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## BOOK REVIEW

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### ***Social Networking Sites and the Surveillance Society. A Critical Case Study of the Usage of studiVZ, Facebook, and MySpace by Students in Salzburg in the Context of Electronic Surveillance***

Christian Fuchs (Salzburg/Vienna: Research Group UTI, 2009). ISBN 978-3-200-01428-2.

**Sandoval Marisol and Thomas Allmer**  
*University of Salzburg*

#### **1. Introduction**

“My data are sold for advertising,” “connects people from all over the world and you find old and new friends,” “Big Brother is watching you,” “networking of students, exchange between like-minded people,” “spying by employers,” “entertainment and amusement” “international coming together,” “the transparent human,” “collaboration,” “the surveillance society.”

These are just some of the statements given by students asked about the advantages and disadvantages of integrated social networking sites (ISNS). The statements illustrate that students conceive social networking sites as contradictory: On the one hand, students see ISNS as possibilities for maintaining existing friendships; establishing new contacts; renewing old contacts; communicating, establishing, or maintaining international contacts; sharing photos and other media; and having fun. On the other hand, students stress risks of ISNS like political, economic, and personal surveillance; the possibility of employers to access profiles; advertising; unwanted contacts; stalking; harassment; and becoming a potential crime victim. Hence, “communication and surveillance are antagonistic counterparts of the usage of commercial social networking platforms” (96).

The ascertainment that social networking sites contain contradictory potentials is just one important result of a study published by Christian Fuchs, associate professor at the ICT&S Center of the University of Salzburg. His critical case study deals with the usage of studiVZ (studi=students, VZ=Verzeichnis=list; list of students), Facebook, and MySpace by students in Salzburg, Austria, in the context of electronic surveillance. In a first step the approaches of techno-pessimistic and techno-optimistic research about ISNS are criticized as forms of technological determinism and the author’s own approach of critical research is developed. For doing so, Fuchs emphasize the social context of ISNS, namely, the political and economic interests of electronic surveillance in capitalist society and concludes, “the only solution to privacy threats is to overcome new imperialism, surveillance society, and capitalism” (22). Subsequently, an empirical case study with almost 700 analyzed datasets is presented. It shows that students in Salzburg are rather less than knowledgeable but highly critical of the rise of a surveillance society. Students consider communication as the greatest opportunity and surveillance as the greatest risk of ISNS. Therefore, Fuchs deduces an antagonism between communication and surveillance in commercial social networking platforms and recommends, for instance, “to create non-commercial, non-profit social networking platforms on the Internet” (116).

The ability to describe social reality as contradictory and antagonistic shows Fuchs’ association with critical theory as it has been founded by Karl Marx and has been advanced by representatives of the Frankfurt School. Thus, in order to discuss Fuchs’ study we will first look at central characteristics of critical theory (section 2). In a next step we argue that Fuchs’ study advances critical theory by applying it to contemporary social phenomena, and thus is an important contribution to critical theory in the information age (section 3). We conclude with some remarks on the overall value of Fuchs study for contemporary Internet research (section 4).

#### **2. Elements of Critical Theory**

The identification of antagonisms and contradictions, and the confrontation of existing social reality with its not-yet realized potentials are important elements of the critical theory of Karl Marx, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse.

In the “Preface to Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (Marx 1859, 7-11)<sup>1</sup> Marx stresses an antagonistic character of productive forces in capitalist society. On the one hand, relations of production control productive forces in the predominant conditions; on the other hand, “the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism” (Marx 1859, 9)<sup>2</sup>. Marx points at an oppressive character of existing social relations, but at the same time he identifies societal potentials for transcending the existing negativity. Hence, he is able to develop out of the existing actuality the true reality and new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles, because “the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation” (Marx 1859, 9)<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Adorno (1976, 68-70) states in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (1976, 68-70) that reality as it ought to be has to be confronted with the existing reality; consequently, criticism is necessary. Critical theory “must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from outside into those which the object has of itself, into what the object, to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with what it is. (...) In other words, theory is indisputably critical” (Adorno 1976, 69). It is a dialectic of essence and appearance. In Horkheimer’s famous essay “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1982, 188-243), he stresses the necessity of thinking in social antagonisms; hence, he considers the contradiction of capital and labor and of productive forces and relations of production. Like Marx and Adorno, Horkheimer tries to show the real social possibilities, which result from advanced productive forces, and to develop an idea of the future: “Nonetheless the idea of a future society as a community of free men, which is possible through technical means already at hand, does have a content, and to it there must be fidelity amid all change” (Horkheimer 1982, 217). Also, Marcuse emphasizes in his essay “Philosophy and Critical Theory” that “current conditions and the analysis of their tendencies necessarily include future-oriented components” (1988, 145). So, he argues there are societal “potentialities that have emerged within the maturing historical situation” (1988, 158).

Why is critical theory able to describe society as contradictory and antagonistic, and why does it see both repressive and progressive developments at the same time? We argue that this results from several central characteristics of critical theory. The following list is certainly not exhaustive, yet the four elements described below allow explaining why critical theory looks at social phenomena as complex and contradictory, criticizes oppressive realities, and strives for emancipatory social change.

### **Dialectical Analysis:**

Based on Hegel's dialectic, critical theory defines categories in relation to other things. Categories emerge in a dual way, cause, contradict, and negate each other; hence, it is a negation. Furthermore, raising quantity causes new qualities in dialectical categories at a certain critical point; hence, it is a turnover from quantity to quality. Finally, dialectical categories sublate each other. New qualities emerge, old ones are eliminated but are kept in a new form and on a higher level; hence, it is a negation of negation. Dialectical social criticism emphasizes negations in society and supports a negation of negation for "a future society as a community of free men" (Horkheimer 1982, 217). It criticizes existing contradictory social conditions and asks for a cooperative society. On the ontological, epistemological, and praxeological level, dialectical philosophy considers social phenomena as complex, opposes one-dimensional thinking, and comprehends society as dynamic and changeable.

### **Society as Totality:**

Critical theory has a certain term of "societal totality and its laws of movement" (Adorno 1976, 68). It detects a difference between essence and appearance and is able to identify reasons for social problems because it thinks in social totality. Thinking of society as a whole with its objective functions and developments is a crucial precondition for analyzing and criticizing society.

### **Humanistic Orientation:**

Man is defined as a reasonable human being with happiness, self-determination, and liberty, and accordingly, as a Supreme Being. In capitalist society, man is alienated from himself where categories such as liberty are not realized. Critical theory is concerned about human beings and wants to liberate them because they are more than *manipulatable* subjects in the production process. Thus, critical theory has a humanistic and emancipatory character, "concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence" (Marcuse 1988, 135).

### **Historical Understanding:**

Critical theory points out that the bourgeois mode of production is historically specific and changeable, not natural; thus, "the prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation" (Marx 1859, 9).<sup>4</sup> Emancipation is not an idealistic idea, but a real materialistic possibility in contemporary society. Hence, critical theory emphasizes possibilities to transcend the existing negativity and develops transformative approaches.

Dialectical analysis allows critical theory to look at social phenomena as complex and contradictory; the consideration of society as totality allows to identify and to criticize power relations which shape certain social phenomena; because it is humanistic, critical theory wants to transcend the existing social reality and tries to foster emancipatory social change. Critical theory is able to conceive social reality as changeable because it looks at it as an historical result of specific human practices. These elements of critical theory can also be found in Fuchs' study on social networking sites.

## **3. Fuchs' Study as an Example for Critical Theory in the Information Age**

Within contemporary Internet research Fuchs' study on social networking sites and surveillance is remarkable because it places the discussion on positive and negative effects of social software within a wider societal context. As he points out, most research on social networking sites is individualistic: it focuses on how individuals use ISNS either in a way that threatens them or in a way that empowers them. In contrast to such techno-optimistic and techno-pessimistic approaches, Fuchs'

study is an example of critical Internet research, which updates critical theory and applies it to the study of contemporary social phenomena.

### **Dialectical Analysis:**

As we have shown a central characteristic of critical theory of Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School is dialectical analysis. Dialectical analysis looks at social phenomena as complex and contradictory. It tries to identify contending pressures, contradictory forces, opportunities, and risks and shows to which extent these tendencies are realized and/or suppressed.

Dialectical analysis allows Fuchs to criticize techno-deterministic arguments of both techno-pessimistic and techno-optimistic approaches. For him both approaches are one-dimensional because they assume that technology has only one, either negative or positive, effect on society. In contrast, Fuchs looks at technology and society as "complex, dynamic systems" (13), which have "contradictory effects" (13). This means that technology contains the potential to be used in a repressive and/or emancipatory way. It can function as a means of exploitation and domination as well as a tool for strengthening the co-operative potentials of society. Societal effects of technologies thus depend on the societal context of their usage and can only be determined by analyzing underlying power-relations.

His dialectical approach allows him to avoid a one-sided view and to recognize that at the same time ISNS also contain positive potentials. He points out that ISNS support the maintenance of existing and the establishment of new friendships, community building, communicative exchange, and cooperation. However, in contemporary society the full realization of these emancipatory potentials is suppressed. The usage of ISNS is always accompanied by threats such as economic or state surveillance.

These contradictory potentials of ISNS are also reflected by the results of Fuchs' empirical study. One important result of the study is: "Although students are very well aware of the surveillance threat, they are willing to take this risk because they consider communicative opportunities as very important. That they expose themselves to this risk is caused by a lack of alternative platforms that have a strongly reduced surveillance risk and operate on a non-profit and non-commercial basis" (99). This shows that when using ISNS students are confronted with the contradiction that using these platforms at the same time brings advantages and poses threats.

The dialectical orientation of his approach also allows Fuchs to imagine an alternative that transcends the existing negativity. The transcendence is not located outside societal possibilities, and can be realized by transformative human practices. Transcendence in this approach is linked to immanent, material conditions of social reality. This allows defining a transcendent vision, which is not an idealistic utopia but a real social possibility.

By citing examples such as Wikipedia, Fuchs identifies tendencies that point beyond the existing social reality. The full realization of these potentials requires social transformations: "One needs to change society for finding solutions to problems. There are no technological fixes to societal problems" (14). The aim of a critical Internet theory is not only the establishment of the Internet as a public good and as a space for free and self-determined access to, exchange of, and co-operative production of information commons, but includes the transformation of society as totality.

### **Society as Totality:**

Fuchs stresses that techno-pessimistic as well as techno-optimistic approaches on ISNS assume that societal risks and

opportunities are inherent qualities of technologies. Fuchs disagrees with this assumption and points out that every discussion of risks and opportunities of ISNS has to consider the societal context.

This marks another important element of critical theory, which is a characteristic of Fuchs' study: to place the analysis of certain phenomena within the totality of society. He stresses the importance to "frame research issues by the macro context of the development dynamics of society as a whole" (21). The consideration of society as totality allows Fuchs to determine which of the contradictory potentials of technology is prevailing today, and how to foster the realization of emancipatory potentials.

Fuchs shows that ISNS are run by commercial enterprises and that "ISNS are objects of capital accumulation" (22). He argues that the main threats in regard to ISNS do not result from wrong behavior of individual users, but from corporate interests. For him profit-interests of new media corporations, which own ISNS, create the danger of state surveillance and economic surveillance: "On the one hand new imperialism has produced a situation, in which war and terror potentially reinforce each other, and the West reacts by increasing surveillance. [...] On the other hand, not only the state, but also corporations have an interest in gathering personal data in order to develop personalized advertising strategies that target individual tastes and related tastes by aggregating and assessing user data" (33).

As Fuchs emphasizes these repressive effects of ISNS on individuals and society are not characteristics of technology as such but result from their usage by capitalist corporations. This insight can already be found in Karl Marx's "Capital." In the context of the industrial revolution and the rise of machinery he pointed out: "The contradictions and antagonisms inseparable from the capitalist employment of machinery [...] do not arise out of machinery, as such, but out of its capitalist employment!" (Marx 1867, 465)<sup>5</sup>

#### **Humanistic Orientation:**

For a critical theory, which is humanistic and wants to foster the emancipation of humans and society, the question how threats and repressive realities can be challenged and advantages and emancipatory potentials can be realized is important.

Fuchs does not limit himself to pointing out the repressive realities and suppressed potentials, but he further develops ideas for transformative strategies that aim at fostering human emancipation. According to Fuchs, it is important to increase awareness of the repressive character of a capitalist usage of ISNS, which brings about threats such as economic and state surveillance. In order to increase critical knowledge Fuchs recommends to strengthen critical public discourse on surveillance, to organize information campaigns that show how people are immediately affected by surveillance, to document privacy violations, and to create non-commercial, non-profit social networking platforms on the Internet.

#### **Historical Understanding:**

Fuchs is able to identify societal alternatives because he recognizes that the way in which ISNS are used today, the purposes they serve, and the effects they have result from specific human practices in contemporary society. This means that surveillance does not result from natural qualities of the technology, but from historical conditions and human practices. Technology could also be used in another way.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Fuchs' approach is rooted in Marxian philosophy and critical theory. It is a materialistic, dialectical, and historical approach, which is humanistic and interested in human emancipation and

in the transformation of society as totality. We argue that this is a very promising background for studying the Internet and for assessing societal advantages and risks because it allows us to confront technological determinism and to look at technological structures and its effects as products of human practices and of societal power-relations.

The value of Fuchs' study does not only stem from the profound collection of empirical data on student's usage of ISNS, but also from its critical, dialectical orientation. This approach allows grasping the Internet as complex, contradictory, and as subject to contending pressures. Fuchs' analysis shows that repressive potentials are prevailing today. However, his approach allows him to identify suppressed possibilities, the tendencies that point beyond the existing reality, and the starting points for a transformation of the Internet and of society.

Fuchs' study is an important contribution to critical theory in the information age. It provides promising insights for scholars as well as for students who want to avoid technological determinism and to look behind mere appearances at societal power relations that shape technology and its usage.

#### **Endnotes**

1. English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm> (May 2, 2009)
2. English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm> (May 2, 2009)
3. English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm> (May 2, 2009)
4. English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm> (May 2, 2009)
5. English translation from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm> (May 2, 2009)

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## **SYLLABUS DISCUSSION**

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### ***Teaching AI and Philosophy at School?***

**Aaron Sloman**

*School of Computer Science, The University of Birmingham*

<http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~axs/>

#### **1. Introduction: We Need Something Different**

This paper proposes a way of teaching computing, not as a branch of engineering, but as a way of learning to do philosophy, cognitive science, psychology, linguistics, and