chapter 18


Christian Fuchs

1 Introduction

In 1977, Dallas Smythe published his seminal article Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism (Smythe 1977a), in which he argued that Western Marxism has not given enough attention to the complex role of communications in capitalism. The article’s publication was followed by an important foundational debate of media sociology that came to be known as the Blindspot Debate (Murdock 1978, Livant 1979, Smythe answered with a rejoinder to Murdock: Smythe 1994, 292–299) and by another article of Smythe on the same topic (On the Audience Commodity and its Work: Smythe 1981, 22–51). More than 30 years have passed and the rise of neoliberalism resulted in a turn away from the interest in class and capitalism and in the rise of postmodernism and the logic of the commodification of everything: Marxism became the blindspot of the social sciences.

The declining interest in Marx and Marxism is visualized in Figure 18.1 that shows the average annual number of articles in the Social Sciences Citation Index that contain one of the keywords Marx, Marxist or Marxism in the article topic description and were published in the five time periods 1968–1977, 1978–1987, 1988–1997, 1998–2007, 2008–2013. Choosing these periods allows observing if there has been a change since the start of the new capitalist crisis in 2008 and also makes sense because the 1968 revolt marked a break that also transformed academia.

Figure 18.1 shows that there was a relatively large academic article output about Marx in the period 1978–1987: 3659. Given that the number of articles published increases historically, also the interest in the period 1968–1977 seems to have been high. One can observe a clear contraction of the output of articles that focus on Marx in the periods 1988–1997 (2393) and 1998–2007 (1563). Given the historical increase of published articles, this contraction is even more severe. This period has also been the time of the intensification
of neoliberalism, the commodification of everything (including public service communication in many countries) and a strong turn towards postmodernism and culturalism in the social sciences. One can see that the average number of annual articles published about Marxism in the period 2008–2013 (269) has increased in comparisons to the periods 1988–2007 (156 per year) and 1988–1997 (239 per year). This circumstance is an empirical indicator for a renewed interest in Marx and Marxism in the social sciences as effect of the new capitalist crisis. The question is if and how this interest can be sustained and materialized in institutional transformations.

Due to the rising gap between the rich and the poor, widespread precarious labour, and the new global capitalist crisis, neoliberalism and the silence about class and capitalism have suffered cracks, fissures, and holes. Eagleton (2011) notes that never has a thinker been so travestied as Marx and shows that the contrary of what the common prejudices say about Marx makes up the core of his works. But since the start of the global capitalist crisis in 2008, a relatively large interest in the works of Karl Marx has developed. Slavoj Žižek (2010) argues in this context that the recent world economic crisis has resulted in a renewed interest in the Marxian Critique of the Political Economy. This is also 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, 12–13) says that for understanding the global dimension