CHAPTER 4

The Relevance of Marx’s Theory of Primitive Accumulation for Media and Communication Research

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1 Introduction

The current global crisis of capitalism has inspired numerous social theorists to both revitalize and reinvent many of the key arguments and trails within Marx’s magnum opus Capital. Without any other comparison to the increasing body of literature that draws on Capital, this chapter will be yet one more attempt to connect to the seminal work that has been counted out so many times before by the apologetics of capitalism.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Marx’s (1867/1990) theory of original/primitive accumulation (“ursprüngliche Akkumulation”), described in the first volume of Capital, and its relevance for analysing the role of (mass) media, online communication and communication systems, in the process of capital accumulation. In order to revitalize Marx’s argument in Capital, the theory of original/primitive accumulation is updated in relation to Harvey’s (2003; 2006; 2010a) theory of “accumulation by dispossession.” Harvey draws on Marx’s discussion of primitive accumulation in order to unfold the neo-liberal shift within the development of global capitalism.

Following a basic theoretical understanding of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession the chapter addresses two key aspects of news media content and media structures in relation to the processes of accumulation by dispossession. It examines the media representation of social struggle against capital accumulation, and how both news media content and news media systems facilitate capital accumulation in the finance sector. Furthermore the chapter taps into how surplus value is produced in the realm of Internet use, particularly Web 2.0. Here, some thoughts on how everyday Internet use could be understood as surplus labour and how users are transformed into commodities will be addressed. In relation to the discussion on everyday online activities, Marx’s theory of original/primitive accumulation provides an understanding of new forms of exploitation by the appropriation of intellectual assets and creativity in the field of cultural production, distribution and communication in the Web 2.0. Here the chapter discusses how the
commodification of free time, the self and social relations, plays a key part in
the political economy of social media and the Internet. Included is also a short
section that discusses if Internet surveillance, and the commercial gathering,
owning and processing of personal information, could be understood as an
underlying threat to citizens, and a part of what Žižek (2008) defines as the
objective violence of capitalist exploitation.

The chapter combines the results of empirical research on news media with
examples of how the everyday use of social media and intellectual assets and
creativity in the field of cultural production/distribution could be explained
through a Marxist theory of capital accumulation in a time of systemic crisis.
Harvey’s updated version of Marx’s notion of original/primitive accumulation
provides a strong argument for understanding the recent development of late
capitalism.

2 The Process of Capital Accumulation

The immanent driving force of capitalism is the endless accumulation of capi-
tal, a process where capital is accumulated for the sake of accumulation, or as
Marx (1867/1990, 595) put it “accumulation for accumulation’s sake, produc-
tion for production’s sake.” The very basic formula of capital accumulation,
outlined by Marx (1885/1992) in the second volume of Capital, draws on how
capital is circulated through several key phases:

\[ M \rightarrow C \rightarrow (Lp/Mp) \rightarrow P \rightarrow (v/c) \rightarrow C' \rightarrow M' \]

To put it simple – the accumulation of capital is obtained by the circulation of
capital, where money (M) is transformed into commodities (C) by the purchase
of labour power (Lp) and means of production (Mp). To secure accumulation,
the money needs to be greater in the end of the process than in the beginning,
which means that the value of the produced commodity is higher than the
value of the commodities used as inputs. In the production process the value of
labour power and the means of production take the form of productive capital
(P) when attached to the produced commodity. The value of labour force (v)
equals the costs of the labour power bought (wages) and the value form of
means of production (c) equals the cost of the means used (constant capital).
So, surplus value is generated when the commodity is sold at a higher price
than the costs of production, which is made possible by surplus labour (unpaid
labour time). So what basically creates surplus value is the amount of labour
time that is not paid for by the capitalists. When the produced commodity (C')
is sold, capital once again enters the process of circulation in the form of (new)