Marxism: Karl Marx's Fifteen Key Concepts for Cultural and Communication Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Stalinist versions of Marxist theory have indeed justified domination, have been deterministic, economic reductionistic, anti-humanist, and anti-democratic. But such interpretations have nothing to do with Marx himself and his theory. Prejudices against Marx build on such misunderstandings.<sup>5</sup> Marx's theory itself is a radical critique of any form of exploitation and domination. It advances a dialectic of necessity and chance, and of the economic and the non-economic. It promotes socialist humanism, and understands socialism as true and full democracy.

### *The Approach Underlying This Book*

In the past twenty years, I have worked on the analysis of capitalism and communication. This work has taken the form of a significant number of publications, studies, and projects that have focused on particular problems and topics. I have used critical theory, empirical research, and ethics in these studies. One common feature in all of my works has been my interest in critical theory, which always takes Karl Marx' works and socialist politics as the starting point.

You cannot properly study communication without a simultaneous deep analysis of society as totality. Analyses of communication and society therefore necessarily interact in a critical theory of communication. Most studies in the field of communication studies (and most or even all other fields, even philosophy) are micro studies focused on single phenomena in single contexts. Marxist theory is a critical, interdisciplinary analysis of capitalism as totality. It is a true form of interdisciplinarity. It is based on a dialectic of general and concrete levels of analysis. It is universal and specific at the same time.

Marxist theory has been a constant influence and feature of my work. The concrete expressions of this interest have changed over the years. In earlier works, I often tried to combine Marxist theory and Hegelian dialectics with complexity theory and self-organisation theory. Complexity theory is a form of systems theory that analyses how order emerges from disorder.<sup>6</sup> Such systems are also called self-organising systems because as complex, dynamic systems they create changes from within themselves.

I later lost interest in complex systems theory because it is a very structuralist approach and has in the works of scholars such as Niklas Luhmann and Friedrich Hayek turned into neoliberalism. It is possible to 'translate' the categories of complexity theory such as self-organisation, bifurcation, chaos, order from disorder, etc. into dialectical philosophy and to combine them with a critical theory of society. In the years from 1998 until 2008, I devoted

---

<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton. 2011. *Why Marx Was Right*. London: Yale University Press.

<sup>6</sup> See: Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers. 1984/2017. *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature*. London: Verso.

a great deal of thought to this task, which resulted in many publications (usually carrying the term ‘self-organisation’ in their title).

In a critical phase, the condition of a complex, self-organising system is undetermined. The parts of the system interact in such a way that something new emerges that is more than the sum of the system’s parts. This process is also termed emergence. There are certain philosophical parallels between the concept of emergence and the dialectical notion of sublation (*Aufhebung*).<sup>7</sup> *Aufhebung* has a threefold meaning: elimination, preservation, and lifting up. In a critical phase (that is also termed bifurcation point in the theory of complex systems), a new quality of a system or a new system emerges. Particular old qualities are eliminated, other old qualities are preserved, and new qualities emerge on a new level of organisation.

But the possibility of combining dialectical philosophy and complexity theory does not undo the fact that evolutionary economists and other bourgeois thinkers (such as Hayek and Luhmann) have given bourgeois meanings to terms such as self-organisation.<sup>8</sup> They for example argue that the market is a self-organising system and thereby justify neoliberalism ideologically. To argue that we live in a self-organising market system sounds positive as if there were no social problems. The same can be said of the concepts of the information society and the network society. To argue, as Marxists do, that we live in an antagonistic capitalist system that because of its antagonisms is inherently crisis-prone, is in contrast critical because it signifies the existence of problems in the very categories that are employed.

I have become convinced that an update of Marx’s theory and Hegelian philosophy in the 21st century is a viable approach for critical theory and that this approach does not need to borrow from complexity theory in order to be consistent and offer convincing explanations. Hegelian Marxism has a rich and diverse tradition and history that is today often forgotten, but possesses an immense intellectual and political wealth that 21st century critical theory can build on. There is a rich tradition of Marxist theory that can inform the critical study of society, communication, and culture. Because of the neoliberal turn and the postmodern turn, many Marxist approaches to the study of society, communication, and culture have been forgotten. I build on Marx and theories inspired by Marx in order to ground a Marxist theory of communication.

In the book at hand, I am less interested in discussing theories that justify or do not critically analyse capitalist society. Such theories dominate the mainstream of academia. ‘Bourgeois’ theories should of course be read and criticised, but dealing with them can also take away some of the already limited

---

<sup>7</sup> Christian Fuchs. 2003. The Self-Organization of Matter. *Nature, Society, and Thought* 16 (3): 281–313.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Fuchs. 2008. *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge. Chapters 2 and 3.

time we all have that can be used more productively for constructing our own, critical theories and working on our own critical analyses of society.

By working through a multitude of analyses of concrete societal and communication phenomena I have over the years developed a range of theoretical insights. These insights, concepts, and analyses have never been static, but have developed. Critical theory is itself dialectical. By working through various critical and bourgeois theories and working out analyses of a range of social phenomena (including privacy, surveillance, digital labour, social media, the Internet, authoritarianism, nationalism, protest, advertising, globalisation, imperialism, nature, sustainability, participation, democracy, the public sphere, culture, communities, etc.), I have established in different places and my mind some elements of a critical, dialectical theory of capitalism and communication.

The dialectic is a logic that refuses reduction of the world to single things and the either/or-logic practised so often in simplistic analyses. It uses the logic of both/and, and analyses the world as an open, dynamic totality that consists of a network of contradictions. In a contradiction, one moment exists as a distinct phenomenon with its own qualities and at the same time can only exist through another moment. The two moments of a dialectical relation are dependent and independent. They also interpenetrate each other. A dialectic is a dynamic, contradictory relation. If the dialectical relation is sublated (*‘aufgehoben’*), then its contradiction collapses and a new phenomenon emerges that yet again is based on a dialectical relation.

In capitalism, the class antagonism between the capitalist class and the working class is an example of a social dialectic: Workers are compelled to produce commodities that capitalists own and sell in order to yield profits. In capitalism, workers cannot survive without being exploited by the capitalist class. Capital cannot exist without labour that produces commodities and profit. A sublation of the capitalist class antagonism means that a classless organisation of work and society is established. For example, in a self-managed, worker-owned company the class antagonism is sublated.

In the book at hand, the dialectic is applied to communication and capitalism.

### *This Book's Structure*

The purpose of the work at hand is to present foundations of a critical theory of communication and capitalism. Each chapter covers one of the foundational themes of a critical theory of communication and relates communication to a particular key concept. The focus is on materialism (chapter 2), the materialist analysis of society (chapter 3), communication and society (chapter 4), capitalism and communication (chapter 5), communication technologies (chapter 6), communication society (chapter 7), political communication in the public sphere (chapter 8), ideology (chapter 9), nationalism (chapter 10), global communication and imperialism (chapter 11), the

commons (chapter 12), death and love (chapter 13), social struggles and alternatives (chapter 14).

The chapters of this book are organised in the form of three parts: Part I focuses on the foundations of communicative materialism (chapters 2, 3, 4), part II on communication in capitalist society (chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11), and part III on the materialist transcendence of communicative capitalism (chapters 12, 13, 14). Whereas part I analyses the foundations of the general materialist analysis of the world and society, part II further develops these foundations in order to work out an immanent critique of communication in capitalism. There is a dialectic of immanence and transcendence. Immanent critique requires transcendental critique, i.e. reflections on and struggles for alternatives beyond domination. Such endeavours need alternative societal frameworks, political praxis, class struggles, ethics, and metaphysics (metaphysics understood as the study of the trans-empirical). Part III deals with transcendental aspects of communicative materialism, which include the society of the commons, metaphysical reflections on death and love, and social struggles for alternatives.

I have revisited and updated theoretical ideas from earlier works. In doing so, I have focused on analysis on the level of society as totality. By working through theoretical moments, new theoretical moments have been added, while older ones have been contextualised, updated, or revised.

## 1.2. Critical and Marxist Communication Theory

The book at hand is a contribution to both theories of society and communication theory. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock point out that the mainstream of communication theory has historically been idealist and positivist. This mainstream has advanced the view that society's problems are 'a problem of communication', whereby it 'evacuates from analysis the key problems of power and inequality in structural relations without which social theory is barren.'<sup>9</sup> Such approaches have also often conceptualised communication systems (communications) as the key determinant of society, disregarding 'the social contexts of production and reception and their relations to the central institutions and processes of class societies.'<sup>10</sup>

A dialectical, critical theory of communication cannot simply be a theory of communication, but must at the same time be a dialectical, critical theory of society. It needs to understand how the antagonisms of class and domination interact with communication processes. Such a theory is therefore a critical societal theory of communication and a critical communication theory of soci-

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Golding and Graham Murdock. 1978. Theories of Communication and Theories of Society. *Communication Research* 5 (3): 339–356. p. 346.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

ety, an approach that analyses the dialectics of communication and society in the context of society's antagonisms. This means that such a theory has to focus on communication in the context of society's antagonisms, class, domination, exploitation, power structures, production, labour, capital, ideology, the state, violence, wars, imperialism, international and global capitalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, racism, fascism, inequalities, crises, social struggles, social movements, the public sphere, and quests for socialism. Understanding communication requires that we understand the 'grander narrative' of society.<sup>11</sup>

### *Three Marxist Theory Approaches*

The main influences on this book's approach come from the intellectual traditions of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Humanist Marxism, and critical political economy of communication. Humanist Marxism stresses the role of humans in society, of alienation in class societies, and of praxis in the struggle for a just world. The Frankfurt School complements this approach with a special focus on the critique of ideology. Marxist political economy of communication is an approach that has emerged in the field of media and communication studies. It analyses the relationship of communication to class, capitalism, domination, and social struggles. All three traditions of thought are based on Marx's theory. The approach used in this book has been influenced by elements from all three of these Marxist traditions.

### *What is Humanist Marxism?*

But what is Humanist Marxism? It is an approach that is built on some core ontological, epistemological, and axiological principles.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Ontology:*

- Society is grounded in human practice and social production.
- Only humans themselves can achieve a humane society by their practical self-activity in social struggles. Praxis is a key aspect of achieving a humane society.
- Capitalism, class, and domination constitute a form of human alienation that makes visible a difference between how social life is and how it could potentially be.

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Golding. 2018. New Technologies, Old Questions: The Enduring Issues of Communications Research. *Javnost – The Public* 25 (1–2): 202–209. p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> Erich Fromm, ed. 1965. *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

*Epistemology:*

- Marx's early writings, especially the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, are important intellectual foundations of Humanist Marxism.
- There is no epistemological break in Marx's works that led him away from humanism. Marx's later works are guided by the general principles formulated in his early works.
- Humanism requires an open form of theory, dialectic and praxis. Orthodoxies such as Stalinism turn socialism into a dogmatic, deterministic, mechanistic, reductionist, and quasi-religious practice.

*Axiology:*

- Given society's grounding in human praxis and social production, humans should be collectively in control of the conditions and results of their activity.
- Democratic socialism is the society adequate to humans. It is not limited to politics, but extends to the collective self-management of the economy and society. Democratic socialism is the foundation for the full realisation of humans' and society's potentials.

*Critical Theory*

Because they analyse and advance the sublation of class, exploitation, and domination, theories that are based on Marx are critical theories. But Critical Theory also denotes the approach of the Frankfurt School. The Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923 at Goethe University Frankfurt. In 1930, Max Horkheimer became the Institute's Director. He worked together with Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, and Friedrich Pollock on an interdisciplinary, critical theory of society. After Hitler and the Nazis had taken power in 1933, the members of the Institute, who were all Marxists with a Jewish family background had to flee from Germany and most of them went to the USA. They continued to run the Institute in the USA and edited a journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. In 1950, the Institute was reopened at Goethe University Frankfurt. While Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock returned to Germany, Marcuse, Neumann, Löwenthal, and Kirchheimer stayed in the USA.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory is a critique of instrumental reason. Instrumental reason is a logic that sees humans as an instrument for advancing domination. It dehumanises the human being and reduces humans to the status of things and machines. Therefore, technological rationality is another term for instrumental reason. Marx' concept of commodity fetishism and Georg Lukács' notion of reification exerted a large influence on the Frankfurt School. Critical Theory wants to uncover how the hidden mechanisms of domination and exploitation operate. Critical Theory wants to 'give a name to what

secretly holds the machine together. [...] It seeks to raise the stone under which the monster lies brooding.<sup>13</sup> Critical Theory's critique of instrumental reason operates on several levels:

- Critical Theory analyses how exploitation reifies humans in capitalism and in class societies in general.
- Critical Theory analyses authoritarian structures of the individual personality and in society.
- Critical Theory analyses fascism as the most extreme form of instrumental reason and capitalism.
- Critical Theory analyses the instrumentalisation of human consciousness as ideology and false consciousness.
- Critical Theory criticises perverted, dogmatic forms of Marxism such as Stalinism as forms of instrumental reason.
- Frankfurt School theorists oppose critical, dialectical reason to instrumental reason.

### *Critical Political Economy of Communication*

Marx's main work *Capital* carries the subtitle 'A Critique of Political Economy'. It is a critique of capitalism, a critique of class societies, and a critique of intellectuals who have analysed capitalism in an uncritical manner. Friedrich Engels points out that political economy analyses 'the conditions and forms under which the various human societies have produced and exchanged and on this basis have distributed their products'<sup>14</sup>. Marx learned a lot from studying the works of 18th- and 19th- century classical political economists, such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, James Steuart, Jean-Baptiste Say, and John Stuart Mill. At the same time, Marx's works are a critique of classical political economy that often reifies capitalism and class societies as natural forms of society. Marx's own approach critically studies the production, distribution and consumption of commodities in capitalist society, capitalism's historical genesis and contradictions as well as the struggles taking place in this type of society.

Vincent Mosco understands political economy of communication as the 'study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually

---

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno. 1957. *Sociology and Empirical Research*. In Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot, and Karl R. Popper: *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 68–86. London: Heinemann. p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Engels. 1878. Herr Eugen Düring's Revolution in Science. In *MECW Volume 25*, 5–309. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 138

constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources.<sup>15</sup> There are different traditions of the political economy of communication, such as the Marxist, the (neo-)Keynesian, the neo-classical, or the institutionalist approach. Overall, the political economy of communication is ‘broadly marxisant.’<sup>16</sup> The political economy of communication has been institutionalised in the form of the International Association of Media and Communication Research’s (IAMCR) Political Economy Section that was created in 1978<sup>17</sup>, modules taught in universities, literature<sup>18</sup>, studies, and journals such as *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (<http://www.triple-c.at>) and *The Political Economy of Communication* (<http://www.polecom.org>).

### *Communication Theory Typologies*

A critical, Marxist theory of communication can be situated in the field of communication studies via a discussion of communication theory typologies. There are both historical and logical typologies of communication theories. The first give a historical overview of theories, the second present logical distinctions of communication theories.

---

<sup>15</sup> Vincent Mosco. 2009. *The Political Economy of Communication*. London: Sage. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Murdock and Peter Golding. 2005 Culture, Communications and Political Economy. In *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 60–83. London: Hodder Arnold. p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> For a short history of this section, see: Janet Wasko. 2013. The IAMCR Political Economy Section: A Retrospective. *The Political Economy of Communication* 1 (1): 4–8.

<sup>18</sup> For overviews, see: Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, eds. 1997. *The Political Economy of the Media I & II*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, eds. 2011. *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, eds. 2017. *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, eds. 2017. *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. Janet Wasko. 2014. The Study of the Political Economy of the Media in the Twenty-First Century. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 10 (3): 259–271. Jonathan Hardy. 2014. *Critical Political Economy of the Media. An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge. Paula Chakravartty and Yuezhi Zhao, eds. 2008. *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, eds. 2011. *The Political Economies of Media*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Benjamin J. Birkinbine, Rodrigo Gómez, and Janet Wasko, eds. 2017. *Global Media Giants*. New York: Routledge.

Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart<sup>19</sup> give a historical overview of some theories of communication. They argue that in the 19th century, society was conceived as an organism and communications as networks for the physical transport of commodities, thereby both enabling and constituting the emergence of mass communication. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, empiricist and functionalist communication research emerged. Further developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century communication theory that Armand and Michèle Mattelart discuss are information theory (the mathematical theory of communication, cybernetics), critical theory, structuralism, cultural studies, the political economy of communication, intersubjective communication theories, network theories, information society theories, and theories of globalisation and global media.

Other historical studies in communication theory and communication studies include those published by Hanno Hardt, Everett Rogers, Paddy Scannell, and Dan Schiller<sup>20</sup>. It is also very important to document the history of communication studies at the international level and in respect to non-Western countries.<sup>21</sup> The main insight that we can learn from such historical studies is that Marxist communication studies has struggled in an academic field dominated by traditional, instrumental approaches so that its representatives have again and again faced discrimination and attempts to marginalise their research.<sup>22</sup> The present work is part of critical communication research's struggles against the dominant, positivistic, uncritical, instrumental, capitalist, neoliberal logic of academia.

Logical typologies form the second approach to the meta-study of communication theories. Iulia Nastasia and Lana Rakow<sup>23</sup> distinguish communication

---

<sup>19</sup> Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart. 1998. *Theories of Communication: A Short Introduction*. London: Sage.

<sup>20</sup> Hanno Hardt. 1992. *Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History and Theory in America*. Abingdon: Routledge. Hanno Hardt. 2001. *Social Theories of the Press. Constituents of Communication Research, 1840s to 1920s*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Paddy Scannell. 2007. *Media and Communication*. London: Sage. Everett Rogers. 1994. *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach*. New York: The Free Press. Dan Schiller. 1996. *Theorizing Communication: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> See: Peter Simonson and David W. Park, eds. 2016. *The International History of Communication Study*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> See: John A. Lent, ed. 1995. *A Different Road Taken: Profiles in Critical Communication*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. John A. Lent & Michelle A. Amazeen, eds. 2015. *Key Thinkers in Critical Communication Scholarship. From the Pioneers to the Next Generation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>23</sup> Diana Iulia Nastasia and Lana F. Rakow. 2004. *Towards a Philosophy of Communication Theories: An Ontological, Epistemological and Ideological Approach*: Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association. New Orleans Sheraton, New Orleans. May 27,

theories according to the type of ontology (O), epistemology (E), and axiology (A) they use. They distinguish five major communication theory approaches: rationalism (O: idealism, E: rationalism, A: absolutism), functionalism (O: realism, E: empiricism, A: elitism), criticism (O: materialism, E: materialist dialectic, A: revolution), interpretivism (O: subjective nominalism, E: humanism, A: pluralism), postmodernism (O: solipsism/relativism, E: scepticism/constructivism, A: anarchy/post-ideology). Nastasia and Rakow argue that the Frankfurt School and Critical Political Economy belong in the third domain, the domain of critical theories. Consequently, the approach presented in this book belongs to this domain, as it draws on Marxist theory.

Robert T. Craig<sup>24</sup> lists and discusses seven theories of communication:

- the rhetorical approach
- semiotics
- phenomenology
- cybernetics
- socio-psychological approaches
- socio-cultural approaches; and
- critical theory.

These theories of communication differ by the way they theorise communication. Communication is conceptualised:

- as discourse (rhetorical approach)
- signs (semiotics)
- dialogue (phenomenology)
- information processing (cybernetics)
- interaction (social psychology)
- (re)production of social order (socio-cultural approaches)
- critique and discursive reflection (critical theory).

This book belongs to the last of these approaches. The tradition of critical communication theory theorises communication in the context of exploitation and domination, class and power, ideology, social struggles, and the quest for an alternative, non-dominative, classless society. Whereas some approaches forget about the role of exploitation and class and merely focus on domination, power, politics, and culture without analysing the role of exploitation, class, and the economy, a Marxist communication theory analyses communication in the context of the dialectic of class and domination and of capitalism as a societal totality that is grounded in the logic of accumulation and creates inequalities.

---

2004. [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/1/3/2/5/pages113255/p113255-1.php](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/1/3/2/5/pages113255/p113255-1.php) (accessed on 25 February 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Robert T. Craig. 1999. Communication Theory as a Field. *Communication Theory* 9 (2): 119–161.

James A. Anderson and Geoffrey Baim<sup>25</sup> characterise communication scholarship with the help of two axes: analytical research/empirical research, and foundational research/reflexive research. They characterise foundationalism as modernist, focusing on certainty, causality, closure, while reflexivity is understood as postmodernist, focusing on erasure, agency, indeterminacy. In Anderson and Baim's typology, analytical approaches privilege theory, frameworks, concepts, values, whereas empirical approaches privilege observation, measurement, presence, and experience. The result is four different approaches: the foundational-analytical approach, the reflexive-analytical approach, the foundational-empirical approach, and the reflexive-empirical approach. Marxist and critical theory approaches to communication are characterised as foundational-analytical, cultural Marxist approaches as reflexive-analytical. The problem with this typology is its undialectical nature that does not allow it to adequately classify dialectical approaches. Hegelian Marxist approaches stress the dialectics of object/subject, structures/agency, necessity/chance, continuity/discontinuity, society/individual, theory/empirical research, reason/experience, nature/culture, society/economy, etc. Anderson and Baim's typology cannot properly account for the dialectic, which is why they mischaracterise Marxist approaches to communication. Communication is a process that is embedded in the (re)production of society's dialectics. It is not surprising that in another publication, Anderson mischaracterises dialectical approaches by arguing that 'Hegel and Marx continued to submerge the individual,'<sup>26</sup> although Marx spoke of a dialectic of the individual and society: 'Above all we must avoid postulating "society" again as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of *communal* manifestations of life carried out in association with others – *are* therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man's individual and species-life are not *different*, however much – and this is inevitable – the mode of existence of the individual is a more *particular* or more *general* mode of the life of the species, or the life of the species is a more *particular* or more *general* individual life.'<sup>27</sup>

A dualistic typology of communication theories comparable to that of Anderson/Baim is Karl Erik Rosengren's<sup>28</sup> application of Burrell and Morgan's

---

<sup>25</sup> James A. Anderson and Geoffrey Baym. 2004. Philosophies and Philosophic Issues in Communication, 1995–2004. *Journal of Communication* 54 (4): 589–615.

<sup>26</sup> James A. Anderson. 1996. *Communication Theory. Epistemological Foundations*. New York: The Guilford Press. p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx. 1844. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In *MECW Volume 3*, 229–346. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 299.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Erik Rosengren. 1983. Communication Research: One Paradigm, or Four? *Journal of Communication* 33 (3): 185–207. Karl Erik Rosengren. 1993. From Field to Frog Ponds. *Journal of Communication* 43 (3): 6–17.

typology of social theories<sup>29</sup> to communication theory. Burrell and Morgan distinguish theories according to two axes: subjectivism/objectivism, radical change/continuity, resulting in four different paradigms: interpretivism (subjectivism/continuity), functionalism (objectivism/continuity), radical humanism (subjectivism/radical change), radical structuralism (objectivism/radical change). In a later publication, Rosengren<sup>30</sup> substituted the change/continuity axis for conflict/consensus. Rosengren characterises Critical Theory as radical humanism (subjectivistic/radical change) and Marxism as radical structuralism (objectivistic/radical change). There are structuralist versions of Marxism, such as Althusser's theory and the school of thought building on his approach, that disregard the dialectic of individuals and society, and therefore fit into the typology. But humanist, dialectical Marxist theories cannot simply be characterised as subjectivistic and focusing on radical change. They analyse, like Marx, the dialectics of agency and structures and continuity and change in class societies.<sup>31</sup> A crisis of capitalism is a point of discontinuity that opens up society for radical change. If emancipatory class struggles fail in such situations, then capitalist power can reconstitute itself so that there is a continuity of capitalism through change. Marxist dialectics does not fit into dualist typologies, but rather transcends such classifications. One key point that will be outlined in this book is that communication is a social and societal process, a dialectic that cuts across dualisms.<sup>32</sup> Communication is the process through which humans produce and reproduce society's dialectics.

In his seminal *Mass Communication Theory*, Denis McQuail<sup>33</sup> frequently develops typologies that are an intersection of two axes that each have two poles for outlining communication phenomena and theoretical approaches. The result is quadruples of approaches and dimensions, i.e. typologies with four categories. McQuail applies the approach of quadrupling for meta-theorising

---

<sup>29</sup> Gibson Burrell & Gareth Morgan. 1979. *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*. Aldershot: Gower.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Erik Rosengren. 2000. *Communication: An Introduction*. London: Sage. p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> See: Christian Fuchs. 2016. Herbert Marcuse and Social Media. In *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*, 111–152. London: University of Westminster Press.

<sup>32</sup> See: Christian Fuchs. 2011. *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. London: Routledge. Chapter 3. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama. 1999. Thinking Dialectically About Culture and Communication. *Communication Theory* 9 (1): 1–25.

<sup>33</sup> Denis McQuail. 2010. *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage. Sixth edition.

media and communication theories,<sup>34</sup> theories of the consequences media and communication have for society,<sup>35</sup> theories of media and order;<sup>36</sup> theories of relations between media, culture and society,<sup>37</sup> relations between personal and mass media,<sup>38</sup> information behaviour,<sup>39</sup> media governance,<sup>40</sup> media types,<sup>41</sup> and media effects.<sup>42</sup> Such dualistic models certainly have heuristic relevance because they are an ‘aid to the description and explanation of communication’ and are ‘a source of hypotheses, a guide to research, and a format for ordering the results of research.’<sup>43</sup> But a problem of dualistic typologies is that they cannot account for phenomena and approaches that transcend or are located between categories. They cannot explain communication’s dialectics.

McQuail presents a typology of communication theories along two axes.<sup>44</sup> One axis distinguishes between media-oriented and society-oriented approaches, the other one between culturalism and materialism. The result is four approaches that McQuail calls media-culturalism, media-materialism, social culturalism, and social materialism. In another typology, McQuail presents theories of media and society as the intersection of two axes where one displays centrifugal or centripetal forces (resulting, respectively, in fragmentation or integration) and the other axis reflects a range running between optimism and pessimism.<sup>45</sup>

In the first typology, the distinction between materialism and culturalism is inept. Raymond Williams points out that culture is a realm of social production and therefore material.<sup>46</sup> Matter is not the opposite of culture. Culture is not immaterial. What McQuail probably means is either the distinction between subject/object or between culture/economy. But in neither case is there a strict dual separation because there are theories of the cultural economy, culture in

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 466.

<sup>43</sup> Denis McQuail. 2008. Models of Communication. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach, 3143–3150. Malden, MA: Blackwell. p. 3143.

<sup>44</sup> McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Williams. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also: Christian Fuchs. 2017. Raymond Williams’ Communicative Materialism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 744–762.

the economy, the dialectic of subject/object, and the dialectic of media/society. In respect to the second typology, centrifugal forces cannot always be clearly separated from centripetal forces. These two forces often reach dialectically into each other. For example, flexible production and niche marketing create a variety of commodities so that capital accumulation in the culture industry works as the integration of diverse and individualised commodities that all have in common that they are products of cultural labour, that they are produced for and sold on the market, and that they objectify surplus labour that yields profit. In respect to the same typology, dialectical approaches transcend McQuail's distinction between media optimism and media pessimism by stressing that society and communications have a diversity of contradictory potentials and that whether communications have rather positive or rather negative effects in society depends on the results of social and class struggles. A dialectical critical theory transcends the dualisms that traditional communication theories define. The book at hand presents such an approach.

*Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory* is a contribution to both Marxist theory and to communication theory. I am convinced that communication studies can and has to learn important lessons from Marxist theory and that Marxist theory can be inspired by communication theory. But all too often communication is not taken seriously enough in Marxism and Marxism is dismissed and discriminated against in mainstream studies (not only, but also in communication studies).

The method of work I have adopted operates on two dimensions: It combines critical theory, empirical social research, and ethics. It tries to work through known and unknown Marxist approaches in order to update elements from them for a critical theory of communication. There is too much focus on the latest bourgeois trends in social theory (such as post-humanism, actor network theory, new materialism, etc.) that lets scholars forget that Marxism has a powerful interdisciplinary, dialectical methodology and makes knowledge matter politically.

### 1.3. Dialectical, Humanist Marxism and Communication Theory

The approach I present in this book stands in the tradition of Hegel and Marx. I have more recently added Aristotle to this line of thought because I have become convinced that Aristotle had a profound influence on Marx's works. Aristotle's philosophy has especially influenced Marx and humanist socialists such as Georg Lukács in respect to the dialectical notion of matter, the dialectical concept of essence, the dialectic of potentiality and actuality, the teleological ontology of production, technology (techne) as practice, use-value, exchange-value, the forms of value, the money form, as well as the ethics and politics of

the common good.<sup>47</sup> The line of thought Aristotle – Hegel – Marx that shapes my approach has been influenced by my engagement with the approaches of a range of critical theorists: Theodor W. Adorno, Günther Anders, Avicenna, Ernst Bloch, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Angela Davis, Erich Fromm, Lucien Goldmann, Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jürgen Habermas, David Harvey, Hans Heinz Holz, Horst Holzer, Max Horkheimer, C.L.R. James, Manfred Knoche, Henri Lefebvre, Georg Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, Alasdair MacIntyre, Herbert Marcuse, Maria Mies, Thomas Nagel, Franz Neumann, Mogobe B. Ramose, M.N. Roy, Jean-Paul Sartre, Dallas W. Smythe, Edward P. Thompson, Mario Tronti, Claudia von Werlhof, Raymond Williams, and Slavoj Žižek.

### *Aristotelian, Dialectical, Humanist Marxism*

Grounding an approach in Aristotelian, dialectical, Humanist Marxism is often brushed aside with the label ‘Euro-centrism’, assuming that European and Aristotelian thought has an inherently imperialistic character. Such arguments disregard the grounding of Aristotelian thought in African philosophy: Innocent C. Onyewuenyi<sup>48</sup> shows that Egyptian philosophy, mathematics, medicine, agriculture, law, and religion influenced Greek thought. Greek philosophers such as Thales had been to Egypt, where they were influenced by Egyptian philosophy. There are ‘Egyptian origins of Greek philosophy and civilization’.<sup>49</sup> Egyptian philosophy also influenced Aristotle: ‘Aristotle became acquainted with doctrines and ideas of the Egyptian priest-scholars which were not known to, and not taught by, Plato. Hence the richness and variety of speculations which appear in the Aristotelian corpus and his philosophical advance over

---

<sup>47</sup> See: Ernst Bloch. 1963/2019. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. New York: Columbia University Press. Georg Lukács. 1984. *Georg Lukács Werke Band 13: Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. 1. Halbband*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand. Georg Lukács. 1986. *Georg Lukács Werke Band 14: Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. 2. Halbband*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand. George E. McCarthy. 1990. *Marx and the Ancients: Classical Ethics, Social Justice, and Nineteenth-Century Political Economy*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. George E. McCarthy, ed. 1992. *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth-Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Scott Meikle. 1985. *Existentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*. London: Duckworth. Jonathan E. Pike. 1999. *From Aristotle to Marx: Aristotelianism in Marxist Social Ontology*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>48</sup> Innocent C. Onyewuenyi. 1993. *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

Plato.<sup>50</sup> The 'Aristotelian Left' developed Aristotle's philosophy in a materialist manner. Islamic philosophers Avicenna und Averroes, who conceived of matter as (self-)producing and dialectical, were important figures in this movement.<sup>51</sup>

Aristotle's philosophy is a 'mediating theory'.<sup>52</sup> The question of how phenomena are related is one of the foundational problems of philosophy. Aristotle's philosophy is a 'mediating theory', which stresses the middle between two extremes.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, a dialectic is constituted by two opposed poles that are identical and non-identical, i.e. contradictory, so that there is potential for the sublation of the contradiction between these two poles. The problem of mediation was solved dialectically by Hegel and Marx. Aristotle's philosophy, like those of Hegel and Marx, is triadic and stresses the relationship between two poles. For Hegel and Marx, the resolution of a contradiction is its sublation, which means the contradiction is dissolved and something new emerges. For Aristotle, the resolution of a contradiction is moderation and the assertion of the middle of two extremes. Aristotle's philosophy is a rudimentary, underdeveloped, and rather conservative form of the dialectic.

What is decisive about Aristotle's philosophy, however, is that it asks the question about mediation. It 'was Aristotle's immeasurable innovation in philosophy to have been the first to be aware of this problem of mediation'.<sup>54</sup> Whereas other philosophical approaches assume that the world is unmediated and preach a radical dualism and relativism, Aristotle's starting point is the mediation of the world, by which he created the foundations of dialectical philosophy. Today, radical relativism and radical unmediatedness (the fetishism of difference) take on the form of various poststructuralist approaches. Dialectical philosophy is today not just resistance against positivism, but also resistance against poststructuralism. For every theory of society, the problem of mediation is the problem of how the human subject and society's objects are related. In dialectical, Humanist Marxism, there is a subject/object dialectic, where human production is the decisive process in the reproduction of society. In communication theory, dualist thought takes on the form of the separation of production/communication, work/interaction, economy/culture, labour/ideology, production/consumption, etc. A dialectical theory of communication and society has to substitute these dualisms of communication for subject/object-dialectics.

For Aristotle, the dialectic is a method of discussion, asking questions, engaging with problems and giving answers that focuses on contradictions. The

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>51</sup> Ernst Bloch. 1963/2019. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>52</sup> Theodor W. Adorno. 2001. *Metaphysics. Concepts and Problems* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

Aristotelian dialectic involves propositions ‘which contradict the contraries of opinions that are taken to be reputable.’<sup>55</sup> The ‘dialectic is a process of criticism.’<sup>56</sup> Aristotle must be credited for identifying that contradictions are an important principle and moment of dialectics. But his notion of the dialectic is limited to the realm of logic and arguments made in discussion. Hegel and Marx extended the dialectic’s scope from the realm of argumentation and logic to society and nature, although differing with respect to the question what is the driving force of the dialectic. While for Hegel, spirit is the driving force, Marx stresses the materiality of the dialectic. Ernst Bloch points out that there are already foundations of dialectical materialism in Aristotle.<sup>57</sup> For Aristotle, matter is dynamic, productive potentiality (*δυνάμει ὄν, δυνατόμει ὄν*, being-impossibility), that is, the material cause from which concrete forms are produced through the efficient cause.

#### 1.4. Anti-Humanism

Since the 1960s, anti-humanist social theory has flourished in various forms. This section gives a short overview of some important anti-humanist approaches. Dialectical, Humanist Marxism is critical of anti-humanism.

##### *Louis Althusser’s Negative Legacy*

Although I am in favour of advancing and building on a broad range of critical theories, there are traditions that I think have done much damage to critical theory: Althusserianism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, as well as anti- and post-humanism. Althusser writes that ‘the structure of the relations of production determines the places and *functions* occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the “supports” (*Träger*) of these functions.’<sup>58</sup> He disregards that human work recreates and changes the relations of production, human practices produce and reproduce social structures, and that class and social struggles have the potential to change and transcend such structures. Althusser neglects one side of the dialectic

---

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle. 1984. Topics. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation Digital Edition*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, 381–617. NY: Princeton University Press. §104a.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, §101b.

<sup>57</sup> Ernst Bloch. 1963/2019. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar. 1968/2009. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso. pp. 198–199.

of structure and agency. He consequently describes his approach as an anti-humanist reading of Marx. The main problem of Althusserianism is that it has advanced the idea of the death of the human subject that has inspired several generations of scholars and has resulted in anti-humanist thought that under the disguise of being critical has advanced new forms of oppressive thought.

### *Luhmann, Barthes, Foucault*

Niklas Luhmann advanced a politically conservative social theory that in some respects parallels that of Althusser. Luhmann argues in his social systems theory that humans are ‘as psychic and as bodily systems [...] sensors’ in the environment of social systems.<sup>59</sup> For Luhmann, a social system is a connection of communications without humans that has a self-referential character, which means that communication produces communication. He makes communication structures into subjects, which does not consider that communication is a process produced by humans. Michel Foucault shares Roland Barthes’ thesis of the death of the human subject<sup>60</sup> and reduces humans to functions of discourses: The ‘subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse.’<sup>61</sup> By conceptualising discourse structures as determining society, Foucault advances a structuralist and functionalist concept of society. Foucault argues that structuralism ceaselessly functions to “unmake’ that very [hu]man who is creating and re-creating his positivity in the human sciences.’<sup>62</sup> Foucault very much welcomed structuralism’s anti-humanist intention to subordinate humans under structures, and practiced anti-humanism as his own programme.

### *Actor Network Theory, Posthumanism, Cyborgs*

Actor network theory is a particular form of post-structuralism. Bruno Latour defines an actor network as ‘assembly of humans and nonhumans’<sup>63</sup>. He sees

---

<sup>59</sup> Niklas Luhmann. 1995. *Social Systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p. 410.

<sup>60</sup> Roland Barthes. 1968/1977. The Death of the Author. In Roland Barthes: *Image Music Text*, 142–148. London: Fontana Press.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault. 1977. What Is An Author? In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, 113–138. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. p. 138.

<sup>62</sup> Michel Foucault. 1970/1989. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge. p. 414.

<sup>63</sup> Bruno Latour. 2004. *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 69.

nonhumans (such as technologies, laboratories, instruments, materials, etc.) as social subjects and therefore, for example, speaks of ‘*the voices of nonhumans*’.<sup>64</sup> Latour and actor network theory obliterate the differences between humans and nonhumans by claiming that the latter are social actors. Latour’s theory and related approaches are also called New Materialism<sup>65</sup>, which is a vulgar understanding of materialism that does not conceive of matter as a dynamic process of (self-)production, but as things and objects.

Posthumanism is a version of New Materialism. It stresses a ‘subject that works across differences’<sup>66</sup> and that ‘subjectivity includes relations to a multitude of non-human “others”’.<sup>67</sup> Posthumanism stresses especially the subject position of cyborgs, which are hybrids of humans/technology or humans/non-humans achieved with the help of computer technologies, Artificial Intelligence, robotics, and genetic engineering. ‘A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism’.<sup>68</sup> Some scholars argue that the predicted rise of cyborgs as advancing the end of patriarchy. Another argument in respect to cyborgs that scholars such as Ray Kurzweil advance is that cyborgs will make humans immortal.<sup>69</sup> Posthumanism is a version of naïve technological determinism and technological optimism that assumes that society and humanity radically change because of the rise of new technologies.

Postmodern theory has emerged in the post-Althusser climate. Its main offence against critical theory has been the advancement of anti-Marxism, which means the neglect and downplaying of the importance of class and capitalism in society and of Marx and approaches building on him in critical theory. Along with it have come reformist identity politics that fail to challenge the totality of exploitation and domination.

### *Technological Determinism: Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler*

Techno-centric theories of the media, just like poststructuralism, decentre the role of humans in society. Marshall McLuhan’s media theory and Friedrich Kittler’s media history are two examples. McLuhan argues that print

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds. 2012. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.

<sup>66</sup> Rosi Braidotti. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity. p. 49.

<sup>67</sup> Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, eds. *Posthuman Glossary*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. p. 340.

<sup>68</sup> Donna Haraway. 1985/1991. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, pp. 149–181. New York: Routledge. p. 149.

<sup>69</sup> Ray Kurzweil. 2005. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. London: Viking. Ray Kurzweil and Terry Grossman. 2004. *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale.

technologies cause negative effects in society and that electronic media have positive effects. He argues that 'print causes nationalism' and 'created individualism and nationalism'.<sup>70</sup> Electronic technologies would have created a global village: 'But certainly the electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous "field" in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a "global village"'<sup>71</sup>

Friedrich Kittler calls for an ontology that focuses on 'relations between things in time and space',<sup>72</sup> so that 'ontology turns into an ontology of distances, transmissions, and media'.<sup>73</sup> As a consequence, Kittler wrote a history of communication technologies without the history of society. For him, technology is itself an acting subject. Kittler postulates a straightforward determination of society and humans by media technologies: 'Media determine our situation';<sup>74</sup> 'technical media are models of the so-called human'.<sup>75</sup> While Lukács and the Frankfurt School warn against instrumental reason's logic of quantification colonising society, the humanities and the social sciences, Kittler welcomes, commends and propagates this development. Kittler's programme is the application of structuralism and the logic of machines, mathematics, and computer science to the humanities and society as well as to systematically contest 'the humanities' three elements: history, spirit, the human being.<sup>76</sup> Kittler wrote these words in the introduction to a collected volume from 1980 that he edited and that holds the programmatic title *Exorcism of the Spirit from the Humanities* (in German: *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften*). While the materialist, dialectical critique of society has the potential to sublimate individualism and idealism in the humanities and social sciences, Kittler's exorcism is the worship of machines and therefore of capitalist reification and capitalism's fetish character, so that his approach means regression into mechanical materialism.

Interpreting technologies as subjects leads Kittler to argue that technologies act. He argues, for example, that wars are conducted between technologies and

---

<sup>70</sup> Marshall McLuhan. 1997. *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone. London: Routledge. pp. 141, 157.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall McLuhan. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Kittler. 2009. Towards an Ontology of Media. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (2–3): 23–31. p. 24.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> Friedrich Kittler. 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p. xxxix.

<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Kittler. 2010. *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*. Cambridge: Polity. p. 36.

<sup>76</sup> Translation from German: Friedrich Kittler. 1980. Einleitung. In *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften. Programme des Poststrukturalismus*, ed. Friedrich Kittler, 7–14. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh. p. 8.

not by humans who aim at achieving or defending power: It 'has become clear that real wars are not fought for people or for fatherlands, but take place between different media, information technologies, data flows.'<sup>77</sup> John Durham Peters argues in this context: 'Agency Kittler tends to attribute to abstractions such as world war and not to living, breathing actors. He is not interested in audiences or effects, resistance or hegemony, stars or genres; he spends no time on subcultures, postcoloniality, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, or class.'<sup>78</sup> Kittler's approach is an 'antihumanist technological determinism'<sup>79</sup> that is characterised by 'hardware euphoria'.<sup>80</sup> McLuhan and Kittler are both technological determinists, to whom Raymond Williams' criticism applies that in techno-determinism 'intention [...] is irrelevant'<sup>81</sup> and technology is presented 'as a cause'.<sup>82</sup>

### *Structuralism's Anti-Humanism*

The types of approach just mentioned – Althusserian structuralism, Luhmann's system theory, Foucauldian discourse theory, poststructuralism, actor network theory, new materialism, posthumanism, McLuhan's media theory, Kittler's media history – share the assumption that society is not a realm of human practices organised as a dialectic of structures and agency. They rather reduce society to social, linguistic, or technological structures that are said to be independent of humans and their practices and to act as subjects. Structures are turned into subjects, which overlooks that structures are produced and reproduced by human practices that are conditioned, enabled, and constrained by structures. Anti-humanism is the core of the discussed approaches. In order to question economic, political, methodological, philosophical, and ideological individualism and idealism, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches fetishise structures. But they overlook that disrespect for and contempt of humans, the overemphasis on structures over practices, and the neglect of the dialectic of structures and practices can very easily have misanthropic political implications. Anti-humanism is undialectical.

---

<sup>77</sup> Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. xli.

<sup>78</sup> John Durham Peters. 2010. Introduction: Friedrich Kittler's Light Shows. In Friedrich Kittler: *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, 1–18. Cambridge: Polity. p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds. 2010. *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>80</sup> Sybille Krämer. 2006. The Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation. On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media. *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (7–8): 93–109.

<sup>81</sup> Raymond Williams. 1974/2003. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Routledge. p. 130.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

It misses society's dialectic of human practices and structures that Marx pinpoints in the following words: 'just as society itself produces *man as man*, so is society *produced* by him.'<sup>83</sup> In contrast and opposed to anti-humanist theory, the task of the book at hand is to work out what roles communication plays in the dialectics of humans and society, practices and social structures, the individual and social systems.

The books that have most influenced my thought and from which I have probably learned most have been Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, *Capital*, and *Grundrisse*; Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic* (often referred to as 'Smaller Logic', which implies that the *Science of Logic* is more important, although the *Encyclopaedia Logic* is Hegel's most systematic and ultimate dialectical work and therefore constitutes his 'Universal Logic'), Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, and Georg Lukács' *Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins* (*Ontology of Societal Being*).

Neoliberal capitalism has turned in a negative dialectic into authoritarian capitalism and established the foundations of a new fascism. Democratic socialism is of course the only real counter-model to fascism and capitalism. In the situation of highest danger, the task is first and foremost to defend and advance humanism. Only through humanism can we reach socialism (and vice-versa). My approach taken in this book and in general can be characterised as dialectical, Humanist Marxism and humanist socialism.

The political task is and remains for the time being that we come together and through social struggles sublimate communicative capitalism into a commons-based society and communicative commons. Humanism is only true and complete as a commons-based community of humanity. The commons can only become true as humanism.

---

<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx. 1844. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In *MECW Volume 3*, 229–346. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 301.