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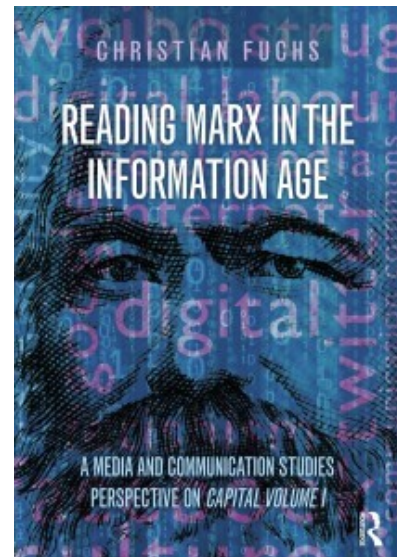
Reading Marx in the Information Age

Fuchs, Christian (2016): Reading Marx in the Information Age. A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital Volume 1. New York: Routledge. 416 pages. ISBN 9781138948563.

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Throughout my studies it usually went without contestation when professors in their seminars and lectures on media and communication asserted that “Critical Theory was discussed in 1970s but they’ve run around this garden long enough by the end of the 70s” – how can students do more but shrug their shoulders if they never hear the opposite from their teachers? It is of great value that with Christian Fuchs Communication and Media Studies have a young, committed and strongly engaged scholar and teacher who pushes Critical Theory including Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School and Herbert Marcuse (back) into the discipline. It is to be hoped that his commitment will encourage other critical scholars and Marxian thinkers in the field to come out of the wood confidently.



As German native and fluent English speaker Fuchs has the valuable ability to comfortably swim in the waters of both the Anglo-American Marxian debates and in the by far more vast and differentiated sea of German Marxian and Marxist traditions. With this great asset, however comes a liability to also bridge gaps by raising awareness within the English-only Marxian debates for relevant currents that are hitherto very little received. It is thus a great misfortune that the author com-

pletely ignores the strand of Value-Criticism, the third big “school” of Marxian thought besides the orthodox current (most prominently represented by W.F. Haug) and the Neue Marx Lektüre (nowadays most prominently represented by Michael Heinrich). We do not know if this strand is neglected by choice or by his own non-awareness of Value-Criticism’s dynamic theoretical contributions also in the field of digitization and media. Fuchs himself draws from Heinrich as well as from Haug and seems to be rather – albeit not clearly – situated within the orthodox current; some might call this ‘undogmatic’.

The book’s intended structure is clear and made explicit: the aim is to summarize the main points of Capital Vol. 1 chapter by chapter, by paraphrasing and quoting, and to add a media perspective to Marx’ analysis for each chapter. The exercises at the end of each chapter are refreshing and push students (or readers) to school themselves in utopian thinking about what emancipatory media could be like once stripped off their commodity-form in a post-capitalist society; it also sharpens their awareness for working conditions in the global division of labour.

Fuchs’ choice to closely tie the book’s structure to Marx Capital Vol. 1 results in two weaknesses: First and foremost, redundancy: To name just a few examples, advertising, technology, alienation, commodity fetishism come up numerous times throughout the book, as well as general remarks on possible non-capitalist, utopian sketches of a communist or post-capitalist society. Readers might have difficulties to stay on top of things by the fourth chapter. Second, lack of information on the “information age”, i.e. “questions about the role of media, information, communication, the computer, and the internet in capitalism” (p.2) that Fuchs had originally set out to pose and answer in his book. Each chapter paraphrases and sometimes extensively quotes Capital Vol. 1, whereas in some chapters nothing is said on how this relates to media.

This is a real pity. Right at the beginning, in the first chapter discussing commodity and value, the chance is missed to complicate these two basic, but fundamental categories of Marxian analysis in the light of the developments of software and digitization. Since 2007 scholars such as Stefan Meretz, Ernst Lohoff and Robert Kurz have been debating heatedly whether software commodities actually still have any value at all and how the absence or existence of value in software products relates to the value production and value realization (profits) in the wider crisis-struck economy. This discussion would also lead to the more general question of what the actual role of the media sector is within the greater economic framework: How relevant is it for the global market in the light of crises in the automobile, real estate and other big sectors, especially against the backdrop of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and shrinking value-mass?

Whenever Fuchs does go deeper into media-specific fields and thinks them through with Marx’ terms, it becomes interesting: one is the question of whether the audience actually performs labour by using Facebook, since the audience is

sold as a kind of commodity to the advertising industry that places ads in Social Media (p. 241 ff.) – a thought that has been elaborated by Fuchs in his earlier monograph “Digital Labour and Karl Marx”. Fuchs’ competence and vast knowledge of the development of the media industry manifests itself in many well-presented and thoroughly discussed statistical figures.

The book is meant to be a companion to reading *Capital* for people interested in media and communication, especially students. Whereas it is already quite a challenge to fully grasp *Capital* for newcomers, I wonder if the many and sometimes elaborate references to Hegel and his dialectic method are helpful or confusing. Fuchs applies the Hegelian triplicity to a whole range of distinct and concrete questions which sometimes has an arbitrary taste. Against the background of his choice to devote much space in the book to Hegel and dialectics, it is confounding that dialectical and dialectics is oftentimes used in a colloquial, non-Hegelian sense of antagonistic, reciprocal (“dialectic of online and offline communication”, p. 223), contradictory (consequence of technology for employment, p. 212), complex (“the dialectic of activism”, p. 223). There is nothing wrong with using ‘dialectical’ in its various colloquial meanings, but is irritating when this happens parallel to the treatment of Hegelian dialectics.

The repetition of the assertion that Marx in *Capital* Vol. 1 chose terms such as alienation (*Entfremdung*) and especially exploitation (*Ausbeutung*) primarily as normative and even moral terms and only secondarily as analytical terms is very debatable. Precisely Marx’ *Capital* stands in contrast to Marx’ explicitly political writings (such as the *Communist Manifesto*); the manner and mode of critique that Marx devoted himself to by orienting himself along Hegel’s dialectics as method, is *Kritik durch Darstellung* (criticizing by depicting), not critique by moral accusation. This misinterpretation becomes acute where Fuchs, who shows several times that he is interested in linguistic accuracy (e.g. debate over work vs. labour as translations for the German ‘Arbeit’), fatally misinterprets Marx’ metaphors of the werewolf and the vampire for the depiction of *Capital*. Very certainly, these metaphors are chosen, not (!) “in order to point out that capitalism as system of exploitation is morally detestable, a scandal that confronts the working class” (p. 123), but because vampire and werewolf are, first, undead creatures and, second, are fictions of the human mind that eventually gain power over their inventors very practically where men really believed in their existence (werewolf trials, witch hunts etc.): *Capital* is undead, it’s the “automatic subject”, “accumulated labour”, “dead labour”; it is created by humans and encompasses not only workers, but capitalists themselves: “Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer” (Marx, “Results”, p. 466). In this context, it would have been worth making a point against reductionist critique of capitalism (*verkürzte Kapitalismuskritik*) e.g. by drawing on Marx’ famous metaphor of the “character masks” (*Capital* Vol. 1) in order to encourage thinking and arguing against simplistic, structurally anti-semitic, personalized critique of capitalists, such as ‘media magnates’ or ‘greedy bosses and

managers'. Capitalism is essentially a social relation between all people and not simply "between workers and capitalists" (sic! Fuchs, p. 15); it is not reducible to questions of ownership ('who owns the factory'), and social relations are not equitable with class relations ('workers versus capitalists'). Fuchs himself strongly and repetitiously stresses the phenomena of the fetishism and alienation, two concepts that clearly discount this reduction to class struggle. More clarity is desirable in this respect throughout the book. Somewhat linked to this is the ambiguous treatment of the 'critique of political economy' as a mere critique of (morally) bad ownership structures – a treatment of the media sector as a political economy is not the same as a critique of political economy of media. The latter puts into question the very categories of a political economy, such as 'labour', 'value' and 'exchange' and exposes them as mere capitalism-immanent categories and real-abstractions (Realabstraktionen) instead of transhistorical, anthropological necessities. Where Fuchs raises attention to the difference between 'labour' (the capitalist-immanent 'Arbeit') versus 'work' (the potentially non-capitalist 'Tätigsein') he does encourage this categorical critique of seemingly natural concepts (p. 30).

Whereas Fuchs has a great ambition to inspire scholars to read and think about the commodity fetishism, alienation and ideology – and indeed pleads for a critical understanding of ideology (p. 43) – his actual handling of the three concepts is disappointing. He blurs the concept of the commodity fetishism by sometimes using 'fetishist/fetishism' in the Marxian way and sometimes in the colloquial way, i.e. as a glorification or as overestimation of, for example, technology (p. 206, 221, 233) or as manipulation and deception by advertisement (p. 47). Similarly ideology appears in the book as manipulation, "misrepresentation", as "legitimation strategy" (both p. 43) and as "distorted content" in media products (p. 101) which fundamentally misses its more complex character as the very right consciousness in a wrong society, i.e. as the reflexive form (Denkform) of an a priori fetishist matrix of society. With all due respect: It is plainly wrong to say that ideology is about "a normative distinction between true and false beliefs and practices" (p. 43). This is not the critical concept (that Fuchs himself pleads for), but quite the opposite, the 'neutral', understanding of different ideologies (plural), put forward by Lenin as voluntarist choice of a bourgeois versus socialist ideology.

Fuchs lets himself get carried away to make en passant general remarks that are more of a personal opinion than an academic discussion; two examples that more or less well-read Marxian thinkers will stumble over are the allegations on the state (states are not problematic per se, p. 224) – and on Althusser ("did not understand and had not read Marx", p. 101).

My impression of Fuchs' book mirrors the observations made by another reviewer on his earlier "Digital Labour and Karls Marx" (2015): redundancy, supposed "hurried writing", "abrupt and unclear transitions" and superficiality. The image of "too many ingredients in the pot. Much is left uncooked" hits the mark also with regards to "Reading Marx in the Information Age". "These types of mistakes will li-

mit the appeal of the work and provide an easy out for unsympathetic readers.” (all quotes from McQuade 2015, p. 229). Scholars and students seeking an introduction to Marx’ Capital should be referred to David Harvey, Michael Heinrich, Moishe Postone, the Krisis-Group or Robert Kurz, those interested in a communications and media perspective on Capital have yet to make up their own minds with the help of the existing literature, certainly including Christian Fuchs’ own publications on the field.

McQuade, Brendan (2015). Review of “Digital Labour and Karl Marx,” by Christian Fuchs. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 21(1). 227. doi:10.5195/jwsr.2015.541

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