Critical Political Economy of Communication and the Problem of Method

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Abstract: This chapter argues that the quality that defines critical political economy is its critical method. Definitions of the critical political economy of communication are considered and shown to focus on specific theoretical concerns while not fully addressing the fundamental issue of a critical method. A critical method for Marx is a historical materialist dialectical method, thus this paper argues for a deeper consideration of the Marxian dialectical method in relation to critical political-economic theorizing of communication. Sources for methodological development from Marx to 20th-century Western Marxists are outlined. The potential contribution of the Marxian dialectical method to the continued development of the critical political economy of communication is demonstrated by showing the possibility of developing a critical political economy of communication as capital focused on the central role of exploiting audience labour by controlling the conditions of cultural consumption and signification.

Keywords: Critical Political Economy, Dialectical Method, Historical Materialism, Audience Labour, Communication as Capital, Exploitation Communication, Cultural Consumption, Signification, Karl Marx, Dallas Smythe, Raymond Williams

1. Introduction

The critical political economy of communication, culture, media, and information has been defined, examined, and re-examined by a number of eminent political economists over the course of at least four decades. That collective self-reflectivity I take to be a necessary and productive quality of critical theorizing. What does not seem to have been addressed, however — at least not sufficiently — is the critical method by which political economy is a critical theory. By method, I mean a particular use of human reason to produce knowledge of human existence. Critical theory relies on a critical method, and a critical method for Marx is a historical materialist dialectical method. In fact, that method is the foundation of Marx's critical political economy. Thus, Marx is an essential source for considering the nature of that method, in addition to being an essential source for the theory and concepts of political economy. In this chapter, I attempt to outline an engagement with the dialectical method that I suggest is necessary for a critical political economy of communication, and I attempt to demonstrate the productive potential of such an engagement by connecting it to the “blindsport” debate about the place of communication in Marxist theory initiated by Smythe (1977).

The political economy of communication can be a critical theory of how audience activities of consuming culture and making meaning are made a source of value if it is further developed by the Marxist dialectical method.

There is a now decades-long division of the field of critical media and communication studies into political economy and cultural studies (Gandy 1995). However, as Peck (2006) has argued, we shouldn’t be bored with the “political economy vs. cultural studies” debate because the assumed division at the heart of the debate is a problem for a critical understanding of communication, culture, and media. The treatment of culture, and particularly the subjective signifying activities of consumers of culture (or, audiences), as a separate realm from the economy with which political economy is concerned makes it impossible to adequately understand the processes through which signification is capitalized, while the political economy of communication should be fundamentally concerned with those processes. Peck (2006, 94) argues that non-dialectical thinking is the reason culture and the economy are treated as “distinct areas of human existence” by both political economy and cultural studies rather than as terms for aspects of the social world and social practice. Smythe (1977) created an opening for the political economy of communication to see how audience activities are actually key to understanding communication industries with his theory of the audience commodity. While I argue the audience commodity does not accurately explain the role of audiences in the capitalization of communication — the treatment of communication processes as processes of capital circulation and accumulation — Smythe’s concept of audience labour provides a productive but as yet unexplored path forward. A dialectical method of theorizing is the means by which the concept of audience labour can provide a foundation for more adequately understanding communication as capital because it is the means by which signification is understood an aspect of
the same “whole and connected social material process” (Williams 1977, 140, quoted in Peck 2006, 104) in which capital circulates.

Marx and a number of Western Marxists developed a historical and materialist dialectical method. By historical materialist dialectical method, I mean the use of human reason to produce knowledge of human existence by seeing it as a historical process within a material reality, thereby enabling an understanding of human social being as interrelated and contradictory as it actually is. Such reason is dialectical in that it is “knowledge and comprehension of man by man” (Sartre 2004, 823) in which knowledge and the known, the subject and the object, are dialectically related. Dialectical reason, then, contrasts most clearly with analytical reason, by which knowledge is produced by separating reality into distinct parts. Such reason cannot grasp the whole of human existence because it sees fundamental separations as existing in reality (e.g. “culture” and “economy,” “society” and “nature,” “mental” and “material”), or, even more fundamentally, asserts an unbridgeable separation of subjective knowledge and objective existence (e.g. Kant 2009). While, as Hegel (1977, 11) said of the knowledge produced by dialectical reason, “the True is the whole.” For Marx, human existence is both individual and social, differentiated and unified, so any real knowledge of it must be able to see it in that dialectical sense. A dialectical method as employed by Marx (1990, 103) is “critical and revolutionary” because it is a means to produce consciousness of the social reality of which every individual is a part but which, as a social reality, is thereby a social product. The dialectical method of reasoning is the means by which Marx produced his own critical thought. It is that dialectical method that is the critical foundation of Marx’s critical theory, thus I define “critical theory” specifically as theory produced by means of a historical materialist dialectical method, which I also refer to here as a critical or Marxist dialectical method.

I do not claim that there is only a subjective, epistemological dialectic – that there is only a dialectical method – and not an objective, ontological dialectic. The method of knowing existence and existence itself cannot be separated in that way if knowledge is to reflect reality (“The dialectic is both a method and a movement in the object” (Sartre 2004, 20). The question I raise in this chapter is the nature of the method of the critical political economy of communication, an issue within media and cultural studies, not philosophy, thus I do not deal with the dialectic itself. My answer to the question of method is the Marxist dialectical method. Because that critical dialectical method is the critical foundation of Marx’s work, it is necessary for political economists who wish to be similarly critical to be self-conscious of their method of theorizing as much as they are self-conscious of their political-economic theory and its concepts so that those concepts, and even the theory itself, do not become static but instead remain perpetually critical. This chapter is intended to contribute to a consideration of the critical dialectical method of theorizing as it is relevant to the critical political economy of communication.

My goal in this chapter is to make the issue of method a central concern of critical political economy and to demonstrate some of the potential of the historical materialist dialectical method in relation to understanding the processes by which communication is treated as capital. First, I discuss the critical political economy of communication as it has been defined by those who have had a significant role in its development in the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Method in the sense that I define it above does not seem to have played a significant role in defining the critical nature of that political-economic theory, although I note two scholars who have dealt with the critical dialectical method of theorizing culture and communication: Dan Schiller and Christian Fuchs. Second, I examine the role of dialectical method in the work of Marx. I argue Marx’s historical and materialist dialectical method is at least as important for the critical political economy of communication as the specifics of his political-economic theory. Third, I consider the development of the historical materialist dialectical method in the 20th century by Western Marxists who did not attempt to use it as a method of political-economic theorizing but instead as a method of theorizing culture and consciousness. I argue their use of dialectical reasoning to critically understand culture and consciousness is a crucial link between Marx’s political economy and the critical political economy of communication. Finally, I connect the Marxist dialectical method to the critical political economy of communication by considering how it enables insights into the capitalization of communication, and particularly signification.

2. Critical Political Economy of Communication: The Problem of Method

Beginning in the 1970s, a number of scholars contributed to the conscious development of a political economy focused on communication, culture, media, and information. In addition to distinguishing their “political economy” from the dominant neo-classical “economics,” those scholars generally defined their approach as “critical.” A brief intellectual history of those definitions over more than four decades makes clear the unifying characteristics of that critical political economy. I group them
all under the label critical political economy of “communication,” although others consider the more appropriate overarching label to be “culture,” “media,” or “information.” While the continuous efforts to clarify, define, and critique the precise nature of the critical political economy of communication is one of its most productive features – enabling it to follow actual historical change – its method does not seem to have received the same attention. Schiller (1996) and Fuchs (2011b) are two exceptions. I argue for an engagement with method that is as continuous and widespread as consideration of the theoretical categories and concepts has been.

When “method” has been specifically discussed, it has tended to be techniques of analytical reasoning rather than method in the more fundamental sense of self-conscious critique and declaration of the way in which the human capacity to reason is used to produce “knowledge.” In the tradition of Enlightenment thinking, that is what Marx meant by “method,” whether discussing his method or that of other political economists or philosophers, and it seems to be equally important for critical political economists of culture to deal with the question of method. Importantly, Marx (1990, 102-103) identified his method with the dialectical method of Hegel, which he claims to have modified to make it “critical and revolutionary.” By “method,” then, I am referring to what can be considered questions of “philosophy,” but I do not argue that all critical political economists of culture must also be philosophers; rather, it is simply necessary to engage with the work of those who have considered what specifically makes for a “critical” method. Discussions of dialectical method by Marx and Western Marxists are a necessary methodological foundation for a critical political economy of communication. I do not find much evidence of such methodological consideration in the definitions of the critical political economy of communication, and I claim that has had and continues to have important implications for the theory itself. In particular, the signifying activities of consumers of culture have yet to be systematically incorporated as a fundamental aspect of the capitalization of communication.

There have been numerous definitions of the critical political economy of communication offered over the last four decades. Murdock and Golding (1973, 205) define the “political economy of mass communications” as an understanding of the “basic features” that “underpin and shape the economic context and political consequences of mass communications.” They argue it is necessary to see mass media organizations as “first and foremost” profit-based businesses producing commodities. Media businesses are just like every other capitalist business. But, they are also quite distinct from other industries because of the nature of the commodities they produce: Their products are also ideas objectified into “cultural” products (e.g. television shows, news stories, music). That dual nature of cultural products – they are both “commodities” and “ideas” – is a theme present in all definitions of critical political economy of communication. For Murdock and Golding, the most important task of a political-economic theory is to clarify concretely and specifically how “ideology” is produced (207) by articulating “the general and systematic constraints” generated by media industries’ production of culture as a commodity (223). The culture produced is limited by its commodity nature, which creates a general “ideological” effect of reinforcing the status quo (226-227). The political economy of “media” is an analysis of the way capitalist power relations are legitimated (232). While Murdock and Golding outline basic theoretical aspects and the recent history that makes such a theory necessary, the issue of method is not addressed.

Garnham’s (2006/1986) statement remains an essential foundation of a critical political economy of communication. However, it is primarily a discussion of specific theoretical issues, with the dialectical method itself only implicit, although strongly so. Because he stops short of such direct methodological consideration, Garnham fails to completely reject vulgar materialism. While Garnham insightfully critiques exactly the aspects of Marxist theory that must be addressed by a critical political economy of communication (base/superstructure, the means of mental production, ideology, the production of culture), he does not fully resolve the issues he highlights. He relies on a partially reified concept of “the economic” and his political economy of communication is thus also partially reified: Culture can be understood by understanding its historically specific “economic” production. Signification is completely eliminated from consideration. “The economic,” is then an “evasion” (Williams 1977, 93; Garnham 2006/1986, 207). Ultimately, Garnham’s position is insightful but contradictory, which is what makes his essay a necessary and useful starting point for a critical political economy of communication.

In critiquing Garnham on those grounds, it might seem as though I am questioning the entire premise of a political economy of communication, but my goal is just the opposite: By arguing that political-economic theory can neither exclude human activity related to “meaning-making,” “consciousness,” “ideology,” or “subjectivity,” nor consider it something that is understood once “class” and “capital accumulation” are critically theorized (Garnham 2006/1986, 203), I am attempting to expand the terrain of political economy. It seems that the production of culture, as an objective
signifying process, has been incorporated in a way that avoids a reductionist “reflection” theory – and that is precisely one contribution of the critical political economy of communication to critical political economy in general – but the subjective signifying process, as an aspect of the production of consciousness, remains mostly outside political economy even though consciousness was the first thing Marx (1978d) attempted to show was materially produced.

In one example of the contradictions of the essay, Garnham (2006/1986, 206) actually articulates that precise issue: “[W]e could say that the purpose of a political economy of culture is to elucidate what Marx and Engels meant in The German Ideology by “control of the means of mental production”. But Garnham’s critique of Williams reveals a refusal to fully deal with the implications for critical political economy of “control of the means of mental production”: It must also be a critical political economy of signification, dealing directly with the problem of “ideology” by means of its own critical method. Again, Garnham is clear in his assertion of the need to see cultural production as the production of commodities and ideas, but the full significance of that production of ideas, which Murdock and Golding (1973, 206) also highlight as the aspect of real importance in cultural production, is left unaddressed: Consumers of culture also activity produce ideas.

While Williams (1977; 1980a; 1980b) pushes for the elimination of all reified methods of theorizing social production by incorporating what he saw as the last significant barrier — culture as material production — Garnham (2006/1986, 207) pushes back by way of historical specificity and a distinction between “the economic” and “the material”. He mistakenly finds Williams to be ignoring the specificity of capitalist production and counters with a reified “economic perspective,” while missing the significance of Williams’ critique of the method of theorizing. Williams (1977; 1980a; 1980b) demonstrates that, if the concepts and categories of political economy are to remain critical, and if Marxist theory is to remain a critical theory of the social production of human life itself (Marx 1978a, 4), the concepts and method of Marx’s theorizing must also be used to theorize the production of culture. In contrast to that, Garnham (2006/1986, 208) makes what is perhaps his most problematic claim: the distinction between “social form” and “cultural form”, between which there is “an essential divide”. He concludes with the claim that culture and consciousness are not material until “they are translated into social forms”. The production of consciousness, and its relationship to culture, is thereby banished from the political economy of communication.

Smythe provides the means to reclaim for the critical political economy of communication the space abandoned by Garnham, although Smythe also fails to fully overcome the problems he identifies. Smythe (1977) focuses attention precisely on the production of consciousness by means of the critical dialectical method of Marx. He does not stop at consideration of production by the culture industries but also theorizes audiences as producers rather than consumers. For Smythe, “control of the means of mental production” is in the hands of the “consciousness industry”. Members of the audience are forced to work for advertisers, who buy audience labour-power from media companies. Importantly, however, by Smythe’s method of theorizing individuals are seen to labour in the production of their own consciousness (and the whole process is seen as social). Smythe does not fully develop his insight, but he provides the basis for a further development. He directly addresses the necessity of a dialectical method: “[T]he way to a Marxist theory of how ideology is produced by monopoly capitalism is to use an historical, materialist, dialectical method always seeking the reality of class struggle” (Smythe 1978, 126).

The primary theoretical aspects outlined in the late 1970s have remained the foundation of the critical political economy of communication. Jhally (1989, 66) describes it as a theory of “the economic context of ... mass-mediated culture”, or what are called “the cultural industries.” Like Murdock and Golding, Garnham, and Smythe, Jhally emphasizes the importance of the dual nature of cultural production as commodity production – it produces both commodities for exchange on the market and objects with cultural meaning – and the necessity for the critical political economy of communication to account for both. Jhally insightfully claims the Frankfurt School (particularly in The Culture Industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002)) is one half of a critical political economy of communication, alongside those more typically identified as political economists (e.g. the scholars discussed in this section). However, Jhally’s (1989, 80) claim that the exchange-value of cultural commodities dominates the use-value is indicative of the need to further expand the theoretical scope by reconsidering the method of theorizing: While the claim seems to be a simple statement of fact about commodities in a capitalist society, it enables political economists to ignore the use-value, or “meaning”, of cultural commodities. The production of culture is thus only partially grasped, since “meaning” is central to the process, and audience signification is again pushed aside as something that can only be understood by other means of theorizing.

More recent definitions of the primary aspects of the critical political economy of communication also echo the earlier definitions (e.g. Garnham 2011; Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko 1993; Mosco
reiterating Marx’s political economy without also engaging political economy for understanding development. It is clear the significance and specifics of Marx’s dialectical method have been missed. Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko are indeed correct that “a reassessment of method” is necessary. In a wide-ranging survey of the specifics of the critical political economy of communication, Mosco (2009) fills in the details of how scholars have theorized communication, culture, media, and information by the general approach first outlined in the 1970s. However, his relatively brief discussion of the “philosophical foundation” of the theory does not address the dialectical method, and his description of the “critical” epistemology of the theory is telling: Critical is understood in relation to other, presumably uncritical, theories that also have different values (10), rather than the method of reasoning that Marx considers the critical foundation of his political economy. Wasko, Murdock, and Sousa (2011, 1-2) define the “critical” aspect of critical political economy similarly—that is, by virtue of the content of the theory rather than the method of theorization. Garnham (2011, 42) has recently criticized the field for remaining “stuck with a set of problems and terms of analysis that history has simply passed by”, “a tired and narrow orthodoxy”. While that critique points directly to problems of method, Garnham instead limits his critique to the concepts and contents of the theory itself.

Calabrese (2004, 2) agrees with the defining characteristics of a critical political economy of communication outlined by the authors already noted, but he also urges precisely the theoretical development toward which this chapter is intended to contribute: a deeper engagement with “the production and circulation of meaning” (ibid., 9). He also specifically cites the dialectical method of theorizing as the key to that development (ibid., 9-10). In one sense, then, this chapter is a contribution further “toward a political economy of culture,” a contribution in which the dialectical method is the primary focus.

Two scholars in the field of critical political economy of communication who have dealt with the question of method are Fuchs (2011b) and Schiller (1996). As their considerations of method seem to be exceptions within the field, I highlight them as a necessary starting point for the development of the theory. Fuchs (2011b, 97) defines a “critical” theory of communication and media similarly to the critical political economists discussed above: “the analysis of media, communication and culture in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control.” Importantly, he also specifically insists that “dialectical philosophy” is essential for critical theory in general (ibid., 3-71) and critical media and information studies as an aspect of critical theory (ibid., 112-121). In developing the latter point, Fuchs concentrates on media as technology of communication and thus specifically elaborates on how the critical dialectical method is a means to produce a “complex technology assessment” (ibid., 112) and to see the dialectical relationship between media and society. My focus is on meaning, so I want to expand on his discussion by demonstrating the method is useful beyond the avoidance of technological determinism (either optimistic or pessimistic).

Schiller (1996) emphasizes Williams’ discussions of the critical method of theorizing culture and communication as essential to what he considers a necessary development of a “unified conceptual framework” for theorizing communication. Schiller calls for a framework unified around the concept of “labour” so that human communication can be understood as an active human process but one that is not separate from other aspects of human social existence. He argues against what he considers to be the theoretical reification of “intellectual labour” as something distinct from “manual labour.” While the “dialectical method” is not Schiller’s explicit focus, he clearly promotes that critical method of theorizing.

3. Marx’s Dialectical Method: Historical, Materialist, Critical, Revolutionary

Lukács (1971) argues that method is the essence of Marxism. To be “Marxist”, then, is to follow Marx’s method rather than to take what he wrote about a capitalist system of production as a definitive, absolute statement. Political economy, then, must be produced by that dialectical method if it is to be similarly critical and revolutionary. The Western Marxists who have explicitly engaged with the dialectical method, however, have not been those working in the area of political economy; they have been those Marxists who went back to the question of method as a way to figure out how to be Marxist without being economistic. The critical political economy of communication that later developed in relation to Western Marxism re-emphasized the importance of the categories of Marxist political economy for understanding communication and culture but seems to have done so by reiterating Marx’s political economy without also engaging with the method that produced it.
Marx (1990, 103) considers his critique of political economy “critical and revolutionary” by virtue of his dialectical method. It is a critical and revolutionary method because it is not a means to producing thinking that celebrates existing society but is rather a means to produce consciousness of society as a product of human action that is thus historical rather than eternal, and that is thus transformable. The dialectical method, and the theory produced by it, is critical and revolutionary in terms of the consciousness it is a means to produce. For Marx and Marxists, such critical knowledge of society is a necessary means for the social production of a society of freedom and equality. Marx’s dialectical method is the foundation of his critique of classical political economy, through which he simultaneously produces his own critical, revolutionary political economy. It enables him to produce knowledge of capitalist society by seeing that society as the product of a social process of production, and to see the nature of that process itself. “Society” is a product, and Marx’s critical political economy is a means by which the producers can become conscious of their production; Marx’s dialectical method is the means by which he produces that critical political economy:

In its rational form, [the dialectic] is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps the transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary (Marx 1990, 103).

In a number of his works, Marx critiques the method – the use of reason – of others. It is possible to define Marx’s critical, revolutionary dialectical method without seeing it as a specific method for political economy but instead as a means of using human reason in a particular way that can produce knowledge of the world as it is. In Volume I of Capital, Marx (1990) describes what he considers to be the difference between his “materialist” dialectical method and that of Hegel:

My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of “the Idea,” is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought. (102)

Marx thereby attempts to establish the materialist basis of his dialectical method: An understanding of the “material” world of humans is the means by which to understand human social existence. The “material” world is, for Marx, the product of human activity but the relationship is dialectical: “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (Marx, 1978d, 165). Marx (1978b) says a “true materialism” that is a “real science” is one in which the basic principle is “the social relationship ‘of man to man,’” (108). Marx (1978c) also says a critical, revolutionary materialism conceives reality as “human sensuous activity, practice” (143). That materialist method is a dialectical method that sees humans as the ones “who change circumstances,” although they are then also “products of circumstances” (144). Human “essence,” the essence of human existence, is not an individual quality; it is social: It is “the ensemble of the social relations” (145). “Social life is essentially practical”; understanding “human practice” in the material world is the method by which to understand social life (145).

Marx (1978b), critiques the method of classical political economy as being, essentially, uncritical and counter-revolutionary in part because it is ahistorical. It is a method of producing a consciousness of society that does not see it as fundamentally human-produced and, therefore, does not see it as something that can be changed, certainly not something that should be changed. The consciousness produced is one in which existing society – the essence of it, at least – is understood as natural and eternal. Through that consciousness, human activity reproduces existing society. By virtue of that method of reasoning, political economy inherently sides with the interests of capitalists. That is evident in the categories of classical political economy, which Marx (1973, 104) claims are “fixed, immutable, eternal categories” that are supposed to represent eternal relations of production. Thus, classical political economists produce an understanding of bourgeois institutions as natural institutions. “In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God” (120-121). For political economists, present-day relations “are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws that must always govern society. Thus there
has been history, but there is no longer any" (121, emphasis added). In contrast, Marx (1973, 106, emphasis added) says, “[a]ll that exists, all that lives on land and under water, exists and lives only by some kind of movement. Thus the movement of history produces social relations.” Economic categories are ideas produced by humans; they are “historical and transitory products” (110).

In The German Ideology, Marx (1978d) defines the fundamental premises of his method: actual human history, meaning human material social being, or human life, as it is comprehensible to humans. Thus the first premise is “the existence of living human individuals” (149):

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those they find already existing and those produced by their activity (149).

Marx re-emphasizes the premises of his method a number of times (154, 155), so it should be clear that the human social process of production that is human life is the foundation of his means of using human reason to understand what is in fact a social totality. It is precisely because that totality is in fact a constantly moving social process of human material activity that Marx asserts it is possible for humans to have knowledge of it.

While Marx’s (1979a) statements about “structure” and “superstructure” in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy can and have been interpreted as his declaration of the greater importance of the economic “base”, they can be understood differently if they are placed in the context of what, in the crucial paragraph, he twice says is the thing in which he is most interested: humans producing their own lives.

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite state of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (4).

I will restrict my comments on that dense statement to a few key points. The “social production” of human life is the crucial concept to grasp in order to see the critical and revolutionary extent of Marx’s method. It is not an economic determinism. It is a means to know real human social life. To say social being determines social consciousness is not to say that “the economy” determines everything else; “the economy” is an abstraction that is not inherently critical, while Marx uses “the economic structure of society” as a critical concept to describe something concrete: the social and material conditions in which human existence is produced. That perspective on the “social production” of human life should make clear why, for Marx, political economy was a useful means of producing his own consciousness of that social production: Political economy is the theory of material production. Developing that theory with a critical, revolutionary method – a historical materialist dialectical method – makes it a critical, revolutionary theory, and one that is knowledge of all human production, or all human life, not just “economic” production.

4. Western Marxism: Developing a Critical, Revolutionary, Dialectical Method

Marx’s historical materialist dialectical method was further developed by a number of Western Marxists in reaction to the “Marxism” of the Soviet Union, in which the dialectic became a law of nature rather than a human capacity to reason. A re-emphasis on the dialectical method was a means to make Marxist theory critical rather than reified. The Western Marxists I consider – Lukács, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Lefebvre, Sartre, and Williams – did not attempt to produce a method for political economy but instead contributed to the on-going production of a critical theory of society to demonstrate that the Marxist method is not an economistic or reductionist means of dealing with the aspects of human life that have (problematically) been considered part of the “superstructure” that “reflects” or is “determined” by the material “base”. Lukács, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Lefebvre, and Williams all reiterate the historical materialism of Marx’s dialectical method; Sartre develops that method itself. A Marxist political economy of communication must necessarily deal with that problem within Marxism, therefore it must deal explicitly with questions of method.
Lukács (1971) outlines the basic critical method of theorizing in the Marxist sense. Important to such a critical theory is a “process of abstraction” (6), but that does not mean the theory is divorced from real human history. On the contrary, the method of critical theory is to abstract from history. There is, thus, a dialectical relationship between theory and history within the method. In the case of a critical theory, actual history is the specific source for abstraction. By that method, critical theory moves beyond the “real existence” of facts to their “inner core” (8). At the heart of a dialectical method of theorizing is “the simultaneous recognition and transcendence of immediate appearances” (8). By seeing “the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process” and integrating them “in a totality,” critical theory becomes a way to turn “knowledge of the facts” into “knowledge of reality” (8). Theory, as “knowledge of the whole” (Lukács 1971, 10; an indication of the importance of Hegel (1977, 11) for the Marxist dialectical method), is a “dialectical conception of totality” that makes it possible “to understand reality as a social process” (13). It is consciousness of existence, a necessary aspect of a conscious existence that is capable of producing a different reality. By that critical and revolutionary method, critical theory is also a theory of social change.

Only when the core of existence stands revealed as a social process can existence be seen as the product, albeit the hitherto unconscious product, of human activity. This activity will be seen in its turn as the element crucial for the transformation of existence (19).

Marcuse (1976) defines the Marxist dialectical method similarly, as the means to reveal existence as a social process so that it can be consciously transformed. By virtue of the method used, the theory produced is “a practical one; praxis does not only come at the end but is already present in the beginning of the theory” (Marcuse 1973, 5). It is a critical, revolutionary theory because it is knowledge that informs real action. Because being is dialectical, it “can only be grasped dialectically” (Marcuse 1976, 16). Humans can understand themselves and the world they create— the social process in its totality— as historical and dialectical because that social totality is historical and dialectical. That social process is human history itself, and it is that material social process for which the method is a means of producing consciousness. “Only because and insofar as the real is historical, it is dialectical; the real can and must be understood through the dialectical method” (19).

What Horkheimer (1972) labels “critical theory” is produced by that same historical materialist dialectical method. It is the method of theorizing that Horkheimer attempts to show differentiates a “critical” theory from a “traditional” theory. In fact, Horkheimer’s definitive essay might be more aptly titled, “Traditional and Critical Method”. A Marxist theory is a critical theory produced by means of a critical method. A critical dialectical method demands critical theorizing, not static theory. The traditional method of theorizing, on the other hand, produces a theory that is uncritical consciousness of the reality of social being. For traditional theory the basic requirement is “harmony”: “all the parts should intermesh thoroughly and without friction” and there should be no contradictions (190). In the traditional method, theory and history are separated. “There is always, on the one hand, the conceptually formulated knowledge and, on the other, the facts to be subsumed under it”, and that method of subsumption is called “theoretical explanation” (193). Traditional theory is a theory of the status quo. The reproduction of existing society necessitates uncritical consciousness. Critical theory is inherently a theory of social change: It sees society as a material social process of production by means of its historical materialist dialectical method. It is consciousness that is critical and revolutionary because it can envision “the rational state of society”, “a future society as a community of free men” (216-217).

Lefebvre also reiterates the critical and revolutionary aspect of the historical materialist dialectical method. Against the method of “dogmatic,” simplified, and “economicist” Stalinist Marxism, Lefebvre (2009) defines a “dialectical” form of materialism that is produced by a critical, revolutionary method. Lefebvre’s Dialectical Materialism is a critique of Stalinist dialectical materialism as a philosophy of Nature, with “the laws of the dialectic” as “the laws of Nature” (1-3). Lefebvre’s dialectical materialism can be defined negatively as “opposed to those doctrines which limit human existence, either from without or within, by subordinating it to some external existence or else by reducing it to a one-sided element or partial experience seen as being privileged and definitive” (98). In particular, Lefebvre wants to reinstate “alienation” as a foundational concept, in opposition to the method of dogmatic Marxism that rejects or de-emphasizes it (4). For Lefebvre, the historical materialist dialectical method is a means to produce critical, revolutionary consciousness of “the dialectical movements within the human and social reality” (5).

Dialectical materialism’s aim is nothing less than the rational expression of the Praxis, of the ac-
tual content of life – and, correlatively, the transformation of the present Praxis into a social practice that is conscious, coherent and free. Its theoretical aim and its practical aim — knowledge and creative action – cannot be separated (Lefebvre, 2009, 100).

Like Lefebvre, Sartre attempts to counter a “Marxism” that is produced by non-dialectical reason. Sartre’s Search for a Method and Critique of Dialectical Reason develop the Marxist dialectical method itself. For Sartre (1968), philosophy is method (5); it is “a method of investigation and explanation” (5) to produce consciousness. Soviet “Marxism” separates theory and practice into “pure, fixed knowledge” and “empiricism without principles” (22). “[I]t has ceased to live with history” (29). What Sartre (2004, 27) calls “external,” “transcendental,” or “universal” dialectical materialism is a method of seeing human history as simply an aspect of natural history. For Sartre, that method provides no foundation for the possibility of the truth of human knowledge since the movement of history is in nature, outside of human influence. Instead, Sartre insists, the dialectical method must be historical materialism, in which to live and to know are the same (thinking is “a particular form of human activity”) but being is irreducible to thought (25, 33). “Knowledge” is itself historical (Sartre 1968, 4), thus, it is socially and materially produced; it is a process of “knowing” (4). The method of “knowing” must also be historical and material: It must be critically dialectical. For Sartre, that is a historical materialist dialectical method that is a “regressive-progressive and analytic-synthetic method” (148), a “heuristic” method that “teaches us something new because it is at once both regressive and progressive” (133). The product is critical, revolutionary consciousness, which makes the method “a social and political weapon” (5).

Although Williams also reiterates Marx’s historical materialist dialectical method, he also brings the theoretical discussion back to communication and culture. As with the other Western Marxists discussed in this section, Williams attempts to demonstrate that Marxism is not a theory of mechanical materialism or economic determinism or reductionism. In Marxism and Literature, Williams (1977) insists on understanding communication, culture, and consciousness as materially and socially produced. Underlying the dialectical method for Williams is what he describes as an indissoluble, continuous, material social process. That indissoluble process is the unity of different individual human activities, and all such human activities are material. Williams draws on what is a similarly fundamental concept for Marx (1978b; 1978c; 1978d): human material social activity, or labour.

Williams (1977) specifically questions the usefulness of the concept of “ideology.” He recognizes its use by Marx as an effort to push for a dialectical method by critiquing attempts to separate and prioritize “consciousness” or “ideas”. Williams argues that Marx sees consciousness “from the beginning as part of the human material social process, and its products in ‘ideas’ are then as much part of this process as material products themselves” (59-60). The human material social process is an “indissoluble process” that includes consciousness and thought (61). Williams says the concept of “ideology” might be insufficient for the redefinition of the products and processes of social signification that is necessary to reinvigorate Marxist cultural theory (71), and the use of the concept within critical political economy in a way that displaces the subjective signifying process suggests he is correct.

As Williams makes clear, the problem for a critical dialectical method is precisely how to distinguish aspects of what is actually a whole, continuous social process in order to gain knowledge of that process. The Western Marxists considered here have produced complementary answers to that question. Williams makes his own significant contribution in a way that is directly useful for a critical, revolutionary political economy of communication: The method must be to understand all human activity as material production. Williams (1977) critiques the non-dialectical Marxism that divides the whole social process into material production and mental labour/consciousness/thought/culture, a method that he says results in a position that seems “too materialist,” or materialist in a vulgar sense, but is actually not materialist enough (90-92). That form of materialism fails “to understand the material character of the production of a cultural order” (93). To overcome that failure, Williams says, it is necessary “to look at our actual productive activities without assuming in advance that only some of them are material” (94). It is in the precise spirit of that statement that a critical political economy of communication that accounts for signification can be developed by means of a dialectical method.

One development within Western Marxism that represents a major alternative to the historical materialist dialectical method I explore and advocate in this chapter is the Italian or autonomist tradition of Marxism. Specifically, the autonomist concept of “immaterial labour” (e.g. Lazzarato, n.d.) is a theoretical challenge to what I claim is the necessary development of a critical political economy of communication that accounts for subjective signification processes. In one sense, the
autonomist method of theorizing immaterial labour is a direct challenge to Williams’ “cultural materialism”, which I cite as particularly useful for the critical political economy of communication. The autonomist method appears to be neither fully dialectical nor fully materialist, since its foundation is that “immaterial” activity is now a basic aspect of human life because of technological change (Terranova 2009). Culture and consciousness are essentially distinct from “material” processes and, thus, cannot be understood by the historical materialist dialectical method. A “non-economic critique of political economy” is now necessary because value “is increasingly becoming social and subjective” (Terranova 2009). The autonomist social factory thesis is that social relations produce economic value (Terranova 2009). While I agree with the need to develop a theory of the subjective and the cultural – I push critical political economy toward subjective signification – the autonomist method that makes culture and consciousness only now theoretical objects is problematic. The historical materialist dialectical method provides a means to see the production of both culture and consciousness as productive human activities prior to the development of computer technologies. The concept of immaterial labour appears to be a product of exactly the reification of “intellectual” labour that Schiller (1996) critiques. Terranova (2000) is right to see “cultural” and “affective” activities as labour, and she argues for labour as the fundamental category (e.g. 40). She is also correct that we are all “knowledge workers” (42): Culture and consciousness are basic aspects of all human life. But in seeing such activities as immaterial labour, she relies on a method that prevents the totality of the social process that is human life from being understood as such. Work processes have not now, abruptly “shifted from the factory to society” (33); Work processes within a capitalist society have always entailed labour outside the strict confines of the factory and every other workplace.” That is particularly true in relation to the production of consciousness and the productive, signifying activities of consumers of culture.

5. Toward A Critical Political Economy of Capitalizing on Cultural Consumption and Signification: The Dialectical Method as Solution

A critical political economy that can explain communication as capital in theoretical terms must be concerned with the specificities of the way in which communication processes are turned into processes of capital circulation and accumulation. Following Marx’s method of beginning from the premises of “real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live” (Marx, 1978d, 149), we can then take up Williams' (1980a, 47) argument for theorizing the consumption of cultural objects as “an activity and a practice” of “active perception and interpretation.” Analysis then entails discovering “the nature of a practice and then its conditions” (47). A historical materialist dialectical method of inquiry for the abstract, theoretical analysis that enables the construction of a political economy (Marx 1990, 90, 102) is a means of determining the conditions of practices of cultural consumption.

That method also entails an analysis of the dialectical relationship between the “singularity” of consumption and the “generality” of production (Marx 1993, 89; Harvey 2012) in capitalizing on communication. Although cultural consumption and subjective signification are singular processes for any individual, they are also general processes in that they are part of the “whole and connected social material process” (Williams 1977, 140) of human life. The most essential aspect of the capitalization of communication is the transformation of singular, subjective processes of cultural consumption and signification into processes subsumed under the general production of social life under conditions that enable the appropriation of value and accumulation of capital by one class. In theorizing that process of capitalization, I conceptualize the subjective processes of cultural consumption and signification as “audience labour” (Nixon, 2014). Capitalizing on communication requires the exploitation of audience labour. That exploitation is achieved by controlling the conditions of audience practices of consumption. The “particularity” of distribution (Marx 1993, 89) is then also an important aspect of the method. Because audience labour is a singularity in which the product, subjective meaning, is not alienable from the signifying producer, audience labour-power cannot be commodified. Smythe’s audience commodity thesis does not hold. But controlling the conditions of audience labour does enable the extraction of value through relations of distribution: rent and interest. The equivalent of a rent payment can be extracted directly from cultural consumers in exchange for access to (but not ownership of) the object of their consumption. The equivalent of an interest payment can be extracted from advertisers in exchange for borrowing partial control over the object of cultural consumption (Harvey 2006, 68-74, 255-260, 330-372, 266-270; Nixon, 2014).

That political economy also provides a means to gain insights into the real historical processes by which communication has been capitalized by controlling the conditions of cultural consumption.
I consider that a history, not a political economy, although such historical work has long comprised a considerable amount of the scholarship characterized as "political economy" (e.g. McChesney 1993; 2004; Schiller 1999; 2007; Schiller 1989; 1992). None of that historical work has addressed the role of audience activities as exploited audience labour. Williams' (1980b) call for a "history of communicative production" is a useful (and seemingly unexplored) starting point for this historical analysis. It seems we can identify a capitalist mode of communicative production with a long history that continues in relation to digital communicative production. The history of communication as capital has been a history of controlling the conditions of cultural consumption and signification — a history of audience labour exploitation. This is a history of "the culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). I will briefly consider this history by way of three examples of capitalizing on communication through the exploitation of audience labour.

The apparent origins of capitalizing on communication by controlling the conditions of cultural consumption are found in the creation of copyright. In Britain, there had long been a separation of cultural consumers from the means of consumption under the monopoly of the state licensing system in the 16th and 17th centuries (Bettig 1996, 17-22; Feather 2006, 26-27; Starr 2004, 28). The limitation on production created a limitation on consumption. During that time, the Stationers Company had a monopoly power to capitalize on that situation because its exclusively granted right to own a printing press (Blagden 1960, 21) gave it a monopoly power to extract rent payments in exchange for access to the meaning objectified and materialized in books. The conditions of capitalization were liberalized with the passage of the Statute of Anne in 1710 — the first "modern" copyright right law. That parliamentary act created the legal conditions for transforming a monopoly system into a potentially competitive market, since the right to own culture became the right of anyone who could produce it, or, importantly, any publisher who could acquire that ownership right from the actual producer (i.e. author) (Bettig 1996, 23). The book publishing industry developed specifically under that liberalized power to control the conditions of cultural consumption and exploit the audience labour of reading by extracting payment from readers in exchange for access but not ownership, since copyright ensures that ownership remains with the copyright holder.

The commercialization of news in the U.S. in the 19th century is another example of the development of an industry that capitalizes on communication specifically through its ability to exploit audience labour. The newspaper industry's increasing reliance on advertising revenue (Baldasty 1992) was based on its control over the conditions of news consumption. Even without a copyright in news, newspaper capitalists controlled the conditions of news consumption by virtue of the materiality of that process: news could only be consumed in an objectified, material form, i.e. in print. That gave newspaper capitalists the power to extract payment in exchange for access to news and, thereby, directly exploit the audience labour of reading news. The commercialization of news was a significant further development of the capitalist mode of communicative production, as it was the creation of a second means of using control over the conditions of cultural consumption to extract value. Newspaper capitalists lent part of their control over the conditions of consumption to advertisers, by lending them part of the space in a newspaper, in exchange for what amounts to an interest payment. Newspaper capitalists maintained control and de facto ownership of the space in their newspapers, and at the end of the advertising process they owned that valuable space plus surplus-value in the form of interest. Since the payment is extracted from advertisers but based on control over audience activities, I refer to this as an indirect exploitation of audience labour. Advertisers, meanwhile, were specifically interested in the control over the conditions of the productive, signifying aspect of audience labour that they gained by borrowing space in a newspaper, because it was the only way they could affect the singular process of subjective meaning-making in the hope that the product of that process would be demand — or, a "consumer consciousness" (Smythe 1977, 1, 6).

Capitalizing on communication by controlling the conditions of cultural consumption and directly or indirectly exploiting audience labour is also a dominant aspect of communication as capital in the digital era. The recent work on digital labour (e.g. Andrejevic 2002; 2011; Fuchs 2010; 2011a) has not accounted for the digital labour of audiences and the exploitation of that labour, which is as fundamental to the capital accumulation strategies of "platform" industries as it is to "content" industries. Google capitalizes on communication through its control over the conditions of cultural consumption, such as the consumption of Web search results or videos on YouTube. It primarily does so by indirectly exploiting digital audience labour to generate advertising revenue. Google lends to advertisers part of the space next to search results or YouTube videos in return for a payment akin to interest. Advertisers gain power to affect the signifying activities of consumers of search results or videos by transforming part of the object of their consumption into an advertisement.


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