CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Marx is Back – The Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today

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‘Marx is fashionable again,’ declares Jorn Schutrumpf, head of the Berlin publishing house Dietz, which brings out the works of Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels. Sales have trebled – albeit from a pretty low level – since 2005 and have soared since the summer. [...] The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, gave him a decent review last month: ‘Marx long ago observed the way in which unbridled capitalism became a kind of mythology, ascribing reality, power and agency to things that had no life in themselves.’ Even the Pope has put in a good word for the old atheist – praising his ‘great analytical skill.’ (The Times, Financial crisis gives added capital to Marx’s writings. October 20, 2008).

No one claims that we’re all Marxists now but I do think the old boy deserves some credit for noticing that ‘it’s the economy, stupid’ and that many of the apparently omniscient titans who ascend the commanding heights of the economy are not so much stupid as downright imbecilic, driven by a mad exploitative greed that threatens us all. Marx’s work is not holy writ, despite the strivings of some disciples to present it as such (The Evening Standard, Was Marx Right All Along?. March 30, 2009).

Karl Marx is back. That, at least, is the verdict of publishers and bookshops in Germany who say that his works are flying off the shelves (The Guardian, Booklovers Turn to Karl Marx as Financial Crisis Bites in Germany. October 15, 2008).

Policy makers struggling to understand the barrage of financial panics, protests and other ills afflicting the world would do well to study the works of a long-dead economist: Karl Marx. The sooner they recognize we’re facing a once-in-a-lifetime crisis of capitalism, the better equipped they will be to manage a way out of it (Bloomberg Business Week, Give Karl Marx a Chance to Save the World Economy. August 28, 2011).

Time Magazine showed Marx on its cover on February 2nd, 2009, and asked in respect to the crisis: “What would Marx think?” In the cover story, Marx was presented as the saviour of capitalism and was thereby mutilated beyond recognition: “Rethinking Marx. As we work out how to
save capitalism, it’s worth studying the system’s greatest critic” (Time Magazine Europe, February 2nd, 2009).

In the golden, post-war years of Western economic growth, the comfortable living standard of the working class and the economy’s overall stability made the best case for the value of capitalism and the fraudulence of Marx’s critical view of it. But in more recent years many of the forces that Marx said would lead to capitalism’s demise – the concentration and globalization of wealth, the permanence of unemployment, the lowering of wages – have become real, and troubling, once again (New York Times Online, March 30th, 2014).

These news clippings indicate that with the new global crisis of capitalism, we seem to have entered new Marxian times. That there is suddenly a surging interest in Karl Marx’s work is an indication for the persistence of capitalism, class conflicts, and crisis. At the same time, the bourgeois press tries to limit Marx and to stifle his theory by interpreting Marx as the new saviour of capitalism. One should remember that he was not only a brilliant analyst of capitalism, he was also the strongest critic of capitalism in his time: “In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time. Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries. The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Proletarians of all lands unite!” (Marx and Engels 1848/2004, 94).

In 1977, Dallas Smythe published his seminal article *Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism* (Smythe 1977), in which he argued that Western Marxism had not given enough attention to the complex role of communications in capitalism. 35 years have passed and the rise of neoliberalism resulted in a turn away from an interest in social class and capitalism. Instead, it became fashionable to speak of globalization, postmodernism, and, with the fall of Communism, even the end of history. In essence, Marxism became the blindspot of all social science. Marxist academics were marginalized and it was increasingly career threatening for a young academic to take an explicitly Marxist approach to social analysis.

The declining interest in Marx and Marxism is visualized in Figure 1.1 that shows the average annual number of articles in the Social Sciences Citation