Interviews

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN FUCHS ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

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Moment:

First of all, thank you for accepting our invitation. We'd like to start on a more personal note and ask about your academic background and how you came into contact with the field of communication. As far as we can understand you have a degree in computer science and seem to have worked on systems theory. Today you are arguably the most famous and prolific proponent of critical theory and critical communication studies. Can you tell us more about your academic journey?

Christian Fuchs:

There are more details on my academic background and development in an interview published in the book *Key Thinkers in Critical Communication Scholarship*, to which I'd like to refer the readers (Fuchs, 2015). I can summarise the basic points here: I was already a highly political human being when I was a pupil. I became convinced that fascism is the biggest danger to humanity. That insight led me to become a democratic socialist. Today, I characterise myself politically as a humanist democratic socialist.

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In school, I was quite interested in computer programming and mathematics, which is why I started to study Computer Science. After a couple of semesters, I realised that I am more interested in Politics, Sociology, and Philosophy and that the mainstream of Computer Science ignores society and is shaped by instrumental reason. My political and critical side became the dominant one so to speak in respect to what I wanted to analyse and study. However, I remained interested in the topic of computing and the Internet. I thought starting all over with a degree in Politics, Sociology, or Philosophy at another university would be cumbersome. As a consequence, I focused on combining Informatics and Social Sciences (Social Informatics), which was possible in my diploma and doctoral studies. My basic interest became how we can critically analyse the dialectics of digital media and society. The more I delved into reading Social Sciences and Humanities literature, the more I became convinced that Karl Marx's analysis is still very important today and that the whole tradition building on Marx is of high importance for the analysis of communication and capitalism.

I first read in Marx's *Capital* when I was a pupil. I found it interesting but quite difficult and repetitive. As part of my focus on Social Informatics, I also attended modules at university specialised in the sociology of technology. In one module on the sociology of technology, students gave talks about key works in the sociology of technology. I enlisted to give a talk on Marx's chapter "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" in *Capital Volume 1* (Marx 1867/1990, chapter 15). This is the longest chapter in *Capital Volume 1* and one of the most important ones. I was so fascinated by Marx's analysis that I decided in that semester to not just read the one chapter but the whole book. It helped me to understand the antagonistic role of technology in capitalism and I developed some ideas that have continued to be relevant for me until today (see, for example, Fuchs 2016b, 2020c, 2024). When I became interested in Marx in the 1990s, there was little interest in and lots of opposition to them. Neoliberalism was the nouvelle vague in capitalism's political economy and Postmodernism was the nouvelle vague in social theory. So, my interest in Marx did not make things easy in many respects.

After my PhD, I worked at various interdisciplinary research centres and Departments that all had links to the field of Media and Communication Studies, which led me into this very academic field. My main interest is the Critical Political Economy of Communication, the Media, and Digital Media, an approach and subfield of Media and Communication Studies. Concerning theories, I am interested in Karl Marx, scholarship based on Marx, especially the Marxist-Humanist tradition (see Fromm 1965; Alderson and Spencer 2017), as well as the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory.

You also asked me about systems theory. Wolfgang Hofkirchner was the supervisor of my diploma thesis and PhD and my mentor. Wolfgang developed an interesting critical systems theory of information (see Hofkirchner 2013, 2023) that combines dialectical philosophy, information theory, critical theories, and

systems theory. It is a philosophy of information in nature and society. I worked together with Wolfgang in the research project "Human Strategies in Complexity" (http://www.self-organization.org/) that he led on these topics, which is how I became interested in this approach and started publishing on it myself. I focused on applying the approach to society and digital capitalism. Later, I became less interested in systems theory as I felt that practices, work, and labour should be more foregrounded in the analysis of society and that the combination of Hegel and Marx (Dialectical Critical Theory) is analytically more powerful than systems theory. I learned a lot from critical systems theory and have built on and gone beyond this approach. Today, I use concepts such as "emergence" that come from systems theory more implicitly and focus on more Marxist-Humanist concepts that put social production at the centre of the analysis of society and class struggles at the centre of the analysis of capitalism (see Fuchs, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2021b, 2020a, 2016a). What I learned from the engagement with Critical Systems Theory is how to apply dialectical philosophy to the analysis of society in general, capitalist society, and digital capitalism. The mainstream of Systems Theory is not critical. I mean the theories and approaches of thinkers such as Niklas Luhmann and Friedrich Hayek. Both approaches are politically conservative. Luhmann's notions of functional differentiation and self-reproducing systems and Hayek's notion of spontaneous order ideologically justify neoliberalism. Critical alternatives should be based on the analysis of the dialectics of structures and practices, society and individuals, economy and society, etc. In a way, approaches such as the ones of Luhmann and Hayek are undialectical. Hofkirchner has advanced a critical, dialectical systems approach. My own interest is to not start with the notion of the system but to start from the human being as a social, producing, working being, or as Marx says, "The premises from which we begin are […] real premises […]. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (Marx and Engels, 1845/1846, p. 31). Social analysis should start with human individuals who exist, produce, and live in definite social and societal relations. Humans are social, societal, and producing beings.

Moment:

Journal of Communication (JoC) published its special issue "Ferment in the Field" in 1983 (vol. 33, no. 3). You and Jack Linchuan Qiu published your editorial of and introduction to a new "Ferments in the Field" special issue under the title "Ferments in the Field: Introductory Reflections on the Past, Present and Future of Communication Studies" in 2018. In this editorial, you remarked that there has been l a discussion of the origins, current state, and prospecs of the field of Communication Studies since this 1983 special issue. Could you explain what brought you back to these debates? How do you evaluate how the field of Media and Communication Studies has developed since 2018?

Christian Fuchs:

Journal of Communication (*JoC*) is one of the highest-ranked journals with one of the highest impact factors

in the field of Media and Communication Studies (see, for example, https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=3315). It is and defines the mainstream of this field. The first *Ferment in the Field* special issue was published in 1983 (Gerbner, 1983). At that time, George Gerbner was the journal's editor. Gerbner was editing it as a pluralist journal so that also critical scholars, including Marxist ones, got published, which is evident in the *Ferment* issue. Other Ferment special issues followed in 1993 and 2008. They made evident the disappearance of Marxism not just from *JoC* but from the representation in the mainstream of the field as a whole. This was the time when neoliberalism in political economy and Postmodernism in theory were on the rise, which is why David Harvey (1990) characterised Postmodernism as a theory and cultural logic that reflects capitalism's flexible regime of accumulation.

Jack Qiu and I in a conversation had the idea that a new *Ferment*s issue could focus on the question of what role critical scholarship does and should play in Media and Communication Studies. At that time, Silvio Waisbord started work as editor of *JoC* and Jack, who knew Silvio, became an associate editor. I think it was at the IAMCR 2016 conference in Leicester that Jack and I suggested a new Ferments special issue to Silvio, who liked the idea. I believed that ideally such a special issue should focus on Critical Ferments and document the state of the art and perspectives of Critical and Marxist Media and Communication Studies in order to compensate for the lack of the representation of Marxist and related critical positions in the journal over a long time. Silvio was of the opinion that such an issue needs to be broad and not just contain critical perspectives. In the end, I think there is a good number of articles in the 2018 special issue "Ferments in the Field: The Past, Present and Future of Communication Studies" that can be characterised as what from my perspective is defined as critical scholarship (Qiu and Fuchs, 2018).

In the special issue's introduction, I and Jack outline five trends in Media and Communication Studies since 1983: "(a) communication studies on a global scale, (b) research in fast-changing digital media environments, (c) the importance of critical communication studies, (d) the new critical and materialist turn, and (e) praxis communication and ways to address power imbalances in knowledge production" (Fuchs and Qiu 2018, 220). How I see that introduction is that it is an appeal to the importance of critical scholarship in Media and Communication Studies.

I have not conducted content analyses of what perspectives, theories, and approaches have to what degree been present in *JoC,* other journals, and the mainstream of Media and Communication Studies in general. Therefore, I cannot make informed statements about how the role of critical scholarship has overall developed in the field since 2018. Such an analysis would be a very good and important task for PhD theses.

My educated guess is that overall in the field of Media and Communication Studies, computational social science methods, what Vincent Mosco (2014, 196-205) has characterised as "digital positivism", continue to

play a very important role. I want to refer the reader to another essay where I discuss what the problems are of digital positivism (Fuchs 2019). One of the problems is that first, the Business School started to colonise the field, which resulted in the emergence of Media Management, Media Business Studies, etc. and that now via digital positivism Computer Science has started such a colonisation process too. The danger is that as a consequence, there is not enough time and space for an interest in critical philosophical, critical theoretical, and qualitative empirical analyses of the media as advocated by the Critical Political Economy of Communication and the Media approach.

There is significant interest in Marx-inspired analyses of media and communication and the approach of the Critical Political Economy of Communication and the Media. The IAMCR's Political Economy section is one of the association's largest networks. The journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* (http://www.triple-c.at). which I have edited for now 22 years gives a special focus to the Marxist Political Economy of Communication and the Media. It has published a series of special issues focused on Marx-inspired research (Fuchs and Mosco 2012; Fuchs and Monticelli 2018; Fuchs 2020b; Fuchs 2021a; Allmer, Arslan and Fuchs 2024) and the majority of the regular articles also utilise Marxian analysis. The approach of the Political Economy of Communication has been grounded by scholars such as Dallas Smythe and Vincent Mosco. Vinny Mosco died earlier this month, which is very a tragic loss. He was a Radical Humanist in many respects, from the way he treated others in personal relations to academic work and politics. Mosco has, together with Catherine McKercher, shown and stressed the importance of labour analysis in the Political Economy of Communication (Mosco and McKercher, 2008). He has grounded a critical-humanist version of the Political Economy of Communication. He has made evident that Marxian-inspired Critique of the/Critical Political Economy of Communication and the Media is of crucial importance if we want to understand (and change) society and the media today (Mosco 2009). Marxian-inspired Political Economy is a Critique of the Political Economy of Communication and the Media in that it is a critique of capitalism (capitalist media), ideology (ideology in and of the media), and uncritical academia (see Knoche 2024). But it is also Critical Political Economy of the Media and Communication because it works on critical theories and critical concepts of society, communication, and the media. So, it is both negative and a negation of the negation.

Digital capitalism features an antagonism between digital capital and the digital commons that shapes, among other things, academic publishing and open access. The mainstream of open-access publishing is for-profit open access that makes a profit from high article and book processing charges that can only be covered by relatively wealthy universities, academics, and individuals. Especially universities and scholars in the Global South are disadvantaged. The alternative is Diamond Open Access (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2013), which is not-for-profit open access. There is an absolute lack of public funding for Diamond Open Access. There are only very few funding initiatives. The mainstream of academic publishing is dominated by

for-profit traditional and for-profit open-access models (see Knoche 2020). We need much more public funding by Diamond Open Access journals, book series, and publishers.

Critical, dialectical theory and critical, dialectical Political Economy is not abstract. It operates with the help of real abstractions and by ascending from the abstract to the concrete, as Marx describes the dialectical method in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1857/1858/1993, 81-111). This means that it starts from a concrete societal phenomenon, from concrete societal problems, and then by developing analyses and theory abstracts from it so that a better understanding of the problem in the context of society/capitalism as totality, class structures, structures of domination, class and social struggles, etc. emerges. This means that good, critical scholarship focuses on obscure research topics, but chooses topics that matter politically in the time we live. Unfortunately, there is too much obscure research.

At the same time, society's problems explode. Neoliberal, global capitalism has in negative dialectic backfired and created social crises of massive inequalities, economic crises, financial crises, crises of the state and democracy, ecological crises, and the emergence of new forms of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, right-wing extremism, and fascism. Digital fascism is such a novel phenomenon. The world has become much more polarised. Fascists and right-wing authoritarians have become dominant in many parts of the world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown how nationalist, right-wing authoritarianism fuses with what used to be called "imperialism".

If Donald Trump wins the 2024 US Presidential election, then a world war between Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and others on the one side and the USA, the EU, NATO, and some more on the other side will become a real threat and possibility. Such a war could be the final war of global armageddon that extinguishes life on Earth. It is not good times and not interesting times we live in. It is bullshit times. This is the context for critical scholarship today and for Critical Media and Communication Studies. We can and should not simply go on to conduct banal analyses of influencers on Instagram and TikTok, etc. Critical Studies have to react to and focus on the political polarisation of the world. This means that scholarship on world war and world peace and the media is of key importance in the present moment. I'd myself prefer to work on other topics, but given the actual political situation in the world system, I am now working on a book focused on "World War and World Peace in the Age of Digital Capitalism". For example, we have to avoid one-sided, simplistic notions of (media) imperialism that uncritically idealise BRICS and BRICS media.

Moment:

In your 2019 article mentioned in your response to our second question, you state that digital media studies is not a field or a new discipline, but a research topic. At the same time, you emphasize the danger of "digital positivism" for critical studies. Studies and debates on digitalization, big data, computational methods and, more recently, artificial intelligence have gained immense popularity. For example, recently

Christian Fuchs:

Computational social science methods that partly also use AI have become very popular as a method in Media and Communication Studies. Whole funding programmes have been set up and lots of money has been invested, both by public and private funding agencies. Many scholars join this new hype and think they now must use and teach these methods.

I am not in principle opposed to computational and quantitative methods but think there is the danger that when we all start learning programming and computational methods there is not enough time left for critical theory and philosophy and that quantitative methods therefore replace critical analysis. In any case, quantitative methods are not enough, they need to be combined with qualitative methods, critical theory, and philosophy. And there is much value in practicing "traditional" methods such as interviewing. By talking to people, you can find out many things that large-scale big-data based computational content and sentiment analyses can never find out. Computational social science cannot study underlying motivations, experiences, moral and political judgements, and Political Economy. There simply are things that cannot be computed and quantified.

Therefore, I agree with the late Vincent Mosco, who sadly passed away earlier this month, that big data analytics and computation social science are digital positivism:

"Big data deals with subjectivity to the extent that analysts can do the impossible – i.e., assign a precise numerical value to its various states. This is inherently flawed because subjective states such as happiness, depression, or satisfaction mean different things to different people, and assigning the same numerical value to the choice of this term simplifies to the point of absurdity. The same goes for other attitudinal terms such as like and dislike, agree and disagree, and their amplifiers, such as "strongly." […] In addition to giving theory insufficient attention, big data tends to neglect context and history" (Mosco, 2014, 198, 201).

The analysis of AI is just like digital media not a new field or discipline, but a subtopic of the study of digital media, which is itself a research topic, not only in the field of Media and Communication Studies, but in many academic fields. I am critical of the claim that new disciplines, fields, interdisciplines, etc. emerge. I think it does not make sense to put a box around a part of academic and label it in a certain manner. That scholars do so is an expression of inner-academic struggles for resources. Interdisciplinarity is mainly a buzzword and ideology. For me, Marxian theory and research is the most inter- and transdisciplinary field

that exists. It is universally applicable as theory and approach to study the world and how it is shaped by Political Economy.

Lots of the topics in the study of AI have to do with the automation of intellectual labour. There have already been debates about the effects of computer-based automation on society in the 1950s and 1960s. Already Marx (1867) engaged with questions of the rationalisation and automation of capitalism. ChatGPT, AI-based robots, industry 4.0 technologies, etc. will not eliminate human labour, they transform it. Social struggle and political regulation will determine of the effects of AI primarily support the interests of capital or the interests of labour. This means that AI is embedded into capitalism's class relations and has an antagonistic character. Questions of automation first concerned industrial labour, then low-skilled service and office labour, and now also highly-skilled intellectual labour. AI is one of many research themes within the study of digital media. In respect to the AI-based automation of academic labour, it is for certain that critical thought cannot and should not be automated. A robot cannot be a critical and public intellectual, activist, etc.

Overall, I agree with the assessment of the article by Hepp et al. (2023, 53) that you mentioned in your question, namely that the "task is to resist the hype on the surface by critically examining the growth of automated communication". I argue for doing so based on Marxian Political Economy of Communication and Critical Theory.

Moment:

As we all know, Cultural Studies assert that individuals hold the power to resist dominant structures through their use of popular practices. Despite the association of consumption with capitalist systems, Cultural Studies argue that consumption can also be a powerful tool for resistance against those systems. In this context, Cultural Studies emphasize the active subjectivity of individuals and their potential to resist oppressive power structures. We know that you have been critical of the Cultural Studies tradition in the past, for example in your book *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, but we also know that you appreciate key theorists such as Stuart Hall. How do you evaluate this tradition in general?

Christian Fuchs:

As everything, also Cultural Studies is complex and not monolithic. Overall, I think Cultural Studies is one of the critical research traditions. Political Economists of Communication and the Media should engage with, have conversations with, quarrel with, and co-operate with Cultural Studies.

I have always been a critic of the assumption that cultural consumption is always and automatically progressive, liberating, and a form of political resistance. You do have such a form of cultural determinism and cultural reductionism in quite some works. But this is not a unitary development.

Marx (1857) outlined in the *Introduction to the Grundrisse* that there are dialectics of production, circulation, and consumption. When it comes to information, there are such dialectics of the production, circulation, and consumption of information. Consumption and culture are just like production and distribution necessary and important dimensions of a Political Economy of Communication approach. The phenomenon of the prosumption of information and other developments have made the boundary between production and consumption again more fluid than before. This also means that the boundaries between Political Economy and Cultural Studies are today much more fluid than they have been before. The clear separation that has been postulated by, for example, Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg in the 1990s does and should not exist today (Garnham, 1995a, 1995b; Grossberg, 1995).

My own work has been much influenced, among others, by Raymond Williams. Williams was always a Marxist theorist and created a special approach to Cultural Studies that he termed Cultural Materialism (see Fuchs, 2017). Engaging with Raymond Williams allows us to see the importance of work and production in society and that culture, information, communication, media content, etc. are not immaterial but material. I disagree with Stuart Hall (1980), who claimed in his "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" essay that the approach of Williams and E. P. Thompson is a "Culturalism". It can better be characterised as Humanist Marxism. Humanist Marxism is a tradition in Cultural Studies and Political Economy of Communication and Culture that is different from the Birmingham tradition. Both are critical traditions.

Stuart Hall was a Marxist theorist of culture. He stood much more in this second paradigm he identified, namely Structuralism. Althusser and Laclau had important influence on him. But so had various works by Marx. Hall's approach is not a purely Structural Marxism. There are of course some very structuralist formulations in his works, where structures are presented as actors and acting. But there is also a Marxist-Humanist line of thought in Stuart Hall's works. This is the line of thought in Hall's works I am interested in and that I have engaged with, quarrelled with, worked through, and have tried to critically-constructively further develop. Colin Sparks (1996) has shown that Hall's relation to Marx and Marxism was ambivalent. When Stuart Hall said in this last interview that Cultural Studies today lacks the kind of conversations it once had "with, against some aspects of, around the questions, expanding a Marxist tradition of critical thinking" (Jhally 2016, p. 338), which is a "real weakness" (p. 339), then to a certain degree this was certainly also a form of self-criticism. My assessment is that from a Marxist perspective, there is lots of interesting theory and analysis in Stuart Hall's works, which is why Critical Political Economists and critical scholars should engage with and argue with, for, against, and beyond Stuart Hall in order or productively draw on ideas that emerge from this engagement. In the two long essays on Hall that I wrote and that taken together form something like the material for a small book, I have tried such a constructive-critical engagement by reengaging with Hall on issues such as

Structuralism/"Culturalism", communication theory, communication and work, articulation, the relationships of the ideas of Hall/Williams/Lukács, ideology critique, etc. (Fuchs 2023a, 2023b).

One type of work I am interested in and have been doing is to establish foundations of a Marxist-Humanist theory of communication and society. This is a contribution to communication theory and media theory and social theory. But first and foremost, I see this project as part of work on the theory foundations of the Political Economy of Communication and the Media. The Political Economy of Communication and the Media requires theory, empirical research, and moral philosophy. One theory-construction method I use is that I engage with various forgotten and more or less well-known critical theories that have aspects of communication. There are many approaches, for example the ones by Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebrvre, Georg Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, David Harvey, Nancy Fraser, etc., that at a first glance have nothing to do with communication but in fact are very inspiring for the development of a Marxist-Humanist theory of communication and society. Some of the issues I have been interested more recently how to interpret the late Antonio Negri's Spinoza-interpretation from a Marxist-Humanist communication theory perspective and how a Marxist-Humanist concept of the media should look like.

Marxist theory and research is a vivid field of analysis that can help us to better critically understand the world we live in and the roles of communication, culture, media, and the digital in it. It also helps us to create knowledge that can inspire activism that strives for the creation of a commons-based society, a democratic socialist society.

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