Review

Allmer, Thomas. (2015). *Critical Theory and Social Media: Between Emancipation and Commodification*. London: Routledge, pp. 213. Hardcover £90.00, Kindle Edition £41.99.

In past years, a number of writers – including Astra Taylor, Cory Doctorow, Howard Rheingold, Christian Fuchs, and others – have published important books about the dynamics of the social media. Yet, Thomas Allmer has managed to find a unique standpoint that provides his book with a much-deserved place in this somewhat cluttered research space. Based on a combination of in-depth theoretical inquiry and sound quantitative research, *Critical Theory and Social Media* addresses issues pertaining to theory and practice in equal depth – thus walking the walk of critical social praxis.

The first part of the book summarizes theoretical foundations of critical theory of technology. It is conveniently divided in four main areas: critical theory and dialectics, critical Internet and social media studies, critical (Internet) privacy studies (ideology critique), and critical (Internet) survelliance studies (commodity critique). This part starts with a reading of Frankfurt School theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Andrew Feenberg, and reaches to contemporary media theorists such as Christian Fuchs and Clay Shirky – all imbued with theories of Karl Marx. Secondary literature is often somewhat dull, as it is impossible to write theoretical foundations without repeating what others have already said. However, Allmer skillfully systematizes the existing theories, avoids the usual pitfalls of the hedgehog approach, and helps readers to clearly see new connections between the existing theories.

The second part of the book describes a case study with one general research question: Which major advantages and disadvantages of social networking platforms do Austrian students see? The case study was conducted as part of a larger research

project funded by Austrian Science Fund and conducted between 2010 and 2013 under the coordination of Christian Fuchs. Overall results are in line with previous research – the main advantages of social networking are maintaining existing relationships and distance communication, while the main disadvantages are data abuse and privacy issues. Yet, the unusual depth of Allmer's research, especially in open questions, provides important insights into rationales for such attitudes.

The third part of the book looks at social media from the standpoint of digital labour, and uses Marxist theory to create links between epistemology, ontology, and praxiology. Here, Allmer closely follows the footsteps of Christian Fuchs, project coordinator and the leading expert on Marxist theory in the information age. Yet, Allmer still manages to provide his own distinctive contribution to the field, and analyses technological and social constraints and potentials of social media to strengthen the idea of the network commons and a commons-based information society. By and large, this is the most interesting part of the book. While there is plenty of available literature which explains what happens with social media (epistemology) and which social struggles are causing what happens (ontology), it is crucial to understand what should be done (praxiology). Here, Allmer offers a nuanced approach to human relations with technologies, and points towards the importance of class struggle.

This book does not aim to become a new reading of the relationships between critical theory and social media. It does not offer novel theories, and does not aim to produce a scientific revolution. Instead, it combines existing theoretical knowledge, offers some fresh perspectives, firmly grounds itself in reality, and provides really useful knowledge about social phenomena facing us here and now. Instead of offering one more sweeping generalization, Thomas Allmer goes the hard way and produces relevant, socially embedded research which is a necessary precondition for critical emancipation. This kind of research is hard to conduct, and it often unjustly remains in the shadows of academic superstars. In my humble opinion, however, the final

product is worth the effort – and much more socially relevant than writing one more grand theory of the Internet. Therefore, I warmly recommend *Critical Theory and Social Media* for two main reasons. First, the book provides important insights into the logic of the contemporary social media. Second, it shows a good example of doing relevant social science research in and for the age of the network.

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