

MS 2306 From Hypertext to Cybertext

New Media through the lens of **Critical Theory**

New Media in the Context of Critical Theory

What is this lecture about?

Researching New Media from a
socio-economic perspective
(Marxism, Post-Marxism, Critical Theory)

Example (not a good one though...)

*The power of the Web in redefining existing
economic relations between producers and
consumers.*

What is this lecture about?

- Introduction to a range of ideas, concepts, theories and vocabulary referring to Marxist Essentials
- Strong position in Media Studies (looking at media ownership, media meanings etc.)
- 'Critical Theory' (M.Horkheimer) subsumes different schools of thought sharing a normative approach: The world needs to be changed!



What is this lecture about?



Marx(ism) is dead !?

"Marxist theory (...) still helps us to explain why certain things don't seem to get better faster."

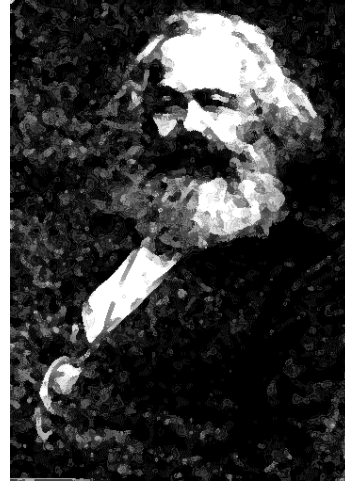
Belsey 2002

Marxism

Karl Marx (1818-1883),
philosopher, political
economist, historian

"The philosophers have only
interpreted the world, in
various ways. The point,
however, is to change it."

Karl Marx



Marxism

**Domination Base
Ideology Capital
Class
Commodity Fetishism
Superstructure
Alienation
Exploitation**

Marxism

Essential assumption:

Economic relations determine social relations
and hence, the history of man

Marxism

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on (...) a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."

Marx 1848: The Communist Manifest

Marxism

Economy determines sociality

"At the heart of this analysis [Marxism] is the claim that how a society produces its means of existence (its particular 'mode of production') ultimately determines the political, social and cultural shape of that society." Storey 2001

Conclusion: Analysis of social phenomena needs to determine socio-economic relations

Marxism

Seven Essentials

(Price 1993, Media Studies)

1. A **society** is a human organisation at a particular stage in its economic and social development.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

2. Our society is a **capitalist** one in which the population is divided into classes; broadly speaking into working, middle and ruling classes.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

3. There are different **classes** because some groups own the means of production, while others have only their labour to sell.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

4. **Individuals** alone have little or no influence on the state.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

5. One of the major sources of oppression is the **family**, as a result of its being maintained by capitalism; equality will come through revolution when economic injustices will be removed.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

6. **Power** in society can be found in the state, which is the political instrument of the capitalist class; the working class has a kind of power, which comes into being when it acts as a conscious revolutionary collective.

Marxism

Seven Essentials:

7. The **mass media** exist to maintain the capitalist state in power.



Marxism: Class

People with the same status in a societal
Structure sharing interests & behaviour

Marxism: Class

People with the same status in a societal
Structure sharing interests & behaviour

Haves

Have nots

Capital

Labour

own means of
production

give their labour
to be able to consume

Dominating class

Alienated, exploited
class

Marxism: Class

The German paradox (until 1989):

	Arbeitgeber "those who 'give' work"	Arbeitnehmer "those who 'take' work"
West:	employers	employees
East:	employees	employers



Marxism: Base & Superstructure

The structural spheres of a society:

Base

- 'forces of production'
(raw materials, technologies, workers - skills, education)
- 'relations of productions'
(class relations of those engaged in production);

Superstructure

- institutions
(political, legal, cultural, educational)
- forms of social consciousness
(political, religious, cultural, philosophical)
generated by the institutions

Marxism: Base & Superstructure

Twofolded/mutual relationship:

The Base is said to condition content
and form of Superstructure;

the Superstructure both expresses
and legitimates the Base.

---> a rigid grid that is being
associated with 'structuralism'



Marxism: Ideology

Refers to a supposedly dominant ideology
that supports the interests of the dominant
class

"The class which has the means of
material production at its disposal has
control at the same time over the means of
mental production, so that thereby (...) the
ideas of those who lack the means of
mental production are subject to it."

Marx & Engels: The German Ideology

Marxism: Ideology

Ideology = **false consciousness**

"From this perspective the mass media disseminate the dominant ideology: the values of the class which owns and controls the media."

Chandler 2001

This static model excludes any process of (often very subtle) negotiation and subcultural production > look at post-marxist and post-modern theorists



Marxism: Determinism

"It is in fact not the consciousness dominating life but the very life dominating consciousness."

Marx, Die deutsche Ideologie

e.g. Technological Determinism

"In its most extreme form, the entire form of society is seen as being determined by technology: new technologies transform society at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals (...)
'Human factors' and social arrangements are seen as secondary."

Chandler (2000) 'Technological or Media Determinism',
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tecdet.html>)

Marxism: Determinism

"The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill with the industrial capitalist."
Marx: The poverty of philosophy

Marxism: Determinism

Economic determinism
(Economic relations are the basis
for all social phenomena)

Ideological determinism
(base/superstructure model;
domination of a certain ideology)

Technological determinism
(tools and means of production
shape society)



Ideological battlefield

Who are the opponents in the ICT debate?
(The quick-and-bold-answer):

Marxists
Critical Theorists
Lefties

Neo-liberals
Manovichs
Information-Society-
Theorists

Post-Modernists

Post-Marxist theorists

Three different schools of thought
(Dyer-Witheford, N. 1999, Cyber-Marx):

- **Scientific socialists** [aka objectivist, classical, neo-orthodox]
- **Neo-Luddites** [mainly followers of the Frankfurt School]
- **Post-Fordists** [including Post-Modernists]

Post-Marxist theorists

Scientific socialists
e.g. Ernst Mandel

Due to falling rate of profit, new technologies will accelerate the revolution and ultimately defeat the capital, bursting apart old relations of productions

Problem: "Scientific socialism effectively liquidates human agency, and substitutes for it an inexorable, and ultimately sinister, technological automatism."

Post-Marxist theorists

Neo-Luddites*

"Technology-as-domination theorists"
e.g. Robins & Webster

New Technologies do not undermine capitalism, but will consolidate and deepen capitalist power; new technologies as new means of domination

* Luddites: social movement of English workers in the early 1800 protesting violently against changes produced by the Industrialisation

Post-Marxist theorists

Neo-Luddites

"Confronting assembly lines, napalm manufacturers, nuclear power plants, growing numbers of theoreticians and activists rediscovered the dark, nightmarish aspects of Marx's writing on technology"
Dyer-Witheford, N. (1999) p.99

This stance is mainly reflected in work of the 'Frankfurt School'

Post-Marxist theorists

Neo-Luddites

Problem: Individual is subject to technological exploitation "to which the best response is a reactive, heroic, but probably hopeless neo-Luddism."

Post-Marxist theorists

Post-Fordists (or Post-Modernists)

e.g. Mark Poster, D. Kellner

Theorising a technologically mediated reconciliation between labor and capital (Social democrats 'new' labour)

Technology can help us to overcome the brutality and rigidity of modernism, allowing individuality, niches, subcultures, and can support democracy

Post-Marxist theorists

Post-Fordists (or Post-Modernists)

Problem: There is not much criticism towards Information Technology left; Postmodernists and Neo-Liberals almost indistinguishable.

Critical Theory: Frankfurt School

Institut für Sozialforschung /
Institute for Social Research

1923 Frankfurt/Main
1933 New York
1950 Frankfurt

Clearly a Marxist stance towards society and ideology; however:
not the Proletariat will initiate changes, but critical reflection and reason will
(> role of intellectuals)

Critical Theory: Frankfurt School

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer
Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947):

Technologic rationality (Sciences and technology) have developed from means of enlightenment to means of oppression

- domination of nature has become the domination of man
- forces of production have turned to forces of destruction



Critical Theory: Frankfurt School

Herbert Marcuse
The One-Dimensional Man (1964):

The modern subject is 'one-dimensional' and incapable of thinking beyond the limits of the oppressive system



Critical Theory: Culture Industry

Binary opposition:

Culture <-> Popular Mass Culture

'Media produced for profit and the masses (by the Culture Industry) create uniformed, one-dimensional people'

Critical Theory: Culture Industry

Culture Industry (1944, Horkheimer, Adorno) refers to collective operations of Mass Media

"The entertainment and advertisement conglomerates which create artificial needs, distract dissent, and endlessly endorse the existing order."

Dyer-Witheford, N (1999) p.96

Critical Theory: Culture Industry

Mass media culture is coined by 'standardisation, stereotype, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods', in order to benumb the people. (Lowenthal)

"The Culture Industry discourages the 'masses' from thinking beyond the confines of the present."

Storey 2001



Critical Theory: Benjamin

Walter **Benjamin**, 1892-1940

'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'
(1935/36)



Looks at Film and Photography as new media but has likewise influenced many cyber-cultural thinkers (inseparability of original and copy)

Critical Theory: Benjamin

Sees his work in Marxist tradition
(introduction)

Conceptualises **politics of art** that
is 'useless for fascism but helpful in
formulating revolutionary demands'

Although associated with Frankfurt
School, very different approach to
mass-produced culture

Critical Theory: Benjamin

Believes that changes in the
technological reproduction of culture
are changing the function and the
position of culture in society:

"technical reproduction can put the
copy of the original into situations
which would be out of reach for the
original itself."

Critical Theory: Benjamin

"For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility."

Benjamin 'The Work of Art...', Section IV

Critical Theory: Benjamin

Mechanical reproduction challenges the **aura** of an artwork, i.e. its sense of 'authenticity', 'authority', and 'distance'

Reproduction technologies **detach** the cultural text or practice from the authority and rituals of tradition.

Theme: From an auratic to a democratic culture



Cybernetic Capitalism

"How much faith should we place in technology's ability to improve our lives?"
Robins & Webster 1999

- Clearly normative attitude
- 'Information revolution' is a myth that does nothing to improve social conditions
- **Cybernetic capitalism** describes a system of ongoing capitalism with a new set of highly effective instruments

Cybernetic Capitalism

Information Revolution is a '**concerted ideology**' of industrialists, politicians and academics to make us believe in a new era of wealth and abundance

"Our point is that the 'Information Revolution' is inadequately conceived (...) as a question of technology and technological innovation. Rather, it is better understood as a matter of differential (and unequal) access to, and **control over**, information resources."
Robins and Webster 1999

Cybernetic Capitalism

ICT are being used as a means of applying principles of Taylorism* to the whole society

Taylorism subsumes a range of methods to improve on effectivity of labour (division of tasks, training, control)

* refers to F.W.Taylor's 'Principles of scientific management' (1911)

Cybernetic Capitalism

Cybernetic Capitalism

"For what is unfolding now is the continuation of what was set in motion in the early 19th. century: what we now call the global information economy is (...) the most recent expression of the capitalist mobilisation of society."

Robins and Webster 1999



Digital Capitalism

Dan Schiller: *Digital Capitalism* (2002)

The myth of the Information revolution:

"This utopian vision - Internet as salvation - expresses ancient yearnings. Historical detoxification through scientific knowledge: the truth - information? - will make us free."

Digital Capitalism

"Indeed, the Internet comprises nothing less than the central production and control apparatus of an increasingly supranational market system."

Schiller 2002



Informational Capitalism

M. Castells: *The Rise of the Network Society*
(1996)

'Informational Capitalism':
"an especially unforgiving (...) form of
capitalism because it combines enormous
flexibility with global reach (both of which were
absent in previous capitalist eras) thanks to
network arrangements."
Webster 2002

Informational Capitalism

Networks: the domination of the **space of flows** over the space of places

"The network makes explicit the dynamics
by which a globally connected elite is
coming to dominate and control the lives of
those who remain bound to the world of
locality, thus reinforcing a 'structural
domination of the space of flows over the
space of of places'."

Terranova 2004 (quoting Castells 1996)



exercise

Text: Douglas Kellner (1998) 'New Technologies, the Welfare State, and the Prospects for Democratization'

- Work in groups of five
- Find **key terms!** develop a vocabulary from the text!
- Describe **key ideas!**



Critical Theory of Technology

Kellner, D. 1996: 'New Technologies, the Welfare State, and the Prospects for Democratization'

A Critical Theory of Technology should avoid:

- **utopian** phantasies (computers will solve the problems of the world)
- **dystopian** stands (computers are vehicles of alienation and mere tools of capital, the state and domination)
- **technological** and **economic determinism**

Critical Theory of Technology

Inclusive concept of technology:

'bad IT-use' promotes domination and oppression while undermining democracy, community, creativity, and other positive values

'good IT-use' enhances positive values such as democracy, community, freedom, self-development

Critical Theory of Technology

Technocapitalism:

- increasingly important role of technology
- continued primacy of capitalist relations of production

"Capitalist imperatives continue to dominate production, distribution, and consumption, as well as other (...) domains. Workers continue to be exploited by capitalists and capital continues to be the hegemonic force - more so than ever after the collapse of communism." Kellner 1998

Critical Theory of Technology

Technocapitalism does not hinder individuals to use the Web politically:

" (...) it is up to citizens to create new public spheres, new politics, and to use the new technologies to discuss what kinds of society we want and to oppose the society we don't want. (...)

It is up to individuals and groups to promote democratization and progressive social change." Kellner 1998



Easy Reading Resources

- David **Chandler**: Marxist Media-Theory
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/marxism/marxism.html>
- Personal Homepage of **Mick Underwood**:
<http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/media/marxism.html>

Other related Web-links see:

<http://del.icio.us/UELuk/MS2306CriticalTheoryNewMedia>

For a complete **bibliography** see handout!