BUILDING UP CRITICAL THEORY OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: INCOMPLETE MISSION

by

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Fuchs, Ch. 2008, Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age, Routledge, New York and Abingdon, x and 398 pp.

1. THE PROMISE AND PREREQUISITES

Up to the present time, authors researching on the Internet have been working more or less explicitly within the epistemological framework of information society theory. If we agree on living in an emerging information society which is different from the social arrangements of the past, would it imply that we are in need of a new general social theory? With this question in mind, the title of Fuchs' book Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age looks very promising.

The book starts with important statements to which I will return later in the critical discussion: "The Internet is ubiquitous in everyday life." (p. 1) and "Computerized network technologies change all areas of society ..." (p. 4). Only by accepting these statements can we understand Fuchs's line of reasoning and his emphasis on the importance of the Internet in future social change.

The structure of the table of contents resembles other notable books on the Internet and society (e.g., Castells, M. 2001, The Internet Galaxy, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Van Dijk, J. 2006, The Network Society, 2nd ed., Sage, London). Theoretical foundations are laid and defended in the first three chapters. The next chapter contains an analysis of the development of the Internet to which the author's theoretical perspective is applied. In the

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fifth chapter, theories on the contemporary form of capitalism are recapitulated to clarify the type of socioeconomic formation of today. The following four chapters subsequently focus on the four basic subsystems of the Internet and society relation (see below).

Prior to this book, Fuchs published mostly on the information society and the Internet from the perspective of both system theory and critical theory. This is noteworthy because the systematic use of these approaches has been marginal in analyzing the role of the Internet in contemporary social change (cf., Webster, F. 2006, Theories of the information society, 3rd ed., Routledge, London and New York). Here, the author takes on the demanding task of analyzing the Internet-society relation by employing an epistemologically questionable combination of these approaches. The most important problem seems to be to set up a social theory that would not only allow him to describe both current social dynamics as well as logic, but that would also provide the reader with scientifically based normativity. This would help to guide both individual action as well as social movements on the way to sublating capitalism and bringing up cooperative, decentralized, informational, and participatory democracy at the global level (cf., pp. 7, 31-34, 350-353). To achieve this, Fuchs tries to distinguish himself from authors who omit the creative role of human capacity in shaping the conditions of social existence. On the one side it concerns authors who, in the process of transforming and applying Marx's ideas, were naturalizing the idea of radical social change (especially Lenin, Stalin, and Mao; cf., pp. 21-22, 347). On the other side it concerns authors who argued against the people's capability to design and control society in its entirety (especially Luhmann and Hayek; cf. pp. 23-40). Arguments are mostly based on references to Hegel, Marx, Marcuse, and on author's interpretation of self-organization theory. To avoid being criticized for similarity with Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems, in which human bodies are intentionally absent, Fuchs pays special attention to interpreting and defending self-organization as a dialectical process enacted by creative humans whose "… practices produce and reproduce structures that enable and constrain further practices" (p. 336). Evolution is enacted and new structures emerge through this two-way process, which he applies also to the relation between the Internet and society (pp. 2, 122). Fuchs is extensively claiming that his approach is in fact a continuation and a realization of dialectical philosophy that we can find in the work of Engels and Marx (p. 17-23). To support the case, Bourdieu's the-

ory of practice and Giddens' structuration theory are introduced as corresponding with his model (pp. 40-62).

The normativity used by Fuchs throughout this book is based mainly on distinguishing two modes of the social being, i.e. cooperation and competition. He goes against constructionist tradition and legacy of existentialism by claiming that "cooperation forms the Essence of human society and that competition estranges humans from their Essence" (p. 33). Aside of referring to Marx and Hegel, his argument for this claim is based on the idea of cooperation as a cohesive force, a substance of social self-organization, and a natural aspect of human relations (pp. 31-34). As "(i)n modern society individuals and groups compete for the control and accumulation of structural resources, which separates society into classes ... , ... modern society is not a fully developed society, its existence doesn't correspond to its Essence, and individuals and society are alienated from the immanent Essence of society" (p. 71). Therefore, competition in itself is an alienating and excluding force which is immoral and objectionable (cf., p. 33).

2. CORRUPTED SUSTAINABILITY, ECONOMY, WORK, POLITICS AND INCLUSION: CAPITALISM IS TO BE BLAMED

There have been plenty of conceptualizations of the nature of contemporary societies accompanied by diverse adjectives such as knowledge, postindustrial, postmodern, informational, network, virtual, etc. "In order to avoid an affirmative ideological functionalization of such concepts and to give them a critical twist" (p. 340), Fuchs promotes the term "transnational informational/network capitalism" to point out the key attributes of present societies (p. 71, chapter 4). As capitalism is the system of competition, alienation, and exploitation (p. 75), "(m)odern society is shaped by an antagonism between cooperation and competition" (p. 97). Thereafter, modern society can be analyzed as a set of interrelated subsystems in which this antagonism takes specific forms of concrete risks and opportunities. Fuchs is analyzing four selected subsystems focusing on their dialectical relation with the Internet, i.e. the ecological, the economic, the political, and the cultural system.

In chapter six, Fuchs concentrates on the question of sustainability from the perspective of risks and opportunities that the development of the Internet poses to "the ecosphere". On the one side, ICTs offer the possibility of lowering the ecological burden of transportation and production due to

telework and the virtualization of the production process. However on the other side, ICT's use is accompanied by an increase in travelling, energy consumption, emissions, and waste. According to Fuchs, ICTs cannot fulfill its ecological potential because it is hindered by the very logic of capitalism (pp. 140-146). To bring "a sustainable information society" into existence, "the destructive character of the economy must be sublated" (p. 146).

In the seventh chapter, Fuchs is arguing against present autonomy in the workplace as a new ideology of discipline and control (pp.148-149), teamwork in transnational enterprises as a "cooperation for competition and profit" (p. 154), monopolies in the information industry (pp. 168-171, 186), and class competition in the informational capitalism producing new forms of exploitation (pp. 189-209). Grounded in Marx's labor theory of value, Fuchs criticizes the commodification of information/knowledge products (pp. 175-177) and blames all parts of the economy profiting from business with information (music industry, mass media industry, software industry, etc.) for selling their goods "at prices that are much higher than the commodity values" (p. 209). As an alternative, Fuchs develops and promotes the idea of gift economy as an economic model based on information sharing, cooperative ownership and decision-making, horizontal networking, self-realization, and the absence of exploitation (pp. 161-164, 185-189).

Concerning the political system, the antagonism takes the form of struggle between "eParticipation" and "eDomination" (p. 213). The latter reveal itself through digital divide, information warfare, and new forms of sprawling electronic surveillance. On the other side of barricades, grassroots digital democracy and cyberprotests embody the chance of overcoming established hierarchical, elitist, and exclusive forms of government. To overcome digital exclusion, Fuchs proposes "the strategy of dialectical integrationism" based on synchronous technological, societal, and political measures "that can support local societal development and are in line with local knowledge and needs" (p. 224).

According to Fuchs, the inclusive aspect of the Internet can be seen for example in its evolution from "a tool for thought" in the beginning of the nineties ("Web 1.0") through "Web 2.0" as a medium of communication to presently emerging "Web 3.0", which function as a tool for cooperation and participation (pp. 123-136). On this technological basis, the subsystems of cyberculture emerge in the form of virtual communities. Paralleling the evolution of virtual communities with the evolution of the socializing di-

mension of the Internet, Fuchs creates interesting three step dialectical mod-
el of togetherness emergence (pp. 308-312). Within this historical and con-
ceptual context can we understand Fuchs claiming that "the information so-
ciety has potentials for cooperation that provide a foundation for the full
realization of the immanent essence of society—cooperation" (p. 7).

3. THE SHORTCOMINGS OF BUILDING INSUFFICIENTLY CRITICAL CRITICAL THEORY

This effort to constitute critical theory of the Internet is praiseworthy and
can serve as a good starting point for further elaboration. Nonetheless, to
preserve Fuchs' assumptions of what is good and what is evil while trying
to make them fit his theoretical model, he often favors normativity to reality
thus weakening his critical stance. For example, one can be in awe that
"happiness and satisfaction ... are only achievable for a small privileged
elite" (p. 43). Also, he claims that email communication as a part of Web 2.0
emerged fully around 2005 (pp. 125-129) whereas email started to be used
by the majority of computer users during the seventies. Concerning criti-
cism, one can ask why Fuchs does not question the universal need for ICTs
and why does he claim the universal use of the Internet both a fact (see p. 1)
as well as the prerequisite for the elimination of poverty and social inequal-
ity (pp. 221, 223). From this perspective, his endeavor to conceptualize a
true ecological alternative via promoting ICTs sounds embarrassedly. One
can easily object by questioning, how tightly the Internet itself is linked to
capitalism and its treadmill of consumption?

One can also wonder about the role of Marx's authority in the argument-
ation style. To actualize Marx in the context of informational capitalism is
undoubtedly a meritorious act. Still, to use his work as unquestioned and
unsurpassed source of truth can be easily seen as quite outdated (the same
goes for Engels and Marcuse). Especially problematic are the parts con-
cerned with the functioning of capitalism and information pricing. These
parts are based almost exclusively on references to Marx, but fail to take the
Post-Marx development of economic theory into account (see e.g., pp. 74-76,
174-177). For this reason, Fuchs' critique of mass media and software in-
dustry based on Marx's labor theory of value could be easily questioned.

Considering the major categories of the book, i.e. competition and co-
operation, it would certainly help to treat them as Idealtypen that should
not be mistaken with reality. In other case, as can be seen throughout the

book, one can get easily trapped when trying to find out whether concrete set of social practice is in its essence cooperative or competitive. In this book, it gets particularly problematic when analyzing the organization of human activities since in every collective activity these two aspects are inseparably intertwined.

In my opinion, the most contributive part of the text can be found in the set of overviews and typologies of digital divide policies, information warfare analyses, and digital democracy concepts (pp. 213-266). In spite of mentioned weaker moments, I see the prime value of this book in providing the reader with an overwhelming number of motives to think over the problems and possibilities of the emerging critical theory of the information society. However, its promise still lingers unfulfilled as this attempt remains doubly cought in the hindering discursive webs of old-style critical theory and the ideology of inherently good Internet.