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# Herbert Marcuse and Social Media

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*Abstract: This article reflects on the relevance of Herbert Marcuse's philosophy of technology in the age social media. Although Marcuse did not experience the rise of the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW), and "social media" as major means of communication, his insights about technological rationality, technology, and the role of technology in the context of labor allow us today to reflect on the relevance of Marcuse's philosophy of technology for a critical theory of digital and social media.*

## 1. Introduction

Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce argue that "Herbert Marcuse synthesized Hegelian, Marxian, and other currents of modern philosophy...in an attempt to reconstruct the Marxian theory in accordance with changes in the trajectory of modern culture, politics, and society."<sup>1</sup> Peter Marcuse writes that his father's achievement was that he analyzes "political conflicts, economic conflicts, and cultural conflicts—and, quite centrally and profoundly, how these conflicts relate to each other."<sup>2</sup> Given the breadth and depth of Marcuse's Marxist theory of society, it is rewarding to ask how it can help us to understand aspects of contemporary economy, politics, and culture and their interconnections and how we can reactualize Marcuse's approach for this purpose. My own contribution, with respect to this project, has been to study—inspired by Marcuse, Marx, Hegel, and others—the world of the Internet and digital media.

While a PhD student at the Vienna University of Technology in Austria, I started teaching philosophy and sociology of technology to informatics students in 2000. I had read Marx and made his analysis of technology in capitalism a centerpiece of my lectures; however, I wanted to complement Marx by a critical analysis of the role of technology in the twentieth century. As most students interested in critical theory in the German-speaking world, I had read Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, but I found their approaches did not sufficiently engage with the relationship of technology and society. I had at this time only read a couple of Marcuse's essay; we were not so much encouraged to engage with Marcuse, as many scholars had the (false) impression that Marcuse only copied Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, "Introduction: Marcuse's Adventures in Marxism," in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, vol. 6, *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Marcuse, "Afterword," in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, vol. 6, *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 433.

culture industry and did not write much more than *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>3</sup> Facing the task of teaching critical theory of technology, I discovered the importance of Marcuse's works.

I adopted parts of *One-Dimensional Man* and Marcuse's essay "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology"<sup>4</sup> for teaching. Fascinated by Marcuse's insights, I read more and more of his books and articles and thereby obtained a fuller picture of the breadth and depth of his critical theory. I was especially impressed by *Reason and Revolution*<sup>5</sup> because it opened up an interpretation of Hegel's dialectical logic for me that was grounded in a dialectic of subjectivity/objectivity and chance/necessity and helped me to understand the importance of avoiding the twin traps of idealist subjectivism that neglects structural conditions of action and vulgar materialism that sees the world as being determined by natural laws.

I wrote three German books about the contemporaneity of Marcuse's works.<sup>6</sup> These three works have not been widely read because they have not been translated into English, and there is much more interest in Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas than Marcuse in the German-speaking world. Having established some conceptual foundations of a critical theory of technology, I moved on and started working on the foundations of a critical theory and a critique of the political economy of the Internet and the media. In the work on these books,<sup>7</sup> Marcuse's, Marx's, and Hegel's concepts were tools of critical thought that helped me to understand the antagonisms of the media and communication in twenty-first century capitalism. In addition to Marcuse, Marx, and Hegel, I have especially made use of Dallas W. Smythe's and Raymond Williams's works for grounding foundations of a critical theory of the Internet and social media. Throughout these years, Marcuse was always there in my writing and thinking and has been a crucial influence.

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," [1941], in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner, vol. 1, *Technology, War and Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41-65.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941; Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Christian Fuchs, *Krise und Kritik in der Informationsgesellschaft: Arbeiten über Herbert Marcuse, kapitalistische Entwicklung und Selbstorganisation* (Norderstedt: Libri Books on Demand, 2002) [*Crisis and Criticism of the Information Society: Works on Herbert Marcuse, Capitalist Development and Self-Organisation*]; Christian Fuchs, *Emanzipation! Technik und Politik bei Herbert Marcuse* (Aachen: Shaker, 2005) [*Emancipation! Technology and Politics in the Works of Herbert Marcuse*]; and Christian Fuchs, *Herbert Marcuse interkulturell gelesen* (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2005) [*Herbert Marcuse: An Intercultural Interpretation*].

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Christian Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Christian Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Christian Fuchs, *OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014); Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London, Sage: 2014); Christian Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2015); as well as collected volumes, such as Christian Fuchs, Kees Boersma, Anders Albrechtslund and Marisol Sandoval, eds., *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, eds., *Marx is Back—The Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today* (Vienna: Unified Theory of Information Research Group, 2012); Christian Fuchs and Marisol Sandoval, eds., *Critique, Social Media and the Information Society* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Marisol Sandoval, Christian Fuchs, Jernej A. Prodnik, Sebastian Sevignani, and Thomas Allmer, eds., "Philosophers of the World Unite! Theorising Digital Labour and Virtual Work: Definitions, Forms and Transformations," special issue, *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12, no. 2 (2014): 464-801; Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs, eds., *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Eran Fisher and Christian Fuchs, eds., *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

In this paper, I reflect on how some of Marcuse's theoretical work can help us to critically understand what many today term "social media." Social media are World Wide Web-based platforms such as blogs (e.g., Blogspot, WordPress, Tumblr), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, VK, Renren), user-generated content sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, Youku), microblogs (e.g., Twitter, Weibo) and wikis (e.g., Wikipedia).<sup>8</sup> It is evident that all media are to a certain extent social because they reflect and transmogrify society in complex ways. The actual change that communication systems, such as Facebook, reflect is that the World Wide Web (WWW) has since 2005 become more a system of cooperative work and community formation than it was before.<sup>9</sup> These media are social because they enable and are means of sharing, communication, community, and collaboration. At the same time, they are deeply embedded into capitalism's commodity logic and therefore reflect individual private property, individualism, and structures of exploitation and domination. Capitalist class relations that *individualize* these social media's *sociality*, limit the sociality of social media as means of informational production. This paper focuses on some, but by far not all dimensions of Marcuse's thoughts for reflecting on social media: the computer (section 2), work and labor (section 3), ideology (section 4), and the dialectical logic of essence (section 5).

## 2. Herbert Marcuse and the Computer

Marcuse lived in a time that saw the rise of the computer and its increasing impacts on the economy, politics, culture, and everyday life. Marcuse again and again reflected on the positive potentials and negative realities of the computer. Here are some examples.

On the one hand, Marcuse stressed the role of the computer as a tool of control, domination, and exploitation.

The formal rationality of capitalism celebrates its triumph in electronic computers, which calculate everything, no matter what the purpose, and which are put to use as mighty instruments of political manipulation, reliably calculating the chances of profit and loss, including the chance of the annihilation of the whole, with the consent of the likewise calculated and obedient population.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, he identified liberating potentials of the computer.

[Marx] saw the possibility of reducing alienated labor already in capitalism, namely as a consequence of technical progress or, as we would say today, increasing automation, mechanization, computerization, whatever you want to call it. That, however, is only the anticipation, or the first traces, of the liberation of the human being from full-time alienated labor.<sup>11</sup>

So, Marcuse saw the dialectic of modern technology<sup>12</sup> also at play in computer technology.

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<sup>8</sup> Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1968), 224-25; first published in German in *Max Weber und die Soziologie heute* (1964). This translation, principally by Kurt Wolff, is based on a revised form of the essay first published in German in *Kultur und Gesellschaft* (1965).

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "On the Aesthetic Dimension: A Conversation between Herbert Marcuse and Larry Hartwick," [1978], in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner, vol. 4, *Art and Liberation* (London: Routledge, 2007), 220.

<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology"; Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

An electronic computer can serve equally a capitalist or socialist administration.... In Marxian theory itself...the social mode of production, not technics is the basic historical factor. However, when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality—a “world.”<sup>13</sup>

Marcuse, like Marx, considered the antagonism between class relations and the productive forces to be at the heart of modern technologies such as the computer: the computer socializes the means of production and communication and is therefore a foundation of a better society; however, its *capitalist application* turns it into a tool for warfare, control, surveillance, advertising’s manipulation of needs, the creation of unemployment, and new forms of precarious labor, among other things. Marcuse did not think that one must simply abolish capitalism and then use the same technologies in a socialist or communist society. He rather felt that a qualitative change of society would have to come along with a qualitative change of technology.

The technological transformation is at the same time political transformation, but the political change would turn into qualitative social change only to the degree to which it would alter the direction of technical progress—that is, develop a new technology. For the established technology has become an instrument of destructive politics.<sup>14</sup>

The technology which the industrial societies have inherited and developed, and which rules our lives, is in its very roots a technology of domination. Consummation of technical progress therefore implies the determinate negation of this technology.... The idea of qualitatively different forms of technological rationality belongs to a new historical project.”<sup>15</sup>

For a truly communist society, Marcuse argues that modern technology must be dialectically sublated (*aufgehoben*)—that is, at the same time eliminated, preserved, and lifted to a new qualitative level of existence:

If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technical base itself. For it is this base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of needs and the reduction of toil—it remains the very base of all forms of human freedom. The qualitative change rather lies in the reconstruction of this base—that is, in its development with a view of different ends.<sup>16</sup>

Marcuse expresses the dialectical sublation of technology and society also as a reconstruction that helps with the healing of society’s wounds: “Perhaps technology is a wound that can only be healed by the weapon that caused it: not the destruction of technology but its re-construction for the reconciliation of nature and society.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “The Problem of Social Change in the Technological Society,” [1962], in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner, vol. 2, *Towards a Critical Theory of Society* (London: Routledge, 2001), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Children of Prometheus: 25 Theses on Technology and Society,” [1979], in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, vol. 5, *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation* (London: Routledge, 2011), 224.

This means that a truly communist society has to abolish repressive uses of the computer, e.g. as automated killing technology operating drones and warplanes, and to transform specific repressive designs of computer technologies. Social media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter are based on complex terms of use that enable the commodification of personal data and the exploitation of users' digital labor.<sup>18</sup> Communist social media in contrast also support and do not abolish social networking. They require a redesign of social media in such a way that they are privacy-enhancing, advertising-free, user-controlled, not-for-profit, and allow the users a say in formulating the terms of use. Social media are thereby dialectically sublated (*aufgehoben*): they lose their dominative character and simultaneously retain, realize, and expand their liberating potentials.

Marcuse died in 1979 at the age of 81. He did not live long enough to see the rise of the World Wide Web (WWW). When discussing the computer, he therefore predominantly spoke about automation, which reflected a major question of his time: *whether the computer in production brings about a more repressive or a more liberated economy*. Marcuse's answer was dialectical: he saw liberating, democratic, and communist potentials of the computer that were limited by the repressive realities of capitalism and class. Today, computer technology has become a networked and mobile means of information, communication, and collaboration. Of course, Marcuse could not analyze mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; however, his critical thought and concepts are still well suited as one of the methodological foundations for a critical theory of the Internet and social media.

### 3. Herbert Marcuse and Digital Labor on Social Media

Marcuse argues that the modern economic concept of labor as wage labor has influenced the general understanding of work and has resulted in "the narrowing of the concept."<sup>19</sup> He distinguishes between a general form of labor (work) that is an essential and foundational category that describes productive human activities in all societies and the economic concept of labor typical for modern societies.

Work has for Marcuse three dimensions: *Arbeiten* (working as a process), *das Gearbeitete* (the object of work) and *das zu-Arbeitende* (the goal of work). Marcuse argues that work has three important characteristics: duration, permanence, and burden. The essential duration of work means that it is never finished, work is an "enduring being-at and being-in-work."<sup>20</sup> Work is permanent because an object as the result of production is "worked into the 'world'."<sup>21</sup> That work involves a burden does not necessarily mean for Marcuse that it is toil, but the abstinence from individual pleasure: in work "man is always taken away from his self-being and toward something else: he is always with an other and for an other."<sup>22</sup> Marcuse stresses that work is not just producing a world of goods, but it organizes "'economics as life'."<sup>23</sup> The "first and final purpose" of work is "to bring about the being of Dasein itself, in order to 'secure' its duration and permanence."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*; Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*; and Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," [1933], in *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

Marcuse points out the duality of human activity in capitalism that is founded on an antagonism of use-value and exchange-value so that human needs can only be satisfied via the mediation through the commodity form and class relations. Human activity, in capitalism, is therefore simultaneously concrete and abstract—work and labor.

Marcuse stresses the importance of distinguishing between work and labor in capitalism. Work is a social activity to transform human and social nature (culture) in such a way that new qualities emerge that satisfy human needs. Human needs involve not just food, housing, and clothing, but also social reproduction through communication, learning, and education. Work therefore involves the production of physical use-values (e.g., food, housing, clothes) and nonphysical use-values (e.g., social relations, communications, happiness) that satisfy human life. In the last instance, it is wrong to dualistically separate work and communication as well as the economy and culture, and more accurate to maintain rather a cultural materialistic position that assumes communication is a specific form of work that satisfies the social need of relating to others, being informed, communicating, and forming communities.<sup>25</sup>

Based on these assumptions, it becomes evident that social media are tools of digital work—human social activities that enable information, communication, collaboration, and community; however, in capitalism, social media invert their own social essence—Google and Facebook are not predominantly means of communication, but the largest advertising agencies in the world. Social media’s dimension of exchange-value and abstract labor dominates over its dimension of use-value and concrete work. In this context, Dallas Smythe’s notions of audience commodification and audience labor gain new importance:<sup>26</sup> The users of corporate social media create content, connections, profiles, and behavior data in order to achieve the social use-values of information, communication, and community. Corporate social media commodify this data by selling it to advertisers who in return can present advertisements targeted to the interests of individual users. Wherever there is a commodity, there is labor producing this commodity and a class relation that organizes the exploitation of labor. Therefore, corporate social media usage is a form of surplus-value creating—and exploited digital labor that yields—profits for social media capitalists.<sup>27</sup>

Capitalism connects labor and play in a destructive dialectic. Traditionally, play in the form of enjoyment, sex, and entertainment was in capitalism only part of spare time, which was unproductive and separate in time from labor. Sigmund Freud argues that the structure of drives is characterized by a dialectic of Eros (the drive for life, sexuality, lust) and Thanatos (the drive for death, destruction, aggression).<sup>28</sup> Humans would strive for the permanent realization of Eros (pleasure principle), but culture would only become possible by a temporal negation and suspension of Eros and the transformation of erotic energy into culture and labor. Labor would be a productive form of desexualization—the repression of sexual drives. Freud speaks in this context of the reality principle or sublimation. The reality principle sublates the pleasure principle; human culture sublates human nature and becomes humanity’s second nature.

Marcuse connects Freud’s theory of drives to Marx’s theory of capitalism.<sup>29</sup> He argues that alienated labor, domination, and capital accumulation have turned the reality principle into a repressive reality principle—the performance principle: alienated labor constitutes a surplus-repression of Eros—the repression of the pleasure principle takes on a quantity that exceeds

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<sup>25</sup> Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*.

<sup>26</sup> Dallas W. Smythe, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1–27.

<sup>27</sup> Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*; Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*.

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920; New York: Norton, 1961).

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955).

the culturally necessary suppression. Marcuse connects Marx's notions of necessary labor and surplus labor/value to the Freudian drive structure of humans and argues that necessary labor on the level of drives corresponds to necessary suppression and that surplus labor corresponds to surplus-repression. This means that, in order to exist, a society needs a certain amount of necessary labor (measured in hours of work) and hence a certain corresponding amount of suppression of the pleasure principle (also measured in hours). The exploitation of surplus-value (labor that is performed for free and generates profit) would mean not only that workers are forced to work for free for capital to a certain extent, but also that the pleasure principle must be additionally suppressed beyond what is necessary for human existence.

Behind the reality principle lies the fundamental fact of Ananke or scarcity (*Lebensnot*), which means that the struggle for existence takes place in a world too poor for the satisfaction of human needs without constant restraint, renunciation, delay. In other words, whatever satisfaction is possible necessitates *work*, more or less painful arrangements and undertakings for the procurement of the means for satisfying needs. For the duration of work, which occupies practically the entire existence of the mature individual, pleasure is "suspended" and pain prevails.<sup>30</sup>

In societies that are based on the principle of domination, the reality principle takes on the form of the performance principle. "Domination is exercised by a particular group or individual in order to sustain and enhance itself in a privileged position."<sup>31</sup> The performance principle is connected to surplus-repression, a term that describes "the restrictions necessitated by social domination."<sup>32</sup> Domination introduces "*additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association."<sup>33</sup>

Marcuse further argues in *Eros and Civilization* that the performance principle means that Thanatos governs humans and society and that alienation unleashes aggressive drives within humans (repressive desublimation) that result in an overall violent and aggressive society. Due to the high productivity reached in late-modern society, a historical alternative would be possible: the elimination of the repressive reality principle, the reduction of necessary working time to a minimum and the maximization of free time, an eroticization of society and the body, the shaping of society and humans by Eros, the emergence of libidinous social relations. Such a development would be a historical possibility—but one incompatible with capitalism and patriarchy.

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello argue that the rise of participatory management means the emergence of a new spirit of capitalism that subsumes the anti-authoritarian values of the political revolt of 1968 and the subsequently emerging New Left, such as autonomy, spontaneity, mobility, creativity, networking, visions, openness, plurality, informality, authenticity, emancipation, and so on, under capital.<sup>34</sup> The topics of the movement would now be put into the service of those forces that it wanted to destroy. The outcome would have been "the construction of the new, so-called 'network' capitalism,"<sup>35</sup> so that artistic critique—that calls for authenticity, creativity, freedom, and autonomy in contrast to social critique that calls for equality and overcoming class<sup>36</sup>—today "indirectly serves capitalism and is one of the instruments of its ability to endure."<sup>37</sup> Play labor is a new ideology of capitalism: objectively

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 35; emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 37; emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 37-43.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 490.



alienated labor is presented as creativity, freedom, and autonomy that is fun for workers. That workers should have fun and love their objective alienation has become a new ideological strategy of capital and management theory. Facebook labor is an expression of play labor ideology as element of the new spirit of capitalism.

Gilles Deleuze has pointed out that, in contemporary capitalism, disciplines are transformed in such a way that humans increasingly discipline themselves without direct external violence.<sup>38</sup> He terms this situation the society of (self-)control. It can be observed, for example, in the strategies of participatory management. This method promotes the use of incentives and the integration of play into labor. It argues that work should be fun, workers should permanently develop new ideas, realize their creativity, and enjoy free time within the factory. The boundaries between work time and spare time, labor and play, become fuzzy. Work tends to acquire qualities of play; entertainment in spare time tends to become labor-like. Working time and spare time become inseparable. The factory extends its boundaries into society and becomes what Mario Tronti has termed a social factory:

The more capitalist development proceeds, i.e., the more the production of relative surplus value asserts and extends itself, the more the cycle *production-distribution-exchange-consumption* closes itself inevitably, the societal relation between capitalist production and bourgeois society, between factory and society, between society and the state become more and more organic. At the highest level of capitalist development, the societal relation becomes a moment of the relations of production, and the whole of society becomes cause and expression of production, i.e., the whole society lives as a function of the factory, and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society.... When the factory raises itself to the master of the whole of society—the entire societal production becomes industrial production—then the specific characteristics of the factory get lost inside of the general characteristics of society.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, as work time and spare time get blurred in the social factory, work-related stress intensifies and property relations remain unchanged. Facebook's exploitation of Internet users is an aspect of this transformation. It signifies that private Internet usage, which is motivated by play, entertainment, fun, and joy—aspects of Eros—has become subsumed under capital and has become a sphere of the exploitation of labor. It produces surplus-value for capital and is exploited by the latter so that Internet corporations accumulate profit. To a specific degree, play and labor are now indistinguishable. Eros has become largely subsumed under the repressive reality principle. Play is largely commodified, as there is no longer free time or space not exploited by capital. Play is today productive, surplus-value generating labor that is exploited by capital. All human activities, and therefore also all play, tend under the contemporary conditions to become subsumed under and exploited by capital. Play as an expression of Eros is thereby destroyed, human freedom and human capacities are restricted and damaged. On Facebook, play and labor converge into play labor that is exploited for capital accumulation. Facebook therefore stands for the total commodification and exploitation of time—all human time tends to become surplus-value generating time that is exploited by capital. Table 1 summarizes the application of Marcuse's theory of play, labor, and pleasure to Facebook and social media.

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<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177-82.

<sup>39</sup> Mario Tronti, *Arbeiter und Kapital* (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1966), 30ff; author's translation from German.

<b>Essence of Human Desires</b>	<b>Reality Principle in Societies with Scarcity</b>	<b>Repressive Reality Principle in Classical Capitalism</b>	<b>Repressive Reality Principle in Capitalism's Age of Facebook</b>
immediate satisfaction	delayed satisfaction	delayed satisfaction	immediate online satisfaction
pleasure	restraint of pleasure	leisure time: pleasure  work time: restraint of pleasure, surplus repression of pleasure	Collapse of leisure time and work time: leisure time becomes work time and work time becomes leisure time;  all time becomes exploited;  online leisure time becomes surplus value-generating wage labor time = surplus repression of pleasure;  play labor time = surplus value-generating pleasure time
joy (play)	toil (work)	leisure time: joy (play)  work time: toil (work)	play labor: joy and play as toil and work, toil and work as joy and play
receptiveness	productiveness	leisure time: receptiveness  work time: productiveness	collapse of the distinction between leisure time/work time and receptiveness/productiveness,  total commodification of human time
absence of repression of pleasure	repression of pleasure	leisure time: absence of repression of pleasure  work time: repression of pleasure	play labor time: surplus value generation appears to be pleasure-like, but serves the logic of repression  (the lack of ownership of capital)

**Table 1: Pleasures in Four Modes of Society** (human essence, society with scarcity, classical capitalism, capitalism in the age of Facebook), based on a table presented by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 12.

Work stands in a dialectical relation with play: in play, humans have the freedom to do with the objects of play whatever one wants to do. "In a single toss of a ball, the player achieves an infinitely greater triumph of human freedom over the objective world than in the most massive accomplishment of technical labor."<sup>40</sup> Play has "no duration or permanence. It happens essentially in 'intervals,' 'between' the times of other doings...that continually dominate human Dasein."<sup>41</sup> In societies where work is toil, play would be dialectically related to work in such a way that it is an escape from work.

Play is self-distraction, self-relaxation, self-recuperation...*for the purpose* of a new concentration, tension, etc. Thus play is in its totality necessarily related to an other from which it comes and at which it is aimed, and this other is already preconceived as *labor* through the characteristics of regimentation, tension, toil, etc.<sup>42</sup>

Work is a durable and permanent process that produces objects in the world that satisfy human needs. Play, in contrast, takes place unregularly and does not involve the necessity to create use-values that satisfy human needs: play has the freedom to do with objects whatever one likes. This can involve creating new objects, but also destroying existing objects or engaging in unproductive activity that is purely joyful and does not create anything new. This means that in playing with a ball one can develop a new form of game, destroy the ball, or just toss it around for fun.

In play labor (*playbor*), the relationship between play and labor has changed: whereas labor is permanent and play irregular, Facebook playbor does not take place at specific times either during "free time" or "work time," it rather can take place *any time* during wage labor time, at home or on the move (via mobile devices). Play labor is irregular in the sense that it takes place at irregular times and intervals, but it is permanent because users tend to return and update their profiles and repeat their activities. Whereas labor creates new objects that have a permanency in the world and satisfy human needs and whereas play has the freedom to do with objects whatever one pleases, the Facebook user has the freedom to design one's profile however one wants (but given strict limits by Facebook, such as the available input fields, what kind of images, videos and comments are allowed to be uploaded), but every browsing behavior and activity on Facebook is made permanent by being in the form of data that are stored, processed, analyzed, and commodified for the purpose of targeted advertising. Whereas play is relaxation and distraction from the unfreedom and hardships of labor and at the same time recreation of labor power, playbor explodes the relative temporal and spatial separateness of play and labor: Facebook usage is relaxation, joy, and fun and *at the same time* like labor creates economic value that results or can result in monetary profits. It is recreation that generates value, consumption that is productive, play that is labor.

Play is free activity without duration and permanence; labor is unfree activity with duration and permanence. Play labor has the semblance of freedom, but is unfree in that it creates wealth and profits that are controlled by others; it is regular in its irregularity, creating permanence of data storage and usage in its impermanence of usage (e.g., irregular times, no need to create something new or useful). It is fun and joy that is not *like play* mainly an end-in-itself or *like laboring* an end-for-others. It is rather *as fun* an end-in-itself, *as social activity* an end-for-others and *as value-creating activity* an end-for-capital, i.e., a particularistic end-for-others that monetarily benefits private property owners at the expense of play workers.

Paid creative industry work is also becoming more like play. The best examples are the playground-like Google offices that at a first glance hide the inhumane reality of working long

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<sup>40</sup> Marcuse, "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," 128.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.; emphasis in original.

hours. Rosalind Gill as well as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, among others, show the ambivalence of much creative industry work, which is precarious, but cherished, because of the fun, contacts, reputation, creativity, self-fulfilment, and self-determination that it tends to involve.<sup>43</sup> The difficulty is that labor feels like play and that exploitation and fun thereby become inseparable. Play and labor are today, in certain cases, indistinguishable.

The liquefaction of boundaries—between labor/play, working time/leisure time, production/consumption, the office and the factory/the home, the public/the private—is one of the tendencies of contemporary capitalism. It is, however, not the only or main feature of modernity, as claimed by Bauman—who speaks of liquid modernity.<sup>44</sup> Liquefaction is rather combined with other developments of modernity, such as neoliberalism, individualization, globalization, financialization, the commodification of everything, and informatization, that are constitutive for the continuity of capitalism through the creation of discontinuities.

#### 4. Herbert Marcuse, Ideology, and Social Media

Marcuse uses the term technological rationality for describing the phenomenon of instrumental reason. His point is that ideology and manipulation try to make human consciousness and human behavior function like an automatic machine that has only a limited set of available response behaviors. Technological rationality contains “elements of thought which adjust the rules of thought to the rules of control and domination.”<sup>45</sup> Technological rationality denies that reality could be other than it is today. It neglects alternative potentials for development. It aims at “liquidating the oppositional and transcending elements.”<sup>46</sup> Technological rationality causes one-dimensional thinking, in which “ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.”<sup>47</sup>

Technological/instrumental rationality in capitalism has a double character. For Marx, the commodity and capital accumulation are based on the exploitation of labor power, with the production and appropriation of surplus-value. Class society turns humans into instruments that in capital serve the dominant class’ need for capital accumulation. At the same time, the commodity has a specific aesthetic and subjective appearance: the labor involved in its production disappears behind the commodity and money form, one can only see a thing devoid of social relations. The social is hidden behind the commodity form that appears natural and endless. Ideology operates the same way: it naturalizes domination and exploitation by presenting them as the best option, without alternative, essential, and natural.

Capitalist media are modes of reification and therefore expressions of instrumental/technological rationality in a double sense. First, they reduce humans to the status of consumers of advertisements and commodities. Second, in capitalism, culture is to a large degree connected to the commodity form: there are cultural commodities produced by cultural wage-workers that are bought by consumers, and audience commodities that the media consumers themselves become by being sold as an audience to the capitalist media’s advertising clients.

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<sup>43</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Europe,” *Information, Communication & Society* 5, no. 1 (2002): 70–89; David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 138.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

But, there is also a third dimension of significance. In order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system; it makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic. The first and the second dimensions above constitute the *economic* dimension of instrumental reason; the third dimension is the *ideological* form of instrumental reason. Capitalist media are necessarily means of advertising and commodification as well as spaces of ideology. Advertisement and cultural commodification make humans an instrument for economic profit accumulation. Ideology aims at instilling belief in the system of capital and commodities into human subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. It is, of course, an important question to what extent ideology is successful and to what degree it is questioned and resisted, but the crucial point about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation.

One-dimensional thought and reductionism are characteristic of societies that want to legitimize the domination of one group or class over another and employ simplifications of reality for doing so. Critical theory uses dialectical thinking to oppose ideology, fetishism, reification, false consciousness, instrumental reason, technological rationality, and one-dimensional consciousness. Dialectical thinking sees reality as complex, a developing process, full of potentials for change, and as contradictory. It assumes that to each pole of reality there is a second pole that opposes (negates) the first pole and points towards a different reality. Dialectical thought is therefore “two-dimensional.”<sup>48</sup> It operates with “transcendent, critical notions”:<sup>49</sup> “The dialectical concepts transcend the given social reality in the direction of another historical structure which is present as a tendency in the given reality.”<sup>50</sup>

At the level of ideology, social media-capitalists, -gurus and -demagogues try to destroy and forestall the complexity, multi-dimensionality, and dialecticity of communication and society by trying to present only potential advantages and to maintain silence about aspects of social media’s domination, exploitation, control, surveillance, repression, manipulation, and neoliberal individualism. Social media ideologies present capitalist Internet platforms as purely advantageous. They consistently advance the engaging/connecting/sharing ideology:<sup>51</sup>

- Facebook: “the power to share and to make the world more open and connected.”<sup>52</sup>
- Google: “the world’s information”  
“make it universally accessible and useful”  
“make money without doing evil.”<sup>53</sup>
- YouTube: “to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small.”<sup>54</sup>
- Twitter: “to connect with people, express yourself and discover what’s happening”  
“give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly.”<sup>55</sup>
- Instagram: “fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends and family.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” [1937], in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 86.

<sup>51</sup> Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*, chap. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookUK/info>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Google, <https://www.google.de/intl/en/about/company/philosophy/>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/yt/about/en-GB/>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Twitter, <https://about.twitter.com/company>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

Pinterest:	“collecting and organizing things you love.” <sup>57</sup>
LinkedIn:	“connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful.” <sup>58</sup>
Tumblr:	“share the things you love.” <sup>59</sup>
VK:	“a web resource that helps you stay in touch with your old and new friends.” <sup>60</sup>
Baidu:	“providing the best way for people to find what they’re looking for online,” “We provide our users with many channels to find and share information.” <sup>61</sup>
SINA Weibo:	“allow users to connect and share information anywhere, anytime and with anyone on our platform” “an array of online media and social networking services to our user to create a rich canvas for businesses and brand advertisers to connect and engage with their targeted audiences.” <sup>62</sup>
Renren:	“enables users to connect and communicate with each other, share information, create user generated content, play online games, watch videos and enjoy a wide range of other features and services. We believe real name relationships create a stronger and more enduring social graph that is essential in the mobile internet world and difficult to replicate.... Our vision is to re-define the social networking experience and revolutionize the way people in China connect, communicate, entertain and shop. To achieve this, we are focused on providing a highly engaging and interactive platform through technology that promotes connectivity, communication, and sharing. The mobile internet is making the world more connected, and Renren stands at the forefront of this evolution.” <sup>63</sup>
Tencent:	“to enhance the quality of human life through Internet services.” <sup>64</sup>
WeChat:	“value-added Internet, mobile and telecom services and online advertising under the strategic goal of providing users with ‘one-stop online lifestyle services’” “connect with friends across platforms.” <sup>65</sup>

Social media ideology inverts commodity fetishism.<sup>66</sup> In inverted commodity fetishism, the users do not immediately experience the commodity form because they do not pay money for accessing a commodity. Rather they get access without payment to social media platforms that are not commodities. The commodity form takes place without an exchange in which the users are involved: the platforms sell usage data to advertising clients who get targeted access to users’ profiles, which become ad spaces. It is rather difficult for users to think of corporate social media use as labor or exploitation because inverted commodity fetishism creates a social

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<sup>56</sup> Instagram, <http://instagram.com>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Pinterest, <http://uk.about.pinterest.com/>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>58</sup> LinkedIn, <http://www.linkedin.com/about-us>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Tumblr, <https://www.tumblr.com/>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> VK, <http://vk.com/terms>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Baidu, <http://ir.baidu.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=188488&p=irol-homeprofile>, accessed on April 9, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> SINA Weibo, [http://corp.sina.com.cn/eng/sina\\_intr\\_eng.htm](http://corp.sina.com.cn/eng/sina_intr_eng.htm), accessed on April 9, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Renren, <http://ir.renren-inc.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=244796&p=irol-irhome>, accessed on April 9, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Tencent [QQ, WeChat], <http://www.tencent.com/en-us/at/abouttencent.shtml>, accessed on April 9, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> WeChat, <http://www.wechat.com/en/>, accessed on April 9, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*.

experience and social use-value for them and tries to ideologically hide the role of the commodity.

Social media corporations, advertising and management gurus, and uncritical social media scholars that celebrate capitalist platforms associate social media with the following claims: it enables everyone to get and share information; to communicate, engage, produce and distribute content; to connect with others. A further claim is that producing, connecting, sharing, communicating, and engaging via social media enhances humans' quality of life and society's quality and transparency. In these claims, there is an underlying assumption that social media necessarily makes society more open, transparent, and connected; whereas aspects of closure and power are not considered and if they are considered, they are only framed in such a way that indicates social media empowers users. Social media ideology reflects Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, which assumes that social media enables a culture "in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content"<sup>67</sup> and there is "strong support for creating and sharing creations with others."<sup>68</sup>

The problem with this approach is its simplistic understanding of participation as content-creation and content-sharing, while ignoring the political connotation of participation as participatory democracy, *a system* in which all people own and control and together manage that which affects their lives.<sup>69</sup> The engaging/connecting/sharing ideology is an ideology because it only views social media positively and is inherently technological-deterministic. It assumes that social media technologies as such have positive effects and disregards the power structures and asymmetries into which it is embedded.

This engaging/connecting/sharing ideology is not just typical for Western corporate social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Tumblr or Instagram, but it is also similarly shared and communicated by Chinese corporate social media companies, such as Baidu, SINA Weibo, Renren, and Tencent. This circumstance indicates that both Chinese and Western Internet capitalism use quite comparable neoliberal ideologies for legitimizing themselves. Social media ideology is a form of one-dimensional thought both in the East and the West: it is silent about exploitation and disadvantages that users may experience from capitalism's and the capitalist state's control of the Internet. Eastern and Western social media capitalists not only share the engaging/connecting/sharing ideology, but they also use the same capital accumulation model, which is based on targeted advertising and the exploitation of users' digital labor.<sup>70</sup>

Marcuse argued that tolerance is repressive (and is administered pseudo-tolerance and intolerance) when there are "indoctrinated individuals who parrot,"<sup>71</sup> so that alternative voices are not present, and when monopolies and ideologies dominate the media and the public sphere.

But with the concentration of economic and political power and the integration of opposites in a society which uses technology as an instrument of domination, effective dissent is blocked where it could freely emerge: in the formation of opinion, in information and communication, in speech and assembly.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 290.

<sup>68</sup> Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* [MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, chap. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*, chap. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 90.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

The consequence of all of this is that “tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society.”<sup>73</sup>

Social media in capitalist society has taken repressive tolerance to a new level. The engaging/connecting/sharing ideology often associated with social media presents these forms of communication as pure freedom, in which everyone can participate without constraints, where everyone can speak, be visible, be heard, and be seen—thereby, the image of a tolerant, free and pluralist society is conveyed. Capitalist social media’s tolerance is, however, a form of repressive tolerance. Social media ideology tries to hide the repressive character of censorship and power asymmetry that is at play.

The difference between broadcasting and social media is that in the first kind of medium there are centers that control the dissemination of information. In social media, every consumer of information can be a producer who creates and disseminates information. It is, however, mere semblance and ideological appearance that the emergence of prosumption democratizes the media because not everyone owns Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and there are hierarchies of reputation, visibility, and voice on these media.

Is Twitter really a tolerant, free, and pluralist medium that allows you “to connect with people, express yourself and discover what’s happening” and that gives “everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly”?<sup>74</sup> *How many followers do you have on Twitter?* A few hundred? Or if you are really very active, maybe you have 2,000 followers? 2,000? Not bad, that’s just 53,943,079 fewer followers than Katy Perry! So, who has the largest number of followers? See Table 2 for the answer: celebrities and online platforms operated by the world’s largest advertising and online companies (Google and Facebook).

Rank	User	Role	Followers
1	Katy Perry	Singer	53,945,079
2	Justin Bieber	Singer	52,463,662
3	Barack Obama	Politician	43,378,939
4	YouTube	Web platform	42,598,158
5	Lady Gaga	Singer	41,536,612
6	Taylor Swift	Singer	41,511,366
7	Britney Spears	Singer	37,702,978
8	Rihanna	Singer	35,791,889
9	Instagram	Web platform	33,274,744
10	Justin Timberlake	Singer	32,694,810

**Table 2: The Users with the Largest Number of Followers on Twitter**

Source: Twitter Counter, <http://twitaholic.com/>, accessed on June 27, 2014.

*Do you have a Facebook page that users can like?* How many “likes” does your page have? Maybe 5,000, if your page is really doing well. That’s just 459,573,017 fewer “likes” than the page “Facebook for Every Phone” has. What are the most “liked” pages on Facebook? See Table 3 for the answer: apps and WWW technologies operated by the world’s largest Internet and advertising companies (Google and Facebook), celebrities, and a soft drink company.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>74</sup> Twitter, <https://about.twitter.com/company>, accessed on April 10, 2014.



<b>Rank</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Likes</b>
1	Facebook for Every Phone	App	459,578,017
2	Facebook	WWW platform	153,263,157
3	Shakira	Singer	97,981,993
4	Eminem	Singer	90,499,491
5	Rihanna	Singer	88,401,628
6	Cristiano Ronaldo	Footballer	88,263,095
7	Coca-Cola	Drink	84,193,944
8	YouTube	WWW platform	81,398,634
9	Vin Diesel	Actor	79,339,029
10	Michael Jackson	Singer	75,846,710

**Table 3: The Facebook Pages with the Largest Number of Likes**

Source: Socialbakers, <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-pages/>, accessed on June 27, 2014.

Does Facebook really give you the “the power to share and to make the world more open and connected”?<sup>75</sup> The reality is that these are empty promises and that hierarchies of ownership and reputation create asymmetries of voice and visibility. As a consequence, some are more connected, visible, read and heard, retweeted, reposted than others, which in turn cements and advances status hierarchies. The tolerance, freedom, and plurality that social media promise in capitalism turn out to form an ideology. Tolerance, freedom, and plurality are repressive in a social media world that operates within a capitalist society.

Social media ideology constitutes an antagonism between social media’s essence and appearance: the very essence and task of the media is to bring people together; however, capitalist reality that social media’s sociality foster new forms of exploitation, commodification, individualism, and individual private property. Social media ideology makes social media appear as something purely positive; it splits off the negative reality of domination and exploitation from social media. It makes social media one-dimensional and is a form of reductionist technological rationality that justifies the instrumentalization of humans’ activities for capitalist purposes by disguising exploitation as sociality, fun, and play.

## **5. Herbert Marcuse, the Logic of Essence, and Social Media**

Marcuse has argued that the Nazis’ notion of essence, which sees the Jews’ nature as being parasitic, greedy, and money-oriented, is based on particularism and is therefore opposed to the

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<sup>75</sup> Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookUK/info>, accessed on April 10, 2014.

Hegelian and Marxian notion of essence, which assumes the existence of universal qualities of humans and society.<sup>76</sup> For Hegel, essence is not a particularistic, but a universalistic concept. “The Absolute is the Essence.”<sup>77</sup> “Essence [is] the ground of existence.”<sup>78</sup> “The ground is the unity of identity and difference.... It is essence put explicitly as a totality.”<sup>79</sup>

In Marx’s philosophical writings, Hegelian essence is interpreted as sociality and cooperation. “The individual is *the social being*.”<sup>80</sup> “By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals.”<sup>81</sup> The implication of this assumption is that cooperation is something that all humans share, that capitalism alienates cooperative potentials, and that societal conditions should be created that allow all humans to participate, to have equally realized rights, and to live in equity. It is this stress on universal equity that led to the Nazis’ hostility towards Hegel and Marx. So, for example, in the main work by Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazis’ primary ideologist, Hegel was opposed because for him the state was a universal concept. Rosenberg argued that Hegel’s and Marx’s writings were foreign to the notion of blood (*blutfremd*), whereas Rosenberg celebrated Nietzsche as someone who destroyed all values and stood for the breeding of a higher race (*rassische Hochzucht*).<sup>82</sup> Marcuse summarized the Nazi’s opposition towards Hegel’s universalism:

The state as reason—that is, as a rational whole, governed by universally valid laws, calculable and lucid in its operation, professing to protect the essential interest of every individual without discrimination—this form of state is precisely what National Socialism cannot tolerate.<sup>83</sup>

An alternative to postmodern relativism and fascist naturalism is to assume, as Marcuse does, that there are universal human characteristics such as sociality, cooperation, or the desire for wealth, happiness, freedom, reason; that conditions should be created that allow the universal realization of these qualities, that societies that do not guarantee the realization of these human potentials are false societies; and that consciousness that wants to perpetuate such false societal conditions is false consciousness. Such a form of universalism is not totalitarian, but should be read as a form of humanism that struggles for universal equity. Only the assumption that there is something positive that all humans have in common allows the envisioning of a state where all humans are guaranteed equal fundamental rights. Such essential conditions are not given and envisioned automatically. They have historical character; and, under given economic, political, cultural, and technological conditions, they can be reached to a certain degree. Humans have the ability to struggle and to act consciously in transformative ways. Therefore, each societal epoch is shaped by the question *if humans will or will not act to create and realize the epoch’s inherent and dynamically developing potentials or not*. They shape and potentially enhance the space of possibilities and, at the same time, act or do not act to realize these created possibilities. Human essentials are substantial, if they are achieved or not.

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<sup>76</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*.

<sup>77</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic: being part one of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) §112.

<sup>78</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on Logic: Berlin, 1831*, trans. Clark Butler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 132.

<sup>79</sup> Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic*, §121.

<sup>80</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. and trans. Martin Milligan (1844; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 105; emphasis in original. This Dover edition is an unabridged republication of the work originally published by Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, in 1961.

<sup>81</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (1846; New York: International Publishers, 2004), 50.

<sup>82</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20 (des zwanzigsten) Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen, 1930), 525.

<sup>83</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 413.

To which extent they can be realized and how they develop is completely historical, which means that their realization is based on human agency.

[In Marx's works] the negativity of reality becomes a *historical* condition which cannot be hypostatized as a metaphysical state of affairs.... The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it.... Truth, in short, is not a realm apart from historical reality, nor a region of eternally valid ideas.... Not the slightest natural necessity or automatic inevitability guarantees the transition from capitalism to socialism.... The revolution requires the maturity of many forces, but the greatest among them is the subjective force, namely, the revolutionary class itself. The realization of freedom and reason requires the free rationality of those who achieve it. Marxian theory is, then, incompatible with fatalistic determinism.<sup>84</sup>

Marcuse anticipated the critique of postmodern relativism when he argued in 1936 for a Marxist notion of essence: "A theory that wants to eradicate from science the concept of essence succumbs to helpless relativism, thus promoting the very powers whose reactionary thought it wants to combat."<sup>85</sup> It makes practical political sense to argue that there is a truth immanent in society that is not automatically realized and that this truth is given in the need and possibility of a good life for all. Oppression takes on different forms and contexts, and oppressed individuals and groups frequently stand in contradictory relations to each other. Truth is subdivided into partial truths that are interconnected. Oppressed groups and individuals share common interests because they are all confronted by the same global system of oppression, at the same time they also have differing sub-interests because oppression is contextualized in many forms. What is needed is a differentiated unity, a form of politics that is based on unity in diversity.

For Hegel, the essence of things means that they have fundamental characteristics and qualities as such that frequently are different from their appearance. Truth, for Hegel, is the direct correspondence of essence and existence, only true existence is real and reasonable. In Marxism, (especially) Marcuse has taken up Hegel's notion of essence and has stressed that essence is connected to possibilities and that a true society is one that realizes the possibilities that are enabled by structural aspects such as technological forces, economic productivity, political power relations, and worldviews. Essence in society is connected with what humans could be.<sup>86</sup> In this context, Ernst Bloch utilizes the ontological category of "not yet" in order to signify concrete potentials that can be realized, but have not yet been attained.<sup>87</sup> Marcuse gives the following definition of the essence of man and society:

Connecting at its roots the problem of essence to social practice restructures the concept of essence in its relation to all other concepts by orienting it toward the essence of *man*.... Here the concept of what could be, of inherent possibilities, acquires a precise meaning. What man can be in a given historical situation is determinable with regard to the following factors: the measure of control of natural and social productive forces, the level of the organization of labor, the development of needs in relation to possibilities for their fulfillment (especially the relation of what is necessary for the reproduction of life to the "free" needs

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<sup>84</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 314-315, 318-319; emphasis in original.

<sup>85</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 45.

<sup>86</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence."

<sup>87</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (3 vols. 1938-1947; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959); Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

for gratification and happiness, for the “good and the beautiful”), the availability, as material to be appropriated, of a wealth of cultural values in all areas of life.<sup>88</sup>

For Marcuse, ethics is connected with questions of what can and should be because society can reduce pain, misery, and injustice<sup>89</sup> and use existing resources and capacities in ways that satisfy human needs in the best possible way and that minimize hard labor.<sup>90</sup> A false condition of society or of a social system would mean that its actuality and its potentiality differ. Marcuse stresses that in capitalism oppressed humans are alienated because they do not possess the means of production and the fruits thereby produced. He says that alienation means that humans and society are alienated from their essence. The sublation of the alienation of labor and humans by establishing a realm of freedom means the realization of the human and social essence. One can read the works of Marx as a deconstruction of ideology, the identification of potentials that strengthen the realization of human freedom, and the suggestion that humans should act in ways that realize potentials that increase the cooperative character of society. Here both chance and necessity are important. Existing structures, social relations and forces of production in economy, polity, and culture, determine certain potentials of societal development (necessity). The human being in its social practices realizes potentials by creating actuality (chance). Freedom here is freedom to create novelty that is conditioned (enabled and constrained) by societal reality. Marx’s works can be interpreted as ethics of liberation and cooperation in so far as they suggest that humans should act in ways that bring society closer to the latter’s cooperative essence. Marx’s stress on socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*) shows that he sees cooperation as an essential societal phenomenon and considers the realm of freedom as the realization of the cooperative essence of society. This is what Marx means when he speaks, for example, of “the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his *human*, i.e., *social* mode of existence,”<sup>91</sup> the “complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being,”<sup>92</sup> “the *positive* transcendence of *private property as human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation of the human* essence by and for man.”<sup>93</sup> For Marx, cooperation is an objective principle that results in a categorical imperative that in contrast to Kant stresses the need for an integrative democracy and to overthrow all relations of domination and exploitation.

Such a reading of the Marxian works implies the ethics of cooperation. Cooperation is a type of social relationship for achieving social integration that is different from competition. Cooperation is a specific type of communication and social relationship, in which actors achieve a shared understanding of social phenomena, make concerted use of resources so that new systemic qualities emerge, engage in mutual learning, all actors benefit, and feel at home and comfortable in the social system that they jointly construct. Cooperation in this sense is (or at least can be visualized as being) the *highest principle of morality*; it is the foundation of an objective dimension of ethics—cooperative ethics. All human beings strive for happiness, social security, self-determination, self-realization, inclusion in social systems so that they can participate in decision processes, codesigning their social systems. Competition means that certain individuals and groups benefit at the expense of others; there is an unequal access to structures of social systems. Such is the dominant organizational structure of modern society; hence, modern society is an excluding society. Cooperation as it is understood here includes people in social systems. It lets them participate in decisions and establishes a more just distribution of and access to resources. Hence, cooperation is a way of achieving and realizing basic human needs. Competition, in contrast, is a way of achieving and realizing basic human needs only for certain groups and by excluding others. In sum, cooperation forms the essence of

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<sup>88</sup> Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” 72; emphasis in original.

<sup>89</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Ethik und Revolution,” in *Schriften*, vol. 8, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), 106.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>91</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 103; emphasis in original.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 102; emphasis in original.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

human society, whereas competition alienates humans from their essence. For Hegel, essence means:

Things really are not what they immediately show themselves. There is therefore something more to be done than merely rove from one quality to another, and merely to advance from qualitative to quantitative, and vice versa: there is a permanent in things, and that permanent is in the first instance their Essence.<sup>94</sup>

Essence is “the *sum total of all realities.*”<sup>95</sup> “The truth of being is essence,” essence is the “background [that] constitutes the truth of being.”<sup>96</sup>

One can imagine a society that functions without competition. A society without competition is still a society. One cannot imagine a society that functions without a certain degree of cooperation and social activity. A society without cooperation is not a society. It is a state of permanent warfare, egoism, and mutual destruction that sooner or later destroys all human existence. If cooperation is the essence of society, then a truly human society is a cooperative society. Full cooperation is just another formulation for participatory democracy. Cooperation as the highest principle of morality is grounded in society and social activity itself. It can be rationally explained within society, and, to do so, there is no need to refer to a highest transcendental absolute principle, such as God, which cannot be justified within society. Cooperative ethics is a critique of lines of thought and arguments that want to advance exclusion and heteronomy in society. It is inherently critical. It subjects commonly accepted ideas, conventions, traditions, prejudices, and myths to critical questioning. It questions mainstream opinions and voices alternatives to them in order to avoid one-dimensional thinking and strengthen complex, dialectical, multi-dimensional thinking. Cooperation is the immanent essence of all societies. It is the ground of human existence. Competitive class societies estrange society from its very essence. To transcend estrangement and the false state of society means to constitute transcendental political projects that struggle for the abolition of domination so that the immanent essence of society can be realized. This transcendence is grounded in society itself, in the cooperation process of humans. It is an immanent transcendence.

The notion of immanent transcendence as the dialectic of essence and existence is based on Hegel’s notion of truth and actuality as correspondence of essence and existence. “Actuality is the unity, become immediate, of essence with existence, or of inward with outward.”<sup>97</sup> Not all existence (*Sein*) is actual (*Wirklichkeit*). Only existence that is reasonable, corresponds to its essence and therefore has become true, is actual. Marx saw the lack of control of the means of production, of the labor process, and of the results of labor by the immediate producers as an alienation of society and humans from their essence.

Estranged labour turns thus...*Man’s species being*, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being *alien* to him, into a *means* to his *individual existence*. It estranges man’s own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his *human being*.<sup>98</sup>

One of the first critical scholars to have seen the logic of essence as foundation of immanent transcendence in the twentieth century is Marcuse:

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<sup>94</sup> Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic* §112.

<sup>95</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic* (1812; London: Routledge, 2010), §810; emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, §807.

<sup>97</sup> Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic*, §142.

<sup>98</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 76; emphasis in original.

The fact from which the critique and the interpretation set out was the alienation and estrangement of the human essence as expressed in the alienation and estrangement of labor, and hence the situation of man in the historical facticity of capitalism. This fact appears as the total inversion and concealment of what the critique had defined as the essence of man and human labor.... Regarding the situation and praxis from the standpoint of the history of man's essence makes the acutely practical nature of the critique even more trenchant and sharp: the fact that capitalist society calls into question not only economic facts and objects but the entire "existence" of man and "human reality" is for Marx the decisive justification for the proletarian revolution as *total and radical* revolution, unconditionally excluding any partial upheaval or "evolution." The justification does not lie outside or behind the concepts of alienation and estrangement—the justification is rather precisely this alienation and estrangement itself.<sup>99</sup>

C. B. Macpherson's theory of participatory democracy is also based on the Marxian notion of essence. He considers the essence of humans as "the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgement and action, for aesthetic creation or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and, sometimes, for religious experience" (that is, human developmental power).<sup>100</sup> Participatory democracy would be the realization of human essence, which would presuppose the sublation of private property and the technological maximization of free time.

Capitalist social media are founded on an antagonism between essence and existence: they promise to advance human sociality—sharing, communication, collaboration, and community—but, by doing so in a particular form, they advance the exploitation of human labor, the domination of the capitalist class, capital accumulation that spurs inequality in society,<sup>101</sup> and a particularistic one-dimensional ideology that only stresses social media's potentials and neglects its negative realities. Social media's capitalist existence thereby comes into contradiction with the very social essence that it promises. At the same time, social media is not pure exploitation, domination, and ideology. It advances the contradiction between the class relations and the social relations of communication as means of production. Facebook, Google, and Twitter have potentials to enhance human life's sociality by providing new, more intense and extended forms of sharing, communication, collaboration, and community; however, these potentials are limited by social media's capitalist and class character. Truly social media require a noncapitalist framework *as well as* a qualitative redesign. Social media are an expression of how capitalism produces germs of communism that turn into their own opposite and deepen capitalist exploitation and domination. Social media's essence can therefore only be realized by users' revolution that struggles for truly social media.

## 6. Conclusion

Marcuse has grounded a critical theory in that which is dialectical, practical, and humanistic; it is oriented in structural contradictions (just like contradiction through class struggle); it takes

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<sup>99</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," [1932], in *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 104, 91-92; emphasis in original.

<sup>100</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 4.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Christian Fuchs, "Thomas Piketty's Book 'Capital in the Twenty-First Century', Karl Marx and the Political Economy of the Internet," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12, no. 1 (2014): 413-430.

ideology (just like the potentials for its overcoming) seriously; and, it connects the dialectics of capitalism to the dialectics of communication and technology.

This paper has tried to show that although Marcuse's works predate Facebook, Twitter, Google, and similar WWW platforms, his critical theory can today provide an epistemology, method, and political impetus for understanding and changing capitalist social media's antagonisms, class structures, and ideologies.

The reality of social media in capitalism shows the "the tension between potentiality and actuality, between what men and things could be and what they are in fact."<sup>102</sup> Social media points towards and is a material foundation of a communist society, in which the means of physical and informational production are collectively controlled, but its reality contradicts this potential and the human essence of co-operation by fostering new forms of exploitation and ideology.

Critical theory is *ethical*. It has a "concern with human happiness."<sup>103</sup> It is a *critique of domination and exploitation*. It holds that "man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society."<sup>104</sup> Corporate social media fosters human play, sociality, fun, and happiness in appearance only because it at the same time hides the reality of exploitation. It inverts the commodity fetishism so that the commodity logic is hidden behind social benefits that foster the exploitation of digital labor. At the same time, the use-value dimension of social media points towards communist forms of ownership, control, democracy, and communication and has this anticipatory character; however, these communist potentials are limited by the capitalist reality of social media.

If, for instance, it is said that concepts such as wages, the value of labor, and entrepreneurial profit are only categories of manifestations behind which are hidden the "essential relations" of a second set of concepts, it is also true that these essential relations represent the truth of the manifestations only insofar as the concepts which comprehend them already contain their own negation and transcendence—the image of a social organization without surplus value. All materialist conceptions contain an accusation and an imperative. When the imperative has been fulfilled, when practice has created men's new social organization, the new essence of man appears in reality.<sup>105</sup>

The concept of social media is a manifestation of class society. It hides its own communist potential and ideologically presents the reality of the exploitation of digital labor as truth, play, fun, democracy, wealth, revolution, rebellion, and participation. Social media as a concept also points towards its own unrealized essence—a truly social and cooperative society that can never be attained under capitalist rule and in a class society. The capitalist reality of social media contradicts its own essence.

Marcuse's critical theory is a dialectical theory in many respects. One of these dimensions is his focus on political praxis as dialectical struggle for democratic communism and against capitalism. In the world of social media, this means that we have not yet attained social media, but that there are potentials in the media and society today for achieving truly *social* media and overcoming the particularisms that limit human life. Reading Marcuse today reminds us that truly social media and a true society are still possible and can be attained in and through revolutionary social struggles.

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<sup>102</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 69.

<sup>103</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 135.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>105</sup> Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," 86.

Marcuse's theory is not just political in that it provides a political-economic analysis of the repressive organization of economy, politics, and culture. It is also political because it deeply cares about political subjects and struggles and the way revolutionary subjectivity is articulated, constrained, repressed, and withheld. Marcuse analyzed and politically related especially to the working class movement, the student movement, feminism, the environmental movement, and the Civil Rights movement. Near the end of his life, Marcuse summarized his assessment of the political movements of his time by writing that "movements such as the worker opposition, citizens' initiatives, communes, student protests, are authentic forms of rebellion determined by the particular social situation, counter-blows against the centralization and totalization of the apparatus of domination."<sup>106</sup> He argued that "the anti-authoritarian movement, the ecology movement, and the women's movement" are "the manifestation (still very unorganized and diffuse) of an instinctual structure, the ground of a transformed consciousness which is shaking the domination of the performance principle and of alienated productivity."<sup>107</sup>

The capitalist crisis that started in 2008 conditioned new struggles and expressions of political subjectivity. These included especially far-left, fascist, and religious fundamentalist movements all over the world. In European countries, fascist and far-right groups and parties have been growing, whereas the strengthening of the Left has had particular significance in Southern Europe (e.g., Greece, Portugal, Spain) and has expressed itself in other parts of Europe in the form of anti-austerity, Occupy, and student movements. A decisive political task is to weaken the far-right forces and to strengthen the Left in order to fill the void that the convergence of social democracy and conservatives (accompanied by a strengthening of far-right forces) has created.

In this context, an often-discussed question has been what roles social media and the Internet play in new forms of political struggle all over the world.<sup>108</sup> The positions range *from techno-euphoric celebrations* that see new struggles such as the Arab Spring as revolutions 2.0 and as Facebook or Twitter revolutions *to outright neglect and denial* of any media-dimension of contemporary protests (as in "Protests take place on the streets and occupations on the square, not on the Internet."). A more nuanced dialectical position—that can be backed up by empirical research—is that digital and social media are in contradictory dialectical ways connected to political movements: there is a contradiction between movements' use of commercial and noncommercial social media and a dialectic of online and offline communication, in which activists who are on the streets and in the squares use face-to-face communication and online media in mutually enhancing ways for protest information, communication, and mobilization.<sup>109</sup> Commercial social media pose new potentials for protest mobilization as well as new risks such as corporate and state surveillance and control of movements. The point is that we understand the contradictions these media entail and that we find institutionalized ways of support for alternative, critical, noncommercial and nonprofit media—with money, work, personnel, infrastructure, time, and space. The task is to create critical, alternative media as counter-institutions, which requires "working against the established institutions, while working in them."<sup>110</sup> Specifically in the realm of social media, this means that we need our own alternatives to Google, Facebook, and Twitter that are controlled and run by users. Achieving this aim requires political and institutional reforms, support by left-wing parties, groups, and

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<sup>106</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Protosocialism and Late Capitalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis Based on Bahro's Analysis," in *Rudolf Bahro: Critical Responses*, ed. Ulf Wolter (White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1980), 46.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>108</sup> For overviews, see Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *OccupyMedia! The Occupy Movement and Social Media in Crisis Capitalism*; and Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>109</sup> Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>110</sup> Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 55.



governments as well as media reforms. Radical reforms of the media system are urgently needed for this purpose.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Christian Fuchs, "Social Media and the Public Sphere," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12, no. 1 (2014): 57-101.