CHAPTER 2

Towards Marxian Internet Studies

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1 Introduction

The Internet has become an important socio-technical system that shapes and is shaped by life in contemporary capitalism. Internet Studies has become a crucial field that is engaged in thinking about the transformations of society, individuality, politics, economy, culture, and nature (Fuchs 2008).

As some scholars have argued the third world economy crisis that started as housing and financial crisis, but soon became a world crisis of capitalism, has resulted in a renewed interest in approaches that label themselves as explicitly critical and anti-capitalist (for example: Harvey 2010, Žižek 2009, 2010b), it is an important task to reflect on the state of those approaches within Internet Studies that label themselves as being explicitly critical. The task of this chapter is therefore to provide a short overview of approaches to Critical Internet Studies, to point out key concepts of this field, and to reflect on critiques of Critical Internet Studies. The paper is divided into the discussion of the return of Marx (Section 2), Critical Cyberculture Studies (Section 3), Critical Political Economy/Critical Theory of the Internet (Section 4), a comparison of these two approaches (Section 5), a discussion of Critical Internet Studies concepts (Section 6), a discussion of digital labour (Section 7), critiques of Critical Internet Studies (Section 8). Finally, some conclusions are drawn (Section 9).

2 Marx is Back

Eagleton (2011) notes that never a thinker was so travestied as Marx and shows that the contrary of what the common prejudices claim about Marx is the core of his works. Žižek (2010b) argues that the recent world economic crisis has resulted in a renewed interest in the Marxian Critique of the Political Economy. This is shown by the attention recently paid to Marx in the mainstream media. Time magazine, for example, had Marx on its cover and asked about the global financial crisis: What would Marx think? (Time Magazine, February 2, 2009). Hobsbawm (2011, 12f) argues that for understanding the global dimension of contemporary capitalism, capitalism’s contradictions and crises and the existence of socio-economic inequality we “must ask Marx’s questions” (13). “Economic
and political liberalism, singly or in combination, cannot provide the solution
to the problems of the twenty-first century. Once again the time has come to
take Marx seriously” (Hobsbawm 2011, 419).

One interesting thing about Marx is that he keeps coming back at moments,
when people least expect it, in the form of various Marxisms that keep haunt-
ing capitalism like ghosts, as Derrida (1994) has stressed. It is paradoxical that
almost 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union, capitalism seems to have
intensified global problems, caused severe poverty and a rise of unequal
income distribution, and as a result has brought a return of the economic in
the form of a worldwide economic crisis and with it a reactualization of the
Marxian critique of capitalism. Although a persistent refrain is “Marx is dead,
long live capitalism”, Marx is coming back again today.

There are especially six aspects of Marx’s works that are relevant for the
analysis of contemporary capitalism:

- The globalization of capitalism that is seen as an important characteristic of
  contemporary society by many social theorists is an important aspect in the
  works of Marx and Engels (for example: Callinicos 2003). Connected to this
  topic is also the Marxian theme of international solidarity as form of resis-
tance that seems to be practiced today by the altermondialiste movement.
- The importance of technology, knowledge, and the media in contemporary
  society was anticipated by the Marxian focus on machinery, means of com-
munication, and the general intellect (see for example: Dyer-Witheford
- The immizerization caused by neoliberal capitalism suggests a renewed
  interest in the Marxian category of class (see for example: Harvey 2005).
- The global war against terror after 9/11 and its violent and repressive results
  like human casualties and intensified surveillance suggest a renewed inter-
est in Marxian theories of imperialism (see for example: Fuchs 2011, Chapter
  5; Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2003).
- The ecological crisis reactualizes a theme that runs throughout Marxian
  works: that there is an antagonism between modern industrialism and nature
  that results in ecological destruction (see for example: O’Connor 1998).
- The new global economic crisis that started in 2008 has shown that Marxist
  crisis theory is still important today (Foster and Magdoff 2009, Foster and
to be inherently crisis-ridden.

Žižek argues that the antagonisms of contemporary capitalism in the context
of the ecological crisis, intellectual property, biogenetics, new forms of apartheid