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# Capitalism and the Media: Moral Economy, Well-Being and Capabilities

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## Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the renewal of consideration of media and culture under capitalism, by seeking solid normative foundations for critique via various compatible elements: moral economy, well-being understood as flourishing, Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and the value of culture. Insufficient attention has been paid to normative and conceptual issues concerning capitalism, media and culture. Moral economy approaches might help fill this gap by valuably providing a richly critical ethics-based approach to economy and society, compatible with the best political economy. Two further concepts, compatible with moral economy, can reinvigorate and renew critique of capitalism, media and culture. The first is a particular (Aristotelian) conception of well-being, understood as flourishing. This is outlined, and its potential contribution to critique of media and culture under capitalism is explicated. The second is capabilities, which can provide a basis for dealing with different understandings of flourishing. The article outlines the capabilities approach, analyses rare applications of it to media and culture, and explains how these applications might be built upon, by developing Nussbaum's work in a way that could ground critique in an understanding of the potential value of media and culture in contributing to people's flourishing.

**Keywords:** capitalism and media, moral economy, capabilities, well-being, flourishing, value of culture, ethical turn, Nussbaum

## Article

Not so long ago, capitalism was a concept largely ignored in public discourse and social science, other than by Marxists. Things have changed since the turn of the century. Faced with the prospect of devastating climate change, growing inequality and the

devotion of vast resources to goods and services that do not seem to answer to meaningful human needs, capitalism itself has come under scrutiny. Academics, journalists, and even the Pope have weighed in. Some accounts have achieved a remarkable degree of attention, acclaim and sales (such as Piketty, 2014). As a result, debates about capitalism are perhaps now more diverse, contested and confusing than ever. The plethora of commentary seems not to have significantly restrained the pursuit of unbridled capitalism. But there is now widespread acceptance that capitalism is a meaningful way to describe a vital systemic aspect of the world in which we live, and a growing appreciation that a fuller critical understanding of this mysterious entity might be helpful for humanity.

It is not clear however that there has been a similar growth in attention to capitalism in recent debates about culture and about the communication media. This is in spite of the fact that developments in these realms seem to confirm a sense of capitalism's onward march, and in some respects are at the core of recent changes in capitalism. In particular, the rise of the internet and mobile communication emerged from a new and evolving type of capitalist activity, centred on Silicon Valley, which presented itself as benign, and was accepted as such by many commentators. The social media produced by Silicon Valley have further fuelled the continuing growth of promotional communication, including the rise of 'self-branding', an increasing insertion of competitive behaviour into people's efforts at self-realisation. In media and cultural policy, the view that very lightly regulated markets are the most efficient and ethical way to allocate resources and co-ordinate economic activity has gained ground to a remarkable degree. It has been manifested in attacks on public service media, and in cultural policy's fostering of 'creative industries', in the interests of economic growth, rather than for their contribution to well-being, or other non-economic goals.

Of course, there have been many valuable treatments of the above developments, and other related ones too (more on this below). But rather few of them draw explicitly and/or substantially on theories of capitalism to conceptualise their analyses. Fewer still, I shall argue below, have linked a serious effort to understand capitalism with explicit sustained discussion of how *evaluations* of it might be grounded. No doubt this lack partly derives from genuine difficulties. There are many plausible competing understandings of capitalism. And how does one assess something that, in some

conceptions, seems to be everywhere and everything– and therefore nowhere and nothing in particular? (The term ‘neoliberalism’ is often used as a substitute, but that by no means solves the problem). These combined difficulties have made it hard for critics of capitalism-media-culture relations to construct reasoned critiques that can transcend divisions on the left, and carry weight beyond it.

This article does not purport to fill this gap by itself – no single article could - but it does aim to contribute to the renewal of consideration of media and communication under capitalism, by seeking solid normative foundations for critique. Rather than go ‘back to Marx’ (a move which, if not performed in a doctrinal way, can undoubtedly be helpful), it follows a different route, by drawing on recent ethically-informed thinking about capitalism and economic life, and on related political theories concerning *justice*. It therefore builds on recent efforts to integrate philosophical and social-theoretical thinking about ethics and values into the study of media, communication and culture (Couldry, 2012; Couldry et al., 2013; Rao and Wasserman, 2015) beyond sometimes conceptually thin treatments of ‘journalistic ethics’. However, this welcome ‘ethical turn’ in the field has paid little attention to capitalism itself, and indeed has neglected political-economic processes and concepts such as markets. It has even had little to say about how we might understand class, gender and ethnicity and other phenomena in relation to capitalism. So the approach here strives for greater synthesis of political economy, cultural studies, social theory and ethics, by drawing upon variants of critical social science known as *moral economy*.

A discussion of how capitalism might be defined will help to clarify the place of ‘economic’ processes and concepts in the approach advocated here, and also explain how this article must necessarily delimit the otherwise foolhardy enterprise of addressing capitalism-media relations as a whole. Cogent definitions of capitalism often centre on two main features: class relations defined by private ownership and property-less workers, and economic coordination organized mainly through decentralized market exchange (Wright, 2010: 34-5). Together, Erik Olin Wright notes, these two features generate the characteristic competitive drive for profit and capital accumulation that produces a striking dynamism relative to all earlier forms of economic organization. However, many students of capitalism now acknowledge the need to understand capitalism in broad terms, recognising the importance of the

economic, but not confining analysis of capitalism to this level. One way to do this is simply to recognise, as Wright (2010: 35) does, that ‘many other institutional arrangements are needed to make capitalism actually work’ besides property, markets and so on. It is possible to develop a non-functionalist understanding of such ‘background conditions’ to capitalism, as Nancy Fraser (2014) does in a recent article, and media and culture could fruitfully be understood as one such set of institutional arrangements, but I cannot pursue that line of enquiry here. Rather, I want to make two simple clarifications on the back of Wright’s definition. One is to recognise that discussion of political economy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for analysis of capitalism, and I will return at the end of this article to how the moral economy of media approach advocated here needs to be conjoined with other ways of understanding communication. The second is that, for reasons of space, I focus here on the issue of *markets*, and hope to address class (understood intersectionally in relation to other aspects of social identity under capitalism) in later work. More specifically, my approach in this article is to suggest ways in which the effects of (proliferating and extending) markets on media and culture might be evaluated, drawing on the ethically-inflected moral economy perspectives mentioned above. This approach concentrates on *the effects of markets on media and culture’s capacity to contribute to human well-being or quality of life*, with ‘well-being’ defined in a specific way that I will explain in due course. Next, though, I need briefly to contextualise my approach with reference to existing approaches to capitalism-media-culture relations, and to expand on my earlier assertions about the neglect of the concept of capitalism in recent media and cultural studies.

### **Approaches to capitalism, media and culture**

For many years, critiques of media and culture in relation to the concept of capitalism were mainly to be found in two categories of writing, broadly understood. One was critical political economy of culture, or media (PEM for short), part of the discipline or field now known as media, communication and cultural studies (or some variation on that term). Developing out of sociology and politics departments, PEM produced numerous important empirically-based critiques of ways in which media were entangled with state and business power in capitalist societies. In some of the most cited texts, however, the concept of capitalism is almost entirely absent (e.g.,

Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Elsewhere capitalism is mentioned frequently, but there is little explicit conceptualisation of capitalism itself or of what the fundamental objections to it might be (e.g., McChesney, 2008; Zhao, 2008). That is not in itself a major criticism of any individual works. But theoretical synthesis attempting normative or explanatory underpinning for political economy's critiques of capitalism was rare (Garnham, 1990; Mosco, 1996 were among the exceptions), and has become rarer with the years.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as a result of this general lack of theoretical and normative ambition, PEM has failed to have much impact on developments in other areas of social theory or cultural theory.

Meanwhile, other areas of media and communication studies influenced more by once-fashionable post-structuralism and cultural studies, have shown little interest in the concept of capitalism, or in political-economic analysis. There, analysis of capitalism was often felt to be tainted by the supposed economic determinism and/or Communist doctrinalism of previous Marxian approaches, and the main writers eventually left behind even neo-Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci and Althusser who were considered unblemished by 'economism'. There was much discussion of 'culture-economy relations', but only outliers such as Gibson-Graham (1996) attempted sustained analysis of the concept of capitalism from a post-structuralist perspective on economic thought. Although the theoretical wing of cultural studies later showed interest in autonomist Marxism, and in new French-theory icons such as Rancière, capitalism has generally been of little interest to cultural studies. The new wave of writing and thinking about capitalism of the last ten years in public discourse and social science has mostly left media, communication and cultural studies untouched.

A second major source of thinking about media and culture in relation to capitalism derived from what might broadly be called critical theory. This tradition began in earnest with the work of writers such as Lukacs and Adorno, who brought together concepts from Marx (who had made only passing comments on culture and communication in his work) with Hegelian and other forms of European philosophy. Adorno remains a towering figure in conceptualisations of capitalism, media and culture, but he has very little interest in capitalism as a political-economic system, and inheritors of his tradition often resort to cant in their dismissals of contemporary culture. The most distinguished living exponents of critical theory in this tradition, Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson, fruitfully draw on theories of subjectivity influenced

by psychoanalysis to explore the cultural contradictions of the capitalist system. But they have almost nothing to say about what are widely regarded as two fundamental features of capitalism itself – markets and class-property relations. What’s more, the critical theory tradition tends to shun explicit engagement with normative debate about economic concepts generally. There may be much invocation of the concept of the commodity, or commodification, but not much clarification of what the problem is. The same is true of autonomist Marxism’s efforts to engage with communication and culture (such as Dyer-Witheford, 1999 and Terranova (2000)’s seminal interventions regarding ‘free’ or unpaid labour). Partly as a result, critical theory of media and culture under capitalism has suffered from normative under-development.<sup>2</sup>

My claim then is that even though there has been some attention to capitalism-media-culture relations, in media and cultural studies there has been a lack of serious theoretical interest in key concepts and processes (notably markets and class), and in difficult normative questions regarding capitalism. How then might moral economy help address those lacks and contribute to a regeneration of critique, on different terms? First of all, what *is* moral economy?

### **The concept of moral economy**

The concept of moral economy refers to the way in which all economies are suffused with values and beliefs about what constitutes proper activity, regarding rights and responsibilities of individuals and institutions, and qualities of goods, service and environment (Sayer, 1999: 68). All economies, then, in this sense, are moral economies. A moral economy *approach* takes this idea seriously, by considering the moral values informing particular economic arrangements and institutions, and providing reasoned evaluation of them. Fundamentally, this is a matter of introducing ethical thought into the study of economic life. One advantage of this tradition is that it takes seriously the problem of *normativity* or making judgements (as opposed to stating facts or providing explanations) in the realm of economic life. Moral economy has tended to thrive most among historians, anthropologists, philosophers and social theorists, rather than among economists, but it has the further strength of taking concepts such as markets seriously by drawing on a much wider range of disciplines and fields than the prevailing ways of understanding capitalism, media and culture discussed above.

The approach emerged in the late twentieth century. In 1994, political scientist William Booth (1994) provided an overview of a 'moral economic school' that had flourished mainly among anthropologists, economic historians and classicists over the previous half century, including a number of writers who did not use the concept of moral economy at all, or only in a passing way, for example, Polanyi's (1957/1944) account of how the development of industrial capitalism led to the 'disembedding' of economic life from social relations, as a new self-regulating market society became dominant. Booth praised moral economy for its efforts to embed studies of economies in 'the wider architecture of the community' and for requiring that accounts of economic life should be centrally informed by the 'question of the good to which the economy and its sustaining institutional nexus are ... subordinate' (1994: 663). But Booth criticised the tendency of Polanyi and other moral economy writers to portray pre-modern societies in romantic terms, neglecting the hierarchical social relations sustained by non-market forms, and understating the degree to which modern market societies were themselves embedded in a 'sustaining institutional and normative nexus', founded on formal (though often not substantive) equality.<sup>3</sup>

More recent moral economy work has avoided some of the pitfalls identified by Booth. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a welcome revival of interest in ethical dimensions of economic life, especially the ethical implications of the expansion of markets and 'market thinking' under contemporary capitalism. Some of this work has crossed the boundaries between academic research and popular publishing (e.g. Sandel, 2013; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012). But the most developed accounts of the potential contribution of moral economy to social-science understandings of economic life, including capitalism as a system, have been provided by Andrew Sayer in a series of articles and book chapters that build on his earlier sympathetic critique of radical political economy from a critical realist position (Sayer, 1995). Here I draw on writings by Sayer (1999, 2000, 2003, 2007) to make three key points about moral economy approaches.

First, as already indicated, moral economy approaches are strongly normative – they seek not only to identify moral principles but to make informed judgements about what is good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust, exploitative and non-exploitative etc. in the realm of economic life. In this respect, in Sayer's terms, moral



economy approaches are part of a broader set of critical social science approaches that provide alternatives to the subjectivism and amoralism of much conventional economic and sociological thought, and to the relativism and crypto-normativity of some post-structuralist and postmodernist perspectives. This emphasis on the normative does not mean that moral economy can or should ignore explanation or empirical detail. But there is an emphasis on paying careful attention to evaluation and its grounding.

Second, a moral economy approach can be seen as a contribution to political economy, rather than as an attempt to supersede it. Moral economy can serve to develop a more adequate and nuanced political economy by exploring normative questions that are often repressed or hurried over. Political economists as different as Adam Smith and Marx were concerned with ethical values (though Marx was scathing about attempts to displace politics by dubious invocations of morality). However, modern political economy approaches, in general and in the realm of media and culture, may have followed liberal economics in understating, or at least failing to consider adequately, the way that moral values underpin economic action.

Third, a moral economy approach should not imply a lack of attention to power. Sometimes, invocations of 'ethics' can seem to downplay considerations of power and politics. But there is no reason why moral economy approaches should not incorporate analysis of questions such as exploitation, inequality and domination where appropriate. Moral economy needs to be connected to the more general project of critical social science (Sayer, 2000) and to struggles for emancipation and justice. A failure to address power and domination would seriously weaken the enterprise. On the other hand, the focus on normative grounding may encourage nuance, complexity and ambivalence. Some writers who might be labelled contemporary 'moral economists' are more careful to register the ambivalence and complexity of the development of economic forms such as markets than are many 'radical' political economists. To give just one example, Sayer (1999) discusses the way in which the de-traditionalisation brought about by capitalist modernity (including markets) changes social relations so that how to behave is no longer strictly dictated by custom. He suggests that this can be read in different ways and either (or both) positively and negatively – as a new freedom, or as a new atomism that breaks down community and sociality. It is important to hold on to such normative ambivalence, while retaining a critique of illegitimate and

pernicious forms of power and inequality, when considering contemporary capitalism-media-culture relations.

Moral economy has much to offer media and culture, but it has mostly neglected these domains (I will come to the most significant exception -Keat 2000 - later). Sayer himself has intervened in social-theory debates about relations between culture and economy (see Sayer, 1999). However, this concerns culture in the sense of shared understandings, practices, values and beliefs, rather than culture defined in the more restricted sense of knowledge and aesthetic-artistic experience which is how the term tends to be used and understood in media, communication and cultural studies. A similar problem (in terms of my interests here) regarding the breadth of definition of culture surrounds the idea of *cultural political economy*, which has overlaps with some moral economy research. Cultural political economy (CPE) is a term that has been used to refer to social science that takes seriously the importance of the 'cultural' dimensions of economic life, such as the social relationships that sustain economic activity, and the interactions between meaning and practice (Sayer, 2001; Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008). Moral economy has a close affinity with CPE, where relations of power and domination are made central to analysis of economy/culture relations, but again in the 'broad' sense of culture. Conversely, within media, communication and cultural studies, the term 'moral economy' has only been sporadically employed (e.g., Jenkins, 1992; Green and Jenkins, 2009). And it has certainly not been well understood in that discipline or field, with some valuable exceptions (Banks, 2006; Murdock, 2011).

Having (re)introduced the concept of moral economy, characterising it in general terms, I now want, as I indicated earlier, to focus on two broadly moral-economic concepts that might help to invigorate and renew explanation and evaluation of capitalism-media-culture relations. One (a particular conception of well-being) is addressed explicitly in moral economy writing and in related, more overtly Marxian thinking; the other (capabilities), is associated with the work of writers who are in many respects compatible with a moral economy approach, even if they do not use that term.

### **Well-being, quality of life, flourishing**

A concept of well-being seems an important element of any assessment of capitalism, or indeed any other set of social arrangements, at least when considered in terms of social justice, because it forefronts the fundamental issue of people's experiences of the world. However, well-being is often interpreted and used in dubious ways, as Davies (2015) has recently illuminated (though he fails to offer a positive conception of it). We need a conception of well-being that can be distinguished from mistaken conceptions that would undermine critiques of social injustice, including neo-liberal, relativist and nihilist ones. To address just the first of these, defenders of capitalism often assert (or just assume) the superiority of markets over other ways of co-ordinating economic activities in complex societies on the grounds that it is the system which, on balance, most effectively advances well-being. That assertion is often strongly linked to two other key claims for the superiority of markets: that they a) are supposedly neutral between different conceptions of the good, and therefore the best way to address otherwise insuperable issues of knowledge and value-incommensurability, and b) are based on principles of liberty and autonomy, and in turn help to promote liberty and autonomy (O'Neill, 1998: 64). Neo-liberal market advocates claim that markets provide the neutrality required by the pluralism of modern societies. Some, such as the 'Austrian' school, reject the possibility of rational communication about ethics, and argue that pluralism requires amoral and arational mechanisms. According to this view, politics should be restricted to setting the framework for the market, rather than setting any particular notion of the good. Neo-classical economics allows more room than theoretical neo-liberalism for intervention by the state in order to ensure that preferences are met. But, according to the neo-classicists, no judgement of people's preferences should interfere with efficiency – a market-led notion of politics that places them close to neo-liberalism's advocacy of neutrality.

A vital contribution that moral economy can make to discussion of such problems concerning value pluralism in modern societies derives from its rejection of such neutrality-based conceptions of well-being, and its insistence that economic and cultural decisions should be made on the basis of ethical decisions about what constitutes the good life. Market liberals (and also some on the left influenced by postmodernism) would claim that such a view is insufficiently pluralistic, in that it does not sufficiently recognise the vast range of human values and beliefs. But this is based

on a mistaken and relativist notion of plurality (or difference) that moral economists, often influenced by Aristotelian thought, would reject, as meaning that no belief about values is superior to any other. As moral economy writer John O'Neill (1998) points out in his important book, *The Market*, modern 'welfarist' arguments for markets based on their contribution to well-being tend to be empty of content, based on formal notions of well-being defined as the satisfaction of preferences, rather than substantive ones which would specify the content of well-being. This shift from substantive to formal conceptions of well-being is rooted, O'Neill (1998: 38) claims, in the tendency in economic thought towards dubious subjectivist conceptions of well-being, whereby 'the content of a person's well-being is determined by their desires or beliefs about what is good for them' - as opposed to the obviously correct and uncontroversial subjectivist point that the content of well-being changes from person to person.

An alternative to the utilitarian, preference-satisfaction conception of well-being or welfare used by many economists and other defenders of capitalism is needed, and we also need to reject any equation of well-being with 'happiness'. Moral economy and other modes of critical thinking underpinned by Aristotelian traditions, including Marx's conception of well-being, advocate instead a concept of eudemonia or *flourishing*. This has the advantage of suggesting 'a broad idea of well-being' and of referring to 'objective properties, not just subjective states' (Wright, 2010: 13).<sup>4</sup>

Moral economy and related Aristotelian political theory, rooted in conceptions of well-being as flourishing, can contribute to critique of media and communication in contemporary capitalism in a number of ways. First, they can productively focus attention on the failure of capitalist media and culture to enhance flourishing, thus providing a deeper, richer normative foundation for critiques emanating from political economy, critical theory and cultural studies. Sources from outside the moral economy and Aristotelian traditions indicate this fundamental problem of well-being in modern capitalist societies such as Lane's *The Market Experience* (1991) but also the more recent 'happiness economics' (Layard, 2006). The latter uses a utilitarian notion of well-being at odds with the Aristotelian position underpinning moral economy, but even this utilitarian approach at least opens up the question of the systematic failure of modern capitalist markets in terms of well-being. One reason for prevalent social dissatisfaction under 'developed' capitalism is that many of the goods people seek through

markets are *positional goods*. O'Neill (1998: 57) gives the examples of luxury holidays and educational qualifications 'in so far as they are valued as a means to employment' rather than as means to knowledge. The problem with positional goods is that the implied promise to each individual that a good will make them better off is not realised if everyone has it or even if many people have it.

There is a direct link to cultural and media goods here. Cultural consumption in capitalism is very often positional. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) is the most famous analysis of the competitiveness involved in cultural goods. Even if Bourdieu excludes other more positive dimensions of cultural consumption (Miller, 2012 offers a more balanced and superior account in this regard) he usefully draws attention to how much contemporary culture is associated with status competition. Cultural goods in modern markets seem to be deeply connected to modern processes of self-identity and possessive individualism (see Honneth, 2004). What's more, cultural goods, because of qualities associated with them that we will now discuss, derived from their particular and distinctive ability to disseminate meanings about *other goods*, might at times have a tendency to encourage the consumption of positional goods in general, such as luxury goods and holidays, not just media positional goods. In this respect, moral economy accounts that focus on flourishing in relation to the particular characteristics of media and cultural products produced and consumed under market relations more firmly ground critique than vague condemnation of (cultural) consumption *per se*. Its conception of well-being makes clear that the satisfaction of desires through the market, celebrated by defenders of capitalism, only leads to greater happiness or flourishing if those desires are good ones. It is important to understand that this notion of well-being is *objectivist* rather than *subjectivist*. As Sayer (2011: 134-139) explains, our subjective assessments of our well-being are deeply fallible and so flourishing is better thought of 'in terms of objective states of being which people strive to discover, achieve or create' (p. 134). As Sayer emphasises, it is vital to realise that this objectivist conception of well-being does not mean that there is 'only one good way of living' (p. 135). We should take a pluralist, but not relativist, view that there are many kinds of well-being, but 'not just any way of life constitutes well-being'. What is good is not simply relative to one's point of view – and social science can help develop ways of thinking about what might be good in a more objective way.

A second potentially fruitful contribution of moral economy and related Aristotelian theory is to draw attention to positive possibilities of media and cultural goods for the flourishing of individuals, communities and societies. While moral economy's objectivism provides a more cogent and meaningful conception of well-being than is provided by the advocates of capitalist markets, and therefore helps us to see that *real* well-being is not necessarily, or not truly, advanced by the expanded remit of markets in the realm of culture and media, it needs to be recognised that some market advocates take a more sophisticated subjectivist approach to well-being, defining it in terms of what we *would* value if we were fully informed about the merits of particular products (O'Neill, 1998). This more developed subjectivist approach is not so incompatible with the objectivist view of well-being held by moral economists, and also by classical economists such as Adam Smith. But, for O'Neill (1998: 48), what even this more sophisticated subjectivist view misses is the way that 'improvements in well-being come through public deliberation and education of our preferences, not simply by satisfying those we have'. The need for moral economy to address capitalism-media-culture relations becomes glaringly obvious at this juncture (although O'Neill's general moral economy of markets does not find space to do so). For cultural and media products are surely vital ways in which people deliberate, and are exposed to deliberation over, the nature of products, and about whether they meaningfully enhance people's lives. In this respect, as the moral economy philosopher Russell Keat (2000) has pointed out, cultural and media products can be understood as *meta-goods*: goods that can be 'about' other goods and that can serve to develop people's capacities to make judgments about the nature and possibility of well-being. Education too is another vital enabler of such meta-discourse, but in fact education often carries out this function in relation to what might be more conventionally defined as media and cultural goods, such as through the teaching of literature, or history, where students are encouraged to consider books and other texts. This moral economy conception of meta-goods then is a helpful way to ground discussion of the value of culture and media, providing a more rigorous grounding in ethics and moral philosophy that might strengthen defences of public service broadcasting and arts subsidy.

A third potential contribution of the approach advocated here is that this in turn raises the question of how effectively capitalist societies tend to produce and consume

such products. Keat argues that cultural goods, with their potential and actual benefits for well-being, are likely to be under-produced in market economies. This is because they show the features of ‘transformative’ rather than ‘demand’ value: ‘their value consists, at least in part, in providing the means by which an existing set of preferences and desires may be transformed, through critical reflection, into more considered ones, rather than in directly satisfying those preferences, which is the characteristic of goods possessing “demand” value’ (Keat, 2000: 157). Precisely because of this, such goods are likely to be under-produced in capitalist systems, dominated as they are by market exchange. Keat provides an account that suggests the limits of markets in the realm of media and culture, without dismissing the potential benefits of markets in certain circumstances, or the genuine concerns of market defenders.

Keat’s arguments also indicate a fourth potential value of the conceptualisation of well-being as flourishing I am advocating, and this relates more directly to policy. This is that the moral economy account above provides a potential basis for justifying non-market or less marketised provision, such as public service broadcasting, in order to enhance flourishing. This also makes Keat’s discussion highly relevant to recent debates in cultural policy about *cultural value* (see, for example, Warwick Commission, 2015). In Keat’s hands, moral economy suggests how the potential contribution of the production and consumption of cultural goods to well-being might ground the quest for a conception of the value of culture that might combat economic and other forms of ‘instrumentalism’ in cultural policy, where that value is understood in terms not of well-being, but in terms of contribution to economic growth, or social goals such as crime reduction.

## **Capabilities**

The discussion so far has not yet adequately considered the issue of how to ground a conception of well-being as flourishing, when faced with the great variety of people, communities and societies on our planet, in a way that avoid dubious universalisms. One important attempt to elaborate such a grounding has been provided by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, in his ‘capabilities approach’. Sen may not use the term ‘moral economy’ himself, but his Aristotelian approach to economic issues makes him a kindred spirit to those who explicitly invoke the concept.

For Sen, what people are able to do is more important than states of mind in assessing the good life, and flourishing. For this reason, Sen drew on the concept of 'capability' (a translation of the Greek *dunamin*), the ability of people to do certain things, should they choose to (Sen, 1999: 18). The goal of economic development – a principal concern of Sen's – should be to enable such functionings.

As with moral economy, media and culture have only very rarely figured in the capabilities approach to ethics, markets and economic life. Exceptions include Sen's own work with Drèze on how a free press helps to limit the consequences of famine, but Sen and Drèze's (1989) work confines its insights to the benefits of a formally free press, paying no attention to how markets limit substantive media freedoms for many potential producers. Sen shows no interest at all in any political economy of the media themselves.

Conversely, some media and cultural analysts have made fruitful use of Sen's ideas – but with important limitations. Nick Couldry uses Sen's capabilities approach as part of his outstanding efforts to develop a philosophically and sociologically informed conception of media justice. It fits with Couldry's well-argued preference for an Aristotelian ethics that does not specify 'ought' in advance, and pays attention to concrete practices, to what people actually do (and need), rather than excessively abstract conceptions of good and bad. Couldry (2010: 105) proposes that we need to go beyond the limitations in Sen's approach to media and democracy by treating *voice* – people's abilities to give an account of themselves – as a fundamental capability. But Couldry does not attempt to address the political economy of media neglected by Sen and, as with the rest of his otherwise remarkably deep and wide oeuvre, Couldry does not confront the question of the relationships between markets and media production and distribution (Couldry, 2012: 185) but instead treats them as tangential to his main concerns. But this approach undermines the explanatory work that is needed to complement any normative approach to ethics and injustice. For economic arrangements – most notably, the nature of media markets under capitalism – are vital to understanding how the media take the form they do, and any effort to argue for change needs to confront how cultural-economic arrangements might be made better.



An earlier treatment by Nicholas Garnham is helpful in this respect, and also in that it more clearly (though schematically) lays out a set of relevant research programmes linked to the capabilities approach. For Garnham (1997) the most valuable potential contribution of Sen's capabilities approach to understanding media and communication was that it could allow policy debate in these fields to transcend the poor normative framing that plagued it. Garnham observed that crude measures of access and usage (in media policy) or visits (in cultural/arts policy) do not get at people's *actual ability to make use of resources*. By contrast, judgements informed by the capabilities approach would consider how well or badly media and communication, as they currently exist, serve people's needs and functionings. From the supply side, that would allow us to look at the degree to which media systems provide content that might contribute to functionings that people have reason to value, such as democratic participation in decisions about communities and societies, or physical health. In turn, Garnham pointed out, this might (or might not) lead us to advocate a greater role for public service media in order to limit some of the ways in which a marketised broadcasting system, based on the support of advertisers, might operate.

It needs to be emphasised that Sen's approach (and Garnham's adaptation of it) avoids the paternalism that both left and conservative-libertarian critics would rightly question, emphasising the very great variability in people's inclinations and practices, but because it is based on the kinds of objectivist notions of flourishing and the good life outlined above, it rejects the cop-out that services should be provided on the basis of what people say they enjoy, or what they purchase in the market. From the 'demand side' perspective of users, the capabilities approach would allow debate about constraints on what users do with the opportunities presented to them, and what might stop them from using media and communication resources to achieve functionings that they have reason to value. Such 'inhibitors' may in part be understood as economic: income and wealth distributions might affect people's understanding of their lives, and will affect their ability to purchase expensive items. But they can and must also be understood in social and cultural terms too, by considering how distinctive forms of interaction and belief within different communities might enhance or constrain people's ability to make use of opportunities.

Garnham's attempt to adapt the capabilities approach for analysing media has barely been taken up in media and communication studies (though see Mansell, 2002). The capabilities approach is under-developed in media and communications, as is the concept of well-being as flourishing that it seeks to ground. Sen perhaps might have helped matters by being rather clearer about what, in his opinion, the most relevant capabilities were. So a possible way forward for more adequate development of the capabilities approach for the media is to turn to the other chief exponent of the approach, the feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who has advanced Sen's contributions by specifying ten sets of human capabilities she thought were generally necessary for well-being and a life lived with dignity (Nussbaum, 2006: 76-77). That list includes fundamental capabilities such as not dying prematurely, having good health and shelter, bodily integrity (including security against violent assault), and control over one's political and material environment. Needless to say, a flourishing cultural or media life is greatly inhibited in situations where people are deprived of such capabilities. But a number of Nussbaum's capabilities relate more directly to the potential value of culture and media in modern societies. Briefly (for more details, see Nussbaum, 2006), these include:

- Attachment, love, care and not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
- Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason in a way informed by and cultivated by an adequate education.
- Being able to laugh, play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Nussbaum's specification has the added advantage of encouraging us to think of media and communication capabilities in wider terms than the information and knowledge on which Garnham and Couldry focus. In other work, including her defences of what Americans tend to call 'liberal education', Nussbaum (1997, 2001) suggested how access to a rich set of artistic-aesthetic experiences might help people to understand and enhance vital emotional, imaginative and cognitive capabilities. As with Keat's moral-economic approach, discussed above (Keat, 2000), this is fundamentally a matter of the *value of culture*, and Nussbaum's attention to the affective dimensions of culture,

linked to her capabilities approach, provides a deeper basis for grounding a moral economy approach's conception of the value of media and culture, in terms of their ability to contribute to flourishing.

However, there is a problem. Nussbaum's approach to cultural flourishing is potentially rather cognitivist and intellectualist, often stressing 'high cultural', contemplative artistic experiences. (The same might be said of Keat's suggestive notion of meta-goods, as he elaborates it in his book). Nussbaum's approach needs to be extended to cover a wider range of cultural activity and forms of knowledge, drawing on insights from cultural studies and potentially also from other sources such as pragmatist aesthetics, to address how ordinary, demotic and sociable cultural practices might be thought of as enhancing people's well-being in a meaningfully enriching way (see REDACTED for further discussion). That would require consideration, for example, of how access to a rich set of popular musical practices would enhance people's flourishing. The provision of an adequate musical education and funding for musicians and distribution would be a vital element of policy informed by such a capabilities approach. Such a cultural education would need to be responsive to the way in which musical practices are embedded in ordinary, everyday life, and yet not strip them of their demotic vitality.

### **Conclusion: Moral Economy and Critique of Markets**

Moral economy is not an exclusive or dogmatic approach. It is only one of a number of social theories of economic life, and fuller assessment of its relations to other heterodox approaches is a matter for further research on media and culture. It will not appeal to everyone. Crucial aspects of moral economy, such as its focus on ethics and the value of culture, and its objectivist notion of well-being, are ultimately incompatible with the subjectivism of conventional economics and the misunderstanding and avoidance of normativity that characterises much positivist and empiricist social science. Its search for more rigorous normative foundations for critique may make it unattractive to humanities researchers drawn to more exploratory and interpretivist modes of enquiry. But it has a number of potentially valuable contributions to make to critical social science and humanities. In the present context, the most relevant is that it

offers the potential to redress the normative underdevelopment of how capitalism is presently understood in media and cultural studies, by developing a nuanced ethics-based critique of relations between the media and capitalism.

To explore this potential, I have examined two fundamental concepts in which moral economy writers have shown great interest, and I have considered how they might be used in respect of communication media. Those concepts are well-being (based on Aristotelian conceptions of flourishing and quality of life) and capabilities – the latter a concept developed to ground the former, and to make it more pragmatically applicable to political action and to debates about public policy. Those concepts of course can be, and often are, used by those who would not be sympathetic to moral economy, and they can be used as a basis of bland, uncritical thinking. But this article has interpreted those concepts in a particular (Aristotelian) way, in order to specify and animate them, and to suggest how they might reinvigorate critique of media under capitalism.

Moral economy provides a more cogent and meaningful conception of well-being than ones used by many defenders of capitalism and markets, and by some critics of them. This can help us to see that real, meaningful flourishing is not advanced by the expanded remit of capitalist relations (markets, class and other ‘background conditions’) in the realm of media and culture. Moral economy thereby specifies more carefully than some eminent critical approaches to media-economy relations (including much critical theory and political economy work) the limitations of capitalism. Using the capabilities approach in the realm of media might help form a richer sense of the value of knowledge and aesthetic-artistic experience, in terms of their ability to contribute to human flourishing, thereby clarifying arguments and positions in political activism and public policy. Moral economy could enhance the capabilities approach to media and culture by helping to evaluate and explain factors that promote or inhibit those positive facets of media and culture.

Moral economy’s focus on ethics need not, indeed must not, preclude an interest in sociological variation and it should be understood as part of a more general critical social science. So a moral economy of culture should forge connections with the empirical sociology and anthropology of media. An example would be the rich emerging

field of cultural studies of cultural production (sic), including the 'production studies' movement in television studies (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009), which, though strong on empirical analysis of rituals and routines, currently suffers from a lack of attention to value, and insufficient normative grounding for its evaluations of production. Finally, moral economy needs to work in tandem with the best aspects of political economy of media, in providing a critique of power and inequality in cultural production. Examples would include the writings of scholars such as Edwin Baker (e.g. 2002) and Graham Murdock (e.g. 2011), which provide evaluation of media markets in terms of their implications for public life and democracy but which also seek to *explain* the specific dynamics of those markets.

There is then a very broad range of cases in which moral economy ideas might be mobilised in media and communication studies: from studies of how particular audience members find their well-being compromised or enhanced by current communication provision, to the question of whether social media as they are currently constituted contribute meaningfully to people's flourishing. Obviously, the present article is a work of meta-theoretical development, so there has been no space to apply the concepts developed here to empirical cases, or to draw upon existing empirical work, except in brief passing examples. Studies of cultural labour have been one area in which efforts have been made to make links between moral-economic approaches and empirical work (e.g., Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This article though is a piece of theory building, intended to provide ideas and concepts that might be used and tested in further research, by others and by the author. Moral economy is only one possible route for enhancing critique of media and culture. But given the severity of the problems concerning capitalism-media-culture relations, and the limited state of critique in this area, it is potentially an extremely valuable one.

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs (2011) has sought to provide foundations for critical media studies in an orthodox reading of Marx and Frankfurt-style critical theory but in my view he pays too little attention to limitations in Marx's accounts of capitalism, and to competing social theories of it.

<sup>2</sup> Capitalism, and indeed its effects on quality of life, are sometimes addressed in what might be called 'critiques of consumer society' in sociology and cultural studies. For example, Ustin Lewis (2013) has done an admirable job of gathering evidence about the consequences of unbridled capitalism on media and quality of life. But he does not seek to conceptualise capitalism or well-being, as a moral economy would.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest widely-cited use of the term 'moral economy' appears to be in an essay by the eminent Marxist social historian E.P. Thompson, first published in 1971, on responses of the poor to food shortages in eighteenth century England. According to Thompson, the emergent field of political economy placed less emphasis on the social values underpinning economic ideas and more on instrumental notions of efficiency and effectiveness. But Thompson's article does not actually make a substantial contribution



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to developing the concept of moral economy in the sense that the term has come to be used.

<sup>4</sup> Of course it is possible to use flourishing itself in a vague or apolitical way, and even in ways compatible with neo-liberalism. But any term can be appropriated or misused. See Wright (2010: 10-16, 45-50), see also Sayer (2011: 134-5) for discussion of why flourishing is a valuable way of understanding well-being in the context of critical, emancipatory social science and political struggle.

<sup>5</sup> The purpose of such a list is not to close off debate, but to open it up. It is accompanied by an explicit invitation to amend in the light of other experiences and ways of viewing the world, to avoid false universalism. Problems with Nussbaum's own list do not necessarily render the idea of specifying capabilities invalid.