

CHAPTER 8

Political Communication in the Public Sphere

We have already seen in chapter 3 that the public sphere is a kind of interface of society that mediates between different spheres. When citizens are engaged in politics as part of non-government organisations, movements, and practices, and when they discuss politics in public, then they are part of the public sphere. In this chapter, we will analyse political communication in the public sphere in more detail.

Political protests take place in the public sphere. In the past decades, there has been much talk about the role of new social movements (such as the environmental movement, the gender equality movement, the LGBT movement, the animal rights movement, etc.) in politics. Many liberal and conservative observers have in this context argued that the labour movement is outdated, no longer plays an important role in politics and social struggles, and that new social movements have replaced the labour movement in social struggles. If the question about social movements is framed in this way, then it is one about the relationship of the economic and the non-economic, class and non-class, exploitation and domination. Given the importance of this question, we will in section 8.1 discuss the relationship of capitalism and domination. Section 8.2 discusses the notion of the public sphere and how it relates to political communication.

8.1. Capitalism and Domination

Alienation

In chapter 5, the notion of economic alienation was discussed. Alienation is a process that extends beyond the economy and therefore deals with domination in general. Marx introduced the notion of economic alienation in capitalism, but he also pointed out that there is alienation in the realms of politics and

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ideology: 'It is indeed *estrangement* which matters in the so-called Christian state, but not *man*. The only man who counts, the *king*, is a being specifically different from other men, and is moreover a religious being, directly linked with heaven, with God. The relationships which prevail here are still relationships dependent on *faith*.'¹ 'Political emancipation is at the same time the *dissolution* of the old society on which the state alienated from the people, the sovereign power, is based.'²

Marx indicates that dominative ideologies (such as religion, nationalism, neoliberalism, etc.) are an alienation of human consciousness, and that political rule that is detached from citizens constitutes political alienation. For Marx, alienation is on the one hand domination as exploitation and on the other hand a universal form of domination, where humans do not control the systems, organisations and structures in which they live day in and day out.³ Class relations alienate humans from the conditions, process, and products of work. The state alienates humans from collective political decision-making. Ideology alienates them from cultural meaning-making.

The basic feature of alienation is that humans are not in control of structures that shape their lives. In a class society, humans do not control the means of production. In a dictatorship, they do not control political decision-making. And in an ideological culture, they do not control worldviews and the definition of reality.

David Harvey argues that alienation is a universal process he terms universal alienation because it extends beyond production into the realisation of economic value, distribution, consumption, politics, everyday life, culture, social conditions, etc.⁴ In all types of alienation, asymmetric power confronts humans so that they are not in control of certain objects that shape their lives (nature, the means of production, the means of communication, the political system, the cultural system, etc.). As a consequence, they have disadvantages in society.

Alienation includes the lack of control over an activity that results in externalised products. This lack of control means the non-existence of the collective ownership of property and the lack of influence on political decisions and meaning-making. Appropriation and reconciliation (of humans with their

¹ Karl Marx. 1844. On the Jewish Question. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works (MECW) Volume 3*, 146–174. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 158.

² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³ See: Christian Fuchs. 2018. Universal Alienation, Formal and Real Subsumption of Society Under Capital, Ongoing Primitive Accumulation by Dispossession: Reflections on the Marx@200-Contributions by David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16 (2): 454–467.

⁴ David Harvey. 2018. Universal Alienation. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16 (2): 424–439.

conditions of existence) are the opposite of alienation. In becoming reconciled with society by appropriation, humans collectively take control of the structures that affect their lives. In the economy, alienation means that the dominant class exploits the labour of the dominated class. In the political and the cultural system, alienation takes on the form of political and ideological domination. Domination is defined as one group having advantages at the expense of others and controlling means that allow it to shape society in its own interest against the interest of powerless groups.

Communication is, like all production and behaviour in society, purposeful. It has the goal of producing understanding of the world. This does not mean that understanding implies consensus and agreements. Communication is not necessarily morally good, liberating, and enlightening. Phenomena such as psychological warfare and media manipulation are forms of communication just like political protests against fascism or care for the sick, elderly, and children. There are alienated and non-alienated forms of communication.

In his book *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács introduced the term reification in the context of alienation. He thereby expresses that in alienation, humans are treated like and reduced to the status of things and objects. They are robbed of their humanity. Reification is a form of objectification that takes on dominative and class character: 'Only when the objectified forms in society acquire functions that bring the essence of man into conflict with his existence, only when man's nature is subjugated, deformed and crippled can we speak of an objective societal condition of alienation and, as an inexorable consequence, of all the subjective marks of an internal alienation.'⁵

Reification is the process that creates alienation. Alienation is a particular state resulting from alienation. Reification is the process of exploitation and domination, whereas alienation is the status of being alienated, i.e. exploited and dominated. Practically speaking, process and result, practice and structure, cannot be separated, so alienation and reification are used in a quite synonymous manner. Appropriation is a process in which humans struggle to control their essence. It is not a return to an original status that historically once existed and was then lost, but is the struggle for the realisation of conditions that are immanent to society itself. Society's essence comprises the positive potentials that enable a good life for all. The ethical standards of society are not externally imposed, but are defined by the potentials of society itself. In class societies, social struggles are conflicts about the realisation of potentials that lie on the continuum between alienated conditions on the one hand and appropriated conditions on the other hand.

Tables 8.1 and 8.2 provide typologies of alienation and appropriation in society's three subsystems (the economy, politics, culture).

⁵ Georg Lukács. 1923/1971. *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin. p. xxiv.

Table 8.1: A typology of alienation.⁶

FORMS OF ALIENATION	Subject (experiences, emotions, attitudes)	Intersubjectivity (social agency and communication)	Object (structures, products)	Struggles
<i>Economic alienation</i>	<i>Work dissatisfaction</i>	<i>Lack of control/alienation of labour power: exploitation</i>	<i>Lack of control/ alienation of the means of production and output: propertylessness</i>	<i>Individual: anti-capitalism Social: Unionisation, class struggles</i>
<i>Political alienation</i>	<i>Political dissatisfaction</i>	<i>Lack of control/ alienation of political power: disempowerment and exclusion</i>	<i>Lack of control/ alienation of decisions: centralisation of power</i>	<i>Individual: politicisation Social: social movements, protests, parties, revolutions</i>
<i>Cultural alienation</i>	<i>Cultural discontent</i>	<i>Lack of control/ alienation of influential communication: insignificance of voice, disrespect, malrecognition</i>	<i>Lack of control/ alienation of public ideas, meanings and values: centralisation of information</i>	<i>Individual: cultural literacy Social: struggles for recognition</i>

Alienation means conditions under which humans do not collectively control the relations, structures and systems that shape their lives. As a result, these relations, structures, and systems have an instrumental character. They are governed by instrumental reason. Appropriation means that humans collectively seize control of the conditions that shape their lives and that common goods exists, i.e. conditions where all benefit. Alienation is also a form of appropriation, in which the dominant class expropriates the products created

⁶ This typology was first introduced in: Christian Fuchs. 2016. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press. Chapter 5.

Table 8.2: A typology of appropriation.⁷

FORMS OF APPROPRIATION	Subject (experiences, emotions, attitudes)	Intersubjectivity (social agency and communication)	Object (structures, products)	Struggles
<i>Economic appropriation</i>	<i>Self-realisation</i>	<i>Self-control of labour power: self-management</i>	<i>Self-control of means of production and products: democratic socialism</i>	<i>Individual: anti-capitalism Social: Unionisation</i>
<i>Political appropriation</i>	<i>Active citizens</i>	<i>Self-control of power: people power</i>	<i>Self-control of decisions: participatory democracy</i>	<i>Individual: politicisation Social: social movements, protests, parties, revolutions</i>
<i>Cultural appropriation</i>	<i>General intellectuals</i>	<i>Self-control of influential communication: involvement, mutual understanding, respect and recognition</i>	<i>Self-control of public ideas and values: cultural public sphere</i>	<i>Individual: cultural literacy Social: struggles for recognition</i>

by the subordinated class and appropriates these products.⁷ Exploitation is the ‘capitalist mode of appropriation’.⁸ Commoning is the alternative mode of appropriation indicated in table 8.2. It is characteristic of the communist mode of appropriation. In capitalism, *[a]ppropriation* appears as *estrangement*, as *alienation*,⁹ whereas commonism is the ‘real appropriation’ of the ‘social (i.e., human) being’.¹⁰ It is the ‘appropriation of human life’.¹¹

⁷ This typology was first introduced in: Christian Fuchs. 2016. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press. Chapter 5.

⁸ Karl Marx. 1867/1976. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin. p. 929.

⁹ Karl Marx. 1844. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In *MECW Volume 3*, p. 281.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

The models outlined in the two tables above are based on the dialectic of subject and objects: Human subjects produce and reproduce objects that condition the subjects' practices. Communication mediates this dialectic. These three dimensions (subject, the object, mediating communication) form the three columns of tables 8.1 and 8.2.

Exploitation is the economic form of alienation. Political domination is the political form of alienation. Cultural domination (cultural imperialism = unity without diversity, cultural fragmentation = diversity without unity) is cultural alienation. Humans' appropriation of the societal conditions, in contrast, means a commons-based economy, participatory democracy, and unity in diversity.

An alienated economic system is a class system where workers are exploited. A self-managed economy, in contrast, is one where humans produce, control, and own property in common. An alienated political system is a centralised bureaucracy, where bureaucrats rule citizens. In participatory democracy, citizens have the resources, time, and skills needed to take meaningful collective decisions. An alienated cultural system is one where a privileged group controls the means of collective meaning making and definition power. In a commons-based cultural system, humans have the real possibility to be general intellectuals, they co-produce meanings of the world, recognise each other's identities, and implement a unity in diversity of identities and lifestyles.

Human subjects experience the world in social action. In doing so, they have certain feelings about the world. They can experience and assess objective alienation as alienated or as non-alienated. Objective alienation can result in feelings of alienation, but does not necessarily do so. Slaves do not automatically hate their slave-master. Some alienated individuals love alienation and those who dominate them. But objective alienation always contains potentials for resistance and feelings of alienation.

Subjective alienation may remain a pure individual expression. But it can also take on collective political forms that advance class struggles, political protests, and struggles for recognition. Such struggles can be the foundation of a commons-based social system and a commons-based society. But there is no guarantee that social struggles will succeed. Overcoming alienation establishes at the subjective level self-realising activity, active citizenship, and general intellectuality. But humans can also feel non-alienated in advancing alienated conditions. Struggles for appropriation are only truly emancipatory if the aim is social structures where all benefit, feel and are at home.

The Instrumental Reason of Capitalist Communications

Capitalist communication systems (communications) are instrumental systems and alienated in a threefold way:

1. They treat humans as consumers and objects of advertisements and bourgeois ideology.

2. In capitalism, culture and communication take on the commodity form. There is a range of communication commodities in whose production cultural workers, audiences, and users are exploited (see table 5.3 in chapter 5).
3. In capitalism, there are classes, dominant groups, and ideologues who communicate ideologies that aim at instrumentalising consciousness so that humans accept, justify, and sustain domination and exploitation. Capitalist communication technologies are means of advertising, commodification, and ideology. Capitalist communications instrumentalise communication work and human consciousness.

Domination is instrumental rationality and is mediated by instrumental communication. Co-operative rationality is the antagonist of instrumental reason. It is a form of rationality that informs teleological positings in such a manner that the aim of practices is the establishment of conditions that benefit all. Co-operative rationality in the last instance aims at participatory democracy and the common good, whereas instrumental rationality results in particularism and in the last instance in fascism. Co-operative communication is communication that mediates co-operation and the quest for the creation of common goods.

In class societies there is a history of antagonism between instrumental and co-operative rationality. Dominant classes and groups develop ever newer methods of exploitation and domination that instrumentalise humans so that particular groups benefit at the expense of others. Resistance and alternatives do not always and not automatically emerge, but there is also a history of struggles for alternatives that are informed by co-operative rationality.

Class and Domination

Data cited in chapter 7 shows that the working class is the largest dominated group in the world. Class therefore has a special status in capitalist society. Class and class politics are more foundational than identity and identity politics. Class inequality cannot be overcome without the overthrow of capitalism.

Women have conducted the majority of reproductive labour that includes labour such as child-rearing, care, education, cooking, laundry, shopping, cleaning, etc. Reproductive labour reproduces labour power so that workers are capable of being exploited by capital. Reproductive labour produces a gratis resource for capital. It is therefore not exploited by wage workers, but by capital. Productive labour produces value and commodities that are sold to accumulate capital. Houseworkers produce and reproduce labour power that is sold as a commodity to capitalists. Therefore, reproductive labour is a type of productive labour. In patriarchal class societies, there is a division of labour where certain types of labour that are unpaid, low paid, or precarious are the domain of women and the more privileged forms of labour are the domain of men. Ideologically this division is justified by a naturalisation of dualisms such

as mind/body, culture/nature, creator/creature, rational/emotional, individual/social, active/passive, public/private, aggressive/weak, war/peace, etc.

Maria Mies writes that women are in capitalism subject to three types of exploitation: 'they are exploited [...] by men and they are exploited as housewives by capital. If they are wage-workers they are also exploited as wage-workers.'¹² Rosa Luxemburg argues that in capitalism, milieus of ongoing primitive accumulation are 'indispensable for accumulation' and that capital proceeds 'by eating [...] up' the labour conducted in such milieus.¹³ Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof interpret housework and labour in the Global South as milieus of ongoing primitive accumulation in Luxemburg's understanding.¹⁴ In these milieus, we find the super-exploitation of non-wage-labour in order to enable capital accumulation. The exploitation of non-wage-labour ensures the reproduction of labour power. By primitive accumulation is meant 'overt violence, with the aim of robbery wherever, whenever, and against whomever this is "economically" necessary, politically possible, and technically feasible'.¹⁵ Capitalism has an inherently imperialistic character and has a necessary drive to create new spheres of exploitation, commodification, and accumulation. Women, colonies, and nature form 'the main targets of this process of ongoing primitive accumulation'.¹⁶

Neoliberal capitalism has extended the inner colonies of accumulation so that the precarious labour that has traditionally been typical of houseworkers has become widely spread. Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and von Werlhof term this process housewifisation.¹⁷ Housewifised labour has characteristics of housework such as 'no job permanency, the lowest wages, longest working hours, most monotonous work, no trade unions, no opportunity to obtain higher qualifications, no promotion, no rights, and no social security'.¹⁸ It is the 'source of unchecked, unlimited exploitation'.¹⁹ Housewifised labour means the 'superexploitation of non-wage labourers [. . .] upon which wage labour exploitation then is possible'.²⁰ It is the 'externalization, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists'.²¹

¹² Maria Mies. 1986. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books.

¹³ Rosa Luxemburg. 1913/2003. *The Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Routledge, p. 363

¹⁴ Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof. 1988. *Women: The Last Colony*. London: Zed Books.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony*. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*.

¹⁸ Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony*, p. 169.

¹⁹ Mies, *Patriarchy & Accumulation on a Worldscale*, p. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Racism emerged as a consequence of European colonialism in America, English colonialism in Ireland, and the African slave trade.²² Racism is linked to imperialism. Racism has justified colonialism and unequal exchange, as well as the oppression and exploitation of people in colonial countries and of immigrants.

David Roediger argues, based on W.E.B. Du Bois' work, that 'the pleasures of whiteness could function as a "wage" for white workers. That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships.'²³ This theoretical approach can be generalised: White supremacy or any other type of racism has the role of cultural or ideological power. It allows white workers and the white bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from people of colour and to exert power over the latter. Masculinity is a form of ideological power that makes men distinguish themselves from others and exert power. Whiteness and masculinity are ideologies that aim at the accumulation of cultural power that manifests itself in reputation, status, and social distinction. Masculinity and whiteness are patriarchal and racist ideologies. They sustain a type of bio-politics in which the body is a space of politics and where cultural power is accumulated.

David Roediger's work shows that the motivation of masculinity, whiteness, racism, nationalism, and other ideologies is the goal and desire of individuals to make up for the exploitation and domination (= alienation) that they experience. As a consequence, politics is not focused on fighting the dominant class, but on scapegoating underdogs. The pleasure derived from oppression and exploitation is a cultural 'wage'. Political advantages derived from oppression and exploitation are a political 'wage'. Ideological power is used to attain economic and/or political power – better economic positions, higher wages, more income, and increased political influence. Racism, nationalism, sexism, and other ideologies function as means for the creation of economic and political wages. Such ideologies can create economic, political, and cultural surplus-wages' that are economic, political, and cultural forms of power. Ideology, culture, and authority result in surplus wages in the economy. Ideology and politics in capitalist society are systems of accumulation in which political and cultural surpluses are accumulated. The surplus that ideology produces is not just surplus pleasure and enjoyment in the suffering of others, but also economic, political, and cultural power.

In capitalist society, the logic of exploitation informs forms of domination, including racism and patriarchy. This relation expresses itself in the form of political and ideological wages. Production is the general model of society. In capitalism, exploitation's logic therefore shapes domination, whereas particular forms of domination (racism, patriarchy, etc.) do not necessarily shape exploitation, although they frequently have an influence on the organisation

²² Audrey Smedley. 1998. 'Race' and the Construction of Human Identity. *American Anthropologist* 100 (3): 690–702.

²³ David R. Roediger. 2007. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso. Revised edition. p. 13.

of class relations. Capitalism needs to exploit labour and therefore there are constantly renewed strategies of how to increase exploitation. Ideology serves as justification for exploitation. It also distracts attention from exploitation or communicates justifications of domination and exploitation that hide the actual power and class relations.

The public sphere is an important aspect of political communication. It will be discussed in the next section.

8.2. Communication in the Public Sphere²⁴

The Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas defines the public as a sphere that is ‘open to all’.²⁵ ‘We call events and occasions “public” when they are open to all, in contrast to close or exclusive affairs.’ The public sphere has in essence the task of engaging citizens in ‘critical public debate’.²⁶ The public sphere needs communication systems for political debate. The logic of the public sphere is independent of economic and political power: ‘[L]aws of the market [...] [are] suspended’ as are the ‘laws of the state’.²⁷ Habermas argues that the public sphere is not just a sphere of public political communication, but also a sphere that is free from state censorship and from private ownership. It is free from particularism and instrumental reason.

Habermas discusses key characteristics of the public sphere:²⁸

- The public sphere is a realm for the formation of public opinion.
- In a true public sphere, all citizens have access.
- The public sphere enables political debate in unrestricted fashion (freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression and publication of opinions) about matters of general interest.
- The public sphere enables political debates about the general rules governing social relations.
- Private property, influence, and skills enable individuals to be heard in the bourgeois public sphere. Workers have been excluded from these resources.

²⁴ This section is partly based on material that was first published as part of the following article: Christian Fuchs. 2014. Social Media and the Public Sphere. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 12 (1): 57–101.

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. p. 1.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 122–129, 136; and: Jürgen Habermas. 1989. The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article. In *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Bronner and Douglas Kellner, 136–142. New York: Routledge.

This is evident, for example, in the lower rates of access of working class-children to higher education, and their lower completion rates.

- The bourgeois class only serves and advances its own particular interests that are profit interests and not the common interest.
- Marx saw communism as the public sphere and as an alternative to the bourgeois state that serves class interests. This is evident in his analysis of the Paris Commune (March–May 1871) as a specific kind of public sphere.

In capitalist society, the economy is a separate sphere that is based on commodity production and wage-labour. The realm of the economy is mediated by the household, where reproductive labour takes place. The notion of the private is in capitalism split into the sphere of the private ownership economy and the intimate family. The public sphere connects culture, the economy, and politics, and thereby creates intersections of society's subsystems.

Liberal ideology postulates individual freedoms (of speech, opinion, association, assembly) as universal rights. The particularistic and stratified character of capitalist class society undermines these universal rights. It creates inequalities and therefore unequal access to the public sphere. There are two immanent limits of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas discusses:

- The limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion: if individuals do not have the same level of formal education and material resources available, then this can pose limits for their participation in the public sphere.²⁹
- The limitation of freedom of association and assembly: big political and economic organisations 'enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations'.³⁰

Habermas argues that as a consequence of these limits, the bourgeois public sphere is colonised and feudalised. It is not a true public sphere, but a class-structured political space. The public sphere is a concept of immanent critique for criticising the shortcomings of societies. Habermas does not necessarily say that it exists everywhere, but only that it should exist. Immanent critique compares proclaimed ideals to reality. If it finds out that reality contradicts its own ideals, then it becomes clear that there is a fundamental mismatch and that reality needs to be changed in order to overcome this incongruity. The bourgeois public sphere creates its own limits and thereby its own immanent critique.

Public spaces and public spheres cannot only be found in the West. The claim that the public sphere is a Western-centric concept is therefore short-circuited. Such a claim also poses the danger of justifying undemocratic regimes that are opposed to the West in the name of challenging Western-centrism and

²⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 227.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Euro-centrism. The public teahouse is an old cultural practice and space in many parts of the world, such as in China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, and the UK. Di Wang compares the early 20th century Chinese teahouse to the British public houses.³¹ It is a common space, where people from all walks of life go for different purposes. The Chinese word for teahouse is 茶館(*chágǔǎn*). Chengdu (成都) is the capital of the Southwestern Chinese province Sichuan (四川). “Teahouses in Chengdu, however, were renowned for their multiclass orientation. One of the “virtues” of Chengdu teahouses was their relatively equality.”³² Women were first excluded, but by 1930 fully accepted. These teahouses were not just cultural spaces, but also political meeting points, where political debates took place and political theatre pieces were performed, which attracted not only citizens, but also government spies. Wang discusses the role of the Chengdu teahouses during the 1911 Railroad Protection Movement. Public meeting places are spheres of civil engagement that can turn into political spaces of communication and protest.

The various Occupy movements that emerged after the world economic crisis that had started in 2008 were movements where protest and the occupation of spaces converged. They created self-managed public spheres of political communication. This creation of public spheres took place not only in the West, but in many parts of the world in times of global capitalist and social crisis. A common aspect of these protests was that many of them used the tactic of making space public and political, and that these protests took place in a common crisis of society. Resistance is as old as class societies, so public spheres have been formed as resisting publics throughout the history of class societies. The public sphere exists wherever humans gather to collectively organise and voice their anger with and discontent over exploitation and domination.

Communication and the Public Sphere

Communication technologies circulate ideas in public to a broad range of people. They are systems for publishing, for making information public. Media systems and media organisations address people with particular contents. They speak to them as private individuals in their cultural role, as members of communities of interests in the socio-cultural sphere, as citizens or politicians in the political realm, as activists in the socio-political sphere, as owners, managers, or employees in the economic system, and as members of economic interest groups in the socio-economic realm. Confronted with content provided by the media, humans communicate about these contents. Figure 8.1 shows the interactions of the media systems in capitalism’s public sphere. Media create public information (news, entertainment, user-generated content etc). They

³¹ Di Wang. 2008. The Idle and the Busy. Teahouses and Public Life in Early Twentieth-Century Chengdu. *Journal of Urban History* 26 (4): 411–437.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 421.

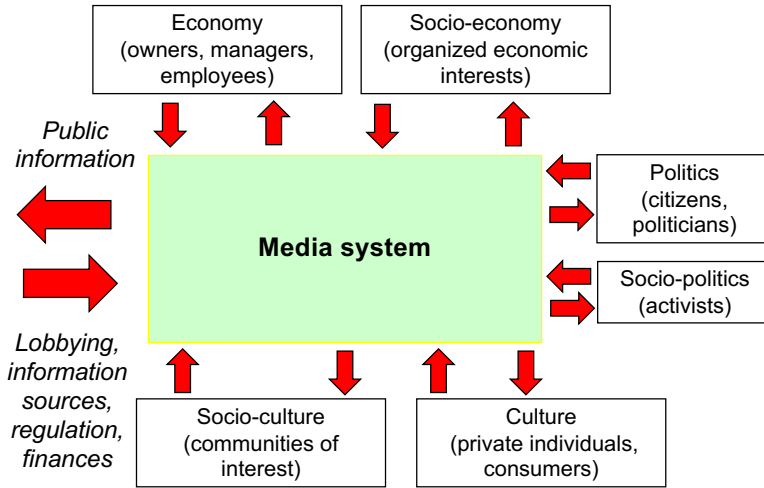


Figure 8.1: The role of the media system in the public sphere.

confront humans in their social roles with information that supports them in making meaning of the world. In order to create cultural content, workers in the media system rely on humans in various social roles as information sources. In capitalism, these information sources tend to be asymmetrically distributed, with politicians, governments, parties, celebrities, experts, companies, and managers playing a significantly more important role than everyday citizens. The media system also requires inputs from the economic system (financing in the form of loans, money paid for content or audiences, subsidies, donations) and the political system (laws, regulation).

Table 8.3 distinguishes two levels of the organisation of the media and introduces a distinction between capitalist media, public media and civil society media.

The media system has a public role for making information public. Public culture is, however, mediated by political economy and ownership structures:

- *Capitalist media* are companies that are privately owned by single individuals, families, or shareholders. They are culturally located in the public sphere, but at the same time they are part of the capitalist economy. Therefore they produce not only public information, but also capital and monetary profit by selling audiences/users and/or content.
- *Public service media* are funded by or with the help of the state and/or are created and maintained by a specific statute. They are a public service that plays the role of providing political, educational and entertainment information to citizens. They are as organisations located in relation to the state system that does not control but rather enable them.

Table 8.3: Two levels and three political economies of the media.³³

	Capitalist media	Public service media	Civil society media
Political economy (ownership)	Corporations	State-backed institutions	Citizen-control
Culture (public circulation of ideas)	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making

- *Civil society media* are full parts of the public sphere. They are economically related to the state if they receive public subsidies. Often, they stand in an antagonistic relation to the capitalist economy and governments because as alternative media they tend to reject for-profit and commercial logic and they tend to express alternative points of view that challenge governments and corporations. Civil society media are media that are run, owned, and controlled by citizens as common projects. They express alternative points of view on the level of culture and have alternative organisation models at the level of political economy.

Media make information public on their cultural level, but only some of them are publicly controlled on the economic level by state-enabled institutions or civil society, whereas capitalist media are profit-making corporations based on private ownership.

There are several ways in which capitalist media limit the public sphere:

- *Media concentration*: There is a tendency for market competition to result in concentration. In the commercial media landscape, the mechanism of the advertising-circulation spiral enforces media concentration.
- *Commercialised and tabloidised content*: Advertising-financed media tend to focus more on entertainment than news, documentaries, and educational programmes, because this content is better suited to attracting advertisers.
- *Power inequalities*: There are power differentials in commercial media that disadvantage individuals and groups that do not have significant shares of money, political influence and reputation, and disempower their voices and visibility:

³³ Based on: Graham Murdock. 2011. Political Economies as Moral Economies. Commodities, Gifts, and Public Goods. In *The Handbook of the Political Economy of Communications*, eds. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock and Helena Sousa, 13–40. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

- a) Private media ownership gives owners the possibility to influence media content.
- b) For-profit and advertising logic makes media organisations dependent on market and commodity logic, and prone to exclude voices that question these logics.
- c) There is an educational and economic gap that can privilege educated and wealthy individuals in the consumption of demanding and time-consuming culture.

When analysing whether certain communication systems constitute a public sphere, one should take into account both the level of political communication and the level of political economy. This allows specific questions to be asked that can help to determine whether we can speak of the existence of a public sphere.

- (1) Analysis of the political economic dimension of mediated communication:
 - (1a) Ownership:
 - Is there a democratic ownership of the media organisation and communicative resources?
 - (1b) Censorship:
 - Is there political and/or economic censorship?
 - (1c) Exclusion:
 - Is there an overrepresentation of viewpoints of corporate elites or of uncritical and pro-capitalist viewpoints? To what degree are critical viewpoints present?
 - (1d) Political content production:
 - Who can produce content? How visible, relevant, and influential is the produced content?
- (2) Analysis of political communication:
 - (2a) Universal access:
 - How relevant/frequently used are political communication sites or political communication forums/features/contents within more general platforms? Who has access and who uses the sites for political communication (class, income, education level, age, gender, ethnicity, origin, etc.)? How relevant is political communication in relation to other forms of information and communication (for example, as pure entertainment)?
 - (2b) Independence:
 - How independent are the sites and discussions from economic and state interests?
 - (2c) Quality of political discussion:
 - How valid (right, true, truthful, understandable), inclusive, attentive, sincere, reflexive and inclusive is political discussion?

Public Service Media

There has been a tradition of public service broadcasting in Europe and other parts of the world that has been a crucial dimension of the modern media system in the 20th and 21st centuries. Slavko Splichal gives a concise definition of public service media (PSM): ‘In normative terms, public service media must be a service *of* the public, *by* the public, and *for* the public. It is a service *of* the public because it is financed by it and should be owned by it. It ought to be a service *by* the public – not only financed and controlled, but also produced by it. It must be a service *for* the public – but also for the government and other powers acting in the public sphere. In sum, public service media ought to become “a cornerstone of democracy”³⁴.

Table 8.4 introduces a model of public service media that operates on three dimensions. There are economic, political, and cultural dimensions of public service media: organisation, participation and content. On each level, there is the production, circulation, and use of a specific good that is organised in line

Table 8.4: A model of public service media.

Sphere	Media	Production	Circulation	Use
Culture: social meaning	Content	Independence, unity in diversity, educational content	Cultural communication and debate	Cultural dialogue and understanding
Politics: collective decisions	Participation	Independence, unity in diversity (representation of minority interests and common affinity and reference points for society), political information	Political communication and debate	Political dialogue and understanding
Economy: property	Organisation and technology	Public ownership	Non-profit, non-market	Universal access, universal availability of technology

³⁴ Slavko Splichal. 2007. Does History Matter? Grasping the Idea of Public Service at its Roots. In *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media. RIPE@2007*, ed. Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Jo Bardoel, 237–256. Gothenburg: Nordicom. S. 255.

with the logic of public service. So, for example, public ownership of PSM is an economic aspect of the means of communicative production.

On the economic level, PSM are means of production, circulation, and consumption of public information. PSM's means of production are publicly owned. The circulation of information is based on a not-for-profit logic. Consumption is made available in principle to everyone by giving citizens easy access to PSM's technology and information. On the political level, PSM make available inclusive and diverse political information that can encourage political debate and the achievement of political understanding. On the cultural level, PSM provide educational content that has the potential to support cultural debate and the achievement of understanding in society.

Critical Media and the Counter Public Sphere

Alternative media can stimulate public debate. It is not their non-'mainstream' character that makes them alternatives. They are also not alternative because of their small scale. Alternative media can be local or small-scale media, but do not have to be. Alternative media are critical media.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's book on the proletarian and bourgeois public sphere gives attention to left-wing media.³⁵ Negt and Kluge are interested in the question of how the Left can control the intellectual means of production and create counter-ideas. Negt and Kluge stress how important it is for the Left to have its own critical organisations that are independent from capitalism, i.e. both from capitalist ideologies and capitalist ownership. Some approaches include right-wing media into the concept of alternative media. Negt and Kluge in contrast see all media that are not part of the Left as standing outside of the proletarian public sphere.

Negt and Kluge's notion of a counter public sphere stresses the importance of the collective control of the means of communication and the need to communicate critical content. The concept of the proletarian public sphere and its media is 'idea against idea, product against product, production sector against production sector'.³⁶ The proletarian public sphere puts a stress on organisations, models, and production that challenge capitalist ownership and communicate ideas that challenge capitalism, class, and domination. Critical media form the content and communicative dimension of the counter public sphere.

Alternative media are often part of or sympathetic to protest movements. But not all critical media are necessarily connected to social movements. There are cases where we have critical media, but no large critical public sphere, protests and

³⁵ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. 1993. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

social movements. All alternative media together constitute the alternative public sphere, that is, a sphere of protest and critical politics. As an oppositional force this sphere is vital for democracy. The counter public sphere opposes the corporate media, corporate media monopolies, and monopolies of political opinions.

When speaking of the proletariat, many think only of industrial labour. Negt and Kluge's book was first published in 1972. Since then, the proletariat has changed: Service and knowledge labour have grown significantly. We have witnessed the rise of neoliberal capitalism that has included a weakening of labour vis-à-vis capital. We need to update our notion of the proletariat. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri have coined the notions of the multitude³⁷ and the 'social worker'.³⁸ These two concepts foreground the commodification of and extraction of value from society's commons. The commons have become an important aspect of surplus value production. The notions of the exploited class, the working class and the proletariat are not restricted to industrial labour, but also include, for example, houseworkers, knowledge workers, migrant workers, precarious self-employment, precarious workers, retirees, students, the unemployed, and workers in developing countries. The proletariat are all those who produce goods and commons that are appropriated by capital. Capital exploits the producers of the commons.

Critical media are the multitude's media. They are media operating in the counter public sphere. They express the experiences and actual or ascribed consciousness of the dominated class. Critical media come out of political struggles and class struggles. In the 1980s/1990s/2000s, there was much political focus on identity politics struggling for the recognition of marginalised groups or the recognition of nature as a moral and not just an economic value (the environment). After the new world economic crisis that emerged in 2008, it became evident that class is not outdated. Class has always been a major feature of capitalist society. The postmodern Left has again and again belittled the importance of class.

The proletarian public sphere, just like the proletariat itself, will not exist forever. It aims at its own self-sublation, at a society without classes and without class-based communication. Certain scholars and activists have criticised unified notions of the public sphere. They argue that women, gays and lesbians, and ethnicities have been excluded from the public sphere. Therefore, they claim, it is more promising to struggle in multiple subaltern counter publics against oppression. They consider the unification of the public sphere as dangerous. But a real danger lies in fragmentation and micro

³⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London: Penguin.

³⁸ Antonio Negri. 1988. Archaeology and Project. The Mass Worker and the Social Worker. In *Revolution Retrieved. Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects 1967–83*, 203–228. London: Red Notes.

struggles that do not attack the totality. The danger of pluralistic publics without unity is that in struggles they will focus on mere reformist identity politics that do not challenge the totality of capitalist society that negatively affects the lives of all subordinated groups. In an egalitarian society, common communication spaces are needed to guarantee cohesion and solidarity in a strong democracy. Postmodernists and post-Marxists put so much emphasis on difference that they overlook how difference can easily become repressive and a form of new oppression that claims to challenge old oppression, but only means plurality without unity. The counter public sphere and an egalitarian public sphere should be based on unity in diversity. We need unity in diversity in order to be able to establish a society of the commons and participatory democracy.

What is the best role of alternative media in the counter public sphere? It is better and more effective if there are just a few widely accessible and widely consumed critical media than many small-scale special interest alternative media. The risk of the latter is the fragmentation of the communication of struggles. Emancipatory struggles include that social movements and critical media try to initiate large-scale political communication. If they do not manage to do so, then they are often ignored or are self-contained, fragmented, irrelevant, precarious, and politically unimportant and ineffective.

8.3. Summary and Conclusions

We can summarise this chapter's main conclusions as follows:

- The analysis of political communication in the public sphere poses the question as to how capitalism and domination are related. Alienation is not just an economic phenomenon, but economic, political, and ideological in character. It operates at the level of the human subject, societal structures, and mediating communication processes. Exploitation, i.e. economic alienation, acts as a model of political and ideological alienation. In capitalism, exploitation and domination are based on the logic of accumulation. Political and ideological alienation aim to establish surpluses in authority and distinction that act as political and ideological wages that enable a surplus of pleasure, enjoyment, power, real wages, and income.
- The public sphere is a realm of political communication that allows the democratic participation of all. Its openness is constrained by economic, political, and cultural power asymmetries. Because capitalism is based on such asymmetries, its bourgeois public sphere is necessarily limited, colonised, feudalised, and just a pseudo public sphere. The media system operates in the public sphere as a system of political information that provides inputs for political communication. Capitalist media limit the public sphere in many respects, and hamper democratic communication.

- Public service media and critical alternative media are two approaches that have the potential to challenge capitalist media. Both models face many problems and limits and are not immune to the subsumption of communication under the logic of capitalism and domination. But they have often been and continue to be starting points for discussions about and the organisation of alternatives to capitalist communication. Although they offer no guarantees, they do contain potentials for a democratic public sphere.

Political communication is in capitalism closely related to ideology. The next chapter focuses on the critique of ideology.