

OVERCONNECTED, UNDER-ENGAGED:  
WHEN ALIENATION GOES ONLINE

Volume 1 of 1

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# Abstract

The emergence and development of Internet enabling communication technology has created new possibilities for people to interact and has changed the culture of communication more generally. This thesis analyses the way that these developments have impacted the social world and the communicative relations between individuals who live in it. To do so, I put research on online communication into contact with the Marxist and first-generation Critical Theory discourse of 'alienation'. Using 'alienation' as a methodological lens, I draw out the similarities and differences between the contemporary social world and the alienating socio-economic-political systems of earlier periods of capitalism. I argue that contemporary capitalism has structured online communication so that it distorts intersubjective relations between individuals. Consequently, the relationship between the contemporary individual and the social world in which they live represents a distinct and new form of 'alienation'.

The thesis is divided into three parts: alienation, subjectivity and contemporary alienation. First, I conduct an exegesis of the tradition of theorising alienation that runs from Karl Marx through to the first-generation Critical Theorists. I establish alienation as a critical concept and examine how capitalism's domination of that relationship has gradually widened as that system has developed. Second, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the account giving subject and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, I reconstruct an account of the individual as a communicative subject. I engage with Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action to establish a theory of the social world as constituted through intersubjective communicative relationships. In the final part of thesis, I argue that the contemporary social world is formed by online and offline communicative ecosystems and discuss the contemporary socio-economic-political system. Finally, I bring together the themes of the thesis to describe the distinctive features of contemporary alienation.

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# Introduction

*"The Internet, like the steam engine, is a technological breakthrough that changed the world."*  
Peter Singer (2010)

This thesis considers the way in which the emergence and development of online communication has changed the social world and communicative relations between individuals who live in it. I put research on online communication into contact with the Marxist and Critical Theory discourse of 'alienation'. Using 'alienation' as a methodological lens, I draw out the similarities and differences between the contemporary social world and the alienating socio-economic-political systems of earlier periods of capitalism. I argue that contemporary capitalism has structured online communication so that it distorts intersubjective relations between individuals. Consequently, the relationship between the contemporary individual and the social world represents a distinct and new form of 'alienation'.

## A changed world: the Internet and society

The Internet is a tidal wave. It will wash over the computer industry and many others, drowning those who don't learn to swim in its waves (Bill Gates, quoted in Anderson 2005: 13).

The Internet became publicly accessible in 1990. Since then, Internet usage has expanded exponentially. By the end of 2017, more than 4 billion people – over half of the world's population – were Internet users (IWS 2018). Also, the ways in which users access that network have evolved. Where users were once tied to their desks, the development of smartphones, watches, tablets, and other devices has made online access portable. These developments, in turn, have allowed the Internet to transcend national and economic barriers. Indeed, in "regions with growing economies [...] mobile phones might be the first and primary platform for Internet access" (Blank & Dutton 2014: 50). With the expanding reach of the Internet and the increasing ubiquity of these "always-on/always-on-you" technologies, as MIT researcher Sherry Turkle terms these portable devices (Turkle 2008), the Internet has become a constant presence in modern life. Indeed, it has become so pervasive that some academics have argued that stopping children from Internet use is a form of child abuse (see: Cashmore et al. 2018).



Corresponding to this expansion of access and usage, the emergence of social networking sites and services has brought about recognisable changes to the social world as well as to the individual's engagement and use of the medium. No contemporary event would be complete without celebrities, politicians, and ordinary people marking it with a *selfie* to be shared online (the word selfie was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013 (OED 2013); the social media campaigns #blacklivesmatter and #metoo have raised social awareness of the discourse of gender and racial inequalities that still blight the 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal world; Twitter and Facebook, if not used to organise it, allowed the world to witness and support the revolutionary actions of the Arab Spring (see: Chayko 2017, Fuchs 2017); services such as Facetime, Skype, and WhatsApp allow us to talk face-to-face over great distance and in real-time, and many habitually switch to and between the instant text messaging functions offered (see: Medianou & Miller 2013); Wikipedia provides an unparalleled repository of public knowledge on everything from propositional logic to the national cuisine of Estonia; new media websites like medium.com and theconversation.co.uk provide credible alternatives to mainstream media.

In many ways, this hyper-connected social world fits the utopian predictions of the early Internet era. Yet, as these developments have accelerated in unpredictable ways and directions, so public and academic discourses have begun to reflect more upon the negative effects and potential of online communication usage. Discussions of cyberbullying and trolling, distorted body image problems, eating disorders, and mental health concerns, are widespread and ongoing. *Gaming disorder*, for example, was identified as a mental disorder by the World Health Organization in June 2018 (WHO 2018). In response to growing public and professional concerns about the extent of Internet use, the National Health Service (UK) in 2018 announced the opening of an Internet-addiction centre in London (Marsh 2018). The problems of over-use and misuse are often viewed as *diseases* or pathologies specific to a generation that has grown up accustomed to online communication, yet to see these issues as limited to the youngest members of society would be an under-appreciation of just how far, and wide, these new technologies have reached into society. The 2018 Ofcom *Communications Market Report*, for example, found that

the average Briton checks their smartphone every 12 minutes (Ofcom 2018). Whilst a 2018 PewResearch survey found 26% of Americans surveyed admitted to being constantly online (Perring & Jiang 2018). As Sherry Turkle's decades long study of the relationship between the individual and technology shows, new technology has changed the communication behaviour patterns of all generations, as individuals are in a constant dance between online and offline, driven by the fear of missing out (see: Turkle 2015; 2011; see also: boyd 2014; Shariff 2015).<sup>1</sup>

To consider another angle, recent developments in world politics have forced states and governments to re-assess the attitude that "digital technologies are [...] somehow autonomous" (Berry 2015: 10). In the light of the results of the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the EU, and US presidential elections in the same year, communication technology and the online are under scrutiny for their role in shaping our contemporary political and social landscape (see: Fuchs 2018). With the sentiment that technology is the reason for things going 'wrong' in the first place – the often-dystopian discussions of 'bots' and 'bubbles', Cambridge Analytica, fake news and radicalisation, suggest a world on the brink.

As the title of this thesis suggests, I am sympathetic to these discussions. Yet, my aim here is not to cast judgement on the Social Networking Sites of the time (as I am writing, the main players are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat), or pronounce the death of democracy. Rather my interest and arguments concern underlying changes in communicative culture and engagement with the social world brought by the advent of the online and the economic forces that structure it. In this respect, the focus of this thesis is not on specific online platforms, nor on the symptoms of any changes that these platforms have played a part in, but on the state of the relationship between the individual and the social world that they live in.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a myriad of interlinked but separate issues that emerge from this research, especially concerns about the physical and mental well-being of an individual (i.e. how the emergence and development of technology is immediately affecting the embodied individual in regard to, for example, body image, screen time etc.) The argument that I forward in this thesis is closely related to these concerns but, focused as it is upon the changing nature of intersubjective communicative relationship, it runs somewhat orthogonal to concerns about embodiment. That is not to deny that changes of the sort I am interest can affect embodiment – e.g. trolling can lead to specific harm – but I consider that to be a topic worthy of a separate research project.

The terms 'overconnected' and 'under-engaged' are metaphors for the key findings of this analysis. These can be taken to describe the character of the individual's situation when participating simultaneously in the two communicative ecosystems that I shall argue have come to constitute the contemporary social world.

On one hand, the development of online communication technology has provided the individual with an opportunity to connect and communicate with the other in a multiplicity of new online spaces. Whilst the network that follows from these connections is modelled on the immediate communicative ecosystem, however, it also allows the individual to maintain a kind of mediated presence and availability online, even when the individual themselves is not engaged with the conversation online. It is as a result of this virtual availability, we shall see, that the individual comes to be connected, not just to the other, but connected in ways and dimensions that they do not explicitly seek, or are necessarily even aware of. They are, to turn a phrase, 'overconnected'.

On the other hand, what the analysis will show is that, despite the seeming freedom of online communication, the individual's mediated presence on the platforms where much of that communication occurs is structured so as to serve the economic interests of the companies who provide those platforms. Through this re-structuring of online communication *new media* companies are able to exploit the communicative nature of the individual as a social subject. They do this, as this thesis argues, by inculcating in the individual the need to communicate online as much, and as often as possible. The more the individual acts upon this need, though, the less – and the less *responsibly* – they will truly engage with their communication, the communications of others, and the social world in which communication occurs. Just as the individual becomes 'overconnected' as they jump into online communication, so we might say, they become 'under-engaged'.

## Contemporary research field

The snapshot above describes only a small selection of phenomena associated with the Internet. Still, it highlights the socio-economic-political changes that are, in common discourse, explicitly ascribed to the growing use of online communication. They also illustrate the diversity of topics that relate to the communication associated aspects of the online. Unsurprisingly, these technologies and associated changes in behaviour in the social world have provoked a vibrant and disciplinarily diverse range of academic research into the different aspects of Internet usage.

This thesis develops a philosophical analysis of the state of the relationship between the social world and the individual in light of the development of the Internet and specifically the development of new communication forms online. With that, it makes use of and aims to further contribute to existing critical scholarship on the state of the contemporary social world as well as the socio-economic-political system that underlies the operation of the online world. In particular, I engage with work that can be broadly described as belonging to the tradition of Critical Theory – especially Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth. Other scholars drawing on this theoretical framework have also informed my analysis and will be discussed in some detail. These include Judith Butler and Rahel Jaeggi, as well as Jodi Dean, José van Dijck, Christian Fuchs, and John B. Thompson. Following here is a brief survey of contemporary work that brings the Critical Theory tradition into relation with online communication as well as some work more loosely related to this tradition. There are three relevant areas of discussion, two of which my study engages with:

Firstly, the analyses of Marx and first-generation Critical Theorists of how the capitalist socio-economic-political system creates an oppressive and exploitative social world, have been used to analyse ways in which service providers exploit user data to profit from the individual's engagements online (see: Miller 2011). One interesting product of discussion along these lines has been an economic critique of the online sphere, employing a notion of fair economic treatment to argue that online users should be recognised for their economic contribution and recompensed accordingly. With the time and effort users expend on their online activities, and the

revenue providers extract from this, not doing so can be seen as a form of economic exploitation (see: Berry 2015; Fuchs 2017). The principal strand of discussion, however, has focused upon the nature of online communication in a market-governed system and how, as the Internet has become a public resource, the capitalist socio-economic-political system has developed new forms of market control. Examples are the manipulation of the range and flow of information available (van Dijck 2013), the creation of the need to constantly communicate (Dean 2005), and the personalization of the presentation of information (Pariser 2011).

Recognition of the ways in which online communication is susceptible to manipulation, and the impact of that on individuals' opinions about the social world, especially politics, has also led to a wave of publications from journalists and commentators who raise similar concerns as this thesis. To highlight a few, titles include: *The People vs Tech* (Bartlett 2018); *The Internet is not the Answer* (Keen 2015); *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (Foer 2017). Much of this work is speculative and loosely argued and, in general, I shall not engage with this literature. At the same time, I would suggest, anyone working on this area should be aware of the work being done outside academia. Some of these texts offer insights into aspects of Internet culture not easily accessible to academic research. Work on the rise of far-right political thought and its exploitation of online communication to alter the political landscape is a particularly topical area, with texts such as Angela Nagle's *Kill all Normies* (2017) and Mike Wendling's *Alt-Right: From 4-Chan to the White House* (2018) (for an academic discussion of similar issues see: Fuchs 2018).

A second area in which the Critical Theory approach has been brought into contact with analyses of online activities and spaces is discussion around Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and his notion of the public sphere. Proponents of the idea that the online sphere represents the realisation of Habermas's public sphere, emphasise the access and neutral nature of online communication and suggest that, since recognition can be gained more easily in online communication, Habermas's ideal of an all-inclusive discourse is achievable in that space (Barton 2005; Kellner 2000). This view was most prevalent early in the

Internet era, before the increasing dominance of social media platforms that directly monetize communication between users. It has regained prominence as new services have developed without any recognisable source of revenue. Opponents to this view stress the fact that the online world is governed and provided by private companies and therefore resembles in key aspects offline mass-media. They also argue that the unsuccessful translation of online activism to action in the offline world is evidence against the democratic potential of the Internet (see: Dean 2003; Harper 2016; Kreide 2016; Rasmussen 2014). As represented by Habermas's own 2006 contribution to this discourse, the current trend of this discussion is largely pessimistic. Whilst I do not engage with this research in depth in my analysis, my use of Habermas's theory of communication is informed by it.

A third research area loosely related to the themes of the thesis is found in contemporary psychology and sociology work employing the Marxian and Critical Theory notion of *fetish* (Dean 2005; Kaplan 2006). Marx introduced the concept of commodity fetishism to explain the power that factory produced objects have on individual labourers in capitalist society. The first-generation Critical Theorists developed this notion through their engagement with psychoanalysis. Researchers in contemporary sociology and psychology have adopted it to analyse the trends of social media usage and Internet enabled devices and examine associated psychological effects. Specific foci include technology addiction (Kuss & Griffiths 2011), obsession (Chaulk & Jones 2011) and narcissism (Sheldon & Bryant 2015). This work resonates with the establishment of institutes and programmes addressing Internet usage as a mental health issue mentioned earlier. Although this strand of research deals with similar phenomena to this thesis, its focus on the psychological consequences of technology usage runs orthogonal to my interest in changes to the structure of communication between individuals and the effects that these have on the individual's relationship to the social world. Bringing my discussion of communication into contact with research on the psychological consequences of technology usage may be a fruitful area for further research but is not at the centre of this thesis.

# Research methodology/Assumptions

Herbert Marcuse, in his 1941 essay *Some Implications of Modern Technology* writes:

We do not ask for the influence or effect of technology on the human individuals. For they are themselves an integral part and factor of technology, not only as the men who invent or attend to machinery but also as the social groups which direct its application and utilization (Marcuse 1978[1941]: 138).<sup>2</sup>

Echoing Marcuse, this thesis starts from the assumption that technology is always embedded in a specific socio-economic-political system. Any new technology will reflect the decisions made by its designers throughout its development, as well as their perception of how it will be useful in their contemporary social world. That is not to say that technologies follow the designed pathways, but that their initial design provides structures, a grammar of possibilities, that affect even the likely unpredicted usages and transformations. (see: Introna 2016; Rosenberger 2017; Verbeek 2005[2000]). Likewise, how a technology is put to use in society, and as a result developed further, is shaped by the individuals, institutions, and groups who adopt and engage with it. Technology, on this understanding, is neither beneficial, nor detrimental to society in the abstract; in practice it always reflects and affects the values and structures of the society in which it is used.

A second assumption, that I support by drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984[1981]; 1992[1981]), is that the relationship between the individual and the social world is an interdependent communicative relationship. The social world frames the individual's existence and experience; the individual's behaviour has a role to play in defining and establishing the social world. Communication is fundamental in establishing this relationship. The relationship can become distorted when the social system in some way interferes with the individual's freedom to contribute to the social world. The disintegration or manipulation of reliable communicative relations can harm the individual.

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations follow the original formatting and language of the source, unless stated otherwise. Where two publication dates are given, the date without parentheses refers to the cited edition, the date in square brackets refers to the original publication date. Where a work is cited multiple times, citations following the first only include the edition date.

My third assumption is that the ubiquity of problematic communicative behaviour online, behaviour that would rarely go unchallenged offline, must in some way be inherent in the nature of the online communicative ecosystem. The research on cyberbullying, in particular, supports the conclusion that objectionable communicative online behaviour is enabled by the medium. Anonymity, a diffusion of responsibilities, a perceived disjunction between offline and online, and the possibility to selectively apply moral norms, have all been identified as factors contributing to this phenomenon (see respectively: Park et al. 2014: 75; 79; Kwan & Skoric 2013: 18; and Snakenborg et al. 2013: 90; Selwyn 2008, cited in Park et al. 2014: 75; Park et al. 2014: 74). In this respect, I examine the possibility that offensive communication (as well as other unusual forms of communication online) has not so much found a new venue online but is enabled by the structure of online communication.

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, I employ *alienation* as a methodological lens to analyse the relationship between the individual and the contemporary social world.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to reflect on the possible impact of online communication technology on the individual's ability to interact with the social world. Alienation in the critical tradition that I engage with refers to a distorted relationship between individual and social world. A crucial tenet of this tradition is that such distortion – and so alienation – depends on the structure of the social system in place and the ways in which this system dominates individual existence. This entails that attempts to analyse a new development in (capitalist) society requires a re-articulation of the framework of alienation. I have attempted to give an account of contemporary alienation in the present Internet age. The examination of the influence of recent developments in intersubjective communication and

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<sup>3</sup> On a theoretical level, this analysis follows the dialectical method – as my aim is to analyse the contemporary social *via* investigation of the tension that arises when we put into contact the capitalist critique of the contemporary world with the individual as a communicative subject, whose communicative responsibility is not diminished by the space in which it occurs. On a conceptual level, as shall become clear in the course of the thesis are a number of different negations/tensions that all contribute to the contemporary social world – between, for instance, structure and agency, online and offline, recognition and being dismissed.



communication technology, requires also an account of the social world and of the individual that theorises the significance of communication to each.

The thesis is divided into three parts – alienation, subjectivity and contemporary alienation. Chapters 1-3 form the first part of the thesis. Chapter 4-5 the second. And Chapter 6-9 the last.

**Part I** offers an exegesis of relevant accounts of alienation. It establishes alienation as a critical concept for assessing the individual-social world relationship and examines how capitalism's domination of that relationship has become gradually more total as capitalism has developed.

**Part II** establishes an account of the individual-social world relationship that can accommodate the potential effect of changes in intersubjective communication and communication technology upon that relationship. Respectively, it argues that the individual is a communicative *subject*; and, that the social world is constituted through intersubjective communicative relationships.

**Part III** establishes an account of the contemporary social world formed by online and offline communicative ecosystems and discusses the contemporary socio-economic-political system. Finally, it argues that the relationship between the individual and the contemporary social world shares similar features to the totalising capitalist systems discussed in part I and describes the distinctive features of contemporary alienation.

## Alienation as a critical concept: a short history

Alienation has been employed throughout the Western tradition of philosophy as a critical concept with which to analyse the individual-(social) world relationship and to describe instances in which that relationship is somehow mal-functioning. Apart from this general description of the concept, however, the meaning and usage of the term, and the specific relationships that it has been used to examine, have varied greatly. For that reason, a brief history of alienation in Western philosophy provides a basis for my use of the concept for the current analysis.

The term alienation can be traced back to the Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic period from 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Alienation (*allotriôsis*) is given a prominent position within their theological and (loosely termed) pantheistic ethics and metaphysics and plays an important role in their materialist conception of morality. The concept of alienation and its opposite, *appropriation* (*oikeiôsis*), are used to explain the individual's relation to the world and the reason that pervades it. Roughly, alienation refers to the state that the individual occupies before they have properly realized that their self-interests and the interests of society, others in that society, and ultimately the natural world as a whole, coincide. Alienation is overcome through the process of appropriation, whereby the individual realizes their place in the world and takes the interests of other people and the world as their own (see: Endberg-Perderson 1986).

The term alienation gains new significance in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Enlightenment quest to replace myth with a rational-empirical understanding of the world led to development of the view of the individual as a social being. Alienation, respectively, became a concept for describing and analysing the relationship between the individual and the social system, itself the product of interaction between human-beings. In this context alienation was taken to be an inevitable consequence of society – as social coherence precludes the satisfaction of all individual needs. An example is the social critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1993[1762]). Rousseau does not offer a set definition of alienation but, rather, uses it interchangeably to explain two central but juxtaposing features of social life: the inalienable rights of the individual to engage in social life; and the way in which social

life alienated individuals from the state of nature. Rousseau employs the concept of alienation to illuminate the individual's relationship to the external conditions and the structure of the social world that they live under.

In contrast, the critical tradition of alienation theorising has its origin in the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977[1807]; 2005[1820]; 2010[1817]). The phenomenon of alienation is an essential feature of Hegel's dialectical ontology. Dialectics, for Hegel, is a methodological framework that explains all social as well as mental phenomena, and how they lead to self-recognition. Hegel considers alienation as a negative/negation state in the dialectical process, where the entity is able to perceive itself as different from the others. The state of alienation is necessary for the entity to be able to position itself in relation to its surrounding and become self-aware. Though his own interests do not (primarily) lie in criticism, Hegel's claim that alienation is a part of an ontological process, and that this state can be overcome, suggests its value as a concept for critiquing a particular social order. In this respect he is a central figure in the tradition – and the two strands of alienation theory that come to dominate the discourse both emerge in response to Hegel's dialectical account and the position that alienation holds in it. One is a metaphysical approach to alienation, which challenges Hegel's claim that all entities are able to reach self-recognition as a final state. The other is a materialistic account which claims that alienation is not ontologically necessary but rather is determined and defined by the material social conditions under which the individual lives (Sayers 2011: 11).

The metaphysical account of alienation (or equivalent terms) was developed by a disparate group of philosophers through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Søren Kierkegaard (1994[1843]; 2008[1849]), Martin Heidegger (2008[1927]) and Jean-Paul Sartre (2003[1943]). Whilst these thinkers did not share a common understanding of human nature, nor of the nature or possibility of self-recognition, they all see alienation as the default state of the individual's social existence. Surrounded by others, the individual is always in a position of being defined by the system and tempted to follow the mass. Alienation is a universal and inevitable part of social existence. Overcoming alienation, respectively, is possible only if the

individual dismisses the influence of the other and seeks to realize their own nature autonomously.

The materialist strand of alienation theory, also emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is rooted in Karl Marx's material dialectics (2004[1932]; 1990[1867]). In contrast to the metaphysical account, Marx and his followers emphasise the power and effects of the specific socio-economic conditions of society and its governing forces upon the individual. In this strand of thinking the concept of alienation gains its critical capacity. The material conditions of society, Marx argues, define both the relationship of the individual to the social world and the state of the individual in that world. Alienation, here, is taken to refer to an oppressive and overpowering social structure. It is used more specifically to analyse the shortcomings of capitalism. Marx suggests that the industrial socio-economic system forces the individual to engage with the social world in an unnatural manner. Instead of providing for oneself, as Marx claims is in the individual's true nature, the individual is alienated through relations of wage-labour and commodity consumption. Overcoming this stage of alienation is not guaranteed and only a change in socio-economic conditions would bring such change.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marx's critical conception of alienation is further developed by multiple thinkers, including György Lukács (1972[1932]), and the first-generation Critical Theory thinkers, especially Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer (1997[1944]), Herbert Marcuse (2002[1964]; 1970[1965]) and Erich Fromm (2004[1961]). Where these thinkers diverge most significantly from Marx is in arguing that the social structure is alienating in all aspects of the individual's social existence – not only or even primarily wage-labour. The Critical Theorists suggest that individuals are conditioned to and incorporated within that alienating system. The alienating social world is total and individuals come to replicate that world in all their social interaction.

Some say that one aspect that turned out problematic in the first-generation Critical Theorists' use of alienation is that it becomes a psychological-diagnostic term employed to explain a variety of feelings and mental states, the causes of which were attributed to capitalism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. indifference, reification,

absurdity, meaningless, instrumentalization) (Jaeggi 2014: 5. See also: Seeman 1959; Twining 1980; Wegner 1975; Williams & Cullingford 1997). As a result of this, the critical value of alienation is dismissed by many scholars at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. More recently, however, and in response to both the material as well as metaphysical accounts of alienation, Rahel Jaeggi develops an account of 'self-alienation' as a specific discrepant relationship that the individual has with themselves and through that, with their life story. Jaeggi argues that alienation occurs when the individual is unable to healthily engage with the role that they have come to occupy in the social world. Jaeggi raises questions concerning the role of individual agency for the relationship between the individual and the social world.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse and theorise the effects of the online communicative ecosystem, and associated technologies, upon the individual's experience and their relationship to the social world, I shall be engaging with the critical tradition of alienation theorising linking Hegel, Marx, the first-generation Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, and the work of Rahel Jaeggi (2014[2005]). The metaphysical and ontological accounts do not feature in the following discussion.

I see alienation as a valuable concept with which to analyse the relationship between the individual and the social world, although it is a critical and a negative concept. For that reason, any analysis in terms of alienation is bound to uncover the negative aspects of a research object. This thesis is no exception. Whilst the conclusions of my analysis will be largely critical of online communication and the ecosystem that has evolved, this thesis has not explored all the angles of the theme. Alienation theory is strong in providing a critical but possibly also a partial understanding of changes to the social world and their impact upon the individual. Other analytic concepts and approaches to the topic may expose more positive aspects of online communication for individuals and society.

# Chapter outline

## Part I

### **Chapter 1: Alienation and capitalism and Chapter 2: Alienation and the development of capitalism**

These two chapters focus on the material conception of alienation, according to which alienation is a feature of specific social systems.

The material account of alienation was first established by Karl Marx to analyse the impact of Industrialisation on society and the individual who is experiencing technological development first hand. Marx's account investigates how sociality, which – on his account – is always related to the individual as a *producer* of and in the social world, is fundamentally altered by changes to material, and specifically ownership, conditions. As capitalism introduces wage-labour, so the individual needs to participate in the production of commodities to assure their existence. At the same time, the individual has little control over the economic and political system which determines the nature and content of this existence. As social relations to the other come to be determined through the production and consumption relationship imposed on the individual by capitalism, so they are recognisably alienated from the way in which they should and would live if truly free.

Marx's approach, looking at the impact of socio-economic-political change on individuals as society members, was adopted and developed further by the 'first-generation' Critical Theorists, especially, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. They used alienation to explain how technological development was used in their contemporary era to mediate the oppressive social system and, due to that, alienation became a form of existence in which individuals no longer recognise any alternatives outside the oppressive system. Alienation, understood this way, is a universal phenomenon, forming the experience of all individuals in society, that is triggered by capitalism.

The theories discussed in these two chapters demonstrate how capitalism engenders alienating experience with gradually more all-encompassing means. At the same time, the material accounts of alienation conceive of the individual-social

world relationship as one-directional and so discount the role that the individual's response to the social system can have in their being alienated. Alienation, on this account, is a feature of the social system encountered by all members of a society regardless of their subjective experience of that. In Chapter 3, I look at an account of alienation that pays greater attention to the role of individual agency in the alienation relationship.

### **Chapter 3: Alienation and the self**

This chapter discusses Rahel Jaeggi's self-alienation theory. In contrast to Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists, Jaeggi depicts alienation as an individual, and so, subjective phenomenon, that is not encountered by all individuals. In providing an individualistic account of offline individual-social world relationship, Jaeggi makes a number of novel contributions to the wider discourse.

First, Jaeggi challenges the previous material and metaphysical alienation accounts on two fronts. She argues that they rely on an implausible idea of a possible tension-free non-alienated existence and that they present alienation and non-alienation as distinct and disconnected stages – and as such allow no transition between the two.

Second, Jaeggi's argues that alienation is a relational phenomenon – a *relation to relationlessness*. Selfhood, for Jaeggi, refers to the individual's self-determined perception and account of their life. When alienated, the individual is not able to properly establish the relation with the social-self in such a way that the latter contributes to their self-determined account of themselves. Respectively, a non-alienated existence requires that the individual properly establish that relation, i.e. that the self *appropriates* the social-self.

Jaeggi's account is an important contribution to the discourse on alienation in so far as she identifies alienation as a malfunctioning relation – not a state – and highlights the importance of individual agency in that relation. Yet, I argue, Jaeggi fails to properly acknowledge the social existence of the individual as an intersubjective communicative being – and the way in which the social world, its norms and rules, limit the individual's possibilities.

## Part II

### Chapter 4: Subject

Chapter 4 develops an account of the individual as subject formed in intersubjective relations with the other and discusses the forces that determine the subject's social existence.

To explain the ways in which the subject is formed, I draw on Judith Butler's theory of *account giving* and Axel Honneth's on *recognition*. Through their work, I present an account of a moral subject who is vulnerable because of their inherent sociality. This vulnerability emerges because the individual develops subjectivity (i.e. becomes a subject) only through recognition by others as an equal. In this sense, the individual is always struggling or fighting to be recognised. It is only when recognised and addressed that the individual is able to realise both the limitations to knowing about themselves, and the limitations that language presents to voicing themselves as an 'I'.

At the same time, the other is in a position to reject or disagree with the account the individual is providing. As the subject-other relationship is a two-way relationship, all individuals are in the position of always being both subject and other. That means, they are at the same time struggling to be recognised and deemed to have an acceptable account of their self, as well as in a position to dismiss and/or challenge the other's account. Becoming aware of this mutual vulnerability demands that people act morally towards each other. Being always dependent on the other, the individual can only hope for recognition.

By combining Butler's account of the subject with Honneth's understanding of the role of recognition in the subject's formation, I develop an account of the individual as a subject formed in intersubjective relations – always needing an other to gain self-awareness. This subject is always vulnerable and is inherently relational. Correspondingly, moral and social norms develop out of the interactions between subject and other as individuals recognise (or fail to recognise) the simultaneous vulnerability that they and the other hold.



## **Chapter 5: Communicative subject**

In Chapter 5, I consider how (verbal) communication and communicative relations – as the primary form of intersubjective relationship – determine and form both the subject and the social world. In doing so, I give an account of how moral behaviour, and responsibility for behaviour in front of the other, arise through intersubjective communication.

The chapter draws on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action to discuss the importance communication has in the development of the subject's self-awareness and moral behaviour. These functions of communication can be understood in terms of the specific demands that a speech act places upon communicator and addressee. These demands fall into three domains: the inherent validity claims within the speech act, the demand for justifying those claims, and the rules of validity for challenging the speech act.

Intersubjective communication that involves these demands, Habermas suggests, has a twofold power:

1. Generating responsibilities for everyone involved in the interaction.
2. Generating and solidifying the norms that determine the social world.

Habermas's model of communication explains how the individual is not just a subject, but a *communicative subject*. The individual is, thus, vulnerable because the other as a communicator has the power to deform the subject's self-awareness, but similarly holds responsibility for their own communication. It is this combination of the power to hurt the other and affect the other's social experience and the corresponding vulnerability to the other that makes communicative behaviour moral behaviour.

## **Part III**

### **Chapter 6: The contemporary social world – offline and online**

In Chapter 6, I establish the account of the contemporary social world and explain the development of the Internet from the web 1.0 to web 2.0. In doing so I argue that, whilst the web 1.0 was simply an extension of offline mediated communication, the

web 2.0 has come to mimic or imitate the offline communicative ecosystem by way of social media. As a result of this, I suggest that contemporary online communication has become a coherent communicative ecosystem that should be considered distinct from that found offline. By doing so I explain how the development of new communications technologies, and specifically social media, have altered the constitution of the contemporary social world.

## **Chapter 7: Communicative capitalism**

Chapter 7 establishes how modalities of communication, especially online communication, function in forming the contemporary social world and replicating capitalist ideology within it. I use the works of Jodie Dean, Jose van Dijck, Christian Fuchs, Simon Lindgren, Vincent Miller and others to analyse how the contemporary social world frames the communicative subject through new technology – and the internal structures and functions of these technologies and platforms. Building on the previous chapter, I describe how the online-subject's online activities are monetized by social media through the creation of sophisticated profiles on their interests, preferences, and social relationships. This data-subject is used for new forms of targeted advertisement and marketing that are a lucrative source of revenue for the social media companies. The data-subject can also be used to modify the individual's experience of the online world in such a way that they are not able to fully appreciate the ways in which that world is structured by capitalism and how the social media companies profit from their time online. In this way, *communicative capitalism* exploits both the individual's time and labour.

## **Chapter 8: Equivalence thinking**

This chapter provides an analysis of the forms of communication (or communicative action) that the contemporary *communicative subject* – living under or in communicative capitalism – is specifically engaged with. In doing so this chapter draws out and highlights the discrepancies that occur between communication conducted online and offline.

Applying John B. Thompson's classification of offline face-to-face communication, mediated communication and mediated quasi-interaction to Internet communication,

I establish the similarities and differences between offline and online communication. I suggest that a new form of communication has emerged online – *Internet mediated communication* – that is distinct from the extension of established forms of mediated communication that Internet technology enables. *Internet mediated communication*, as I define it, is perceived to function as communicative action. It is through this form, I suggest, that discrepancies between online and offline communication arise. To explain these discrepancies, I look at *Internet mediated communication* in the light of the rules of communicative action established in Chapter 5. Comparison of Habermas's model of well-functioning intersubjective communication to *Internet mediated communication* highlights fundamental differences between these two forms of intersubjective communication. Specifically, I argue that *Internet mediated communication* does not operate on the same demands for responsibility for one's communicative acts as is found in well-functioning offline communication.

## **Chapter 9: Contemporary alienation**

In this chapter, I draw on the themes of the previous chapters to describe the state of the relationship between the individual and the contemporary social world. I argue that this relation manifests a distinctive new form of alienation brought about by the emergence of the online communicative ecosystem and the system of communicative capitalism that structures that. With reference to the discussion of alienation in Chapters 1-3, I illustrate the ways in which the contemporary social world manifests similarly alienating features to early periods of capitalism. By distorting intersubjective communicative relationships, however, communicative capitalism has added new dimensions to alienation. Firstly, by inculcating in the individual a distorted need for online recognition communicative capitalism conditions the individual to forget the vulnerability that underlies intersubjective relations, and so treat their communication and the other instrumentally. Second, by enabling the individual to communicate without due responsibility to the other and the social world, it facilitates the inclusion into that social world of meanings and values that do not reflect the shared interests of those who live in it.

# Part I

## Chapter 1: Alienation and capitalism

*"We are not our own any more than what we possess is our own. We did not make ourselves, we cannot be supreme over ourselves. We are not our own masters."*  
Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (2007[1932]: 204)

### Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to diagnose the relationship between the individual and the social world in light of contemporary developments in communication culture. More specifically, the rise of the Internet, social media, and social networking sites. As discussed in the Introduction, I shall do so by theorising what I take to be a distinct form of contemporary alienation.

Before developing my account of contemporary alienation, it will be important to survey the thinkers from the tradition on alienation whose work I shall be drawing from. Since the aim of this thesis is a critical analysis of the individual-social world relationship, the relevant thinkers are those who use and develop the concept in this critical way. In this chapter and the next I discuss Karl Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists' uses of alienation in critiquing the capitalism of their contemporary periods. It will also be important to discuss a response to this tradition in the shape of Rahel Jaeggi's account of self-alienation. Jaeggi's account, in some sense, goes back to the earliest roots of the term 'alienation'. I shall discuss her view in Chapter 3.

The theoretical upshots of this survey of the tradition are: First, as discussion of the Marxist-Critical Theory tradition will show, the face of alienation is bound to change along with significant developments in the social world. Hence, I argue, we should see alienation as a relationship contingent on the material conditions of the social world. The discussion of Marx and the Critical Theorists will help us to better understand some of the core features of alienation. Central to this is to see how specific conceptions of alienation are not apt descriptions of different eras.

Correspondingly, the discussion highlights the idea that theorising the social world in terms of alienation requires an account specific to the era discussed.

Second, as the discussion of Jaeggi's critique in Chapter 3 will show, it would be an omission – as the thinkers discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 may tend to – to only consider alienation from the perspective of the social world. Alienation refers to an unhealthy individual-social world relationship. Thus, we should recognise the ways in which it is also dependent upon the individual in that relationship. Jaeggi's account is an important step towards recognising the importance of individual agency in the specific constellation of alienation in any period. At the same time, I shall argue, Jaeggi makes the opposite mistake. In focussing solely upon the agency of the individual in the alienation relationship, she dismisses the importance of the social. In that respect, I conclude the first part of the thesis by suggesting that we need a *truly* interdependent account of alienation that pays due attention to both sides of the relationship between the individual and the social world.

In this chapter and the next, I survey the history of alienation as a critical concept through the works of Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists.

In Chapter 1, I consider Marx's development of Hegel's use of alienation to supplement his critical account of capitalism and in so doing give birth to the critical alienation tradition. In Chapter 2, I turn to the first-generation of thinkers from the Critical Theory or Frankfurt School.

By drawing upon this discussion of the analyses of capitalism found in Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm, I (i) highlight some of the core features of capitalism that lead to some or other form of alienation; (ii) identify the role that technological changes have had in changing the face of alienation; (iii) illustrate that the nature of alienation is always contingent upon the social era in which the individual-social world relationship is being analysed.

## 1.1. Karl Marx: Capitalism as alienating

### 1.1.1. The genesis of Marx's theory

#### 1.1.1.1. *Hegel: dialectical method and alienation*

The roots of critical usage of the concept of alienation lie in the work of German philosopher G.W.H. Hegel and his introduction of the dialectical method. Since Marx's account of alienation was in part a response to Hegel, it is worth briefly discussing Hegel's concept before turning to discuss Marx's account in more detail.

Hegel's work, in the light of Enlightenment thinking, was focussed on developing a notion of *absolute* or spirit which is "not only substance but also subject" (Beiser 1993: 7). Motivated by dissatisfaction with Immanuel Kant's conclusion in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "the world of 'the-thing-in-itself' – is for ever beyond our knowledge" (Singer 2001: 4), and the limitations to the capacities of the human being<sup>4</sup> that that conclusion implies, Hegel saw "the purpose of philosophy as the rational knowledge of the absolute" (Beiser 1993: 4). Hegel's innovation, in this regard, was his development of the dialectical method. It is this method, and the role of alienation in that, that gives birth to the critical discussion of alienation that this thesis engages with.

The concept of the 'dialectical relationship' refers to the interdependent relationship between objects in the world, where 'object' is a placeholder for anything identifiable. Hegel's articulation of this concept highlights, first, that a single object can only become distinct and aware of itself (i.e. reach self-consciousness) in relation to an other object. And, second, being put into relation with, or appearing in front of the other changes the nature of the object itself. It is in respect to these two points that Hegel's 'dialectical method' can be seen as a methodology with which to theorise

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<sup>4</sup> I will use *individual* as a general term for human beings as social beings throughout the thesis. I use the pronouns they/them to refer to the individual. I use gendered pronouns only when quoting original sources e.g. in Marx's account – man/he; in Jaeggi's account – self/she etc. The term *human being* is used as a species name, most prevalently in relation to discussing Karl Marx's theory of alienation.

any development in history, and, specifically how individuals are impacted by such developments.

Hegel's 'dialectic' describes a three-stage process of development – often referred to as abstract-negative-concrete, or thesis-antithesis-synthesis – that all things entail and need to go through. It is only through undergoing this dialectical process that things are able to gain self-consciousness and distinct identities. In the following extract from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel presents the basic concept of this dialectical process in description of how Spirit comes to have not just abstract, but concrete and identifiable existence:

Spirit has come on the scene as a pure universality of knowing, which is self-consciousness, as self-consciousness that is the simple unity of knowing. It is only through action that Spirit is in such a way that it is really there, that is, when it raises its existence into Thought and thereby into an absolute antithesis, and returns out of this antithesis, in and through the antithesis itself (Hegel 1977: 485).

The dialectical process unwinds when opposing forces (which could be physical objects, individuals, ideas, or social systems) clash with the object. When this occurs, the object is made aware of the other as distinct from themselves. In response, the object must assess themselves in comparison to this newly realised other. This initial coming to be aware of itself as distinct from the other marks the shift from the initial 'abstract' stage of the dialectical process to the 'negative' that is necessary for it to truly come to be. As Hegel refers to this transition here:

The beginning, the principle, or the Absolute, as at first immediately enunciated, is only the universal. [...] the words, 'the Divine', 'the Absolute', 'the Absolute', 'the Eternal', etc., do not express what is contained in them [...] Whatever is more than such a word, even the transition to a mere proposition, contains a *becoming-other* that has to be taken back, or is a mediation (Hegel 1977: 11; italics original).

The moment in which the object embarks on comparison of itself with an other and so comes to recognise the differences between the two, in turn, can be described as the state of antithesis. Or, as Hegel puts it here 'alienation':

The *alienation* of the divine Being is thus made explicit in its twofold form: the Self of Spirit and its simple thought are the two moments whose absolute unity is Spirit itself. Its *alienation* consists in the moments going apart from one

another and in one of them having an unequal value compared with the other (Hegel 1977: 470; emphasis added).

Through this newly established relation to the other, then, both object and other gain a new awareness also about themselves, their nature, and their essence. Thus, as Hegel states:

This antithesis resolved not so much through the conflict between the two moments which are pictured as separate and independent Beings: their very independence implies that each of them in its own self, through its Notion, must resolve itself (Hegel 1977: 470).

It is through realisation of this implication of self, then, that object and other reach self-consciousness. And it is in meeting as such, that a novel situation or relationship is created that extends beyond the two forces and becomes the grounds for future novel meetings. This, then, is the final stage of synthesis in which what was abstract is resolved into something concrete.

Hegel applies the idea of the dialectical process more specifically to describe and theorise the struggle of individuals – embedded in society – to reach self-consciousness as members of that society and as living among other individuals. The dialectical process as undergone by the individual is described in the following passages:

Self-consciousness is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else. [...] Its essence and absolute object is 'I' [...], it is an *individual*. [...] Other is also self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual. [...] they are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes. [...] **in other words, they have not as yet exposed themselves to each other in the form of pure being-for-self, or as self-consciousness** (Hegel 1977: 113; italics original; emphasis added).

Personality does not arise till the subject has not merely a general consciousness of himself in some determinate mode of concrete existence, but rather a consciousness of himself as a complete completely abstract I, in which all concrete limits and values are negated and declared invalid. Hence personality involves the knowledge of oneself as an object, raised, however, by thoughts into the realm of pure infinitude, a realm, that is, in which it is purely identical with itself. Individuals and peoples have no personality, if they have not reached this pure thought and self-consciousness (Hegel 2005: 2).



Just as more generally, then, the individual does not develop identity or personality, without undergoing the dialectical process. As that process only unfolds when confronted by the other, however, the realisation of self-consciousness can and inevitably does lead to significant struggles between individuals. As Hegel makes clear, on his view, this is a necessary and essential part of the dialectical process:

Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death-struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won [...] (Hegel 1977: 113 *italics original*).<sup>5</sup>

Corresponding to its inevitable drama, Hegel famously claims that the dialectical process is something that can and should end in self-consciousness no matter the social circumstances that individuals are in. Though the conditions in which the individual is oppressed in their social existence may limit the possibility to recognise and establish themselves as an (equal) other, material and socio-economic-political conditions *cannot* block that process entirely, and, crucially do not distort the dialectic by which that occurs. This is best illustrated in Hegel's much discussed lord-bondsman analogy, which he refers to below:

[I]n fashioning the thing, he [bondsman] becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right. The shape does not become something other than himself through being made external to him; for it is precisely this shape that is his pure being-for-self, which in this externality is seen by him to be the truth. Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own (Hegel 1977: 118).

As this passage illustrates an, on Hegel's account, alienation – as antithesis – is a necessary part of the dialectical process by which the individual reaches self-

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of Hegel's concept of the dialectic has an important role to play in Honneth's reframing of the related Hegelian concept 'recognition'. Honneth employs this concept to critically assess the struggles that the contemporary – and especially marginalised – individual faces when it comes to establishing their self-consciousness in socio-political environments where the other might dismiss the existence of the intersubjective relation in the first place (see: Honneth 1996). For Honneth the life-and-death nature of the struggle between individuals is not abstract, but, often, quite literal. Unsurprisingly, then, this kind of struggle is not, for Honneth, an essential part of reaching self-consciousness – but rather a barrier to it. (I discuss aspects of Honneth's thought in more detail in Chapter 5.)

consciousness, as well as how society develops, i.e. As per the quote above, it is only in the state of alienation that the individual 'acquires a mind of his own'. Equally important, though, is that on Hegel's account, just as it is inevitable that the dialectical process will move through the state of alienation, so it is inevitable that the individual and the social world will eventually overcome that state (Hegel 2005[1820]).

Hegel's application of his dialectical method to theorising the development of the individual and of the society in which that development occurs, thus, is essentially optimistic. This optimism is wedded to Hegel's *political* idealism, according to which the liberal state is the eventual end point of the dialectical process and necessary for individual freedom. Whilst, then, Hegel recognises a form of 'social alienation' that occurs in relation to the social order (distinct from the 'spiritual alienation' that occurs in relation to the individual and their coming to see themselves as a member of society). And, correspondingly, claims that an alienating civic society in which people are not able to exercise their freedom is an inevitable part of history. His suggestion is that the growth of self-awareness and fight for liberty that accompanies the rise of the liberal state in his period has led to freedom and so the overcoming of this social alienation. It is in response to this political idealism that we shall see Marx presents a *materialist* theory of the individual-social world relationship.

Marx himself draws out the point of departure between his and Hegel's dialectical methodologies in more general terms in the foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition of *Capital*. As he puts it, quite explicitly:

My dialectical, method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea, is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translate in the forms of thought (Marx 1990: 102).

Despite the criticism, Marx is nonetheless heavily influenced by Hegel and, indeed, is not above praising his predecessor's methodological approach. In *Economic and*

*Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, for instance, Marx acknowledges Hegel's contribution to theorising the individual as a worker, stating:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* – the dialectic of negativity as the moving and creating principle – is, first, that Hegel grasps the self-creation of man as a process, objectification, as loss of object, as alienation and transcendence of this alienation, and that he therefore grasps the nature of *labor*, and conceives objective man (true, because real man) as the result of his *own labour* (Marx 2004[1932]: 137; italics original).

Yet, at the same time as offering this praise, Marx is highly critical of Hegel's use of a merely *theoretical* analysis of the socially embedded individual as the grounding of his overall philosophy (Marx 2004: 137). Most importantly, and in line with his emphasis on the material conditions in which the dialectical process occurs more generally, Marx disagrees with Hegel's account of individual alienation – qua 'spiritual alienation' – as a merely mental or psychological phenomenon that overlooks the socially embedded nature of the individual. As he sees it, for Hegel:

[*Human*] *life, man*, is equivalent to *self-consciousness*. All alienation of human life is therefore *nothing* but *alienation of self-consciousness*. The alienation of self-consciousness is not regarded as the *expression*, reflected in knowledge and thought, of the real alienation of human life (Marx 2004: 138; italics original).

Where Hegel goes wrong is in overlooking – in respect to alienation, if not all aspects of his work – that the individual lives and labours in a material world. And so, the phenomenon of alienation – for the individual as well as society – should also be understood in terms of a relation to the individual world. Thus, Marx continues the above quote, claiming that:

Instead, *actual* alienation, that which appears real, is in its *innermost* hidden nature (which philosophy first discloses) only the *phenomenal being* of the alienation of real human life, of *self-consciousness*. All re-appropriation of alienated objective life appears therefore as an incorporation in self-consciousness (Marx 2004: 137; italics original).

It is in respect to these points, then, that Marx makes – for the purposes of this discussion at least – his two most significant departures from his predecessor:

The first, his rejection of Hegel's claim that society had moved beyond its alienating state. The second, his rejection of Hegel's claim that the individual as a spirit is able

to overcome the state of alienation independently from the social (Sayers 2011: 31). It is in rejecting these aspects of Hegel's conception of alienation as a transient stage in the dialectical process that Marx establishes the usage of alienation as a critical concept through which to assess the individual-social world relation under a distinct socio-economic-political system. More specifically: capitalism.

#### 1.1.1.2. Karl Marx: 'Material' dialectics and alienation

##### 1.1.1.1.2.1. Marx's dialectics

In response to the perceived shortcomings of Hegel's dialectical approach, Marx develops a new form of the *dialectical method* that is often referred to, as Critical Theorist Erich Fromm puts it, as 'dialectical' or 'historical materialism' (Fromm 2004: 8). According to Marx's method the development of both society and individual occurs in relation to the material conditions of the social world. In contrast to Hegel's suggestion that the individual and the social world develop separately, for Marx, the individual and the social world are affected by and defined by each other. The individual-social world relationship, as such, is seen to be an interdependent relation; whereby the social world is formed through collective action and every individual brings this social world into material reality through their own behaviour. At the same time, the individual experience is framed and limited by the social world within which they live. As Marx explains:

It is above all necessary to avoid postulating 'society' once again as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual is the *social being*. The manifestation of his life – even when it does not appear directly in the form of communal manifestation, accomplished in association with other men – is therefore a manifestation and affirmation of *social life*. Individual human life and species-life are not *different things*, even though the mode of existence of individual life is necessarily either a more *specific* or a more *general* mode of species life, or that of species-life a more *specific* or more *general* mode of individual life (Marx 2004: 106; italics original).

The structure of the social world and the individual's social occurrence are, as such, "dialectically intertwined" and, according to Marx, cannot be unravelled (Inglis & Thorpe 2012: 19). This same idea, central to the early work of the 1844 *Manuscripts* quoted above, is later echoed in *The German Ideology*, he states:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour (Marx [& Engels] 1998[1932]: 42).

And, on the same page:

[M]en, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness (Marx [& Engels] 1998: 42; *italics original*).

Marx's emphasis upon the necessity of *starting from* material conditions when theorising the social world and the individual's place within it remains a central feature of his thinking throughout his career (see: Ollman 2001; Sayers 2011). Where his emphasis does change, is in shifting from investigation of the state of the individual who is subject to capitalist society, and the novel consumption-production relationship which dominates it, to the emergence and functioning of the capitalist socio-economic-political system itself. This shift in emphasis can be described in terms of the shift from the 'dialectical materialism' of Marx's early work to the method of 'historical materialism' in his later work.

As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, 'historical materialism' relies on "expounding the real process of production – starting from the material production of life itself – and comprehending the intercourse connected with and created by the mode of production, i.e. civic society in various stages, as the basis of all history (Marx [& Engels] 1998: 61). What is crucial to recognise though is that this methodology is fundamentally connected to the 'dialectical methodology' employed in his earlier work. As Althusser explains:

Dialectical materialism, or Marxist philosophy, is a scientific discipline distinct from historical materialism. The distinction between these two scientific disciplines rests on the distinction between their objects. The object of historical materialism is constituted by the modes of production, their constitution and their transformation. The object of dialectical materialism is constituted by what Engels calls 'the history of thought' [...] all problems that broadly cover the domain called by classical philosophy the 'theory of knowledge'. [...] Of course, this theory can no longer be, as it was in classical philosophy, a theory of the formal, atemporal conditions of knowledge [...]

From the perspective of Marxist theory, it can only be a theory of the history of knowledge - that is, of the real conditions (material and social on the one hand, internal to scientific practice on the other) of the process of production of knowledge (Althusser 1990: 8).

At least on Althusser's suggestion, then, there is no true break in Marx's own thought. But, rather, it is in the division of labour between the two connected methodologies of dialectical- and historical- materialism that Marx is responsible for a true epistemic break in the history of ideas – one where ideological concepts can be replaced by scientific ones (Althusser 1969[1965]). Whilst, then, Marx is best known for his later, more obviously political work (including that co-written with Friedrich Engels), and as Wolff puts it, “as a revolutionary, whose works inspired the foundation of many communist regimes in the twentieth century” (Wolff 2017). It is the development in his earlier work of ‘dialectical materialism’ as a new philosophical approach to theorising the relationship between the individual and the social world that we might see as his true innovation – as it is this innovation that underlies the ‘historical materialism’ of his later work. And it is in this earlier work that Marx offers his most sustained account of ‘alienation’.

#### 1.1.1.2.2. *Alienation*

Marx's work focussed on analysing the emergence and functioning of the capitalist socio-economic system, including private property, emergence of value, commodity production, exploitation and the sharp division of society into two classes – the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – that the industrial production process introduces.

Alienation as understood for Marx can be seen as an *objective* phenomenon: whereby the individual-social world relationship is distorted by features of the social system that are external to the individual and independent of the experience of any specific individuals living under that system.<sup>6</sup>

The human being as an ‘individual’ or ‘self’ of a capitalist society, is constituted, for Marx, by an ensemble of social relations (see: Marx 1978[1888]: 145) If, as Marx argues is the case in capitalism, the social world is constituted in such a way as to

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<sup>6</sup> The distinction between objective and subjective alienation is made by a number of writers, including Fuchs (2016) and Leopold (2018).

distort the individual-social world relationship, then, these relations will all take place under that alienating system (Ollman 2001: 27). As a result of this, whilst Marx's alienation is an objective phenomenon, the individual subjected to it nonetheless undergoes 'self-alienation' (which corresponds to Hegel's spiritual alienation). In this state, the individual under capitalism cannot independently create the relations necessary to the self; but remains dependent on the other to do so (Fromm 2004: 31) Thus, in every interaction the overbearing system of oppression manifests itself on the 'self'. Despite the presence of 'self-alienation' in Marx's account, however, it is important to recognise that Marx is not referring to a specific self that corresponds to any particular individual. Rather, talk of the self is little more than a way for Marx to refer to what he perceives as the essence of the human being in relation to the alienating system. Crucially, the alienating social system is taken to remove the essential agency of all individuals living in it. For all talk of the self, then, Marx's conception of alienation as an objective phenomenon has it that the individual human being is alienated *qua* human being – not any specific identity that they might have.

Marx's discussion of alienation is coined in his early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (from here referred as the *1844 Manuscripts*) (2004[1932]). These are a selection of fragmented notes from Marx's youth that were only first published in 1932 in the Soviet Union and which explain how capitalism subjects individuals to an oppressive consumption-production system, and gives rise to a classed society.<sup>7</sup> It is specifically in the *1844 Manuscripts* that Marx first raises the possibility that the individual-social world as material relationship has become alienating due to change in the means of labour, essential to human being, wrought by change in the material conditions of society. Whilst, in his later works Marx's focus turns to more specific relationships under capitalism – e.g. reification and commodity fetishism – the account of alienation developed in the *1844 Manuscripts* is implicit in these later analyses. Thus, whilst the term 'alienation' has a less prevalent position in Marx's mature work, the sentiment of it remains important and, as Mészáros argues, "Assigning the concept of alienation exclusively to the youthful

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<sup>7</sup> The publication date helps explain why the role of alienation in Marx's thought has at times been underappreciated.

period grossly falsifies the ‘mature Marx’ [...] undermining the unity and internal cohesion of his thought” (Mészáros 1970: 22).<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that – similarly to the shift in methodology from dialectical- to historical- materialism – the theoretical emphasis upon alienation as a critical term undergoes a similar transformation that is useful to keep in mind in the following discussion. In the *1844 Manuscripts* ‘alienation’ is employed to frame, in abstract terms, the discussion of the individual’s position in a society where the individual is not able to fulfil their essence as a social, labouring/producing being. Correspondingly the *1844 Manuscripts* set up Marx’s philosophical account of the individual as a labouring being and so, always in an interdependent relation to the social world through the material conditions that it provides. Marx’s later works, as discussed earlier, whilst following from his early work, focus specifically upon theorising the economic relationships that capitalist society, and the individual living in it, is determined by and operating with. So, in *Grundrisse* (1993[1939]) (often considered the transition point from Marx’s philosophical to economic-political theorising) Marx’s emphasis on theorising alienation is upon, not just the individual’s experience in the capitalism, but how alienation is systematic or becomes systematised; whilst, in *Capital*, the focus is upon the capitalist consumption-production system and so where alienation is discussed in that work it is only in so far as it relates to that economic discussion.

Given the aims of this thesis, the following chapter primarily focuses upon the core philosophical account of alienation as a critical tool for explaining the individual-social world relationship, and less so upon how Marx applies it in his later more explicitly economic work.

Finally, and before looking at Marx’s account of alienation in more detail, it is important to recognise that Marx’s account is a diagnosis of a specific social milieu.

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<sup>8</sup> Ollman suggests that the popular view that the term ‘alienation’ disappears from Marx’s later economic writings is largely the result of translations of *Capital* that do not include an index. As he points out alienation is mentioned several times in books I and III of *Capital*, as well as in *Theories of Surplus Value* and *Grundrisse*. (Ollman 1976: 304) More in-depth arguments for alienation’s importance throughout Marx’s writings can also be found in Fromm (2004), MacIntyre (1953), Sayers (2011).



His analysis refers to the period following the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that is characterised by the social shifts brought about by the Industrial Revolution. In this period, as Marx aims to demonstrate, the developments of new technology alter the nature of the social world as they change the possible means of production and, as a result, also change the hierarchy of ownership and power relations on which society rests. As I shall suggest, these changes are precursors to the changes brought about by new technologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, we shall see, whilst alienation is a valid critical concept with which to analyse all of these changes in the social milieu, Marx's conception of alienation is applicable *in full* only to the early developments of capitalism (especially the stratification of society into two social classes) with which he is himself concerned.

## 1.1.2. Marx's critique of capitalism

### 1.1.2.1. *Capitalism: distorting engagement*

For Hegel, alienation is a negative situation in which the individual is not able to self-realise. The social world forces people to live under conditions where they are not able to "exercise their collective freedom" (Hegel 2001: 56). Thus, when it comes to the relation with oneself, the individual is unable to recognise themselves as an agent. The value of the concept of alienation in Hegel, as we saw earlier, lies in its shedding light upon the notion of 'self-realisation'. Importantly, labour is one of the forms of self-realisation, or 'being-for self' that Hegel recognises in this analysis (Hegel 1977: 138).

Marx takes Hegel's abstract conception of labour as a form of self-realisation as his starting point for assessing the individual-social world relationship under the specific material conditions of capitalism. In short, for Marx, the ideal world is a product of labour and the individual is a labouring being. Labour, in this light, is not something that individuals are forced into by the capitalist social order. Rather, for Marx, labour is the way or means by which the free individual appears in the social world. As voiced by Marx in *Capital vol 1*:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the

metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power (Marx 1990: 283).

It is in this abstract sense that labour gives the individual the power to be the master of themselves – set aside from and opposed to nature. In this way, labour is not only a means for production, but the essential expression of the individual. As explained by Fromm:

Labor is the self-expression of man, and expression of his individual physical and mental powers. In this process of genuine activity man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end – the product – but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable (Fromm 2004: 33).

Moreover, it is in the act of labouring that the very social nature of human being presents itself. Just as the individual expresses themselves through labour, so the individual cannot do so outside of society. As Marx writes in *Grundrisse*:

The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society – a rare exception which may well occur when a civilized person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into wilderness – is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individual's living *together* and talking to each other (Marx 1993: 84).

What makes the act of labour unique to the human being is that human beings are able to produce *universally* (Marx 2004: 84). For Marx, people do not produce merely to satisfy their physical needs, but rather, can produce when freed from their physical needs (Marx 2004: 84). In this way, the individual is able to engage in the activity of labour for the sake of the activity itself and it is in this kind of activity that Marx grounds his conception of self-realisation.

As the process of labour is one of self-realisation, the relation the individual has with the product of their labour is a special one. On one hand, through labour, the individual establishes an intimate relationship with the product of their work. The individual puts themselves into the product, and, by being able to consume that

product, satisfies the need for its production in the first place. In so doing, the individual masters their own life. They engage with the activity of labour because it is natural – and the outcome of that is something that confirms and maintains their existence as a human being and as a part of nature (Marx 2004: 83).

On the other hand, through the act of production, the individual also establishes themselves as a member of a society, an ‘individual’ or ‘self’ among equals. As Marx explains:

It is just in his work upon the objective world that man really proves himself as *species-being*. This production is his active species life. By means of it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is, therefore the *objectification of man's species life*; for he no longer reproduces himself merely intellectually, as in consciousness, but actively and in a real sense, and he sees his own relation in a world which he has constructed (Marx 2004: 84; italics original).

In this light, Marx suggests that the human being, as an individual, should establish four relationships through the activity of labour. First, the human should establish a relation with the immediate product of their work, i.e. the thing that they have poured themselves into. Second, the human should engage with the act of work as a necessary and satisfying activity. Third, the human should recognise themselves as a member of a species that can create objects of beauty. Lastly, the human should see themselves in relation to other people who are also providing for themselves and through that process creating society. It is through these that humans can recognise their labour as a natural activity for themselves as well as the product of the labour (Marx 2004: 80).

On the back of this account of labour then, Marx's suggestion is that capitalism is alienating in so far as it brings into being an unnatural and distorted labour process. Whilst individuals are still in a position where they need to labour to satisfy their physical/natural needs – this is structured around production and not the activity of labour itself. This situation is well summarised in the following passage from *Capital*:

[Within] the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort

the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proposition as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time [...] (Marx 1990: 799).

As a result of the individual having this structure imposed upon them, all four relations that labour should allow individuals to establish – to object, to oneself, to other, and to society – become distorted. And so, the individual under capitalism is not able to engage in an organic process of social world creation through labour as they should. As Fromm, summarising Marx's position, puts it:

Marx's central criticism of capitalism is not the injustice in the distribution of wealth; it is the perversion of labour into forced, alienated, meaningless labor, hence the transformation of man into a 'crippled monstrosity' (Fromm 2004: 33).

In this light, the core of Marx's critique of capitalism is the idea that capitalism prevents the individual-social world relationship from functioning by perverting the activity of labour. In the next section, I shall describe the specific features of capitalism that lead to this.

#### *1.1.2.2. Alienating features of capitalism*

Alienation, for Marx, is tied to the individual under capitalism's inability to engage with the activity of labour in a manner where the relations essential to the individual can be properly established. Correspondingly, labour itself has a revised role in the capitalist system. Where labour should be undertaken for the sake of the activity itself, in capitalism, it is the outcome of the production process that comes to matter. This is easiest to recognise in factory work where the worker is unable to claim the product of their labour and it comes to have an independent existence from the worker – and so to have power over them. The same disconnect, however, is present in any labour activity in capitalism where labour is compensated, not with ownership of the product of one's labour, but with money. As a result of this, money and the objects that it allows one to purchase come to be the only means available to the

individual to provide for themselves, and most importantly, distinguish themselves from others.

For Marx, this transformation of free labour into alienating wage-labour has its roots in industrialisation.

Industrialisation operates on the idea of mass production, which is profitable primarily to the person who owns the means of production and so owns the product and can sell it on. Individuals who do not have a stake in that ownership are forced to direct their labour towards the industrialised production process in exchange for a wage. In so doing, they are stripped of the possibility – in time and place – to produce for themselves. Whilst the worker is paid for their time, then, they have no claim over the product towards which their labour has been directed. Thus, as Marx explains in *Grundrisse*:

[L]abour capacity's own labour is as alien to it – and it really is, as regards its directions etc. – as are material and instrument. Which is why the product the appears to is as a combination of alien material, alienation instrument and alien labour – as *alien property*, and why, after production, it has become poorer by the life forces expended, but otherwise begins the drudgery anew, existing as a mere subjective labour capacity separated from the conditions of life (Marx 1993: 462; italics original).

As a result of the workers estrangement from the product of their labour, that product becomes an entity of its own – a commodity. As Marx explains, the process by which the commodity comes to gives the latter an almost paradoxical state of being:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social character of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between the objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers (Marx 1990: 164).

The peculiar character of the commodity, thus, is that its value does not lie in relation to its physical properties. Instead, the commodity exists amongst other commodities; its value set in relation to these and only emerging after the product is made and exchangeable in the market. As such, the commodity comes to have *exchange value*

that is independent from both the labour that went into its production and what it can be used for. As Marx explains in *Capital vol. 1*:

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-value (Marx 1990: 176).

This phenomenon of ascribing an exchange-value inherent to the object is what Marx calls ‘fetishism’ of commodities and is central to the capitalist economic system (Marx 1990: 165). Because of their supposed inherent value, independent of the owner or the seller of the product, objects become desirable in their own right – not in relation to their use-value. As such objects also become a marker and fixer of social class. Now, if some person desires some product, they need to purchase it – based upon the exchange value – from whomsoever owns that product. Through that transaction, the original owner is able to increase their wealth, and so cement their place in the social order.

This brings us to the first of what I will suggest are the three core features of alienating society: the distortion of needs.

#### *1.1.2.2.1. Distortion of needs*

Now, wealth is on one side a thing, realized in things, material products, which a human being confronts as subject; on the other side, as value, wealth is merely command over alien labour not with the aim of ruling, but with the aim of private consumption etc. It appears in all forms in the shape of a thing, be it an object or be it a relation mediated through the object, which is external and accidental to the individual (Marx 1993: 487).

Where commodity fetishism leads society to obsess over objects, money is the mediator of these exchange-value relationships. (Whatever object one desires, one needs money to purchase it). Correspondingly, money comes to have a central position in capitalism. As Marx puts it: “The need for money is [...] the real need created by the modern economy, and the only need which it creates” (Marx 2004: 113).

What has given money this special position, as the description of the labour process in capitalism showed, is the substitution of the relationship between the individual

and the product of their labour with a monetary relationship. As such, the object of production becomes a commodity, distinct from the individual, and the only possibility to claim ownership of that object is with money. In respect to this idea, Marx argues that all relationships under capitalism are reduced to object relationships available for purchase. Not only, then, does Marx suggest that the product of work comes to have value independent of the worker and their labour, but, so too does the labour itself become an object. He writes: “Labour does not only create goods; it also produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces goods” (Marx 2004: 79; italics original).

On one hand, we can see this where services, such as plumbing or hair dressing, are available for purchase as objects (e.g. terms like ‘fitted sink’, or a ‘cut and blow-dry’ refer to services as objects). On the other, the factory owner effectively buys the worker’s labour as an object, as hourly work is ascribed an exchange value and made subject to the same purchasing process as the product for which that labour is exchanged.

In this sense, capitalism has distorted the social being that, through labouring or production, is the essence of the individual. The individual, as a member of the wage-labour force, is now forced to work alongside other individuals for the sake of self-preservation; without creating genuine social relationships and so without receiving anything with genuine social meaning from that work. Despite the involvement of many in the production process, then, Marx is explicit that, just as it is not an individual process, neither is it a social process:

[In] the production process of capital [...] labour is a totality – a combination of labours – whose individual component parts are alien to one another, so that the overall process as a totality is *not* the *work* of the individual worker, and is furthermore the work of different workers together only to the extent that they are [forcibly] combined, and do not [voluntarily] enter into combination with one another (Marx 1993: 470; italics original).

In this light, every relationship is reduced to a relationship of consumption, in which objects are exchanged according to a fixed value – labour to money, money to product of labour, and so on. Even the people under capitalism come to relate to each other as workers, entities whose labour as object belongs to (or could belong

to) someone else. To put it differently, on this view, people have a possibility to exist and express their agency only through consumption. And, it is due to this that people have developed a need for objects, what following Fromm, we can call 'the need for having' (Fromm 2004: 30). It is this socially constructed need that underlies capitalist society and is articulated through the need for money that we saw Marx describe above. As Marx states elsewhere: "Thus *all* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of *all* of these senses; the sense of *having*" (Marx 2004: 107; italics original).

With this emphasis on the socially determined need for having, Marx presents a critique of capitalist society whereby ownership is the necessary means for the individual to have any social standing. Whilst his account presents a very broad picture of economically divided class-society, however, it also depicts the ongoing struggle of the individual to establish themselves in a society that is dominated by the 'having' ideology. People only engage with each other in exchange relationships in which the idea of ownership becomes defined and in which the need for having is materialised. Money, thus, becomes the social glue, and driving force of all relationships within society.

This brings us to the second of what I take to be the three core features of alienating society.

#### *1.1.2.2.2. Distortion of relation to the other*

In light of the 'having' ideology (Fromm's term for Marx's account) that money introduces and the social struggles that it generates, Marx's account of alienation can be seen as an account of an emerging malaise of individuality, or self-centredness. The pre-capitalist ideal of co-existence and co-operation to create the social world is replaced by a situation in which everyone is driven to engage only with satisfying their own needs. The more individuals engage in this race to acquire money and objects, the more that they end up contributing to that oppressive system. And as Marx states, by celebrating this alienating false need, people get gratification from objects whilst at the same time being alienated from their natural being:



The less you *are*, the less you express your life, the more you *have*, the greater is your alienated life and greater is the saving of your alienated being. Everything which the economist takes from you in the way of humanity, he restores to you in the form of *money* and *wealth* (Marx 2004: 115; italics original).

As society comes to operate on the need for having, so the possibility to have a relationship with the other in a manner where the object, and so the alienated labour process, is not a core part of that relationship is removed. The individual focussed on satisfying their own self-centred needs through selling their labour and consuming commodities turns aside from issues in the social world that arise from the needs of other individuals. With that, on Marx's account, early capitalism created a situation in which the individual is so focused upon themselves and their position in the social world, that anything that does not originate from their own needs – i.e. the internalised false needs of having money and objects – appears hostile. As Marx and Engels explain:

Just because the individuals seeks *only* their particular interests, which for them does not coincide with their communal interests, the latter is asserted as an interest 'alien' to them, and 'independent' of them, as in its turn a particular and distinctive 'general' interest [...] (Marx [ & Engels] 1998: 53; italics original).

Or, to put it simply, early capitalism according to Marx, prevents one from perceiving the other as an equal individual, but instead always perceive them as a competitor – someone who might possibly have more, and so, become better socially positioned. As such, the other can only be a means to one's ends, or an obstacle to ones' ends.

This brings us to the third of the core features of alienating society: the way in which the alienating system levies the efforts of individuals living under it to replicate the alienating features of that system.

#### *1.1.2.2.3. Replication*

As noted earlier, since, on Marx's account, all members of society are subjected to and forced to embrace the need for having, we can describe early capitalism as an objectively alienating socio-economic system. No one living under this system can avoid the process of commodification and consumption that distorts the four key

relationships. The human being under capitalism, thus, is alienated *qua* human being – and not because of any particular position or identity that they may have within that society. Moreover – and crucially – as Marx sees it, so long as the wage-labour mode of production continues, in which the motivation to satisfy the need for having supplants all others, that system will continue to replicate itself.

Central to Marx's argument is the thought that industrialisation has robbed people of the possibility to live sustainably by their own means and to engage with others through their work. Rather, society has come to be dominated by a system that estranges the person from their work product and leaves them only with the need for having. Yet, as the need for having supplants all other needs, consumption becomes the only way to operate within society. As all members of society are driven by this consumption-ethos, so production is increased – and this, in turn, replicates and cements the alienated labour relationships on which industrialisation operates. The need for having, then, not only turns workers into consumers of the alienating system but transforms them also into the means by which that system sustains itself. As Marx writes in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

[The] *worker* has the misfortune to be a *living* capital, a capital with needs, which forfeits its interest and consequently its livelihood every moment that it is not at work. [...] The worker is only worker when he exists as a capital *for himself*, and he only exists as a *capital* when capital is there *for him*. The existence of capital is *his* existence, his life, since it determined the content of his life independently of him (Marx 2004: 91; italics original).

## Conclusion

Whilst Marx's recognition that the brute power of the social system to determine the needs of the individual is the source of that society's being alienating is novel, his analysis of the alienating features of early capitalism is specific to the developments that characterise that era. In particular, Marx's analysis is specific to a system that has been changed by the arrival of new technologies and machinery that catalyse the Industrial Revolution. Given this, unsurprisingly perhaps, Marx's account does not allow the suggestion that engagement with technology – as well as driving alienation – might provide solace to the individual under capitalism. Likewise, he does not allow that engagement with the object, oneself, the other, or the social world

might come to feel natural to the individual even in an alienating system. Again this is not surprising, since the source of alienation lies in the brute force of industrialisation in Marx's account, the individual, though alienated, is able to recognise themselves as such. (And it is in this, that, for Marx, lies the very hope that people, as a collective, might rise up in revolution against the system and overthrow the dominant socio-economic-political power.)

What we shall see in the next chapter, is that with the continuing development of technology, capitalism rapidly transforms into a more sophisticated system – in which the nature of labour as well as commodities changes. Nonetheless, as the first-generation Critical Theorists argue, these changes do not cause the need for having that underlies the alienating nature of capitalism to disappear. Rather, that need is transformed in such a way, so the suggestion goes, that it and society become even more individualistic and self-centred than in the era of capitalism that Marx describes.

As we shall see in more detail, one crucial way in which the Critical Theorists diverge from Marx is that they focus – not only on the socio-economic system – but how that socio-economic system relates to both culture and politics. Thus, where for Marx at least the feeling of alienation is collective, the Critical Theorist's suggestion is, in effect, that sociality itself has come to be utilised by capitalist system as a new site of competition. Correspondingly, the idea that commodities have power over individuals, in Marx's account an abstract idea in so far as those commodities are related to the means of existence and the unequal distribution of wealth – materialises in the period analysed by the Critical Theorists in the commodification of entertainment and a need for commodities that are by no means necessary for existence. As a result of these differences, though their respective analyses of capitalism recall the same basic alienating features as Marx does in early capitalism, the Critical Theorists also illustrate in their work how the face of alienation is bound to change as the material conditions of the alienating social system change.

With that, let us turn to the Critical Theorists and their developments of Marx's account of how capitalism is objectively alienating.

# Chapter 2: Alienation and the development of capitalism

## Introduction

Marx's analysis of early capitalism targeted the advent of industrialisation and explained the impact that the emergence of wage-labour and commodity relationships had upon the individual in the social world. In this chapter, I discuss the revisions made to Marx's framework by the first-generation<sup>9</sup> of Critical Theorists<sup>10</sup> in response to the development of capitalist society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first half of the chapter provides a general overview of the Frankfurt School and the development of Critical Theory within that school as a development of Marxism in response to the social and historical developments in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I give a short overview of the history of the Frankfurt School, then, discuss two significant influences upon the first-generation Critical Theorists whose work I engage with in this thesis. These are Georg (György) Lukács and his theory of 'reification' and Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly as interpreted by Erich Fromm.

In the second half of the chapter, I turn to discuss key aspects of the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. These three thinkers are amongst the core of the first-generation Critical Theorists. Their works on the rational structure of capitalism and the place of culture and politics within that provide an understanding of the way in which the capitalist socio-economic-political system

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<sup>9</sup> "Martin Jay (1996, xv, 356–364), in his *The Dialectical Imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of the Social Research 1923-1950*, distinguishes between the Frankfurt School's first generation (e.g. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer), second generation (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Alfred Schmidt, Albrecht Wellmer), and third generation (e.g. Axel Honneth, Oskar Negt, Helmut Dubiel, Claus Offe, Hauke Brunkhorst, Detlev Claussen)" (Fuchs 2016: 22). The discussion in this chapter focuses on the first generation so described.

<sup>10</sup> Except in this chapter, when not specified it can be taken that the terms 'Critical Theorists' refers to the members of the first-generation as described by Jay. In this chapter I largely do specify, though in some instances where context is clear, I follow the pattern in the rest of the thesis for stylistic reasons.

developed into a total system of domination in which no aspects of the individual's life were untouched by the alienating features of that system. The discussion is divided into three parts. I first provide an overview of Horkheimer and Adorno's, and Marcuse's, critiques of what they call, respectively, the 'instrumental' or 'technological rationality' according to which the social order of capitalism has come to be structured. I then turn to discuss Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the 'Culture Industry' and the role mass-production of culture occupies in extending the alienating features of the system from the work-life to leisure time. Finally, I discuss the extension of this analysis in the work of all three to the political domain.

## 2.1. Critical Theory: re-articulating Marx's dialectical method

### 2.1.1. Frankfurt School and the 'first-generation' of Critical Theory

The terms Critical Theory or Frankfurt School are often used interchangeably to refer to the socio-philosophical work of thinkers associated with the Institute of Social Research of Frankfurt University established in Germany in 1924. There are also several contemporaries of the Frankfurt School thinkers who did not explicitly work in the research institute but should still be recognised for their influence upon the output of the Frankfurt School and their place in the history of Critical Theory. These include Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Antonio Gramsci (see: Jay 1976).

The Institute of Social Research was privately funded by 'patron of the left' Felix Weil, who wanted to promote Marxist theory (Wiggershaus 1995: 16). A number of members of the institute/research assistants were young scholars in a position, both monetarily<sup>11</sup> as well as educationally<sup>12</sup>, to challenge the capitalist society in which they lived and observe how their contemporary bourgeoisie continued to oppress the working-class without resistance from the latter. Though some of the Institute's research assistants were also openly involved in political action in the November Revolution and after this (Jay 1976: 13), the private-funding of the Institute meant

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<sup>11</sup> Parents supporting their sons' academic pursuits, for example (see: Jay 1976: 35).

<sup>12</sup> Studying with the best in the field, e.g. rabbis (see: Jay 1976: 21), pianists (see: Jay 1976:23), etc.

that it could operate without ever being officially attached to government, or any political movement or parties. That said, the political climate of post-WWI Europe, and especially Germany, scarred by the rise to power of the National Socialist Party, inevitably shaped the Institute and its members concerns. Most significantly, if only on a practical level, with the majority of its members being of German-Jewish origin, the Institute went into exile in 1933. The members of the Institute came to be scattered across countries, establishing branches in Switzerland, France, and (unofficially) the UK; and finding more permanent residence in 1934 in the US as the (International) Institute of Social Research in Columbia University, New York (Jay 1976: 39). The first-hand experience of the upheaval in Europe, as well as of US society following the move away from Europe, was to provide the catalyst for a new kind of thinking about capitalism and play a key role in the move to rethink Marxist thought more radically than it had been before.

Even before the move to the US, the members of the Institute were drawn from a variety of different disciplinary backgrounds, including philosophers, literary theorists, and psychologists. Thus, whilst we can consider Critical Theory in general to be a form of social philosophy, as Martin Jay (1976: 41) points out, it was “expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions” and over its history the transdisciplinary output of the Institute did not represent a specific topic, style, nor even research agenda. If there was a “first point of common interest” between the thinkers of the Institute, it is what Axel Honneth describes as their “social-theoretical negativism” – a concern to analyse society in terms of its shortcomings and failures, not in terms of an ideal of how it should be. As Honneth explains:

Both the members of the inner circle, as well as those on the periphery, of the Institute for Social Research perceive the societal situation upon which they want to have an effect as being in a state of social negativity. Moreover, there is widespread agreement that the concept of negativity should not be restricted in a narrow way to offences committed against principles of social justice, but rather should be extended more broadly to violations of the conditions for a good or successful life (Honneth 2004: 338).

Despite the disparate research interests of the group, their work contributes to the continuation of Marx’s project of challenging and critiquing the existing social order.

With the political turmoil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this critique was not limited to capitalism. And, as Jay explains: “An intensification of their [Critical Theorists’] exploration of the crisis of capitalism, the collapse of traditional liberalism, the rising authoritarian threat, and other related topics seemed the best contribution they could make to the defeat of Nazism” (Jay 1976: 40).

The Institute’s contribution to the Marxist project was most literal under the lead of its first head Kurt Albert Gerlach and his successor Carl Grunberg, who looked to address Marxism in their contemporary era through “an institute [...] devoted to scientific socialism” (Wiggershaus 1995: 16). With the appointment of Horkheimer as the head of the Institute (in 1931), however, the Institute’s research interests broadened. And it is particularly Horkheimer’s emphasis on “the role of social psychology in bridging the gap between individual and the society” (Jay 1976: 26), that leads to the empirically engaged strand of critical thinking most commonly associated with the Frankfurt School and the so-called first-generation of Critical Theorists.

Within the Institut itself, a still smaller group had coalesced around Horkheimer, consisting of Pollock, Lowenthal, Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm. It is really their work, rooted in the central tradition of European philosophy, open to contemporary empirical techniques, and addressed to current social questions, that formed the core of the Institut’s achievement (Jay 1976: 31).

Amongst the group of thinkers listed by Jay, Marx’s concept of alienation comes to have central importance – even across the methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary differences between them. As Honneth puts it:

No concept has been more powerful in defining the character of early Critical Theory than that of alienation. For the first members of this tradition the concept was taken to be so self-evident that it needed no definition or justification; it served as the more or less self-evident starting point of all social analysis and critique (Honneth 2014: vii).

I shall turn to discuss the development of the Institute’s output under Horkheimer’s leadership in due course – and specifically the account of alienation’s development under capitalism forwarded in key selections of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. Before doing so, however, we need to briefly mention two significant influences upon

the Critical Theorists that bridge the gap between their work and Marx, and which explain the key methodological differences.

#### 2.1.1.1. Lukács's theory of reification

As noted above, the early Western Marxist predecessors and contemporaries of the first-generation Critical Theory thinkers, most notably Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch and Antoni Gramsci, were significant influences upon the development of Critical Theorists<sup>13</sup>. Amongst these, Lukács and his concept of 'reification' – developed in his 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness* – is of particular importance to the current discussion.

Lukács's discussion of reification is clearly related to the topic of alienation, yet his conception of reification is developed in response to the notion of commodity fetishism developed in Marx's *Capital*.<sup>14</sup> The reason is purely a matter of historical accident, Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* were published only in 1932, and so Lukács had no access to that text until some years after he first published *History and Class Consciousness*.

Where in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx put forward an account of the capitalist socio-economic system focused upon how human-social world relations are distorted so as to give rise to alienation, *Capital* forwards a primarily economic account of the (mal)functioning of capitalist society. Central to this economic argument is Marx's account of how commodities gain independent value, and so, become objects of fetish, considered to have existence completely independent from the individual. As Andrew Feenberg explains:

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<sup>13</sup> As Western Marxism is a loose classification, referring to the re-emergence of Marxist theory in Western and Central Europe after the October Revolution, some Critical Theory thinkers are also considered part of the tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel's term 'reification' is also prevalent in Axel Honneth's work on social recognition between individuals. The phenomenon, however, is significantly different from Marx's as well as Lukács's account, as it refers to a communicative attitude/relationship, which would change from situation to situation. I briefly touch on Honneth's conception of reification in Chapters 4 and 9 (see Fuchs 2016 for a thoroughgoing analysis of Internet communication, specifically on Facebook, via the concept of reification. Fuchs's account relies principally on Lukács's conception of reification, but also takes into account Honneth's re-articulation of the term.)



In *Capital* Marx explains the market in terms of the fetishism of commodities. By this peculiar expression he meant the substitution of exchange value for use value, relations between social objects for relations between the human being who produces them, both in everyday life and in the scientific representation of the economic. Fetishism characterizes a society in which the economic relation between the individuals are governed by the forces they unleash through their unplanned market interaction. In such a society, the “law” of the market takes on an independence and power, a “material character”, the individuals themselves increasingly lose. This is due to the fact that production and exchange are splintered and fragmented (Feenberg 2014: 70).

Lukács builds on Marx’s idea that capitalism transforms relations to object relations to consider how capitalism has transformed all human relations into object relations. As he poses the question “how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?” (Lukács 1971[1923]: 84). His answer, foreshadowing the Critical Theorists’ accounts of capitalism, is that it does so completely, and that commodities become “the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects” (Lukács 1971: 83). As he explains:

What is important is to recognise clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature (Lukács 1971: 131).

Lukács describes this phenomenon, using Marx’s terminology, as “reification” – “literally, treating human relations as relations between things” (Feenberg 2014: 62). As the above indicates, Lukács identifies the source of ‘reification’ in the inappropriate extension of the ‘scientific-technocratic rationality’ to all aspects of life. Feenberg explains that it is this epistemological position that leads the individual to the belief that bureaucracy, technology and the markets all have existence over and above their social nature and, as such, are morally neutral, where “[i]n reality these institutions are social products, shaped by social force and shaping the behaviour of their users. [...] Like legislation, they are either good or bad, never neutral [...]” (Feenberg 2014: ix).

Though the capitalist system, for Lukács, is characterised in its entirety by the phenomenon of reification, however, Lukács nonetheless held that there was a limit

to how much that system can grind down the individual. Central to this suggestion, as Habermas explains, was the Hegelian concept of the essence of human being on which Lukács's account of the individual rests:

[L]ukács counts on there being some reservation within the subjective nature of human beings that is resistant to reification. Precisely because the individual worker is forced to split off his labor power – as a function – from his total personality and to objectivate it as a commodity – as something that is literally alienable, saleable – his now abstract, empty subjectivity is roused to resistance [...] (Habermas 1984: 266).

The influence of Lukács's theory can be especially felt in the Critical Theorists' discussions of the rational structure of capitalism, the emergence of the idea of 'selfhood', and in the suggestion that the commodity relationship that individuals come to have with the objects of culture makes them especially susceptible to the dominance of specific political ideologies. As we shall see, however, the Critical Theorists move even beyond Lukács's theory of reification to suggest that, not only do objects come to have power over social relations, but that the individual themselves becomes an object in the capitalist system. The root of this difference can be traced to the Critical Theorists' rejection of Lukács's Hegelian understanding of the individual and their questioning Lukács's assertion that the individual retains an innate resistance to the social system. As Jürgen Habermas, discussing Horkheimer and Adorno's critiques of the culture industry and fascism, writes:

Horkheimer and Adorno, who no longer trust in the Hegelian logic just as it is, contest this assertion on empirical grounds. Because they hold to the theory of reification, they have to explain the historical experiences that so clearly speak for the fact that the subjective nature of the masses was sucked into the whirl of societal rationalization without offering resistance and that it accelerated rather than retarded this process (Habermas 1984: 266).

To explain what they take to be the empirical invalidation of Lukács's Hegelian account, then, the Critical Theorists turn to Freudian psychoanalysis and its explanation of the human psyche and behaviour in terms of universal 'inner drives' and 'desires'.<sup>15</sup> For the Critical Theorists this supposedly empirical approach to theorising human nature could explain – as the Critical Theorists had themselves

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<sup>15</sup> In particular, Joel Whitebook points out, the first-generation Critical Theorists' (especially Adorno's) attempt to marry "cultural modernism with left-wing politics" plays a significant part in Freud's psychoanalysis obtaining a prevalent position in Critical Theory thinking (2004: 74).

witnessed – why individuals failed to resist, as Lukács's theories suggested they would, even the most brutal or banal behaviours that the oppressive political systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demanded from them. However, the ways in which the various first-generation Critical Theorists incorporated the psychoanalytic picture of the individual differed. These differences, in turn play an important role in subsequent differences in their accounts of alienation. As Jay explains, for Horkheimer and Adorno it “strengthened a deepening pessimism and helped foster a retreat from political activism”, for Marcuse “it led to reaffirmation of the utopian dimensions of his radicalism” (Jay 1976: 107). In this light, it will pay to briefly discuss the account of the individual that the Critical Theorists inherited from psychoanalysis, and especially in Fromm's interpretation of that.

#### *2.1.1.2. Psychoanalysis*

At the same time that socio-political developments in Europe called for a re-working of Marxist theory to explain the failure of the working class to throw off the shackles of capitalism, Sigmund Freud's method of psychoanalysis had become widely known and practised in the field of psychology.<sup>16</sup> At first sight, these two theoretical frameworks may not seem compatible. Where Marx's theory emphasises the possibility for individuals to overcome the social system that defines and limits them, for Freud the individual's existence and future is always in relation to their lived experience. Indeed, as Martin Jay writes: “The conservatives and radicals alike agreed that Freud's basic pessimism about the possibilities for social change were incompatible with the revolutionary hopes of a true Marxist” (Jay 1976: 86). Against this background, the introduction of aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis to their rearticulation of Marxism can be seen as one of the defining features of the work of the ‘first generation’ Critical Theorists, a key point of differentiation from the orthodox Marxist tradition with which the Frankfurt School had originally engaged, and “a mark of the Institut's desire to leave the traditional Marxist straitjacket behind” (Jay 1976: 87).

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<sup>16</sup> Horkheimer, himself, had undergone analysis by Karl Landauer after which he was successfully able to deliver lectures without prepared notes (Jay 1976: 88).

The catalyst for this engagement with previously rejected theory was the opening of the Frankfurt Institute of Psychoanalysis in early 1929. The institute, led by Karl Landauer and Heinrich Meng, and with Frida Fromm-Reihmann and Erich Fromm as lecturers, became “the first avowed Freudian organization to be tied, even indirectly, to a German university” (Jay 1976: 88). Not only was it based in Frankfurt University along with the Institute of Social Research, but the arrangements had researchers from the two institutes sharing rooms with one another, leading, as Wiggershaus writes, “to an institutional link between the psychoanalysis and historical-material social research” (Wiggershaus 1995: 54).

Establishing the Institute alongside the Marxist Institute of Social Research very much fit the widening research interests of the younger generation of members, and credit must be given to Horkheimer’s personal contacts as well as his interest in psychoanalysis and influence in the university. Despite the Horkheimer-led adoption of Freudian language and concepts (e.g. repression, desires, anger) in the work produced by members of the Institute whilst still in Frankfurt, however, it is primarily through Erich Fromm’s contributions during the Institute’s exile in the US that the Institute came to be associated with the effort to combine the two approaches into one overarching framework (Jay 1976: 88).<sup>17</sup>

Fromm took human being’s nature “as something created though relatedness to the world and interaction and interaction with the other” (Jay 1976: 89). Human nature, understood in this relational manner, is a potential, not a fixed entity. In this light, Fromm considers it significant that Marx was able to recognise/identify the impact that social conditions have on individuals, going so far as to say that ‘This was one of the greatest discoveries of Karl Marx [...] one of the most far-reaching, most fundamental approaches to the understanding of society’ (Fromm 2010: 47).

Marx’s account of human being, as discussed in Chapter 1, focussed on the individual having certain innate needs, where the need for having that Marx identifies

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<sup>17</sup> It is characteristic of later generation Critical Theorists to engage with psychology research of the time as well. In this light, the emphasis on intersubjective relation, and intersubjective communicative relations in Habermas’s and Honneth’s work is informed by their engagements with developmental psychology.

as a constitutive feature of alienation, is the consequence of a distortion of those needs as a result of specific social conditions, i.e. the introduction of private property by the capitalist system. Whilst adhering roughly to this Marxist description of the individual, Fromm took up the challenge to provide it with a more solid grounding. In this light psychoanalysis, Jay suggests, “could flesh out materialism’s notion of man’s essential nature” (Jay 1976: 92). Thus, Fromm explained the effect that change to the social world had upon the individual in terms of “[t]he earlier Freudian dichotomy of erotic and self-preservation drives” (Jay 1976: 92). As Jay explains:

Because the former were capable of being displaced, sublimated and satisfied in fantasies [...] while the latter could not [...] sexuality was more adaptable to social conditions. [...] The task for an analytic social psychology was to understand unconsciously motivated behaviour in terms of the effect of the socio-economic subculture on basic psychic drives. [...] A valid social psychology must recognise that when the socio-economic base of society changed, so did the social function of its libidinal structure (Jay 1976: 92).

In his early writings to and alongside the researchers of the Institute of Social Research, Fromm tries to consolidate psychoanalysis’s focus on individual experience with his theorising on capitalism. In reference to capitalist society, similarly to other Institute members and especially Horkheimer, Fromm looked to explain the unsatisfactory outcome of the revolution, arguing that: “No mass soul or group consciousness really exists, although social factors do influence the formation of individual psyches” (Jay 1976: 101). The ‘mass’ for Fromm, then, was nothing but the collection of individual members of society and, so, his explanation of the masses’ failure to challenge the dominant class system was focussed upon the effects of that system upon the individual consciousness. In this light he offers a traditionally materialistic Marxist prescription for how to treat the ills of capitalism. As he puts it:

The quasi-neurotic behaviour of the masses, which in an appropriate response to the damaging and the pointless conditions of life they are inevitably faced with, cannot, therefore, be “healed” by “analysis”. It will only be “healed” by the *alteration and elimination of these conditions of life* (Fromm cited in Wiggershaus 1995: 59; italics original).

Though in his later work Fromm moves away from psychoanalysis to focus more on Marx – in pursuing his ongoing interest in “the development of social psychology” he

never completely dismisses psychoanalysis or the place that Freud has in his thinking (Jay 1976: 91). Where the other members of the school, despite using “psychoanalytic categories during and after the war”, Jay points out “were less than anxious to publicize their involvement with Freudian theory” (Jay 1976: 102), Fromm continued to develop a view that “psychologizes society and culture” (Jay 1976: 102).<sup>18</sup>

Whilst Fromm was key to development of the Critical Theorists’ view that individuals were not able to live a self-realising life in their contemporary social period, he did not dismiss the possibility that fulfilment in life is plausible (Wiggershaus 1995: 60). The way that he saw this fulfilment could be reached developed throughout Fromm’s thinking, but in Fromm’s own words he “always upheld the same point that man’s capacity to freedom, for love, etc. depends almost entirely on the given socio-economic conditions, and that only exceptionally can one find [...] that there is love in a society whose principle is the very opposite” (Fromm, quoted in Jay 1976: 100).

Of the various philosophers and social scientists of the Institute, psychoanalysis and especially Fromm’s interpretation was most influential upon Marcuse’s work. Though, as Jay suggests, Marcuse “was less interested in individual psychology than in the social totality” (Jay 1976: 106), Fromm’s optimism about the potential of overturning the oppressive system of capitalism was reflected in his analysis of capitalism. Wiggershaus explains:

Using the metapsychological part of Freud’s own theory, he [Marcuse] tried to show that culture without repression is indeed conceivable, and that it can exploit the objective conditions created by the previous, repressive culture (Wiggershaus 1995: 499).

Where Fromm’s work was concerned with the individual as a single entity and the impact of the social world on the individual, however, Marcuse was critical of the notion that the social world is a fixed or determinate system (Wiggershaus 1995: 499). Instead, his work – though deeply influenced by Fromm –

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<sup>18</sup> It is through the work of Fromm that the term ‘alienation’ becomes commonly used in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century psychology. It is through its general use in psychology as the name of a modern ‘disease’ that has different psycho-pathological manifestations that the philosophical concept, unfortunately, loses its critical capacity.

focussed on society as a whole. In this light, Marcuse argues that the possibility for change is inherent in the system (see: Wiggershaus 1995: 504–5). Thus, for example, Marcuse suggests in his essay *Repressive Tolerance* that intellectuals are in a position to create the necessary discourse for the change to occur (Marcuse 1970: 81). Whilst, then, their approaches differ (partly representing Fromm's and Marcuse's engagements with different time-periods of Freud's work), the key point remains the same: Marcuse, influenced by Fromm, and counter to other Critical Theorists, shares in his optimism that individuals are able to overcome the oppressive social world (Jay 1976: 112).

This question of the possibility of overcoming an oppressive system, thus, represents a crucial theoretical split between the first-generation Critical Theorists: Horkheimer and Adorno depict the capitalist system as totalising, where “there is no way to break out of the dialectic of enlightenment from inside; only a utopian rupture of some sort could derail its seemingly relentless advance” (Whitebrook 2004: 79). Whilst Marcuse “maintained, the science and technology created by capitalism can produce a qualitatively new level of abundance that can provide the basis for the utopian leap required to break the dialectic of enlightenment” (Whitebrook 2004: 89). Whilst it is important to note this split, however, my aim in engaging with the work of the first-generation Critical Theorists is not to assess this aspect of their analysis. Rather, my interest is in how they explain what they take to be the state of total alienation wrought by capitalism that had developed so that the individual is not so much subject to the oppressive system but becomes a part of that system; and how this explanation can inform our understanding of the contemporary social world.

I discuss this in the remaining sections of the chapter.<sup>19</sup>

As we shall see, the Critical Theorists' general account of capitalism differs from the description of capitalism in Marx's work in two significant ways. First, the Critical

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<sup>19</sup> In Chapter 1, I referred often to Fromm's book *Marx's Concept of Man* – I consider this an informative analysis of Marx's position. In the following discussion, however, I will not be engaging with Fromm's work exhaustively, since he explains the manifestation of alienation through different psychological states of the individual i.e. fear, anger, anxiety, etc. Though this is an interesting and related topic, I do not engage with discussion of psychological manifestations of alienation since my interest is in the impact that the socio-economic-political system has upon the individual's social experience and their capacity to exercise their individual agency within that system.

Theorists describe a system in which the social, cultural and political aspects of the social order combine to create a system of rational domination. In this respect, the Critical Theorists analysed capitalism in advanced industrial society as a socio-economic-political system, in which capitalism is manifested in all social-relations – not just labour relations, as per Marx's socio-economic analysis of early capitalism. Second, in the Critical Theorists' accounts individuals in the capitalism of their period are not just subjected to the all-encompassing social order but internalise the rationality on which it operates such that they become products of that system themselves. In this respect the individual is taken to see themselves as exercising freedom and finding their path to self-realisation through commodity consumption – as opposed to perceiving the oppressive nature of the system they live under.

One thing to clarify before turning to discussion of Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno, is that these thinkers do not explicitly employ the terms 'alienation' or 'reification' in the systematic manner of Marx or Lukács. (In that respect, any further explicit use of term alienation in this chapter should be understood as corresponding to my interpretation of the thematic character of the work).

There are at least some passages in which it is apparent that alienation is used in the same vein as Marx's. These appear especially in reference to how the material conditions of their contemporary capitalist socio-political-economic system, and the rationality/ideology underpinning that, dominate the individual's life and undermine their agency. On these lines, for example, Marcuse commenting on the seeming freedom found in capitalist society, writes in *One-Dimensional Man*:

The criterion for the free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it completely relative. Free election of masters does not abolish the master or the slave. Free choice among wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain *alienation* (Marcuse 2002: 10; emphasis added).

And, Horkheimer and Adorno write in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

[Today] machinery disables men even as it nurtures them. But in the forms of machines the alienated *ratio* moves toward a society which reconciles thought in its fixed form as a material and intellectual apparatus with free, live,



thought, and refers to society itself as the real subject of thought (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997:37; italics original).

Nonetheless, explicit mentions of alienation are uncommon in the work of the any of these thinkers. Instead, the method and language of critique is primarily derived from Lukács's discussion of reification. At the same time, however, and despite the debt owed to Lukács's work on the topic, the specific term 'reification' is similarly as uncommon – or unsystematically used – as alienation. Instead, as Habermas explains:

[They] generalize it [reification] temporally (over the entire history of species) and substantively [...] The generalization of the concept of reification leads to a concept of *instrumental reason* that shifts the primordial history of subjectivity and the self-formative process of ego identity into and encompassing historico-philosophical perspective (Habermas 1984: 382; emphasis added).

Following Habermas, then, I do not take the relative absence of these terms as evidence that the Critical Theorists are not following in the same line of theory as Marx's work on 'alienation' and Lukács's on reification. Instead, I would suggest, and as will hopefully become clear in the following discussion, that we can observe that continuity in the thematic connections between the work of the Critical Theorist's and their predecessors.

## 2.2. The social world and total alienation

In the remaining sections, I explain the Critical Theorists' accounts of how the alienating features of the late-capitalist socio-political-economic system had extended into all aspects of the relationship between the individual and the social world. The discussion is in three parts.

First, I explain the development of Lukács's critique of scientific/technocratic rationality in the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. In the Critical Theorist accounts, what Horkheimer and Adorno call 'instrumental rationality' and Marcuse 'technological rationality' had come to dominate late-capitalist society so that individuals waive their individual critical capacity in favour of the system's authority and the technology on which it operates. In this way, the technological ideal of

efficiency becomes central to the whole social world, and correspondingly, determines the options and behaviour patterns of individuals living in that world.

Second, I explain the role – discussed in most detail by Horkheimer and Adorno – that culture and mass communication play in instituting the instrumental/technological rationality so as to make the social world, as a whole, alienating. Culture in capitalism, so Horkheimer and Adorno argue, has been stripped of its aesthetic originality and become a product of industry which, whilst operating on capitalist interest, provides an easily consumable mass-produced experience. ‘Mass culture’, as entertainment, has a dual nature: firstly, it is a commodity in itself; and, secondly, it is a means to (subtly) advertise other commodities. As consumption of entertainment occupies the individual’s leisure time it is considered an exercise of individual freedom. By exercising this ‘freedom’ to consume, the individual internalises the rationality of the system and becomes dependent on the consumption process in all aspects of their life.

Third, I consider how the Critical Theorists extended their analyses of instrumental/technological rationality and the culture industry to suggest that the political sphere and the political lives of the individuals living in the capitalism of their period had also been swept up in the totalising changes.

### 2.2.1. The rationality of capitalism

Horkheimer and Adorno’s book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997[1944]) provides our starting point for understanding the Critical Theorists’ account of capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno’s interest is not so much in the emergence of the specific economic arrangements of capitalism, but in the socio-cultural developments which have led to capitalism’s development as a system of socio-economic-political domination. Echoing Lukács, they suggest that the roots of this domination lie in the Enlightenment quest for a rational explanation of the functioning of the world. This project, on their analysis, was conceived as a challenge to two forms of authority: the authority of an omnipotent and omniscient deity and the authority of the monarchy. By looking to undercut belief in the mystical and divine hierarchy, “[e]nlightenment”, they argue, “has always aimed at liberating men from fear and

establishing their sovereignty” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 3). The emancipatory aims of the Enlightenment project, however, go hand in hand with the aim of control. Accordingly, the rationality of Enlightenment was at heart ‘instrumental rationality’ – understanding nature in order to control it. So, Horkheimer and Adorno write:

What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 4).

In light of this understanding, as Wiggershaus puts it, for Horkheimer and Adorno: “the decisive event in the history of human culture was not the development of the modern period and of capitalism, but rather humanity’s domination over nature” (Wiggershaus 1995: 334). By debunking myths and mythical explanations of nature “matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 6). Knowledge about the material world becomes power over that world. This reduction of the world to the rules and standards of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, gives away the totalitarian nature of the Enlightenment project – even attempts to resist the Enlightenment rationality must be couched in rational argument. As they put it:

Whatever myth the resistance might appeal to, by virtue of the very fact that they become arguments in the process of opposition they acknowledge the principle of dissolvent rationality for which they reproach the Enlightenment. Enlightenment is totalitarian (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 6).

Scientific explanations rely upon ascribing the contents of the world specific identities, “apprehension, classification, and calculation” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 27). Horkheimer and Adorno argue however, that this process of categorisation is arbitrary and can never be complete; “classification is a condition for the cognition, and not cognition itself” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 220), and the promise of total explanation upon which scientific rationality rests is itself a myth.

The world as a gigantic analytic judgement, the only one left over from all the dreams of science, is of the same mold as the cosmic myth which associated the cycle of spring and autumn with the kidnapping of the Persephone (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 27).

This same quest for rational explanation, and the mastery of nature through systemisation, leads also to the domination of the individual in contemporary society by instrumental rationality. As individuals come to believe in the accuracy and power of the explanations provided in the name of rationality, so they extend the narrative of rationality and scientific explanation to the social world and the relations between individuals in that. In doing so, they grant that same system of thought power over the functioning of the social order. In Horkheimer and Adorno's words:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator towards men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 9).

For Marx, capitalism's introduction of a new type of economic relationship between individuals is the cause of the social world's becoming alienating. Horkheimer and Adorno consider capitalism to be no more than a specific manifestation of the system of rationality that, at this moment, dominates the social world. A crucial aspect of this is that the categorisation of things extends also to the individual (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 14). With this, Horkheimer and Adorno make an important distinction from Marx's account of the individual – where Marx's individual remains separate from the system that the social world is operating on, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the individual's selfhood depends upon the structure of the social world in which they take on a specific identity. Yet, identity after the Enlightenment becomes just another means to classify and categorise: and with the emergence of and acceptance of this system of categorisation, the individual becomes subject to the same system of explanation/knowledge as the social world. In doing so, the individual gives up their autonomous being and opens themselves to identity becoming a form of control, manipulation and domination by the capitalist system. The development of the social world and the individual according to the tenets of rationality, thus, become interlinked:

The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. The individual is wholly devalued in

relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: xiv).

This critique of Enlightenment instrumental rationality can, then, be seen as representing a certain suspicion towards technological and social progress. It is not that Horkheimer and Adorno denied the possible benefits of these, but rather, they refused to take it for granted that progress would necessarily lead to a more just or open society. Instead, progress of the form that society had *in fact* undergone, in their minds, had done nothing but solidify the structures of control in capitalist society and extended them further into the lives of the individuals living under that system. In this light, the novelties of capitalism's development were a kind of illusion: The objects, technologies, and aspects of life brought about by progress serving only to cement the dominance of the already existing system; the only newness, new ways of taking control and of systematising yet more aspects of life.

A similar line of argument is found in Marcuse's work. He shared Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism about the ways in which supposedly emancipatory and critical developments could be, and had been, co-opted by the system. He describes how the emancipatory ideals of free speech, thought, and conscience had been be co-opted and undermined as follows:

Freedom of thought, speech, and conscience were – just as free enterprise, which they served to promote and to protect – essentially *critical* ideas, designed to replace an obsolescent material and intellectual culture by a more productive and rational one. Once institutionalized, these rights and liberties shared the fate of the society of which they had become an integral part. The achievement cancels the premise (Marcuse 2002[1964]: 4).

Echoing Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of instrumental rationality, Marcuse places the notion of a 'technological rationality' at the centre of his discussion of the social world. Key to his account is the suggestion that developments in capitalist society following World War II have naturalised the individual to the alienating conditions of the social world in which they live. As a result, the capitalist system is no longer external and alienating, but, rather, the individual is conditioned to find fulfilment in acting out a pre-defined form of individuality.

For Marcuse, it is crucial to the individual's nature as a social agent that they are also a political agent. In this light, the individual's engagement with the social world should be such that they are exercising their agency as a *critical being* (see: Marcuse 1978[1941]: 141). What is characteristic of the developments of capitalism in the period he theorises, Marcuse suggests, is that capitalism has come to create the *impression* that the individual is able to critically engage with the social world. However, this is mere illusion. Instead, the system manipulates the individual so that they are unable to see anything constructively outside of the limits of the society they occupy – and so, nothing they contribute can lead to genuine change. Marcuse's notion of 'technological rationality' emerges precisely from this idea that the space between the individual's capacity of critical engagement and the socio-technological system has been erased. As he puts it: "Individuality [...] has not disappeared. The free economic subject rather has developed into the object of large-scale organization and coordination, and individual achievement has been transformed into standardized efficiency" (Marcuse 1978: 142).

With this, as Marcuse explains below, all parts of society – and so all aspects of the individual's life – are merged into one technology that works towards its own self-replication and which leaves no space for genuine critical agency:

We do not ask for the influence or effect of technology on the human individuals. For they are themselves an integral part and factor of technology, not only as the men who invent or attend to machinery but also as the social groups which direct its application and utilization. Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behaviour patterns, an instrument for control and domination (Marcuse 1978: 138).

Marcuse uses 'technology' here to refer to a social arrangement in which all aspects of society – politics, industry, culture, and individuals – are interlinked and part of the same system.<sup>20</sup> As parts of this larger mechanism, though, none of these can exist

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<sup>20</sup> In this essay, Marcuse uses the term 'technics' to refer to technological products/objects. In contrast to his view of 'technology', Marcuse does not see 'technics' as hostile or negative in themselves—but, by nature, neutral. The impact of 'technics' rather depends on the system in which they function. The objects of technology are, thus, not to blame for domination—that only happens when they are used to maintain a system that aims to dominate.

separately from the others. This also means that each of those parts of the system comes to operate on the values that best serve the system as a whole – i.e. mechanical efficiency. Yet, this includes the individual as much as any other part of the system – and so “individualistic rationality [is] [...] transformed into technological rationality” (Marcuse 1978: 141). As Marcuse explains in more depth:

The idea of compliant efficiency perfectly illustrates the structure of technological rationality. Rationality is being transformed from a critical force into one of adjustment and compliance [...]. Reason has found its resting place in the system of standardized control, production and consumption. There it reigns through the laws and mechanisms which insure the efficiency, expediency and coherence of this system (Marcuse 1978: 144).

Though the system is governed by technological rationality, and whilst the enormity of that system would suggest otherwise, Marcuse reminds us, that system is always steered by interested groups: “The principle of competitive efficiency,” as he puts it, “favors the enterprises with the most highly mechanized and rationalized industrial equipment” (Marcuse 1978: 141). In the next section I show that Horkheimer and Adorno emphasise the role that culture has in mediating the vested interests in society, whereas Marcuse argues that the whole socio-political machinery comes to echo the views and interests of whichever group controls that technology. Thus, for Marcuse, technological domination also means political domination – capitalism as a socio-economic system of alienation, becomes a socio-economic-political system.

At the same time, Marcuse suggests that the technological developments of his era are the very source of people’s comfort with their current social arrangement. As machinery becomes more sophisticated, able to perform a greater range of tasks and to do so ever more accurately, so individuals become willing and happy to defer decision making to the technocratic system. In this way, Marcuse suggests:

The facts directing man’s thought and action are not those of nature which must be accepted in order to be mastered, or those of society which must be changed because they no longer correspond to human needs and potentialities. *Rather are they those of the machine process, which itself appears as the embodiment of rationality and expediency* (Marcuse 1978: 143; emphasis added).

This acquiescence to the supremacy of the technocratic system, however, simply grants it the upper hand; transforming technology from the facilitator of social relations into the authority that dictates what is best for the individual.

Echoing Marx, Marcuse suggests that the training and emphasis upon routine that comes with the technological rationality disconnects the worker from their activity of labour, and so from their existence as an individual.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the homogenisation of the individual is, for Marcuse, an inherent part of being a social being in the period. The individual is trained from early on to become an efficient cog in the machine, and their performance is always measured to a standard rather than in relation to individual ability.<sup>22</sup> As a result of this, the kind of standardisation that Horkheimer and Adorno (as we shall see) suggest the Culture Industry imposes upon (for instance) the individual's choice of looks and tastes, is extended to all fields of life. What is especially deceptive about this social arrangement is that this standardisation process is presented as in the interest best of the people. In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse writes: "non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole" (Marcuse 2002: 4). Likewise, the norms against which the individual's actions and choices are measured appear to be reasonable norms. Thus, people willingly accept these norms, assigning responsibility for their choices and actions to the system as authority – even whilst that system works to exploit them.

[W]hat could be more rational than the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances; the concentration of individual enterprises in more effective, more productive corporations; the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects [...] (Marcuse 2002: 3).

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<sup>21</sup> Marcuse's point is similar to points made by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1991[1975]; especially *Part three: Discipline*) Foucault discusses how norms, including educational norms, are part of the dominant socio-economic-political system that moulds 'normal' or average individuals.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm, along the same lines, also writes about the worker's personality becoming a commodity in *Pathology to Normalcy*: "The man has to be nice, and all the nicer the farther you want to get. The individual does not feel himself as this concrete individual who eats and drinks and sleeps and loves and hates, who is somebody unique and somebody concrete, but as a commodity, as somebody which has—and I say intentionally which *has*—to sell itself on the market successfully. He must cultivate the qualities which are in demand [...]" (2010: 52). A similar sentiment is also expressed in *Marx's Concept of Man* (2004: 45); and *The Sane Society* (2002[1956]: 138).



Where technology (in the Marcusian sense) is granted the position of authority, the rules that govern the system are perceived as the rules by which the individuals should organise their lives. As the individuals living under capitalism inculcate that rationality, however, so the system is further able to dominate and manipulate the individuals' consumption habits and engagement with the social world.

In promoting identification with the machine, technological rationality leads to an estrangement between people. More comfortable conforming to the technological rationality than exercising genuine human agency, people retreat from the public sphere to the private so as to retain a false feeling of importance via the immediacy of information consumption. It is especially this manipulation through information that cements the alienating nature of the system – as people are so overwhelmed and shaped by it that they become incapable of seeing outside the possibilities that the dominant regime offers. Individuals become reduced to a one-dimensional individual “redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension” (Marcuse 2002: 14).

For the Critical Theorists indoctrination into the instrumental/technological rationality is a crucial step in the propagation of the alienating work-labour relationship and the internalisation of the distorted needs that are related to commodity consumption. Key to this is that the individual in the capitalism of their period takes the supposed freedom to choose between predetermined categories of life as a freedom to establish ‘oneself’. In celebrating this freedom to define ‘oneself’, the individual is unable to recognise, or distance themselves from, the oppressive nature of the social world. Instead, Marcuse suggests, people come to relate their personalities to specific objects and treat those objects as extensions of their own body. Consequently, specific brands and commodities become the embodiment and expression of one’s selfhood.<sup>23</sup> Lifestyle becomes yet another product of the capitalist system and that product another avenue of control:

[P]eople recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very

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<sup>23</sup> Fromm likewise, in *The Sane Society*, compares the alienated individual in capitalism to a talking object, considering the phrase “I am a typewriter” to be similar to “I am a manufacturer” (Fromm 2002: 138).

mechanism which tied the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced (Marcuse 2002: 11).

By defining 'oneself' through commodities and choosing to express their freedom through consumption – the individual becomes a commodity too. This emphasis on domination through control of the possibilities to define oneself is a cornerstone of the first-generation Critical Theorists' analyses of capitalism. One of the key mechanisms by which capitalism has come to encourage individuals to surrender their autonomy to the authority of the system is through the manipulation of culture and its transformation into a vehicle for delivering capitalist ideology. This process is enabled by the development of new technologies of mass-communication and is treated in most detail by Horkheimer and Adorno in their account of the 'Culture Industry'.

### 2.2.2. Culture as an industry

Today the culture industry has taken over the civilizing inheritance of the entrepreneurial and frontier democracy – whose appreciation of intellectual deviations was never finely attuned. All are free to dance and enjoy themselves, just as they have been free, since the historical naturalization of religion, to join any of the innumerable sects. But freedom to choose an ideology – since ideology always reflects economic coercion – everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 166).

Similarly to capitalism in Marx's period, the capitalism of the Critical Theorists can be understood as operating on wage-labour. The alienating social structure identified by Marx remains recognisably present. Moreover, production has taken new avenues and consumption is advertised more aggressively, as the social power of specific industries has grown in relation to this (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 163). At the same time, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the alienating features of this social system are more difficult to recognise precisely because the capitalist rationality of consumption has overtaken, not just economic relationships, but also culture. In turn, culture itself has become an industry – an industry that sells the impression of overcoming alienation via the medium of entertainment, whilst actually echoing the socio-political ideology of consumption. In this way, the elite continues to dominate

the social system, not in so brute a manner as in Marx's time, but through subtle control of both work and leisure time.

It is in this context, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, that the culture industry – and the new technologies of mass communication associated with it – enables the interests vested in the established industries to hide their motives. Targeted advertising, for example, dresses up consumption as the possibility to express one's individuality (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 123) – yet what really counts is that the products themselves are similar enough that everyone will consume something.<sup>24</sup> People define their lives through the small differences, but, in reality, these differences are just a mirage. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it here:

[The individual] is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. Pseudo individuality is rife: from standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality. What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 154).

To the delight of the producers, their efforts to create a homogeneous mass of consumers result in the populace being happy to consume what is available, rather than demanding something genuinely new (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 134). One of the defining characteristics of capitalism is people's trust that wage labour does not fully alienate and that they are able to express their individuality through the consumption of culture. Horkheimer and Adorno, though, argue that it is exactly the opposite: it is this perceived freedom to consume entertainment that dominates and distorts the needs of the individual and is the defining characteristic of alienation in capitalism as it has developed.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst the experience of seeing or listening appears to be an object of free choice and allows the perception of governing one's life, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that

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<sup>24</sup> Fromm emphasises the immediacy of consumption in capitalism as he describes how the variety of objects available tally with capitalism's introduction of methods for the individual to consume these immediately and constantly e.g. the possibility to buy expensive objects in instalments (Fromm 2002: 159).

<sup>25</sup> A similar sentiment is voiced by Adorno in his book *The Jargon of Authenticity*, where he writes: "The free time of the subject withholds from them the freedom which they secretly hope for; their free time chains them to the ever-same, the apparatus of production—even when the apparatus is giving them a vacation" (Adorno 2003: 28).

that experience is just another object of consumption. Moreover, the content of the experience can serve as a way of promoting other things to consume. Thus, in addition to the immediately alienating consumable objects that Marx describes, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, that an industry produces consumable experiences that echo the socio-political, alienating, ideology (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 143). As they see it, the day-to-day existence of the individual is alienating in work, in the consumption of goods, *and* in leisure time.

This domination of leisure time is achieved through a transformation of culture into easily consumable entities that contradict the very same values that they claim to exemplify. As Adorno in his essay *The Schema of Mass Culture* explains:

Mass culture is a system of signals that signals itself. The millions who belong to the underclasses formerly excluded from the enjoyment of cultural goods but now ensnared provide a welcome pretext for this new orientation towards information. But this grandiose system of elucidation, transformation and rapid familiarization in the sudden shock of imposition destroys everything that the ideology of cultural products claims to promote so widely (Adorno 2001: 82).

Mass culture strips culture of its meaning and reduces the objects of culture to entertainment that pastiches art with the aim of providing a standardised and standardly satisfying experience. Moreover, these objects are marketed brazenly, not as an art form, but as entertainment: "Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce" (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 121). It is this reduction of culture to entertainment, readily available and happily consumed by the masses that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, underlies the ever-increasing homogeneity of life under capitalism and the replication of the ideology of capitalism in all fields of life.

The transformation of individuals into a homogeneous mass, as per Marx's depiction of factory work, is inherent to the mass-production process. In these circumstances, individuals become part of the workforce, and so come to resemble each other in their labour assignments, working conditions and wages. However, in the view of Horkheimer and Adorno this, is a partial homogeneity, arising only in the realm of

work-life and specific to one social class. What the culture industry allows capitalism to achieve is the transformation of the whole of society into a classless mass, where the alienating need to consume extends also into the worker's leisure time. Counter to pre-set and often mechanical work assignments, the individual is free to choose their leisure time activities. The culture industry encourages the individual to exercise that freedom by choosing between the empty experiences of mass-production. And, as individuals choose to spend their time consuming these homogenised products, so they become a mass of individuals with similar tastes, similar habits, and similar opinions. In this sense, the individual living in capitalism is determined by mechanisation – where work is directly, and leisure time indirectly, a product of standardised routine:

Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 137).

On one hand, then, the culture industry transforms all people into simple consumers replicating the same consumption habits. This, in turn, creates the demand for the objects of consumption to be replicated. The differences between replicated objects, as noted earlier though, are marginal and the formulae established by the culture industry are reproduced across different genres (see: Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 122). On the other hand, individuals are also homogenised in respect to their ways of responding to the object of consumption – and so the possibility for disagreement is eliminated. The reduction of everyone to an 'all-knowing' or 'not-knowing' mass is accompanied by an increasing emphasis on providing explanations of the object of consumption that guarantee certain responses to the object. (Contemporary art exhibitions, keen to provide a story about the possible experience one might take from the works displayed, might be thought of as good example of this practice! (see: Adorno 2001: 81).) Moreover, they suggest, where an immediate explanation of how one ought to react is not available, responses to the object are determined and forced to the audience through external signs that come in a non-stop flood and allow the prevailing ideology to preclude the possibility for contemplation and reflection.

These hints and cues can range from the subtle, e.g. the gradual swell of strings to bring tears to the eye, to the obvious, e.g. canned laughter. These various approaches predetermining the experience guarantee to the individual that there is no need to engage emotionally or intellectually with the entertainment they are consuming. The requisite emotional responses will be prescribed and provided for them. “No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every reaction [...] any logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 137).

This aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis further illuminates the process by which attitudes are shaped for the populace and how, in turn, they are systematically excluded from any substantive or significant decision-making process. For, by way of these predeterminations, it is not just that a person’s time is governed by different industries, but that the industries make the necessary decisions for the individual. In this light, the late-capitalist social system that the culture industry mediates is doubly oppressive – it determines both the possibilities of experience, and the perception of experience. More than that, it also shapes the particular needs and interests that the individual develops: “producing them, controlling them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement: no limits are set to cultural progress of this kind” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 144). Consequently, as the individual’s responses become more predictable and programmed, so they too become the products of this industry. Entertainment, thus, becomes a way of desensitising the workers to their day-to-day hardships.

As entertainment, and marketed as such, the products of the culture industry are explicitly juxtaposed with the alienating work-life. Thus, the individual’s engagement with entertainment provides a possibility to pick and choose; whereas work is predetermined. And, where work needs physical and mental engagement with the process of work – be it at the production line or in the office – a leisure time filled with entertainment provides a possibility to ‘switch off’ in ways that do not demand thinking (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 137).

Serious art has been withheld from those for whom the hardship and oppression of life make a mockery of seriousness, and who must be glad if

they can use time not to spend at the production line just to keep going (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 135).

So, in one sense, entertainment is able to provide an immediate feeling of satisfaction, a feeling of overcoming or, at least, forgetting the alienating social world. At the same time, entertainment is itself an industry that operates on the need to replicate consumption of the product. The products of the entertainment industry are for short-lived satisfaction, ensuring that people return for more. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the culture industry 'frustrates desire' as it operates through presenting situations in which there is no possibility that the expectations will be fulfilled. "The culture industry" as they put it, "perpetually cheats its consumers of what it promises [...] the real point will never be reached, [...] the diner must be satisfied with the menu" (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 139). In doing so, it creates a desire to consume more and more – even with the knowledge that there is no end to this consumption – a systematic return to and reliance upon entertainment becomes necessary. Through this process, the culture industry is able to create the perfect consumers – a mass of individuals seeking to exchange constant suffering for short-term satisfaction.

The new technological media, moreover, help to contribute to this forgetting of the alienating social system by providing a safe hiding space from the oppressive social, as well as, simultaneously, feeding the illusion of reinventing oneself. So, for instance Horkheimer and Adorno identify the cinema screen as a source of escapism and day dreaming, where, sat in a dark room, people can look into someone else's story, hide away from the looks of others, and witness the world go by. In this, the bright screen leaves the watcher to the shadows with their own thoughts (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 139). Or rather, lack thereof.

Whilst the screen provides a seeming escape from social expectations, the entertainment – especially visual entertainment – is structured in such a way that people internalise what is taking place on the screen and act accordingly. The movies, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, resemble reality, so the 'story' would be easier to identify with, even if the coherence of the narrative is seriously questioned (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 126). The situations that the actor is faced with could

be happening to everyone in the audience and so everyone could be the actor. In this semblance of real life, people are sold the hope of lucky chance as another way of overcoming their alienating work-life. Although the chance is very slim, it is something completely separate from the set work-life and helps to suppress the feeling of suffering that comes with being part of a production process.

That said, this form of escapism – mixed with visual similarity to the real world – desensitises the individual to the recognition of how the alienating individualistic need to have and to consume has overtaken their whole existence. Again, we can understand this in terms of the system's exploitation of the notion of freedom. On one hand, people are offered the freedom to choose to follow the dominating ideology or not. The movies, however, show what happens to individuals who decline to follow – they become outsiders, victims of misfortune, or are even villainized themselves. In such ways, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the culture industry emotionally bullies people into surrender to the social system (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 133).<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, people are encouraged to use their freedom to consume in every instance. The process of consumption, though, becomes more important than the quality, as it is only through constant repetition that one's freedom-in-the-system is found. In both respects, though, the role of the culture industry is to transform the individual into yet another consumer where the real differences between individuals are almost non-existing. As they put it:

What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental so firmly that it is accepted as such. The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass-produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimetres (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 154).

Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry explains how the ethos of mass-production and the underlying instrumental/technological rationality of the alienating system extends from the industrialised workplace into the leisure time of

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<sup>26</sup> Quoting Tocqueville: "Under the private culture monopoly it is a fact that 'tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: You must think as I do or die. He says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us.' Not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually – to be 'self-employed'" (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 133).



the worker. Whilst the 'culture industry' has a central role to play in widening the scope of the alienating nature of the system, the manipulation and domination of the individual is not confined to their tastes and proclivities for entertainment. Rather, the Critical Theorists suggest, the instrumental/technological rationality extends also into the political domain.

### 2.2.3. Freedom as a façade for oppression

With capitalism's evolution into a system of total social control, so the Critical Theorists suggest, the same mass communication means and marketing tools that allowed the extension of the mass-production process into the cultural domain, extend into the political. Christian Fuchs explains the role that the promotion of capitalism as an ideology has in maintaining the dominance of the socio-economic system:

Ideology aims at instilling the belief in the system of capital and commodities into human's subjectivity. The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism [...] the crucial aspect about ideology is that it encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation (Fuchs 2015: 290).

Just as the individual is sold the freedom to choose between the products of the culture industry, the notion of political freedom is at the heart of capitalism's evolution, which – despite its oppressive features – still represents a form of democratic society. Yet, whereas, Marcuse points out, "democracy is a form of government which fits very different types of society, [...] the human costs of a democracy are always and everywhere those extracted by the society whose government it is" (Marcuse 1970[1965]: 100).

In this light, the democratic freedom that allows a plurality of voices and opinions in late capitalist social-political discourse, as Marcuse argues in his essay *Repressive Tolerance* (1970), is managed to prevent change to the existing socio-economic-political system. Correspondingly, the "ideology of tolerance", he suggests, becomes a tool for the dominant capitalist socio-economic system that "favours and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination"

(Marcuse 1970: 123). As all views come to be tolerated, so dissent becomes a part of the system. Even the freedom to challenge the status quo cancels itself out when the method of challenge is moderated by the technological rationality that political discourse, like all other aspects of the system, operates upon.

The toleration of free discussion and the equal right of opposites was to define and clarify the different forms of dissent: their direction, content, prospect. But with the concentration of economic and political power and the integration of opposites in a society which uses technology as an instrument of domination, *effective dissent* is blocked where it could freely emerge: in the formation of opinion, in information and communication, in speech and assembly (Marcuse 1970: 95; emphasis added).

Marcuse's point here, is not that the concentration of power is exercised to block dissent. Rather, dissent is rendered ineffective as the supposedly objective and democratic tolerance of all views – no matter how outlandish, unacceptable, or poorly supported – results in a “*neutralization* of opposites” (Marcuse 1970: 97; italics original). Mass communication has an important role in this ‘neutralization’. “Stupid opinion”, Marcuse writes, “is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth, and falsehood” (Marcuse 1970: 94). Having already surrendered their critical agency to the system and the media that serves as its information delivery system, the individual is unable to determine which views are worth listening to, and which are to be ignored. By giving equal space and weight to opposing views in the name of balance, and by providing a platform for all opinions to be voiced, the media guarantees the lack of impact of these views and checks the possibility that any of these might come to be dominant and supplant the capitalist ideology. Explaining the importance of controlling the media, Christian Fuchs writes in *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* that the Critical Theorists recognised that: “[I]n order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and makes use of media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic” (Fuchs 2015: 290).

The media of communication and entertainment becomes the binding force between capitalist interests, the production process, and political discourse. Even were it not

connected to society's vested interests, the media can never be completely neutral, but must always decide what to cover and how to do so. "The meaning of words", Marcuse writes, "is rigidly stabilized" (Marcuse 1970: 96). By exploiting and mediating the democratic discourse of freedom, the media provides the possibility to dictate the political agenda. And so, as Marcuse suggests, the media is in a position to engender a false consciousness in individuals as well as society, where "tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of repressive society" (Marcuse 1970: 111).

One area of the political arena that draws special attention from the Critical Theorists is the role of the workers' and trade unions in political discourse. Influenced by Marx's original call for a workers' revolution, the first-generation Critical Theorists are highly critical of the unions. By relying on the union to challenge the system in their name, they suggest, the individual yet again sets aside their critical agency and defers to the authority of the system. As opposed to genuinely serving the interests and defending the rights of the workers, the unions function as a part of the system of domination that tethers the interests of the individual to the dictates of instrumental/technological rationality. Here Horkheimer and Adorno relate this to the domination of leisure time by the culture industry:

The subjects of the economy are psychologically expropriated, and the economy is more rationally operated by society itself. The individual no longer has to decide what he himself is to do in a painful inner dialectic of conscience, self-preservation and drives. Decisions for men as active workers are taken by the hierarchy ranging from the trade associations to the national administration, and in the private sphere by the system of mass culture which takes over the last inward impulses of individuals, who are forced to consume what is offered to them (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 203).

Moreover, as Marcuse points out, the protocol of industrial action is decided not by the individual, but by the hierarchy of industrial and political agents and public approval (Marcuse 1970: 102). In this way, the possibility of protesting the system is itself regulated. The power of dissent as a force for social change is neutered and the possibility for a *democratic* revolution eliminated. Crucial to this aspect of capitalism's control of the political sphere is the way in which individuals find themselves in collusion with the system. Overcoming oppressive forms of

democracy, Marcuse suggests, would demand undemocratic action to escape the all-encompassing system (Marcuse 1970: 100). And, thus, so long as the workers resist *total* revolution, the system will remain stable, unchanged.

I maintain that practices such as planned obsolescence, collusion between union leadership and management, slanted publicity are not simply imposed from above on a powerless rank and file, but are *tolerated* by them – and by the consumer at large. However, it would be ridiculous to speak of a possible withdrawal of tolerance with respect to these practices and to the ideology promoted by them. For they pertain to the basis on which the repressive affluent society rests and reproduces itself and its vital defences – their removal would be that total revolution which this society so effectively repels (Marcuse 1970: 102).

The neutralisation of dissent and prevention of effective political challenge cements the extension of the capitalist ideology into the total social order.

Given their critical analysis of the supposedly liberal and democratic order of capitalism, Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno are acutely aware of instances where specific political attitudes and approaches overtake, or hijack a numbed society. Yet, in order for a political party or grouping to dictate the discourse through propaganda, that group needs to be in a position to use the mass media. Since the mass media is controlled by the forces of capital, the political ideas that it affords space, either need to be in line with the interests of its gatekeepers, or, presented in such a way as to suit those interests. As Marcuse, commenting on the way that information becomes available to the public, writes: “[T]he facts are never given immediately and never accessible immediately [...] [they] are established, ‘mediated’ by those who made them; the truth, ‘the whole truth’ surpasses these facts and requires the rupture with their appearance” (Marcuse 1970: 99).

For any specific programme, idea, or product to come to dominance, then, it must take control of the means of mass communication. This is the case when seizing control of the political agenda as well as when advertising commodities. It is the intensity of exposure to the specific message that makes individuals, already desensitised by the economic propaganda, susceptible to political propaganda. That is because it is operating on the same psychological mechanism as selling

commodities: freedom to choose in a predetermined space (from a variety of predetermined messages).

Turning away from their critique of capitalism, Horkheimer and Adorno's most vivid illustration of the relation between mass communication and domination of the political discourse is found in their discussion of National Socialism's use of and propagation of anti-Semitic rhetoric in Germany:

The radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; his voice rises from street loud-speakers to resemble the howling of sirens announcing panic – from which modern propaganda can scarcely be distinguished anyway. The National Socialists knew that the wireless gave shape to their cause just as the printing press did to the Reformation. The metaphysical charisma of the Führer invented by the sociology of religion has finally turned out to be no more than the omnipresence of his speeches on the radio, which are a demoniacal parody of the omnipresence of the divine spirit. The gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content, just as the benefaction of the Toscanini broadcast takes the place of the symphony. No listener can grasp its true meaning any longer, while the Führer's speech is lies anyway. The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker's word, the false commandment absolute. A recommendation becomes an order (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 159).

What this example illustrates is that ideologies rise to dominance on the back of wider economic, social, and political conditions. Rhetorical moves and slogan-like approaches to serious social-political issues – that we might associate more readily with advertising – exploit the state of individuals already desensitised by the social world. In this state, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, individuals would easily adopt and parrot the discourse, without properly distinguishing the commercial from the political. Thus, the anti-Semitic message could spread without any critical discourse of its wrongness or the grave consequences that were to follow from that. As a result, the sentiment and language of anti-Semitism came to be a constitutive part of the social world and a vehicle for transmission of the totalitarian ideology that it draws upon:

When the German Fascists decided one day to launch a word – say, 'intolerable' – over the loudspeaker the next day the whole nation is saying 'intolerable'. By the same pattern, the nations against whom the weight of German 'blitzkrieg' was thrown took the word into their jargon. The general repetition of names for measures to be taken by the authorities makes them, so to speak, familiar, just as the brand name on everybody's lips increases

sallies in the era of free market. The blind and rapidly spreading repletion of words with special designation links advertising with the totalitarian watchword (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 165).

The contagious nature of this discourse was fuelled by the specific economic circumstances of the period as the social and economic injustices of the time were blamed upon the Jewish population. This rhetoric of blame, in turn, exploits the fear of the unknown that Horkheimer and Adorno suggested was the flip-side of the Enlightenment project to categorise and understand the world. Faced with uncertainty and hardship, the political rhetoric translates the fear of the unknown into a fear of the other that exploits and directs the individual's irrational prejudices toward a specific social group. And so, "[p]eople shout: Stop thief! – but point at the Jews. They are scapegoats not only for individual manoeuvres and machinations but in a broader sense, inasmuch as the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to them" (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 174).

Of course, this action and hatred toward the other does nothing to serve justice or address the dissatisfaction with economic, social, and political inequalities that a social world governed by instrumental/technological rationality inevitably produces. But overcoming the individual's dissatisfaction with the system is not the end result of such rhetoric – only the externalisation of that feeling. Marginalised social groups are treated as an instrument with which to motivate the individual to direct and adopt inherently irrational behaviour (Adorno 1989: 229). The authoritarian voice<sup>27</sup> manipulates the background feeling of dissatisfaction, as if following its prescriptions would make a difference. Instead, the individuals who give in to such propaganda are driven by their distress "to plunder, and construct a complicated ideology to that end, with illogical claims to be the saviours of the family, the fatherland, and mankind" (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997: 171).

Though the example of the National Socialists' use of anti-Semitic rhetoric and propaganda does not fit precisely into the critique of capitalism, I take it as an

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<sup>27</sup> The authoritarian personality is Adorno's concept which gives an explanation of why some people turn, more easily than others, to anti-democratic propaganda. Adorno's account is based on Freud's emphasis upon the importance of childhood. Hence, Adorno ties the authoritarian character to the stage of early child development and a lack of parental love and acknowledgement. (As Joel Whitebook points out the Freud-inspired link between aggression and childhood that this account makes is extremely speculative, but that is a different matter (Whitebook 2004: 76).)

effective illustration of how – in the Critical Theorists' account – the use of political propaganda enlists the individual in propagation of political ideology similarly to how the culture industry encourages acceptance of the consumption ethos.

## Conclusion

This chapter and the previous have focused on accounts of alienation according to which the individual-social world relationship is distorted by features of the social system that are external to the individual and independent of the experience of any specific individuals living under that system. Alienation, on this understanding, is contingent upon the specific constellation of the social system at any particular period in its development.

The roots of this tradition, we saw in Chapter 1, lie in Marx's analysis of the interdependent relationship between individual and social world and its distortion by early capitalism. Marx locates the source of this distortion in the capitalist socio-economic system of mass production, wage labour and private property. It leads to individuals needing to purchase objects that they would have produced for themselves. Objects become commodities that are fetishized: wanted and admired in their own right.

The first-generation Critical Theorists Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse – influenced by Lukács and Freudian psychoanalysis – develop Marx's account of the oppressive capitalist socio-economic system, to explain the impact that socio-technological advancements have on the social world in capitalism. In doing so, they significantly develop the value of alienation as a critical concept for assessing the individual-social world relationship. Central to the Critical Theory account of the alienating features of capitalism is the suggestion that the oppressive nature of the social system lies in its rational structure as much as its economic. As the mass-production process has extended into the social and political domains, so the individual is indoctrinated into and internalises the rationality of that system in place of their own critical agency. The alienating nature of society becomes total and is willingly embraced by the individual.

In the next chapter, I consider a recent development of the Marxist-Critical Theory tradition of theorising alienation, forwarded by Rahel Jaeggi in her 2014 book *Alienation*. Jaeggi conceives alienation as an individual, and so subjective, phenomenon, that is not encountered by all individuals. Where the accounts of Marx and the Critical Theorists demonstrate the way in which alienation is dependent upon the social conditions of any particular period, Jaeggi's account emphasises the role of individual agency and responsibility in determining the state of the individual-social world relationship.



# Chapter 3: Alienation and the self

*I don't want to blend in and be indistinguishable,  
I want to be part of the different crowd,  
and assert my individuality along with others*  
King Missile, *It's Saturday* (1992)

## Introduction

In the previous chapters I surveyed Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists use of alienation to critically assess the individual-social world relationship in capitalism. In doing so, we saw how the state of that relationship is contingent upon the structure of the social world, as well as how significant developments in that structure alter the nature of alienation. A common feature of the accounts given by Marx and the various Critical Theorists is the idea that the different forms of capitalism prevent individuals from being able to critically contribute to the way that the social world they live in is constituted. Instead, the psychological state of the individual living in the alienating system comes to reflect the rationality around which that system is structured, and the feelings and emotions that the system has instilled in them.

There are two central aspects to this general approach to theorising alienation: the account of the social world as structured by capitalism; and the account of the individual who lives in that world and is affected by capitalism. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, though they differ on the details, Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists all ground their analyses in an essentialist and universalist account of the individual's nature. For Marx, all individuals are in essence labouring beings. Since, capitalism distorts the relationship between labour and the product of labour, capitalism alienates the individual understood this way. The Critical Theorists, we saw, replace Marx's roughly Hegelian account with a more complex picture of the individual defined by universal and inherent psychological needs. Capitalism, on this understanding, is alienating because the system distorts the social relations through which the individual is able to satisfy these needs. Given their essentialism about the individual, Marx and the Critical Theorists' accounts of the different periods of capitalism each entail a specific and universal picture of self-alienation. Since all

individuals have the same essential nature, and capitalism works by distorting social relations, alienation under a given system has a common manifestation in the psyche of the individuals living under that system. The supposed 'freedom' that capitalism provides, as Marx and the Critical Theorist's argue, is only the freedom to choose between the pre-determined means of 'self-alienation' – but makes no difference to the state itself. Thus, how the individual exercises their own agency within the social system makes no difference to, either, their experience of the social system and its alienating conditions, nor the social world itself.

In this chapter, I discuss an account of alienation that explicitly addresses the question of individual agency in alienation: Rahel Jaeggi's account of alienation as self-alienation in her book *Alienation*.<sup>28</sup> Jaeggi's aim is to develop a critical theory of alienation with which to assess the individual's relationship to the social world that does not rely upon either an essentialist account of the individual, nor a universal ideal of the good life, or social structure.<sup>29</sup> In this light she argues that the individual should be understood as a 'self' constituted by the individual's aware engagement with their social existence through a process of appropriation. On her understanding, 'self-hood' is an entirely subjective phenomenon and represents the free exercise of the individual's own agency. Alienation occurs when the individual does not engage with their social existence and appropriate this as a part of their 'self'.

Jaeggi's account both highlights and draws out the problems with the essentialism about the individual inherent in Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorist's treatments of alienation that I mentioned at the end of the last chapter. In doing so, Jaeggi draws attention to the importance of individual agency in determining the state of alienation and, is thus, particularly significant to my analysis of the impact of new forms of online communication upon the individual-social world relationship. For that reason, it is important to consider this critique in detail. Nonetheless, in the final

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<sup>28</sup> I refer to the English translation of the book published in 2014 and translated by F. Neuhauser and Alan E. Smith; the book was originally published in German in 2005 as *Entfremdung – Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems* (*Alienation: A Contemporary Problem of Social Philosophy*).

<sup>29</sup> Jaeggi's criticisms of extant accounts of alienation extend to both material accounts of alienation and metaphysical accounts. Given my general focus on the material critical tradition, I mainly focus on her discussion as it pertains to material accounts, rather than the metaphysical accounts.

section of this chapter, I argue that despite the cogency of her critique Jaeggi's positive account of the individual – and alienation in relation to that – is lacking.

One feature of Jaeggi's account of the individual as self is that she explicitly (if briefly) relates this to the issue of how the individual represents their 'self' on the Internet and in online interactions (writing prior to the emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter). Jaeggi argues that having recognised that the individual is a continuous self we should also consider online self-presentation to be a part of the individual's selfhood – not, as is sometimes assumed, a kind of 'identity role playing' distinct from the individual's *real* self (see: Turkle 1995). So, Jaeggi suggests that her account of selfhood is particularly suitable when considering "postmodern identity" (Jaeggi 2014[2005]: 198). This resonates with the idea, which I develop later in the thesis, that the individual's exercise of agency online is an important part of contemporary alienation. Having said that, given the shortcomings with her account of the individual that I discuss in the second half of the chapter, I take it also that her account of the individual's relation to their online interactions is ultimately unsatisfactory also.

In the rest of this chapter, I, first, describe Jaeggi's critique of extant alienation accounts and their reliance upon an essentialist view of the individual. Second, present her positive account of the individual. Third, discuss her notion of self-alienation as a phenomenon in which the individual's appropriation of their social-self is distorted. Finally, I consider the shortcomings of Jaeggi's self-oriented account.

### 3.1. Rahel Jaeggi's critique

In this section I focus on Jaeggi's critique of Marx and the Critical Theory accounts of alienation. It is this critique that provides the substance of Jaeggi's own account of alienation, that I discuss later in the chapter. Underlying Jaeggi's criticism is her contention that the concept of alienation refers to a relationship between the individual and the social world (or more precisely, self-presentation in the social

world)<sup>30</sup> which is neither universal nor defined as deviation from a set ideal. For Jaeggi alienation is a personal phenomenon, the source of which lies in the individual exercise of agency. Hence, she describes her account as an account of alienation as self-alienation.

Jaeggi's account of alienation emerges from the idea that moments occur in the life of the individual in which they do not find themselves to have mastered the situation that they are in. She considers the occurrence of such situations as a matter of the individual's inherent ability to will something to be their life, where the willing, and the possibility to execute that will, do not overlap. It is in respect to this possibility that Jaeggi suggests the various conceptions of alienation that make it contingent only on factors external to the individual are unsatisfactory. This includes the conceptions of alienation developed in the accounts of Marx and the Critical Theorists. Jaeggi's suggestion is that these accounts treat alienation as a universal or objective phenomenon for *humankind*, and as a consequence of that, provide no space to analyse how a specific individual should establish a proper relation with the self, and so, with the social world. In contrast, Jaeggi argues that the identification of the source of alienation in external factors is a mistake, and it is rather through the relationship with the self that either a sufficient, or discrepant relation to the social world is established. Along these lines she states:

Self-alienation, so the thesis I will defend here, is a condition in which one is unable in crucial respects to appropriate the life one is leading and in which one does not have oneself at one's command in what one does, where the latter condition is understood such that it does not presuppose that complete transparency and command constitute the normal or ideal state of individuals (Jaeggi 2014: 48).

By critiquing the alienation discourse from the perspective of the individual, Jaeggi suggests a way to bridge the divide between material and metaphysical accounts of alienation. Both strands, in her opinion, have, so far, relied upon an idealised view of the non-alienated existence – the alternative state to being alienated always treated as a pre-defined, idyllic, form of life where people can present their 'essence'

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<sup>30</sup> As Jaeggi explains it, "self-alienation is also always alienation from the world – if it is to be understood as a relation to what I will and do (in the world) – then the self cannot be investigated apart from, but only in relation to the world" (Jaeggi 2014: 48).

(Jaeggi 2014: 32). Jaeggi, in contrast, aims to show that relying on an ideal form of being is counterproductive, and argues that:

[I]t is possible to avail ourselves of the critical import of the concept of alienation without relying on the certainty of a final harmony or reconciliation, on the idea of fully self-transparent individual, or on the illusion of having oneself and the world completely at one's disposal or command (Jaeggi 2014: 32).

Jaeggi sees the individual as an engaged member of functioning society in which they are faced with different circumstances that form their life-experience. For her, alienation accounts that distinguish sharply between a 'true' and 'false' form of self and being, do not carry any weight. That is because these accounts are unable to provide a viable representation of how an individual's social self is continuously manifesting and forming the self throughout that individual's life. In other words, Jaeggi contends that every individual has a distinct life, with which they can, and should, engage in a continuous and attentive manner (Jaeggi 2014: 170).

To develop her critique, and, in turn suggest the need for reframing of the central topic of the alienation discourse, Jaeggi looks at how, what she takes to be the two underlying criteria of alienation discourse – essentialism about human nature and a set picture of a tension-free existence – function (Jaeggi 2014: 2). Corresponding to her endorsement of a subjective account of alienation, Jaeggi's critique focuses on the account of a specific individual to which these criteria lead.

To consider non-alienated existence as a specific way of how people are *made to be*, as Jaeggi points out, is to take it that there is a fixed understanding of the 'true' or 'authentic' self of an individual. Alienated existence, respectively, then, stands for a 'false' self (Jaeggi 2014: 44). Invoking notions of 'true' and 'false', however, suggests that there is a 'true' essence of an individual, which is, or could be, separate from the existence of that individual. But, as Jaeggi makes clear she thinks that there are clear problems with this reification of the self:

According to this model, there is a self that exists prior to and apart from its being realized, something that constitutes the innermost part of someone without it needing to be realized in any deed, activity, or other mode of expression. But his idea is highly dubious. It is unclear what the inside of a person is supposed to be such that, on the one hand, it does not require

articulation, but, on the other hand, it already exists as something determinate (Jaeggi 2014: 46).

Hence, in this view, the self has two simultaneous forms of existence. These forms do not connect to each other in a way that would enable an individual to reach their 'true' self, even when willing. Rather, 'true' and 'false' are extremes that juxtapose each other – one actual and the other potential. Marx's alienation account illustrates what Jaeggi has in mind. In Marx's account, whilst alienated, there is no possibility for the individual to reach the non-alienated state since it is an independently occurring state from alienation that demands a change in the social system to be possible. In the same way, Jaeggi challenges the distinction of 'alienated' and 'self-realising' forms of existence, where whilst in one the other is not accessible.

A similar discrepancy in the distinctions made in forms of being, Jaeggi suggests, is also common to people's everyday self-interpretations. For example, when "the bank employee and father who says that 'he is really an artist' believes that he has fallen short of his true calling" (Jaeggi 2014: 44). Or, when a dynamic young editor, scarred by crisis, "expresses a need to finally 'find his way back to himself'" (Jaeggi 2014: 44). Such tropes indicate an understanding that there is a different – the 'true' – form of being, which is separate from the individual, and that the individual needs to reconnect with.

Jaeggi's objection to these sharp distinctions is founded in the thought that, in day-to-day existence, there is no division between an individual's form of being and how that individual is *made to be* i.e. one's essence. Rather than a 'true' and 'false' self, she suggests, there is a single continuum of an individual – one being, which is manifested through lived life. Thus, on Jaeggi's account, there is no 'true' self which is distinct from the 'current' self, hidden away and waiting to be manifested. Instead, every individual has agency over their life-experience and to ascribe 'true' being to something other than the individual's life-experience is to undermine the agency of the individual. Jaeggi's critique resonates with the notion of 'selfhood' that Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse suggest is artificially created by capitalism to get people to consume more and identify themselves with objects. Yet whereas the 'self' for the critical theorists was to be contrasted to the individual, for Jaeggi the two are

the same. Therefore, she explains, when the individual refers to their 'true' self as something different to their lived life, they "[f]ail to do justice to the fact that humans are beings that *lead their lives* and that become what they are only by doing so" (Jaeggi 2014: 46; italics original).

In similar vein to this Jaeggi argues that, the self of an individual is inextricably tied to its social manifestation – or 'social self'. The self cannot be something that has no presence, but it has to be part of the continuum of the life-story in which the individual exercises agency through taking control of one's social self. So, she states:

[T]here is no truth of the self beyond its manifestations. What we *are* must be expressed and *externalized* in order to acquire reality. There is no self apart from its realization; it becomes determinate only as something realized (Jaeggi 2014: 46; italics original).

Crucially, what Jaeggi is suggesting here is not that the self is contingent on external social factors – as would fit with the accounts of alienation discussed in the previous chapters. But rather, that the nature of the self rests on how the individual's own engagement with their social life works to form their life-story. Either, the individual recognises the continuum of their social-manifestation in life-story as their individual self, and so, has a *true relationship* with oneself. Or, the individual fails to recognise themselves in that life-story, which leads to a *false way of being*. Hence, as I discuss in the next section, in Jaeggi's account alienation manifests itself in relation with the self.

Jaeggi's first critique of extant accounts of alienation, thus, rests on her misgivings about the fragmented account of the individual and the self that she considers those accounts in turn to rely upon. As opposed to a true and false self, she argues, there is only one self that is manifested in the experiences that taken together define the individual's life story. What counts is how the self relates to that life-story. Her second critique challenges the way in which the non-alienated existence is presented from a different angle. Not only is it a mistake in her eyes to define a 'true' non-alienated existence in terms of 'human essence, it is also a counterproductive to consider the non-alienated state as tension free. As she puts it:

The perspective from which the problem of alienation is approached ceases to be interesting precisely when it presupposes a pre-established harmony among relations or a seamless “oneness” of individuals with themselves or with the world; it becomes productive when it calls these relations into question without supposing that they can be completely free of conflict (Jaeggi 2014: 32).

This contra-positioning of the tension-ridden alienated existence and the ideal non-alienated existence is a mistake that Jaeggi suggests both the materialist and metaphysical traditions of alienation are guilty of. It can be recognised in both treatments of individual existence as well as social order. We see this, for example, in Heidegger’s notion of reaching self-realisation; or, the Critical Theorists ideal of not being manipulated by the distorted needs imposed on the individual by capitalism encountered in the previous chapter. The same idea is also prevalent in descriptions of the ideal non-alienating society. Whether we are talking about the communism that Marx envisages, or the discursive form of democracy that Marcuse (1970) endorses, none of the suggested social orders seem to be embedded with the same internal struggle and tensions as is the oppressive social order – in this case, capitalism – that is fighting to maintain its dominant position by all possible means.

Jaeggi considers this line of thought entirely counterproductive and unrealistic (Jaeggi 2014: 4). Again, motivated by her interest in providing an account that depicts a realistic social world, Jaeggi considers tension – which she takes to be juxtaposition of the established and the new, unconsidered, or strange – an important part of a self that is always in the making (Jaeggi 2014: 192). In this view, then, neither identity nor social system should be depicted as having a harmonious unity. Indeed, as she points out (Jaeggi 2014: 49), the fallacious idea of a harmonious state leads back to the idea of there being different stages, either of an individual being or the society, that can be distinguished from each other and in which some form of being can become ‘true’. In this light, alienation, for Jaeggi, cannot stand in opposition to a perfect tension-free being, just because neither individual life, nor society, can ever be sustainably tension free. Instead, as we shall see, Jaeggi suggests that alienation is related to how the individual incorporates, engages, and deals with the tensions that they encounter in their life experiences. Seeing how these experiences will be different for all individuals, and moreover that



the self is established in relation to these experiences, it follows for Jaeggi that there will be no objective phenomenon of alienation – whether that be determined by metaphysics or capitalism.

In dismissing the universalism of previous accounts and suggesting that only individual lives can be properly scrutinised, Jaeggi shifts the subject of alienation discourse from ‘humankind’ to the individual, and how, through every social occurrence, that individual manifests their unique self and creates their life-story. In respect to this shift in emphasis, self-alienation for Jaeggi stands for having a dysfunctional relation with their own life. That said, she still aims to provide a common framework through which each occurrence of alienation can be analysed. In respect to this, the following section considers Jaeggi’s account of how the individual should engage with their life-story to live a fulfilling life.

## 3.2. Individual as self and appropriation of self

Having considered Jaeggi’s response to alienation discourse, I now turn to consider her notion of the self in more detail. Jaeggi considers the self to have freedom to set its own ends, and act accordingly. Fulfilling life demands recognising this freedom and appropriating different life situations into one coherent story. In the following sections I first, elaborate on Jaeggi’s account of the individual, and then, her account of the process by which the individual achieves a fulfilling engagement with their life: appropriation. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for her account of self-alienation as an insufficient appropriation process.

### 3.2.1. *Self*

Dismissing the essentialist view of self leaves Jaeggi with an account by which every individual, firstly, has no pre-set nature, metaphysical or social; and secondly, is distinct from any other being. It is, then, necessary to investigate how this individual as *tabula rasa*, in Jaeggi’s opinion, establishes their self, and through that their relation to the social world.

By discarding essentialism about the individual, as well as humankind, Jaeggi eliminates the possibility that the individual is able to define themselves in relation to

something stable or fixed. From this perspective, the idea of embodiment comes to be crucial. Individuality – which Jaeggi understands as selfhood – is constituted through a continuum of situations, which all have the reference point of the same individual. But it is only *lived* experience – and the social manifestation of self, or social self – that contributes to development of the individual. In other words, the individual is never distinct from their social being.

Jaeggi talks about the ‘self’ or of a person’s ‘identity’ broadly in the same sense as it is used in everyday language. As she considers it, the self is:

[W]hat could be called the (psychic) continuity or the (psychic) unity of a person [...] the more or less stable ‘agency’ that we presuppose when we understand ourselves as acting persons or what we have in mind when we say ‘this is who I am’ (Jaeggi 2014: 156).

In dismissing the idea of an essential being, and emphasising lived experiences as the manifestation of selfhood, Jaeggi follows Isaiah Berlin<sup>31</sup> in ascribing the individual a positive freedom in respect to which they are able to set and realise ends valuable in themselves (Jaeggi 2014: 35). As she writes:

Being a human being rather than a thing means [...] ascribing to oneself what one wills and does, taking responsibility for it and (therefore) being able to identify with it (Jaeggi 2014:35).

At the same time, though, this freedom does not refer to the capacity to act in just any manner. In particular, it is not freedom to act in a way that fails to cohere with one’s self-manifestation, but, rather is the freedom to act in a way that matters to oneself. So, referencing Robert Pippin, she states:

[...] only those acts and intentions that I can ‘link ... with me such that they count as due to me or count as mine’ are ‘instances of freedom’ (Jaeggi 2014: 35).

It is in light of positive freedom, that Jaeggi articulates how the relationship between the self, its setting of ends, and the social manifestation of self, i.e. the self acting on these ends, *should* be established for a non-alienated existence. In short, it is the correspondence between willing, and being able to execute one’s will, to paraphrase

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<sup>31</sup> For Berlin *positive liberty* is a form of acting which seems to require a presence of some sort of life quality (i.e. of control, self-mastery, self-determination or self-realization).

Axel Honneth's introduction to her book, that determines whether one's existence is alienated or not (Jaeggi 2014: viii).

If people are able to establish ends that are valuable to them, as Jaeggi suggests they are (borrowing from Ernst Tugendhat), the question should not be *what* people are willing. Rather, the emphasis should be on the '*the How of willing*' (Jaeggi 2014: 34; emphasis original). Hence, for Jaeggi, the emphasis of any analysis of the individual-social world relationship should be on the quality of relations between self and social-self. Nonetheless, she argues, because humans have the ability to act according to their will, they also have an immanent desire to maintain the freedom to do so. As Jaeggi puts it: "When I say, 'I want to be able to do what I will,' I must also mean, 'I want to be able – freely – to will'" (Jaeggi 2014: 34). However, since the relevant conception of freedom is the freedom to engage with one's life in a certain way (the how of willing), not the freedom to determine the content of one's life (the what of willing), Jaeggi is able to dismiss any further analysis of the impact of the social on the willing self. This idea will be central to my assessment of her account, later in the chapter. Before offering that assessment, though, it is important to discuss Jaeggi's positive account of how the individual avoids an alienated existence through the process of 'appropriation'.

### 3.2.2. *Appropriation*

In this section, I focus on how Jaeggi conceives what it is for the individual to engage with their life. She describes this as the process of *appropriation*, which is taken to stand for the process of incorporating different life-situations into one's self and making them a part of one's life story. As Jaeggi describes the concept: "[...] appropriation refers to a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the world, a way of dealing with oneself and the world and of having oneself and one's world at one's command" (Jaeggi 2014: 36).

The process of appropriation encapsulates Jaeggi's response to her suggestion that the central question determining an individual's ability to live a fulfilling life is *how*, not *what* that individual wills. The concept of appropriation arises originally with the Stoics, and by embracing that term Jaeggi introduces an ethical dimension to her

theory. In Stoic ethics, appropriation (*oikeiôsis*) is the process that determines the individual's engagement, attitude, and standing in relation to the world. For the Stoics the individual should appropriate the interests of others, society, and ultimately the world in its totality, to be their own interests. The capacity to engage in the process of appropriation reveals the ethical stance of an individual in society; and it is in respect to this capacity that the individual has the duty to act appropriately (Engberg-Pederson 1986).<sup>32</sup> Crucially, the Stoic concept of appropriation is rooted in their broadly pantheistic conception of the universe – the individual should appropriate the interests of others, etc, because they are a part of the same universal being. Whilst Jaeggi's usage of appropriation reflects the Stoic origins of the concept, her account does not include anything like the ontological underpinnings of Stoicism. Instead, Jaeggi suggests that the normative grounding of the appropriation process lies in the capacity of the individual to be engaged with the content of their life.<sup>33</sup>

The appropriation process is, for Jaeggi, a positive process that includes "integration and transformation of what is given" (Jaeggi 2014: 1). It is a process in which the individual is able to "reflectively determine oneself *as something*" in an "affective and identificatory way", and so make it one's own and, thus, part of the self (Jaeggi 2014: 200). Appropriation is thus the means by which the different, and often conflicting, parts of an individual's lived experience are bound together into a coherent life-story. Rather than dismissing radical change in their life, Jaeggi suggests, change needs to be appropriated so as to become a part of the individual's perception of self (Jaeggi 2014: 177). As Frederick Neuhouser, the translator of Jaeggi's book, puts it, in using appropriation Jaeggi provides a performativity-constructivist interpretation of "the human being who simultaneously produces himself and his world" (Neuhouser 2007).

With her focus on the individual's capacity to appropriate, to engage with situations and to establish a conscious relationship with the social representation of their self

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<sup>32</sup> For Stoics, actually, the way of living is more important than the outcomes of their action (Engberg-Pederson 1986).

<sup>33</sup> See Leopold 2018 for criticism of Jaeggi's account in regard to the normative grounding of her conception of appropriation. For similar sentiment see: Fuchs 2016: 155.

in that position, Jaeggi presents a view of the self as always fluid<sup>34</sup> and always 'in the making' (Jaeggi 2014: 165). Yet, because the self is, for Jaeggi, formed only in relation to its physical manifestation, the self is always formed through intersubjective relations – relation to others, and through that, relation to the world. Thus, and echoing Axel Honneth's account of the individual (which I discuss in the next chapter), Jaeggi states that it is only when in front of others that an individual needs to recognise and assess their self (Jaeggi 2014: 161). On one hand, others create the background against which the social self will appear. This is a purely instrumental relationship. On the other hand, others present an immediate challenge to selfhood. Engaging with others, thus, demands a coherent life story, which means that the appropriation process needs to be undertaken. Correspondingly, a successful appropriation process allows the individual to establish a healthy relationship to the social world. Whilst the self is radically fluid, it is also radically relational (Jaeggi 2014: 180). That is, relations with the other are always necessary for the self to truly become aware of their selfhood, i.e. to recognise their social self as distinct and appropriate it. In this sense, the principal freedom and also the main task of the individual is to understand themselves as a subject, master their own action, and take the responsibility for engaging with their life in a considerate manner. As Jaeggi puts it:

The aspiration of a successful appropriation of self and world would be, then, to make the world one's own without it having been already one's own and in wanting to give structure to the world and to one's own life without beginning from a position of already having complete command over them (Jaeggi 2014: 39).

This account presents a twofold picture of the individual. On one hand, the freedom to appropriate one's life shows that the individual possesses agency – whatever the social self might be, it is always up to the individual themselves for the appropriation process to take place. On the other hand, however, it is this very possibility that represents the vulnerability of the human: as the will to do so has to come from the self, the moment of not practising their agency, or failing to recognise a possibility to act on their agency, would lead to harming themselves. This means that in the light

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<sup>34</sup> Jaeggi's emphasis on the fluidity of self is her response to the multiple identity view, which is championed by thinkers like Sherry Turkle, who talks about 'identity play' (Jaeggi 2014: 198).

of action, the active engagement with one's life is in relation to a possibly deficient appropriation process. One such deficient process, for Jaeggi, is alienation.

### 3.2.3. *Self-alienation: Relation to relationlessness*

This section focuses on the opposite of self-realisation in Jaeggi's account where the relationship between self and social self is not sufficiently established, i.e. self-alienation.<sup>35</sup> Jaeggi defines alienation as a *relation to relationlessness* (Jaeggi 2014: 1) describing this as the situation in which: "One does not have oneself at one's command in what one does" (Jaeggi 2014: 48) and elsewhere as "[A] *deficient* relation one has to oneself, to the world and to the others" (Jaeggi 2014: 5; italics original). To develop this notion, Jaeggi considers a number of different real-world manifestations. Analysing specific cases leads Jaeggi simultaneously to put forward a general account of the self-alienation phenomenon whilst still insisting that the responsibility for overcoming this state of being – establishing the sufficient relation – remains always in the hands of the individual.

In accordance with her positive account of self-realisation, for Jaeggi the phenomenon of alienation is always a phenomenon happening to this free, goal-setting, self. Yet, because everyone's life-story is distinct, she suggests, alienation will manifest itself differently in every occurrence as well. Moreover, in respect to that same point, alienation is not something that will necessarily happen to everyone but is explicitly related to a certain self's ability to undertake the appropriation process. In this light, Jaeggi establishes a novel account of alienation in which the concept of alienation is critical for analysing the *how* of living. That is, the quality of life in relation to the self being unable to engage with the social self.

Relating self-alienation to the freedom the individual has on establishing one's own life, Jaeggi states:

My account of the problem of alienation can be linked up with the concept of willing in the following way: instances of alienation can be understood as obstruction of volition and thereby – formulated more generally – as

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<sup>35</sup> Throughout this section and in further text, I use the notion of alienation and self-alienation interchangeably, when explaining Jaeggi's phenomenon of self-alienation.

obstructions in the relations individuals have to themselves and the world (Jaeggi 2014: 34).

What Jaeggi means when defining self-alienation as a relation to relationlessness is that the individual, i.e. the self, in failing to appropriate their social self, stands in a relation to that social self as alien to them. Thus, the self is simultaneously engaged with something that is the individual's own, as well as alien to them (Jaeggi 2014: 49). In contrast to prior alienation accounts, which suggest that to be alienated is a state distinct from one with no relations to the non-alienated existence, Jaeggi argues that even self-alienation involves a relation with the self. However, this relation is deficient because the self has not established the will to integrate the social self into their life-story.

By stipulating that alienation occurs because of an insufficiency in the relation that every individual establishes themselves, Jaeggi is able to argue that whilst the manifestation of self-alienation is always distinct, the phenomenon of *misappropriation* is, in principle, always the same. To explain the nature of this discrepant self-relation, Jaeggi provides a phenomenology of self-alienation through four examples. These four situations are one's that, in Neuhausser's words, "illustrate a different way in which the self's appropriation of, or identification with itself, and the world is disturbed or incomplete" (Neuhausser 2007). What Jaeggi, through these situations, aims to show is that whilst the manifestation of the social self might be based on external impulses or reasons, appropriation always demands that the individual recognise themselves as the agent in this situation.

To understand how this insufficient relationship in everyday circumstances occurs, I take a closer look at the examples of self-alienation that Jaeggi describes (though these examples are central to Jaeggi's account of alienation, they are in my view weaknesses of the account. I shall turn to this and the deeper connotations of those criticisms in the final section of the chapter):

The first example that Jaeggi offers is one where alienation occurs as "the feeling of powerlessness or of loss of control over one's own life" (Jaeggi 2014: 51). It is an instance where the self takes itself to be a powerless outsider in its own life, i.e. one is considering oneself not in control of the dynamics of one's life. To explain self-

alienation as it manifests in this way, Jaeggi describes a young academic – a mathematician – living in a suburb and a first-time father. This situation, he finds, is significantly different from what he considers to be his life – a life of chaotic juggling to keep a healthy social-life and obsessive work-life in balance. In respect to his current life in the suburbs, then, he occasionally becomes overwhelmed with a feeling of *unreality* that is a feeling of not being in charge of the dynamic of his own life. That is, he struggles to recognise the sedate life-situation he now finds himself in as his own life, whilst at the same time knowing that this is where he has come to be (Jaeggi 2014: 52).

According to Jaeggi, in this example, the social self is engaged in action that is unfamiliar to the self, making it difficult to recognise this action as a part of one's own life (Jaeggi 2014: 54). The self, thus, becomes disconnected from the social self, where to be connected requires taking control of one's life as a responsible agent. Yet, as Jaeggi argues, this situation should not be considered as an instance of heteronomy, because the individual is not, in any sense, forced to act against their will. Rather, self-alienation emerges in this situation from the fact that the individual does not experience their will acting in this situation at all. The social self does not come across to the self as the subject of one's will and the self is not seen to be making the important life decisions.

Jaeggi's second example of self-alienation describes a situation in which the self is not able to convincingly express the social roles that the social self is faced with. To illustrate this occurrence of self-alienation, Jaeggi provides a pastiche of an overly eager worker who, in a desperate attempt to fulfil well the role that they are given, imitates the perceived ideal of their senior colleague. Despite the eager worker's efforts, however, others can see through the enthusiastic role-performance as ill-fitting, or badly delivered. In the light of self-alienation, then, the recognition of discrepancy between the willing self and one's ability to present that self in social roles illuminates the difficulty of appropriating social roles (Jaeggi 2014: 69).

Jaeggi's point with this example is to emphasise that social roles, *per se*, are not alienating, as these are just manifestations of the social self. Rather, the phenomenon of self-alienation emerges when the individual is not fully able to



articulate themselves in a social role that they occupy (Jaeggi 2014: 68; 158). In this kind of case, the social self becomes somewhat distant from the self, i.e. alien to itself, as the social roles are simply copied, but not appropriated as part of the self. In this kind of case, the social self does not become completely foreign, but inaccessible (Jaeggi 2014: 71).

Jaeggi's third example illustrates a form of self-alienation in which self-identification with one's wants or behaviour is missing, and so, these are not considered to be a "part of one's story" (Jaeggi 2014: 99). These are instances in which the individual encounters lack of access to themselves. Jaeggi illustrates this manifestation of alienation through the example of a self-identifying feminist, who despises herself for responding to certain situations in a 'feminine' manner, of which she earlier disapproved in others (Jaeggi 2014: 100). For example, her responding to male attention by becoming giddy is something that she is not willing to self-identify with, and thus, a moment in which she dismisses her social self.

In light of this example, Jaeggi considers self-alienation as "not being able to move freely in one's life, being inaccessible to oneself in what one wants and does" (Jaeggi 2014: 128). By this, she means, the self does not have command over the social self, because the individual has consciously discarded certain forms of manifestation of that social self. So, instead of seeing the acts of their social self as different aspects of their life story, the individual comes to stubbornly hold to a set view of their self and life-story. In this situation, self-alienation manifests itself in what Jaeggi considers an 'inner division', i.e. the lack of coherence "between the characteristics, desires, feelings, and attitudes that constitute who one is and not as an agreement of one's various features with a centre or core" (Jaeggi 2014: 158).

Jaeggi's final example is somewhat similar to the second. This case describes an instance in which the individual has an indifferent relation to its environment, and so, does not emotionally invest in that environment (Jaeggi 2014: 158). This phenomenon, which Jaeggi illustrates with an example drawn from Pascal

Mercier's<sup>36</sup> novel *Perlmann's Silence*<sup>37</sup>, appears as being alienated from the world. A respectable senior academic acts in utter indifference towards his own work, his critics, and to the world in general. This behaviour leads to a situation where, eventually, his social self becomes alien or unrecognisable even to himself (Jaeggi 2014: 132). In this example, then, self-alienation leads to a situation in which the social self is not presenting the self in the world at all.

In respect to these examples then, Jaeggi suggests more generally that alienation denotes a relationship characterised by:

A detachment or a separation that in fact belongs together, the loss of a connection between two things that nevertheless stand in relation to each other. Being alienated from something means having become distant from something in which one is in fact involved or to which one in fact related – or in any case ought to be (Jaeggi 2014: 25).

The particular aspect that Jaeggi, in this instance, is referring to is the quality of the relationship that the examples illustrate. As it stands, these are all empty relationships, not leading to appropriation, and so, not creating a coherent life-story. But, how do these qualitatively different – alienated – relationships appear? And, how are these related to self-realisation?

On Jaeggi's account of the self, the freedom to set one's own ends and act on them – the ability to appropriate the social self – constitutes the unalienated existence. In setting out this view, Jaeggi draws on the work of Ernst Tugendhat in which he suggests that being in charge of one's life means confronting life's practical questions of how to carry on and act in specific situations. As Jaeggi sums up:

In order to be able to pose the practical question 'What should I do?' I must (a) see the question as such and be able to identify it as a possibility, (b) be interested in it (and in answering it), and (c) be in agreement with myself (as the one who poses the question) (Jaeggi 2014: 202).

Similarly, as we have seen, Jaeggi emphasises the importance of *how* things are willed i.e. *how* is the individual engaged with setting and satisfying one's goals, not

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<sup>36</sup> Pascal Mercier is a pseudonym of philosopher Peter Bieri, whose philosophical work Jaeggi also refers to (see: Jaeggi 2014: 177). Bieri's philosophical work focuses on human freedom and the appropriate/ethical way of living.

<sup>37</sup> Since Bieri's hero is working on appropriation himself, this is something of a meta-textual example.

what is willed, when seeking self-realisation. Self-alienation, in this light, is an instance where the way in which things should be willed, becomes distorted – it is an instance where the individual is not able to identify themselves as the person who has to, or even can, engage with their life. In this light, self-alienation could for Jaeggi be considered as a misconception of one's own self.

Jaeggi's distinction between different manifestations of self-alienation shows ways in which the necessary critical engagement with one's life and questioning of the practicalities of existence might fail to take place (Jaeggi 2014: 57). In doing so, she illustrates her idea of how the self needs to take hold of the situation and pose the question of how one's life should be lived to avoid alienation. Without asking those questions the individual is not able to recognise that their social existence is dependent upon their engagement with their social-self – and thus is unable to recognise their own agency. Moreover, it is not just engagement with one's self that is important, but also the mode of engagement. When there are two competing modes of life, as in one of the examples, it is not that taking hold of the individual's self means to either act on both of these or decide which is 'rational' to follow. Rather, it is important to see how the individual is ruling themselves as well (Jaeggi 2014: 202). This requires that the individual is aware of their social-self, and, based on the situation, is able to respond in a manner appropriate to that. This highlights the ethical implications of Jaeggi's account – it is not just that recognising agency is sufficient for living a self-realising life, but, the individual should also be able to decide what is the right thing to do.

To sum up, Jaeggi provides a positivist account of self. The phenomenon of self-alienation, likewise, is a situation where appropriation, i.e. making something one's own, fails and the individual has lost the power to set their own life goals, and, as a consequence, to engage with the social self so that it would contribute to achieving these ends. In such a situation, the individual is not sufficiently, if at all, asking the question how they should live. Yet, at the same time, such a situation does not entail that the self is not in a relationship with the social self. Rather, it is just to say that the relationship between self and social self has become distorted – the self does not see the social self as contributing to the individual's life-story. The social

manifestation of the self is experienced as alien or unfitting. Overcoming this situation is only possible if the individuals themselves recognise their agency and invests in taking control of their life.

For my study, the significance of Jaeggi's self-alienation account lies in its emphasis upon the agency of the individual as the agent of both self-realisation and self-alienation. She makes a bold claim that it is only a matter of the individual's personal engagement with their social self that would determine whether they are able to live a life that would satisfy their set ends, or not. That is, whether the person has established an appropriate relation with the social world, or not. On one hand, Jaeggi provides an account of alienation that does not consider the individual being to be subject to a totalising situation, without the possibility to overcome that situation. This allows her to employ alienation as a critical term for assessing the individual's own contribution to their relationship to the social world and investigate an individual's own engagement with the life of their social self. In this sense, Jaeggi's conception of alienation provides a valuable tool for understanding how people, in their day-to-day life, take responsibility for, and engage with, their own life. On the other hand, in suggesting that all occurrences of social self should be appropriated, Jaeggi downplays the impact that the social has on the individual. It appears as if the individual could live a fulfilling life no matter the social circumstances – just so long as they are able to recognise and appropriate everything that contributes to their life-story. In the following section, drawing on Klinkauer, Müller and Reinwald's responses to Jaeggi, I challenge this idea.

### 3.3. Problems with Jaeggi's account

As we have seen, and in direct contrast to the objective accounts of alienation discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Jaeggi suggests that alienation is an individual phenomenon that not everyone experiences, whilst those that do are both the cause of it and their own salvation from it. Self-alienation, as Jaeggi calls this, takes place when the individual is unable to recognise the freedom to take charge of their life and incorporate, through appropriation, their social self into their life-story (Jaeggi 2014: 48).

The liberal paradigm of self-alienation that Jaeggi describes shifts the focus of alienation theory from totalizing systems to the individual's life practice and how they take control of that, regardless of external circumstances, including the overarching social system under which they live. Jaeggi's account, though, is problematic in its own right. It is a feature of Jaeggi's emphasis upon the individual that she dismisses any significant social impact on the individual's self-perception and life experience. As a result, she considers the individual to have sole control when it comes to establishing a proper relationship with the self, and so, with the social world. Echoing her own criticisms of the objective accounts of alienation, I argue that Jaeggi provides an unrealistic and distorted picture of the individual-social world relationship, in which only one party to the relationship has the power to determine its nature.

In this light, I shall argue that Jaeggi's self-alienation account, as it stands, is – similarly to the social alienation approach discussed in the previous chapter – not, on its own, fit for analysing the individual-social world relationship. I discuss the established critique of Jaeggi's self-alienation theory, where the account has been challenged in respect to its scope; in particular the validity of extracting a general picture of self-alienation from her limited set of examples. A second criticism concerns the lack of clarity about the appropriation process. After considering these criticisms, I put forward my own critique – highlighting Jaeggi's lack of recognition of the impact that the social system as well as intersubjective relations have upon the formation of the relation between self and social self.

### 3.3.1. Criticism's of Jaeggi's account.

One of the principal criticisms of Jaeggi's self-alienation theory concerns the scope of her project.<sup>38</sup> Tobias Müller and Eva-Maria Reinwald, in their 2010 book review, point out that, though Jaeggi provides an individual focused analysis, this analysis could still be employed in the service of analyses of social worlds and circumstances (Müller & Reinwald 2010: 200). The examples that Jaeggi introduces have the potential to provide a rich source from which to draw an account of the social world's

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<sup>38</sup> The German edition of Jaeggi's book German has the sub-title: *A Contemporary Problem of Social Philosophy*.

impact on the free individual. For example, in the case of the giddy feminist, we witness a situation where an individual is struggling to rationalise discrepancies between her socially induced behaviour and her social manifestation of self that is embodied and not in line with said behaviour. In the light of this example, it would be interesting to see, whether these socially determined ways of engaging with one's self e.g. feminism; or, vice versa, emphasising femininity, give space for the individual to set their ends, or become ends in themselves. Yet, here there seems to be a discrepancy in how Jaeggi views the freedom to choose – for discourses like feminism are themselves socially constructed. Hence it is not clear whether choosing to identify as a feminist represents a freedom to determine one's self. Rather, it would appear to be the freedom to choose an identity that itself incorporates substantial expectations of how the individual should be. When the woman tries to keep her practical everyday behaviour in line with the expected behavioural norms, this does not seem to represent her full freedom in manifesting the self. It rather seems an embodied way of confirming a wider and pre-determined notion of how a woman should behave.

Müller and Reinwald (2010: 202) suggest that Jaeggi's later essay *Was ist eine gute Institution?*<sup>39</sup> could shed light on alienation as a phenomenon with a social cause that is consequently experienced similarly by many. In this essay, Jaeggi focusses on translating her account of self-alienation to collectives, making a claim that institutions that originate in collective action, i.e. politics, can also become distant, and so, alien from these origins. If this is the case, individuals could start dismissing their engagement with the institution. Alienation, as a socially triggered phenomenon could, in light of this account of institutions, be understood as a phenomenon where social factors methodically undermine the agency of individuals subject to those institutions. Self-alienation understood in this way, then, would appear as a widespread phenomenon when people understand that they are defenceless against the system, and so, are unable to change anything in their social situation for the self to occur differently (Jaeggi 2009). This is, however, explicitly not discussed in

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<sup>39</sup> Jaeggi, R. (2009). Was ist eine (gute) Institution?" ("What is a (good) institution?") in R. Frost, M. Harmann, R. Jaeggi and M. Saar (Eds.), *Social Philosophy and Critique*, Frankfurt a. M. English version available as a manuscript: *What is a (good) institution?*

terms of alienation by Jaeggi. And, therefore, there is no possibility to situate the notion of the social as alienating, nor alienation as a socially occurring phenomenon, within the framework as Jaeggi develops it.<sup>40</sup>

Related to Müller and Reinwald's criticisms, Thomas Klinkauer (2014), in his review of Jaeggi's book, argues that Jaeggi's account cannot accommodate what appear to be paradigmatic cases of self-alienation. He contends that her examples rely on a strong class and race bias and as a consequence of her use of these examples to develop her account, it only applies to very specific, relatively free individuals. In this light, he suggests (for instance), the classical Marxist account of the factory worker as the paradigmatic example of someone alienated is too easily dismissed. In respect to this point, Klinkauer suggests that Jaeggi's account would have significantly differed from the one she gives if she would have considered examples of alienation across a wider range of situations and social circumstances.

In place of the individual who Jaeggi presents as (relatively) independent in their work life, Klinkauer proposes a scenario of managerialism as an example of alienation. In this instance, he suggests, alienation would appear as a complete lack of control over one's role performance, not as discrepant role play. To illustrate his point, he depicts a worker following their daily routine. On one hand, the social roles that workers have to perform on a daily basis are established by the system, whether by a specific corporation or the industry in general. Yet, on the other hand, in circumstances of the work itself, the orders and queues for the role performance come from other people – the workers' superiors, and members of management. In this situation, Klinkauer suggests, the individual does not feel themselves to be playing any role, but rather, to be subject to the manipulations of other people and administrative systems. Klinkauer offers this example to demonstrate the idea that the social self and the work self, i.e. how others encounter and treat the social self in work circumstances, might come apart. That is, in some instances it may be the work life that triggers alienation, not life *per se*. In this respect, Jaeggi places no emphasis on how different social roles trigger self-alienation dissimilarly.

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<sup>40</sup> Jaeggi also dropped the subtitle in the English translation. It is possible she recognised the limitations of her self-centred account herself.

These criticisms highlight that Jaeggi's examples are all related to forms of life in which the individual is not socially oppressed, nor is their existence explicitly dependent on an oppressive system. Counter to, for example, a situation in which a person is working on minimum-wage to feed themselves and their family, Jaeggi's examples depict comfortably well-off people with free time to contemplate the discrepancies between their self-perception and their social selves. What Jaeggi's account does not illuminate, then, is whether the same kind of appropriation of social self might take place, or even be in the agent's interests, in cases where the differences between self and social-self are because of debilitating social positions. Would the same account of self-alienation as discrepant appropriation be plausible when assessing a person's engagement with their social self when that person is subjected to systematic racism, abuse, and prejudice? In this kind of instance, it seems that, not only would the social conditions have a significant impact on the individual being able to consider themselves as alienated or not, but also on whether they would want – or should – undertake the appropriation process as conceived by Jaeggi.

This way of thinking about the contingent circumstances on which appropriation depends leads back to the point I put forward in the discussion of Klinkauer's criticism of Jaeggi's limited view of life. Jaeggi, through her examples, presents a very idealised and, due to that, partial view of the individual's life and the discrepancies that might occur in it. They seem to focus on people who are not willing to allow the organic development of the self they have 'determined' to be – and recognise new occurrences of social self – not out of incompetence, but out of comfort. Alternatively, though, self-alienation of this sort might come out of self-preservation or because it would empower oppressive structures. So again, an individual might resist appropriating a situational social self because they are subjected to prejudice in the social world, or, alternatively, because of rejecting their religious background, or the neo-liberal economic paradigm in which they live, and so on.

In my further discussion I want to focus attention on two central aspects of Jaeggi's account. Firstly, in my opinion, Jaeggi does not pay due attention to the social systems the individual is living under and that define the possibilities their social self.



All social selves, I shall suggest, are dependent on socially defined norms. And secondly, Jaeggi overlooks the importance of intersubjective relations to the individual's living a fulfilling life. Whilst the interdependence of self and society is inherent to Jaeggi's account of self, the possibility that the social could be – as a system or ideology, as well as a specific group or individual (as manifesting this ideology) – oppressive, is dismissed by her resolute focus on self-alienation over social -alienation. In contrast to Jaeggi's account, I suggest, others are necessary for the individual to confirm their ability to define themselves. This leads me to suggest that Jaeggi's account is too centred on the individual for self-alienation, as she conceives it, to be a viable concept for analysing the relationship between the individual and the contemporary social world.

As Jaeggi depicts the individual, the social is always a part of the individual's way of forming their life-story. Yet, Jaeggi herself emphasises that, when assessing the individual's engagement with their social self, and so, with the world, it is not important what the social representation is, i.e. what kind of life a person is *willing* to have. Vice versa, for Jaeggi, what matters is how the individual is able to engage with the life at hand, i.e. how a person is able to use the life at hand to achieve what they *will*. Jaeggi downplays both the life at hand, as well as the life that an individual aims to reach. Both are pre-formed by the social system. Hence, I would suggest, whilst the individual may have the agency to choose between socially determined forms of life they do not invent those forms themselves.

To illustrate what I mean by considering individuality being determined by the social, I return, once more to Jaeggi's examples. Consider the feminist torn because her situational behaviour does not fit her self-perception. Being a feminist is not something that someone would will in an articulate manner without there being a social movement of feminism already; i.e. the image of the feminist that she wants to be already exists. Moreover, as a consequence of this, there are forms of the social self that are considered manifestations of this social movement and forms that are not. The feminist's dilemma is tied to the problem of responding to male admiration in a manner that is not in line with the image of a feminist cultivated by the woman and her social group. In the light of self-realisation as Jaeggi conceives

it, of course, the individual needs to appropriate whichever behaviour is a part of one's life, so that the life, in general, would contribute to set goals. But, it seems that following the standards of (for instance) feminism, could be a set goal in its own right. Vegans, to take another example, are often perceived as fierce advocates of animal rights. So, this is likely to become a feature that determines the selfhood for someone who chooses to be a vegan. There is always some socially conventional criterion – some looser than others – of how a specific identity should be manifested if an individual is to consider that identity a part of their self. To put this discussion into the context of Jaeggi's discussion of the will, then, what an individual seems to be willing is the social self to appear in a form that would be recognisably a manifestation of a socially determined value system. Every new occurrence of the social self, likewise, then, needs to be situated in relation to these values.

In this light, whilst Jaeggi ascribes to the individual the agency to set their goals in life and act in accordance with these goals for life to be fulfilled, what the individual in their social presence is actually doing is simply acting out and negotiating the relationship between their social self and the socially conventional behavioural standards and ideologies that they have taken to stand for the self. Hence, the way in which the social defines even the simplest manifestation of the social self cannot be overlooked – and the individual is not able to choose to be whomever they want, but, rather they can only negotiate across the available templates of identity and social life.

At the same time, though, other people as social agents also play an important role in defining each individual's possibility to successfully reach self-realisation. Jaeggi's suggestion that the person lives a self-realising life only when their self has appropriated their social life seems to be only partially true. As her examples illustrate, the social self becomes actualised only in interactions with other people. But, that also means an individual can only recognise the need to engage with the social self through their relationship to others, as well as the social world more broadly. Whilst Jaeggi recognises the need for others, however, the others have no immediate impact on the relationship between the self and the social-self that might lead to self-realisation.

Jaeggi underappreciates the inevitably social nature of a 'self-realising life' as well as other people's influence on one's capacity to live freely and practise a self-fulfilling life within society. For Jaeggi, intersubjective relations are useful to the individual because they can help the individual to recognise their social self. They do not, though, indicate the vulnerability that the individual is actually faced with when appearing in front of the others. That is to say, Jaeggi dismisses the possibility that some people are unable to, even with a wholesome picture of themselves, satisfy their freedom to act on their ends, just because other people do not see them as equal, free, agents. And, whilst the freedom of setting one's own ends is taken to be a basic freedom – it is associated, for Jaeggi, with being a free agent in society. Klinkauer's critique of class and race bias in Jaeggi's examples is of great importance. Jaeggi's phenomenology of self-alienation is based on the life-experiences of a very specific social class that is difficult to countenance with the very different life-experiences of those in less privileged positions.

Whilst Jaeggi considers the freedom of the individual to set ends as non-negotiable, I argue in the next chapter, drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Axel Honneth, that recognition as an agent is prior to the freedom to set one's ends. Jaeggi's account seems ill equipped to explain how it might be possible to live a self-realising life if an individual is classified as a member of a group who is not recognised or marginalized within society. Whilst the individual might be engaged with their social self, it does not mean that the others recognise this social self. In this respect, it might be more harmful for the individual to consider their social manifestation as a part of their life-story, than to distance themselves from it. If the social self is not recognised by others, then, the individual has no chance to satisfy their goals without being subject to cognitive dissonance or adopting some kind of double consciousness.

An individual living in a social setting not tolerant towards sexual minorities, for example, who identifies as part of that group, is likely to struggle to reach self-realisation given that their set ends are dependent on being recognised as an equal member of the society. The struggle to legalise same-sex marriages, for example, illustrates how not all set ends that the individual wills, can be satisfied in all social

settings. Thus, in certain social settings an individual's life might remain unfulfilling, for just the reason that it is dependent on social recognition – and that is not always easily come by. Moreover, having an engaged relation with the social self, who is recognisably a member of minority group and oppressed because of that, might be harmful for the self, and surely, also distorts their life story (or contributes to it in an unsatisfactory manner). Again, then, it seems alienation cannot be dependent just on the engagement that the individual has with their own life, but is also dependent upon the social situation, thus the status of the social self has to be taken into account as well.

## Conclusion

Jaeggi's account is a useful contribution to the discussion of alienation in so far as it sheds light upon the relationship between individual agency and alienation. In so doing it also helps us to see the assumptions that underlie the accounts of alienation discussed in the previous chapters. Marx's and the Critical Theorist's accounts of alienation capture how the structure of the social world can generate and determine the conditions for alienation, as well as how the manifestation of alienation can change depending on the material conditions of the social system. However, these accounts of alienation do not fully engage with the question of how the individual's exercise of agency within that system can make a difference to their experience of alienation – as well as the structure of that social world. As Marx recognised, just as the social world forms the life-experience of the individual living in that world, those individuals, as a collective, are able to affect and change the social world in which they live. That is, they are able to change the material conditions which define the structure of the social world, and so, also, the intersubjective relations that they establish. Nonetheless, and despite his recognition of this, on Marx's analysis individual agency is subsumed by the system. I.e. Marx's individual under capitalism is a producing individual, and so determined by material conditions. Similarly, whilst the Critical Theorists focus specifically on the way that capitalism has evolved so that it eliminates individual agency in decision making – and so presuppose the possibility of individual agency, as well as its interdependency with the social system – that they consider that agency to have been subsumed so entirely unsurprisingly

leads them to focus little on how the individual might exercise agency in capitalism itself. Nonetheless, the collective societies that Marx and Critical Theorists analyse, are still formed by individuals – and even under the objectively alienating conditions of capitalism those individuals are bound to make different choices as to how they live, act, and behave within the confines of that system. To ignore the question of how those choices – and so genuinely inter-subjective interactions as interactions between individuals subject to the same system – affect the face of and experience of alienation, thus, seems to me an oversight.

On this front, Jaeggi's account fares better. However, it does so only by failing in the opposite way to previous accounts. Where Marx and the Critical Theorists place too little emphasis on individual agency Jaeggi's account places too much. She effectively dismisses the way in which the specific social conditions and circumstances in which the individual's life unfolds will always frame and limit the possibilities for the individual to exercise their agency. In this sense, Jaeggi's self-alienation account is too inward-looking to offer any substantial analysis of alienation – where that is understood to refer to a distorted version of the individual-social world relationship.

What the discussion in these three chapters highlights, then, is that we need an account of alienation that pays attention to both the individual and the social world. To put it another way, just as the individual-social world relationship is an interdependent one, so I think we need to recognise that the distorted version of that relationship – i.e. alienation – is also an interdependent one. Indeed, this is only more so when we – as this thesis does – consider the question of how changes to society in the shape of changes to communication culture might lead to a distinct form of alienation. In that respect, then, it will be necessary to establish an understanding of the individual that can properly accommodate the influence of both intersubjective relations with other individuals, and so, the prevailing social conditions under which those individuals live – as well as the influence that the individual, or, at least individuals in collective action – can have on that situation. In the next two chapters, I draw upon the work of Butler, Honneth, and Habermas to develop a conception of the individual as a communicative subject.

# Part II

## Chapter 4: Subject

*"I gotta use words when I talk to you."*  
T.S. Elliot, *Sweeney Agoniste* (1974: 135)

### Introduction

In this chapter, I argue for a conception of the individual whereby the individual can only appear as a singular, self-aware 'I' and recognise their vulnerability in the light of the intersubjective relations of appearing in front of the other and being subjected by the other. Correspondingly, I argue that the individual is inevitably social and should be considered as a *subject* that is always acted upon. This understanding of sociality is more basic than in Chapters 1 and 2. Individuality, and intersubjectivity, on this account, are not initially determined by socio-economic-political conditions, but how individuals as human beings act upon each-other as subjects. In this light, this chapter presents an account of intersubjectivity as it emerges from the individual's initial experience of being subject to a physical embodied other. From this experience the individual realises that they will always be subject to the other, hence vulnerable, and so ethical behaviour (towards the other) emerges. It is in this way that intersubjectivity comes to govern the subject's behaviour in the social world – even in the absence of the immediate, embodied presence of the other. In the next chapter, I add this account by considering the importance of discursive communication and the rules that it operates upon in properly functioning intersubjective relations. By doing so, I shall establish an account of the non-alienated individual as a *communicative subject*.

The following discussion of the individual as subject is divided into three parts.

First, I discuss my reasons for discussing the contemporary individual in terms of subjectivity and the subject. Second, I expound upon the idea of the individual as *subject* as always being in an interdependent relationship with an other. To do so I draw on Judith Butler's work on the 'account giving self'. Following Butler, I suggest it is through this relationship with the other that the individual's social nature is

determined and, as subjects recognise each other in their vulnerability and act accordingly, that moral behaviour emerges. Thirdly, I discuss Axel Honneth's notion of recognition to illuminate the pre-linguistic aspects of the subject's vulnerability.

Though Butler's and Honneth's general accounts of the individual are developed independently and have different social-theoretical motivations, their positions are complementary. By combining their respective theorems, I develop an account of the individual as *subject* suitable for analysing the contemporary form of alienation. On this account, the individual is inherently in, and affected by, an interdependent relation with the other. This relationship can, moreover, occur in different modes. It can be an empowering relationship, when the individual is considered as an equal member in the intersubjective relationship. Or, it can be limiting, when recognition of equality in vulnerability is declined.

## 4.1. Why theorise the individual as subject?

In Chapters 1-3, I established that the extant theories most compatible with the thesis that new forms of communication make the contemporary social world uniquely alienating are nonetheless unsatisfactory given the conceptions of the individual on which they operate. In their respective critiques of capitalism, Marx considers the individual to be in essence a labouring being, whilst the Critical Theorists take individuals to have a common psychological nature that is exploited and oppressed by the capitalist social system. On either understanding, the nature of 'self-realization' is independent of the contingencies of individual existence, but the possibility of 'self-realization' and, correspondingly, alienation *is* dependent on the material social conditions of the individual's existence. In contrast, according to Rahel Jaeggi's account of self-alienation, the individual can determine their individuality unilaterally, through their own agency, and without having to take the social system into account. On this understanding, 'self-realization' and, correspondingly, alienation depend upon the individual's attitude to their life and social existence, not the external social conditions of that life.

Since this thesis is concerned with changes to the ways in which individuals *communicate* with each other, what is needed is a way of theorising the relationship

between the individual and the social world that can conceptualise how these changes affect the nature of that relationship. A fruitful analysis of the contemporary social world in terms of alienation, thus requires an account of the individual that pays attention to the importance of intersubjective *communicative* interactions. As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, however, Jaeggi's account of alienation is unequipped to properly accommodate the communicative aspect of the relationship between the individual and the social world – simply because her emphasis is so starkly upon the individual and their self-recognition that it comes with an effective denial of the influence that the social world, and so others in that world, have upon the individual. In contrast, given his recognition of the interdependency of the individual and the social world and his conception of the individual as formed by social relations,<sup>41</sup> Marx's approach, in principle, is able to accommodate consideration of more obviously intersubjective aspects of social experience. However, as we have seen, Marx sees all social relations as, inherently, material relations and so determined by material conditions – and so should also be taken to conceive intersubjective relations – i.e. relations occurring between individual subjects – as determined by material conditions. Such an understanding of how individuals relate to each other, though, would appear to be a description of 'intersubjectivity' in name only. On that note, the first-generation Critical Theorist go yet further than Marx when they suggest that that the material conditions of capitalism, not only determine 'intersubjective' relations abstractly, but, manipulate the specific appearance/occurrence of those relations. Thus, coming to dominate human nature almost entirely.

Instead, then, what I want to suggest is that we conceive of the individual in terms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity – but in such a way as to place the communicative relationship with the other subject at the heart of that conception. I.e. On the account I shall offer it is not the social-economic-political conditions in which the individual will live their life that forms the individual *qua* individual, but rather the initial

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<sup>41</sup> See for instance, Marx's *6<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach*, where he states explicitly: "[...] the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx 1978: 145). As I belabour in the discussion in the main text, to say that the individual is constituted by social relations is to say something amenable to discussion of intersubjectivity – but it is not necessarily to say that the individual is constituted in specifically intersubjective social relations.



dialectical encounter with and subjection to the other as something different from the individual. Thus, I shall argue, the fundamental site of the formation of subjectivity, and so the individual, is the communicative relation with other subjects. And, as such, intersubjective relations are fundamentally communicative in nature.

Before turning to discuss the account of the individual in detail, then, it will be worth briefly going over the motivations for doing so.

First, to refer to the individual as *subject* implies an always relational conception of the individual. *Subject* is always subject-of, or subject-to, thus, the conception of individual as subject entails an inherent relation to an other or, more broadly, to society. That is not to say, necessarily, that the individual as subject is always in a relationship of submission, whether it be to other individuals, or to a social system. But that the individual does not exist, and is not defined, in isolation. The external, i.e. the other, affects the way in which the individual establishes themselves. On this account, the individual as subject becomes a self-aware individual only in a situation where they are recognised as other and among others. Hence, only through interaction – in the presence of and engagement with the other – is the individual able to see themselves as distinct and singular.

In this light, it is important to appreciate that the individual is always subjected to multiple relations, involving a multiplicity of others, affects and different forces; and, as Butler points out, it would be a mistake to dismiss the multiplicity of these relations (Butler 2015: 5). Instead, we ought to recognise that the external forces that form the subject and demand it to become self-aware emerge not just from one other, or one social norm. Rather, because the subject is continuously and inherently social, the intersubjective relationship is also continuous – forming and affecting the subject each and every time that the individual is in the presence of an other.

Secondly, the non-submissive intersubjective relationship is a two-way relationship – the subject is simultaneously both actor and acted upon. This is simply because the other, as a relational being, is in the same position. As Butler puts it, when talking about the subject: “The task is to think of being acted on and acting simultaneously, and not only as a sequence” (Butler 2015: 6). Thus, when considering the individual as subject, the central challenge is to understand how intersubjective relations define

*both* the individual and the other(s) who at the same time receive and give out, mutually 'acting and being-acted-on'.

Thirdly, because of the similarity of the positions of the individual and the other, each is equally vulnerable. In respect to this mutual vulnerability, the intersubjective relationship is one of equality – with equal responsibility, and equal awareness of the impact that individuals have upon each other. As a consequence, I shall argue, there are expectations and functions built into the very structure of the intersubjective relationship. What is more, since, as I shall argue in the next chapter, the content of intersubjective relations is explicitly a communicative relation, then, it is especially the communicative relationship in which these expectations and responsibilities emerge.

In short, to talk about the *subject* is to talk about the relational existence of the individual: it is in intersubjective relations that the individual establishes and fully knows themselves, whilst at the same time, since the other has the power to damage these relations, it is in respect to these that one is vulnerable and limited in their capacity to establish and fully know themselves. Moreover, in considering the individual as *subject* we emphasise that there is no possibility to consider the individual aside from in relations – the *subject* can only be witnessed in front of the other; and, the *subject* can only become self-aware because of the other. Without relations there is no possibility to distinguish or learn who I am as an individual.

As a result, then, I take it that by conceiving of the individual as *subject* we have a suitable starting point from which to re-articulate the term, or phenomenon, of alienation so as to better understand the influence of new forms of communication on contemporary society and the individual within that society.

In the next section I shall use Judith Butler's work on the 'account giving self' to flesh out the conception of the individual as subject.

## 4.2. The individual as social *subject*

To consider the individual as *subject* demands us to consider the framework from which the subject emerges. In other words, we need to consider how the *subject* emerges in and through intersubjective relations, as well as how these relations form

the blueprint of social interaction, and through that the social world. In her books *Excitable Speech* (1997a) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler investigates how a self-aware and self-voicing subject 'I' emerges through intersubjective relations. She describes the process in which the very recognition of the individual as subject appears prior to carrying any specific social identity<sup>42</sup>. Butler's aim is to explain how the initial act of subjection functions and how the force of the other affects the individual via intersubjective relationships. In this respect, Butler offers an account of the subject who, by way of intersubjective interaction with the other, always faces the possibility of being challenged to explain who they are. It is through this ever-present possibility of challenge that the subject comes to acknowledge its inability to fully grasp itself, and so, leaves the subject reliant on the other to understand the situation. And it is in light of this idea of the subject's vulnerability to the other that Butler's account provides, in my opinion, a compelling description of how moral behaviour emerges in the intersubjective relations.

Butler develops her account of the subject throughout her work. By uncovering the ways in which the individual is defined and formed within social and linguistic conventions embedded in structures of power, her overarching project looks to analyse the many dimensions of oppression. Within this project, *Excitable Speech* presents a sustained examination of the linguistic dimensions of oppression. Through discussion of hate-speech and insults she analyses the social power of language and the way that the individual's linguistic vulnerability in front of the other can be exploited. *Giving an Account of Oneself* extends Butler's approach to moral philosophy. By engaging with the work of Adorno, Cavarero, Foucault, Hegel,

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<sup>42</sup> In her earlier work Butler conceived of the subject as an ascribed identity in a specific social context and power-relation. This is in line with M. Foucault's idea of subjection, where individuals, as social subjects, are ascribed identities that are products of the power-relations; and where the subject is re-enacting, and solidifying, power relations. In *The Physics of Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Butler (1997b: 1) writes of subjection, and subjectivity:

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what "one" is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.

Levinas, and Nietzsche, Butler explores the grounding of moral norms in the subject's capacity to hurt and be hurt. In doing so she adds to her earlier work on the linguistic vulnerability and limitations upon the individual, and further illustrates the power that the other has to undermine the individual's self-perception and self-knowledge. These two works are central to Butler's development of the account of the individual as a subject.

## 4.2.1. The structure of intersubjectivity

### 4.2.1.1. *The other*

*"The other is rather someone who is also there and occupies, more or less peacefully, the same territory" (Cavarero 2000: 88).*

On the conception of the individual as subject, the individual is inherently in an intersubjective relationship with the social in general, and the other in particular. Correspondingly, when the individual appears in the social world, i.e. is in a situation where everyone is able to witness the individual, they present their distinctness by voicing themselves as an 'I', or, in a similar manner, presenting the self-referential 'I'. To the bystander this seems a natural occurrence. That is because in the eyes of a bystander, or in a relation to a bystander, who is always an other to the 'I', another individual cannot present themselves in any way other than 'I'. Yet, whilst voicing this 'I' is the only way in which the individual is able to present themselves to others, that is not to say that either the process of individuation, or voicing themselves as an 'I', occurs internally or at the whim of the individual. Rather, as Butler suggests, the trigger for individuation is embedded in intersubjectivity. In short, the other holds power over the possibility for the 'I' to appear and to be voiced in a social world. Butler refers to this as the subject's *fundamental dependency on the other*, which she describes as "the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the other and being addressed by the other, and that there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality" (Butler 2005: 33).

There are two interlinked features of the emergence of the 'I' that Butler suggests this *dependency* entails: on the one hand, the other implicitly provides a space or chance to recognise and announce one's embodied singularity, i.e. 'I' only appears

among or in front of the other. And, on the other hand, the other explicitly demands, through the process of address, the 'I' to give an account of themselves, i.e. the other challenges the individual to answer the question "who are you?" (Butler 2005: 31).

I now consider how these features, for Butler, define the emergence of the 'I'.

#### *4.2.1.1.1. The other: framing the 'I'*

Charles Taylor offers a description of the subject-other relationship that captures well what Butler refers to as the *fundamental dependency* between subject and other. As Taylor puts it: "One is a self<sup>43</sup> only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (Taylor 1989: 35). The individual can only consider themselves as an 'I' when there are others who can mirror, or reflect, the individual, because it is only in that mirroring that the individual is given the possibility to see themselves. In a similar vein, Butler suggests that the very root of the process of distinguishing oneself from others is the physical presence of the other.

Appearing in the social world – in front of the other, or others – means that the subject becomes physically visible as singular (Butler 2005: 33). Through this visibility the subject recognises that their social presence – the 'I' that they form – is related to a specific body. As a result of this, the 'I', and its singularity, is limited by the subject's own embodiment. Conversely, Butler suggests, drawing on the literary analysis of Cavarero<sup>44</sup>, the physical body of the other as it appears in front of the subject should not just be taken as an aspect of the other, but, also, the manifestation of singularity of the other. The whole of the other is constituted in singularity, though, in a merely physical sense. Singularity, as Butler uses the term, is defined by body parameters and experiences and sets the limit of how compatible as well as interchangeable the bodies of the individual and the other are. As Butler puts it: "[S]ingularity has no defining content other than the irreducibility of exposure, of being *this* body exposed

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor uses the term self, as selfhood e.g. self-awareness, in a way that is similar to Butler's use of the term 'I' – to refer to the self-aware subject among others.

<sup>44</sup> In Adriana Cavarero's 2008 book *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*.

to a publicity that is variably and alternately intimate and anonymous” (Butler 2005: 34).<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, the embodied singularity of the ‘I’ means that the ‘I’ is able to be distinct only because of the intersubjective relations that ‘I’ emerges from. That is to say that the self-aware ‘I’ only comes to be when the individual is subjected to the process of individuation by the other. In this sense, this continuous presence of the other forms a relation that forces or teaches the ‘I’ to be, to emerge. What this means, though, is that there are aspects of individuation through intersubjective relations that predate the subject’s ability to recognise, or voice the ‘I’ as an independent, singular being. As Butler puts it:

[W]hat we call ‘independence’ is always established through a set of formative relations that do not simply fall away as action takes place, even though those formative relations sometimes are banished from consciousness, even arguably *must be* banished to some extent. If I can come to *touch and feel and sense* the world, it is only because this ‘I’, before it could be called ‘I’, was handled and sensed, addressed, and enlivened (Butler 2015: 11; emphasis added).

Also preceding the ‘I’ are the ways that the ‘I’ comes to be itself in relation to the other. In this respect, there is always a limitation upon ‘independence’. On one hand, the other imposes the individuation on the ‘I’ from its very beginning, by acting on the ‘I’ as on a distinct being. And, on the other hand, it is the other that, by starting the individuation of the ‘I’, leads the subject into the constant flux of intersubjective relations where others are acting on the ‘I’. Butler explains this point in the following passage:

‘I’ comes into sentient being, even thinking and acting, precisely by being acted on in ways that, from the start, presume that nonvoluntary, though volatile file of impressionability. Already undone, or undone from the start, we

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to recognise that whilst Butler agrees with Cavarero in thinking that embodiment defines the limit of the subject, there is a serious difference in how they approach the idea of human uniqueness. Cavarero operates on the notion of uniqueness—arguing from a singularity of human being—that sets limits upon how the account is given to a specific body (Cavarero 2000: 34; 38). Thus, for Cavarero, every body would lead to giving a distinct account. Butler, on the other hand, considers that the moment of being addressed is the moment when an account of oneself is established as an account, and as this is already externally determined, it can never be unique. Whilst I follow Butler in thinking that the subject becomes something only when others can witness it—it is valuable to recognize the limitations that the embodied being creates.

are formed, and as formed, we come to be always partially undone by what we come to sense and know (Butler 2015: 11).

Moreover, as will be further discussed in the light of the 'I' needing to articulate who they are, the 'I' being prompted by, and acted on by the other, creates a situation where the 'I' is not really able to explain the whole being of themselves. Due to the embodied singularity's being prior to the emergence of self-awareness, the 'I' is not able to explain the initial intersubjective relations that guide the formation of 'I'; thus, the 'I' is always partially in relation to the other.

In this sense, whilst, for Butler, this very beginning of the 'I', or the possibility of the 'I', is based on this intersubjective relationship, what is shown so far, is just that 'I' becomes aware of one's physical difference through mutual reflection. This inevitable distinctness in the background of intersubjective individual relations, though, does not yet give reason for the individual to articulate the 'I'. To understand from where that demand arises we need to turn to Butler's idea of the process of *address*.

#### 4.2.1.1.2 *The other: addressing the 'I'*

I am already in relation not only to one particular other, but to many, to a field of alterity that is not restrictively human. Those relations form a matrix for subject formation, which means that someone must first sense me before I can sense anything at all. [...] Even as I come to speak within a discourse that firmly lodges the 'I' at the source of its distinct action, I see that this 'I' remains in thrall of prior transitivity, acted upon as it acts (Butler 2015: 8).

As the above quote illustrates, for Butler, the individual needs to recognise that there is a process prior to the emergence of 'I' that acts upon the social individual. Along these lines, Butler argues that the 'I' – and not just the singularity of the subject – emerges because the other – who is the source of the individuation process – wants to know more about the subject through the scene of *address*. In this way, the inevitable force of the other's physical presence is supplemented by the direct force of being addressed. To understand how the subject, as 'I', emerges through these forces, then, the nature and the appearance of *address* need further investigation.

Put simply, the scene of address is a situation where the other asks the subject to give an account of oneself, i.e. to explain oneself. Having had their distinctness from

the other pointed out, as well as from the background where the others are, the subject (either implicitly or explicitly) needs to become self-aware so as to be able to respond to the question at the core of this situation: “Who are you?” (Butler 2005: 31). It is in this process of being addressed, and responding to the question implicit in that address, that Butler suggests that the ‘account giving self’ emerges. And it is the ‘account giving self’ that constitutes the ‘I’ of the subject.

As Butler acknowledges, this concept of *address* is borrowed from Nietzsche’s discussion of account giving for the purpose of justice, in which the scene of address is one in which the subject needs to explicitly prove their innocence. For Nietzsche, as Butler interprets him at least, the process of address – the moment of establishing justice – takes place in a system that has a functioning understanding of justice and punishment; a legal framework which operates on revenge (Butler 2005: 13). In this context, the situation of address is one in which the subject is asked to explain their behaviour in front of the other precisely because they are seen to have caused suffering or harm. Nietzsche’s account of asking the subject ‘who one is’ is a situation where an accusation is embedded in the demand and which entails that someone in the position of power is able to challenge the subject to give an account (Butler 1995: 15). In that respect, the other – in the position of power – who challenges the subject also acts as judge and is in the position to decide whether the account given is satisfactory.

In contrast to Nietzsche, Butler suggests that the addressing/being-addressed relationship is not specific to situations where an account is given under duress and, correspondingly, the subjection process does not need to be in relation to a legal system. Rather, on her understanding, the same address-challenge structure emerges in intersubjective relations with the other more generally. Accordingly, Butler suggests that the relationship of address-account giving is at the very core of every individual as a social being (Butler 2005: 33).

The very moment of address – being asked to provide an account of oneself – is, for Butler, a moment marked by self-questioning, and the immediate need to claim the ‘I’, whilst being aware of the possibility of misrecognition. At the moment of address, separation from the other, i.e. the addressee, takes place and the ‘I’ is ascribed by



the other with a specific identity. Self-awareness, correspondingly, refers to the possibility of being ascribed an incorrect 'individuality' that the 'I' should refer to. Whatever the situation, the addressed needs to indicate whether the individual identifies themselves with the category that is ascribed to 'I', or not – whether a social role or a name (Butler 2015: 14). Because of this demand, however, there is always a moment of self-questioning, when the addressed subject asks themselves: "Is that me to whom you refer when you claim that I am this or that?" (Butler 2015: 14).

This self-questioning and the need to immediately recognise whether the ascribed identity refers to the 'I' indicates that the very sociality of the individual demands the subject be prepared for this social address. A certain readiness is a prior and "essential condition of the formation of the subject" (Butler 1997a: 32). In short, as a social being, the subject is expected by the other to be ready at the moment of address (Butler 1995: 10). Just as the possibility for the 'I' to emerge is determined by the existence of social relations, one's recognition by an other is not a matter of one's internal, individual norms. Instead, because the process is social, there is a normativity that emerges from this intersubjective recognition and so guides the intersubjective relationship (Butler 2005: 34). I will return to the discussion of norms that guide the intersubjective relation in due course. First, I want to consider what it means for the 'I' to be able to give an account.

#### 4.2.2. Giving an account: the subject's self-narration

In the situation where the subject is being addressed and asked to explain itself, the individual has nothing more to begin with than an 'I'. Yet, until the moment of address, until the moment of being called on, or approached in a challenging way, where the underlying aim of the person addressing is to know *who they are*, the subject has not needed to think about this 'I'. In the situation of address, the individual is challenged with a self-referential question of what 'I' consists of. This process can be considered almost vile or disruptive to the subject as the other's demand of an account puts the subject in a position of needing to decide upon an account at once – knowing that how the 'I' presents itself through that account may have a lasting impact. In this sense, the other's demand for an account can be seen to lead the subject into a state of "vexation or distress" (Morin 2011: 198).

Borrowing from Adorno's idea of negative dialectic<sup>46</sup>, Butler argues that it is in this situation, where the subject needs to explain themselves, that the individual is able to recognise that the 'I' is deeply rooted in "social temporality" (Butler 2005: 8). Adriana Cavarero explains the problem that the 'I' faces. According to Cavarero, all subjects have a narratable 'self'<sup>47</sup>, and it does not matter in what form the account might be given. The paradox with account giving, however, is that because the subject is rooted in the society in which certain structures and relations are not recognizable or graspable for the 'I', the subject is never able to give a full story of the 'I' (Cavarero 2000: 34).

The social temporality that the individual is situated in, then, presents two limitations: firstly, the language that the account should be given in. This not only limits the account, but as was mentioned before, also precedes the subject. Others acting on the subject have defined the subject according to already established categories and choosing among those categories means embodying them. Secondly, the subject is not able to know their very beginning, which creates a limitation upon what the subject is actually able to present.

Despite these limitations, the subject cannot sidestep the demand, or eschew responsibility for its account. Vice versa, as Butler argues, the ability to narrate means that the individual must take full charge for their actions and the preconditions of being able to give the account (Butler 2005: 12). Moreover, Butler (2015: 4) thinks that acknowledging these limitations means that there is a possibility of saying something about the malleable subject, who is formed by intersubjective relations, and the social 'identities' that are ascribed to the subject in those relations. In this vein, the following discussion highlights how intersubjectivity brings out the inherent vulnerability of the individual.

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<sup>46</sup> Adorno discards Hegel's 'positive' dialectic and argues that as the individual is by their social existence already constrained by identity, then, there is no possibility for the individual to overcome it and reach a state of non-identity (see: Zuidervaart 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Again, this 'self' is just referring to self-referential 'I'.

#### *4.2.2.1 The subject and the limits of embodiment*

The subject, as Butler's account makes clear, is usually associated with and understood to be the individual's linguistic presence in the society. Tied to account giving, the subject as an 'I' is seen as able to self-reference and, through this, establish a relation to the other. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, the subject's entry into the intersubjective relationships that determine its self-recognition occurs prior to the possibility of giving a vocal account of itself. Thus, the subject is acted on as a singularity whenever the individual is in a society. This subjectivity – the beginning of which the subject really cannot remember and, so, comprehend – raises a distinct problem for the subject as the account given is never going to provide the full narrative of the subject. Indeed, there is a significant discrepancy between the physical existence and the self-perceived (or self-aware) existence of the subject.

As established, the subject refers to a specific being who is reminded of their subjectivity through intersubjective relationships. When the subject is asked to give an account – to explain who the individual is – then, in principle, the subject should be able to explain the whole of their life story. It is in this position, trying to voice their 'I', however, that the subject becomes aware of the impossibility of this task. That is because the individual is exposed to, and needs to acknowledge as well as accept, their natality as well as mortality. In the frame of account giving, this acknowledgement puts the individual into the awkward position in which they must admit that their beginning exceeds their recollection of it. And, furthermore, that the beginning has been set by someone else. Cavarero illustrates this point well, when, in discussing the naming act that states an individual's uniqueness, she writes: "[a] unique being<sup>48</sup> is without any quality, and yet it already has a name. The new-born does not choose this name, but is given it by another, just as every human being does not choose how to be" (Cavarero 2000: 19).

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<sup>48</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Cavarero thinks that the account that the subject will give, will be, due to the subject's singularity, completely unique. In this light, she is not taking into account the socially determined language that the account will be given in or considering that the categories that the account is using are all socially set.

It is not, however, only the fact that an individual's story is started by someone else that pre-conditions their understanding of themselves. So too does the mere fact that the individual has no capacity to present the whole story of their bodily existence. The individual's physical body has been in and through more than they are either able to remember or voice. The full narration of one's body, as Cavarero points out, can only be done by others:

If everyone is *who* is born, from the start – and with a promise of unity that the story inherits from that start – then no recounting of a life-story can in fact leave out this beginning with which the story itself began. The tale of her beginning, the story of her birth, nevertheless can only come to existence in the *worm* of narration told by others (Cavarero 2000: 39; *italics original*).

The subject, then, is only able to give a narrative of themselves from their own perspective, yet the self-awareness needed for that is undermined by their physical existence, on which others have been acting prior to the emergence of this self-awareness. So, Butler writes:

The singular body to which a narrative refers cannot be captured by a full narration, not only because the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection, but because primary relations are formative in ways that produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of oneself (Butler 2005: 21).

Every time the subject is asked to present themselves, they become fully aware of not being able to give a full first-hand demonstration of just that. With this awareness, the subject is also faced with the possibility of an other who has a fuller understanding of the subject than the subject would have themselves. This creates a tension in the account-giving subject and places them in a position where history or natality creates an opaque understanding of self – there are actions that, although having happened to the 'I', will never be graspable to the subject.

To put it simply, being able to see someone as subject presupposes the subject's self-aware 'I' formation, as well as the linguistic capability of the subject (Butler 2015: 14) and so others might witness the subject's life in a more 'coherent' manner than the subject. Yet, it is not just the incompleteness of knowledge of the embodied experience that limits the subject's account giving. The very position from which the account is given (the very specific stage in life), and the way it could be given,

contribute to the incompleteness of the account as well. In this sense, the 'I' is always narrated in retrospect; and, in a language that pre-dates the 'I'.

#### 4.2.2.2. *The subject and the limits of language*

There are two distinct limitations to account giving that follow from its nature as a linguistic exercise: an account can only ever provide a narrative of situations that have already happened; and that narrative can only ever be constructed in language. I now consider how these limitations affect the subject.

##### 4.2.2.2.1. *The narrating subject and the narrated 'I'*

Butler considers the subject to have a physical existence that precedes self-awareness, and, thus, is always only able to give an individual account of themselves (Butler 2015: 20).<sup>49</sup> Being born means that there are others who started forming the subject from the very beginning of their life. By the time the individual is challenged to give an account, moreover, they are already in a position of linguistic competency that would allow them to articulate the 'I'. That means, any account that the subject gives, comes from the position of an already 'formed' subject. In this light, providing an account of the process of *becoming* the 'I' is impossible. Thus, the problem of providing an account of initial experience reoccurs, but in this sense, the limitation is one of the distance of the 'I' from the very beginning of embodied singularity. As Butler explains:

To say that I am affected prior to ever becoming an 'I' is to deliver the news by using the very pronoun that was not yet put into play, confounding this temporality with that one. I, personally, cannot go back to that place, nor can I do so in an impersonal way (Butler 2015: 4).

Evidently, the capacity to use language competently as a form of account giving limits the position that the subject is able to give an account from. Moreover, due to the distance from the beginning of embodied singularity, the process of account *giving* is very much a case of account *creating*. For Butler, the history of a certain thing or event is just a narrative, told through specific events limited by a beginning and an end. However, there is not one decisive way in which history ought to be told.

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<sup>49</sup> The ability to give only one account – linking to the embodied being – is similar to Jaeggi's understanding of the individual as a coherent whole.

So too, she suggests, for one's life story. Every attempt to narrate an 'I' is just a particular take on the events of one's life and is of an inherently speculative character. Thus, even if trying to provide a fair account, the things that are important to the 'I' are chosen by the subject themselves – and others can disagree with those choices, or simply take the account on face value.

Further to that, one's prehistory is something that has not stopped happening – not in a chronological, but in a merely narrative sense – and that will change constantly the story that 'I' is attempting to present. Though reliant on accounts of their early life by others, the individual is able to choose for themselves which are the things that are important, and because looking at things in retrospect allows them to reassess their significance, the narrative of the 'I' is always in flux. This phenomenon, as Butler argues, makes "every account of myself partial and failed" (Butler 2005: 78).

In short, due to the demand of the narrative and the process by which the narrative is created, the relationship between the subject and the 'I' that the subject voices, is vexed. In the incompleteness of knowing one's full narrative, the subject is also able to moderate it. And so, the 'I', likewise, could be presented differently to the account that the subject actually opts to give. At the same time, however, that narrative can organically moderate itself and change over time – a phenomenon that is tightly related to the social conventional nature of language. In the next section I discuss the power that language has over subject formation.

#### *4.2.2.2.2. The narrating subject and the language that defines 'I'*

The social existence of the subject has a twofold nature: One aspect, as shown, is that the subject is exposed to the other, who initiates the individuating relation, prior to the subject's self-awareness. Hence, the other prompts the very beginning of the subject as 'I'. Additionally, the language realm that the subject has been born into is moulding the subject before the subject is able to announce themselves as 'I' and prior to the subject having reached linguistic self-awareness. As a result, language becomes constitutive of the subject – the 'I' narrates an embodied performance of

an 'identity'<sup>50</sup> that is a response to the definitions provided by language through the process of address.

As Butler explains, people are given over from their beginning to language (and sign systems) that mould their understanding (Butler 2005: 76). It is through this primary experience, being given over to language to start with, as well as others who use the language, that the 'I' emerges. Yet, as Butler argues "[t]he 'I', regardless of its claims to mastery, will never get over having been given over from the start in this way" (Butler 2005: 77) and so there is no escaping the language realm. Individuals are exposed by birth to the language that will determine what is recognizable and what is not. And so, their mode of self-narration is also pre-established. As such, any attempt to fully describe 'I' can never be more than an engagement with existing language resources and practices that do not allow [total] originality.<sup>51</sup>

In this light, when the subject has finally got to the place of being a competent language user, the individual has formed an understanding of 'I' and is considered to have a coherent understanding of themselves. The 'I', though, only has the possibility to know and voice this account because of the linguistic resources available to explain the 'I'. In this sense, the subject, as a competent language user, can only choose to express the 'I' through the categories and concepts provided by the language.

Butler explains the situation:

I do not arrive in the world separate from a set of norms that are lying in wait for me, already orchestrating my gender, race, and status, working on me, even as a pure potential, prior to my first wail. So norms, conventions, institutional forms of power, are already acting prior to any action I may understand (Butler 2015: 6).

Though individuals often present their own account without knowing (nor needing to know) the wider social background to the terms in which they do so, those terms are

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<sup>50</sup> Butler is particularly interested in oppressive or offensive identities (see: Butler 1997a). Whilst this is an important topic more generally, the purpose of the current discussion is to analyse the importance of intersubjective relations to the formation of the individual more generally. For that reason, I do not focus here on specific identities, but rather the process through which the subject is ascribed an identity of any sort., i.e. the interpellation process.

<sup>51</sup> Hence, Butler does not agree with Cavarero that there is such a thing as uniqueness in self-narrating: narration is always done in language, and language always precedes the subject.

nonetheless a social package. In line with this, and following Foucault, Butler voices suspicion of how language both limits the freedom for account giving and provides the only means available through which the 'I' can be articulated at all:

The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told (Butler 2005: 21).

In this light, Butler emphasises that language does not give individuals an endless means to present themselves. In contrast, they are restricted unconsciously by the prevailing discourse. The subject is only able to reflect upon themselves as much as the language provides the possibility to voice their reflections (Butler 2005: 121). That individuals constitute themselves through text in this manner, however, means that they only constitute themselves through a certain relationship with power (Butler 2005: 125). The social package that language carries means that the adopted identity – the narration that the subject presents and follows – moves from being just a linguistic construct to being enacted by body and reiterated through narrative. The 'I' is a performance of an identity. Being social and being acted on means that by birth, the individual is already embedded in a social system with certain qualities and values. The ascription of qualities by the very initial subjection means that the subject is exposed to the criteria of identity not just through narrative – or physical being. But rather, the subject's embodied presence in the society is a re-enactment of the identities "on the surface of the body" (Butler 2006: 185). Language, thus, does not just give the individual means to give an account, it sets the ways in which this specific subjectivity could be enacted using the resources it provides. So, on one hand, acting out the identity, i.e. following set identity criteria, makes this identity real for that specific subject, for that specific time, e.g. acting as a 'woman'. But, on the other, acting out these identities determines also the use of these categories, and the appearance of these identities, for the future, e.g. what is in society considered as 'womanly' behaviour.

It is the thought that the giving of an account always operates on a pre-existing language that underlies Butler's view that the uniqueness of the 'I' slips away when the subject has to give an account. For, if the subject, as a social being of 'I', is



subjected to set criteria and constitutes one's subjectivity as an 'I' in a narrative; and, this narrative is presented through a language that already has a social meaning; then, the social 'I' is not unique, nor original

Intersubjective relations – in which the individual is acted on and exposed to language – define the social presence of the individual. The embodied performance of pre-established identities is the only thing that grounds the singularity of the social individual as an 'I'. What the 'account giving' in narrative entails, however, is that the subject, as an 'I', is always aiming to give as coherent an account as possible.<sup>52</sup> This would minimise the risk of being challenged, and so, minimise the need to act on one's vulnerability.

To sum up this discussion, being asked to give an account is never an isolated episode, but always a part of a bigger narrative. An individual can never fully know about themselves, but they still have to play the part and provide their story. As individuals are inherently social beings, their performance is always framed by these limitations. Butler explains that, to give an account of 'I', is to “describe what acts when I act, without precisely taking the responsibility for the whole show” (Butler 2015: 16). Emphasising the importance of account giving to the formation of social existence, however, she further states “No one survives without being addressed; no one survives to tell his or her story without being inaugurated into language by being called upon, offered some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story” (Butler 2005: 63).

In this sense, giving an account (and through that account coining one's identity in language) and being a social individual are interlinked: it is through the process of address that the individual establishes relations to the other. And the account giving, in itself, can be considered a kind of test of whether the other considers the account that 'I' gives suitable, or whether that account will be challenged:

Giving an account is thus also a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is

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<sup>52</sup> The discussion of acting out identities runs counter to Goffman's idea of identity performance, where the performance can continuously change, and need only be confirmed by the audience. Butler's position highlights the broader social categories/identities—class, gender etc.—that underlie any account that the subject might give.

understandable by the other, who 'receives' the account through one set of norms or another (Butler 2005: 131).

The limitations that the subject is faced with when giving the account, though, reveal the vulnerable state that the subject inherently occupies. It is this vulnerability which determines the way in which intersubjective relations, and correspondingly, society, should function. I discuss this next.

### 4.2.3. The ethical subject: Vulnerability

Understanding that everyone – as social beings appearing in front of the other – faces the same limitations when it comes to giving a full account, helps us appreciate the vulnerability of the individual, as a social being and subject. In intersubjective relations, the individual is dependent on the other to demand the account, and the other to be considerate in receiving it, whilst knowing from individual experience that no account given will be the full account. From this recognition of vulnerability, emerges an ethical way to behave with and towards the other. This intersubjective vulnerability, likewise, defines the intersubjective relations as something where the other needs to be considerate to the individual, and, vice versa. That is because in intersubjective relationships both parties can challenge the accounts given, i.e. undermine each-other's self-awareness. Or even worse, dismiss the other.

In this light, considering the individual as subject helps us to appreciate how the individual's social existence is shaped by these inherently problematic intersubjective relations. People are vulnerable in these relations, and recognising this inherent vulnerability gives rise to expectations of how individuals in these interactions should behave towards each other. In the following section, I discuss this idea of vulnerability and the morality that it gives life to in more detail.

#### 4.2.3.1. *The vulnerability of the 'I' and the other*

The subject is confronted by its limited perspective when asked to give an account of themselves to the other, as any narrative that the subject provides cannot cover the subject's whole being and there are parts of their being that the subject is not able to disclose. This part is something that only others are able to articulate, as witnesses of the situation. Or, it might be that others can just draw out aspects of the

account that are not coherent or make no sense in the narrative. It is this incompleteness of appearances in intersubjective relations, then, that makes the subject vulnerable in front of the other. Yet, this limitation is one faced in the same manner by both subjects, or all subjects, in the relationship. That is simply because both parties to the relationship are at the same time the 'I' and the other; and so, at the same time as one is recognising one's own limitations, one is exposing the other's. To put it simply, the intersubjective nature of sociality entails a vulnerability for both the subject as well as the other.

To illustrate this point, Butler discusses an interview with Foucault in which he is questioned about his latest research interest. In the interview Foucault has been asked the question of why he has been turning to Nietzsche in his recent research (which is interpreted as a move away from phenomenology, i.e. a significant theoretical shift). Apparently, though, Foucault cannot explain this shift and fails to provide a satisfactory answer. Butler considers this to be an effective illustration of just that situation where "the subject cannot fully furnish the grounds for its own emergence" (Butler 2005: 116). She further continues: "[T]he account he [Foucault] gives of himself reveals that he does not know all the reasons that operate on him, in him, during that time" (Butler 2005: 117). The point that Butler wants to make is that these situations can occur in every moment – everyone could be challenged to explain something i.e. their own behaviour, that they are not able to.

What makes the vulnerability in such situations more acute, Butler suggests, is that one's appearance in front of the other is always subject to the possibility of exploitation. As she explains:

The condition of the possibility of my exploitation presupposes that I am a being in need of support, dependent, given over to an infrastructural world in order to act, requiring an emotional infrastructure to survive. I am not only already in the hands of *someone* else before I start to work with my own hands, but I am also, as it were, in the 'hands' of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human. In this sense, 'I' am nowhere and nothing without the nonhuman (Butler 2015: 7).

In short, for Butler ethical behaviour is an unavoidable result of the subject's exposure to the other, and, at the same time, the others exposure to 'I'. In this light,

the subject exists in and finds themselves in a bundle of fragile relationships that the subject has not chosen for itself, yet where these relationships are crucial for the social existence of that subject (Butler 2015: 16). For these relationships to function, and the vulnerability to be recognised, maintained, and not exploited, however, there needs to be an ethical formula of acting that allows the subject and the intersubjective relationship in which it occurs to achieve some semblance of stability. That is where the moral norms of intersubjective relationships emerge.

#### *4.2.3.2. How morality emerges from vulnerability*

Butler considers the vulnerable situation of the subject, who is not able to completely understand themselves because of their bodily presence and acting out set identities, to suggest that the individual is not the beginning of ethics, but rather that – because of their own opaque being – they are the difficulty, or problem of ethics (Butler 2005: 20). To put it simply, because all individuals realise their subjectivity through intersubjective relations, and because this realisation is framed by their limited perspective, it is exactly these individuals that an ethics needs to cover or protect. Ethical behaviour is established to maintain the coherence of intersubjective relations, since misconduct can violate others. Moral conduct emerges out of necessity, not just from the subject's contingent interests in establishing an order to society.

Correspondingly, it is the individual's inevitable capacity to err in response to the other – e.g. not giving a sufficient account or misusing language – and the vulnerability that this brings, that is the reason for ethical behaviour in intersubjective relations, and so, in society. Butler explains the emergence of ethics as it relates to vulnerability:

If it is precisely by virtue of one's relation to the others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venues for one's ethical responsibility then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds (Butler 2005: 20).

As Boer explains, as accounts are by their nature limited, incoherent and incompetent, the key to Butler's ethics are "negotiation, relational dialogue and mutuality" (Boer 2012: 91). It is, thus, in the subject's acknowledgement that the

other is in the same position as the 'I', and then responding to this acknowledgement, that the social boundaries of intersubjective behaviour are shaped.

In this respect, Butler suggests that all people depend on the mercy of others and are limited by the institutional or social rules that they are subjected to. So, as intersubjective relations are inevitable, then, those relations should address the moral questions of how to act and how to conduct oneself socially (Butler 2005: 3). That means, focusing on talking about or considering how the 'I'-and-other relationship is functioning, and should function, and how the 'I' and other interact within those relationships.

For Butler then, the social individual is a deliberative individual, subjects do not just follow norms but do and should critically engage with and appropriate those norms (Butler, 2005: 8). On the other hand, the social determines – in one way or another – how those norms are to be implemented:

[T]here is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no 'I' that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have social character that exceed a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning (Butler 2005: 7).

Ethical behaviour and the norms that govern it, then, are determined by the initial intersubjective being of the individual – and so it is the responsibility toward others, which arises in response to understanding one's own limitations, that defines the nature of social interaction. In this sense, the coherency of the social world is also dependent upon social individuals' capacity to recognise their vulnerability when appearing among others.

Butler borrows this idea of vulnerability, and correspondingly, the idea that ethics arises to protect individuals from each other (in their vulnerability), from Levinas. As she explains Levinas's position here:

[Levinas] is simply saying that the most primary level, we are acted upon by other in ways over which we have no say, and that this passivity, susceptibility, and condition of *being impinged upon* inaugurates who we are. [...] this condition of being impinged upon is also an "address" of a certain kind (Butler 2005: 90).

In Levinas's use, this 'impinging' is a phenomenon that is given no "diachronic exposition", and so, as Butler argues, can be considered to represent "the voice of no one, the voice of a God, understood as infinite and preontological, that makes itself known in the 'face' of the Other" (Butler 2005: 90). Whilst Butler borrows from Levinas the image of "an Other who is irreducible, whose 'face' makes an ethical demand upon me", she does not carry over this 'preontological' understanding of Levinas's 'Other', but rather views it as something belonging to "an *idealized* dyadic structure of social life" (Butler 2005: 90; emphasis added).<sup>53</sup> (Thus, Butler retains the idealisation of the other in Levinas's account whilst at the same time situating it in something, i.e. the structure of social life, that is altogether more concrete.)

What is important to bear in mind, then, is that whilst the talk of the 'I'-Other relationship indicates a relationship between embodied subjects, there is a dimension to that relationship, i.e. the *responsibilities* between individual and other, that transcend its initial embodiment. Instead, the fact of embodiment is replaced with the having of an attitude that is always upheld by the possibility and awareness that there can be an (embodied) other. As such, the moral framework that is initially grounded in the embodied intersubjective relationship becomes the framework that guides the individual's existence – and impinges upon the ongoing state of being a subject.

As Butler puts it: "Our responsibility is not just for the purity of our souls but for the shape of collectively inhabited world" (Butler 2005: 110).

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<sup>53</sup> Levinas's discussion of responsibility in front of the other is motivated by anti-Semitic action in Europe in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, it is never far from the surface of Levinas's account that the other, in principle, could be hostile – or, on the other hand, might be frightened and begging for mercy. On his account, and reflecting this, the ethical thing to do is not to act upon revenge (that is a natural feeling given the background he is concerned with) or, any other instinct, but to act on the manner that is the morally right thing to do. Hence, the suggestion that, whilst it triggers the phenomenon, the ethical question is not a question about the embodied presence of the other, but the framework that emerges from these encounters and other triggers. For Levinas, this behaviour is aligned with Judaism. It is the prominence of a specific religion (and how Levinas presents it) in his account, however, that motivates Butler to translating the framework to be socially embedded, and secular (Butler 2005: 95). At the same time, though, echoes of the religious aspect of Levinas's account remain, in so far as Butler's account outlines a moral framework which is not tied always to the embodied presence of the other, but the awareness of the other as always there.

## *Conclusion*

In Butler's account of the individual as subject, the vulnerability of the subject emerges from the fact that the subject, as an 'I', is always appearing in intersubjective relationships, i.e. in front of the other, as a narrational subject. Correspondingly, the other, any other, holds the power for the 'I' to emerge as well as for the 'I' to recognise the vulnerable situation that it is in. When the subject is trying to give the story of 'I', however, the subject will always be limited in knowing the full story since others have given that subject a physical as well as linguistic beginning that predates 'I'. Butler presents the subject as an always linguistic subject, always at the other's mercy, and so, vulnerable. Given the ambivalent relation between subject being the self-aware subject who voices the 'I' and the socially embedded being aware of its limitations, however, this vulnerability has multiple sources.

Firstly, vulnerability arises in the subject's recognition of the other's ability to challenge the subject's narrative and in doing so reveal details of the subject's existence that the subject themselves is not able to comprehend. Hence, the subject is vulnerable because the other can call on them to tell their story. Secondly, vulnerability arises in respect to the very language that the intersubjective communication uses – the subject might, through the act of address, be ascribed names or identities that the subject does not want to claim. These identities might, in turn, disadvantage the social position of the subject, as well as the subject's self-awareness. In this sense, the subject is vulnerable because of the other's ability to refer to them as something specific. Thirdly, the vulnerability of the subject is tied to the very idea that every individual, as a social being, is subject. And so, everyone appears in front of the other in their inherent vulnerability. In this respect, intersubjective relations are taken up with an expectation that everyone is equally considerate to not trigger the vulnerability of the other, i.e. acting morally correctly among, and towards, each other.

Where Butler empathises the linguistic dimensions of subjectivity, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition draws attention to the fundamental importance of pre-linguistic interactions. Subjection, and the individual's vulnerability to it, is *grounded* – not in

linguistic interaction – but in the moment where the individual appears in front of the other. My suggestion is that this notion of *antecedent* or *elementary* recognition well complements Butler’s account and that putting the two accounts into contact we are better positioned to understand the relationship between individual, communication, and the social world. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss Honneth’s theory of recognition as it relates to the individual.

### 4.3. Recognition

Axel Honneth can be considered a third-generation Critical Theorist (Fuchs 2016: 22). His contributions to contemporary political and social philosophy are framed around his re-articulation of Hegel’s theory of recognition. As Iser (2013) puts it “Recognition theory is thought to be especially well-equipped to illuminate the psychological mechanisms of social and political resistance.” In this light, Honneth employs his theorisation of recognition, as the fundamental grounds of intersubjective interaction and so of society, to illuminate the ways in which individuals and social groups can be marginalised in any specific socio-economic-political system (see Fraser & Honneth 2003). Whilst most attention to Honneth’s theory of recognition has focused on its political dimensions, the account of the individual and their relationship to the other, as well as the social world more generally, on which that theory is founded is significant in its own right. Honneth explicitly discusses this aspect of his overarching theory in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996) and *Reification: A new look at an old idea* (2008).<sup>54</sup> In the following sections, I draw on these to make the case for incorporating the notion of

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<sup>54</sup> As the name suggests, in his 2008 book *Reification*, Honneth engages with Lukács’s concept of reification. We saw in Chapter 2 that Lukács conceived reification as a relationship in which individual’s treat each other instrumentally under the influence of the oppressive rationality of the capitalist social system. Honneth re-articulates this concept to put it into discussion with his Hegel inspired account of recognition. More specifically, in this book Honneth is interested in what he calls an elementary form of recognition that underlies all intersubjective engagement. This is a kind of “existential sympathy” (2008: 152) on which more substantial norms of recognition are built. For Honneth, a key feature of reification is that when we reify others “it is precisely their specifically human capacities that we make use of to achieve our own purposes” (2008: 148). As Honneth points out, if reification takes this form, then, it is a form of intersubjective interaction and, thus, presupposes elementary recognition. Correspondingly, reification cannot (except perhaps in extreme cases) be understood as a failure to recognise the other, but rather, should be understood as a distortion of the recognition relationship – where one forgets or dismisses one’s prior recognition of the other. As noted in Chapter 2, I take reification, so understood, to be a distinct, if related, concept to alienation. Reification, we might say, is a potential symptom of alienation – but does not presuppose the latter.



recognition in our account of the subject, firstly, by introducing Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and explaining its Hegelian origins; and, secondly, explaining what is the harm that Honneth considers to occur when recognition is not granted. It is in respect to the latter, I shall suggest, that even when witnessing just the linguistic presence of the subject, we need to take into account the underlying recognition struggle when talking about the social individual as *subject*.

#### 4.3.1. Axel Honneth's theory of recognition

The suggestion that intersubjective relationships that form the subject initially depend on an attitude of intersubjective recognition requires us to take a step back from the question of how the established intersubjective relationships become *linguistically* visible as well as how the linguistic being, and the vulnerability introduced in respect to that, determines the need for ethical behaviour among people. Instead, we need to consider what grounds intersubjective relations in the first place: i.e. how, prior to the process of address, individuals see the other as an equal subject, who would be able to give an account. In respect to that question, Axel Honneth suggests, recognition – *affectively* perceiving an other as an individual human being – holds a central place in the functioning of the social world.

What occurs in this type of [elementary] recognition, what makes up its particular character, is that we take up a stance toward the other that reaches into the affective sphere, a stance in which we can recognize in another person the other of our own self, our fellow human[...] (Honneth 2008: 151).<sup>55</sup>

Honneth's account of recognition stems from his interpretation of aspects of Hegel's thought. As Honneth interprets Hegel, it is by way of recognition that a collective of individuals is distinguished from considerate cohabitation (Honneth 1996: 15). Moreover, on this picture, some basic mutual recognition is elementary between individuals, as without it there would be no possibility to exist at all (Honneth 1996: 43). Expanding on this reading of Hegel, Honneth suggests that the recognitional stance – i.e. appearing in front of the other in order to be recognised; and, vice versa – is the basic form in which the individual interacts with everything,

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<sup>55</sup>Honneth here is describing what he calls 'elementary recognition'. Given the fundamental nature of this form of recognition, I take it that all forms of recognition involve this affective component.

both other individuals as well as objects (Honneth 2008: 38). To be in a social world, i.e. to be a social being, on this account, thus, means always appearing in this relation to the other: at the same time, demanding recognition from them and assessing them. In this way, the recognitional stance is the primary attitude towards oneself and the world. Every engagement in the world is an engagement with something (or someone) that, in itself, is already a whole, embodied, demanding recognition, and so, has to be addressed through, or in the light of, the recognition relationship (Honneth 2008: 36).

Recognition is for Honneth the driving force of the ethical intersubjective relations that societies are built on (Honneth 2008: 11). Without the possibility to be recognised, there would be no interaction between subjects as well as no need for interaction. Hence, Honneth's theory suggests that there is something prior to immediate subjection, or address – i.e. the initial act of recognition. Recognition, for Honneth, is the most primordial engagement with the social world (Honneth 1996: 37) and it is only through recognition and being recognised, that interaction between individuals can occur. Without interaction, on the other hand, no ethical stance can be formed and there will be no stability to intersubjective relations, and so, society cannot be formed. As Honneth puts it “*empathetic* engagement precedes a neutral grasping of reality [...] recognition comes before cognition” (Honneth 2008: 40; emphasis added). Thus, it is only upon experiencing the preliminary resemblance, or compatibility between people, that there is a possibility for further intersubjective engagement to start.

In this way, Honneth suggests, recognition is also the fundamental form of intersubjective encounter that grounds the human experience in the society. As he writes: “A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that the person or things have in themselves” (Honneth 1996: 38). Correspondingly, Honneth's account, which is explicitly concerned with the state of contemporary society and the power relations in place in that society, has both moral as well as social implications. Having said that, and whilst not downplaying its social and critical value, I shall not be engaging with this

aspect of Honneth's account.<sup>56</sup> Rather, my focus shall be upon the implications of the recognition relationship when taken in abstract – and later in the thesis, when taken in respect to the forms of communication that have arisen due to the development of Internet technology.

To show the importance of recognition as grounding for subject, I first introduce Honneth's account of Hegel's recognition theory, and explain how Honneth makes further use of that to explain how the recognition process should function, and what kind of impact it should have on the individual. Second, I will discuss the possible negative impact of mis-recognition, highlighting how the individual is always subject and how subjection is embedded in every intersubjective situation where the subject is either being recognised, or not.

#### *4.3.1.1. The process of recognition*

As said, Honneth uses the theory of recognition to analyse the functioning of the day-to-day social world and highlight the inequalities that emerge because of the lack of universal recognition of all individuals as equals in respect to contributing to the social world. In this light, he is interested in identifying the ways in which the recognition process can become malformed and what harms are done when that is so. More broadly, Honneth argues that social justice requires that all members of society are granted equal recognition.<sup>57</sup> Despite this specific application of his theory of recognition to issues in contemporary society, however, Honneth's basic position is an adaptation of Hegel's analysis of the general function of intersubjective relationships. To understand what, for Honneth, recognition stands for, requires us first to consider Honneth's interpretation of Hegel, and then consider the ways in which he adapts the Hegelian picture of intersubjective relationships.

Honneth considers the recognition relationship – being recognised as human *qua* human – to be the cornerstone of Hegel's ethics (Honneth 1997: 16), his account of

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<sup>56</sup> In this respect, Honneth draws out two different layers of the recognition struggle—the struggle of the single subject; and the struggle of the social group who share the same identity (for discussion see Mark 2014: 16)

<sup>57</sup> Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser's 2003 book *Redistribution or Recognition?* is, in this light, a dialogue between the two on whether recognition of all social groups as equals, or redistribution of goods is the key for gaining greater social cohesion. Honneth argues that recognition is the key.

the ethical life of the individual as a social being, and his social theory of interlinked development between community ties and individual freedom (Honneth 1996: 16). In this light, to understand how recognition relates to the subject is to understand how the elementary intersubjective relationship between individuals as equals is the grounds for a well-functioning society.

As Honneth interprets him, Hegel considers recognition, and likewise, being recognised, to be the state that everyone, as social beings, aims for.<sup>58</sup> In other words, being recognised as human *qua* human is the driving force for establishing any intersubjective relations. What this idea suggests, in turn, is that humans are born into society, not seen as equals, or indeed anything at all. Instead, people need to establish themselves in relation to the other and subject themselves to the assessing gaze of the other to be recognised. This process of actively seeking recognition Hegel describes as the *struggle* for recognition. The blueprint of intersubjective relations is the process of becoming a self-aware 'I' and an agent through and despite this struggle. The tension of having to negotiate (or prove) one's position in the eyes of the other, however, means that one can become an autonomous agent only in relationship with another autonomous agent, and only through the process of othering – as well as being othered.<sup>59</sup>

The 'life-and-death' nature of the struggle for recognition, as Hegel metaphorically describes it, signifies the difficulties of ethical development that the individual is subjected to throughout this struggle (Honneth 1996: 48). The dramatic vocabulary further spells out the idea that an ethical life is possible only when one has recognised – in relation to the other – one's rights and duties (Honneth 1996: 48). Since social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition and since one is able to gain self-recognition only through recognising the normative perspective of one's partner (Honneth 1996: 92), reaching a state of communicative lived freedom – Hegel's ideal of a social system – requires proceeding through numerous stages of conflict and confrontation.

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<sup>58</sup> From here on in this chapter, references to Hegel should be understood as references to Honneth's interpretation of Hegel.

<sup>59</sup> This is a direct reference to the 'lord-bondsman' dialectic: being able to recognise one's distinctness means that the other, also, needs to recognise one's distinctness.

What is crucial to Hegel, and Honneth, and where this account differs from Butler's, is that they see the process of reciprocal recognition functioning in such a way as for there to be different spheres in which recognition can occur. To put it simply, there are different types of intersubjective relationships that the individual is subjected to and recognition in these different relationships leads the subject to gain different kinds of self-awareness.

In this light, Hegel, arguing that subject's development towards self-consciousness is gradual, but interlinked, suggests that the different intersubjective relations are all just stages in the subject's becoming a moral subject.<sup>60</sup> Hegel distinguishes three realms of intersubjective interaction, of family, civil society, and state, and considers each realm more demanding than the last (Honneth 1997: 21). As Honneth describes these, these realms represent recognition as, respectively: "the emotional concern familiar from relationships of love and friendship; as legal recognition; and as approval associated with solidarity" (Honneth 1995: 95). The three levels of self-relation, correspondingly, provide the following traits of recognition: through loving relationships people become aware of the unique nature of their needs; through a rights-based legal relationship recognition of one's moral responsibility emerges; and though the state sphere of ethical life people recognise each other as agents who contribute to maintaining the social order (Honneth 1997: 21-22). In this light, on Hegel's notion of the gradual development of self-recognition through conflict and confrontation, receiving recognition in the proper sequence gradually improves each person's experience of living in society.

Honneth borrows Hegel's triadic distinction of moral intersubjective relations to explain how intersubjective relations rely on initial recognition of the people as equals. Yet, because he is aiming to explain how recognition is crucial for social cohesion and social interaction, he distances his account from Hegel's in two significant ways.

Firstly, Honneth makes a clear distinction between the three spheres – love, legal, and social – in which recognition must occur. That these spheres stand separate

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<sup>60</sup>Honneth refers here to Hegel's second stage of dialectical development of self as an ethical being (See: Honneth 1992: 15-22).

from each-other can be seen most simply in so far as the principles that apply to each can come into conflict (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 144).

Secondly, where Hegel sees normative content only in the social or legal sphere, Honneth suggests that all three spheres have normative content embedded in the process of reciprocal recognition (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 146). This notion of morality present in all spheres is central to Honneth's argument that self-realization can occur only if recognition is achieved in all three spheres – recognising a person's physical integrity is, for Honneth, no less a question of moral obligation than recognising their value as an agent who contributes to a common social reality.

Honneth considers the three spheres of recognition to contribute in the following ways to self-awareness. Recognition in the love relationship would lead to *self-confidence* (Honneth 1996: 17); through legal recognition the subject becomes aware of their moral accountability, and so, develops positive *self-esteem* (Honneth 1996: 118, 120; 1997: 17); and, recognition in a shared value system is a source of *self-worth*, as the subject becomes aware of having valuable capabilities (Honneth 1996: 129; 1997: 17). When all of these recognitions are granted, the subject should be led to a state of 'self-realization' and the subject is able to present themselves as self-aware. On this understanding, Honneth conceives of recognition as an inherently embodied experience and the subject as a socially distinct and articulate subject. The subject is one who is able to perceive themselves as a singular subject sharing legal rights with all other subjects but is valued also for their ability to contribute to creating and maintaining social value. The possibility to reach this self-awareness, though, depends on the other adopting a moral attitude towards the subject. In so doing, each individual comes to recognise the vulnerable state that everyone shares as a consequence of that dependence, and this, in turn, should guide their acts accordingly and lead to respect for the other (Honneth 1997: 29). In this way, Honneth (1996: 36) suggests that the: "[r]ecognitional stance enjoys a genetic and categorical priority over all other attitudes toward self and the world". The social individual, as subject and an other, thus, inherently holds enormous power – and correspondingly – the responsibility to act in a way that is morally right towards the other.

What is crucial to this conception of the subject, though, is the idea that recognition might be not granted (or forgotten) – and that it is this danger that gives rise to the primal vulnerability embedded in intersubjective relations – both for the subject and for society more broadly. For whilst intersubjective relations can emerge only when individuals are recognised by each other as equals, there is no guarantee that the other will grant this recognition. In this light, the wrong that can come when withdrawing recognition lies in the conscious decision not to act on the responsibility that is inherent to one's own status as a subject. In this way, and in stark contrast to the considerate individual's recognition of the other, and so, their own vulnerability, the immoral and inconsiderate person is guided by considerations other than establishing mutual respect.

In the next section, I discuss the ways that this harm can occur when recognition is withheld.

#### *4.3.1.2. Withheld recognition*

The description of the recognition process as a *struggle* that Honneth borrows from Hegel, helps make clear Honneth's thought that the state of recognition is not the only state to which the process of being exposed to the other can lead. Vice versa, situations which lead to feeling insulted or humiliated, and to being disrespected, are also possibilities (Honneth 1996: 131). In these situations, the insulted, humiliated, or disrespected party is denied full recognition. At the same time, however, this is still a subject forming experience. That is because the subject has appeared in front of the other, and so, has been subjected to the assessing gaze of the other.

Denial of recognition can severely impact the individual in two respects. First, it harms the individual by limiting their freedom to act. For example, not being recognised as a valuable contributor to the shared social reality limits one's capacity to contribute to that social reality. Second, disrespect injures the positive understanding of themselves that people establish and gain only through intersubjective relations (Honneth 1996: 131). Withheld recognition, thus, relates to the specific vulnerability to which people are subjected because of the "internal interdependence of individualization and recognition" (Honneth 1996: 131). As the individual's self-image, i.e. their subjectivity, is constructed and maintained in being

continually exposed to and recognised by the other, the denial of recognition can lead to an overall collapse of the individual (Honneth 1996: 132).

Further to this, Honneth argues that there is a link between the possibility of recognition and a person's physical social existence, and that a lack of recognition can affect this link. In this respect, he suggests, disrespect always triggers an embodied response, or affective sensation. Indeed, this response is a crucial indicator to the individual that they have been denied recognition in the first place (Honneth 1996: 136). He explains: "It is only because human subjects are incapable of reacting in emotionally neutral way to social injuries [...] that the normative patterns of mutual recognition found in the social lifeworld have any chance of being realized" (Honneth 1996: 138). Thus, it is only because of the feeling of harm, and the embodied experience of a lack of recognition, that people are motivated in the struggle to become recognised.

In a related fashion, Honneth suggests the very reason that we can witness something as being 'unjust' lies in the link between recognition and moral injury. Moral misdeeds occur when recognition is withheld or denied<sup>61</sup>, and also if physical injury should be taken to result from an action that intentionally disregards essential aspects of an individual's well-being (Honneth 1997: 23).

In summary, Honneth's theory of recognition, similarly to Butler's account-giving, shows how the intersubjective relationship with the other holds the power to affect the subject in both positive and negative ways. Crucially, it is explicitly in the experience of disadvantage that a group, or individual, is led to demand the position and recognition that should be rightfully afforded to all. Thus, a well-functioning society operates only because of the possibility of harm and vulnerability intrinsic to each and every intersubjective relationship.

Honneth's recognition theory, thus, illuminates an important aspect of intersubjective relations. Whilst the moment of *recognisable* subjection starts only when the other

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<sup>61</sup> Honneth recognises three forms of moral injury: The practical maltreatment, when the person is stripped of the opportunity to freely use their body (Honneth 1996: 133); the harm to moral self-respect, when a person has been (institutionally) omitted from rights that they should hold (Honneth 1995:133); and, the harm to self-respect that comes from social value and social groups occurs with the denigration of individual or collective ways of life (Honneth 1996: 134).



acts on the subject – as Butler’s account of the subject shows – there is something prior to that subjection. Following Honneth, we can describe this as the moment of antecedent or elementary recognition – as before acting on the individual as subject, the other has already emotionally perceived a similarity, or equality, to the individual which means that the other has recognised the need for (initial) moral behaviour towards the other. Recognition itself, then, is an affective *and* moral attitude towards the other.

What is particularly important to this way of conceiving the subject is that recognition theory, in a way that Butler’s account does not, acknowledges the physical and psychological vulnerability of the subject in intersubjective relations. Intersubjective relations – and the proper functioning of these relationships – is linked to the embodied existence among others. Yet, if one is not recognised as having that embodied existence, then, those relations cannot form.

Where Butler’s account references embodiment only in an abstract manner – as a means to recognise one’s distinctness, and the limitation of being able to tell one’s story – considering Honneth’s theory of recognition also allows us to acknowledge the importance of the subject’s physical existence in front of the other. As we shall see in Chapter 9, this will be crucial in understanding how contemporary communication culture has led to a malformation in intersubjective relations – and so, a contemporary form of alienation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have established two crucial aspects of my re-articulation of the notion of alienation. Firstly, I suggested that it will be useful to conceive of the individual in terms of subject, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity, and forwarded some motivations for doing so. Secondly, using the works of Butler and Honneth, I have reconstructed an understanding of the *subject* and the forces that form the *subject*. I have suggested that the formation of the *subject* depends upon being recognised and addressed. At the same time, the subject is vulnerable to the ways in which the other can mistreat it in the process of address, or more fundamentally, fail to recognise it at all.

In the next chapter, I shall turn to consider how these intersubjective relations manifest through communication, and how responsibility for proper moral conduct in intersubjective relations is explicitly ascribed to both individual and other through communicative action.

# Chapter 5: Communicative subject

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, I put forward an account of the individual as subject, that I suggested is compatible with the broader discussion of the influence of contemporary communication culture on the individual experience. According to this framework, the individual is a *subject* whose position in society is tied to the intersubjective relation to the other and who is, on account of this dependence, inherently vulnerable. Moral behaviour between individuals, emerges from recognition of this vulnerability. In turn, the expectation of moral behaviour (towards the subject themselves, and subject's behaviour to the other) stabilises the inherently vulnerable intersubjective existence of the *subject*. Whilst establishing the inherent and inevitable relational nature of the subject's social occurrence, however, the form of this relation was not discussed.

The aim of this chapter is to better understand the form in which intersubjective relations take place – communication – and how this relates to the inherent vulnerability of the individual. In doing so, I shall present an account of the individual as *communicative subject*, who, through communication, forms themselves and the other; and, simultaneously, forms the norms and rules that define the social world in which the subject and other reside in. To do so, I will borrow from Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action.

Habermas suggests that the rules of properly functioning communication are such that everyone involved in communicative interactions are ascribed a certain responsibility for how they engage in those interactions. His theory allows us to appreciate the way in which intersubjective communication establishes the rules and norms of the social world in which individuals are living, and by virtue of that, ought to follow.

Before discussing Habermas's theory, however, it will be necessary to consider two preliminary issues. Firstly, I shall briefly explain what I mean by communication, and introduce a distinction between verbal and non-verbal communication that will be

crucial to the following discussion. Secondly, I shall make the case that communication is the source of intersubjective vulnerability.

## 5.1. Intersubjective communication

### 5.1.1. Verbal communication

Before turning to discuss the idea of the subject as communicative subject, it will be necessary to explain what I mean by communication. And more specifically, it will be necessary to explain what form of communication has the capacity to transmit meaning in a way that can affect the subject. To do so, I will distinguish between verbal and non-verbal communication.

In respect to the current discussion, *verbal communication* can be taken to refer to any system of symbols which is used to share meaning, where that meaning is agreed-upon and rule governed. This form of communication encompasses all different signs systems which are learned and shared. This includes written, oral, and sign language. Additionally, there can be forms of bodily expression that operate on learned and shared meanings and can thus, in specific language communities, communicate set meaning. For example, a 'thumbs up' gesture, is commonly understood in English speaking communities to mean 'things are OK' (Dinică 2014: 105).

In short, verbal communication operates on a set of symbols, which provide the means to voice and share one's self-aware 'I', as well as explain and discuss the social world around one.<sup>62</sup> For this type of communication to work it is necessary that the subject and the other share the same meanings. Moreover, as Charles Taylor explains it, meaning is itself social:

We first learn our language of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up. The meaning that key words first had for me are the meaning they have for *us*, that is, for me and my conversation partner together (Taylor 1989: 35; italics original).

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<sup>62</sup> I will touch upon the power and challenges that communication's operating on set meanings brings later, when discussing how shared meaning is fundamental to the subject's intersubjective vulnerability.

Verbal communication can take different forms and not all individuals will have the capacity to recognise the meaning of all verbal communication – and not all expressions will have the same meaning across different communities. There are, for instance, less than 5,000 users of Estonian Sign Language (ESL) (2018) and, so, verbal communication in ESL can only convey specific meanings to a very limited community. The thumbs-up signal, to take another example, though a positive expression in English language communities, is considered an insult in the Middle East. Whilst a ‘thumbs-up’ can convey meaning to large communities, what that meaning is, or is taken to be, depends on the community. Where meanings are shared, competent users of the different forms of verbal communication are able to both recognise the meaning of another’s communication and, moreover, anticipate how their own communications are likely to be received and responded to.

In contrast, *non-verbal communication*, as I use the term, refers to context specific features that are considered to contribute to the verbal communication – whilst not themselves conveying content.<sup>63</sup> These are often seen, for example, as embodied additions to verbal communication such as hand gestures, facial expressions, tone and rhythm of voice. The non-verbal features of communication challenge or supplement the agreed meaning of the verbal aspect of communication – so, for instance, tone can indicate that a comment is sarcastic or humorous, make a speech assertive or questioning and so on. As Iris Marion Young, challenging Habermas’s exclusion of the non-verbal features of communication from his account, points out<sup>64</sup> the possibility for non-verbal communication makes it so that the communicative relationship between subject and other is more than the exchange of expressions with fixed meanings; rather it is one in which both subject and other become negotiators of meaning (Young 1987: 72). As she explains in more detail:

In actual situations of discussion, tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, the use of irony, understatement or hyperbole, all serve to carry with the propositional message of the utterance another level of expression relating

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<sup>63</sup> Throughout the rest of the thesis, I use ‘content’ to refer to the propositional and semantic component of communications. This to be distinguished from the use of content to refer to the results of creative activities, e.g. videos, songs, artwork, etc.

<sup>64</sup> Young here refers to the work of Julia Kristeva to criticize Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Kristeva emphasises the personal embodied experience of communication, in contrast to Habermas’s disembodied rational communicative behaviour (Young 1987: 72).

the participants in terms of attraction or withdrawal, confirmation or affirmation. Speakers not only say what they mean, but they say it excitedly, angrily, in a hurt or offended fashion and so on, and such emotional qualities of communications contexts should not be thought of as non- or prelinguistic (Young 1987: 73).

Both forms of communication, then, are forms of intersubjective communication. Accordingly, both contribute to the formation of individual subjectivity. However, they differ in how they do so. In verbal communication the meaning of the communication is shared and, correspondingly, the likely response to that communication, as well as the effect it will have upon the other, can be anticipated. The significance of non-verbal communication is specific to context. Related to this, the response, as well as the effect, can vary greatly depending on the identity of both the other and the individual. Nonetheless, in so far as non-verbal communication works by supplementing the meaning of verbal communication, it is verbal communication that we can see as more basic to the subject-other relationship.<sup>65</sup> (And as I shall suggest, it is in respect to the shared meanings of verbal communication that responsibility for communication is grounded). At the same time, the online interactions with which this thesis is concerned are situations in which the communication is either stripped of non-verbal features, or, where those features have been translated into signs with fixed meanings and thus, into forms of verbal communication. Though, perhaps, a full account of the individual as communicative subject would focus on both verbal and non-verbal communication, in respect to these points, I shall restrict discussion of intersubjective communication to verbal communication.

### 5.1.2. Communication as the substance of vulnerability

The discussion of Butler's account-giving individual in the previous chapter helped us to establish the vulnerability of the subject in the interaction that occurs with the initial naming and identifying in the presence of the other. Despite appearing in front of the other in one's embodied physicality, the other needs to recognise the individual as a linguistic being, the self-aware 'I'. Whilst the subject can only occur in language by describing or explaining themselves, however, the other is already ascribing the subject with some set of features – subjecting them to meanings already set within

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<sup>65</sup> Though I shall return briefly to Young at the end of this chapter.

language. At the same time, even when recognised as a subject, and provided the chance to offer an account, the limitations of perspective and language prevent the individual's account from ever being complete. In this light, the individual-other relationship is always a *communicative* relationship. Communication provides the individual and the other with a field in which to appear, and language the tools to explain themselves. Likewise, it is the individual's and the other's ability to manipulate language in communication that gives life to the individual's vulnerability. Responsibility for communication, and towards the other are, as a result of this, embedded in all communication and, so moral behaviour is specially connected to the individual's nature as *communicative subject*.

To better understand the communicative nature of the subject, and how responsibility and vulnerability arise in the context of communication, I shall put the intersubjective account of the subject from the previous chapter into contact with Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Habermas is a second-generation Critical Theorist. His ongoing project in normative political theory is a response to the first-generation Critical Theorists' pessimism about the possibility of social change.

By focussing upon communication as his theory does, Habermas fills a crucial gap that emerged in the theories of the first-generation Critical Theorists. As Mendelson suggests, Habermas's predecessors, in following so closely Marx's emphasis upon the oppressive structure of the dominant system, also failed "to fully thematize the categories of intersubjectivity had made it difficult, if not impossible in principle, to see the possibilities of and basis for group formation and collective action within late capitalism" (Mendelson 1979: 48). In filling that gap, then, to quote Mendelson once more: "What separates [Habermas] most from the Marxist tradition in general is his attempt to build hermeneutically informed categories of intersubjectivity into critical theory e.g., language, interaction, communication" (Mendelson 1979: 47). The theory of communicative action – developed in the two-volumes of his *The Theory of Communicative action* (1984[1981]; 1992[1981]), and further expounded upon in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990[1983]) – is one of the central

pillars of this project, crucial to Habermas's defence of and explication of deliberative democracy.

Habermas is keen to establish a method that takes into account the intersubjective nature of individuals, then, so as to overcome what he sees as the self-defeating analysis of the system provided by the first-generation Critical Theorists. It is in light of this that he makes the distinction between the labouring/system and the interaction/communication. This distinction allows Habermas to theorise an intersubjective communicative *power* (and so, also, political system) somewhat separate from the material conditions that determine the individual. It is this split between communicative power and material conditions that enables to Habermas to theorise the possibility of change in a way that the first-generation Critical Theorists could not. The underlying motive behind Habermas's theory of communicative action, thus, is to provide the theoretical grounds for a normative political theory of how society/social decision making *should* operate. And, in his later work he turns to considering the practical applications of communicative action in the political domain – specifically in respect to deliberative democracy. It is worth noting, before moving on, then, that Habermas's theory of communication has received significant discussion – and criticism – in respect to its underlying political motivations as well as the viability or applicability of the model in the political domain. Whilst I shall discuss some of these criticisms later in the chapter, we should keep in mind that this branch of criticism is not criticism of the theory of communicative action itself. And in this respect, regardless of critiques of his political project, Habermas's theory remains significant as a theory of communication in its own right. Habermas's aim in this respect is only to identify a framework of how communication works in everyday situations, and how it *should* work. The framework he develops is grounded in the view that communication is the means of constructing and maintaining the social world. Putting aside discussion of the merits of his political theory, then, it is this aspect of Habermas's theory of communicative action that I shall be focussing upon in the rest of this chapter.



## 5.2. Communicative action

Habermas's theory is grounded in the view that communication is the means of constructing and maintaining the social world, and this being so, the recognition that communication can also form significantly distinct realities. Habermas's early theorising of communication's potential to form the social world is related to his historical, empirical work on analysing the influences of the printed press and its' gate-keepers on public opinion formation (see: Habermas 1989[1962]). The theory of communicative action expands on this idea in an attempt to identify the ideal workings of communication so as to explain how changes in society can and should take place via intersubjective communicative relationships. For Habermas, these are sites for genuine discourse, as opposed to one-directional communication. The theory turns upon the idea that communication is socially embedded and so, Habermas investigates both the role of the individual and the social world in the occurrence of speech acts. In doing so, he ascribes agency to the individual as communicator – suggesting that responsibility is attached to any communicative action just on account of its capacity to bring things into light and bring about change. Understanding how social change takes place through communication, then, also allows us to understand how the individual's vulnerability and responsibility to the other arises within conversation.

As Moon points out (1995: 148), the aim of Habermas's theory is to explain how individuals are able to coordinate their action through communication at all, not how they do. In this regard, Habermas's theory is strictly focused upon the meaning of the utterance, not the manner in which it is presented. Correspondingly, his concern is with how language functions in intersubjective relations, not with the speaker's intentions (Habermas 1984: 275). Thus, it is important to note that Habermas distinguishes the rational content of the speech act from the desires and feelings that accompany it, i.e. his focus is upon what I earlier labelled verbal communication, and not the non-verbal communication that supplements it (Young 1987: 70).

Through focusing on how communication functions in intersubjective relationships, Habermas establishes a framework of rules that every *intelligible speech act*, i.e. verbal communication that draws on shared meaning, should follow. These rules

explain how intersubjective communication functions, how the social world emerges through communication, and how communication functions as a means for maintaining that world. Communication, according to this account, can only take place when referring to the social world. Voicing the norms of this social world gives them either legitimacy or introduces the possibility for change. As I shall argue, the subject's responsibility, in a fundamental way, lies in the transformative power of this kind of communication.

As noted, Habermas's analysis of the nature of communication springs from his investigations of how particular developments in forms of communication impact on social world creation. In particular, we can look at his discussion of the impact of the printed press on forming public opinion in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). This early work engages with the specific historical period of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe (especially England, France and German), and draws on the rise of and fall of the bourgeois *public sphere* to emphasise the importance that free conversation among community members had in bringing about change in the social world.

Habermas's concept has also inspired debate as to whether the Internet could be considered a manifestation of the 'public sphere'. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, this debate was particularly prominent in the web 1.0 era, when a number of academics suggested that the openness of online communication would allow Habermas's ideal to be reached. The way in which the Internet has developed in line with the economic interests of service providers (which I discuss in the following chapters), however, has largely called an end to this debate. Despite the initial promise, the consensus seems to be that the Internet is not, after all, compatible with the notion of the public sphere (see the introduction for references, especially Habermas's own negative appraisal of the Internet in this light).

In the current context, the important point to emphasise is that for Habermas individuals are inherently social and appearing in front of each other means engaging in a communicative relationship – no matter the specific political conditions. More generally, it is the communicative relationship, in an abstract manner, that establishes how the intersubjective relationship with the other and the social world

affects the individual. It is in this more general form that I engage with Habermas's theory here.

### 5.2.1. The theory of communicative action

Habermas develops his communicative theory following Searle and Austin's work on speech act theory. Habermas adopts speech act theory in the first volume of the *Theory of Communicative Action* to analyse political realm, and suggests that turning to theorise communication offers the only possibility to overcome the dominating instrumental rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer, especially in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suggest has otherwise disabled the possibility to provide coherent critical theory of society (Habermas 1984: 386). In this respect, Fuchs suggests that Habermas's attempt to save and supplement critical theory by introducing a theory of communication drawing from speech act theory would have been less well motivated if Habermas had been aware of Lukács' work on communication in the *Ontology of Social Being*. As Fuchs put it:

Habermas does not realise that the importance of communication in society can be grounded in Lukács' works itself, which may be a better way for a critical theory than using concepts of communication that stem from bourgeois approaches such as John L. Austin and John Searle's speech act theories and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism (Fuchs 2016: 50).

As comment on Habermas's theory in relation to his underlying political motivations, Fuchs's point seems fair.<sup>66</sup> As noted above, though, we can assess Habermas's theory as a theory of communication – and especially its applicability to the current discussion – in isolation from his political interests. It is in this way, that I want to suggest that Habermas's theory can be usefully wedded to an account of intersubjectivity that precedes specific forms of social organisation, as discussed in the previous chapter. On that note, then, let us look more closely at the substance of the account of communication that Habermas does develop.

What makes communicative reason possible is the linguistic medium though which interactions are woven together and forms of life are structured. This

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<sup>66</sup> I return to a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Habermas's theory and Lukács later in this chapter.

rationality is inscribed in the linguistic telos of mutual understanding and forms an ensemble of conditions that both enable and limit (Habermas 1997: 4).

Central to his theory of communicative action is Habermas's supposition that society functions on intersubjective communication, and that this is symmetrical by nature. Communication establishes the subject-other relationship (Erman 2006: 381) one in which communicators recognise each other as rational agents, are engaged with each other's communication, and have rational discourse, if needed.

Whilst Habermas ascribes communication, and so, the communicating subject, a capacity for social world creation and social change, his theory of communicative action does not contend that all communication has this function, or capability. In contrast, Habermas argues, it is a very specific communication, or communicative relation, that would function this way (Habermas 1984: 295). In particular, it is only intersubjective verbal communication that provides any possibility for social world creation. Additionally, Habermas stipulates two general conditions that must be met for communication to have the power to create the social world: firstly, the social conditions have to support symmetrical or equal intersubjective communicative relations taking place; and secondly, the communication itself has to display certain inherent qualities that make the process of social world creation possible and sustainable.

These criteria represent the 'ideal' communication situation in which the communicative subject would appear as a rational agent, and the communication serve the purpose, either, of maintaining the current situation or bringing about changes to the social world that would benefit everyone involved. In this sense, these ideal conditions of communication are also the ideal conditions that form the human experience in the social world – as the individual's communication can have an impact on the social, and the social will impact on the individual.

In the following discussion, I shall explain how these criteria are met, i.e. how communication, and so, the *communicative subject*, contribute to social world creation. I will consider four related questions – what does it mean to be a communicative subject and how does communication affect the individual's agency;

and, what does *social world creating communication* stand for and how does it function.

### 5.2.2. The subject as rational communicator

In Habermas's theory communication is essential for any social coherence. He aims to explain how the recognition of utterances and the actions that follow is at all possible in circumstances where motivations and forms of communication vary. Moreover, he looks to explain how the individual as subject is affected by this communication, both directly by engaging in communication, and indirectly by referring to a shared language pool. Habermas's explanation of these various features of communication emerges through his distinction between intersubjective *communicative action* and monological *goal-oriented communication*.

I will untangle the differences between these two modes of communication.

Habermas's view is that the individual is inherently communicative. As he considers it, the subject's recognition of their agency as well as recognising themselves to be inevitably situated in society – i.e. among others – emerges only in communication. All communicative subjects are assumed to have the ability to act purposefully as well as carry out their plans (Habermas 1990: 134) and so, there are inevitable similarities between every communication. In particular, Habermas suggests that at the core of every speech act is a claim for intelligibility i.e. to shared meaning and understanding. It is in respect to this claim that the recipient – the other or subject – can recognise the utterance as meaningful. In that respect “speech acts can be announced as successful if and only if they have the force to generate an intersubjective relationship between two or more subjects” (Edgar 2005: 146). This, in turn, is an expectation that is related to the language itself and the linguistic coherence of the utterance (Edgar 2005: 148).

The relation to the other is forged depending on form, content and/or aim, of the intelligible speech act. And in these respects, communication does not have to be uniform in form, rather the agency that Habermas ascribes to the communicative subject allows the choice of different forms of communication according to the situation. The recognition of multiple forms of communication, and respectively,

several forms of engaging with the other and the shared communication realm, allows Habermas to theorise the organic changes that occur using speech act in different circumstances. In the light of discussion of the individual as subject in the last chapter, the moment of address, for example, can be consciously harmful, i.e. using racialised communication (Butler 1997a: 34), or just neutral, i.e. naming someone 'Peter' (Butler 1995: 10). This allows Habermas to argue for a different engagement with language and communication, where the communication asks for self-awareness and appearing in front of the others in a vulnerable position. It is communication in these circumstances, in particular, that forges a relationship between the individual and the other.

In Habermas's view, there are, in principle, two types of communication taking place in society – one that presents individuals as self-oriented agents, and the other that presents subjects as rational agents. These he respectively labels *goal-oriented communication* and *communicative action*. The individual-other relationship can manifest through either type of communication (Habermas 1984: 286). Where goal-oriented communication establishes an individual-other relationship in which the other does not have any value as a recipient of communication, communicative action establishes a symmetrical individual-other relation, in which all members of the communication-group are recognised as equal (Erman 2006: 383).

To better understand what kind of relationship to the other, and so self-awareness, communication forges, I shall look at the two modes of verbal communication in turn.

#### *5.2.2.1. Goal-oriented communication*

Everyday communication can take multiple forms depending on what the speech act needs in order to succeed. With this in mind, Habermas argues that one form that communication can take is what can be generalised as *goal-oriented action*. This is a form where communication is used as a tool by which individually determined ends can be achieved. Hence, in goal-oriented communication the subject as communicator uses communication that would lay the path to successfully achieve their goals (Habermas 1984: 11). Hate speech, for example, as Butler discusses, can be used as means for subordination of the other:

[Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for the state regulation of hate speech is that] certain kinds of utterances, when delivered by those in position of power against those who are already subordinated, have the effect of resubordinating those to whom such utterances are addressed (Butler 1997a: 26).

Habermas further distinguishes between two forms that goal-oriented action can take, depending on who – the communicator or the recipient i.e. the subject or the other – will be acting out the aim of the communication. Respectively, he labels these *instrumental action* and *strategic action* (where the latter is a sub-species of the former).

*Instrumental action* is a result of instrumental reasoning, which aims to find the best means to achieve a given end. Communication of this sort, thus, is a means to an end, a way to reach one's personal goals. Instrumental action is communication where the end stands alone from the means of achieving that end, and the end is realized by a causal intervention into the world. Habermas explains instrumental action as a mechanical process, like replicating fixed elements of social behaviour, geared towards a specific outcome:

We call an action oriented to success *instrumental* when we consider it under the aspects of following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events. [...] Instrumental actions can be connected with and subordinated to social interactions of a different type – for example, as the “task element” of social roles (Habermas 1984: 285).

*Strategic action*, as a form of instrumental action, is a goal-oriented way of using communication to get the recipients to act so that the communicator's ends will be met. Strategic action takes place when one or several communicators treat each other strategically and use various techniques – from flattering to frightening – to reach their specific goals (Habermas 1990: 133). Whilst coordination of behaviour and stability of situation might occur as a result of such strategic action, it is dependent entirely on the individual interests of the actors (Dietz & Widdershoven 1991: 239). In strategic action the communicative subject looks at the social world through an objectifying lens, and the effectiveness of communication is measured in respect to its success in bringing about one's preferred state of affairs.

If the actors are interested solely in the success, i.e., the *consequences* or *outcomes* of their action, they will try to reach their objectives by influencing the opponent's definition of the situation, and thus his decision or motives, through external means by using weapons or goods, threats or enticements. Such actors treat each other *strategically* (Habermas 1990: 133; italics original).

Both kinds of goal-oriented communication ascribe sole agency to the communicating subject, i.e. the individual is consciously choosing to engage in that form of communication in expectation of bringing about a specific outcome. In this sense, goal-oriented actions can either be successful or fail. The success criterion is always the expected outcome. Thus, whilst 'goal-oriented' action is still intersubjective communication, it is only restrictively so: It does not lead to renewing the social world in a creative way but could only give life to phenomena that have previously been identified as desirable by the communicator. In this way, goal-oriented communication can only ever re-enact socially set values and meanings.

Furthermore, because the communication is merely in service to the individual's personal ends, which might not be transparent to the receiver, depending on the type of goal-oriented action (e.g. political rhetoric as strategic action), this type of communication does not have to be justified to others sharing the communicative space. This leads to a one-sided relationship, where the other's role is simply to enact the goal of the communication. There is no intersubjective relation where the presence of the recipient would affect the communicative subject's self-awareness or goals. Goal-oriented action establishes an instrumental relationship with the other. Rather than considering the other as a rational communicative agent, the other is merely taken as a tool to achieve one's own ends.

In contrast to *goal-oriented action*, Habermas's notion of *communicative action*, describes a form of communication that does treat the recipient as another communicative subject and thus takes the recipient's response properly into consideration.

#### 5.2.2.2. *Communicative action*

In *The Future of Human Nature*, Habermas argues that subjectivity is, "[I]tself constituted through the course of social externalization, and can only be *stabilized*



within the network of undamaged relations of mutual recognition” (Habermas 2003: 34) – communicative action is the form of communication that underwrites this intersubjective recognition.

In this sense, it is via communication that the communicative subject appears in front of others – as, I saw similarly, in Butler’s view of giving an account of oneself. Likewise, it is through communication that the individual presents themselves as a competent member of the language community and seeks recognition from others by triggering a response. At the same time, though, the individual contributes to the shared language sphere against which they would be able to recognise their self as distinct in the first place. Making a speech act, thus, simultaneously underwrites recognition of the other as a someone with whom the shared sphere could be created – i.e. the other has to recognise the speech act as intelligible – and provides the individual with the possibility to distance themselves from the common sphere and recognise themselves as distinct.

Thus, in contrast to *goal-oriented action*, in *communicative action* the aim – to recognise and accept the validity claims that the communication is making – and the way of reaching that aim come together (Habermas 1990: 134).

Of course, since every communicative act carries meaning, and the aim of the communicative act is to convey this meaning – whether it be utterance that results in closing a window or discourse about climate change – in broad terms, all communication can be understood to be ‘goal oriented’. That includes communicative action. Nonetheless, there is still a principled distinction to be made here. *Goal-oriented action* is motivated by the communicator having a goal *extrinsic* to the act of communication itself, and it is in respect to achieving this goal that the speech act is employed strategically – even when a successful strategy might entail that the communicative interaction would not be successful *as communication*. In *communicative action*, however, the primary goals of the communication are those *intrinsic* to the nature of that action as communication. These intrinsic goals, first of all, relate directly to what, in speech act theory, is referred to as the illocutionary aim of the speech acts in question. I.e. a question aims to receive an answer, an assertion aims at acceptance, and so on. Underlying all such illocutionary aims for

Habermas, moreover, is the constitutive goal of communication action. As he puts it, in communicative action “all participants unreservedly pursue illocutionary aims *in order to arrive at an agreement that provides the basis for a consensual coordination of individually pursued plans of action*” (Habermas 1998: 129; emphasis added).

Unlike the goals of instrumental and strategic action, this intrinsic goal cannot be achieved by causally intervening in the world, but depends upon the intersubjectivity of communication and sharing the responsibility for achieving these aims with the other. In other words, from the moment of addressing the other (in instances where the other is seen as equal communication partner) communicative action also involves ascribing to the other the ability to engage in communicative action (Erman 2006: 383). And it is in relation to this intersubjective relationship that communication can lead to rational agreement.<sup>67</sup>

Communicative action emphasises the importance of the subject’s not obstinately following one’s own plans, but harmonising one’s understanding of the situation with others and, when needed, using negotiation to do so (Habermas 1984: 289). Communicative action is a speech act where the aim is to reach a mutual understanding upon the meaning of the communication, and coordinate action correspondingly. As Anita Kihlström and Joakim Israel point out (2002: 211), for Habermas, communicative action functions beyond its immediate semantic meaning – it involves both speaking and acting, and so, at the same time has a richer and more restrictive structure than goal-oriented actions. Indeed, Habermas explicitly emphasises the action that should follow the communicative action – a demand that reflects back on the political ambitions of his theory. Even before the demand for action, however, in so much as the aim of communicative action is recognition and acceptance, communication already ascribes a certain responsibility to take part in the communication process to both parties in the individual-other relationship.

Furthermore, it can already be recognised that communicative action is the key for intersubjective recognition between the members of the communicative realm and

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<sup>67</sup> None of this is to say that communicative action will not have extrinsic goals. It will – i.e aims and goals related to the issues under debate. It is only to say that successful communicative action depends, not upon achievement of the extrinsic goals that communicators might start off with, but upon achievement of the goals intrinsic to the nature of communicative action as communication.

understanding oneself as a valuable communicative member of society. As Habermas puts it:

Moral convictions and norms are, as I said, situated in forms of life which are reproduced through the members' communicative actions. Since Individuation is achieved through the socializing medium of thick linguistic communication, the integrity of individuals is particularly dependent on the respect underlying their dealings with one another (Habermas 2003: 54).

Hence, communicative action is the form of communication that presents the relationship with the other, and moreover, highlights the exposed situation of the communicative subject who is to rely on the other's response, i.e. it is this form of communication that determines the intersubjective aspects of the human condition. It is a negotiation of one's position in the communication and an attempt to establish oneself as an equal to the other (Habermas 1992: 139). Both the effect upon the individual's social experience – i.e. the communicative subject's recognition of themselves as rational and responsible agent – as well as the explicit moral norms that form the social world that the individual is living under, are brought about through the implicit rules upon which the communicative action functions. It is in respect to these rules that responsibility for communication is ascribed to the individual as a member of the social world, and that the other might activate that responsibility.

Habermas emphasises that the communicative subject's relation to the other, and so, to the social world, depends on the individual's communicative attitude. *Goal-oriented communication* can be recognised as communication in which the individual takes an instrumental attitude towards communication and the other as recipient, for the purpose of reaching their own goals. This is an instrumental communicative relation, in which the relationship between the individual and other is monological, and there is no discourse about the meaning of the communication. In this respect, *goal-oriented communication* can only maintain the pre-existing social world i.e. replicate the existing language of identities etc.

*Communicative action* occurs when the communicative subject takes a rational attitude towards their utterance and the other and is interested in reaching a shared understanding of that utterance before it is acted upon. In this way, communicative action is a dialogical form of communication in which the individual recognises the

effect that their utterance would have on all the participants, and is willing to justify the meaning of their communication. In this respect, communicative action can contribute, not just to the maintenance of, but also the creation of and change to the social world.

### 5.3. Communicative action: creating the social world

As mentioned briefly before, Habermas's theory of communication operates on the notion that there is a shared meaning system in place that would allow understanding of utterances and manipulation of language depending on which form of communication the individual is engaged with. The basic criterion of intelligibility arises in respect to this shared meaning system.

Habermas's discussion of communication is complex – he does not consider communicative subjects just as competent players of language games, skilfully communicating the message by switching meanings situation-from-situation. Rather, Habermas finds that being able to play a language game in the first place requires that there be a shared reference system, which individuals are actively maintaining, and possibly contributing to. It is this system that determines and constitutes the social world that individuals live under. Every communication, in one way or another, contributes to the shared language resource – either by merely maintaining it, or developing it. In other words, then, language usage will determine the values and meanings which constitute the social world that individuals live in. These values and meanings, however, depend on the attitudes that individuals adopt towards and in communication with each other.

Generally, it is only when the communicator can draw from the whole reference system, and test out the boundaries of that system, that the creation of the social world is not restricted. To recognise the power of communication to contribute to and change the social world Habermas investigates under which circumstances this language usage can occur freely.

#### 5.3.1. Lifeworld: the free social world

In Habermas's account, for the individual to be able to recognise and respond to communication meaningfully they need not just communicative competence, i.e. to

have mastered the language, but also a certain cultural competence. For communication to succeed, all participants must recognise the meaning of their respective attempts to communicate, and to do this they must draw upon a shared background: what Habermas calls *the lifeworld* (Habermas 1984: 12). However, this background does not specify a single way of interpreting each situation, but provides the means to interpret it at all (Edgar 2005: 169). Correspondingly a breakdown in communication indicates the lack of resources to interpret the situation.

The lifeworld is at the same time constituted through three aspects: firstly, it serves as the hidden context in which communication takes place; secondly, it provides the shared meanings on which communication operates; and thirdly, it defines the range of communication possible (Fultner 2001: 423).

Crucially, the lifeworld is an intersubjective normative notion, one that Habermas suggests is formed by three inter-related phenomena – cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization – that stand for, respectively, culture, society and person. Through communication, individuals at the same time create and confirm the society that they live in, thus, the communicative subject as communicator is simultaneously initiator and product of tradition (Habermas 1990: 135).

Speech acts – either goal oriented or communicative actions – are successful only if they generate an intersubjective relationship between two – individual and other – or more participants in communication. When this occurs, the speech act serves to bring to the fore the background against which the participants can assess the communication, even whilst it is this very background that is the binding force between the participants (Edgar 2005: 146).

The norms by which communicative subjects do this are established, enacted, and maintained through intersubjective relations. But without the challenges to the validity of the rules that arise through communication, those norms remain only abstract features of the lifeworld. It is when subjects are engaged in discourse that the rules that implicitly constitute the lifeworld are lifted from it and made explicit. Implicit certainties are, in such instances, turned into explicit knowledge that can be rationally disputed (Habermas 1990: 138). In this way, communicative subjects simultaneously assess the social conventions whilst using them – in turn, validating

the rules and norms by arriving at consensus on how those norms and rules are to be interpreted.

The lifeworld functions as a background against which any form of speech act – goal oriented as well as communicative act – can be seen as intelligible and be acted on. The nature of the lifeworld, however, itself limits the types of communication that contribute to challenging and validating the norms on which it functions. The instrumental rationality of goal-oriented communication operates on the rules already in place in the lifeworld, it is neither concerned with, nor has the capacity to trigger, a discourse. In this form of communication, then, the rules on which the lifeworld operates remain abstract and are only implicitly referred to in so much as understanding the communication demands that one follow those rules. It is, thus, only communicative action that has the capacity for discourse that would lead to communication, that confirms and changes social conventions.

In respect to the lifeworld, communicative action has a two-sided relationship. The lifeworld provides the grounds for successful communication, i.e. the other as recipient is only able to consider a communication intelligible and understand the communicative subject in relation to the shared meanings that lifeworld provides. Hence, communication will be disrupted if there are no shared meanings to draw from. At the same time, though, the communicative act confirms both the structure of the lifeworld, or, more specifically the norms and rules on which it draws, as well as the relationship between communication and action. That is, communication either validates or changes the norms and the rules that the very communication is drawing from, and, in doing so, in turn forms the lifeworld (Fultner 2001: 421).

Whilst communicative subjects are responsible for testing and shaping the norms of the lifeworld, the subject is, likewise, defined by the communication. The lifeworld subjects individuals to the possibility of establishing a relationship with the other by appearing side-by-side with the other and sharing the communication realm. When communicating, and reaching understanding of an occurrence in the world, the “actors are at the same time taking part in interaction through which they develop, confirm, and renew their membership in the social group and their identities” (Habermas 1992: 139).

Habermas further elaborates on this interdependent relationship in the following passage:

Linguistically and behaviourally competent subjects are constituted as individual by growing into an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, and the lifeworld of the language community is reproduced in turn through the communicative action of its members. *This explains why the identity of the individual and that of the collective are interdependent; they form and maintain themselves together* (Habermas 1990: 199; emphasis added).

The intersubjective relationship with the recipient and the uncertainty of shared background meaning, though, leaves the communicative subject in a vulnerable position. The consequences and side effects, as well as response to the communication, are not dictated by the subject as communicator when communicative action takes place (Habermas 1992: 149) and so the subject is never fully able to control the situation. In so far as unintended consequences may appear, then, the communicative subject is duty bound to explain and reconcile when the communication might be considered as goal-oriented action (Habermas 1984: 295).

That said, when the subject adopts a communicative action attitude, it is not completely at the other's mercy. Where the lifeworld provides an abstract knowledge of the world against which individuals will form an understanding of what takes place, or what should take place; then communicative action functions on inherent rules which moderate how the utterance could be understood, and if necessary, validated against the core components of the lifeworld.

To better understand how communicative action ascribes responsibility to the communicative subject, and how social world maintenance and creation can occur through discourse, we need to consider how the rules of *communicative action* function. Before doing so, though, it will help to briefly consider the restrictive form of social reality in which communication and the communicative subject do not have these rules.

### 5.3.2. Systems world: the unfree social world

The central feature of communication that occurs in the context of the shared *lifeworld* is that whilst the lifeworld provides the tools for communication and

discourse, it does not explicitly restrict the content of the utterance, and so, different social world formations are possible.

The lifeworld itself has a pool of shared understandings against which every utterance will be compared. This implicitly restricts the possible content and understanding of the utterance and, so, sets limitations on social world creation. Nonetheless, new meanings can emerge in the lifeworld through discourse. In turn, these new meanings can be incorporated, further used and referred to. For these additional terms to be a valid part of the lifeworld, however, Habermas contends that they have to have emerged through communicative action and be guided by communicative rationality.<sup>68</sup>

Whilst the lifeworld and free social world creation represents the ideal, Habermas also appreciates that quite different forms of social world can occur in which the emergence of new terms, and changes to the social world are explicitly restricted. These could be seen as distorted versions of the lifeworld, in which instrumental rationality rules, i.e. communication is systematically employed to achieve specific ends. Habermas labels these *system worlds*.

A system world manifests in societies in which social reality is pre-determined by systems of power, and communication serves to reinforce the system. Whilst a

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<sup>68</sup> Communication that occurs in the lifeworld, but is not communicative action, can introduce to the lifeworld terms and norms, which are not good for the health of the lifeworld. Habermas gives a pertinent example of this when discussing the rise of right-wing populism in Europe in a 2016 article. As he puts it:

In my estimate, domestic politicians mishandled right-wing populism from the start. The mistake of established parties lies in acknowledging the battlefield that right-wing populism is defending: “We” up against the system. Here it matters hardly a jot of whether this mistake takes the form of an assimilation to or a confrontation with “right-wing”. Take either the strident would-be French president Nicolas Sarkozy who is outbidding Marine Le Pen with his demands, or the example of sober-minded German justice minister Heiko Maas who forcefully takes on Alexander Gauland in debate – they both make the opponent stronger. Both take him/her seriously and raise his/her profile. [...] It is only *by ignoring their interventions* that one can cut the ground from under the feet of the right-wing populists (Habermas, 12.07.2016; emphasis added).

Habermas finishes his thought by stating that:

Parties that grant right-wing populists attention rather than contempt should not expect civil society to disdain right-wing phrases and violence (Habermas, 12.07.2016).



certain instrumental attitude in a society is inevitable, and goal-oriented action can be a part of a healthy communicative culture, the systems world refers to societies in which instrumental rationality has taken over. Habermas describes the process where the structures of the lifeworld change and solidify, turning it into a complex system where navigation is difficult. In these cases, the lifeworld is reduced to serving only as a part of a bigger structure (Habermas 1992: 173), the systems world.

In this kind of society, the discursive structures of social life as well as the processes of reaching understanding are repressed. The system that overrules the social world is, to a degree, hidden from the members – its values and meanings are asserted through targeted communication and not liable to rational discourse. This mechanism, as Charles Taylor puts it, is a source of the loss of freedom, and relatedly, loss of meaning (Taylor 1991: 29).

The systems world presents an account of a repressive social situation in which the human has little possibility to affect the social world, as the oppression is embedded in the social world itself. In such circumstances, a sphere where communication that has no pre-determined end can occur but has been side-lined and does not have any effect. In this sense, the notion of the 'systems world' describes a restricted communicative relationship, where the communicators have to follow the communication rules determined by the ruling system, rather than constituting these themselves. The systems world parallels the first-generation Critical Theorist's analyses of capitalism, and particularly Marcuse's discussion of repressive tolerance.

This distinction between the system worlds and lifeworld is also crucial to Habermas's efforts to save Critical Theory from what he perceives to be its self-defeating aspects, discussed earlier. By making the distinction between system(s) – which is related to individual's labouring being – and, lifeworld – which is related to individual's communicative being, Habermas sets out the possibility for there to be a change in dominant socio-economic-political system. Specifically, change through discourse.

Interestingly, as alluded to earlier, Lukács offers an alternative account of the system and communication relationship in his *Ontology and Social Being* (Fuchs 2016: 47).

In this text, Lukács developed Marx's idea of economic base and social superstructure maintaining each other, to argue that communication and material changes in society are not distinct but should be considered inherently intertwined. Thus, on this account, it is the communication of material culture that steers and maintain the changes in that culture. Moreover, this communication is inherent to that culture. Lukács suggests, in this respect, that communication develops only because of the communal nature of human existence in which questions and answers about the material/natural things need to be voiced; material life to be organised, and so on. In contrast to Habermas's later separation of system and lifeworld – with one determined by the socio-economic-political system and the other free to produce social life – Lukács suggestion, thus, is that communication is the social glue that helps to maintains the economic life of society. As Fuchs describes this aspect of Lukács's account:

[Language] helps distancing human subjects from objects and from other subjects and at the same time helps to co-ordinate the production of new objects out of existing objects and the emergence and reproduction of social relations between humans (Fuchs 2016: 58).

A key part of Lukács's theorising in this area, is that he considers work – either physical i.e. moulding nature, or mental i.e. moulding social world – as a conscious and active decision process; aiming to achieve ones' goals. As Fuchs puts it, it is this “teleological positing – the conscious and active production of changes by realising subjective intentions in the objective world – [that] is the common feature of the economy and culture” (Fuchs 2016: 69).

Lukács's account, we might note, emphasises the relationship between the work and the communication in a manner such that the individual appears to have no chance to distance themselves from communication that is part of the prevalent socio-economic-political system. Habermas refers to this kind of theoretical move as the “reification of consciousness” (Habermas 1984: 399) and it reflects just the same kind of (purportedly) self-defeating assumptions that he rejects from the first-generation Critical Theorists. It is important to note, however, that Habermas, clearly, does not reject the idea – found in Lukács's theory – that communication is necessary to maintain socio-economic-political coherence. Including under capitalism. Indeed, it is along such lines that he recognises the risk of money and

administrative power coming to determine the production of objects which communicate self-serving and ideological messages (Habermas 1997: 56). Yet, for Habermas, communication can do more than simply help to run or shadow the system i.e. it is not just a means for an individual's self-presentation. And it is in this light that, besides "media-controlled purposive-rational actions" (Habermas 1984: 398) that reproduce social-life, he also ascribes to the individual, specifically, communicative rationality. Communicative rationality – which corresponds to communicative actions – as Habermas conceives it is rationality that is not subject to instrumental reasoning i.e. self-preservation, but, which enables individuals to critically assess the system. He holds that the ability of this form of communication means that the "utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative socialisation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species" (Habermas 1984: 398).

Where, then, Habermas diverges from his predecessors – and also from Lukács – is in his account of the individual as a communicative being. And it is here, that I would suggest lies the strength of Habermas's theory. As it is by making a clear distinction between system steering social discourse, which may well determine the prevalent themes and topics communication, and the individual's ability and responsibility to critically engage and communicate, that he offers us a theory of communication that explains, first, how communication can contribute to the social world, second, that is, suitable for discussion of alienation, and third, that is suitable for analysis of the genuinely intersubjective aspects of the relationship between the individual and the social world that may manifest that alienation.

That said, it follows that only in the circumstances of a free *lifeworld*, can intersubjective communicative action capable of creating and changing the social world occur.

I will now discuss the rules that constitute such communication.

## 5.4. The rules of communicative action

As previously explained, *goal-oriented action* and *communicative action* most noticeably differ in respect to whether the communication needs to follow rules to

reach the aim of communication or if it can use whichever means are suitable. In this sense, goal-oriented action functions without any established rules shared with the other, whilst successful communicative action depends upon others recognising and following the rules of discourse by which a shared understanding of the meaning of the communication can be reached and action coordinated.

Communicative action, then, unlike goal-oriented action, has a rational basis – and the agreement of meaning cannot be forced, but is based upon common consensus. Hence, coordinated cooperation among individuals is also, inherently, rational (Dietz & Widdershoven 1991: 239). It is important to recognise in regard to this point that common consensus, and the coordination of behaviour that follows, does not reflect the validity of any (practical) norms that are acted upon, but only that all the participants agree upon the meaning of the communication (Moon 1995: 148). That is, if there is an agreement over a specific rule that should be applied, it is not an agreement on whether the rule is inherently good or bad, but that everyone finds the rule suitable. The question, then, is not whether any particular agreed-upon rules are good, but how agreement can be achieved.

The rationality that underwrites communicative action is based upon active negotiation to decide the meaning and legitimacy of the communication. As noted earlier, for Habermas, *every* communication makes claims of intelligibility that relate to the language itself and the coherence of the utterance (Edgar 2005: 148). When the other accept these claims (i.e. treats the communication as intelligible), then the content comes under scrutiny.

If the communication functions as goal-oriented communication then it should be recognised as such by the recipient and, if successful, the action following the communication will be in accordance with the communication. Crucially, though there are no claims in the communication that could be contested – there is either uptake or not.

Yet, if the communication functions as a communicative action it raises a set of claims that the individual as speaker implicitly expects either to be recognised or responded to. Successful communicative action depends upon reaching agreement

about these claims and, respectively, agreement is only reached when the recipient validates the claims that the specific utterance makes (Habermas 1992: 132).

In the attitude oriented toward reaching understanding, the speaker raises with every intelligible utterance the claim that the utterance in question is true [...], that the speech act is right in terms of giving normative context (or that the normative context that is satisfied is itself legitimate), and that the speaker's intentions are meant in the way that they are expressed (Habermas 1990: 137; *italics original*).

Following this passage, we can recognise three types of validity claims: claims of rightness, truthfulness and truth. The claim of rightness is related to the intersubjective aspect of society, which provides the resources to redeem normative claims. To claim rightness is to claim that the individual's communicative action is in line with the world of "legitimately ordered intersubjective relationships" (or indirectly, to the norms themselves) (Habermas 1990: 137).

The claim of truthfulness is related to the personal component of the lifeworld that is each participant's own world of subjective lived experience. It is, thus, a claim to the validity of subjective experience to which the communicator has privileged access. Habermas also considers this to be a claim of sincerity (Habermas 1990: 137; Habermas 1992: 307). Claiming that the communication is sincere refers to the degree to which it accurately expresses the speaker's intentions (Edgar 2005: 148) (in this way, the claim of truthfulness also concerns the manifestation of an opinion, or belief). In short, a claim to sincerity is only valid if the communicative subject is genuine in the performance of the speech act (Dietz & Widdershoven 1991: 239).

The claim of truth relates to the cultural aspect of the lifeworld, and with that, to the existence of a specific state of affairs. These are statements that relate to the objective world and are the basic resources for challenging and redeeming utterances (Edgar 2005: 170). As the name suggests, the claim of truth is the claim that the speaker is making a true statement (or accurate existential assumption) (Habermas 1984: 307).

Corresponding to the subject's implicit validity claims, the other as listener accepts the speech act by taking a 'yes' or 'no' position on each claim made (Habermas 1984: 287). The speech act is successful when there is intersubjective

acceptance of the validity claims. For the communicative action to succeed, then, the meaning of the utterance must be recognised, the validity claims that the utterance raises not contested, and the communication followed by the coordination of behaviour.

If any of the inherent validity claims are contested, further justification of the communication and validity claims is required. In challenging the utterance, the other contests either the normative rightness, the subjective truthfulness, or “a certain existential presupposition” of the validity claim; or all three (Habermas 1984: 306).

Contesting validity claims in this way leads to discourse – an interaction based in argument, and which should be won by the best argument. That is, the changing attitudes of the participants should be solely due to the virtue of the argument (Habermas 1990: 160). Discourse is the reflective form of communicative action (Habermas 1990: 130), and is precisely the process through which the norms of the lifeworld that have been taken for granted are brought about and transformed into knowledge (Habermas 1984: 25).

The discursive nature of this validation process is rooted in the rational nature of communicative action, i.e. once discourse occurs, the validity claims are settled one way or the other by the arguments presented in the discourse. Of course, this validation only occurs when the meaning of the contested validity claim is such that, in principle, a rationally motivated agreement is achievable (Habermas 1984: 42). In this respect, Habermas claims cultural values, which are essentially subject to interpretation, do not satisfy the criteria for being subject to discourse (Habermas 1984: 20). The same goes for imperatives and related speech acts, such as requests and demands, for which “the binding force of good reason that every communicative act has in itself is not exploited” (Habermas 1984: 305).

The communicative action ascribes two types of responsibility to the communicative subject – firstly, the validity claims that communication entails demand the subject to be sincere in their statement and stick with the meaning of the communication. At the same time, the possibility for rational understanding of the utterance indicates that they should – when there is a choice – always prefer to follow the relevant rules

without challenging them. This ascribed responsibility, though, is related to self-dignity, i.e. perceiving oneself as a rational agent (Taylor 1991: 32).

The rules of communicative action describe the internal standards of communicative action. The communicative subject aims at achieving mutual understanding of the meaning of the utterance and expects further action undertaken to be in line with the agreed upon meaning. The other is in a position – if needed – to question the communication, before agreeing with the suggestion of the utterance, or providing an alternative themselves. Hence, the rules of communicative action also demand that the individual take responsibility for 'their communication, as it is contributing to the lifeworld by presenting a commonly shared value. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the communicative subject to engage in this form of communication, when possible.

Habermas's rules of communicative action and participation in discourse reflect the ideal conditions of intersubjective interaction. In these conditions, Habermas suggests, there is a freedom for everyone to participate and engage in the discourse, to question and voice their attitudes and needs. Moreover, this is an irretrievable right of everyone (Habermas 1990: 89). Furthermore, Habermas suggests, the agreed upon norms should meet the principle of universality. In his words: "the consequences and side effects that its *general* observance can be expected to have from the satisfaction of the particular interests of *each* individual affected must be such that all affected can accept them freely" (Habermas 1990: 120). In other words, for the ideal to be met, it needs to be the case that every norm would be approved by the individuals affected, *if* they would participate in the discourse (Habermas 1990: 121).

This framework presents an account of how the communicative subject can and should engage in communication that would contribute to validating, maintaining and adding to the norms and rules that are part of the lifeworld, i.e. the pool of meanings that form the social world within which the individual is living. Intersubjective communicative action represents then the 'ideal' form of how the subject forges the interdependent relationship with the social world. The relationship is formed through rational communication with the other and is a process of recognising oneself as

always depending upon the other, and the other's communicative action. Engaging in communicative action also provides the possibility to recognise that one's communication affects the whole group, and that the individual's input is an asset in forming the content of the communication. The 'ideal', then, is to recognise oneself as a rational agent through establishing the communicative relation, and to recognise the others in return as rational.

A prominent critique of Habermas's theory comes from H.G. Gadamer who asks what we might think engagement in this form of discourse can truly achieve. Gadamer, a central figure in the development of hermeneutics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, argues that all forms of understanding, reflection, and criticism should be/are tied to the nexus of tradition (Mendelson 1979: 68). Hence, even Habermasian discourse, which should lead to the best argument to be pursued, is, on Gadamer's understanding, not separate from the pre-set understanding and prejudices that the tradition imposes. If that is the case, then, how is it that discourse can ever add to or change the social world – as it is crucial to Habermas's account that it can? This objection, as Mendelson points out, can be seen in the context of Gadamer's more general attack on the project of the Marx informed Critical Theory to provide an *immanent* critique of capitalism; and, Habermas's aim of re-establishing the normative grounds of that critique. If Gadamer's concerns are well placed, then, we should worry that the freedom that Habermas's notion of discourse is intended to highlight is only illusory. As long as discourse operates on the same linguistic framework as is employed within society more generally, there would appear to be no possibility to challenge and change/ overcome the system which has set it. <sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Taylor echoes this line of critique, when he says:

For Habermas, the priority to a discourse ethic is a product of maturation both ontogenetically and in this history of culture. But clearly there is a gaping hole here. We might be tempted to put it this way: they leave us with nothing to say to someone who asks why he should be moral or strive to the "maturity of a 'post-conventional' ethic [...] he could be asking us to make plain the point of our moral code, to articulate what's uniquely valuable in cleaving to these injunctions. Then the implication of these theories is that we have nothing to say which can impart insight (Taylor 1989: 87).

For the purposes of this discussion, at least, we can take this as a piece with Gadamer. Thus, the comments below can be taken to apply to Taylor's critique too.



Gadamer's critique of the ongoing dependence upon linguistics inherent in Habermas' communicative approach to the question of how to re-make the social world, resonates with a different set of challenges raised by feminist thinkers such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser. Young and Fraser are both concerned with the exclusive nature of the specific social world/setting that Habermas describes as apt for communicative action, and how it would appear to limit the possibilities for people to contribute to the discourse and especially to convey 'new' meaning. Young's criticism, as briefly mentioned earlier, focuses upon Habermas's exclusive focus upon verbal communication (Young 1987). In positing that rational communication is limited to verbal communicative acts, Habermas is unable to accommodate the role that, for instance, justified anger might play in communicating the unjustness of the social order experienced by someone who is marginalised in that order. In this kind of exchange, the non-verbal content would seem to be a valuable part of the discourse, that adds both extra weight and urgency to the verbal content, as well as subtly changing the cognitive content (e.g. the expression 'this is unfair' can be accompanied by justified anger that indicates a deeper moral dimension to that unfairness, such that the real meaning of the expression is 'this is UNJUST'). In that sense, communicative acts that have the same verbal content and linguistic meaning can provide quite different contributions to discourse as a result of non-verbal differences. This line of criticism is also reflected in Fraser's discussion of the nature of the public sphere (Fraser 1990). Broadly, Fraser can be seen to suggest that an emphasis upon 'rational communication' narrowly conceived can bake in prejudice in the form of unfair judgements of communicative competence against those who do not exemplify the traditions of that system. This will happen, just, when the conception of rational discourse in play is set according to the prevailing values of the system in place. In this way, the dominant social system can systematically undermine the validity and variety of voices in the discourse, even whilst appearing to operate on just the kind of 'free discourse' that Habermas describes.

In the light of these criticisms, and reflecting the point made earlier in the chapter, it is important to distinguish the normative framework of communication that Habermas's communication theory provides from the critique of how communication

might occur in any specific constellation of social world. Likewise, criticism of the content of the rules of communicative action – as Habermas identifies them – need not be taken as criticism of that framework over all. If his precluding non-verbal communication does undermine the egalitarian principles of Habermas's theory, then, for our current purposes, we need only note that this kind of communication ought to be covered under the rules of that theory – but we do not need to reject the basic framework of rules that Habermas offers. Indeed, as Mendelson points out, in defence of Habermas, it is very much in the principle of Habermas's discourse ethics that such exclusion should not take place (Mendelson 1979: 70). It is consistent with that underlying principle that the details of the framework itself might be worked out and improved within discourse itself (e.g. through the debate between scholars working on these issues). I might add to this that, as I am employing it here, Habermas's theory as it pertains to intersubjective relationships is wedded to the more basic account discussed in the previous chapter. Where, in line with Gadamer's critique, the norms of discourse as set by the prevailing system might fail to admit valid yet truly radical contributions/criticisms to that discourse – such failures will only occur when there is also a failure at the level of the more fundamental level of recognition. Since recognition in its basic form inherently occurs in the initial ethical encounter between subject and other, however, it is – in principle – possible that recognition can proceed in an undistorted way, even when that goes against the values of the prevailing social system. So long as the intersubjective relations proceed properly at this level, then, there is the possibility for radical change at the more substantive level. And, thus, so long as speakers act upon the demands for responsibility and reflection embedded in their communication as communicative action, rational discourse will not be a place to confirm pre-set ideas – even those about what the content or substance of such discourse ought to be.

## Conclusion

Habermas's theory of communicative action forwards an understanding of the individual as an inherently communicative subject who always occurs in the world in intersubjective (communicative) relationship with the other. An inherent feature of this picture is the notion of the subject as always occurring among others,

determined by intersubjective relationships. In that respect, then, Habermas's theory fits with the discussion in the previous chapter whilst, crucially, giving a greater understanding of the communicative aspect in the intersubjective relationship.

Additionally, Habermas looks to explain social coherence from the perspective of intersubjective communication. To do so he provides a thick description of the two-tier communicative process that is always taking place when the communicative subject engages with the other as their peer. The details of this process, in turn, explain the relationship between the subject's communication and social world creation and provide an 'ideal' picture of the occurrence of this intersubjective communication.

In respect to the discussion over the previous two chapters I shall employ this concept of the individual as a communicative subject in my analysis of the contemporary social world and the influence of new communication technologies upon the individual-social world relationship in the following chapters. To summarise the core features of the communicative subject: the subject is formed and individuated in intersubjective relations. The formative experiences include the situation of address and the process of recognition. Both of these are ongoing and, crucially, represent moments in which the individual is vulnerable to their reception and response from the other. At the same time, the other as a subject themselves, is also vulnerable. In this way, subject and other are mutually responsible to each other.

Moreover, the substance of these interactions is found in communication. In this light, responsibilities to the other can be understood within the framework of responsible communication that Habermas provides. One feature of this framework is that communication, as well as constituting intersubjective relations, is the way in which the norms, values and meanings that make up a shared social world are negotiated, shaped and formed. In that respect, responsibilities for communication are not only responsibilities towards the other, but responsibilities towards the social world that the individual inhabits.

## Part III

# Chapter 6: The Contemporary social world – offline and online

*“As we move into the world of mobile code, of secure systems, of network payment, the new principles are being, silently or not, laid down. These principles will define the behavior of a new machine, a new anthill, a new brain, which is the sum of ourselves and our creations.”*

Tim Berners-Lee (EUSC 1995)

## Introduction

The following two chapters establish the core account of the contemporary social world.

As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, I take the social world to stand for the specific social setting that people are living in, which determines the way how individuals perceive themselves, as well as conduct their social life. The social world, so understood, is constituted by the norms and values, meanings and names that the individual is subjected to from birth. The exact functioning of the social world at any point, as well as the individual's relation to it, is determined by the socio-economic-political system that governs that world and the forms of communication that are possible in that system. An individual communicative subject, correspondingly, is not able to overrule or dismiss the system, nor the values that it epitomises. Rather the relative openness of the prevalent system and the possibility to have discourse determines whether the individual is able to contribute to change in the social world at all. To use Habermas's terms, the *lifeworld* refers to a social setting in which there is scope for discourse and genuine communicative action between individuals, and so social change. The *systems world* refers to a social setting in which the individual is only able to follow and maintain the existing system by replicating existing behaviour patterns. By the analyses of capitalism discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, capitalism is a systems world.

My analysis of the social world up to this point has been concerned with social worlds that are formed by, or maintained through, offline intersubjective communication.

Yet, today, the development of the Internet and associated communication technologies has led to a unique stage in the social world, whereby society, as well as the subject's everyday life, is framed by digital technology, and the online communication it enables. Along these lines, Simon Lindgren defines contemporary society as 'digital society', in which Internet enabled communication platforms, i.e. social media, as well as digital devices, have had and continue to have significant impact on how the social world is formed (Lindgren 2017: 4). Crucially, as Lindgren emphasises, the digital does not stand apart from the contemporary social world but has become central to it. In respect to this, Lindgren suggests the contemporary social experience should be seen as one in which the online experience supplements the offline. As he explains:

Today, we live in a digital society in the sense that we are in an era where our lives, our relationships, our culture, and our sociality are digitised, digitalised, and affected throughout by digital processes. When we repeatedly speak of "the digital" in this way, we use it as an encompassing notion for our current experiences of social life (Lindgren 2017: 7).

I am interested in the possible impact on the individual as well as the social world that the 'digital' has had in relation to intersubjective communication/communicative action. In this light, I argue, that, as a result of the development of online communication technology, the *contemporary social world* has come to be constituted simultaneously by distinct offline and online communicative *ecosystems*. Having discussed offline communication in the previous chapter, the current and following chapters provide an account of the online communicative ecosystem and how it frames the social existence of the contemporary individual.

The structure of the discussion across these chapters is as follows:

In this chapter, I first explain the evolution of the Internet from web 1.0 – where online communication is simply an extension of offline mediated communication, to web 2.0 – in which the emergence of social media has created an online communicative ecosystem that mimics the offline. I, then, suggest that, due to the way in which it mimics the individual's existence offline, the web 2.0 constructed online ecosystem should be considered as distinct from, and not merely extending or complementing, the offline ecosystem. This analysis explains how the contemporary world is

constituted by the emergence of new communication technology means and, in particular, social media.

In chapter 6, I analyse how the online communicative ecosystem, as formed by social media, has come to be dominated by a new capitalist socio-economic-political system that I call 'communicative capitalism', following Jodi Dean's paper *Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics* (2005). Drawing on the work of Jodi Dean, Christian Fuchs (2017), Simon Lindgren (2017), and Vincent Miller (2011), I explain how the democratic discourse of participation and sharing that the social media corporations champion has actually helped those corporations to dominate and exploit the individual's online presence.

Chapter 8 analyses the common perception that communication functions similarly online and offline to show how the structure of web 2.0 communication enables individual to dismiss their responsibility as a communicative subject. Finally, in Chapter 9, I put forward an account of how contemporary online communication has come to dominate the social world, both online and offline. I draw out the differences and similarities between the alienating social systems of capitalism as analysed by Marx and Critical Theorists and communicative capitalism to argue that the relationship between the individual and the contemporary social world represents a distinctive new form of alienation.

## 6.1. The Contemporary online ecosystem

The Internet weaves the fabric of our lives. [...] We live in, on, and by Internet, in work, business, education, health, governance, entertainment, culture, politics, social movements, war and peace, and friends and family (Castells 2014: v).

As Manuel Castells suggests, the commercial introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1990,<sup>70</sup> and the technological development that has followed, has spread the power and influence of the Internet into all aspects of life. At one level, the widespread access of wireless platforms has allowed a global geographic spread of

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<sup>70</sup> Strictly speaking, the Internet dates back to the ARPANET system launched in 1969. Arpanet was developed for military purposes, however, and its usage shared little in common with the social use/discourse that is characteristic of the post-WWW Internet.

Internet access – with there now being 4 billion Internet users and 6 billion subscribers to wireless services (IWS 2018). On another level, technological development has led to the presence of the Internet in myriad different aspects of the individual's everyday life. Thus, whilst being online can be taken to refer simply being on the Internet, or the range of activities carried out through the Internet, what is involved in being on the Internet, as well as the size, nature, and scope of that network, has undergone profound changes in the short time that the Internet has been around.

Three decades of Internet evolution have led, I suggest, to the development of a contemporary social world in which there is a distinct social media controlled online communicative ecosystem that exists in parallel to the offline. Moreover, since, the online ecosystem occurs simultaneously to the offline and, through social media, facilitates comparable intersubjective interactions to those in the offline world – it can also be seen to contribute to the creation of the social world. As Manuel Castells puts it, the contemporary online space is “the social space where people meet, socialize, retrieve information, express themselves, work, shop, create, imagine, participate, fight and shape their experience” (Castells 2014: v). As people have transferred these activities to the Internet, so too has the capacity for intersubjective relations to shape the social world expanded from offline to online communication.

In the following section, I lay out the case for these claims. To understand the nature of the contemporary Internet, I make use of the further distinction between two stages of development of the World Wide Web: the web 1.0 – which refers to the Internet as it was preceding social media, and the web 2.0 – which refers to the Internet after the advent of social media. I first explain the nature of web 1.0 and show how the perception of online spaces that it provided is not compatible with a contemporary account of online interaction. Second, I turn to the web 2.0 enabled online, explain how it differs from the web 1.0, and explain how the development of social media has led to the online communication constituting a distinct and parallel ecosystem to that of offline communication.

### 6.1.1. Web 1.0 – an alternative to offline mediated communication

Where the Internet is the underlying network of connections between computing devices that enables the exchange of data in digital code – whether in the form of raw information, communication, media etc. – the World Wide Web provided a front-end for this network that enabled the ordinary user to easily navigate that data. The term web 1.0, more specifically, refers to the Internet as it was during the first stage of development of the World Wide Web. At this point the web was a decentralised collection of personal web pages and bulletin boards, and Internet communication more generally incorporated email, chat rooms, and user lists (Chayko 2017: 32).

In comparison to the contemporary web 2.0, the Internet in the web 1.0 era was decidedly undynamic. This was partly a result of limitations in the relevant programming languages (i.e. HTML, CSS etc.) at the time, which required that the whole web-page be reloaded whenever new content was added. Additionally, at least in a wider range of instances than now, some basic knowledge of programming was needed to effectively contribute to online conversation at all. (E.g. forums/user-lists which required formal html/css mark-up for italicised text.)<sup>71</sup> Corresponding to these technological limitations, the web 1.0 can be seen as a period in the Internet's development during which most users were limited to consuming pre-existing online content, whilst only a smaller proportion of users could themselves contribute to the creation of new online content (Lindgren 2017: 28). As I shall explain, it is in respect to these limitations that communication in the era of web 1.0 should be seen as complementing and extending offline communication, rather than representing a distinct communicative ecosystem in its own right.

To develop this line of thought, I will make reference to the distinction between different forms of offline communication developed by J.B. Thompson in his 1995 *The Media and Modernity*. Thompson's distinctions are developed in an important critique of Habermas's overarching theories of communication and politics. I shall return to this aspect of his work in Chapter 8 when I put Habermas's theory of

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<sup>71</sup> Sherry Turkle describes the people who spent their free time making such websites and on these lists as 'tinkerers' (Turkle 1995: 60).



communicative action into contact with the discussion of online communication. For the moment, however, we need only focus on the content of Thompson's distinctions. In this light, Thompson identifies three categories of offline communication: *face-to-face communication*, *mediated communication*, and *mediated quasi-interaction*. Before applying this framework to Internet communication, each of Thompson's categories should be explained in more detail.

*Face-to-face communication* is communication that takes place in the immediate communication realm and does not rely on any media to deliver the message (Thompson 1995: 82). Rather, face-to-face communication occurs only with the immediate presence of the communicators. Consequently, further explanation, or reference to the context of the communication, is not necessary; the communicators' shared environment provides the context. In this way, face-to-face communication operates on visibility – as the communicator and recipient share the same spatio-temporal reference system. As a result of this, the success of the communicative exchange is simultaneously in the hands of both communicator and recipient, and again, this can be recognised immediately. If the initial communication is not successful, there is a potential for dialogue.

*Mediated communication* Thompson considers (1995: 83) to be the opposite of face-to-face communication. Letters and phone calls are good examples of this form, which depends upon a technical medium to forward the information of symbolic content to individuals who are distant in space, time, or both. With mediated communication, the spatio-temporal reference system is not shared, and so, communication success depends on the recipient's recognising the meaning of the communication. To aid the process, communicators might consider providing context cues, but the interpretation of these too will be in the hands of the recipient. In short, mediated communication is more open-ended in character than face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, and like face-to-face communication, mediated communication is still always oriented towards a specific other, and so, is also dialogical by nature.

In contrast to mediated communication, Thompson suggests, so-called 'mass media', whilst also involving mediating technologies, function significantly differently.

Neither long-established forms of mass media like books and newspapers, nor radio and television, depend on making a reciprocal connection to the recipient in the same manner as does mediated communication. Rather, the interaction taking place is what Thompson calls, 'mediated quasi-interaction' (1995: 84). This is interaction that targets a pre-defined audience. With '*mediated quasi-interaction*' there is a fundamental asymmetry between communicators and recipients. Most importantly, the communication predominantly moves only in one direction.<sup>72</sup> Thus, 'mass media' communication is usually *monological*.

In light of Thompson's distinctions, then, we can see that the web 1.0 extends the offline communicative sphere in two ways. Firstly, the use of a computer to facilitate online communication serves only to define that communication as another form of mediated communication; and secondly, reliance on the Internet to convey communication is similar to the use of any other network to distribute a message. I shall briefly elaborate on both of these points in relation to online communication in the web 1.0 period.

First, whilst online communication, unlike offline, is by definition all mediated, this is not sufficient grounds to classify it as a separate communicative system. Compare, first, two forms of mediated communication: a letter, which is written offline using, say, a typewriter; and an email, which is written using a computer and is only accessible online. Despite the differences in communication technology and their different forms (i.e. a letter is tangible; email is digital), both letter and email have an author and a recipient. Additionally, in line with Thompson's distinction, in both instances the recipient is expected to understand the content of the message through reading the text.

Similar points can be made regarding the relationship between some forms of early online communication and offline mediated quasi-interaction. Whilst email is directed to a specific individual, similarly as letter writing, other forms of online communication – such as bulletin boards, and blogging – provide the means for distributing

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<sup>72</sup> Letters pages in newspapers, phone-ins on television shows, and other such forms of feedback allow some semblance of back and forth communication, but this is minimal.

information to large audiences. Others provide the means for self-advertisement – e.g. dating websites. Where email resembles offline mediated communication, these other early forms of online communication – which allow the user to get the message out to a wider audience – thus, mirror offline forms of mediated quasi-interaction.

In respect to these points, then, the differences in the specific technology used to produce the message do not appear to pick out any significant difference in the nature of the communication itself.

Likewise, the specific network that online mediated communication occurs within – i.e. the Internet – does not on its own indicate any fundamental difference between online and offline spaces. For where online communication relies on the network of connected computers that forms the Internet to deliver a message to the right email address, so too does offline communication make use of postal services to deliver letters to the correct address. Emphasising only the form of connection, then, also fails to pick out a genuine distinction in the nature of online and offline communications.

Despite the use of computers and the Internet as the means of mediation, then, there is no obstacle to defining the different kinds of online communication prevalent in the web 1.0 era as mere sub-sets of the different forms of mediated offline communication. Email extends letter writing, news websites extend the mass-media, and tele-conferencing extends phone calls.

What may, on the other hand, strike us as a more significant difference between web 1.0 communication and offline communication is the agency that individual needs to exercise to be available for communication. Consider again the comparison between email and letters. The individual, as a member of society, has a continuous physical presence, and so, typically a physical address in that society. In case of letter writing, the other is, in one way or another, able to learn the address and send the message. (Of course, the availability of this information in some cases will depend on the individual actively sharing it with the others. Likewise, addresses can change.) With online communication, in contrast, individuals have no pre-determined presence as communicative actors and there is no address automatically ascribed to them by

virtue of that. Instead, to receive communication, the individual needs to make themselves present online by setting up a 'placeholder' for their physical being, e.g. a user name or an email address. The need for a placeholder means that engaging in online communication demands the individual make conscious decisions to appear online, in a way that engagement with the offline world does not. Likewise, the communicative subject has an active role in establishing the possibility to be connected-with online that they do not offline.

It is in respect to this requirement for online 'placeholders' that discourse championing the virtues of the Internet is often framed as the discourse of (global) connectivity (both in the web 1.0 era and in the contemporary). Some examples include, Richard Thieme, writing in a 1995 edition of the influential technology and culture magazine *Wired*:

The Net is an imaginary web providing real connection with real people, in a remarkably new way. On the Net, the absence of visual cues for race, gender, disability, and age enables us to create personae that simultaneously hide and disclose who we are, making community on the Net remarkably inclusive. By disarming the usual cues that trigger exclusion, the Net becomes a come-as-you-are party, a cultural feast to which everyone is invited. The Net is one source of the mutuality, feedback, and accountability that we need to counteract the rigidity and isolation of modern life (Thieme in EUSC 1995).

Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, in a 1995 speech:

But now we have links, do we know what to do with them? When it comes to designing larger machine, we are still banging the rocks together. But we are at a time of great creativity, of great potential for change for better or worse, and there is a feeling that in fact we may be able to bring our collective teamwork up to a level at which we can ensure our survival. We have got 'the great record' at our fingertips, and maybe we may yet learn to 'grow in the wisdom of race experience' such that Vannevar Bush might be proud of us (Berners-Lee in EUSC 1995).

And, Vinton G. Cerf, rather more poetically proclaiming:

But, could these new resources not be shared? Let links be built; machines and men be paired! Let distance be no barrier! They set That goal: design and built the Arpanet! (Cerf: 1990).<sup>73</sup>

This discourse, in turn, highlights two characteristic features of early online spaces as accessible only via ‘placeholders’.

Firstly, online connectivity in the web 1.0 era was strongly and positively associated with anonymity. By appearing online and connecting with others, the user was allowed to try out different roles and identities, to take on an avatar, write under a pseudonym. In this respect, the web, in its early incarnation, was considered a sphere of endless role play – an image exemplified and exaggerated by the popularity of MUDs (multi user domains or dungeons).<sup>74</sup> The centrality of anonymity to early perceptions of online communication is captured in the iconic Peter Steiner cartoon published in *The New Yorker* on 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1993. The cartoon depicts a dog sitting at and operating a computer whilst looking down explaining something to another dog. The caption reads: “On the Internet, nobody knows that you’re a dog” (Fleishman 2000).

Despite the possibility and uptake of anonymity, however, discussions of this aspect of online communication and the potential harms associated with anonymity did not have the same prominence in the web 1.0 period as they have come to have had more recently (where anonymity is considered, for example, as a key reason for uncivil or harmful communicative behaviour online). Indeed, as I will suggest when turning to discuss the web 2.0, the need for real identities is rooted in the later-found marketing value of the Internet, rather than the now widespread concern for the harms that might come with anonymity.

Secondly, the Internet, in a similar vein to the cinema in Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of alienation in an earlier stage in capitalism’s development (Horkheimer &

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<sup>73</sup> Cerf’s poem laments the passing of the Arpanet, but I take it to clearly represent the idealistic view of the Internet more generally.

<sup>74</sup> See Turkle *Life on the Screen* 1995 for ethnographic work on MUDs and their users in the earlier Internet era.

Adorno 1997: 139), becomes celebrated as an avenue of escapism from the immediate, i.e. offline, world. We can see this, for example, in the way that individuals might choose to present their best selves online, free from the constrictions of their everyday life. As Turkle in her 1996 article *Who are We?* explains, with reference to one of the cases she encountered in her field study of this phenomenon:

Stewart shaped a character named Achilles, but he asks his MUD friends to call him Stewart as much as possible. He wants to feel that his real self exists somewhere between Stewart and Achilles. He wants to feel that his MUD life is part of his real life. Stewart insists that he does not role play, but that MUDs simply allow him to be a better version of himself (Turkle 1995:193).

Where cinema and TV allow only passive content consumption, however, this kind of escape to online spaces demands conscious engagement and as such a personal investment to make connections with others.

At the same time as this, the escapist turn to connecting online can be taken as a response to failing communities in the offline world. Where Robert Putnam, in his famous 1995 paper *Bowling Alone*, argued that the offline world had seen a decline in social capital – and so intersubjective connections, the emergence of the online world presented a new space for these relationships to be established. Yet, whilst the individual is able to create these connections by consciously engaging with others online, there is the possibility to opt out and log-off in a way that is not present offline. Whilst offline connections are organic, then, intersubjective connections established online – especially on web 1.0 – are dependent and determined by the agency and interests of the individual. This is well illustrated by Miller's summary of Rheingold's description of the purpose of online communities:

[O]nline communities are created and sought out specifically to provide people with something that they want or do not have. There is a point/benefit to them that is evident for the members and if these benefits have been obtained or are no longer needed, a member can leave the group. *There is a reason for the existence of the community, and a reason to be in it* (Miller 2011: 192; emphasis added).

The web 1.0's reliance on computers to create the message, and the Internet to distribute it, as we have seen does not differ remarkably from offline forms of mediated communication. But, as the Miller quote illustrates, what was novel to even

this early form of the online system, and communication within that, was the emergence of a network of people (and businesses) who are available for interaction precisely because they have made themselves available and have consciously sought connections, which – as it seems – would somehow serve their interests.

In short, then, the online spaces of the web 1.0 offered an alternative to offline communication spaces – but for that to take place, the individual was required to commit to being online. This demand on agency to appear online does mark a difference between online and offline communication, but it also limited the ways in which web 1.0 communication could substantially differ. Indeed, beyond the conscious decision to become available on the net in the first place, communicative relationships in certain online spaces, e.g. chat rooms or MUDs, could (and still can) only be established if an individual is online, so to speak, in that moment. What is more, in nearly all instances, web 1.0 era online communication required there to be a contemporaneous embodied presence in the offline world to engage with the online world – i.e. someone had to sit at the computer to communicate. Finally, this engagement was, by and large, limited to only one form of communication at a time and required a conscious switching between one's presence online and offline that Turkle describes as “cycling through” (Turkle 1995: 12).

Correspondingly, the identity of the individual during this “cycling through” did not need to remain the same. Thus, beyond the individual making a conscious choice to use the same name for their placeholder across services, there was little need for direct cross-over and connection between online services and web-pages. This is in stark comparison to the possibilities in the contemporary period as we seamlessly multitask and switch between video calling, online messaging and email writing.

In light of these points, three things about the relationship between online spaces in the web 1.0 era and the offline world can be noted.

First, though offering alternative spaces for and means of communication, the online communicative system provided the possibility only to establish intersubjective connections similar to those one can establish offline. Second, the need for active engagement meant that there could be a clear demarcation in the individual's online

and offline communication. The different forms of communication online and offline could be seen to occur consecutively, not simultaneously. Third, the types of online activity in the web 1.0 era each occurred within, or created, their own microcosm – with minimal interoperability. In which sense, the online spaces of the period should not be considered as representing a discrete ecosystem in their own right – but rather an extension of the pre-existing ecosystem of offline communication.

In the light of this discussion, then, I suggest that the web 1.0 era Internet need not be seen to represent a genuine communicative revolution. Rather, the main innovation of the web 1.0 was simply the speed of undertaking intersubjective communication and amount of connections possible. As Jan van Dijk suggests, the quickening and proliferation of such connections is just a part of a communication evolution that has been taking place since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What is peculiar to the more recent web 2.0 revolution are the advances in “digital code, integration and interactivity” (van Dijk 2006: 6) that come with the advent of *new media* or *social media*. In the next section I discuss why and how this new web 2.0 arises as a distinct, parallel communicative system.

### 6.1.2. Web 2.0 – a parallel communicative ecosystem

The communicative revolution that Jan van Dijk refers to is the emergence of web 2.0 – the second stage of Internet evolution, in which an online communicative ecosystem comes to exist in parallel to the offline one. In the web 2.0 period the Internet has come to be dominated by ‘social media’ that provide countless online tools to maximise user-created content (Lindgren 2017: 28).<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the individual is encouraged to stay online, both to create content and to be visible and accessible for intersubjective conversation. In this way, a representation of sociality

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<sup>75</sup> In using the term ‘social media’ I am following the common usage of that term in both, non-academic and academic circles as a reference for websites, applications, tools and platforms that first emerged in the early 2000s, and enabled a greater range of interactions between users than previous forms of online communication. In the following sections, I provide more detail on these developments and a fuller definition and classification of ‘social media’. It is important to note that as I use the term ‘social media’ are not necessarily sites of, or even complementary to, the kinds of intersubjective interactions that are constitutive of genuine sociality. Indeed, I argue in the next chapter that communication through such platforms is unlikely to fulfil the social world building/changing functions of undistorted intersubjective communication. In that sense, my overarching discussion of ‘social media’ as it relates to contemporary alienation fits well within the growing literature on how these platforms have come to be in some sense ‘anti-social media’ (see: Fuchs 2018; Mair et al. (2018), Vaidhyanathan (2018)).



is embedded in these new means of communication (Lindgren 2017: 32) and so, the social media platforms<sup>76</sup> that provide this new interactive experience, including creating content – have enabled people not just to establish connections via writing and visiting specific websites but through networked platforms (Blank & Reisdorf 2012: 539). Respectively, then, the discourse of establishing connections *simpliciter* that was prevalent in the earlier Internet period has changed in emphasis to one of maintaining and celebrating networks of connections. The Internet, thus, has become a field of networks, with communication shared and spread between communicative subjects as nodes within this network. As such, communication online has come to resemble information distribution which, when released, has a life of its own, rather than intersubjective communication that is directed to a specified other (Lindgren 2017: 40).

By investigating the function of social media as tools via which to appear online, this section establishes how the arrival and growth of social media has transformed the contemporary online experience so that it is communicatively distinct from the offline. To do so, I draw on José van Dijck's book *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), which analyses the functioning and lifespan of different social media services. In this light, I suggest, that social media, by creating a secondary network of interconnected platforms and functions, creates a coherent *ecosystem* (van Dijck 2013: 9) of its own. And, second, that, with the ongoing possibility to appear online provided by Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and enabled by technology, the individual is able to establish an *ongoing* online presence. This presence is established in the form of a persistent online 'placeholder' in the form of profile that straddles different online platforms and functions, and – unlike the disparate placeholders in the web 1.0 – is taken to refer to the 'real' individual. This new kind of 'placeholder' I suggest has come to constitute the individual's unified online presence and given rise to what I refer to as *online-subjectivity*. These two features – a distinct communicative ecosystem and distinct subject – establish the distinctiveness of online and offline, and respectively, mark the contemporary social world constituted by both online and

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<sup>76</sup> Platform not a website, because platforms integrate several different services.

offline communicative ecosystems as different from the social world prior to social media.

#### *6.1.2.1. Internet evolution – emergence of web 2.0*

The contemporary online communicative ecosystem, as noted, is far more interactive than in the web 1.0 era. Where the web 1.0, as discussed before, did not support the dynamic addition of new data without disrupting the user experience, the live display of flows of interaction – in the form of newsfeeds, live blogs, and such – are often embedded within contemporary web spaces and platforms. It is this imitation of the flow of offline interaction that most clearly distinguishes the two stages of Internet. As, Vincent Miller put it, drawing on Castells, the contemporary online ecosystem is a 'space of flows' (Miller 2011: 62).

Underlying this evolution in the nature of online activity was the introduction of Ajax programming techniques around 2000. In contrast to the limitations of the web 1.0, Ajax programming techniques (which extended the existing languages such as HTML and CSS) allowed websites with the facility for users to organically and dynamically add, and respectively consume, new information without updating and reloading the entire site. In short, the evolution from web 1.0 to web 2.0 that these new techniques brought about marks the change in the online world from a largely static and one-sided space to an interactive one.

This emergence of an interactive online has also been accompanied by the rapid development of (physical) communication technology. Nonetheless, we should be careful not to define this evolution in terms of that technological development. As Blank and Dutton point out (2014: 36) innovations in the technology have sparked the tendency to refer to current society as a 'post-PC' era, in which new technology is replacing the old. (For example, laptops and even PCs have, for many people, been replaced with tablet and oversized phones.) Whilst the development of such post-PC devices has increased the scope of what can be done with computing devices in general, however, they have only done so on the back of the arrival of and provision of new services and online platforms that have come on the back of the web 2.0.

Rather, then, we can say that the emergence and rapid adoption of web 2.0 has been *supported* by two technological developments: Firstly, the development and broadening of technologies and devices that operate like computers, both in terms of computing power and their enabling access to the Internet, have made it far easier to establish and maintain online connections, no matter where the individual is, or what they are doing in any given moment. Indeed, there is some model of nearly *all* forms of modern technology, from phones to TV's, that allows the user to connect to the Internet. And secondly, the improvement of technology that provides the basic Internet service, i.e. WIFI, fibre-optics, 4G and 5G data connections – have increased the quality of that connection, whilst simultaneously reducing the cost. As a result, online communication forms have become a far more viable alternative to established forms of intersubjective mediated communication than in the web 1.0 period. Taken together, these technological developments have provided an opening for online interaction to occur simultaneously to offline; as Blank and Dutton explain:

The complementary use of multiple devices, some of which are portable, have tended to help users to integrate the Internet more closely to their everyday life and work, and therefore enhance the likelihood of users employing the Internet to create content, find entertainment, and be informed online (Blank & Dutton 2014: 50).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the greater ease of access and wider possibility for getting online have led to (exponential) growth in users as well as Internet usage. As the amount of people available online has increased (with 54% of the world population using the Internet by 2017 (IWS 2018)) so have the number of possible connections multiplied.

Despite these points, however, I want to suggest that whilst technological change has facilitated the evolution of online spaces, it is nonetheless the emergence of new forms of communication and new services for that, as well as the coherent user experience that the web 2.0 enables, that define the communicative revolution which transforms these into a distinct communicative ecosystem.

In respect to that, I shall now turn more specifically to discuss social media and the new set of interactive online platforms that it provides. To begin with, I shall suggest,

these services establish the distinctiveness of the online world from the offline. And, moreover, they transform online space into a discrete system of interaction.

#### *6.1.2.2. Social media: the online ecosystem*

The online spaces of the web 1.0 era we saw to be better characterised as a means of mediated communication and an extension of the existing offline ecosystem, as opposed to being truly distinct from that. The innovations in programming that enabled the shift to the web 2.0 enabled new online platforms – *social media* – with significantly different functions to anything that came online before. Correspondingly, it is as a result of the emergence of social media and the increasing connections between these platforms, that, as José van Dijck suggests, the contemporary online has become an entire ecosystem in its own right (2013: 41).

To properly define *social media* it will be useful to return to the discourse of networking that has accompanied the development of the web 2.0.

Social networks, in general, we can take to refer to connections that individuals establish and have established in the offline world. With the emergence of the web 2.0, individuals – as will be discussed in relation to social networking sites – are in a position to establish an independent and continuous online presence through their ‘placeholder’. Moreover, in contrast to the anonymity of the earlier Internet era, this web 2.0 ‘placeholder’, should typically be similar to the individual’s offline presence. As Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, voices this new ideology:

The days of you having a different image for your work friends or coworkers and for the other people you know are coming to an end pretty quickly... Having two identifies for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity (Zuckerberg, quoted in Pariser 2011: 109).

This universal and identifying ‘placeholder’, then, facilitates the individual in transferring all kinds of intersubjective relation that they have online. Social media, in this light, can be taken as an umbrella term, referring to any and all different websites, applications, and platforms that allows individuals to actively establish and

maintain social connections by way of this *new kind of* 'placeholder'.<sup>77</sup> Importantly, as Lindgren points out, social media are not just tools for networking, but platforms which facilitate networking (Lindgren, 2017: 32). And as van Dijck, explains<sup>78</sup> in the light of actor-network theory,<sup>79</sup> in doing so these platforms are facilitators of the very interaction that consequently comes to form them:

Platforms, in this view [in actor-network theory], would not be considered artefacts but rather set of relations that constantly need to be performed; actors of all kinds attribute *meaning* to platforms (van Dijck 2013: 26; italics original).

Van Dijck later adds:

[The] platform is *mediator* rather than intermediary; it shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely naming them (2013: 29; italics original).

Just as the web 2.0 provides an increase in the possibilities for users to interact with and create content, so social media comes in a number of distinct forms. Jose van Dijck (2013: 8), usefully distinguishes between four forms of social media:

*Social networking sites* (SNSs) – These are sites that merely facilitate the intersubjective communicative relations and allow individuals to establish different networks (become a member of different networks) ranging from groups of friends and acquaintances to groups with shared interests. Examples of SNSs include Facebook and Google+.

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<sup>77</sup> We might also define social media, in part, by reference to the use of the programming techniques discussed in the previous section that were not available in the Web 1.0 era. On such a definition, communication tools in the Web 1.0 era would not be social media by necessity. However, part of the development of social media has been the incorporation of older forms of online communication within the new platforms. Thus, this definition would be too restrictive. What we might note instead, is that it was only with the advent of the aforementioned programming techniques that the more complex forms of networking that are characteristic of social media became possible. Thus, email prior to the Web 2.0 era could not function as social media, email in the Web 2.0 era can be a part of social media.

<sup>78</sup> Van Dijck here is specifically discussing what she calls SNSs (or Social networking sites) as platforms. But, as I consider it, all social media is, in one way or another, a platform.

<sup>79</sup> Actor-network theory is a theory in sociology whereby everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships.

*User-generated content (UGC)* – These media support creativity, foreground cultural activity, and promote the exchange of amateur or professional content. Examples of UGCs include YouTube and Instagram.

*Trading and marketing sites (TMSs)* – These are sites which main purpose is the trading of and with products. These are distinct from SNS and UGC platforms, but nonetheless add to social media culture as they incorporate the means for visitors to communicate about products and traders. Paradigmatic TMSs are Amazon and Ebay.

*Play and game sites (PGSs)* - Whilst these sites are based around activity that does not mirror the offline, they still contribute to the all-encompassing nature of social media. (The games that are popular at any moment can vary greatly, but the general popularity of online games appears to be a constant of the contemporary online. Prominent examples of PGSs include Candy Crush, Minecraft and Pokemon Go.)

Where SNSs and UGCs are fairly obviously platforms that provide the possibility to establish and maintain social ties, the latter two are tied into specific types of online activity. Nonetheless, and whether one is playing Farmville, sharing a make-up tutorial, wishing a boss happy birthday, or purchasing a yoga-ball, all of these platforms have social media functions. Moreover, the way that they provide these functions often overlaps, and indeed they are commonly developed so as to work together. We can see this in a number of respects.

Firstly, certain features of SNSs that operate on ‘real’ user profiles, allows users to establish connections across different sites and platforms. Take, for example, Booking.com – an online hotel booking website, popular because of the very competitive pricing and ease of making reservations. Whilst on van Dijck’s classification, Booking.com is clearly a TMS, it is possible to login to the service (which is necessary to make a booking) through one’s Facebook or Google+ profile. As a result, these seemingly distinct media assume and rely on the individual already being versed in the idea of having a user profile on one of the major SNSs. If the individual is already present on an SNS, then, they benefit from ease of access to

the functions and service provided by Booking.com. This inter-operability, then, makes the contemporary online in general more coherent and easier to navigate. At the same time, this use of profiles operates on the expectation that the subject's SNS profile is truthful – in the sense that it represents a real person.

Secondly, the contemporary online includes functions and ways of interacting that allow these separate media to operate as a coherent whole. For example, 'like' buttons and commenting options are, in some form, embedded into most websites and platforms. As van Dijck (2013: 35) explains, this leads to a certain similarity or homogeneity of the experience across sites, as "[s]ome degree of standardization is important to facilitate connectedness – helping people to find content – but also enhance connectivity". Accordingly, the similarities in *functions* offered by different sites and platforms allow individuals to use and engage with disparate (and otherwise unconnected) sites and content more easily. Hence, allowing individuals to become more connected to and in the Internet. Importantly, certain of these inter-linking functions are peculiar to the online sphere. For example, clicking a 'like button' – usually a pictogram of a thumbs-up – indicates that the subject is agreeing with, supporting, or liking some specific communication, whether it is verbal or non-verbal. The use of this button is a recognised form of communication that represents approval – and so having such meaning carries weight. Moreover, because of being a button, which allows service providers to record and collect this data, rather than a physical gesture, it has cumulative weight, where more clicks on the 'like' button indicates that more users approve of the content of the original communication. A thumbs-up gesture in offline interaction might have similar meaning in and across specific instances, but they do not have the same kind of cumulative weight as the like-counter. (I will discuss in the next chapter how these companies profit from this data collection.)

In this light, van Dijck suggests that the online ecosystem which social media, as a connective media, creates, works counter to traditional media e.g. TV or radio; furthermore, she suggests, it is the embedded interconnectedness of these media that makes the ecosystem unique.

What characterizes the ecosystem most is the *interdependence* and *interoperability* of platforms. [...] Buttons for sharing, trending, following and favouriting are distinctly different, but these also share a common logic; the ubiquitous implementation of a competing platform's button signals not just a technological alignment but a strategic manoeuvre to boost user traffic and infiltrate user routines. [...] Cross-platform integration of technologies and the mutual shaping of users and content indicates that microsystems can be hardly studied separately (van Dijck 2013: 42; italics original).

Whilst the different platforms and sites that make up the contemporary online provide their own services, then, what unites (most of) these is the possibility for the user to share all of their online activity via SNSs. The SNSs, thus, establish the individual's constant online presence and through that form the backbone of their connections online. In doing so, the SNSs are also the backbone of the contemporary online ecosystem's functioning as a coherent whole (including, as I discuss in the next chapter, how it functions economically). With that said, then, I want to turn to how the Social Networking Sites capitalise on that constant online presence to create an accompanying representation of the individual – that I call the *online-subject* – and how the individual is expected to communicate to maintain and remind others of their existence in the network.

#### 6.1.2.3. *Social Networking Sites and the individual*

Social networking sites are the locus of the contemporary online ethos of 'connectedness' and it is through these that being online allows people to establish and take advantage of being a social, networked, being. More specifically, it is via the SNSs that the individual appears as an intersubjective communicative subject online and, so has their offline appearance translated to online spaces. boyd and Ellison emphasise the need to establish a network of people surrounding the user more so than van Dijk when they describe SNSs as follows:

We define social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bonded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison 2008: 211).

As pointed out earlier, and in contrast to the web 1.0, the discourse around social media does not emphasise making new and specifically online connections, but



rather the need to replicate and maintain the individual's offline connected status. SNSs are, respectively, the means to both establish these connections online and extend them across platforms, thus facilitating the ease of maintaining that connected status. As boyd and Ellison put it, social networking is not about making new connections, but rather SNSs "allow users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (boyd & Ellison 2008: 211). And so, they add, SNS users "are primarily communicating with people who are already part of their extended social networks" (boyd & Ellison 2008: 211).

Offline connections, however, can only successfully be transposed when the online and offline identities remain the same (or are clearly associated). To guarantee the swift transition of an individual's social network to online, then, the major SNSs do not operate on multiple identities that can vary from site-to-site or day-to-day. And, rather than anonymity, they request/require the individual's 'real' offline identity to be translated to online – hence, demands (often in 'terms and conditions' documents) that online users use their 'real' name online, verify identities with birthdates (and sometimes documentation) and preferably show a profile picture that clearly and accurately represents the offline person.

With an online representation of the offline individual established, what is then common to SNS profiles is that they help the individual to establish an ongoing presence online and carry this across to different platforms – this presence we can refer to in terms of *online subjectivity* and the *online-subject*. This *online-subject*, thus, becomes an *ongoing* placeholder in the online social networks that the individual has established. Crucially, it is accessible *whether or not* the individual is actively engaged with any of the relevant platforms at a given time or not. And so, in this way, the individual has a constant presence as a node in others' networks. As Vincent Miller puts it, "In social networking sites, the self representing profile is grounded within the context of offline friends and contacts [...]" (Miller 2011: 172).

The online-subject, thus, refers to the relatively coherent representation of the subject across platforms as the subject experiences that representation. An important part of the emergence of the 'online-subject' is thus the previously mentioned possibility to use one or two profiles (e.g. Facebook or Google id-s) to

access a wide range of different platforms and services. However, since the subject's experience of how they are represented online may also occur on independent sites (just as others may interact with the subject as represented on those services) there is not *necessarily* limited to services that operate on the global id systems.<sup>80</sup>

As a result of its constant availability, the individual's online-subject can be approached and addressed by the other at any time with either a private or publicly visible message. Not only is the presence of the individual not required for the delivery of the message, but, depending on the form of the message, others in their network can encounter and interact with it too, whether or not the individual is present online at that moment. In this light, the online-subject has an online presence of its own, separate and distinct from the individual.

As well as the ongoing and distinct presence of the profile on the SNS, the extension of the functions of the SNS to other platforms and sites (such as the booking.com example from earlier) helps to further establish the online-subject as a coherent and truthful representation of the offline individual. As Christian Fuchs, explaining how one's online presence merges into one profile that can be accessed by the whole network, states:

Social media<sup>81</sup> are based on the creation of personal profiles that describe the various roles of a human being's life. [...] A new form of liquid and porous sociality has emerged in which we partly act in various roles, but all of these roles become mapped onto single profiles that are observed by different people who are associated with our different social roles. *This means that social media are social spaces in which social roles tend to converge and become integrated in single profiles* (Fuchs 2017: 50; emphasis added).

In this light, SNSs do not just encourage and enable the transposition of offline social networks online, they also make it so that one's offline activities and preferences become a part of the translation of subjectivity to the online ecosystem.

Taking these features of social media into account, the *online-subject*, refers to the ongoing online presence of the individual as communicative subject; which, despite

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<sup>80</sup> At the same time, not all interactions will occur via the 'online-subject'. For example, if I connect to a random website via the anonymous TOR network, my experience of that website and others experience of me on that website may not be mediated at all by my online-subject.

<sup>81</sup> Fuchs' example is Facebook. So, I take it that he is referring to SNSs, rather than all social media.

its connection to subjectivity offline, is crucially distinct from that. This distinctness lies, principally in the online-subject's simultaneous occurrence to the offline subject – which makes it so that the one individual can be present both offline and, through the help of their online-subject, online concurrently. It is this simultaneous online and offline existence, that I would suggest is characteristic of contemporary online communication, and the distinction between subjectivities that marks the emergence of a truly distinct communicative ecosystem.<sup>82</sup>

Whilst the *online-subject* establishes an online presence for others to approach/address, however, this is not all that is required to establish an individual's position and visibility in the online social network. Rather, the individual only becomes visible to the others when establishing an intersubjective communicative relation to the other. In short, to appear in the network and confirm (the replication of) one's connections, the individual needs to communicate.

Lindgren suggests (2017: 12) that, communication online enables intersubjective communicative relationships in which time and distance are not crucial features for establishing the relationship. As a result of this, there is no special difficulty in creating and maintaining a presence in the online networks that make up the contemporary online. In contrast to the web 1.0 era, however, the contemporary online requires the ongoing establishment and re-establishment of the individual's online presence. This requirement, as Vincent Miller puts it, has led to a prevalence of what he calls 'phatic conversations'. 'Phatic conversations' are interactions that do not carry real information but are carried out principally to maintain the relation to the other (Miller 2011: 204). In online terms, 'likes' and 'shares' are paradigmatic instances of phatic conversation. Online phatic conversations, then, are the manifestation of the thin relationships that SNSs, with the emphasis upon the need

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<sup>82</sup> It is worth clarifying that, as I use the term, although the way in which the individual and others interact with the 'online-subject' mimic aspects of genuine subjectivity, the online-subject is not literally a 'subject'. (Literally it is a representation of the subject in code, dispersed across various platforms). Neither do I intend the 'online-subject' to be understood as somehow extending the 'subject' onto the Internet, such that it is a disembodied part of that subject. Whilst the subject interacts with and so influences, and is influenced by, the online-subject – the latter, as I understand subjectivity, is still only a representation of and so is ontologically distinct from the former.

to establish a network and not the content of communication within that network, promote. As Miller writes:

Social network sites such as Facebook encourage and support networking practices by placing prominence on friends and links to others than on any content being produced by the author. In contrast to *content*-laden practice such as blogging, which relies on information provision and dialogue, social networking profiles provide a means to *connection* by prioritising phatic communication through gestures such as ‘pokes’, ‘likes’, brief status updates, comments on status updates and gifts. *These communications essentially provide means of maintaining presence, and on having that presence acknowledged by others in one’s network* (Miller 2011: 204; emphasis added).

The online-subject’s online presence (and as will be discussed shortly, how the subject appears to others in the network) is directly related and dependent upon the individual’s continuous engagement in online intersubjective communication. Since that communication is enacted within the network, however, it is of a peculiar character whereby it need not be with any specific other but can be directed to the whole network at once. Reflecting that, recognition of such communication can be in a similarly ‘phatic’ manner. For example, one might upload a picture of breakfast on Instagram or Facebook with a description of where the picture was taken, and one’s friends and followers recognise one in this communication by liking that picture. As mentioned before, this kind of response is cumulative and more likes can lead to a greater presence or visibility of the subject and their communications. On the other hand, if the communication is not notably acknowledged, then, the individual has motivation to try harder in their efforts to be noticed and so recognised as connected to others.

Demands upon the individual to establish and maintain their presence in the network highlight the centrality of the *online-subject’s* position within its own network. Whilst the ideology of the SNS emphasises the translation of offline networks to online, for the individual, the online network is always perceived with their online-subject at the centre of that network. This perception of centrality, in combination with the idea that increased visibility is fundamental to recognition, I would suggest encourages the individual’s online behaviour to be particularly individualistic. As Fuchs, echoing this sentiment puts it, Facebook and Twitter “foreground the logic of presenting the individual self, not the formation of collective identities” (Fuchs 2017: 128).

## Conclusion

This is a useful point to draw this part of my account of the contemporary social world to a close. To sum up what has been discussed in this chapter. We can mark a sharp distinction in the offline across the periods of the web 1.0 and web 2.0; whereby, the earlier online communicative system was simply an extension of the offline, and the contemporary online, rather, exists in parallel to the offline. This distinct communicative ecosystem, as we have seen, emerges with and is dominated by social media and the various associated platforms and interconnections between social media. The various features of social media, in turn, imbue the contemporary online with its own logic and marks it as truly distinct from the offline world.

In the next chapter, I explain how the contemporary online ecosystem, and the emergence of the online-subject as the inhabitant of that, have come to form the core of a distinct oppressive socio-economic-political system.

# Chapter 7: Communicative capitalism

*Lie on the couch and talk to me  
Open your mind and bare yourself  
because I think I finally figured out  
how to bill you  
And I'm about to make a fortune*  
Francesco Marciuliano, *Talk to Me* (2012: 46)

## Introduction

The technological developments of software as well as hardware which allowed the launch of the World Wide Web and later introduced social media, cannot be analysed in isolation from wider developments in society during that period. Following the discussion of the development and nature of the online sphere in the previous chapter, then, in this chapter I explain how these new technologies have not only developed alongside the prevalent socio-economic-political system, but have also become the means for its domination.

The first two chapters of this thesis discussed the ways in which capitalism is empowered by and evolves with technological development. In this chapter, I discuss how this process has continued with the emergence of the Internet. Borrowing the term from Jodi Dean, I suggest that the development of online communication, discussed in previous sections, has led to 'communicative capitalism' becoming the prevalent socio-economic-political system. Social media, in turn, is the primary avenue for the distribution of this ideology and the enabling of its dominance of contemporary society. In the following analysis of the nature and function of communicative capitalism I first explain why I take communicative capitalism to be a suitable term with which to describe the current and dominant form of capitalism; and, second, analyse how the individual, because of their ongoing online presence and through the data that they generate in that presence, becomes a source of revenue and a target of online marketing strategies. In short, this section establishes an account of how the contemporary social world is, through the contemporary online, dominated by communicative capitalism, as well as how the human experience in the social world is framed by that socio-economic system.

## 7.1. Communicative capitalism – form

As we saw in Chapter 2, the Critical Theorists analysed capitalism as a system in which all aspects of society had been subsumed under an oppressive instrumental/technological rationality. Since this included the rationality of the individual, they argued, the possibility for resistance against the system was cut off at its root. As, Marcuse argues in his essay on *Repressive Tolerance*, the system achieved the latter paradoxically by enabling people to legitimately challenge the system. By having the means of challenge embedded within capitalism, Marcuse argues, there is little or no possibility for anything to happen outside the system – and so little or no possibility for real change to that system. We might note, almost sixty years later, little has changed (at least in the West). Whatever changes and challenges it has faced, capitalism remains the dominant system. What has changed within that system, however, is that the development of the contemporary online and its associated social media platforms, has introduced new and unique ways to maintain and protect the status-quo.

Vincent Miller defines contemporary society as ‘networked society’ in respect to the emphasis on networks that social media provides and enables the creation of. Crucially, as Miller puts it the ‘networked society’ “is essentially capitalism playing by different rules” (Miller 2011: 59). Along these lines, intersubjective *online* communication can be seen as just another means for ensuring capitalist domination continues: doing nothing more than creating more possibilities to categorise people; to emphasise their individuality; force them to consume; and, with that, reproduce the system.<sup>83</sup> As Jodi Dean, in the light of Marcuse and preceding Miller argues, social media seemingly provides people with the opportunity to engage in participatory democracy, but the companies that provide those platforms have managed to monetise their use so effectively and made the online ecosystem so engaging that there is no opportunity for any real socio-political change to emerge (see: Dean 2005: 55). To describe this state, Dean coins the term ‘communicative

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<sup>83</sup> Indeed, instead of overturning capitalism, I would suggest, the universal appeal of the functions of social media has transformed capitalism in such a way that it is even capable of dominating societies that would previously have been resistant to its economic ideology.

capitalism', in which, as she puts it: "Communicative exchanges, rather than being fundamental to democratic politics, are the basic elements of capitalist production" (Dean 2005: 56).

The development of this new form of capitalism is capitalism's response to technological change. As Miller suggests, networks always have a purpose, and so, should be considered products of instrumental reasoning (Miller 2011: 199). As such, the development of the Internet cannot be separated from the socially embedded technological developments which made them possible. As noted, the predecessor of the Internet – ARPANET – was developed for the military. However, we should not forget that the possibilities for networking on the *contemporary* Internet are provided by companies whose interests and goals are commercial. Whilst, then, the social media companies may emphasise the sociality that their system provides, their interests are nonetheless aligned with the capitalist socio-economic system:

Internet culture is not separate from political economy, but is to a large extent organized, controlled and owned by companies. Social media culture is a culture industry. [...] The cultural expressions of it cannot be an expression of participation (Fuchs 2017: 70).

What Fuchs emphasises here is the naivety of taking social media companies to be selling a communication service. Rather, as I shall elaborate in the following sections, these companies trade on the information about how we use these services, i.e. with whom one communicates, what topics one communicates about, how often one communicates, and so on:

Facebook and Google are not communication companies. They do not sell access to communications, they sell big data for advertising purposes. They are the world's largest advertising agencies that operate as big data collection and commodification machines (Fuchs 2017: 53).

Fuchs here echoes Dean's suggestion that contemporary capitalism is a system in which "communication itself becomes a commodity" (Dean 2005: 55). As she further explains:



[W]hat makes them [communications] commodities is not the need people have for them or, obviously, their use. *Rather, it is their economic function, their role in capitalist exchange.* Similarly, the fact that messages can retain a relation to understanding in no way negates the centrality of their circulation. Indeed, this link is crucial to the ideological reproduction of communicative capitalism. Some messages, issues, debates are effective. Some contributions make a difference. *But more significant is the system, the communicative network* (Dean 2005: 59; emphasis added).

In this chapter, I explain in more detail how the evolution of capitalism through the development of social media, allows capitalism to retain its position as the dominant socio-economic-political system. To analyse this system as a whole, I engage with Jodi Dean's description of the contemporary socio-economic system as communicative capitalism. With reference to the work of Fuchs, Miller, and Lindgren I analyse how the specific features of this system function to frame the individual's actions online.

I argue that the introduction of social media has allowed communicative capitalism to come into its dominant position because: a) online communication, and online presence in general is reducible to data, no matter the content of the message; b) a fundamental goal of social media companies is to encourage people to engage in online communication through the ideal of greater democratic participation so as to obtain the data on which their economic model is based; c) social media companies analyse that data to create better profiles of online users as potential consumers, and then, target them with information that would appeal to them. I suggest that communicative capitalism operates at the surface level by exhorting the democratic value of networking, whilst, in fact, creating for the individual an exceptionally individualistic experience of the social world that both generates revenue for the social media companies and also reduces the possibility for the individual to connect with the other in a meaningful way. It is this last function of communicative capitalism that heads off genuine possibilities to overthrow the contemporary and dominant socio-economic system.

## 7.2. Communicative capitalism – function

### 7.2.1. Online communication: Data exchange

The underlying substance of online space as a digital system is, per se, code. Computers, at base, operate on binary code, and so everything that occurs online must also exist in this form of raw data (Miller 2011: 75). As mentioned in the prior discussion of the evolution of the Internet, the way in which specific web pages and social media platforms appear and the functions they provide, depend upon what the available programming language and techniques allow. Likewise, communication exchanged via Internet, however it occurs, is, at the back-end of the network, reduced to raw data and code. Whatever the content of the communication, it must be transformed into raw data for that communication to be made intelligible to computers and so shared across the network. In addition to this, on social media, the raw data that encodes the content of online communication is accompanied by metadata, which is data encoding explanation of the communication data and the context in which that data is produced. What this means is that the more people engage with social media the greater the mass of data that they produce. Vincent Miller explains the significance of this ever-expanding mass to the companies that possess it:

The Internet and the web have been so revolutionary in this regards because every action that takes place on the web, every purchase, every search, every web site view and every communication, leaves a trace, data trail, footprint or record of that action. This means that, effectively, all consumers and non-consumer activities can be monitored (Miller 2011: 124).

The mass of data produced by online interactions is of value to the capitalist perspective in two respects:

First, as Miller points out above, every activity that takes place online leaves a data trace which, in principle, refers back to the online user. Consequently, there is an ever-growing pool of information about the user's online interactions and activities that can then be processed and analysed by whoever has access to that data. For example, Facebook can trace how many times, and for how long, I have visited *foodgawker.com* whilst writing this chapter, and, further to that, analyse this data for

information about my food preferences and habits. This mass of online data is an unmatched resource for marketing and, so, collecting and controlling that data provides a lucrative source of revenue.

The second important aspect of the coded nature of online activity is that the whole system of online interaction is governed and processed by automatic algorithms. These determine both what is the output from the data provided by online-subject, and how that output will appear to online-subject and others online. Google's closely guarded Page Rank algorithm, for example, provides search results on the basis of what it determines to be the relevance and relative importance of different pages. Whilst, in principle, such processing can be entirely neutral (and indeed, all processing of data online will be algorithmic), as Miller suggests (2011: 75), that data can be manipulated and processed according to any kind of choice or preference on behalf of the data-owner. Indeed, since digital information is essentially the same, no matter whether text, sound, or image, the way that online data is interpreted and displayed is always subject to the preferences and choices of the person who writes the algorithm. As such, not only is data of value within capitalism as a source for extracting the user's preferences, but it can also be reshaped in ways that can be used to re-define the preferences of the subject – both for them and for the others that they interact with.

As the size of the data-set increases, control over that data becomes of ever greater advantage for the platform owners and service provider – and, correspondingly, offers ever greater possibility to disadvantage those without that power (Fuchs 2017: 55). Whilst centralised data ownership poses serious challenges for a functioning society, however, as Fuchs reports, until very recently, the ideology of big data has disregarded the negative aspects (Fuchs 2017: 52). This carefree attitude towards data ownership has allowed social media companies to take a dominant position in the society. This is a crucial feature of 'communicative capitalism'.

Online communication only generates this mass of analysable data, however, if Internet users grant their user-profiles the special status that the SSNs accord them. To acquire this user data, then, the central actors in contemporary capitalism

embrace and voice a discourse of connectedness and sharing as essential to democratic participation, as I shall discuss in more detail in the next section.

### 7.2.2. The discourse of sharing

The emergence of Web 1.0 was accompanied by a strong sentiment of being able to connect, communicate and be heard. In short, the possibility to connect with people was welcomed by many (e.g. B Gates, Introduction, p. 8), with messianic messages of how the Internet is going to change how democracy works. The thought behind this message was that the Internet would finally provide people the kind of public platform for discourse that could be easily accessed by the many as well as encountered by politicians. As Jodi Dean describes the thinking: “The sheer abundance of messages, then, is offered as an indication of democratic potential” (Dean 2005: 58). Continuing, a few pages later:

Indeed, interactive communications technology corporations rose to popularity in part on the message that they were tools for political empowerment. [...] they held up computers as the means to the renewal of participatory democracy (Dean 2005: 61).

Despite the high rhetoric, however, this suggested democratic revolution did not occur. Instead, with the emergence of the web 2.0, the online experience became more personalised, as did the stated aims and benefits of being online. In this light, the discourse around online communication has shifted from one of connection to the unknown, to one of greater engagement with people in one’s pre-existing social networks. And, although this new discourse places a great emphasis upon sociality (i.e. being among others) instead of connectivity, the idea that technology is essential for that sociality is prevalent. As van Dijck neatly puts it: “Zuckerberg deploys a sort of newspeak when claiming that technology merely enables or facilitates social activities; however, ‘making the web social’ in reality means ‘making sociality technical’” (2013: 12).

The technologically enhanced social interaction that emerges with SNSs, however, has also significantly altered the way in which online space is perceived; and how interaction within it is talked about. With its emphasis upon maintaining already established networks, the emergence of SNSs challenges the idea that online space

is constituted by unknown people and suggests, rather, that it is a place in which the individual is welcome and already belonging. Reflecting that, the individual is encouraged to be as visible as possible within their network. To do so, the social media companies have made a conscious move away from the legal/political dichotomy between public and private. Where the Internet was previously sold as a venue for public discourse, the social media companies instead blur the distinction between the private and public. Now, we might say, the Internet is a space for the private to be made public – thus, as Dean puts it, publicity is the underlying ethos of this new technoculture (Dean 2003: 101).

The individual's willingness to make the private public, as Dean points out, allows companies to stay silent on their real goal of collecting the users' data. As she writes in her article *Why Net is not a public sphere?*:

The ideal of publicity configures the Net as a consensual space. Not only does this pathologize all sorts of interactions long part of computer mediated communication – sex, porn, games, banal chatter – but it completely occludes the way that the Net is the key infrastructure element of the global economy (Dean 2003: 103).

On this understanding, social media companies are ascribing responsibility for online interactions to the individual/other as well as strongly encouraging the individual to interact, whilst all the time diverting attention from the reality that all of these interactions provide them with an ever larger – and more valuable – data-set.

To cultivate the active public presence of the subject, companies latched onto the notion of sharing. Sharing, as van Dijck points out, stands for “opacity, nontransparency, and secrecy” (van Dijck 2013: 46) and is contrasted with ‘privacy’. Moreover, this new way of talking about online interaction has numerous positive connotations: It stands for sharing “social as well as economic norms, cultural as well as legal values” (van Dijck 2013: 46). It can be associated with other positive sounding online activities such as ‘friending’ and ‘liking’ (van Dijck 2013:46). Sharing, in short, stands for openness. The rhetoric of sharing in relation to the Internet, on these lines, can be understood as an attempt to generate a normative demand: you, the individual are in control of your communication, but you should share.

Perhaps the firmest advocate of this 'sharing ideology' is Mark Zuckerberg who, in 2011, posted on Facebook:

I founded Facebook on the idea that people want to share and connect with people in their lives, but to do this everyone needs complete control over who they share with at all times. [...] [A]s long as they could make their page private, they felt safe sharing with their friends online. Control was key. With Facebook, for the first time, people had the tools they needed to do this. That's how Facebook became the world's biggest community online. We made it easy for people to feel comfortable sharing things about their real lives [...]. (Zuckerberg, Our Commitment to the Facebook Community, 2011).

A sentiment he repeated in 2014, when commenting on the earnings conference call (Balakrishnan et al., 2018):

I mean it wasn't a completely private experience, but it's not completely public and it's 100 or 150 of the people that you care about.

And creating that space which was a space that had the kind of privacy that no one had ever seen before was what enabled and continues to enable the kind of interactions and the content that people feel comfortable sharing in this network that don't exist in other places in the world.

So, we're constantly looking for new opportunities to create new dynamics like that and open up new different private spaces for people where they can then feel comfortable sharing and having the freedom to express things that you otherwise wouldn't be able to.

An example of the same ideology in a wider context can be found in coverage of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. For example, as recently as 2017, Mary Chayko writes in her *Superconnected: The Internet, Digital Media and Techno-Social Life*, referring to The Egyptian Revolution as well as other social movements in the same period (Occupy, #JeSuisCharlie etc.) "Social media has been instrumental in helping to inspire, jump-start, spread the word about, and sustain a number of movements (Chayko 2017:106). Later adding "Even under difficult conditions- perhaps *especially* under them – the power of social media to help individuals gather and fight for their rights has become apparent and has become a primary affordance of social media" (Chayko 2017:107). A particularly good illustration of this tone of the discourse is Paul Mason's article on the BBC Newsnight blog on 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 entitled

*Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere* (Mason 2011).<sup>84</sup> The 20 reasons cited effectively represent all the dimensions what I have referred as the 'sharing ideology'.

Thus, corresponding to the theme of Engagement are:

2. ...with access to social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and eg Yfrog so they can express themselves in a variety of situations ranging from parliamentary democracy to tyranny.

3. Therefore truth moves faster than lies, and propaganda becomes flammable.

To Sharing:

15. People just know more than they used to. Dictatorships rely not just on the suppression of news but on the suppression of narratives and truth. More or less everything you need to know to make sense of the world is available as freely downloadable content on the Internet: and it's not pre-digested for you by your teachers, parents, priests, imams.

To Connectedness:

8. They all seem to know each other: not only is the network more powerful than the hierarchy - but the ad-hoc network has become easier to form. [...]

And Freedom:

6. technology [...] makes it easy: it kills vertical hierarchies spontaneously, whereas before - and the quintessential experience of the 20th century - was the killing of dissent within movements, the channeling of movements and their bureaucratisation.

20. Technology has - in many ways, from the contraceptive pill to the iPod, the blog and the CCTV camera - expanded the space and power of the individual.

Of course, some of these claims look positively naïve in the era of so-called fake news, nonetheless – as the 2017 publication date of Chayko's aforementioned book from which the earlier quotes come – they continue to be forwarded. Indeed, this is

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<sup>84</sup> A theme that Mason picks up in his later book *Why It's Kicking off Everywhere* (2012, Verso).

despite the evidence that social media did not play such a role as originally supposed in events including the Egyptian revolution.<sup>85</sup>

Whether or not the expressions of the 'sharing-ideology' were accurate to the actual events of 2011, we might note regardless that 'to share' has other connotations when referring to the social media companies use of data. As van Dijck says, in this context: "sharing relates to distribution of personal information, but also implies the spreading of that personal information to third parties" (2013: 46). The social and economic value of the data these companies collect and sell, however, is undermined if it becomes a matter of public knowledge. Whilst social media companies rely on their users to buy into this discourse of openness, they have a vested interest in remaining as vague as legally possible when it comes to informing the individual about how the data is collected and used.

As seen, the discourse of sharing is constructed by social media companies to attract more user traffic online. This traffic, meanwhile, is necessary for the social media companies to collect the data about the users that is their main source of revenue.

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<sup>85</sup> As Fuchs observes, a survey of Tahrir Square activists, with results published in the *International Journal of Communication*, that hardly supports the kind of ideological claim that we saw Mason to make (Fuchs cites Castell (2012) in this respect). As he summarises:

Face-to-face interactions (93 per cent) was the most important form of activist's protest communication, followed by television (92 per cent), phones (82 per cent), print media (57 per cent), SMS (46 per cent), Facebook (42 per cent), email (27 per cent), radio (22 per cent), Twitter (13 per cent) and blogs (12 per cent) (Fuchs 2017: 236).

Interestingly, Mark Zuckerberg initially played down the role of – specifically – Facebook in the Arab Spring revolution, suggesting at a G8 forum in 2011 that "Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen". Though not denying that online communication in general was vital, from the same speech "I do think over time the Internet is playing a role in making so people can communicate more effectively and that probably does help to organise some of these things. If it weren't Facebook it would be something else" (Bradshaw 2011). A year later, however, in a letter to investors he was far less equivocal about the revolutionary potential of his own platform, when writing:

By giving people the power to share, we are starting to see people make their voices heard on a different scale from what has historically been possible. These voices will increase in number and volume. They cannot be ignored. Over time, we expect governments will become more responsive to issues and concerns raised directly by all their people rather than through intermediaries controlled by a select few. [...] Through this process, we believe that leaders will emerge across all countries who are pro-Internet and fight for the rights of their people, including the right to share what they want and the right to access all information that people want to share with them (Zuckerberg 2012).



For all the positive rhetoric of sharing, communicative capitalism, like all forms of capitalism is exploitative. Yet, it is not just exploitative of the workers who run the backend of the social media companies. In addition, the *user* is exploited through their engagement online. As Miller writes “Users produce data that is used and sold by the platform without payment. [...] They work for free” (Miller 2011: 136). Indeed, as Fuchs points out, the surplus value that *users* create “converges towards infinity” (Fuchs 2017: 136) as it costs the companies nothing to generate the data from which they extract value. Instead, it is the user who (willingly) contributes their time and effort to provide that data, without any promise of monetary return.

Despite its origins in dissimulation and exploitation, however, this practice as well as the language of sharing is apparently endorsed by a vast majority of the users of these sites. I would suggest, that this is, at least in part, a result of how – as previously discussed – the online-subject is presented by the social media platforms as always central in their networks. Miller suggests that the popularity and phenomenon of sharing – which makes what is private and what is public vague – is related to the mass media and its extolling of celebrity. As Miller points out, the life of the celebrity, or at least as treated by the mass media, is a something that should be known and accessible to everyone (Miller 2011: 118). By placing the online-subject in a similar position of perceived importance, I would suggest, the social media companies exploit this idea to pressure the user into the need to be seen by others – and so it becomes necessary to share as much as possible with others online. Thus, communicative capitalism coerces the individual to continually and increasingly engage with the system. Meanwhile the companies that hold the data generated by the user’s online activities, are able to create a holistic profile of the online-subject as a consumer i.e. a *data-subject*. This, in turn, can be used to further (directly and indirectly) market the consumption ethos to the online-subject. This requires user profiles that can be sold. The creation of such profiles is the topic of the next section.

### *7.2.3. Online-subject as consumer*

#### *7.2.3.1. Profiling*

The contemporary online space is dominated by companies who are creating the means to collect as well as process and utilise online user data. "What this means", as Eli Pariser suggest, "is that your behaviour is now a commodity, a tiny piece of market that provides a platform for the personalization of the Internet" (2011: 45). Underlying this is the fact that the massive generation and collection of data has revolutionised how companies are able to marketize commodities to single users. Or, in the case of surveillance, ascribe certain behaviour or traits to a single user. Since the individual's online presence and activities provide an endless flow of data (Miller 2011: 125), analysis of this data allows the creation of a holistic profile of the online-subject that is more than just the sum of the user's visible activities on different online websites and the subject's own created online-subject.

Vincent Miller explains how the different services owned by Google are used to create this kind of profile for a specific subject:

Using any search engine leaves a record of what a specific computer (ISP number) searched for and when. Google stores this information for 13 months to help in its marketing efforts. Furthermore, Google also installs cookies on the computer of each visitor to a Google site, which monitors what web sites are visited and when. In addition, people who use Google's unlimited email service, GoogleMail, are subject to having their mailboxes data-mined by automated search tools that collect information about what a user is talking about, their interests and the like. And if the same user also happens to use Blogger or Orkut, the blogging and social networking web sites owned by Google, all of the information provided by the user on those sites is monitored by Google as well, and becomes part of their database (Miller 2011: 124).

This rich dataset, referring back to the offline individual, can be used to create sophisticated ways of profiling the individual (Miller 2011: 125). These profiles are further targeted with adverts, videos, online quizzes, product and friend suggestions, and many other forms of information. Interaction with these provides the companies more data points on the online-subject (Berry 2015: 134). This data, can, in turn, be analysed to further target the individual as a consumer – or indeed, profile them as a potential terrorist. For, as Fuchs reminds us:

The collection, storage, control and analysis of 'big data' stands in the context of the surveillance-industrial-complex and neoliberalism. Big data is a method for the economic and political control and targeting of individuals (Fuchs 2017: 54).

The profile created by this data analysis, however, is subject to two peculiarities:

Firstly, the profile that is created based on online data might not resemble the online profile that the individual themselves established. When the individual creates an online profile – what I have called the *online-subject* – the subject has control of that profile's content – or at least as much as it comes to data consciously shared by and with the individual. Thus, when it comes to their own profile creation, the individual has some control of their immediate online presence. Yet, the individual has no real control of the profile that is created by the system and which is extrapolated from the sum of the online-subject's online activities. Nor, indeed, does the individual typically have any awareness of (or, often access to) this profile. Whilst the online-subject will be targeted with information based upon the data-subject profile that they have no control over, however, the way in which the data is processed can lead the profile of the individual to be quite distinct from the individual's own depiction of themselves. A few recent checks of my Facebook's 'Your interests' page, which details the themes for advertisements that Facebook thinks fit the individual's preferences, for example, found such oddities as 'nursing', 'Inter Milan, and 'soil'. (Even if the user deletes these so-called preferences, it is important to note, Facebook will begin to extrapolate new one's immediately.)

Secondly, the way in which the online data-subject is created has no direct tie to the individual's offline existence. Data holders are able to create a holistic account of the online-subject based on the data that the individual places online – as well as through activities that are not knowable to the individual – and, so, in a sense this data-subject is the very online existence of the individual. Yet, since information that the online-subject will be subjected to online does not directly take the offline individuality into account, the creation of this profile is likely to be erroneous. As Fuchs describes the core problem:

The problem is that algorithms and computers, unlike humans, do not have affects, ethics and morals and only act based on the purely instrumental linear

logic 'IF condition C THEN take action A'. Given that humans are complex societal beings, such linear instrumental reasoning is error-prone and creates false positives. In economic and political life, algorithmic logic can have severe consequences such as human being considered as criminals or terrorists although they are innocent, or being discriminated against by banks, corporations or public services (Fuchs 2017: 55).

Nonetheless, it is this online data that will form the further basis of the data-subject – and so discrepancies between the social media companies' profile of the subject as data-subject, the online-subject, and the individual, are bound to occur. In this way, the online data-subject created by communicative capitalism is a fictional one.

#### *7.2.3.2. How marketing reinforces the online profile*

In Chapter 2, I discussed marketing as the practice of profiling an audience to target consumers with adverts. Consuming the product, likewise, would solidify the profile and possibly lead to further consumption. With the emergence of the Internet, and especially social media and big data analysis, as discussed, the marketisation process has come to take place in a more sophisticated manner. In this light, the more data, the more power communicative capitalism has over the consuming individuals. Yet, the way in which social media has changed capitalism does not start and end with high level profiling. Instead, as the Internet is a flow of information, advertisements have now become an organic part of the online experience that is often difficult to distinguish from non-commercial interactions.

Prior to the Internet (and especially the individual's social media presence) advertising took place on mass media channels, and so, was just as effective as the audience members were susceptible to it. In this sense, pre-Internet marketing was forced to operate on the expectation that the right audience would pick up and see any marketing material, with no chance to match each consumer personally with a product, nor remind each consumer of which products they were suited to (Berry 2015: 234). As social media, and especially SNSs operate by providing streams of news and information to specific – and closely monitored – online-subject's, however, new media provide the possibility to approach and exploit the consumer in new ways.

Advertisements suited to the data-subject can appear prominently in the online spaces with which the individual engages online. Banner advertisements on a newspaper website that is connected to Facebook are a good example of this. What is more, as the data that informs the companies' profile of each user grows, this marketing can become ever more targeted and personal. For example, if I search for holidays in Bali, or purchase Tigi shampoos, then, my online-subject will be flooded with content that suggests similar products. Looking at any of these, of course, creates yet more data in my user profile. (And, as the dataset grows, and the analytical tools become more sophisticated, the possibility to successfully target users with advertisements for products they would never have considered also increase – for example advertising dating services to married people that the algorithms suggest are unhappy.)

Fuchs treats the emergence of this type of data collection and individualised Internet experience as a central feature of communicative capitalism:

[The] rise of co-operative sociality supported by social networking sites and wikis, and the differentiation of cognitive and communicative sociality [...] have to a certain degree changed the technical structure of WWW in order to enable models of capital accumulation and the maintenance of the capitalist character of the WWW. Another significant change is the rise of search engine Google, which has pioneered the web capital accumulation models by introducing targeted advertising that is personalized to the interest of users and monitors their online behaviour and personal interests on the Internet (Fuchs 2017: 48).

Targeted online advertising, as Miller points out, can have some positive aspects as the individual is more likely to be targeted with information on product and topics that they have some interest in – listing as an example, Amazon.com's capacity to build its user profile, not just on the user's previous purchases but also "where they live and what their overall interests would seem to be" (Miller 2011: 127). Companies likewise benefit from being able to roll out more efficient marketing campaigns, as well as exploiting an increased likelihood for users to make impulse purchases (Miller 2011: 126). Nonetheless, for all of its sophisticated profiling and targeted advertising, this system can be remarkably inefficient in properly understanding the link between the activity of the online-subject and the needs of the individual. For example, imagine a user is trying to find a suitable replacement for a broken toilet seat by

scanning through the Internet – building a large and new data-set as they carefully examine all the different models and vendors. Of course, the user is likely only to buy one toilet seat. Likewise, there is unlikely to be any real reason to believe that they will buy another one soon. Yet, if they eventually buy a seat, the data from their search will remain. Despite the fact that the user has sated their interest in toilet seats, the profile used to advertise to them will mark them as an individual who has an interest in toilet seats – at least, until they communicate their purchase online, or the dataset is changed enough that their so-called ‘preference’ for having a seat on their toilet is replaced with a new one.<sup>86</sup>

The other way in which SNSs can approach and exploit the consumer is through the network itself, and the online-subject’s ‘connectedness’ on that. From the perspective of the social media companies the individual’s friend group represents a hub of people whose opinions and preferences have greater marketing potential than any advertisements and links that their advertising systems might deliver directly. This allows online marketing to operate indirectly in a number of subtle, but effective ways:

Firstly, advertisements can now be presented as a part of a narrative – i.e. within the flow of information that the individual receives in news feeds and similar functions. Rather than a separate banner, individuals can be presented with an advert that forms a part of the core user experience. As van Dijck points out:

Sponsored stories, as part of the company’s [Facebook’s] narrative strategy, are claimed to be almost 50 percent more effective than targeted ads. Users automatically approve this tactic by signing the ToS [Terms of Service] (van Dijck 2013: 63).

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<sup>86</sup> This example is based on personal experience. To offer another personal anecdote that illustrates how the data profiling is not there just yet. In August 2018 – a month before finishing my thesis – an advert for purchasing ghost written academic papers appeared on my Instagram feed. What is striking is that the progress of my studies (and occasional despair) has never been something that I post about online. In the past year, though, I have exchanged Facebook messages with friends from my previous philosophy course to arrange a meeting when I have finished; given thumbs up to pictures of friends’ submission ready monographs; and, used Google as a search engine to look up copy editing services. Yet, the only explicit communications concerning my own progress have been through my university email. The connections that these different services and pieces of data have made are impressive and even a little frightening – just as impressive, though, and at least as amusing, is how far off the system could be in inferring from this data that I might be looking to buy an off-the-rail thesis from an essay farm.

Alternatively, products can be presented (again within the same flow of information) in terms of the supposed preferences of friends. A status update on the individual's newsfeed, for example, might state 'Jane has bought *Beautiful You* by Chuck Palahniuk using Amazon.com. Would you like to buy one as well?' Or, alternatively, an update that informs the online-subject that Jane has liked Chuck Palahniuk's Facebook page might appear. And so on. Again, these kinds of updates can occur via third party sites or linked to the general service provided by the SNS.

Secondly, social media have given a new face to the idea of people as brand ambassadors. As opposed to the traditional sense in which the faces for specific brands are provided by celebrities, e.g. Natalie Portman or Kristen Stewart advertising Chanel fragrances, social media allow brands to leverage the idea of a network of linked and 'like-minded' people. As van Dijck writes in reference to Facebook:

Virtually all multinationals, from Coca-Cola to BMW, are using Facebook for marketing and so-called 'mouth-to-mouth at scale' promotion. They pay influential Facebook connectors – people with many friends – to promote their brand through the many intersecting groups and networks that they are involved in. As Facebook owns an unprecedented reservoir of customized (meta)data, advertising and public relations are becoming a mixture of science and statistics, and therefore a lucrative business model (van Dijck 2013: 63).

In the light of personalised advertising strategies such as these, then, not only the data-subject, but the online-subject itself is transformed into a commodity. For the companies who purchase advertisements, the value of the online-subject lies, not just in what the users themselves consume, but how they can be used to make others consume. For the social media networking companies, though, online-subjects as 'brand ambassadors' will create revenue, even if the advertising campaign fails to bring in profits for the relevant company. For, yet again, data can be extracted, and new links and connections between communications, follows, and products made. All of which can be further exploited and sold to companies seeking to advertise through their platforms.

Moreover, the phenomenon of non-celebrity brand ambassadors encourages a perception that 'regular' people can have that same role. Once again, I would

suggest, this is embedded in the online-subject centred conception of the network and the emphasis on visibility within the network. Thus, the network encourages people to believe that by following and being followed in the online world they can acquire enough 'clout' such that they could benefit economically – either in the form of gifted products or being paid for using those products. Getting that clout, of course, requires the online-subject to be visible to others, to expand one's network, and to share the kind of content that is likely to be recognised and approved of (van Dijck 2011: 13). As a result, the contemporary online has seen the emergence of online 'influencers' – people who have an online following large enough that they would have a significant impact on the wider population, e.g. Lifestyle blogger Natasha Oakley<sup>87</sup>, or personal trainer Joe Wicks<sup>88</sup> – and so are able to monetise their online popularity. Despite the promise that you too can be amongst the influencers, however, one still needs to develop a specific kind of profile to do so (an achievement that is hardly as organic as it is presented<sup>89</sup>). Nonetheless, and whatever the chances of any user becoming such an influencer – the efforts to become one produce more content and require greater time spent on social media – thus, creating more data, and so revenue.

To sum up, online marketing is characteristic of how communicative capitalism functions. Based on the profile that is created by data analysis, the online-subject receives a flow of information and constellation of 'their friends' networks that fit their profile. As a result of the prevalent discourse of being part of a network, or being networked, these extended connections are imbued with meaning – and like-minded as this expanded group of 'friends' is supposed to be, so the individual as a online-subject should share their opinions with others, in the expectation of response, and confirmation of their presence. Similarly, the newsfeed becomes meaningful as it is the confirmation of one's still being part of the network. Hence, if in one form of

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<sup>87</sup> Natasha Oakley started posting daily bikini pictures on a blog, and after gaining popularity online (now 2 million followers on Instagram) has launched her own swimwear brand, and now continuously promotes clothing, jewellery and lifestyle brands (Natashaoakleyblog.com).

<sup>88</sup> Joe Wicks is a personal trainer who, by posting short workout and cooking videos, has developed his name into a brand and become one of the highest paid Instagram fitness personalities (Millington 2017)

<sup>89</sup> Several popular lifestyle and food bloggers e.g. Jasmine and Melissa Hemsley, or Ella Woodward had significant starting capital and connections to help turn their online presence into profitable enterprises (Smith 2014; Scott 2015).



another, a suggestion to participate in a creative writing course or to try out the latest cocktail bar appears on this newsfeed, it too has meaning – it is something that has appeared especially for that online-subject. Thus, what is advertised via social media can achieve a different and far greater level of engagement than, say, a billboard on the street.

Whilst the social media companies' vast data-mining and profiling operations exist for the purpose of marketing, the personalised online experience is not exhausted by this. Indeed, the ongoing profiling of the online-subject frames the individual's perception of any and all information they encounter in the contemporary online sphere.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the ways in which 'communicative capitalism' has come to shape the online communicative ecosystem. Supported by a powerful 'ideology' of freedom, sharing, and connectedness, the web 2.0 online is structured by social media companies and other capitalist interests such that the online-subject becomes a source revenue. As we have seen, the contemporary online operates on and creates data. Data determines how the online appears to the individual, and data collected from the online-subject's online activities, as discussed, allows companies who own that data to create sophisticated profiles of the individuals, their interests, and their preferences. This data-subject is used for sophisticated new forms of targeted advertisement and marketing. As the social media companies are able to generate revenue through the data-subject, the system exploits both the time and labour of the individuals who generate that data without full awareness of how it will be used. What is more, the data-subject can be used to modify the online space that a specific individual will encounter and engage with. What the individual as online-subject might perceive as a natural and objective occurrence, then, is in truth a personalised data sphere manipulated to respond to the profiles held on the online-subject. So it is that the reoccurrence of certain topics and visibility of specific friends is not due to the free flow of data, but a response to the feedback loop of reaffirmation of the data-subject held by the social media companies.

As van Dijck points out, then, what is most unnerving about the apparently natural occurrence of the individual's online experience is that they are in no position to recognise the real source and the real purpose behind that specific view of the online. As she writes:

EdgeRank [one of Facebook's algorithms] provides a filter that implicitly ranks the importance of friends. The problem is that users cannot know exactly how this filter works. All features added to Facebook have resulted in mostly invisible algorithms and protocols that, to a degree, control the "visibility" of friends, news, items, or ideas. The objective is obviously to personalize and optimize one's online experiences; but the aim may also be to promote something or someone, although that aim might be hard to trace (van Dijck 2013: 49).<sup>90</sup>

The online ecosystem, in short, presents the individual with a space that fits their data-subject, whilst the individual is not in a position to know why and how their experience of the online has that form. Nor, as such, does this world provide the individual any real possibility to challenge it. Vice versa, as the occurrence of the online is apparently natural and objective, there is the temptation for the individual to accept and endorse the view of themselves and the world that it provides – even more so given that the online-subject will always appear in the very centre of network.

In the next chapter, I examine more closely a specific social phenomena that has arisen with communicative capitalism that I call the *idea of equivalence*. Roughly this refers to the widespread assumption that certain forms of communication online are functionally equivalent to face-to-face communication offline. I return to Habermas's theory of communicative action to compare the relevant forms of communication. By doing so I uncover a fundamental discrepancy between the online and offline ecosystems that is a crucial aspect of the contemporary form of alienation that I describe in Chapter 9.

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<sup>90</sup> What van Dijck describes here is what, following Eli Pariser, is referred to as the 'filter bubble' (Pariser 2011).

# Chapter 8: Equivalence thinking

*"Everyone behaves badly – given the chance."*  
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

## Introduction

Having seen in the previous chapter how communicative capitalism shapes the online communicative sphere and compels individuals engaged in that sphere to constantly communicate and generate content, I want to turn to an associated phenomenon that I call 'equivalence thinking'. This term denotes the idea of perceived similarity between the forms and function of immediate and Internet-mediated communication.

As I shall argue in Chapter 9, the predominance of 'equivalence thinking' in discourse about the relationship between online and offline communication has an important role in shaping contemporary alienation. At the same time, discussing this idea will help us to see some of the crucial differences between online and offline communication. Doing so, again, will inform the discussion of contemporary alienation in Chapter 9.

In this chapter, I elaborate on what I call *the idea of equivalence* and how it helps us recognise a key discrepancy between the online and offline communicative ecosystems.

## 8.1. Equivalence thinking

The idea of *equivalence* was already presupposed in the rhetoric surrounding the launch of the World Wide Web that presented it as an egalitarian free communication sphere that would revolutionise participatory democracy. That hope was short lived – the free space of discussion has also come to accommodate harmful online behaviours such as cyberbullying and trolling. Nonetheless, the idea persists in the rhetoric of tech entrepreneurs, who continue to push the line that the Internet is a

place for ‘voicing’ opinion – a sentiment that appears to presuppose that face-to-face and online communication are somehow equivalent.<sup>91</sup>

On closer examination, the idea of *equivalence* is constructed through two interlinked assumptions – the first, about perceived continuities in form between face-to-face and online communication; the second, that communication in both ecosystems, and so language (as meanings), has the same function.

The perception of *equivalence* in form is rooted in contemporary communication technology’s capacity to mimic offline communication patterns. The immediacy with which messages can be exchanged, and which modern technology enables, allows the fluidity of ‘conversation’ found in face-to-face discourse to be imitated online. Thus, *new* and already well-established forms of communication are used systematically alongside each other, with participants in the conversation fluidly and consciously switching back and forth between realms and media (see: Kreide 2016; Madianou & Miller 2013). As is well evidenced by the ubiquity of smartphones in contemporary life, developments in communication technology have allowed this behaviour to become incorporated into the fabric of our everyday world and way of communicating (Berry 2015: 171). Along with that comes the need to be constantly engaged in online communications as well as carrying on with offline conversation (see: Turkle 2015). As a result, the understanding of what can be considered as *immediate* communication has become ever more blurred.

Whilst the continuity of communication across different spaces may be seen as the root of the assumption of *equivalence*, however, when it comes to considering whether that assumption is justified, the key question is whether Internet communication has the same function as immediate communication. This is a matter, not of the form, but of the content of the communication and its role in determining our shared social reality.

The assumption of *equivalence* in function appears to be widely spread and embedded in the structures of contemporary society in multiple ways. To illustrate, I

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<sup>91</sup> The academic discussion of how the Internet might relate to Habermas’s notion of the public sphere discussed in the Introduction, we might note, also appears to presuppose the equivalence of face-to-face and online communication.

will briefly discuss three sites in which this assumption is made and which also illustrate its difficulties – in law, in journalism, and in the news media.

Perhaps most prominently, offline and online communication are formally treated as equivalent in the extension of existing communication legislation to cover new forms of communication. In the UK, for example, instances of harmful communication via the Internet are subject to laws already in place to regulate offline communication (see: The Malicious Communication Act of 1988, The Communication Act of 2003, and The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, Digital Economy Act 2017).

Whilst aggressive online and face-to-face communications might have the same status in the eyes of the law, however, formal responses to instances of harmful online communication are not common practice. Despite the growing awareness of the extent of the phenomenon, harmful behaviour is often dismissed and responsibility for online action not demanded. When it is, moreover, that tends to be in the face of strong ‘public pressure’.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, the court cases that are held may be turned into poster cases, but these are few and far between.<sup>93</sup> None of this is to say that harmful online behaviour is not taking place all the time, but rather to highlight a discrepancy between the perception of responsibility in law and responsibility in society. In the eyes of law, the two types of communication are treated as functionally equivalent; in everyday life, however, *equivalence* is only assumed when suitable.

A second example of the assumption of *equivalence* in the public perception is evidenced by the growing tendency of mass media to report and respond to some forms of online communication as if intelligible *speech* acts. News agencies, for example, treat Tweets from politicians as viable sources for analysis and present

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<sup>92</sup> UK MP Emily Thornberry (Walsh 2014), for example, temporarily resigned from her position in the Labour Shadow Cabinet after the public backlash and shaming she received following a tweet about Brexit. (On shaming culture and related cases, see: Ronson 2015.)

<sup>93</sup> Activist Jack Monroe, for example, successfully sued journalist Katie Hopkins, when the latter mistook her identity and Tweeted offensive comments, which led Monroe to receive further online abuse from the public (Kennedy 2017). Notably, though, it took a libel case for Hopkins – who has built a career around offensive and abusive ‘straight talk’ to be censured online and she continues to use Twitter. (See also the reticence of SNSs to ban public and serial practitioners of uncivil and intolerant discourse such as conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.)

them alongside press conferences and political debates.<sup>94</sup> In so doing, however, a single Tweet can come to contribute significantly to the public perception of that politician's views, personalities and preferences. Consequently, that Tweet may have an impact on the offline world, for instance, by influencing voter attitudes and the acceptance of policy proposals associated with the politician in question.

Such effects can be uncontrolled and accidental, but they can also be exploited for advantage in public political discourse, depending on where, as well as how (much) the communication is covered.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, what often slips out of discussion is the simple fact that the communication in many of these instances is not the work of the individual in question, but of a well-prepared team (Kreiss 2016). Indeed, the person in focus might be entirely unaware of the specific content of the communication.

A second potential problem with assuming *equivalence*, then, is that those trading on the assumption are more able to manipulate their audience, especially in terms of politics.

Lastly, a somewhat separate phenomenon emerges in the shape of news media's manner of reporting online communication. In this respect, what is notable is how closely the vocabulary used to cover online communication often echoes the terms used for immediate offline communication. For example, Tweets are described as being 'heard'; and 'to Tweet' is often used interchangeably with conversational verbs such as 'to speak' and 'to talk' (see: Morais 2012).<sup>96</sup> By doing so, the borders of what has taken place offline and online are blurred, and understandings of what goes on in specific communicative exchanges can easily be distorted (for instance, it is easy to lose track of whether the people involved were physically engaged in the communication).

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<sup>94</sup> In here I am talking about reputable news agencies who report some form of Internet communication as a part of their collection of news e.g. AK – Estonian Public Broadcasting's daily news show; or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News output.

<sup>95</sup> US president Donald Trump and his Twitter habits comes to mind.

<sup>96</sup> See for instance the Oxford English Dictionary definition: 'to tweet' Verb 'tweet' (OED 2017). Definition: Post a message, image, etc. on Twitter. Example usage of the verb in a sentence: "She talks about her own life, but she's just as likely to tweet about budget cuts and Keynesian economics".

In each of these cases – in the legal domain, journalism, and the media more generally – there is an assumption at work that online communication functions in the same way as immediate offline communication. This can be understood in each case as an assumption about the weight and role that online communication has in shaping the social world – more specifically, that it is the same as for communication offline. In the legal case, abusive online behaviour is considered to be harmful in the same manner as offline; in the journalistic case Tweets (and the like) are treated as equally representative of one's views; in the news media case Internet communications are presented as physical interactions.

I want to argue, though, that assuming *equivalence* in these ways obscures a number of distinctions that are important to preserve: the distinction between online and immediate offline communication; the line between individual and collective communication; and the line between responsible and irresponsible behaviour.

### 8.1.1. Establishing the limits of equivalence

In the previous section I suggested that *equivalence* is constructed through two interlinked assumptions: that face-to-face and Internet communication are alike in form and that they are alike in function. I also suggested that the function of communication is determined by its role in the formation of a shared social world. Thus, to assess whether *equivalence* is justified requires a framework through which we can understand how communication comes to have this function. I shall return to Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984; 1992) to establish such a framework. Given that Internet communication comes in different forms, however, any such framework must have the resources to distinguish between these forms. More specifically, we need to be able to specify, which of those forms is a candidate for being equivalent to immediate offline communication. To do this, I return to Thomson's (1994) classification of communication (which I discussed briefly in Chapter 6)

#### 8.1.1.1. *Defining forms of communication*

In his 1994 book *The Media and Modernity* John B. Thompson forwarded an important critique of Habermas's overarching theory. In a nutshell, Thompson

claims, specifically in reference to Habermas's notion of 'the public sphere', that Habermas's theory fails to recognise the complex nature of communication, and accordingly, does not provide an accurate picture of who is in the position to contribute to the discourse that shapes society and, so, what counts as communication contributing to the social discourse. Thompson's critique is framed around a distinction between face-to-face communication, mediated communication and mediated quasi-interaction. He argues that with the development of communication technology, especially TV, the binary distinction of mediated and immediate communication, proposed by Habermas, is lacking and undermines the impact that mass media has in defining the discourses that take place in society (Goode 2006).

What makes this classification especially relevant to the current investigation is Thompson's emphasis on mediated forms of communication. The key distinction in Thompson's scheme is between dialogical and monological forms of mediated communication. Crucially this distinction separates communication that functions only as a means to deliver information, from that which contributes to discourse, and thus the formation of social reality.

Leaving media manipulations aside, Thompson's discussion emphasises the role that different forms of communication have in framing and shaping the broader context and possibility of discourse. His framework helps, firstly, to identify how Internet communication has provided a new venue for well-established communication patterns, and, secondly, to locate where immediate communication is taking place. Before applying this framework to Internet communication, I will offer a little more detail on each of Thompson's categories:<sup>97</sup>

*Face-to-face communication* is communication that takes place offline and does not rely on any media to deliver the message (Thompson 1995: 82). Rather, face-to-face communication occurs only in the immediate presence of the communicators. Consequently, further explanation, or reference to the context of the communication

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<sup>97</sup> There is some repetition here of the descriptions offered in Chapter 6. Here, though, I have attempted to describe these forms of communication more in respect to how they function than the basic form of each as was my focus in the early discussion.



is not necessary; the communicators' shared environment provides the context. In this way, face-to-face communication operates on an embodied immediacy – as the communicator and recipient share the same spatio-temporal reference system. As a result of this, the success of the communicative exchange is simultaneously in the hands of both communicator and recipient, and again, this can be recognised immediately. If the initial communication is not successful, there is potential for dialogue to sort it out – achieve understanding. Face-to-face communication, in effect, describes precisely those speech acts that Habermas considers to be able to affect social reality.

*Mediated communication* Thompson considers (1995: 83) to be the opposite of face-to-face communication. With mediated communication, the spatio-temporal reference system is not shared, and so, communication success depends on the recipient's recognising the meaning of the communication. To aid the process, communicators might consider providing context cues, but the interpretation of these, too, will be in the hands of the recipient. In short, mediated communication is more open-ended in character than face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, and like face-to-face communication, mediated communication is still always oriented towards a specific other, and so, is also dialogical by nature.

'Mass media', as Thompson calls it, also involves mediating technologies, but it functions differently. Neither long established forms of mass media like books and newspapers, nor radio and television, depend on making a reciprocal connection to the recipient in the same manner as does mediated communication. Rather, the interaction taking place is what Thompson calls, 'mediated quasi-interaction' (1995: 84). This is interaction that targets a pre-defined audience. With 'mediated quasi-interaction' there is a fundamental asymmetry between communicators and recipients. Most importantly, the communication predominantly flows in only one direction. Thus, 'mass media' communication is usually *monological*.

The key behind Thompson's sharp distinction between mediated communication and mediated quasi-interaction is that certain forms of communications (e.g. mass media) are just vehicles for delivering messages to and from specific groups. As such, they should not be understood as efforts to start and carry out a dialogue.

Nonetheless, since the communication is targeted, it is still possible to seek specific responses. In so much as the efforts do not aim to contribute to further discourse or starting a dialogue, however, mediated quasi-interaction should be seen as a form of manipulative communication (similar to Habermas's categories of instrumental communicative action).

## 8.1.2. Assessing equivalence

Having reiterated Thompson's distinction, let us return to the two assumptions underlying the idea of *equivalence*. What this distinction initially helps us to appreciate is that equivalence concerns a perceived similarity between certain types of online and face-to-face communication. First, then, I specify precisely which types of Internet communication are potentially equivalent to face-to-face communication. To do so I extend Thompson's framework of immediate-, mediated-, and mediated quasi-interaction. Having done this, I assess whether any such communication types really are equivalent to face-to-face communication. To do so, I consider whether the relevant forms satisfy Habermas's criteria for communicative action – which has the capacity for creating and affecting the social world.

### 8.1.2.1. *Equivalence in form: Internet mediated communication*

Turning to the different types of online communication, the first thing to recognise is that several types of these have the same mediating functions that Thompson suggests for mediated communication and mediated quasi-interaction. In these cases, as discussed in Chapter 6, it seems that the forms of communication have simply expanded or shifted across communication realms. Letter writing, for instance, has largely been replaced by email, whilst mass media outlets now have both online and more traditional offline outputs.<sup>98</sup>

In the case of mediated communication, new forms of communication (like Snapchat, emails etc.) add *immediacy* to mediated communication in two significant ways: Firstly, some forms of mediation via Internet add another layer of presence to the communication. Video messaging software such as Skype and FaceTime, for

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<sup>98</sup> Although the editorial style, as well as the editor, can differ between offline and online editions of the same media.

instance, allow the recipients a visual experience of the communicator concurrently to the communication. In this respect, these interactive forms of communication raise a question as to whether merely the requirement to use a medium is enough to distinguish these forms of communication from face-to-face communication. In these cases, where the online form retains dimensions of the embodied nature of face-to-face communication, I think there is perhaps a case to be made for *equivalence*. Added to this, Internet technologies allow the barrier to mediated communication (sharing the same communication) with multiple people at the same time to be removed entirely. In this way, for instance, Facebook group chats and video conference calls can create a sense of immediacy between multiple people similar to that found in face-to-face group conversation.

In short, then, some forms of communication via the Internet function as mediated communication, whilst bringing its dialogical nature to a new level and providing immediacy and forms of participation not previously possible. Even with these expanded opportunities, however, it is important to keep in mind that this communication remains, and indeed depends upon its being, dialogical. There is always a recipient and the message is meant for someone specific or for many others. Whilst the nature of the interaction between the people involved in these new forms of mediated communication is different, the willingness to establish a connection with the other remains a crucial aspect of these new modes of communication.

Likewise, online communication has also expanded the *scope* of mediated quasi-interaction. The established forms of mass media communication that Thompson mentions all operate with gatekeepers in place (e.g. publishing houses, editors, and so on). Correspondingly, the people able to insert the message and identify a target audience in offline forms of mediated quasi-interaction are in a certain position of authority. The Internet, on the other hand, makes widely available means that provide anyone with the possibility to message targeted audiences without needing to pass any gatekeepers. In this way, then, mediated quasi-interaction (that is not an extension of traditional mass media) does not demand the communicator to have an authority status. Of course, people with authority will use the new modes of

communication, as the previous discussion of a politician's Twitter account illustrates, but these strategies can also be adopted and replicated by anyone. In principle, even those without authority initially can use the tricks of mediated quasi-interaction to gain leverage and claim authority for themselves.<sup>99</sup>

Despite these points, this form of communication remains monological – even whilst adding some trappings of immediacy (e.g. speed, pictures of communicator etc.). The response, if anticipated, is to some extent pre-determined by the original message, so there is no possibility for rational discourse. Whilst the extent of mediated quasi-interaction has greatly expanded, then, in principle, its nature is unchanged online.

Whilst Thompson's distinction is useful for identifying some of the forms of Internet communication, it has limitations. Non-face-to-face communication falling into each of Thompson's categories either provide no possibility for rational debate (e.g. television), or, if open to debate, involves a time-lag and limitations upon how the meaning of the communication is specified (e.g. letters). As noted, however, some forms of Internet communication systematically break these boundaries and offer a more dialogical form of communication, differing from face-to-face communication principally on account of the system in which they occur. Here, I have in mind examples such as: instant messaging applications that simulate the flow of conversation, Twitter, commenting on Facebook and so on. Thompson's classification does not account for this development. To distinguish this from communication that is a relatively straightforward extension of mediated/quasi-mediated communications, I shall refer to this synthesis of mediated and face-to-face communication as 'Internet mediated communication'.

*Internet mediated communication* mimics the dynamics of immediate world communication, more specifically the dynamics of face-to-face interaction. The people undertaking the communication are 'visible' to the others, i.e. they have names and pictures as place-holders for their physical presence. Furthermore, this

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<sup>99</sup> Food bloggers presenting their nutritional expert 'degree' to gain recognition and build their brands, e.g. the Helmsley sisters, are a good example of this.

communication is dialogical by nature and draws from the communal pool of shared meanings and values. Where it is distinct from *mediated communication* as discussed earlier, especially written forms, e.g. letters and emails, is that the discussion does not have to be limited to a (small group of) previously selected or identified recipients but has an 'audience' and natural flow akin to wider public discourse in the immediate world. Furthermore, as Internet mediated communication does not always have a defined recipient, the communicator does not need to deliver a (content) specific message but can aim to contribute to the discussion more organically – as opposed to mediated communication. Moreover, as it functions without gatekeepers dictating appropriate topics and approaches, the subject of discussion can reflect the communicator's own state of mind. In these ways, then, the Internet has provided a venue for rational discourse, as does face-to-face communication, whereby communication is not just a means for delivering specific information but could be seen as a means to contribute to a debate.

With all this said, it is worth noting that a single online communication platform can allow communication in all of these categories. For instance, one could use Twitter to target a specific group with 'significant' information (a la mediated quasi-interaction), for private messaging (mediated communication), and also to contribute to overall discourse (Internet mediated communication). To illustrate, just consider how all of the following tweets function differently: "MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" (Trump, 2017), "These baked avocado eggs are literally the most perfect breakfast ever" (BuzzFeed, 2017) and "There are 1m Londoners of EU origin. You are Londoners, you are welcome here, and you should be able to stay after Brexit" (Mayor of London, 2017).

To sum up, Internet communication means do not create, nor demand participation in any specific form of communication, nor engagement with a specific interest cluster. Vice versa, the Internet has provided a platform to extend long-established forms of communication. At the same time, it has provided a unique possibility to start, to add to, and contribute to larger discussion in the form of Internet mediated communication. It is this latter possibility that suggests that Internet communication does not only function as Thompson suggests the different forms of mediated

communication do. Moreover, it is this form of online communication that is the best candidate for equivalency in form. Correspondingly, the last section of this chapter considers whether Internet *mediated communication* is equivalent in function to face-to-face communication.

### *8.1.2.2. Equivalence in function*

To assess the *equivalence of Internet mediated communication* and face-to-face communication in terms of function, *Internet mediated communication* will be compared with Habermas's criteria for communication with the capacity to affect social reality. As a reminder these are, roughly, that: the communication has to occur in a free sphere; the communication needs to occur as a communicative act; and, the communicator needs to be prepared to defend the validity claims (truth, truthfulness and rightness) that are inherently made via the communicative act. As the criteria demand, I shall consider Internet mediated communication's amenability to each criterion one-by-one.

#### *8.1.2.2.1. Internet: free realm of communication*

The first question to be addressed is whether the online communicative ecosystem can be considered a system in and via which free communication can occur.

Several theorists have argued that it cannot, and that communication on the Internet is inherently restrictive. My analysis has provided grounds to argue that this view overemphasises the system in which communication on the Internet occurs. It assumes a view such as Habermas's 'systems world' view of the Internet and pays too little attention to the content and structure of the communication itself.<sup>100</sup>

Two prevalent strands of thought in the literature exemplify the pessimistic view of the Internet. On one hand, the sheer pressure of communication that 'always on culture' provides is taken to supersede the free engagement in conversation

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<sup>100</sup> In here I diverge from Habermas's (2006) own view of Internet communication—where he could be seen guilty of this treatment of Internet communication himself—in which he suggests that Internet communication supports clustered discussion, rather than open debate, and, furthermore, that the Internet's emancipatory power only appears as a means for mass communication, which facilitates a change in political power.

(Turkle 2011; 2015; boyd 2014). On the other hand, the systems world discourse is forwarded by the recognition that communication on the Internet is restricted by the moderation of our perceptions of the information stream by the algorithms that manage that stream – this perception is especially prevalent in discussion about the Internet as a possible ‘public sphere’ (e.g. Thompson 1995; Dean 2003, 2005). Yet, both of these views are concerned with the occurrence of the communication, either the sheer amount of it or the sequence of its’ appearance, not the character and the function of said communication. In this light, it is important to distinguish discussion of the nature of online spaces from discussion of the communication that occurs in them.

To assess whether the Internet provides a free space of communication means to assess the communication that occurs in it. Hence, the power of the social reality formation cannot be ascribed to the way in which online communication is presented, or appears to the other, as the algorithmic view would promote. Vice versa, it belongs to the communication. Of course, recognising the way in which the presentation of Internet mediated communication is moderated is important and relevant – not least in the way in which this *does* restrict possibilities for more inclusive and exhaustive discourse. Yet, these discussions of the occurrence of and the responses to Internet mediated communication depend upon a picture of the Internet as a self-sustaining system, an online social reality that people are able neither to reflect on, nor change. I think this is too strong a claim,<sup>101</sup> and dismisses the crucial fact that the communicator can switch between forms of communication.

The emphasis on discussing the amount of communication and its flow takes the communication on which these phenomena depend for granted, downplaying the fact that the participants in the communication are independent (rational) agents. Whilst the flow might be determined by the medium, the communication itself still stands for someone’s speech act, and for it to have any significance it should be

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<sup>101</sup> Discussion of ‘filter-bubbles’ (Pariser 2011) as well as conscious information avoidance (Goldman et al. 2017) seem to dismiss the nature of day-to-day communication, and the fact that Internet communication is part of it. So, information from sources other than Internet communication means should also seep into the consciousness of the communicator. And vice versa, strong-tied groups have always affected the consciousness of the group members (Jenkins 2004).

recognised and assessed as such. Each communication belongs to a specific individual, who must share a certain language capacity with other society members, for whom recognising the communication is possible only because the communication follows certain language rules. In this respect, we should recognise that online discourse is a discourse between human beings who are consciously committing speech acts.

Despite the concerns about the ‘always on culture’ and algorithms, it seems that the online ecosystem meets the first condition. When the necessary logistics for participation in Internet mediated communication are in place, the structure of the communication networks on the Internet, as discussed in previous chapters, does not prevent participants from freely choosing when and what to contribute to the discourse (in terms of meaning and content). In this sense, formation of a free sphere of discourse is no more complicated or limited than offline. Indeed, where Habermas has been widely criticised for specifying conditions for free discourse that are not achievable in the immediate world (see: Fraser 1990) and which presume that every competent member of the society should be able to take part in the discourse and voice their opinion freely (Habermas 1990: 89), the Internet can be seen to lower the barriers to contribution.

It follows that the first criterion for equivalence in function is satisfied by Internet mediated communication. In principle, this form of communication is not pre-determined and people are not simply replicating a fixed social world through it. Rather, their communication is an extension of offline communication that operates with and on the same language. Moreover, Internet mediated communication occurs as a result of a conscious decision and the freedom to choose the content of one’s communication.

#### *8.1.2.2.2. Internet mediated communication: communicative action*

The next task is to consider the nature of Internet mediated communication, and whether it can, at a minimum, take the form of *communicative action* – or whether it is always *goal-oriented*. As a reminder: in *goal-oriented communication* the communicator makes statements that would lay the path to successfully achieve



goals that are not intrinsically related to the act of communication (Habermas 1984: 9). *Communicative action*, though, is action aimed towards rational agreement (about the meaning of the utterance, and respectively, what kind of social reality it creates) (Habermas 1984: 289). It is important to note that both forms are possible in the circumstances of free communication. In free communication, these forms of communication change organically, facilitating agreement upon the relevant norms. When the goal-oriented action becomes dominant, however, the norms become immutable and rational agreement is not possible.

How does Internet mediated communication fare in this regard?

On one hand, much Internet mediated communication can be classed as 'goal-oriented action'. Cyberbullying and trolling are particularly extreme examples of speech acts serving only to attain the communicator's ends, whether it be the communicator's superiority or an action that would benefit them remotely. More traditional forms of goal-oriented action are in place as well (again, the politicians and their Twitter accounts). In any of these cases, people are able to respond. Yet, it has to be recognised that there is a crossover between Internet communication and mediated quasi-interaction which creates a grey area for certain actions to be considered 'goal oriented' or 'communicative'. This, as will be discussed below, complicates the recognition and response to some Internet communication.

On the other hand, and more importantly, much Internet mediated communication takes the *form* of communicative action. People engage in discussion of topics as wide ranging as the future of politics and the most efficient way to burn calories. These topics, and the form of communication, are not related to values that are essentially subject to interpretation, but are subject to rational debate. As such they are amenable to discourse as Habermas defines it (Habermas 1984: 20).

Correspondingly, much Internet mediated communication is also governed by the implicit rules of communicative action that bind communicator to communication – as every utterance aimed at agreement demands that the communicator should, if needed, defend and explain that utterance. In this way, as we saw in Chapter 5, every communicative action is embedded with the responsibility for the cultural,

social and individual claims that it raises. These claims, in turn, can be validated through intersubjective communicative relations – addressees either accept the meaning of the utterance by acting accordingly, or challenge these through discourse.

In principle we can conclude that the online ecosystem provides a free communication space for Internet mediated communication, which can take the form of both ‘goal oriented’ as well as ‘communicative action’. The second criterion for *equivalence* in function is satisfied as well.

#### 8.1.2.2.3. Internet mediated communication: invalidated validity claims

Finally, the last step for *equivalence* is to investigate whether and how the rigorous validation process that communicative action should go through, if it is to affect social reality *qua* the nature of communication action, is enacted in the case of Internet mediated communication.

Importantly, Internet mediated communication lacks the embodied physical immediacy of face-to-face communication. Nonetheless, this does not remove the bare possibility to respond to the content of the communication and challenge the communicator – it is not communication without a source.<sup>102</sup> Even if people do not appear with their full names, the communicator is not unspecified as such, and the communication is always linked to a name, or effective placeholder. The way in which the text can be immediately associated with the name or placeholder is not entirely dissimilar to the way in which people physically present in face-to-face communication can be associated with verbal communication.

In respect to these points, it seems fair to say that the individual can be held accountable for their online communication. The question, then, is whether the way

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<sup>102</sup> I take into account that a significant amount of online communication is produced by Internet bots (as well as bad actors), i.e. communication which is produced by scripted/automated online applications. Most commonly, however, bots are used for inserting specific information, i.e. planting advertising or news reports or increasing user traffic by artificially producing standard responses, e.g. likes in Facebook, views in YouTube. So, in relation to analysing equivalence between online and offline communication, as communicative action, I take it that the issues raised by this aspect of the online ecosystem are not immediately relevant. I say a little more on this topic toward the end of this chapter.

in which this is done is equivalent to face-to-face communication. For that, it is necessary to look, once again, at the validity claims that Habermas argues are inherent in any communicative act and assess whether and how these can be made/occur in Internet mediated communication.

Underlying the claims inherent to any act of face-to-face communicative act is that the communication is in the first place 'intelligible'. This *antecedent* claim of intelligibility relates to the language itself and the coherence of the utterance (Edgar 2005: 148). Central to this relationship is the requirement that communication is in accordance with the rules that govern the structure of the language; including the expectation that "the linguistic expressions are used with identical meanings" (Habermas 1997: 19). Clearly, any act of Internet mediated communication can be readily assessed in terms of its intelligibility – and the reactions and responses that such an act might prompt are indicative of that claim to intelligibility being accepted.

Thus, when @realDonaldTrump tweets (Trump, 2019):

Another Fake Story on @NBCNews that I offered Pardons to Homeland Security personnel in case they broke the law regarding illegal immigration and sanctuary cities. Of course this is not true. Mainstream Media is corrupt and getting worse, if that is possible, every day! (@realDonaldTrump 13<sup>th</sup> April 8:33pm)

The responses to that tweet which either challenge or endorse it, presuppose that the claim to intelligibility inherent in the original tweet is valid.

If, then, the claim to intelligibility is accepted, the content of the communication can come under scrutiny in more substantive ways. Specifically, when the communication functions – or is presented – as communicative action, it raises a set of claims that the speaker implicitly expects either to be recognised or responded to. Successful communicative action, depends upon reaching agreement about these claims and agreement is only reached when the recipient *validates* those claims (Habermas 1992: 132). As Habermas explains (1990: 137):

The speaker raises with every intelligible utterance the claim that the utterance in question is true, that the speech act is right in terms of giving

normative context (or that the normative context that is satisfied is itself legitimate), and the speaker's intentions are meant in the way that they are expressed (Habermas 1990: 137).

Following this passage, then, we can recognise three types of *substantive* validity claims inherent to any apparent act of communicative action: claims of rightness, truthfulness and truth.

The claim of rightness is related to the intersubjective aspect of society, which provides resources to redeem normative claims. To claim rightness, then, is to claim that one's communicative action is in line with the world of legitimately ordered interpersonal relationships (or indirectly, to the norms themselves) (Habermas, 1990: 137). Likewise, the communication can be challenged and rejected based on the aspects of "speaker claims for her action in relation to a normative context (or indirectly, for these norms themselves)" (Habermas 1998: 141).

As with the antecedent claim to intelligibility, it seems clear that online communication can make such a claim. The tweet above from @realDonaldTrump, for instance, makes a claim to rightness in so far as it presupposes that criticism of the Mainstream media is legitimate and justifiable within the public context in which the tweet is made and when made by the President of a democratic country. And, in principle, a responder to @realDonaldTrump might challenge (as @akintundebello appears to when responding 'In issues as this, I don't believe it's right when u condemn news that don't favor u to be fake, and praise those that sing your praise. It doesn't work that way, sire.') or accept (as @JonathanIson777 appears to when responding 'Hence the reason why CNN and other news agencies like them are seeing dwindling numbers in viewers!') this claim.

The claim of truthfulness is related to the personal component of the lifeworld that is each participant's own world of subjective lived experience. It is, thus, a claim to the validity of subjective experience to which the communicator has privileged access. Habermas also considers this to be a claim of sincerity (Habermas 1990: 137; Habermas 1992: 307). Claiming that the communication is sincere refers to the degree to which it accurately expresses the speaker's intentions (Edgar 2005: 148). (In this way, the claim of truthfulness also concerns the manifestation of an opinion, or belief.) In short, a claim to sincerity is only valid if the communicator is genuine in

the performance of the speech act (Dietz & Widdershoven 1991: 239). So, the challenge of communication based on the validity claim for truthfulness or sincerity, can be challenged based on experience that the speaker has unique access to (Habermas 1998: 141).

Again, considering @realDonaldTrump's tweet above we see how Internet mediated communication can make this claim and be subject to challenge in respect to that claim. Clearly the content of the tweet is truth-apt, and indeed refers to information that @realDonaldTrump has access to but his followers do not. The many responses that list the number of times Donald Trump has purportedly been caught lying indicate that the claim to truthfulness is not accepted – i.e. they indicate that @realDonaldTrump is not to be trusted.

The claim of truth relates to the cultural aspect of the lifeworld, and with that, to the existence of a specific state of affairs. These are statements that relate to the objective world and are the basic resources for challenging and redeeming utterances (Edgar 2005: 170). As the name suggests, the claim of truth is the claim that the speaker is making a true statement (or accurate existential assumption) (Habermas 1984: 307). This communicative act, respectively, can be challenged regarding the “truth that the speaker, with her utterance, claims for a statement” (Habermas 1998: 141); i.e. regarding the truth of the proposition (Habermas 1984: 23).

Again, it is particularly clear that instances of IMC can make this claim in the our example tweet, just in so far as that tweet makes several truth-apt assertions. That claim is challenged by those tweets which, not only suggest that @realDonaldTrump is not to be trusted, but that the particular content of this tweet is or seems untrue (e.g. @gfunky1 ‘Sound like something you would do...’).

Now, considering the face-to-face communicative situation, corresponding to the speaker's validity claims, the listener accepts the speech act by taking a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ position on each claim made (Habermas 1984: 287). Thought, in this sense, is complemented by a judgement (Habermas 1997: 12). Moreover, when communication is presenting claims that could be subject to critique, this is not an arbitrary judgement made, but decision that is made “*in the light of reasons or*

*grounds*; such positions are the expression of *insight or understanding*” (Habermas 1984: 38; italics original).

The speech act is successful when this intersubjective recognition of the validity claims is successful. For the communicative action to be successful, then, the meaning of the utterance must be recognised, the validity claims that the utterance raises not contested, and the communication followed by a coordination of behaviour.

If any of the inherent validity claims is contested, on the other hand, then, further justification of the communication and validity claims is required. In challenging the utterance, the addressee contests either the normative rightness, the subjective truthfulness, or “a certain existential presupposition” of the validity claim; or all three (Habermas 1984: 306).

Now, Internet mediated communication – as illustrated by the example tweet - appears as communicative action i.e. communicative acts can be recognised as intelligible; and, there are validity claims that the addressee can agree with or challenge. Thus, Internet mediated communication is not only similar in form to face-to-face communication, but appears on the surface at least to fit this description when it comes to function.

Yet, I would suggest that the two forms of communication differ substantially in one crucial feature. Face-to-face communication demands, by definition, the embodied and immediate presence of an other – successful intersubjective communicative action can only occur if at least two speakers are present and engaged in the communicative exchange. In the case of Internet mediated communication, and despite the ‘presence’ of immediate names, faces, and placeholders, none of the actors are present in the real sense of the word.

Recognising this difference allows us to identify two essential features of Internet mediated communication: firstly, despite the development in the complexity of the communication, Internet mediated communication is inherently still mediated communication; and secondly, without the embodied presence of the other, the

implicit demands of responsibility embedded in the communication cannot be enacted in the same way as with face-to-face communication.

The first of these features should be self-explanatory. Despite the fact that portable devices allow instantaneous and any-time communication, the participants in the communication are still not in each other's immediate presence. The identity of the Internet communicator can be inferred from the name and photo appearing with the communication, but the distance between the communication and the physical person remains, and there is always some kind of intermediary mechanism upon which the communication depends. In this way, Internet mediated communication, just as with *any* form of mediated communication is independent, and essentially detached from the communicator.<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, I suggest that the distance between communicator and communication may be greater in Internet mediated communication than in other forms of mediated communication. Communication, and the intersubjective relations through which it occurs, in turn forge the subjectivities of the people engaged in those relations. In the immediate world, the communicative relation ascribes individuals with communicative rationality, i.e. all those contributing to communicative action are rational agents. With Internet mediated communication this process is removed from the individual who actually communicates – the rationality is ascribed to a name that stands next to a text (i.e. the online-subject).

This leads to the second feature; the validation of claims arising from communicative action depends upon the presence of the other. Whether the claims are challenged or agreed upon depends entirely on the response of and to the people present. As discussed in Chapter 5, silence, and a failure to challenge the communication, indicates that the recipient agrees with the meaning of the utterance, recognises the action that would follow from that meaning, and accepts the lifeworld norms to be as

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<sup>103</sup> To reflect back on the importance of embodiment in respect to subjectivity, we should be careful not to think that this is 'disembodied' communication. The people involved at the ends of the communication have an 'embodied' experience in all kinds of communication. Rather, the point is that the *kind* of embodied experience that communicators have is significantly different when engaged in mediated and especially Internet mediated communication from that when engaged in face-to-face communication.

the original communication suggests. Challenging of the communicative action indicates that the validity claims require further justification. In short, whilst the immediate world communication places an inherent responsibility for one's communication upon the communicator, it also lays responsibility upon the recipient to initiate (or not) action that would validate or challenge this communication. With this mutual responsibility in place, the speech act can be ignored only if it is completely un-intelligible – either because it makes no reference to the social world, or it is made completely out of context. When the communication is intelligible, however, some response is required.

By contrast, in Internet mediated communication responsibility cannot be enacted in the same way. The occurrence of communication in textual form, the number of participants in this communicative realm, and the extended time-frame in which the communication can be witnessed, are all significant. The difficulties that Internet mediated communication validation faces can be recognised when looking at how it takes place.<sup>104</sup>

As mentioned in respect to the previous criteria, some communication platforms allow an overlap (or a grey area) between mediated quasi-interaction and Internet mediated communication. Correspondingly, there is a question of distinguishing speech acts that are 'goal-oriented action' or 'communicative action' on those same platforms. The use of similar communication means allows a 'goal-oriented action' to be considered 'communicative', and vice versa. In face-to-face communication, such confusion could be easily avoided through the challenge-response expectations. In contrast, Internet communication systematically increases the ambiguity because of the temporally extended availability of the communication, which allows widespread access and possibility to take up engagement with the speech act. In this respect, two central problems with Internet mediated

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<sup>104</sup> Not to overplay the example, but the practical difficulties of enacting the norms of responsibility online are well illustrated by the aforementioned tweet from @realDonaldTrump. At the time of writing (5 days after the initial tweet) this tweet had received around 17000 responses, 29000 retweets, and 110000 likes. From a purely practical perspective it would be impossible for @realDonaldTrump to respond to each and every one of those responses that challenges the validity claims in the original tweet. Likewise, those who do respond can reasonably presume that they will not have to defend in any serious way their own responses to @realDonaldTrump.



communication can be recognised: firstly, communication can be shifted in time and context, and the challenge to validate the speech act could arise long after it was due. Secondly, communication can change its nature depending on when it is read – a communicative action can turn to a goal oriented one in retrospect, and vice versa, thus rendering the reasons behind all communications questionable.<sup>105</sup>

Likewise, whilst communicative action can, and sometimes is, challenged, it can also be passed over, i.e. the communicative action should not be considered validated just because of not being challenged. With the recipient not present beyond place-holding names and pictures, however, it is not always clear who is personally responsible for responding, and so the responsibility for communication is not inherently engaged.

The idea of *equivalence* takes Internet mediated communication to operate on the implicit expectation of an immediate response to the communication, in the form of either agreement or challenge. When greeted with silence the communication might be taken to be accepted, thus, providing a feeling of instant gratification ('My communication has been counted as valuable!') even whilst such an assumption might be a misrepresentation of success in a changing social world. Yet, as Dean (2003) suggests this phenomenon is counterproductive in regard to the development of society: the more effort is put into communication that provides the false perception of success, the less people will engage in discourse offline that is more likely to lead to actual challenge or change of the system.

The absence of appropriate challenges also leads to a fusion of rules and meanings constituting the social world: to challenge a speech act is to question the usage and the meaning of the specific rule in the light of the social world. If the speech act goes unchallenged, however, then, it has been validated as compatible with the social world. Instances of unchallenged, unnoticed or ignored Internet mediated communication, allow concepts and meanings to seep into the social world that

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<sup>105</sup> There are several problems with the quasi-permanent nature of online communication: firstly, there are communications which might be dealt with already, but have still remained part of the communicative sphere and so can always resurface. Secondly, there are communicative act, which's meaning becomes problematic only later. Thirdly, none of the communication is completely deleted and so, can become evidence in specific instances.

might not be properly compatible with the original shared values. Nonetheless, without challenge, they can become a part of it, and so, matters that are acceptable for further discussion and use. In this way, Internet mediated communication can lead to changes of the social reality, not through discourse (as Habermas was suggesting recent European politics has engaged with extreme right-wing views (ch.5, p.176 fn.68)) but by remaining online and unchallenged.

The retrospective assessment of speech acts, on the other hand, contributes to the ambiguity of whether the communication was originally supposed to be goal oriented or communicative. This leads to a situation where, in principle, all communication can be considered as part of discourse, or not. A goal-oriented action can in retrospect become used in discourse, and ascribed the status of communicative action. This fluidity makes it possible to doubt the reasons of every speech act that occurs in Internet mediated form – every speech act can be trustworthy, or not. The way to defend oneself from the ambiguity of the realm is to completely ignore the communication – but this simply leads to the problems identified above.

To sum up, then, it seems apparent that the background conditions that are necessary for the validity claims made by instances of Internet mediated to be properly validated (or challenged) are not present. And crucially, communication that has not gone through the validation process that starts with the enactment of responsibility should not be considered to affect the social world. Thus, these two forms of communication – face-to-face and Internet mediated communication – do not follow the rules of communicative action in the same way. With Internet mediated communication, the responsibility for the communicative action is weakened, and responsibility for validation estranged; the immediate context of the communication does not have significance as everything occurs in one flow; and the subjectivity which is formed through this communication is distant to the communicator. In regard to these distinctions, Internet mediated communication that fails to meet the full criteria of *equivalence* should not be seen as fulfilling the function of contributing to social reality in the same manner as does face-to-face communication.

#### *8.1.2.2.3.1 Anonymity and non-human communicators*

The focus of this discussion and the thesis in general is upon non-anonymous online communication. As I have alluded to earlier in the thesis, two other areas we might be concerned with are anonymity and non-human participants in online communication i.e. bots. However, that it is difficult for a proper process of validation and accountability to take place in respect to non-anonymous communication online, I think, helps justify taking such communication to be the focal point of a critical analysis of online communication.

Of course, if someone is truly anonymous in their communication, there will be no way to hold them accountable except by appeal to their inner sense of responsibility (implicitly or explicitly). Similarly, there is no way to hold a bot accountable. What the analysis of Internet mediated communication reveals, though, is that substantively, there is little difference in either regard to non-anonymous communication.

What is more, I suggest, is that the real impact of online communication upon the social world lies in the extended possibilities for non-anonymous communication. If all communication online was anonymous, for instance, it seems unlikely that Tweets would be a regular feature of news broadcasts. Likewise, in so far as our investment in online communication is rooted in the possibilities for non-anonymous communication that resembles face-to-face communication (i.e. Internet mediated communication) any harmful consequences of bot communication would appear to follow from the way in which online communication is structured for non-anonymous communication.

As a final point, it is worth noting that anonymity, at least, is not necessarily a negative feature of any communicative system. For those marginalised and actively excluded from aspects of society, the possibility to communicate and express oneself without fear of reprisals aimed directly at them, can be vital and empowering. Likewise, the possibility to communicate anonymously can be an invaluable mechanism in holding those in power to account. Again, then, it seems theoretically preferable to locate the starting point of critical analysis of online communication elsewhere. On this line, the discussion the account of contemporary alienation in the

final chapter will focus upon non-anonymous communication. This is not to dismiss problems specifically associated with anonymity and bot communication, only to say these are not central to alienation on my account.

## Conclusion

Online communication and offline communication are alike in a number of significant ways. Beyond expanding the scope of established means of mediated quasi-interaction, social media has become an easy and convenient platform for sharing views with friends as well as following opinion-leaders. As this communication is updated in real time, it gives an impression of being a part of a conversation into which one can step at any time. Relatedly, the Internet can come across as an egalitarian communicative ecosystem in which every opinion has its place, and in which there is always opportunity to dismiss those that do not seem right. Given these points, it seems only natural that the discussions that occur online are commonly reported as speech acts just as if they were made in the context of face-to-face conversation.

Yet, this assumption makes the mistake of confusing the different forms of communication taking place via the Internet. To argue for *equivalence* requires that we first specify to which forms of Internet communication this assumption applies. My suggestion is that only Internet mediated communication (with some exception for mediated communication taking place online) should be treated as even a candidate for *equivalence*. Central to that claim, is the observation that both of these forms of communication, in principle, have the capacity to generate discourse.

When we consider Internet mediated communication in its nature as 'a text, appearing on the Internet (and on social media more specifically) that is situated next to a picture and a name, with a possibility to respond to it', however, the differences between Internet mediated and immediate communication begin to become more apparent. When encountering the text, the individual might not know whether the communication has gone unnoticed or unchallenged. Nor can it be taken for granted that the communicator has recognised, or considered, the responsibility embedded

in their act of communication. Correspondingly, reading does not commit the reader to engage with the text in any further way – one is free to dismiss the text at will without the original communicator even being aware of this.

In the next chapter, I shall argue that this discrepancy between online and offline is a key feature of alienation in the contemporary world.

# Chapter 9: Contemporary alienation

*"Most people would trade everything they know, everyone they know – they'd trade it all to know that they've been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered. We all know we die. We all know the world is too big for us to be significant. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment."*

Mae in *The Circle* (Eggers 2013: 485)

## Introduction<sup>106</sup>

In this chapter, I bring together themes from the previous chapters to present my account of contemporary alienation.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I engaged with the work of Marx and first-generation Critical Theory to provide a genealogy of the term 'alienation' as a critical concept to describe the social world and its impact on the individual. In Chapter 3, I situated Rahel Jaeggi's account of self-alienation in relation to this tradition to argue that it is important to realize the role of individual agency determining the nature and state of alienation in the contemporary world. In Chapters 4 and 5, I put into dialogue Judith Butler's theory of the subject, Axel Honneth's notion of recognition, and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action to elucidate the central importance of communication in the development of the individual and their subjectivity. By emphasising the communicative nature of subjectivity, the account of the individual as a communicative subject emphasises the intersubjective responsibility and vulnerability of the individual in relation to the other, and the significance of intersubjective interactions for the constitution of the social world. In Chapters 6 and 7, I discussed the history and the development of the Internet and forms of communication on it to argue that online space has become a distinct communicative ecosystem. I drew on the work of Dean, van Dijck, Lindgren, Fuchs and others to identify the underlying capitalist socio-economic structure of this ecosystem and the

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<sup>106</sup> This chapter should be read as the findings chapter. The arguments and conclusions presented here are drawn directly from the discussions of literature earlier. Where relevant, rather than repeat references to literature discussed, I have inserted references to the page numbers within the thesis where I engage with that literature. The references are formatted as so: Chapter number (ch.), page number (p.), footnote number (fn.) (where relevant).

ways in which value is extracted from online communication. In Chapter 8, I identified the fundamental discrepancies in the functioning of online and offline communication. I argued that the capitalist structure of online communication enables communicative agents to eschew their responsibilities as both *speaker* and *recipient* in communicative exchanges, in a way that they cannot offline. This, I argue, is a central feature of the contemporary social world.

In this chapter I analyse the relationship between the individual, as a communicative subject, and the contemporary social world formed by distinct communicative ecosystems. I argue that, though sharing features of previous eras of capitalism, by manipulating the (online) intersubjective communicative relationship directly, communicative capitalism creates a distinct form of alienation.

To understand this, we need to recognise how communicative capitalism structures online communication in such a way as to create a system that is alienating to everyone living in the society. Uniquely to the contemporary social world, however, I argue that to understand how alienation manifests in day-to-day life we also need to recognise that how individuals as communicative subjects exercise their own agency online feeds back into the structure of the social world itself. It is because of this feedback loop that contemporary alienation is a truly interdependent phenomenon – just as we saw Karl Marx describe the relationship between individual and social world in general in Chapter 1:

It is above all necessary to avoid postulating “society” once again as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual *is* the *social being*. The manifestation of his life – even when it does not appear directly in the form of communal manifestation, accomplished in association with other men – is therefore a manifestation and affirmation of *social life*. Individual human life and species-life are not *different things*, even though the mode of existence of individual life is necessarily either a more *specific* or a more *general* mode of species life, or that of species-life a more *specific* or more *general* mode of individual life (Marx 2004: 106; italics original).

Given the role of individual agency in shaping the contemporary social world under communicative capitalism, I argue – echoing Jaeggi’s account of self-alienation – that there is a distinctive moral dimension to contemporary alienation.

In order to explain these arguments in more detail, I first discuss the alienating features of online communicative ecosystems.

Drawing on the discussion of communicative capitalism in Chapter 6, I show how the contemporary individual-social world relationship parallels features of alienation as identified by Marx, and in ways further developed and discussed by first-generation Critical Theorists. Communicative capitalism distorts the fundamental role of 'recognition' in the subject's appearance in the social world to generate a fetishistic need for online recognition. This distorted need parallels the need to consume in Marx's account of alienation; and the 'false' needs of the 'self' in the accounts of the Critical Theorists.

In line with this new need, the individual is encouraged to ignore their responsibilities in front of the other and is motivated to treat both their communication and the other as objects and means to achieve a kind of 'pseudo recognition'. Given the structure of the online information flow, the need for online recognition can never be satisfied – just as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse suggested that the false needs of capitalism will always be frustrated desires (ch.2, p.79). Thus, the individual is motivated to continually produce content to chase this need; emphasising production over meaning and so, helping the system to continue and grow.

In the final sections of the chapter, I turn to the way contemporary alienation is shaped by individual agency – and how this in turn affects the social world.

As we saw in Chapter 7, whilst communicative capitalism requires constant generation of content, it makes little or no demand on the meaning of any content produced. What is important is that users communicate, not what they communicate. This means that whilst subjected to a distorted need for recognition, the individual as a communicative subject is still able to exercise their agency in choosing what, how, and with whom to communicate. Thus, how the individual experiences alienation is, in a way, still up to them.

Crucially, communication online still occurs between language users operating in a shared pool of norms, meanings and values. Though the communicative subject is



motivated to treat the other as an object, their communications will still be received in line with these meanings, norms and values. Their communication has the capacity to harm and hurt the other. Hence, exercising their agency to communicate specific contents remains a matter of moral responsibility. The subject can embrace the spirit of communicative capitalism, exploiting or ignoring the vulnerability of the other to chase their own needs, or not.

Finally, I discuss how the “freedom” of the individual to exercise their agency creates a feedback mechanism that in turn affects the social world and so the wider manifestation of alienation. Since communicative capitalism demands quantity and replication of content, it provides a structure to propagate and cement concepts, meanings, and understandings. But it does not dictate what those are. Instead, this is determined by the collective actions and interactions of online users – what they choose to communicate, how they respond to others’ communications, and how they make use of each other. Drawing on the discussion in Chapters 5 and 8, I show how these choices come to impact and shape both, online space and the offline world; for the social world as a whole and the experience of the individual subject within that social world.

## 9.1. Online: an alienating communicative ecosystem

### 9.1.1. Conceptualising communicative capitalism

As discussed in the first part of this thesis, the critical concept of alienation refers to a relationship between the individual and the social world that has been distorted as one side of that relationship has come to dominate the other. As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, the tradition of theorising alienation from Marx to the Critical Theorists describes situations in which the source of distortions can be traced to features of the social system that affect all individuals living in it. In the first half of this chapter, I put the critiques of capitalism in the work of Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists into contact with the account of the online ecosystem structured by communicative capitalism developed in Chapters 6-8. By doing so, I show how the contemporary social world – dominated by communicative capitalism – is alienating, and how it is distinctively so.

Analysing the *contemporary* social world, as I explained in Chapter 6, requires analysis of both the online and offline world which each constitute a communicative ecosystem in their own right, as well as contribute to the makeup of the contemporary social world as a whole. Accordingly, my description of the alienating features of the contemporary social world employs the communicative account of the individual-social world relationship developed in the earlier chapters of this thesis. There are two key aspects to this framework:

Firstly, drawing on Butler and Honneth, I consider the individual to be a *communicative subject* – always in, and determined by, intersubjective communicative relations.

Secondly, considering Habermas's communication theory, I take the individual-social world relationship to be an interdependent *communicative* relationship. Correspondingly, the social world, i.e. the norms, rules, values and meanings that frame the individuals' social existence, are an outcome of collective communicative interactions between individuals. At the same time, every intersubjective relationship is formed within and defined by the social world. Thus, in line with the Marx quote at the beginning of this chapter, we can understand the individual-social world relationship as an interdependent one.

On this understanding of the relationship of the individual and the social world, broadly conceived, alienation occurs when intersubjective communicative relationships are distorted so that individuals do not execute their communicative agency to challenge, change, and define the social world.

To explain this, I will refer back to the critical accounts of alienating social systems discussed in Chapters 1 and 2:

Marx theorised the effect of society's change from a feudal system to a capitalist socio-economic one and identified the source of the distorted individual-social world relationship in the labour process. Where labour-relationships are natural to the individual, he argued, in capitalism they are transformed into the means for commodity production and consumption. Consumption, in turn, aims only to maintain

the physical existence of the individual, or through surplus income, establish social status. Through the introduction of wage-labour, thus, capitalism places individuals into a situation where they are able to engage with the other only through objects and the competition for social status that comes with the accumulation of those objects.

In response to the cultural and political changes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the early Critical Theorists were concerned with the expansion of mass-production into the cultural and political spheres, the growing reliance on technology in everyday life, and the rise of populist politics which altered the capitalist system. On their account, the individual becomes a product and part of the alienating system and the instrumental rationality that underlies the mass-production process comes to dominate the system as a whole. The individual internalizes this rationality in their efforts to define their own 'self'. Correspondingly, the individual's relation to the other is distorted as the individual's focus turns to establishing of the 'self' through the consumption of mass-produced objects, lifestyles and political positions.

What the discussion of this critical tradition of alienation demonstrates is how the alienation relationship is bound to manifest differently depending upon the particular constellation of the socio-economic-political system in which it occurs. Respectively, the emergence of both the online communicative ecosystem and communicative capitalism represents a new development in alienation.

Before making the case for that claim, I will also reiterate what I consider to be the key features of online communication and how the structure of that has come to be determined by the forces of communicative capitalism.

Firstly, as I suggested in Chapter 6 (p.201; 208-209) the individual should be seen as having distinct, and often simultaneous, online and offline 'subjectivities'. By providing a separate communicative ecosystem, online communication spaces present the individual with the possibility to translate their offline existence in the form of what I call the 'online-subject'. This act of translation is voluntary on the part of the individual – in a way that their appearance as subject offline is not. Hence, engagement in online communication spaces represents a new kind of freedom in

the individual's existence. The 'online-subject' exists as an online placeholder for the individual as communicative subject and often carries the same features (i.e. name, appearance etc.) as the individual. Whilst the online-subject is brought into being and manipulated by the individual, however, its permanent online presence allows interaction on the part of others – through their online-subjects – even when the individual is not present online.

Secondly, there is a powerful ideology of 'freedom' spun around the online ecosystem (ch.7, p.221-224) This can be explained, firstly, by reference to the various different social media platforms that provide the individual with the choice to engage with the online ecosystem in a variety of ways. More importantly, as the online ecosystem is inherently communicative, it has developed in such a way as to offer a greater variety in the forms of communication than exist offline – and so a greater variety of ways in which the individual can choose to communicate. As the discussion of 'communicative capitalism' in Chapter 7 highlighted, however, the individual's engagement in online communication is, at base, a source of revenue for the social media companies that provide the means for that engagement. Crucially, as the individual's online presence creates data as well as meta-data that can be analysed and monetized in the service of new forms of marketing, it is not just direct consumption, but engagement online *per se* that (potentially) generates revenue for companies that provide Internet services. Driven as it is by profit-making ventures, then, the experience provided online – and the myriad of services that facilitate that – develop and are developed so as to most efficiently extract monetary value from the individual's online activity. The emergence of online communication platforms and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) should be seen against this background. Where they translate and expand the possibilities for communication, they do so principally on the basis of the realisation that communications of even the most trivial and mundane sort can be a source of revenue for the platform providers. As a consequence, these platforms are designed not so much to facilitate communication between their users, but to maximize the content – and so data – that those users generate through communication.

The core source of any communication's value for the online companies lies in the data and meta-data that it generates. Respectively, these can be understood in terms of the specific content of the communication (data) and additional information that the service providers are able to glean from and about the context of the communication (meta-data). The conjunction of data and meta-data, as discussed in Chapter 7, allows the service providers to create a coherent picture of each individual in the form of a *data-subject* (ch.7, p.226-228). The data-subject, in turn, can be used to analyse and predict the individual's online behaviour patterns, and thus facilitate increasingly targeted marketing toward that individual. As captured in Pariser's concept of the 'filter bubble', exploitation of the data-subject further results in the individual's online experience and existence being externally moulded to reflect their online-subject.

Online service providers hide their interest in the *data-subject* behind the discourse of networking and sharing. Rather than the individual's operating anonymously through multiple online identities and usernames, they are encouraged to share every facet of their offline life via the online-subject. This discourse accompanies, and seemingly justifies, the demand for the individual to generate and feed the online-subject, as well as operate with the same online-subject across the different services used.<sup>107</sup>

This analysis so far echoes two accounts of online communication in terms of alienation that employ a more traditional Marxist framework. Given these parallels it is worth briefly discussing these accounts.

Eran Fisher, in his 2012 paper *How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites* suggests that the individual is, besides the other oppressive features of capitalism, alienated as a result of being unable to express themselves freely. Less alienation, in this light, would mean greater control over and opportunity to communicate. "Working on one's Facebook page", as he notes, "can be thought of as less alienating than working watching a television

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<sup>107</sup> This is not to suggest that there is no anonymous online communication – there is plenty. But even if the individual opts to remain anonymous, as long as they communicate in that same system, they create valuable data and meta-data.

program“ (Fisher 2012: 173). In line with the discussion in this chapter, however, Fisher points out that these seemingly free and empowering engagements, are actually the site of the individual's exploitation, as service providers gain value from the engagement, without the individual being compensated in any terms. What Fisher appears to suggest here is that there is a dialectical relationship between exploitation and alienation, and, that the shift from mass media consumption has changed the dynamic of that relationship. Mass media may be alienating, but it is not exploitative in the sense of directly profiting from the individual's engagement with it. In contrast, and paradoxically, the more the individual engages in online communication and receives 'recognition' (likes) from one's peers, the less alienated they will be – whilst at the same time, the more they engage online, the more exploited they are by the system. Hence, we might say, the individual is caught in a closed circuit between being exploited or being alienated.

Fisher's discussion effectively translates the dialectics of the early Critical Theorists to the contemporary period (i.e. the more you consume, the happier you feel), in focusing upon the 'feeling' of alienation. At the same time, I would suggest that by focusing on the feeling of alienation and putting that into tension with exploitation, Fisher fails to pay full due to the way in which the system itself is inherently alienating – irrespective of the content of the individual's experience within that system. In this respect, Mark Andrejevic's ongoing work on new technology fares better.

Where Fisher's work perhaps owes more to the Critical Theorist's than Marx, Andrejevic employs Marx's concept of alienation to theorise the inherently exploitative business-model of the online service providers. Andrejevic emphasises the fact that changes in the form of labour in communicative capitalism (i.e. as material labour has to some extent changed into immaterial labour) have not changed the inherently exploitative nature of capitalism – whilst at the same time they have blurred the lines between labour, leisure, and consumption (Andrejevic 2013: 159). In this light, Andrejevic draws attention to the growing power that individuals, without realising, or indeed, at times effectively celebrating the possibility of doing so, cede to 'communication' companies to exercise control over their lives

and shape the appearance/occurrence of the social world in which they live (Andrejevic 2012: 85; 2014: 189).

By and large, my analysis is in agreement with Andrejevic's discussion in so far as he assesses the economic structure that underpins online communication (as I agree in this respect with Fisher also). As I endeavour to show in the rest of this chapter, however, a full analysis of contemporary alienation cannot only consider the economic structure of online communication. Whilst Andrejevic is right to emphasise the amount of control that the large Internet companies have over data – and specifically our data – we also need to consider what is the content of that data and how that impacts the social world. Yet, as I argue at least, the specific content of the data is at least partly in the hands of the individuals who communicate online.

What marks the system of communicative capitalism *economically* distinct, I would suggest then, is that from the perspective of the companies that service online communication, *every* communicative act has the status of an object from which revenue can be extracted. As such, the optimal situation from the perspective of those companies is that there is as much online communication as possible: the more there is, the greater the chances of any specific act becoming valuable; and the more there is, the more information and so value goes into the *data-subject*. Thus, communicative capitalism frames the online presence of an individual in a manner where the individual is encouraged to constantly feed their online-subject – and preferably through online communication. It is this inculcation of the individual into the rationality of communicative capitalism, that I suggest lies at the root of the developments of contemporary alienation.

Drawing out the parallels between communicative capitalism and the earlier period of capitalism analysed by the Critical Theorists, I will now show how, through the online-subject and its reduction of communication to an object, the former frames the individual's experience online in a way that recalls the objectively alienating features of the earlier period. What is peculiar about communicative capitalism, however, is that, whilst defining the forms of communication and ways of appearing online – it does not determine the content of the communication. Although all communication online is reduced to an object of exchange value, the choice of

content remains in the power of the individuals who engage with the online communicative ecosystem. This contributes to the distinctive nature of contemporary alienation.

### 9.1.2. How communicative capitalism shapes the online-subject

In the following section, I argue that the artificially central, but hidden, occurrence of the online-subject in its own communicative network; the demand to always communicate; and a short lived 'pseudo recognition', put the contemporary individual engaged in online communication in a position similar to the individual in the alienating capitalist systems discussed by Marx and the early Critical Theorists.

On the account of the communicative subject introduced through the work of Butler, Honneth and Habermas, the individual is an inherently social being, formed and realised in relation to others. The individual is exposed to the social world at birth. This sets the individual into a position where the norms, values and meanings that constitute the social world, and others in that social world, are defining the individual before they are aware of their own subjectivity. What the subject must learn as a member of this social world is how the norms, meanings, and values operate in intersubjective relations with the other and how these intersubjective relations make and confirm existence of the social world.

In this light, communication has a twofold importance to the individual:

Firstly, communication frames and substantiates the intersubjective relations between individuals. As discussed, the individual only becomes a subject after being addressed by the other and responding to that address (ch.4, p.117-120). What the other communicates about the individual is what the individual is bound to respond to: i.e. the language and meanings that are used to describe the individual, define the individual. As a result, the other always has power over the individual. Hence, the individual as a social subject is never in a position to invent their own selfhood from scratch. Rather, the criteria of identity are always ascribed to them, and the individual has the choice to act out that identity, or not – to either agree with the meanings attributed to them, or resist (ch.4, p.125-127; 139). The power that the



other has over the subject, though, should not be used recklessly or callously, as the other is at the same time also a subject in the eyes of the individual. In this light, intersubjective relations are based on mutual recognition, specifically, mutual recognition of each other's vulnerability (ch.4, p.145-147).

Secondly, intersubjective communicative interaction between individuals also represents and defines the interdependent relationship between the individual and the social world. The social world, as understood here, is constituted by the norms, values, and meanings that form the content of interactions between individuals living in that social world. Through the collective communicative action or discourse, as defined by Habermas (ch.5, p.161-162) these norms, values, and meanings can be changed and renegotiated. However, unregulated communication (including but not exhausted by goal-oriented and strategic action (ch.5, p.166-167) can also generate new meanings and uses of language that seep into the social world without agreement. Since every specific communicative exchange draws upon, re-enacts, and challenges the prevailing norms, values, and meanings, every specific exchange has its place in contributing to and defining the social world. Communication, thus, has baked into it a certain responsibility of the individual toward the social world and themselves

In light of the individual's status as communicative subject, then, the individual's 'selfhood' offline is always a co-product of the other and the individual as a subject, limited by the linguistic and conceptual resources available to the other and the individual to give and respond to an account. In this sense, the 'self' is the account that the individual, as subject, offers in response to being recognised. Online interactions are structured differently.

In contrast to the offline world, the online ecosystem is constituted by services as enclosed spaces, where the individual's inclusion in that space is guaranteed the moment that they engage with, sign-up, and enter the space. Reflecting the role given to the individual's choices in their appearance online, the online-subject is presented to the individual as the silent occupant at the centre of the ongoing flow of information and communications that constitutes that ecosystem. As such, there is no initial process of appearing in front of the other and waiting to find out how the

other will respond to the individual. Vice versa, others are always visible, in communication, and most importantly, independent of the subject. Occupying a central position in the ecosystem, thus, does not mean that the online-subject is recognised by others by default. Rather, the individual's initial presence within the network is a kind of shadow presence. Recognition can only occur when the individual acts upon the online-subject so that it appears as part of the 'feed' or the 'thread'. To do that, the individual must introduce themselves: they must communicate through the online-subject. The natural need for recognition, thus, transposed online, becomes the need to communicate.

In addition, the online service providers exploit the fact that the individual is already a part of an offline network to make the want to communicate even more pressing. As we saw in Chapter 7, the SNS's that form the backbone of the contemporary online – unlike the forums and chatrooms in the web 1.0 – are built off the back of offline networks (ch.7, p.220). When the individual establishes their online-subject on these platforms, they do not encounter a network of strangers with whom to forge new connections – rather they are confronted by and large with the online representations of the individuals that they know and interact with in their offline lives. In first entering the online space the individual finds themselves invisible to the very same others with whom they have already established and cemented genuine intersubjective relationships. The need to announce themselves to the network, establish their visibility within the flow of communication, and receive recognition is, thus, intensified as the individual is placed in a position of needing to reclaim the recognition that they have already achieved offline.

Though the individual must communicate to be recognised online, however, they are able to decide themselves how they want to be seen and perceived – before being exposed to the other. Thus, the inherent vulnerability of the individual in front of a present other is hidden by the structure of online communication, in a way that it is not in offline intersubjective interactions. This is not to say that the individual's efforts to establish their identity are not constrained online – but these constraints are different from those offline.

Offline individuality is a matter of negotiation with the other over meanings that have been used, identities that are in place in society and so on. In contrast, creation of the online-subject via registration of a social media profile makes immediate demands upon how the individual defines their identity without the influence of others evaluating this self while it is being articulated. Typically, the system requires the individual to do so (at least to some degree) by classifying themselves according to a pre-defined set of categories. However wide the selection of categories might be, there is no negotiation with the system. These categories, moreover, are all imbued with meaning and social significance. As opposed to the endless self-invention that was possible on the web 1.0, the contemporary demand that the user interact online via the online-subject inevitably boxes the individual into pre-existing understandings encapsulated in the profile system through which the online-subject initially registers and thus manifests.

Along similar lines, it is not possible to even temporarily leave the communicative sphere once the online-subject has been established – as it is in the offline. As both online-subject and *data-subject*, the individual remains invisibly present and accessible in the online ecosystem, at the very least for the service providers, but typically to others online also. So, returning to or starting afresh online is difficult to the point of being impossible: the data from previous engagements will implicitly guide the nature and trajectory of the next engagement. (Given the inclusion of meta-data into the data-subject, even establishing a new online-subject is unlikely to free one from one's past activities online). It is not that the individual online is faced with the other, who might well give a different account of the subject to any that the subject can recall or recognise, as Butler suggested (ch.4, p.131-132). Rather, online the actions of the online-subject are remembered and recorded precisely in the shape of the *data-subject*. And – just as one cannot negotiate with the system – there is no method how one could negotiate with data.

Nonetheless, the limited opportunities to define one's appearance online are perceived as freedom in the contemporary period and, thus, embraced by the contemporary individual. The terms and criteria by which the individual defines their online self may be set by the system, but the specific way that the individual uses

these to do so remains their choice. And, crucially, they are free from the gaze of the other whilst they make that choice. Whilst the individual is motivated to communicate online by the promise that their self-defined selfhood will receive recognition, however, what they find online is only *pseudo-recognition* – fading away as soon as it has been reached.

In offline intersubjective relations, as presented by Axel Honneth and discussed in Chapter 4, recognition is the initial condition of interaction between individual and other. Once the individual has been recognised by the other, however, they maintain their identity throughout any further interaction. In contrast, as the flow of online communication is constantly changing, so the individual needs to communicate constantly to maintain the online-subject's status within that flow. If the online-subject recedes from view and becomes invisible once more, the individual cannot assume that they are still recognised. In this sense, the online selfhood that the individual has created, becomes an existential labour of survival online. Whilst communication such as to maintain online-subject's visibility allows the individual to achieve a state that superficially resembles genuine recognition, this state is inherently unstable. To maintain this state requires a constant effort to produce ever more content and communication. As Honneth makes clear, when discussing how reification occurs when recognition is supposedly forgotten, true recognition does not require this kind of maintenance:

It cannot be true that our consciousness can simply be dispossessed of this fact of recognition and that recognition thereby simply “vanishes” from view. Instead, a kind of reduced attentiveness must be at issue, which causes the fact of recognition to fall into the background and thus to slip out of our sight (Honneth 1996: 130).

That, what superficially resembles recognition online can be forgotten whilst true recognition cannot, can be explained by the fact that in online communication it is not the individual as such that is subject to the others' apprehension but rather their presence as represented by their online-subject. For that reason, we could refer to the kind of visibility that individual can achieve online as one of pseudo-recognition. Importantly pseudo-recognition is distinct from reification, which occurs as noted, when even the most basic antecedent recognition *appears* to be forgotten; and,

‘misrecognition’ (Honneth is does not use this term, but it is used widely in discussion of Honneth) which corresponds to situations in which antecedent recognition is accompanied with some form of morally injurious disrespect (See: Honneth 1996: 131).<sup>108</sup>

	<b>Antecedent recognition and its object</b>	<b>Substantial content of recognition</b>
<i>Recognition</i>	Subject is antecedently recognised	Respect
<i>Misrecognition</i>	Subject is antecedently recognised	Disrespect
<i>Reification</i>	Subject is antecedently recognised, but this is ‘forgotten’	None (i.e. antecedent recognition is ‘forgotten’)
<i>Pseudo-recognition</i>	Online-subject is antecedently recognised. Subject is recognised only by virtue of the online-subject	Respect or disrespect or ‘forgotten’

**Figure 1.** Recognition and Pseudo-recognition

As communication online becomes a mechanical process – so the act of communication becomes an instrumental act. Where Habermas conceives of instrumental acts of communication as acts in which the meaning of the communication serves the self-centred purpose of the communicator, the value for the communicator in online communication lies, primarily, in the act itself. Though the individual’s communications are by necessity contentful, the communicative act serves the purpose to satisfy the need for recognition and achieve the pseudo-recognition that is offered online. What counts in respect to that goal, though, is not so much the meaning, significance, or appropriateness of the content, but that it stands out in the flow of communication. The more the individual’s communications stand out, the better the chance that others will respond and thus recognise the online-subject. The more content the individual generates, the better the chance that others will see that content and respond to it. The more responses the communication receives, the more likely that it will remain visible within the

<sup>108</sup> In light of these points, we might note, all communication online has something of the function of phatic communication (see ch.6, p.211-212).

information flow. (Whilst all user-submitted information can be stored, the need for recognition motivates the individual to do what they can to ensure the visibility of their communications to *other users*.)

Similarly to offline interaction, the communicative relation between individuals online brings them into contact with each other. Both are always in the position to act on each other's communications, however, this is not the same as the immediate presence of face-to-face communication. When the online-subject communicates something, they can only be sure of recognition when the other acts in response to that communication; and vice versa. As we have seen, the peculiarity of online interaction is that the individual, as a online-subject, is able to make the first move and actively seek recognition. Because this recognition seeking is taking place online, however, the other also has to make themselves visible to evidence that they have recognised the online-subject. I.e. the act of recognition online requires a communicative act on behalf of the other. Correspondingly, realisation of the online-subject's initial bid for recognition through communication becomes a means for the other to gain recognition also. It follows that recognition online is never an accidental occurrence – rather, it entails communication.

As well as altering the logic of recognition, the online communicative ecosystem has developed in such a way that these contributions and responses become almost automatic. The interconnected structure of platforms and services online, as well as the devices that are used to access them, have made responding to communication a simple and efficient affair with inbuilt functions and standardized responses – 'like', 'share', 'favourite' etc – available at the click of a button.<sup>109</sup> In their discussions of the 'instrumental' or 'technological rationality' of capitalism, the first-generation Critical Theorists focused upon the doctrine of efficiency and convenience and the individual's growing dependence on technology (ch.2, p.66-72). Similarly to how the

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<sup>109</sup> The increasing efficiency of the mechanization of communication is particularly well represented by the recent 'innovation' of automated responses in Google's email platform Gmail. Interestingly, Gmail is better viewed as an online version of simple mediated communication. Though Gmail does not so directly incorporate the online subject as do social networking sites, the improvements in the automatic response system allows the individual to hand over agency to the technology in a more clear-cut way. Whilst agency might be handed to the machine, however, (at least for now) the automatically generated email will still carry the same significance for the recipient.

rationality of the structure of capitalism conditioned the individual to switch off their own critical agency, so the increased efficiency of communication online allows those responding to avoid proper engagement with the content that others produce. Just as with the distorted intersubjective relationships that occur in previous eras of capitalism, online interactions, thus, become transactional relationships – where the unit of exchange is recognition and the content of those interactions is of secondary relevance.

What this means is that the individual's choice of what to communicate – in so far as that choice is made in respect to the need for recognition – will be influenced by their perception of its exchange value. The individual, of course, cannot control how their communication will appear to others once it is entered in the greater flow. And, once it is entered, that communication is in competition with the waves of new content produced by others plugged into the network. To satisfy the need for recognition, then, the content of their communication needs to be both the kind of content that others will respond to as well as the kind of content that the algorithms that regulate the flow of information prioritise.<sup>110</sup> In so far as they attempt to satisfy the need for recognition, the individual's judgement of what kind of content that is will be crucial in determining their choice of what to communicate. As a result, the online-subject does not simply represent the individual's beliefs, preferences, or activities offline, but, rather, those aspects of their selfhood that the individual perceives to have the greatest exchange value online.

As the online-subject is established, the individual will also come into contact with ideas, concepts, and identities that they had not previously incorporated into their social existence. In turn, depending on what appeals and what they judge to have value, the individual may frame future online communication around these ideas, concepts and identities. What amplifies the influence of this market driven process on the online-subject is that the flow of information that the individual is responding to is, of course, generated by other individuals' attempts to satisfy the need for

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<sup>110</sup> In this way the individual's communication displays features of 'strategic action' as the individual is communicating for instrumental reasons to illicit a particular action from the other. What complicates matters, as discussed in Chapter 8, is that success in this action presupposes recognition and the form of communication that are fundamental to genuine intersubjective relations.

recognition. Even without external forces dictating individual choices, the likely result of this process is the homogenization of the online-subject.

The result of this process is that the online-subject's manifestation of selfhood comes to be distinct from the individual's subjectivity. Nonetheless, the individual's efforts to establish their online-subject and maintain its recognisable presence online will lead them to enact aspects of the online-subject in their offline activities. For instance, if part of my online-subject is its love of new food trends, I have to keep abreast of those trends in my offline life to keep up that appearance – i.e. I have to eat the food, review the food, photograph the food, and so on. Thus, despite the discrepancy between the two, the online-subject – and through it communicative capitalism – come to influence and potentially dominate the individual's offline subjectivity. As online-subjects become more generic, we might expect the lives of individuals offline to follow suit.

As we saw in Chapter 2 (p.73-74), the discourse of selfhood in capitalism generates a fetishistic need to have and to consume that is impossible to satisfy. The individual defines their self through their choice of and consumption of the products of capitalism, but the unending production of new products prevents the individual from ever being truly satisfied with their choices. This is echoed in communicative capitalism, which, by generating a distorted and fetishistic need for recognition, sucks the individual into a never-ending cycle of content creation. Just as the consumption ethos fuels the capitalist system offline, so the constant and market driven generation of content online benefits and maintains the continuity of the online system of communicative capitalism. Despite this, it is important to recognise that communicative capitalism's influence on the individual through the online-subject is not the same as exerting direct control over the content of the individual's communication online – even whilst, as discussed in Chapter 7 (p.227), the flow of communication online is carefully moderated by closely protected algorithms. Nor, indeed, is it in the interests of communicative capitalism to dictate content. All data and meta-data has value within the system. For the service providers what matters most is the quantity of data, not the content. (Whether you like unicorns or cats, are right-wing or left-wing, it is your saying so online that generates revenue.)



Moderating content to any great degree would defeat the appearance of freedom on the Internet that is essential to hooking users into that system and generating the data from which the companies' profit. Indeed, one of the ways that the revenue flow is maintained is through the steady stream of entirely new content – new concepts, new ideas, new identities – that individuals can engage with, respond to, and replicate in the content of their communication. Over regulation would block this source of revenue.<sup>111</sup> Not only does communicative capitalism exploit the time and labour of the user (ch.7, p.222), it exploits their creativity too. Whilst the structure of intersubjective communication is distorted online, and the online-subject through which the individual acts is formed according to the market-driven nature of the information flow, a fundamental aspect of communicative capitalism is that it still allows the individual a degree of freedom in how they exercise their agency as a communicative subject. As I shall now argue, this is key to the distinctiveness of contemporary alienation.

## 9.2. The dimensions of contemporary alienation

Given the way that communicative capitalism has structured the online communication, the individual is at once conditioned to continuously communicate and so generate data, whilst being 'free' to choose the content of what they communicate. Moreover, as the comparative analysis of the functioning of online and offline communication in Chapter 8 found that the structure of communication online allows the individual this freedom to choose without adhering to the rules of accountability that govern offline communicative actions. Nonetheless, communication online, specifically Internet *mediated communication* (ch.8, p.244) often has the appearance of communicative action. It is on account of this hidden

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<sup>111</sup> There is a related issue here of how other actors attempt to 'game' the system to achieve their economic or political goals. This has received much attention in light of revelations about the use of data-mining and profiling in the 2016 UK referendum on membership of the EU and the 2016 US presidential election (though the problem is surely not confined to these events). How this relates to the structure of communicative capitalism is vexed. The emphasis on quantity of content over meaning – and, as I discuss in the next section, the ways that this can encourage objectionable, harmful, and hateful communication – undoubtedly enable and contribute to the possibility for manipulation of the democratic process. However, none of this is an inherent feature of the online system. If such manipulation leads to greater revenue for the service providers, then, short of deliberate intervention contrary to capitalist values, we might expect the system to encourage it. If, on the other hand, tolerating such activity has a negative impact on the service providers profits, we might expect the online system to be restructured to prevent it.

discrepancy between online and offline communication that the distinctiveness of contemporary alienation emerges. There are two dimensions to this: firstly, the structure of online communication allows the individual to communicate with the other whilst dismissing the mutual vulnerability that being a communicative subject entails; secondly, the structure of online communication allows the individual to communicate whilst dismissing the responsibility that communication entails in respect to the constitution of the social world. Thus, echoing Jaeggi's account of self-alienation, understanding contemporary alienation requires us to realise the role of individual agency in response to and in cementing the oppressive system of communicative capitalism.

### 9.2.1. Agency and intersubjective relations

To reiterate, the social world is constituted by the meanings, norms, and values shared by the individuals living in that social world and that form the content of communication between those individuals. In choosing the content of their communication, the individual must be aware of the social world from which they draw as well as the weight and significance that their communication will have within that social world. Awareness of the meanings, norms, and values that constitute the social world is also, as we have seen, key to the individual's status as a social being.

The individual as a communicative subject appears socially always in relation to the other, who draws on the meanings, norms and values of the social world to address the individual. This places the individual in a position of always being vulnerable to the other's response to their presence. In particular, the other may exploit shared understandings of the social world to frame the individual's social experiences in ways that are harmful or hurtful to them. Likewise, since the individual draws from the same stock of meanings to respond to the presence of the other – the individual holds similar power over the other. In paying attention to the weight and significance of their communication and its meaning, the subject acknowledges the vulnerability that the intersubjective relationship is built on. Correspondingly, when dismissing the meaning of their communication, the individual dismisses the vulnerability of themselves and the other. In doing so, they open up the possibility that they might hurt, or be hurt, through communication.

Online, by imposing on them the distorted need for recognition, communicative capitalism encourages the individual to communicate through the online-subject without giving due consideration to the weight and significance of the content of that communication. What is more, the looser structure of the rules of communication online allow the individual to avoid the responsibility to defend and justify that content. Despite occurring in a different ecosystem, however, online communication (largely) draws on the same stock of meanings, norms, and values as the offline communicative sphere. Thus, the possibility that the individual hurts others, or is themselves hurt, through their communication remains – even despite the structure of communication online: If one ascribes another individual an offensive identity online, that identity will continue to be offensive offline. The possibility for harm through communication online is not a mere reflection of that possibility offline. By motivating the individual to treat the other and their communication instrumentally, communicative capitalism *actively enables* this kind of behaviour.

Firstly, by communicating to satisfy the need for recognition in line with the ethos of communicative capitalism the individual fails to acknowledge the vulnerability that is at the heart of intersubjective relations – and which remains even in online communication. When the vulnerability of the other (and the individual themselves) is not taken into consideration, however, there is no inherent motivation for the individual to avoid communicating in ways that are harmful, hateful, or hurtful. Secondly, in so far as hateful and harmful communication is liable to illicit a greater response from others online – the online exchange value of such communication will be high. Not only is it possible for the individual to achieve their instrumental goals through abusive communication – i.e. the temporary satisfaction of the need for recognition – but it may be that the individual can do so more efficiently than if the content of their communications was not so objectionable. Communicative capitalism, thus, conditions the individual to communicate online without due attention to their responsibilities to the other and, potentially, provides them instrumental reasons to abuse the vulnerability of the other when they do so. Just as

communicative capitalism exploits creativity, we might say, so too does it exploit vulnerability.<sup>112</sup>

This reveals the first aspect of contemporary alienation.

Capitalism, as analysed by Marx, alienated the individual from the product of their labour; as analysed by the Critical Theorists, the individual's relations to culture, lifestyle, and politics were also subsumed by the alienating system. It was on these vectors of alienation that early periods of capitalism dominated individual agency and, as a consequence, distorted the intersubjective relations between individuals living under those systems. Communicative capitalism, as we have seen, extracts value from the communication that is the very substance of intersubjective relations. By restructuring intersubjective communication and the need for recognition according to the dictates of economic/instrumental rationality, communicative capitalism distorts the relations between individual and other *directly*. Whilst communicative capitalism provides the motivation to abuse the other's vulnerability, however, it remains the individual's choice to do so. (Abusive communication may be one way to illicit a response online, but it is never the only one.) Rather than dominating the individual's agency, we might say, communicative capitalism exploits it for its own ends.

This describes one dimension of contemporary alienation. The second follows from the way that communicative capitalism subverts the capacity of intersubjective communication to alter the constitution of the social world. As I shall explain, communicative capitalism creates a kind of feedback loop in which the choices of

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<sup>112</sup> This brings to mind Axel Honneth's conception of reification (as discussed at ch.4, p.151, fn.53). Honneth, as we saw, conceives reification as a distortion of the recognition relationship, in which the individual forgets or dismisses their recognition of the other as an equal subject. What makes the relationship between individual and other that communicative capitalism enables distinct from reification, so understood, is that, rather than dismissing recognition, the individual's exploitation of the other is founded on the very fact that they do recognise the other as a fellow subject capable of bestowing recognition on them. Like reification, the recognition relationship is distorted – but, in this case, that relationship itself is instrumentalized, not only the other party to that relationship. (see: Fuchs 2016 for a thoroughgoing analysis of Internet communication, specifically on Facebook, via the concept of reification. Fuchs's account relies principally on Lukács's conception of reification, but also takes into account Honneth's re-articulation of the term.)

individuals conditioned to view their online communicative relationships instrumentally in turn affect the constitution of the social world in which they live.<sup>113</sup>

### 9.2.2. Agency and the social world

As discussed in Chapter 5, as well as its significance in the relationship between the individual and the other, communication offline has the capacity to alter the social world from which it draws meaning. By communicating, the individual implicitly claims that the linguistic content of that communication can legitimately be used in a certain way. The other's response to that claim determines whether that usage is accepted or not. If the claim is accepted, then, the individual's usage of the relevant linguistic resources come to stand as a contribution to the social world – either confirming the pre-existing meanings of those terms, or, by demonstrating that a new usage is socially acceptable, altering those meanings. It is in this capacity to confirm or alter meanings, norms, and values that the individual as a communicative subject has responsibility towards the social world, as well as toward the other with whom they communicate. The individual, when speaking, should be prepared to defend and justify the claims about the social world that are implicit in their communication. When receiving another's communication, if they do not accept the claims implicit in the other's communication, the individual has a responsibility to challenge those claims. When the social world is constituted in such a way that it is not the result of agreement reached by individuals in intersubjective communication, it is either the result of domination through the exploitation of social power, or the failure of individuals to fulfil their communicative responsibilities.

Communication online, particularly Internet mediated communication, adheres to the *logic* of discourse. By communicating online, the individual acts as if the linguistic content of that communication can be legitimately used in that way – as such they make an implicit claim about the constitution of the social world from which they draw that content. However, the way that the online ecosystem is structured by communicative capitalism enables the individual to avoid responsibility for the claims made in their communication (see ch.8, p.250-258). (Just as it enables the individual

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<sup>113</sup> This echoes the discussion in Chapter 8, p.257-258.

to avoid their responsibility in respect to the vulnerability of the other). Moreover, having internalized the need for recognition which instrumentalizes the individual's relation to their communication and the other, the individual appears from their own subjective perspective to be justified in carelessly drawing from the social world in their online communications. Additionally, the lack of accountability online makes it difficult to successfully challenge this kind of behaviour – and so, instrumentally inefficient for the other to do so. Nonetheless, communication online that is allowed to stand unchallenged (or is not retracted), stands as a contribution to the online ecosystem – just as in offline communication, either confirming the status quo, or altering the constitution of the communicative ecosystem in which it occurs. Thus, for instance, if the individual communicates something offensive online they run the risk, not only of harming others directly, but of altering the social world in such a way that that kind of communication becomes legitimate and accepted in the online ecosystem. Once such behaviour is normalized it is inevitably replicated.

Crucially, the effects of such changes are not confined to the online ecosystem but come to affect the social world as a whole. As I argued in Chapter 6, the contemporary social world has come to be constituted by both offline and online communicative ecosystems. Despite the differences in how communication functions online to offline, this is not a matter of two isolated ecosystems. Rather, online and offline communication have become entwined so as to jointly determine the constitution of the social world. Thus, change to the online world, also affects the offline.

There are two aspects to this process.

First, as we saw earlier, individuals' efforts to establish their online-subject and satisfy the need for recognition lead to their enacting out, at least some, aspects of the online-subject in their offline activities. As I argued earlier, this is likely to lead to a homogenization of individuals. However, it is also bound to have a knock-on effect upon the offline social situations that those individuals occupy. If enough individuals in an area find that a professed love of avocados is an efficient way of establishing the online-subject, so avocado toast becomes a ubiquitous item on the menu of cafes and restaurants in that area as they look to capitalize on the tastes of their

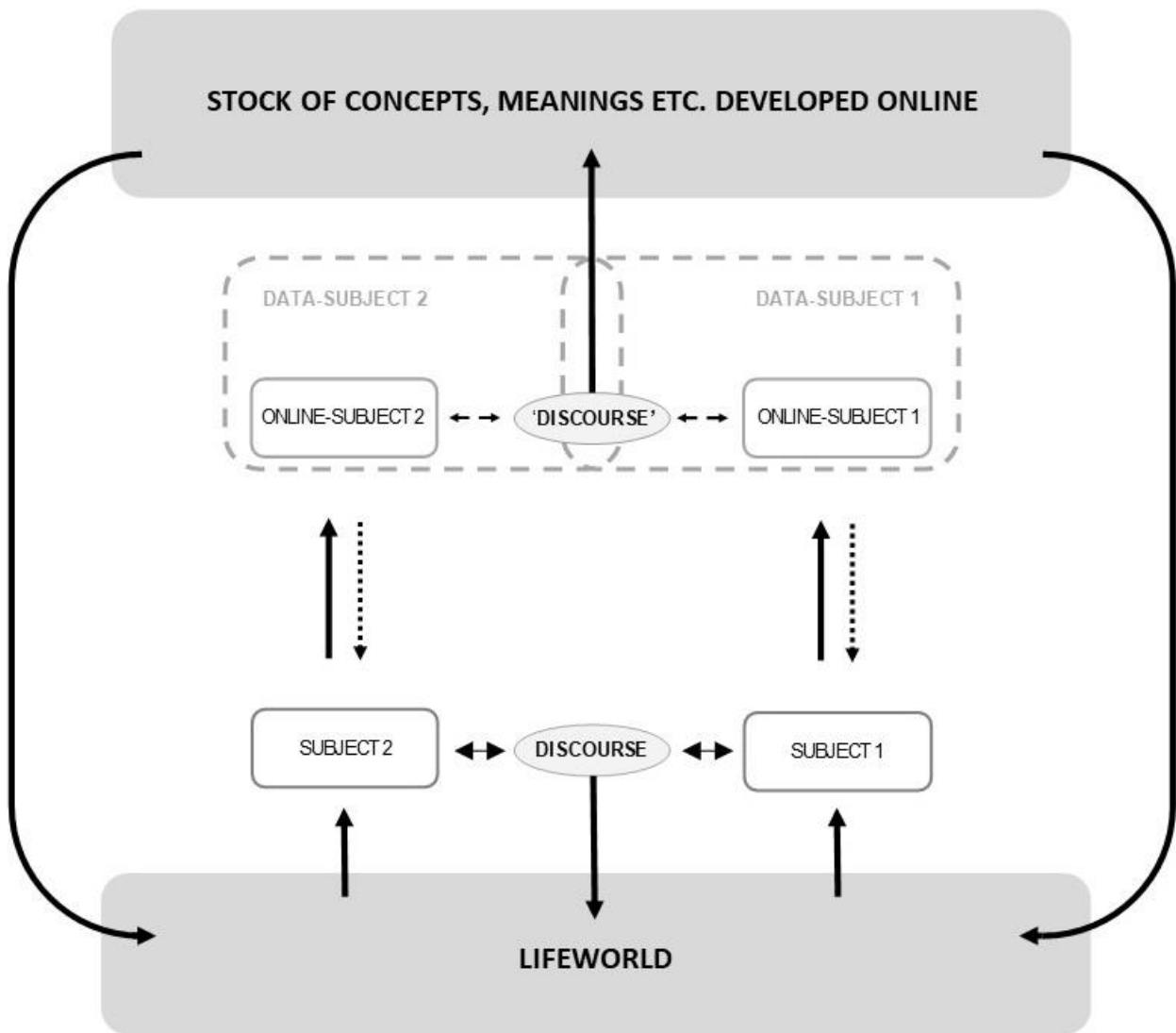
local market. Of course, the Internet is a global network, and so individuals pick and choose the aspects of their online-subject from all parts of the world. But as individuals become homogenised, so does the social world.<sup>114</sup>

The second contributing factor is the *apparent* similarity between online and offline communicative ecosystems. Online-subjects and meanings generated online are similar to offline communicative subjects and meanings generated offline. So, whilst communicative capitalism's immediate grip on the individual might occur online – given the ubiquity of equivalence thinking detailed in Chapter 8 – the mass of content generated online has been, and was bound to be, translated to the offline communicative ecosystem. The way that politician's and president's tweets are taken as policy indicators and so set the news agenda, for instance; or the attention to gender inequalities that has grown out of a hashtag.

What this means is that the meanings, values, and norms that have become normalized and accepted into the structure of the online communicative ecosystem, seep out into the offline world. So too do the new and potentially harmful patterns of intersubjective behaviour that emerge online. Whether each of us engages in online discourse or not, then, the generation of online meanings and their incorporation into the offline renders the contemporary social world into a battlefield of meanings generated by two discrepant systems of communication. The content that has led to this shift, however, to reiterate a point, is not directly in the hands of the communicative capitalists – as in the culture industry. Rather, it is the communicative subject who, responding to the distorted need for online recognition, is in control of what meanings they choose to express themselves online, as well as others who incorporate these meanings into the offline world. By acting out the instrumental rationality of communicative capitalism, however, the individual distorts their own relation to the social world. The contemporary social world is not so much dominated by communicative capitalism as destabilized by it.

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<sup>114</sup> This aspect of my analysis, as the avocado example illustrates, might be fruitfully related to the so-called visual turn in our ways of engaging with the world (see for instance Tiidenberg 2018).



**Figure 2.** The 'Feedback loop' of contemporary alienation.

- Individual subjects engage in offline communication by drawing on the lifeworld, when that communication meets the criteria of discourse, new meanings etc. agreed upon are added back to the lifeworld
- Individual subjects interact with online-subject. Individual subjects are influenced directly by changes to/experiences represented in the online-subject.
- Online-subjects are defined by information entered by subject as well as drawn from the data-subject.
- Individual subjects communicate online only via online-subjects. Communication can resemble discourse, but is not subject to stringent rules of responsibility. Hence 'discourse' not discourse.
- Meanings etc. produced via agreement in 'discourse' feed into online conceptual stock.
- Meanings from online conceptual stock feed back into lifeworld. (See especially the discussion of equivalence.)



### 9.2.2.1. *Alienation in action*

In this brief appendix to Chapter 9, I offer a short case-study to illustrate alienation in action.

An effective (as well as harrowing and dispiriting) illustration of the various aspects of contemporary alienation is the so-called Gamergate controversy that unfolded online over 2014 and 2015 – initially centred around game developer Zoe Quinn, but later taking in a number of other female participants in computer game culture as its victims, and ultimately having profound effects on society as a whole.

In 2014, Zoe Quinn developed the game *Depression Quest*. Whilst *Depression Quest* received positive reviews from some alternative gaming journals, the game's – and Quinn's – success, apparently irritated on-off boyfriend Eron Gjoni sufficiently for him to post online a detailed breakdown of their personal history. In an emotionally wrought 9000-word blog post, Gjoni urges the reader that Quinn is not to be trusted and implies that *Depression Quest* had received a positive review from games-journalist Nathan Grayson with whom Quinn had purportedly had a sexual relationship.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gjoni's post was picked up on in the gaming communities found on the notorious forum/website 4chan. As journalist Mike Wendling (2018: 64) points out in his book on the genesis of the so-called 'Alt-Right', whilst Gjoni's professed political sympathies did not seem to match well with the toxic elements in these communities,<sup>116</sup> his message was quickly "twisted, politicized and amplified" (Wendling 2018:6 4) once it acquired this audience. As a result of this, members of 4chan organised and conducted an extensive campaign of hate and abuse targeted at Quinn. Despite the fact that the game in question was a niche title, the scale of the campaign against Quinn was so extensive that, as Nagle reports, "even the founder of 4chan and champion of the anonymous Internet, moot, banned gamergate talk from 4chan" (Nagle 2017: 22).

In line with the discussion in this chapter, we might analyse this campaign of hate in terms of the effect that it had upon Quinn's online-subject (e.g. as her various

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<sup>115</sup> Grayson, in fact, never reviewed the game (see: Totilo 2014).

<sup>116</sup> Wendling notes that in the blogpost Gjoni's "mentions, unironically, that he is interested in social justice" (Wendling 2018: 64).

social media profiles were barraged with hate mail and rape threats, she would be faced with this representation of her place in online communities anytime that she logged onto those accounts) as well as the more direct consequences of the campaign she faced offline (e.g. her personal data, including home address, was shared online i.e. she got doxxed).<sup>117</sup>

What started as an act of personal revenge, however, quickly transformed into a conspiratorial, political and far wider programme of abuse, targeting not only Quinn, but also journalists covering the industry and other women within that industry.<sup>118</sup> Key to this programme was use of the hashtag #Gamergate. As Wendling explains, a common claim was that the Gamergate ‘movement’ was somehow standing up for the “ethics of video-game journalism” as:

The Gamergate crowds argued not only that games journalism has been influenced by feminists, politically correct ideas, but that the entire industry had been completely overrun to the point where games were receiving favourable reviews based not on their own merit but on how well their programmers conformed to progressive identity politics. Those who dared to go against such principles, the mob argued, were losing status, money and jobs (Wendling 2018: 64).

Despite these *supposedly* civic intentions, however, posts labelled with the hashtag were overwhelmingly negative, abusive, and threatening – and in general far more expressive of a toxic misogynist ideology than any higher aims.<sup>119</sup>

Whilst much of this content was posted anonymously, the Gamergate hashtag was coined by a public figure, actor Adam Baldwin, in a tweet containing a link to a YouTube video on the supposed controversy over Depression Quest.<sup>120</sup> Baldwin describes himself as a small state libertarian conservative and is a frequent

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<sup>117</sup> Quinn details the effect of Gamergate upon her life in her book *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (Quinn 2017).

<sup>118</sup> Other targets for abuse and threats include game developer Brianna Wu, who details her experiences of Gamergate in an article on [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) (Wu 2015); video blogger Anita Sarkeesian, who is known especially for her series of YouTube videos critiquing the content of mainstream video games from a feminist perspective (Sarkeesian, like the other women attacked, it is worth noting is a keen gamer); games writer Jennifer Helper, and more.

<sup>119</sup> Even by the standards of online communication, many of the posts and messages sent to Quinn and other women sucked into the orbit of #Gamergate are shockingly offensive, graphic, abusive, and threatening they are. Angela Nagle lists some of these as part of her account of #Gamergate and its place in alt-right culture, in her book *Kill all Normies* (Nagle 2017: 23; see also: Wendling 2018: 65-6).

<sup>120</sup> See: Know Your Meme 2014.

commentator on hot-topic issues on the right, and the professed aims of the Gamergate campaign would appear to be well within his political ballpark.<sup>121</sup> At the same time, and whilst his coining of the hashtag was instrumental in the spread of that campaign beyond its origins on 4chan, Baldwin (and other public commentators also) was quick to – and apparently able to – wash his hands of any responsibility for the injurious consequences of his tacit role in the movement.<sup>122</sup> As a 2016 article on theguardian.com puts it:

[...] no one in the movement was willing to be associated with the abuse being carried out in its name. Prominent supporters on Twitter, in subreddits and on forums like 8Chan, developed a range of pernicious rhetorical devices and defences to distance themselves from threats to women and minorities in the industry: the targets were lying or exaggerating, they were too precious; a language of dismissal and belittlement was formed against them (Lees 2016).

In general, this aspect of Gamergate well represents what can occur when the norms of responsible communication are lessened. At the same time as this, the legacy of the Gamergate campaign – not least in respect to the disingenuous rhetorical moves that Lees describes above – has been of profound significance to the contemporary social world.

As Wendling puts it:

Under the banner of ethics, truth, and free speech, Gamergate gave voice and political direction to the manosphere. Specifically, it amplified the lament that feminism has gone too far, that a normally male-dominated space was becoming feminized, and that “social justice warriors” were taking over (Wendling 2018: 65).

Despite the vicious and viral nature of the campaign, however, this amplification of a toxic area of discourse online was not universally condemned. Instead, as the hateful rhetoric spread across the Internet and, the algorithms that drive the sites helped to keep communications with #Gamergate visible, Gamergate was treated as a test case by those in the so-called ‘alt-right’ for the effectiveness of such

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<sup>121</sup> At the time of writing, Baldwin’s twitter profile @AdamBaldwin has some 300000 followers. Tweets and retweets are almost exclusively political in nature, attacking members of the US Democratic party (with special attention as of the current moment upon women of colour representing the Democrats in congress), defending Donald Trump, denying climate change and attacking environmentalism and so on.

<sup>122</sup> Notably the original #gamergate tweets have now been removed from the @AdamBaldwin Twitter feed. This despite the general tone of Baldwin’s online output.

‘irresponsible’ online communication campaigns. As Steve Bannon, former editor of the ‘news-site’ Breitbart.com, campaign manager and later chief political strategist for Donald Trump from 2016-17, is quoted as saying in 2018 “You can activate that army. They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump” (Green 2018: 147).<sup>123</sup>

In demonstrating what are the limits – or not – of responsibility in communication online, then, and how far harmful and abusive communication can be pursued, or implicitly endorsed, with impunity, then, the Gamergate movement can be seen to have set the stage for the far wider reaching political events of 2016; as well as introducing a range of new concepts (E.g. social justice warrior), as well as rhetorical strategies and evasions, into the wider social world.

Whilst the content and consequences of the Gamergate movement cannot be fully explained in terms of the features of contemporary alienation that I have described in this chapter, its influence on the wider social world perfectly encapsulates the feedback loop between the loosening of the norms of responsibility online, the encouraging of individuals to engage ever more online, and the insertion of new meanings, concepts, and understandings into the social world whilst circumventing the process of discourse that might ensure that such change reflects the interests of those living within that social world.

## Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have brought together the themes of the thesis to describe the nature of contemporary alienation. This analysis continues the tradition of critical alienation theorising found in the work of Marx and the first-generation Critical Theorists. Communicative capitalism, as an alienating system, has found a way to profit from and exploit the individual through intersubjective communication – just as early capitalism exploited labour, and its later developments exploited the individual’s social agency. Communicative capitalism, however, takes a step back

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<sup>123</sup> As Wendling notes, Breitbart.com was one of the few media outlets to explicitly support the Gamergate movement. In particular, the controversial commentator Milos Yiannopoulos covered the movement to some extent, and in broadly positive tones – despite previously having expressed in fairly vile terms his disdain for the gaming community (see: Wendling 2018: 67-68).

from the total domination of the social world that the first-generation Critical Theorists described in their analyses. By allowing individuals subject to the system the 'freedom' to communicate what they choose, it allows them to define the meanings, norms, and values that constitute the social world, in a way that resembles in form Habermas's communicative ideals (despite the exploitative social system). In particular, communicative capitalism does not dominate the cultural and political domains to the same degree as capitalism in the period of the first-generation Critical Theorists. Instead it is the choices of individuals in their interactions online that largely determines the directions in which culture develops and which forms of music, art, photography etc. become popular, as well as which political positions propagate, and which are deemed acceptable parts of the political discourse. As we have seen, however, the choices of individuals online are never free from the influence of the revenue generating system. The individual is free to create, communicate, and endorse whatever they want online, but they are motivated by the need for recognition and the capitalist system regulates whether it is satisfied. (That is never. Acting on the need leads only to self-alienation.)

This, in turn, hollows out the responsibility that defines communicative action. And so, the online ecosystem is liable to develop in ways that are not agreed upon, and which do not correspond to the shared interests of those online. Likewise, as individuals enact the proclivities of the online-subject in their offline existence, and as society picks up on and responds to what occurs online more generally, so too does the influence of communicative capitalism extend into the social world. As a result, whatever is harmful or hateful, regressive or empty, but generates revenue will become a part of the social world.

In as much as the individual retains their communicative agency online, however, they are morally responsible for what they say, and what they do not. Whilst communicative capitalism makes it easy for the individual to avoid their responsibilities it does not require the individual to do so, nor does it prevent the individual from actively taking responsibility. What they cannot do, however, is unilaterally change the structure of the contemporary social world or the capitalist system. Moreover, the individual can never guarantee, simply from observing the

communication of others online, that others are not communicating in service to the need for recognition. Contemporary alienation is structural. So long as the online communicative ecosystem is structured according to the economic interests of the service providers – it will generate the need for recognition, encourage the individual to treat communication and the other as the means to satisfy that need, enable the individual to eschew responsibility for their communications, and through that forget the vulnerability that lies at the heart of intersubjective and communicative relations.

This critical conclusion naturally raises the question of whether there is some way in which online communication could be reoriented in such a way that it is no longer a source for alienation. Unfortunately, this is too large of a topic to fully address here. But, it is worth gesturing in the direction of potential answers.

The first approach we might consider is structural change to the Internet itself. In his 2018 book *The Online Advertising Tax as the Foundation of Public Service Internet*<sup>124</sup> Christian Fuchs argues for re-structuring the tax system so that states would be able to collect tax from multinational social media companies (e.g. Facebook) and search engines (e.g. Google) whose profit model is related to online advertisement. At the moment, these companies are able to avoid fully paying taxes in most countries by claiming that it is only the software, and so the unit of the company that develops the software, that generates profit. Whilst this approach has helped companies to avoid or dismiss paying taxes, it is widely recognised to be an outright lie, and different countries (as well as EU) have tried to put measures in place to get these companies to pay tax. For such measures to be effective, however, the concept of work in relation to online communication needs to be specified before the legal/taxation framework can be put into place. Fuchs's suggestion is that this could be achieved by introducing an online advertisement tax by which taxes would be levied in accordance with the countries of origin of user interactions with the advertisements that drive the company's profit model.

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<sup>124</sup> An extended version of the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research Institute report.

The funds raised by this tax, Fuchs further argues, could be utilised to subsidise the establishment of an alternative Internet founded on “public service media (PSM) organisations” instead of the private online companies, and so benefitting, rather than exploiting, civic society (Fuchs 2018: 84).

Fuchs responds to a number of hypothetical concerns with this model, and I broadly agree with his responses to these.<sup>125</sup> My own concern is with how users might be encouraged to move their activities from private services to the alternative public services (e.g. open debate format Club 2.0, public service YouTube) that Fuchs suggests the online tax could subsidise. As we have seen, the providers of the major online platforms not only exploit the data and labour of their users but design those platforms in such a way that the individual is internally motivated to continue and increasingly engage in communication on those platforms. Any ‘public media services’ would have to contend with this, if they are to compete with the existing services. The question arises, then, of how to prevent the corporations from modifying the services they provide in such a way as to stay one step ahead of public services in terms of encouraging user engagement. Any response to this problem would have to sail between the risks of public services simply imitating the addictive features of private services (and so doing nothing to address the distortion of intersubjective relations that ensues from the design of those services) and removing the freedom of how we engage with the Internet personally, and also, economically. However, I do not want to claim that this problem could not be resolved and raise it only as a necessary issue that would have to be addressed by any response to contemporary alienation along the lines Fuchs suggests. Despite that, I take it the public service Internet model remains a promising line of research as far as structural

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<sup>125</sup> These are: that implementing a location-based tax would be technically complicated; that there are services that allow the user to connect to the Internet without revealing their location information (not to mention states where this is necessary for other reasons); that the technologies necessary to locate users for the purposes of operating the tax system could lead to greater state surveillance of the citizen; and, finally, that the power of the big online media companies is now so great that it would still be impossible to force them to pay any taxes such a system calculates. I would tend to agree with Fuchs though that none of these objections are insurmountable (see: Fuchs 2018: 84-98 for his responses to these problems)

change goes – and as such a potentially necessary aspect of any wider response to the problems this thesis describes.

A second more fatalistic response is simply to rely on time and technological innovation. As far as this analysis goes, the central problems with online communication lie with *Internet mediated communication* which mimics the functions of face-to-face communication despite the absence of the embodied presence of the other. Potentially, technological innovation could remove this discrepancy e.g. through holograms, virtual reality, augmented reality etc. Thus, online communication might come to truly *replicate* rather than *mimic* offline communication. However, without the regulation of such technologies – which may bring its own problems – it would seem naïve to presume that technological innovation would take this direction. Likewise, this hope rests on the assumption that such innovation is genuinely possible. Finally, as a strategy to redress alienation, this overlooks the possibility that the current state of communication culture might irreversibly alter intersubjective communicative relationships without being checked.

Finally, the fact the system works by allowing the individual to retain and exercise their communicative agency, opens the possibility that contemporary alienation could be addressed at the individual level. Just as the suggestion has been that communicative capitalism encourages and motivates the individual to eschew the norms of responsible communication, so it may be possible to re-inculcate the individual into those norms. Such an approach would presumably have to take the form of a society-wide educational program and may only work accompanied by further structural changes as mentioned above. Whilst working out the details and content of such a program would be a huge project on its own right, given the nature of contemporary alienation I suspect such a focus on the individual will be a necessary part of any effective rejoinder to that.

These brief notes are suggestive of ways that contemporary alienation –shaped by online communication – might be addressed. I would suggest that any effort to do so would likely have to engage with online communication on all fronts: structurally, technologically, and individually. Without such an effort, however, the worry is that online communication and the companies that facilitate it will continue to develop in



such a way as to leave the individual overconnected in their online lives yet ultimately, and profoundly, under-engaged with the social world in which they live.

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