

# Critical Political Economy of Culture and Communication: An Interview with Graham Murdock

Graham Murdock

Loughborough University, UK, [G.Murdock@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:G.Murdock@lboro.ac.uk)

## Abstract:

This paper presents an interview with Graham Murdock. It was conducted by Thomas Allmer and Christian Fuchs for tripleC. In it, Graham Murdock reflects on the field of Critical Political Economy of Culture and Communication, his contributions to and work in this field of studies, the role of Karl Marx in this field, Stuart Hall, Critical Political Economy and Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams, the climate crisis and the environmental movement, Materialism, New Materialisms, Postmodernism, Pierre Bourdieu, the future of society, culture, and the media. The topics the interview covers are structured into three parts: 1. Critical Political Economy, 2. Critical Political Economy and Cultural Studies, 3. Questions of Materialism.

## Keywords:

Graham Murdock, Critical Political Economy of Culture and Communication, culture, communication, interview

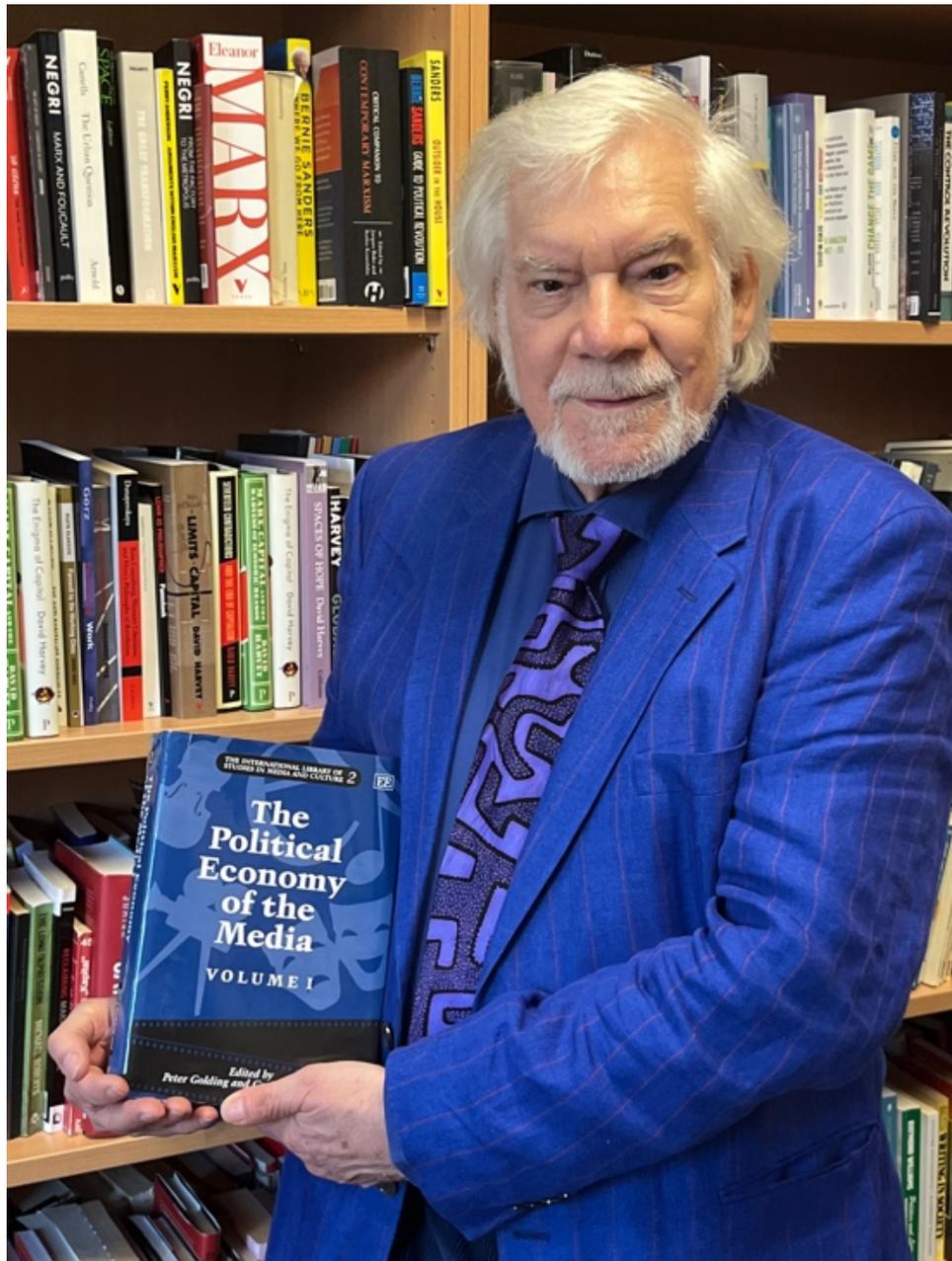
## Acknowledgement:

The present text is based on an interview with Christian Fuchs and Thomas Allmer conducted during my visit to Paderborn to present a guest lecture. It includes additional material indicating sources and clarifying and elaborating on key points. The lecture, *Critical Inquiry and Climate Catastrophe: Digital Media and the Battle for Sustainability*, was given as part of the lecture series *Critical Theories and Analyses of Digital Capitalism* at Paderborn University on October 17, 2023.

Graham Murdock's talk can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuYUuqvj6AM>

## 1. Critical Political Economy



**Thomas Allmer:** We had a look at your publication list on Google Scholar, which is quite impressive. You cover a very broad range of topics within the framework of Political Economy and Critical Political Economy. How do you select the different topics for your works? What does your work process look like?

**Graham Murdock:** To answer your question, I need to briefly retrace my intellectual journey. I trained initially in sociology and still think of myself primarily as a sociologist. I came to Critical Political Economy searching for analytical resources that would illuminate the dynamics and contradictions of capitalist modernity, classical sociology's central preoccupation. So, for me, there was always an analytical agenda that spilled over the boundaries, posing questions of social and cultural transformation and struggle that didn't fit neatly into Political Economy's core concerns.

Religion is a case in point. Far from being rendered residual by the forces of secularisation, as many commentators had predicted, organised religion has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years and moved increasingly to the centre of political ideology and mobilisation, from Modi's Hindu nationalism to Donald Trump's capture of reactionary evangelical Christianity. There is of course a political economy of religion rooted in financial flows, modes of institutionalised control, and the mass circulation of texts and artefacts, but that doesn't exhaust the questions we need to ask which I have returned to in several essays.

My father and grandfather were master printers, practitioners of a craft that played a central role in establishing the communicative foundations of capitalist modernity as an economic and political system, a symbolic field, and a ubiquitous presence in every life. I grew up with images of my father's print shop and the noise of the machines, the avalanche of newspapers, comics, advertising posters and paperback books that surrounded us, and the pleasures of reading, discovering new information and entering imaginative worlds. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise now that I was looking for ways to puzzle out the relations between the economic, social and cultural faces of communication. This led me to resist the specialisation that defined English education and work across the humanities and social sciences.

I took five papers for university entrance, three in social sciences, geography, economics and economic history, and two in humanities, literary criticism and fine art. Textual analysis at the time was divorced from any consideration of social context or the organisation of cultural production. The dynamics of creativity and representation were reduced to the biographies of writers and artists. Browsing one evening in the local public library, I stumbled across Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958). The title promised a way of thinking about the connections between social relations and cultural expression. It was provocative and inspiring and led me to read William's second major book, *The Long Revolution* (1961), which explores the interplay between cultural and political transformation and the rise of industrial capitalism.

Concentrating on the British experience Williams has little say about America's ascendancy as the central imperial power and model of advanced capitalism. After a period of austerity and rationing following World War II, Britain moved rapidly to embrace American-style consumerist-driven growth. In 1956 it became the first major European country to introduce an advertising funded commercial television service. The first supermarket opened in 1948. By 1963 there were thirteen thousand across the country. The result was an increasing tension between the identity of the consumer propelled by possessive individualism and the social contract of citizenship where an expanding portfolio of personal rights carried an expectation of active commitment to contributing to the quality of collective life.

On the advice of my young, radical, teacher I read Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) and was introduced to a vision of American capitalism. Not as a space of endless opportunity, but as a field of struggle between corporate interests, government, and organised labour, and a machine for reproducing and contesting inequalities.

Searching for a framework that would place questions of economic power, social relations and culture in the same analytical space, pulled me increasingly towards sociology, a relatively new university discipline at the time and not yet on the school curriculum. The decisive moment came when I read C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) a militant manifesto for integrative inquiry. I was in good company. In 1998 the International Sociological Association voted it the second most important book in sociology published in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Arriving at the London School of Economics, Marx was largely missing from the economics curriculum but featured within sociology as a foundational theorist of capitalist modernity, together with Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Wrestling with *Capital*, I came to see it as two books contained in the same cover. The first, announced in the main title, draws on a range of vivid documentation to paint a devastating picture of industrial capitalism's anchorage in dispossession and exploitation. The second, signalled in the subtitle, *A Critique of Political Economy*, is an extended settling of accounts with key contributors to what was at the time, the centre of debate around capitalist modernity.

The contemporary intellectual map with the social sciences parcelled out into separate domains of study, sociology, political science and economics, and uncoupled from moral philosophy, is a product of the modern university system that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. In Marx's time, analysis was more open and fluid. The writers he encountered approached capitalism as a social and cultural formation as well as an economic system. They saw new modes of production generating new power relations and intersecting with demands for popular representation to present states and governments with new challenges, raising urgent ethical questions around the balance between individual liberty and the common good.

James Mill, whom Marx comments on at length in his *Paris Notebooks*, typifies this wide intellectual reach. His major work, *Elements of Political Economy* (1821) appeared alongside his defence of parliamentary elections in his *Essay on Government* (1820) and his identification of the good society with the utilitarian principle of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number as advocated by his close friend, Jeremy Bentham, England's leading moral philosopher. This spread of interests is repeated in the work of Mill's more famous son. John Stuart Mill, with his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) followed by *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), his advocacy of *Utilitarianism* (1863) and the enduringly influential defence of personal freedom, *On Liberty* (1859).

The Mills, together with Ricardo, Malthus, and writers that Marx confronts but are now forgotten, are representatives of what has come to be called Classical Political Economy, promoting 'free' market capitalism as the least-worst option for organising complex societies. The leading advocate of this position was Adam Smith. Reading Marx's critique of Smith, and the frequent references to him in contemporary economic and political discourse, prompted me to look more closely at his writings.

Smith's *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776, the year that Britain's American colonies declared independence from the crown, refused hereditary rule and announced a republic based on popular representation. People ceased to be 'subjects' governed by rules they had no say in making. They became citizens with rights to contribute to debates on issues of common concern and elect representatives to speak for them in legislative chambers. From that point on the 'Political' in 'Political Economy' has been centrally concerned with the tensions between capitalism and democracy, the interplay between private interests and the public good, and the role of government in restraining corporate ambitions and underwriting access to the material and cultural resources considered essential for well-being and full social participation.

Contrary to claims by some champions of 'free markets', who have clearly not read him attentively, Smith accepts a degree of government intervention, in the provision of collective infrastructure for example. His case for leaving most economic activity to market dynamics is not simply pragmatic, however. It is grounded in arguments first developed in his earlier book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) based on his lectures as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University.

His championship of markets leads him to reject the obvious practical solutions for addressing inequality and caring for others: common ownership and management of core resources, public interest regulation of corporate excess, and progressive taxation. He squares the circle by resorting to magical thinking arguing that despite their selfishness and neglect of the poor an 'invisible hand' intervenes to ensure that the actions of the rich contribute to the interests of all.

Refusing this fairy tale is the essential starting point for critical analysis. The last three decades of neoliberal politics has reaffirmed just how the much damage the vain and insatiable desires Smith witnessed in the rich of his time continue to inflict on the quality of collective life. Smith's 'hidden hand' has reappeared as 'trickle-down economics' claiming that cutting taxes on corporations and high-wealth individuals will release money and investment into the general economy that will benefit everyone. The available evidence exposes this argument for what it is: a callous and cynical justification for the cumulative concentration of core resources, income, and wealth at the apex of the social scale led by the world's billionaires.

In 2017 eight individuals commanded as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the global population. The current list of the ten richest men in the world is dominated by Americans who have made their fortunes by exploiting innovations in digital technologies. The exception is Bernard Arnault, head of the French luxury products group Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy. The other nine are Elon Musk (Tesla and SpaceX), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer (Microsoft), Larry Page (Alphabet), Larry Ellison (Oracle) and Warren Buffet, whose investment in Apple comprises 47% of his diversified portfolio.

The unprecedented degree of control they now exercise over the organisation of communications is the entirely predictable outcome of the privatisation of the Internet, the absence of effective regulatory oversight of strategic mergers and acquisitions, data accumulation and online advertising, coupled with the capture of public money injected into the economy under the rubric of 'quantitative easing' to bail out the banks following the 2007-8 crash and support business during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their ascendancy consolidates the pivotal role communication systems now play in contemporary capitalism at every level, from the application of military force to the organisation of intimate encounters. It invests Critical Political Economy's foundational questions around the tensions between capitalist accumulation and the constitution of democracy, citizenship and the good society, with a new centrality and urgency.

Facebook is a prime illustration. Its commercial viability depends on packaging user attention for sale to advertisers. The longer users remain logged on and the more intensive their engagement the more personal data they generate and the more precisely commercial and political appeals can be targeted. The logic of maximising attention places users on a moving escalator of increasing sensation. The result is the cumulative corruption of deliberative democracy with Facebook's self-regulation persistently failing to control polarising speech or deep fakes of political address.

The control exercised by the digital majors has been given a further push by their ownership of key companies producing generative artificial intelligence (AI) systems and their command of the data assembly and storage and computing power needed to operate them.

Recent legislative moves in the USA and EU are belatedly attempting to reassert public control over the digital domain. Effective regulation may make a difference, but it will not be enough. There is a clear need for a durable countervailing force by reconstructing core communications facilities as public utilities and public services.

So, to return to your question. From early on in my intellectual career, Critical Political Economy has provided me with a consistent agenda of research and theorising organised around the tradition's foundational concern with the endemic tensions between corporate ambitions and the common good and the constitution of the good society. This is an analytical, philosophical, and practical project. It entails a comprehensive empirical investigation of shifts in the balance of communicative power and their consequences for the diversity and availability of the information, expression and debate that support social agency. It requires continual conceptual work to define liberty, equality and solidarity under contemporary conditions and it imposes a moral obligation to campaign for changes that embed these values at the heart of social and cultural life.

As with all overarching frameworks, however, its pursuit at any one point in time has been shaped by the intersections of biography and history.

I began my academic career in 1968 now seen as a watershed year. For a brief moment, an upsurge of student and worker militancy promised to open alternatives to the continuation of economic and political business as usual. But the spaces rapidly closed to be filled with a new conservatism. In 1969 Rupert Murdoch acquired Britain's best-selling Sunday paper, *The News of the World*, and a failing mid-market daily title, *The Sun*. Right-wing press owners courting political influence were a familiar feature of Britain's cultural landscape but Murdoch's arrival heralded not only an increase in market concentration (later consolidated by his purchase of the broadsheet *Times* and *Sunday Times* in 1981) it signalled a shift in political address.

In 1911 the London Society of Compositors issued a bulletin updating members on the progress of their strike for better conditions. The following year, renamed *The Daily Herald*, it became the major press platform for the labour movement. By the mid-1960s it was in serious financial trouble propelled by shifts in the composition of the industrial working class, an ageing economic base, and an inability to attract younger readers. In 1964, it was renamed *The Sun* and relaunched as a mid-market title but struggled to establish itself. Immediately after taking it over, Murdoch recast it as a tabloid and employed the stock armoury of sensation and titillation to promote an underlying ideology of market populism. The axial tension between capital and labour that had animated the *Herald* was replaced by a new map of social division. Private enterprise was celebrated for delivering expanding opportunities for consumption while bureaucrats, intellectuals and politicians were cast as an uncaring, condescending and self-serving elite opposed to the interests of the 'people' and intent of curbing personal choices with redundant restriction and regulations.

This right-wing populist platform is now all too familiar, reaching its apogee in the militant promotion of Donald Trump by Murdoch's Fox News. At the immediate level, the channel's decision to continue giving airtime to Trump's claims that Biden had 'stolen' the presidential election by rigging the voting, knowing them to be false, was informed by hard-headed commercial calculation. A significant segment of the channel's audience was convinced Trump supporters. Retaining them was an economic necessity but it was also informed by a continuing commitment to promoting market populism as the moral foundation of the good society.

This vision underpinned and legitimated the comprehensive program of marketisation initiated from the early 1980s onwards by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. Public assets were sold to private investors. Previously monopoly or restricted markets were opened to new entrants. Regulatory systems were reordered to reduce barriers to corporate concentration and the expansion of advertising. Public subsidies were whittled away and public cultural bodies were

directed to think and behave like corporations and maximise commercial opportunities. Tax regimes were altered to allow entrepreneurs and investors to retain a greater share of profits. Concerted attacks on rights to strike and collective bargaining weakened organised labour's ability to secure income gains and improved working conditions. Welfare payments were progressively reduced to a bare minimum.

Confronting this unfolding neoliberal landscape raised a series of urgent questions that have directed much of my research over the last four decades. How were the emerging mega-corporations, with interests across a range of media, organised and operated? How was their increasing centrality affecting the diversity of public culture and political discourse? How was the rise of commercialised digital platforms changing the composition of communicative power? How far was the massive expansion of advertising-funded communications consolidating a culture of consumerism and subverting a culture of citizenship? How were the conditions of cultural labour changing? How were deepening structural inequalities restricting access to core communicative resources? Did public service broadcasting still offer a viable counterweight to commercial colonisation? Could it form the basis of a more general public service media system fit for changed conditions? Could the moral economy of professionalised public goods provision be combined with vernacular gift economies to create a digital commons as a counter to corporate enclosure?

Most of my own work around these issues has focused on developments in Britain and the Global North but marketisation has been a transnational movement pursued in varying forms and combinations in a number of emerging economies. China presents a particularly interesting and challenging case.

I first visited China in 1998 when I was invited to present a public lecture as part of the official celebrations for the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Peking University. In 1992 Deng Xiaoping had announced the second wave of market reforms during his tour of the southern provinces. By the time I arrived, the impact was already evident. Television was securely installed as the principal engine driving the rising levels of consumption needed to sustain economic growth. Advertising was replacing state subsidy as the industry's economic base. A mushrooming array of local and regional cable and satellite channels were vying for viewers with the national Beijing-based station, CCTV. With increasing competition and commercialisation tensions between the bottom line and the Party Line intensified. Popular programming essential for audience building, much of it adapted from Western and overseas formats, promoted an individualism at odds with the Party State's solidaristic values prompting a series of regulatory interventions. The roll-out of digital networks created additional problems.

The Chinese government retained overall control of digital developments by locking out the American digital majors and supporting domestic companies delivering core Internet functions: search, social media, and e-finance and e-commerce. The Chinese digital majors now, not only match the range and effectiveness of the services provided by leading Western corporations, but in some areas surpass them. From the outset, effective content control has policed posts for ideological compliance. There have been periodic clashes when the values promoted in domestic content, particularly in video games, are seen as compromising officially mandated socialist values, but the core tension has centred on relations between the leading corporations and the Party State. Political leaders have increasingly come to view the leading digital concerns as a new node of power, indispensable to future economic growth but increasingly uncoupled from Party direction. This has prompted a series of interventions to reassert government control, most recently through state shareholdings.

Shifting relations between markets and states, enterprise and government, have been at the heart of political economic inquiry from the outset. Given its centrality in the emerging global economy, sustained attention to China's management of these relations is indispensable to a comprehensive political economy of the present. I have returned to China often over the last three decades and established working relations with a range of Chinese scholars, but I am still only scratching at the surface.

The initial invitation to China came through a doctoral student, one of a series of brilliant post-graduates from the Global South I have supervised. They have consistently forced me to confront histories rooted in the incursion of imperialism and struggles for liberation, challenged my easy assumptions, and prompted me to engage with issues I might otherwise have ignored. Take military force. Claims to a monopoly of armed force have been central to the constitution of nation states from their foundation. Britain has deployed military power extensively outside its borders, in imperial adventurism and de-colonisation wars, but it has not been a central presence in domestic politics. Several of my students however had witnessed military coups and lived under military dictatorships and recounted their experiences. In 1972 British soldiers shot dead thirteen unarmed Catholic protestors in Londonderry reigniting the Irish Republican Army's military struggle for a united Ireland and prompting the British state to deploy an increased military presence in the North. My conversations with students and subsequent reading around the military and politics provided an essential contextual resource for the research I conducted with colleagues on representations of 'terrorism' and state violence.

The erosions of civil liberties and intensifications of domestic surveillance that accompany declarations of war and states of emergency are salutary reminders that states are apparatuses of force as well as agencies of regulation and sources of subsidy. Critical Political Economy needs to include all three in analysing the organisation of public communication. It is impossible to write the history of modern communications without acknowledging the pivotal role played by military requirements, from the initial decentralised organisation of the Internet to the weaponizing of drone technology.

**Christian Fuchs:** You have had a major influence on using Political Economy for studying media and communication. We are wondering how to best name this approach. In the 1974 article you wrote with Peter Golding that was published in *Socialist Register*, you speak of The Political Economy of Mass Communication. Various other names have emerged. For example, you co-edited *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*. Vinny Mosco's book has the title *The Political Economy of Communication*. In the much-cited chapter that you wrote with Peter Golding in James Curran's book on *Media and Society*, you speak of the Critical Political Economy of Communications. Jonathan Hardy's book has the title on the *Critical Political Economy of the Media*. Mosco and Wasko edited a collected volume titled *The Political Economy of Information*. From your perspective today, what term should best be used for naming this approach? Does it matter if the stress is on one of the terms communication, communications, media, or information? Does it matter to you if we just say 'Political Economy' or 'Critical Political Economy'?

**Graham:** We need to place these publications on a timeline. The inclusion of 'Political Economy' in the title of the 1974 *Socialist Register* article and associated early interventions was a declaration of intent. It announced a rejection of the dominant definition of 'economics', as the study of a value-free bounded domain, and a return to the tradition of integrative and moral inquiry that had defined foundational attempts to

interrogate the rise of industrial capitalism. For Peter Golding and me, the key questions were about power, inequality and social justice, about the relations between economic and symbolic power, how these relations were organised and contested, and the consequences for people's access to the material and cultural resources that enable them to exercise agency in their lives.

As I mentioned earlier however, as it developed political economic inquiry generated two traditions, a 'classical' tradition, represented most forcefully by Adam Smith that has operated ideologically to legitimate the dominant organisation of capitalism, and a critical tradition launched by Marx that has challenged and contested it.

The piece you mention for the James Curran collection was part of a wider program of publication associated with the course on mass communications launched by the Open University in Britain. The course team took the decision to organise the material around the opposition between pluralist and Marxist approaches. The unexpectedly buoyant sales of volumes based on the course carried the arguments well beyond the students signed up.

Those of us interested in developing a Marxist analysis could draw on a range of new resources. Coming to terms with the conservative reaction to 1968 on the Left promoted a revival of interest in Marx and Marxism. Penguin Books issued a series of new translations of key works, including *The Grundrisse*, which had not been readily available in English before. They were joined by translations of key members of the Frankfurt School and other Western Marxist writers confronting the rise of fascism in the inter-war period. Adding 'critical' to the titles of our publications made it clear that we saw our work as a contribution to building on and developing a broadly critical tradition of Political Economy. So, in answer to your question, 'yes', it does matter to me if you say 'Critical Political Economy' rather than just 'Political Economy'.

**Christian:** So, is Critical Political Economy of Culture and Communication the best term for describing your approach?

**Graham:** Yes.

**Christian:** Does it matter if 'communication' comes first and 'culture' second?

**Graham:** That's a tricky question. 'Culture' for me is made up firstly of the systems of thought and belief we draw on to make sense of the social and natural world and our place within it, and secondly of all the ways these systems are embodied in and expressed through material artefacts, rituals and communicative activity.

Communication is a central organising feature of culture, but it does not exhaust it. Communication is culture unfrozen, in motion and contested, but a comprehensive analysis also needs to include the material organisation of the machines and institutions that marshal and deliver cultural resources. So, I would place 'culture' before 'communication' since it is a more inclusive term. It is why I chose the title 'Professor of Culture and Economy' for my personal chair.

**Thomas:** In the essay *Culture, Communications and Political Economy* that you co-wrote with Peter Golding and that was published in several editions of James Curran's book on *Media and Society*, you say that the focus on holism, history, the public good in relation to capitalist interests, and moral questions of justice and equity are key features of Critical Political Economy. How do you see the importance and role of Marx's theory and his Critique of Political Economy in this approach?

**Graham:** I have often been upbraided by critics claiming that since Marx died before the arrival of modern media, he has nothing useful to contribute to the study of contemporary communications. My answer is 'yes', he never watched television or operated a computer, but he remains the most productive starting point for interrogating the logic of capitalist accumulation that continues to shape the organisation of communications in fundamental ways. I join Stuart Hall in approaching Marx 'without guarantees', as a departure point for analysis. I have a bust of him in my home office and we often engage in imagined conversations as I try to puzzle out thorny issues.

Contrary to cruder characterisations which present Marx as dogmatic, what I admire most about him is his constant commitment to questioning and challenging his assumptions as emerging developments presented new problems and new possibilities. His personal motto was 'doubt everything'.

He lived most of his adult life as a political exile in London but continually engaged with events elsewhere. During the decade he spent as European correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, he covered two decisive moments in the consolidation of British imperialism: the Indian Revolution and the Chinese Opium Wars. After the liberation of the serfs, he mastered Russian to explore the potential of the commune system. Almost immediately the barricades had been dismantled, he wrote an impassioned evaluation of the Paris Commune's radical experiment in popular government.

I am often exasperated by the scholasticism of much Marxist scholarship that assumes readers are familiar with key terms and concepts but doesn't both to explain them. I am for an open, not a closed Marx, an accessible Marx that employs resonant practical illustrations to demonstrate his continuing relevance to urgent issues in language that doesn't exclude or intimidate.

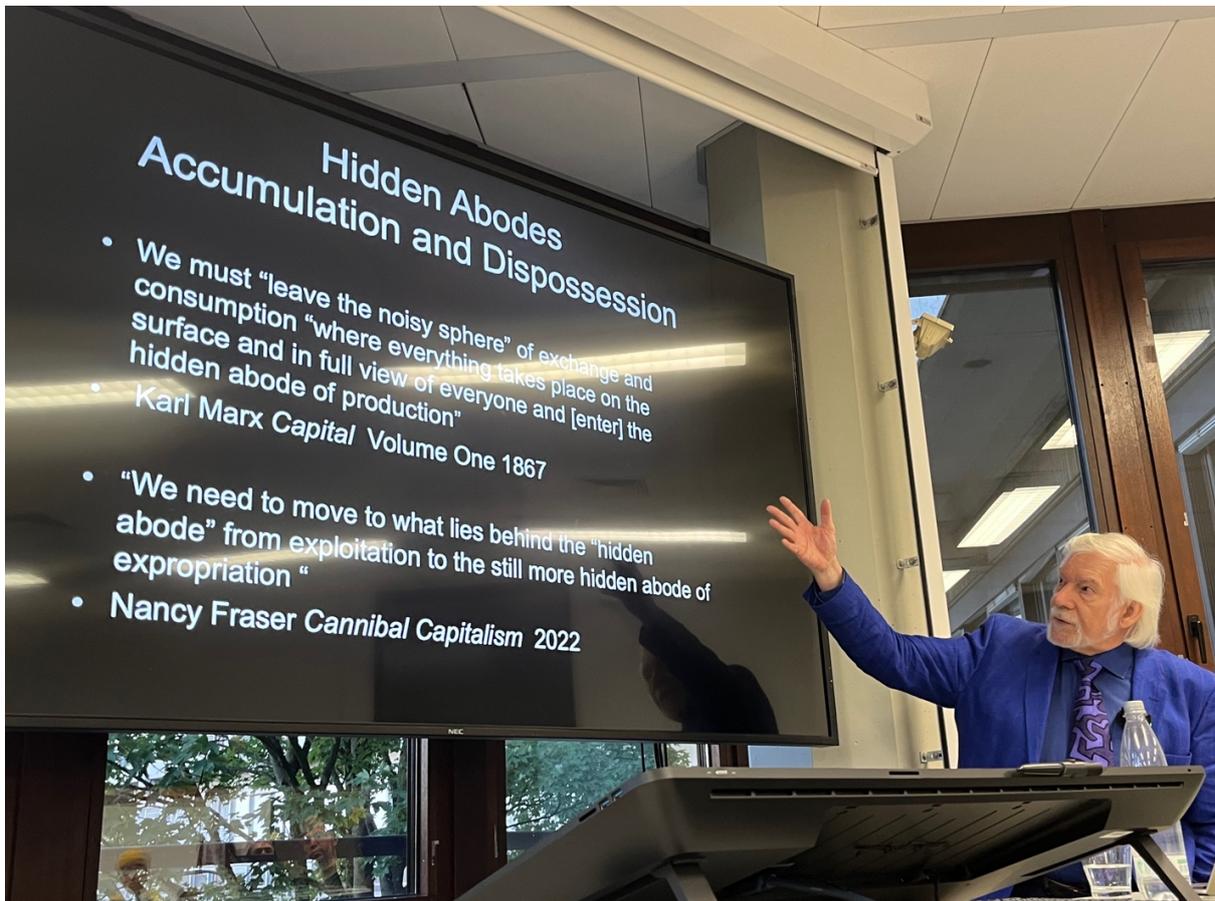
**Christian:** A good number of your works have been authored together with Peter Golding. You are long-time collaborators really. When Peter and you work together, what does that actually look like? Is there a kind of division of labour? What does a Murdock/Golding co-operation look like?

**Graham:** Like me, Peter trained originally in sociology so we shared a common intellectual background and orientation and approached Political Economy in the same way. This basic communality has sustained an enduring collaboration. At a practical level, the process of writing has been surprisingly smooth. We jointly devise an outline schema of what the piece will cover and how it will be organised and divide up the work between us, sometimes by topics but often simply by saying, 'you write the first half and I'll write the second'. We then each read the finished draft and make suggestions for additions and changes based on mutual respect for reservations and critique. Usually, it has only required minor editing and rewriting to produce a final draft that reads as though it comes from a single source. We don't agree on everything, but we agree to disagree so that we can arrive at an accommodation sufficient to publish under both of our names. Neither of us has ever wanted to take our name off anything because we disagreed fundamentally. We normally decide whose name goes first by simply tossing a coin or alternating first authorship.

In the days before digital distribution, we once received a postcard request for an offprint of one of our articles addressed to 'Golding P Murdock' and it is clear that many readers have come to see us as a double act, permanently bound together, like Laurel and Hardy. This disguises the degree to which our collaboration depends on difference as well as communality and draws on our specialist interests and expertise. Peter was

active for a long time in the Child Poverty Action Group and is an expert at ferreting out evidence on inequality and injustice. He will read reports and find a statistic buried in the footnotes that perfectly illustrates the social basis of exclusion from access to core communication goods. His absolute mastery of the empirical evidence made an indispensable contribution to the work we did together on information inequalities and 'digital divides'.

## 2. Critical Political Economy and Cultural Studies



Graham Murdock during his lecture given at Paderborn University on October 17, 2023 (Photo: Christian Fuchs)

**Thomas:** There have been connections of your work to Cultural Studies. For example, in 1975, you co-authored a chapter in the book *Resistance through Rituals*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. Its title is *Consciousness of Class and Consciousness of Generation*. Do you remember when you first met Stuart Hall? And what was in your view his role in British and international Media and Communication Studies?

**Graham:** I first met Stuart in 1968 soon after I joined the Leicester Centre for Mass Communication Research. The Centre had begun life as a support agency for a government inquiry into teenagers and media violence, producing summaries of available research and undertaking original inquiry. As part of this work, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had been allocated a small grant to produce a study of representations on violence in visual media. When it was finished, a group of us from Leicester went over to Birmingham to discuss it.

Stuart had joined the Birmingham Centre in 1964 at the invitation of its founder and first Director, Richard Hoggart, and was in the process of taking over the Directorship when we visited. The report on representations was substantial and drew on a range of qualitative techniques for textual analysis, including elements of structuralist analysis that were starting to gain ground at the time. During my post-graduate studies in the Sociology of Art and Literature, I had taken the opportunity to renew my interests in literary criticism and fine art and signed up for intensive seminars in the Victorian novel, Renaissance art history, and European modernism – so I was familiar with current practices in textual analysis. The Birmingham group’s report was a significant intervention but to the best of my knowledge, it has never been published.

I knew Stuart had trained in literary criticism and abandoned a doctoral thesis on Henry James to edit *New Left Review*, but I was surprised to see a substantial collection of sociology books in his office. Marx sat alongside Simmel and other foundational figures in the sociological tradition. Stuart later left Birmingham to take up the Chair of Sociology at the Open University.

The focus on the supposed antagonism between Political Economy and Cultural Studies ignores the central role the sociological imagination played in the work of the Birmingham Centre. David Morley trained originally in sociology. Angela McRobbie has a joint degree in sociology and literature. Sociology’s ambition to interrogate relations between social relations and symbolic organisation, social location and cultural action, is evident in David’s path-breaking studies of audience readings of television current affairs programming and Angela’s explorations of the media worlds of teenage girls. It is also central to work that informed *Resistance Through Rituals*.

At the time there was a growing volume of popular commentary and social analysis claiming that generational divisions were replacing class inequalities as the central axis of social fracture. This fashionable assumption was comprehensively contradicted by the findings coming out of successive studies of teenage leisure I was directing at the time. They pointed to a more complex and nuanced relation between class and generation in which class-based meaning systems and values were being reproduced across generations but expressed in new cultural forms. From this perspective, far from signalling the demise of class, youth subcultures organised around distinctive clusters of taste in fashion and music, embodied and expressed the tensions and contradictions generated by changes in a class structure marked by de-industrialisation and the expansion of knowledge work. This was illustrated in my own research by the antagonism between a solidaristic skinhead subculture securely rooted in the manual working class and a subculture of expressive individualism among adolescents from professional families, dubbed in the local jargon, Scoobies.

The chapter I contributed to *Resistance Through Rituals* outlined this argument and became a point of departure for other contributors taking issue and suggesting modifications.

**Thomas:** There have been differences and commonalities between Political Economy and Cultural Studies. How do you consider the relationship between the two nowadays?

**Graham:** My work has overlapped substantially with what is generally thought of as Cultural Studies’ core concerns, with how meaning is organised in media and cultural artefacts, its ideological deployment in the service of prevailing systems of power, and their negotiation and contestation as they circulate socially. Sustained analysis of both symbolic systems and everyday social action, is absolutely indispensable to a

comprehensive account of contemporary communications, but it leaves aside questions of how the prior production and distribution of core cultural and communication resources is organised and the consequences of these arrangements for their diversity and availability. These are the central issues that Political Economy sets out to investigate.

Presenting them as opposed and antagonistic to the core project of Cultural Studies is singularly unhelpful and based on a misperception. They are not alternatives. They are distinctive levels of analysis that address particular moments in the organisation and flow of culture and communication. It is never a question of 'either/or' but always of 'both/and'. The problems arise with attempts to integrate them and the vexed issue of economic determination.

**Christian:** Besides *Resistance Through Ritual* and *Policing the Crisis*, one of Stuart Hall's major works is the 'Encoding and Decoding' essay. You wrote a piece on 'Encoding and Decoding' that was published in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*. In this piece, you on the one hand appreciate the importance of the work, on the other hand, you also say that it has certain limits. You point out that the Encoding/Decoding Model is more focused on representation and the interpretation of meaning, whereas Political Economy of Communication is more interested in the production of meaning. The original essay, the long version *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* was published in the Stencilled Occasional Papers Series of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in September 1973. Two months later, in November 1973, in the same working paper series, Stuart Hall published *A 'Reading' of Marx's 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse* where he interprets that passage of the *Grundrisse* where Marx points out that there's a dialectic of production, circulation, and consumption. Stuart Hall was very inspired by that dialectic. He gave an interesting interpretation of it, but it's on a very general philosophical level. He does not relate it to media or communication in any way. But it was written at the same time actually as the 'Encoding and Decoding' essay. Given that production is so central in Marx's *Grundrisse*, I'm wondering why in the 'Encoding and Decoding' essay and also in later works, he forgot about production, the production of meaning?

**Graham:** I have wondered the same thing myself but I never found an opportunity to discuss it with him.

Stuart's exposition in the 'Encoding' paper draws heavily on the semiotics developed by Umberto Eco and his colleagues. This focuses very much on the way general meaning systems circulating in society are translated into and embodied in specific cultural forms. There is a passing reference in Stuart's paper to the way the professional news values of journalists operate to direct selections and emphases but no sustained discussion of the organisation of cultural production and the wider economic and political pressures shaping it. Both these questions were central to the work developed at the Leicester Centre.

Political economic analysis of shifting corporate strategies and state interventions was followed through into qualitative and ethnographic research exploring their impacts on practices of cultural production: Philip Elliott's path-breaking ethnographic case study of documentary television production *The Making of a Television Series*, Philip and Peter Golding's major comparative study of news production, *Making the News*, and *Putting Reality Together*, the seminal study of BBC news conducted Philip Schlesinger who had close ties with the Leicester Centre. My own work on media production focused on television fictions and the changing conditions of authorship. The

two Philips and I later collaborated on a study of popular representations of terrorism, *Televising Terrorism*, which employed Eco's work in a different way.

Marxist analysis has always faced accusations from critics that the concept of determination assumes that key holders of economic power intervene to shape cultural production directly. Sometimes they do. Rupert Murdoch's insistence that every one of his newspapers across three continents threw their full editorial weight behind his unequivocal support for the Bush-Blair invasion of Iraq is a notable illustration. There is also abundant empirical evidence that funding television programming from advertising revenues places a premium on audience maximisation pushing creative choices towards the cultural mainstream. But determinations also work in less obvious, more mediated ways, that require detailed investigation.

In *Televising Terrorism*, we developed an analysis based on Eco's concept of open and closed texts, defined by how far a text accommodated competing meaning systems and whether one was assigned a privileged framing role. We argued that different generic forms supported different degrees of openness. In the case of television fiction, single dramas generally offer more flexibility in featuring alternative and oppositional meanings than either series or serials. We then looked across the range of actuality and fictional programming on British television and analysed ideal typical examples of programming to illustrate openness and closure in action. It was a way of demonstrating how the general economic and political shifts identified in political economic analysis operated differentially at the level of practice by determining the dominant generic mix.

Elsewhere in his writings, Stuart outlines a definition of determination that allows for variations in the combination of pressures shaping particular sites of cultural production, but this argument is not followed through in the 'Encoding' paper or the general work of the Birmingham Centre. The result is a marked asymmetry. Detailed and nuanced explorations of audience negotiations of meaning systems are not matched by comparable attention to negotiations at the point of production as the necessary starting point for understanding the circulation of meaning.

This resistance to starting analysis with the organisation of production is reproduced in the later work Stuart developed at the Open University with The Circuit of Culture model. This presents the different moments in the social circulation of meaning as a linked system but argues that analysis can begin at any point.

As you note, Marx discusses the dynamics of consumption at length, both in *The Grundrisse* and elsewhere in his writings. He sees the final purchase of commodities as not only an economic terminus fuelling future accumulation but as a potential symbolic space inviting investments in meaning. But he is adamant that analysis must begin with the process of production.

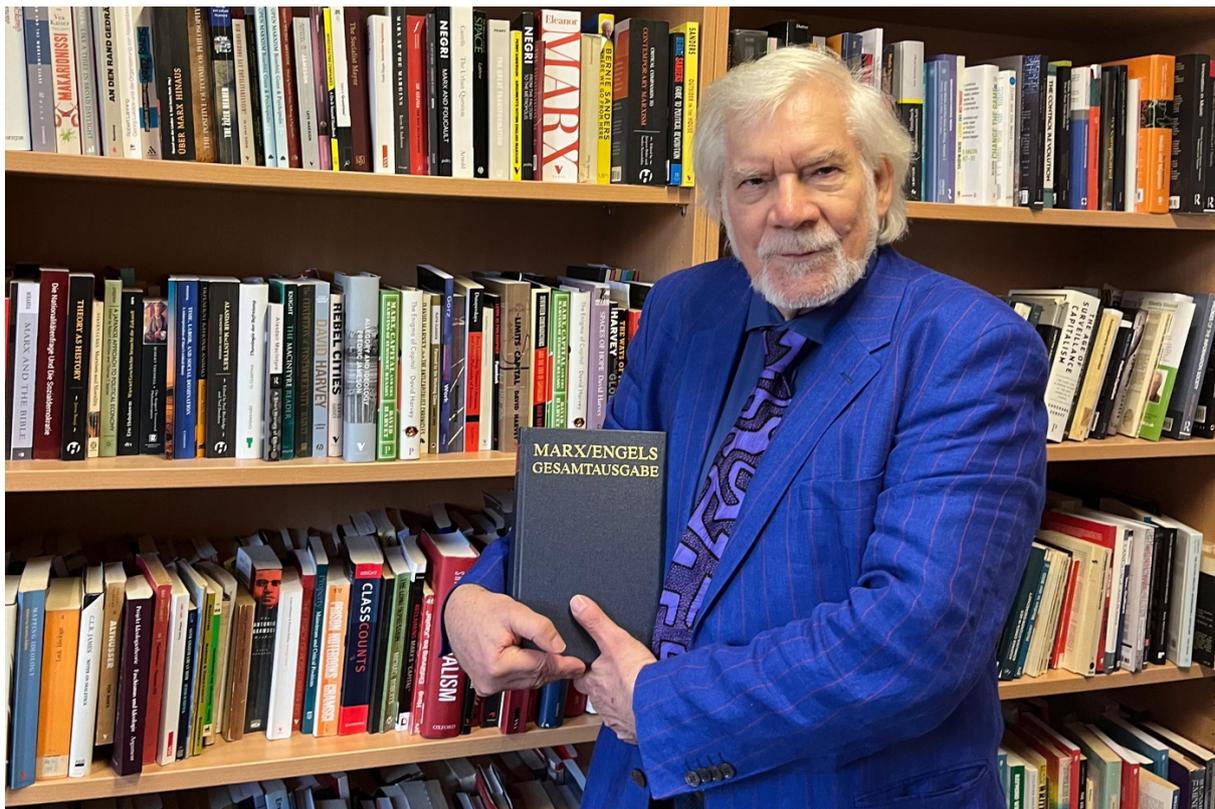
**Christian:** Shortly before Stuart Hall died in 2014, Sut Jhally conducted the last interview with him. In this interview, Hall says looking back now at Cultural Studies, he feels it has somehow lost its way, no longer recognises that there is an economy at all, and that he wishes that conversations with Marxism and against Marxism and some role of Marxism in Cultural Studies would come back. Do you think this was also a kind of self-criticism? In Stuart Hall's works and Cultural Studies in general, there has been a lot of focus on Postmodernism and Poststructuralism since the 1980s. How do you assess this development?

**Graham:** I've read that interview and there is definitely a distinct tone of regret. Remember, by this time Britain had lived through several decades of the neoliberal

counter-revolution. Commercial priorities and logics had run rampant. Public culture had been relentlessly squeezed and attacked. Libraries were closing, the BBC was placed under continual economic and political pressure. Together with everyone else on the Left, Stuart is looking out on this landscape and asking 'How have we allowed them to get away with this? Could we have done more to counter runaway marketisation, saturation product promotion and the shredding of the public sphere?'

Faced with the onward march of neoliberalism in Britain, Stuart had chosen to focus on its legitimating ideology. His analysis of Thatcherism, as a distinctively novel combination of ideological elements crafting a new common sense was brilliant, but it left aside sustained engagement with the multiple impacts of marketisation as a fundamental structural realignment of corporate-state relations. This was the agenda that defined the work that I and an increasing number of critical scholars across Europe and North America embarked on. Stuart accepted that Political Economy was a necessary and valuable contribution to a full critique of prevailing conditions and when we spoke he was always supportive, but his attention was directed elsewhere. By the time he was interviewed by Sut Jhally however, I think the ghost of Marx the critical political economist was standing at his shoulder insistently reminding him that a critique of capitalism must begin with a deconstruction of dominant economic relations.

### 3. Questions of Materialism



**Christian:** In his essay *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms* which was published in *Media, Culture & Society* in 1980, Stuart Hall distinguishes between the two influences on Cultural Studies, Structuralism and Culturalism. Structuralism includes Althusser, by Culturalism he basically means Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and the Humanist Marxists. 'Culturalism' is a bit of a derogatory term. Raymond Williams was for his whole life quite influenced by Marx. And he calls his approach Cultural Materialism. Do

you see a connection or a difference in your approach to Raymond Williams'? What do you see as commonalities and differences?

**Graham:** As I mentioned earlier, Raymond Williams was a major influence on my initial ventures into puzzling out the relations between culture, society and economy and I have followed his work ever since. But his writing presents two problems.

Firstly, he writes in two distinctive registers. His textual commentaries are often engaging and provocative. I particularly admire *The Country and the City* (1973) his exploration of writings on shifting relations between rural and urban experience, one of the defining features of modernity.

For the first fifteen years of his academic career (from 1946 to 1971), he was based in the Extra Mural Studies Delegacy attached to Oxford University, teaching working adults who brought their preoccupations and concerns to the classroom. This sustained encounter with lived experience outside the university informed his engagement with the changing media landscape producing a series of sharp commentaries: *Communications* published as a Penguin paperback in 1962 and the brilliant 1961 essay 'The Magic System' deconstructing the ideological role of advertising. Both publications are eminently accessible, as is *The May Day Manifesto*, a wide-ranging critical review of the state of Britain, written with Stuart Hall and Edward Thompson (key representative as you note of the Humanist tradition of Marxism), published initially in 1967 and reissued in 1968 as a Penguin paperback. The two short chapters on media return to key themes from Williams' adult education years: escalating press concentration; the subordination of communication to the needs of advertisers; and the mounting pressures on the public sector typified by the whittling away of the BBC's ability to provide comprehensive cultural resources for citizenship.

The problems begin with his more theoretical excursions into communication theory where the exposition is often muddy and difficult to read. Very few of his old adult students would have been able or wanted to follow him into those thickets. Anyone promoting dialogue as the foundation of a vibrant democracy has an obligation to present core concepts and arguments as accessible as possible.

My second difficulty with Williams takes us back to the familiar problem of determinations. He counters accusations of 'crude' determination with a redefinition that allows considerable space for the exercise of agency in cultural production. His search for practical applications drew him to the writings of the French humanist Marxist, Lucien Goldmann. In 1970, Goldmann visited Cambridge University where Williams was teaching to give two guest lectures. They discovered overlapping interests and tentatively agreed to collaborate, but Goldmann died before they could work on something together. Goldmann nominates the literary works produced by exceptional writers as primary sources for analysing the imaginative transpositions of the collective consciousness of social groups confronting economic and political change. In his best-known book, *The Hidden God*, Goldmann seeks to demonstrate that the tragic vision of Pascal and Racine expresses the world view of formerly dominant class segments overtaken and marginalised by changes set in motion by nascent capitalism. There is no sustained analysis of the crucial mediating role played by the cultural industries that produced Pascal's books and Racine's plays and the economic and political forces shaping decisions on publication and promotion. William's mature work on relations between cultural expression and economic organisation is marked by the same absence.

Detailing the impacts of shifts in corporate-state relations on the organisation of cultural production, the diversity of representation and debate, and unequal popular

access to core communicative resources was the central ambition of research in critical Political Economy that emerged at the same time and in response to the same shifting landscape. In common with Stuart Hall, Williams' interests took him in other directions and remained substantially uncoupled from these initiatives.

**Thomas:** I would like to change the topic a little bit and would like to come more to your current research topics. In your newer publications, you claim that the Critical Political Economy of Media and Communication has somehow not put enough focus on ecological questions and the climate crisis. You, Richard Maxwell, Toby Miller, Vincent Mosco and others have contributed quite successfully to close this gap. I just would like to turn it upside down: If we look at the green movement and academic analyses of the environmental crisis, how far do you think questions of class, class analysis, and capitalism play a role in it?

**Graham:** My research on the climate and environmental emergencies is part of a wider current in my work around risk, exploring how individuals and societies understand and respond to developments that pose threats to established ways of life. My particular interest is in risks produced by corporate activity. My approach came out of research I contributed to on genetically modified foods.

In the early two-thousands the major agribusiness corporations, led by what was then Monsanto, were pushing hard to introduce genetically modified crops into the British agricultural system. They met with strong resistance from environmental activists employing a radical politics of spectacle. Trial crop fields were invaded and destroyed by protestors dressed as the Grim Reaper or wearing protective suits evoking nuclear contamination. These events were eminently photogenic and widely covered in the popular media. In response, in the summer of 2003, the British government launched an experiment in deliberative democracy, a month-long public consultation, *GM Nation*. It employed media and local meetings to provide information and spaces for discussion. I was involved in evaluating it. To the chagrin of the interested companies and many in government at the end of the process, public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the introduction of GM crops and the proposal was shelved.

I was mainly involved in analysing the media coverage, but the experience prompted me to look more closely at the major agribusiness companies. Their sustained efforts to influence public opinion and policy through political lobbying and manipulating the information released to journalists were entirely familiar and expected from previous debates on newsmaking. Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky had nominated the unequal power of sources alongside ownership and advertising as key forces shaping representations in their influential 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. What I had not considered much before was the control the agribusiness companies exercised over the core resources necessary for life and the wider social and environmental impacts of their business models.

Monsanto's 'terminator' seeds that could only be used once destroyed the traditional practice of collecting seeds at the end of harvest to plant for the following year imposing additional costs on peasant farmers. The aggressive marketing of selective weed killer encouraged mono-cropping eradicating the diverse habitats sustaining pollinating insects.

Working on GM foods prompted me to look more carefully at the environmental impacts of communications.

**Christian:** And of course, Marx reminded us in *Capital* that capitalism is a destructive force that, as he says, destroys both “the soil and the worker”.

**Graham:** Yes. He saw very clearly how industrialising and intensifying agriculture broke the established crop cycle. Abandoning the traditional practice of leaving fields fallow for a season to regenerate and relying on fertilisers and pesticides to maintain productivity created what he called a ‘metabolic rift’, setting in motion both the cumulative degradation of the soil and the contamination of the environment. The dire result is powerfully chronicled in Rachel Carson’s 1962 polemic, *Silent Spring*, which was instrumental in raising my own awareness of environmental issues while I was still at school. I read it at the same time as studying the British romantic poet, John Keats. His desolate vision of a landscape where “the sedge has withered from the lake. And no birds sing” in *La Belle Dame Sand Merci*, captured perfectly for me the spoilation that Carson details with such passion and force.

Marx suffered from chronic health problems. They were exacerbated by London’s acute atmospheric pollution caused by the universal industrial and domestic burning of coal. He took every opportunity to escape for the capital’s famous ‘Smogs’ (smoke fogs) with walks on Hampstead Heath and sojourns at seaside resorts. Unlike some contemporaries, however, he never made the connection between coal burning, CO2 emissions and climate change.

The scientific evidence is now incontrovertible. Burning fossil fuels, coal, gas and oil, is the primary cause of global warming. We are living at a decisive moment in the social and natural history of the planet. The Paris Agreement directs nations to restrict rising temperatures to not more than 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. We are already close to that and given that countries, including Britain, are still mandating significant expansions in the extraction of the fossil fuels predictions see temperatures overshooting the Paris limit by some margin. We are already witnessing an unprecedented upsurge in floods, wildfires, hurricane intensities and other extreme weather events. Add to this the possibility of reaching tipping points in the operation of fundamental ocean and atmospheric processes, which we still do not fully understand, and we are moving towards catastrophe.

Averting this requires the immediate cancellation of all new projects to exploit fossil fuels and moving as rapidly as possible to the clean energy provided by wind, wave and solar power.

**Thomas:** But at the same time, if we look at the environmental debate at the moment, isn’t there too much focus on the demand that we need to change individual consumption patterns? I’m thinking of the recommendation to reduce individual carbon footprints, lifestyle politics, digital detox retreats, etc. rather than focusing on structural questions and the relationship between the environment and capitalism.

**Graham:** Absolutely. It is now increasingly common in public discourse to describe the current era as the Anthropocene confirming human activity as the primary cause of the climate crisis. This terminology is problematic. The emissions generated by corporations and institutions far outweigh the cumulative contribution made by individuals. I prefer the term Capitalocene to focus attention on the pivotal role played by capitalist accumulation.

The energy required by digital communications is already rising rapidly with ever-increasing volumes of data moving through systems and requiring storage. This is set to continue. Speaking to corporate heads assembled at the 2024 meeting of the World

Economic Forum, Sam Altman, the CEO of Open AI, the company behind ChatGPT, the first generative AI system to enter the public domain, admitted that training and using AI across multiple sectors will require vastly more energy than originally predicted. How much more is unknown.

Marx's pivotal concept of modes of production, as combinations of forces and relations, offers a useful starting point for critical analysis. Forces are the resources needed in production. Alongside energy, they include raw materials, machines, and labour power. Relations are defined by the organisation of exploitation and struggle in particular sites of production. Applying this schema to the organisation of contemporary communications directs attention to two key features.

Firstly, it underlines the obvious but often overlooked fact that communication relies on two assemblies of material artefacts. The first is made up of the infrastructural arrays of cables, satellites and masts that enable transmission and connection. The second comprises the proliferating range of devices, computers, televisions, games consoles, and smartphones, that deliver services to end users. Both these assemblies are made from minerals, metals and other natural resources. Their manufacture, transportation, storage and use imposes increasing demands on energy supplies, and their disposal and replacement generates mounting volumes of waste and pollution.

Secondly, each of these moments in the life cycles of media infrastructures and machines is played out across a circuit of relations with global reach. In a key chapter in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx nominates two processes as paving the way for the consolidation of industrial capitalism in Britain and Europe: the commercial enclosure of common land and resources, and the wholesale appropriation of globally distributed natural resources by European colonial incursions. Every day brings new evidence that enclosure, dispossession and annexation remain central to contemporary capitalism. The lives and livelihoods of First Nations peoples have been repeatedly destroyed or rendered unsustainable by aggressive extensions of commercial mining, forest clearances, and thefts of native knowledge.

At the same time, the manufacture, transportation and disposal of media infrastructure and devices continues to rely on the systematic exploitation of labour at every point in the chain: children working in hazardous open pits mines extracting key metals, young female assembly workers living in barrack-like conditions and subject to health sapping production regimes, unlicensed mariners manning container ships without adequate protection, and workers scavenging in the often toxic mounds of discarded electric waste for anything saleable.

Recognising this requires us to reconnect the Political Economy of Communication to the political economies of global enclosure, extraction and exploitation. We are sold successive digital devices and services with promises of pleasure that relentlessly project attention forward to the moments of possession and use. The lives and life chances of the ranks of workers involved in making and delivering them to us and dealing with the waste when we throw them away remain unremarked and invisible. Retrieving these lives and addressing the exploitations that underpin them is central to any critical analysis.

Marx understood very clearly that capitalism's escalating calls on natural resources were unsustainable and towards the end of the third Volume of *Capital* he advocates a radical alternative based on custodianship and care for the environment and handing it on in good order for succeeding generations. Realising this project is the central political challenge of our time.

**Thomas:** So, you would say once Political Economy takes environmental questions seriously, it should be the other way around as well that the green movement and environmentalists should take Political Economy seriously.

**Graham:** Absolutely. In thinking about this I have found Kate Raworth's book *Doughnut Economics* helpful. She uses the metaphor of the doughnut's edible ring to define the area of sustainability. Maintaining it involves a fight on two fronts. The established battles to define and deliver liberty, equality and solidarity remain central but under current conditions proposals for change must take full account of the ecological limits to a liveable planet and ensure that interventions don't overshoot them. Relations between the Red and the Green are central to the radical politics of the present and the future, but experience to date points to significant tensions. One of the primary tasks of critical inquiry is to demonstrate why and how they can be aligned and pursued together.

**Christian:** What you've been arguing is that we need to see how the destruction of nature and the exploitation of labour goes together, and that these environmental questions are fundamentally entangled with capitalism and in the analysis of media and communication you're calling for a new analysis of media materialities. In the contemporary Social Sciences and Humanities, there's also lots of talk about the Materialist Turn. There are approaches that call themselves New Materialisms. Authors such as Bruno Latour and others argue we need to see that not just are there human actors, they say there are also natural entities and machines that are so important in society. They say these are material actors and social actors. Latour calls them 'actants'. In your understanding of Materialism, is there a connection to this understanding of Materialism that Latour has? Or are you more critical of this approach? There's much talk about and influence of this approach. How do you assess that?

**Graham:** The term 'New Materialisms' covers a wide range of theoretical currents, but they mostly share three basic starting points. Firstly, they refuse the idealist reduction of society to language and symbolisation and reassert the material base of social life. Secondly, they reject assumptions of human superiority and lordship over creation and insist that we are embedded in a complex web of interdependencies that stretches across the social, natural and physical worlds. Thirdly, they refuse all constructions of the natural world as a 'passive' resource to be appropriated and insist that natural processes are independently active. Take trees. We are just beginning to understand how trees are linked together by mycorrhizal networks of fungal organisms wrapped around their roots that distribute water, nitrogen and other nutrients and operate to protect and repair weaker trees.

They are examples of Bruno Latour's actants, a concept that came out of his early research on the organisation of laboratory research and his observation that discoveries were collaborations between scientists' interventions and the reactions of the natural processes they were experimenting on. The notion of actants does not presuppose conscious intent but it does invest natural processes with agency and draw attention to the actions they employ to sustain and reproduce themselves. However, since they cannot speak for themselves, how can their interests be defended in policy fora? This is the question Christopher D. Stone asks in his seminal 1972 paper, *Should Trees Have Standing? Law, Morality, and the Environment*. Should they be able to claim rights? He argues that since capitalist corporations have successfully claimed the same legal status as individuals, even though they are collective entities, the same

principle can be reasonably applied to natural phenomena with designated representatives appointed to speak on their behalf. Latour pursues a version of this argument in his provocative proposal for a Parliament of Things. It has also gained ground in law. In 2014 the New Zealand government finally honoured a long-standing claim by the local Maori peoples, and signed a deed of settlement recognising the Wanganui River, which is central to Maori sense of themselves, as a living being, granting it the legal status of a person. It is now an offence to harm it. Since then a number of rivers and mountains around the world have successfully secured legal status.

Marx's materialism directs us to focus on the ways natural resources are appropriated and transformed through labour and the conditions under which this takes place. This remains the necessary starting point for a critical analysis of contemporary capitalism but accepting that the natural world has rights and devising effective mechanisms for enforcing them is also essential to any radical alternative to business as usual.

**Thomas:** That brings me to a question about Postmodern thinking. Political Economy is always focused on the analysis of totalities. It is holistic. Constructivist, Poststructuralist and Postmodern approaches such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Judith Butler and their followers focus their works often on the micro analyses of power, identity politics, the rejection of any notion of truth, causality and universality, and the neglect of class analysis. How do you assess such approaches? Do you think it is possible to combine them with the Political Economy approach? Or do you think that's not possible at all?

**Graham:** The fundamental theoretical fault line running through the social sciences centres on the relations between structures and situated agency. Having started out in sociology, it has been a continual background hum in my work. It is a preoccupation shared by Vinny Mosco who also trained initially in sociology and draws on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory as a central organising principle for his masterly text *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996).

Relations between structure and agency are dynamic and dialectical. As Marx reminds us, people make their own history but not in circumstances chosen by themselves. They negotiate embedded structures drawing on the resources available to them but there are always choices. The roads taken, particularly if they are pursued collectively, impact on prevailing structures, modifying, changing or consolidating them.

Critical Political Economy is an essential starting point for analysis. It addresses the core dynamics organising the unequal distribution of material and cultural resources for individual and collective agency and explores how and why spaces for action open and close. It does not explain how action within those spaces will unfold. In thinking about this I have found Pierre Bourdieu's notion 'fields' useful despite its problems and limits. While fields of action are always structured at a fundamental level by pressures exerted by capitalist accumulation and state intervention, Bourdieu's analysis allows for both the relative autonomy of particular domains of action and the variability of grounded action in particular moments and locations. There is always a micro politics of action but equally, it is always embedded in and framed by forces operating at higher levels of generality. Stripping away these contexts cancels any chance of arriving at a comprehensive explanation.

**Christian:** You mentioned Pierre Bourdieu. And also in your chapter on Encoding/Decoding you positively refer to Bourdieu, which is a quite different kind of French theory in comparison to Foucault or Latour. I think that Bourdieu was to a certain extent quite influenced by Marx because he has this idea of capital accumulation that he takes from Marx and then generalises it. In a way, he was a generalised Marxist. And he stressed the importance of the dialectic of structure and agency in his analysis of the logic of practice and distinctions. But on the other hand, you could also say that when he generalises this logic and introduces the notions of economic capital, political capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital, and social capital, then he turns a bit away from the economy because as a consequence economic capital is not so central and cultural capital is foregrounded. So one could also criticize Bourdieu there. Would you say that Bourdieu can be better connected to the Political Economy tradition than some of the other approaches we have been discussing?

**Graham:** Bourdieu has been a major influence on my own thinking. I particularly admire his continual commitment to putting his theoretical system to work using the full range of available research methods, from ethnography to sample surveys, life histories and documentary analysis. No other French theorist of recent times has displayed anywhere near the same commitment to empirical inquiry.

That said his work has a problematic relation to Marx and to Critical Political Economy. He identifies the increasing separation of different domains of action, and their struggles for relative autonomy, as the defining feature of modernity. He acknowledges that subfields of action are embedded in an overarching 'field of power' centred around the activities of states and corporations but repeatedly characterises attempts to foreground the structuring role of capital as 'economism'.

His insistence on autonomy is central to his major work on cultural production, *The Rules of Art*. Taking the career of Flaubert as a case study, he traces the emergence of the French literary field from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and its increasing power to enforce its own values uncoupled from state-mandated diktats. His focus is on status and the struggle for recognition and respect within the field between competing writers and publishers. At this level of analysis, his work on fields is a useful resource but it is limited by its refusal to look in detail at commercialisation.

Towards the end of his life, however, he became very much a public intellectual writing regularly for newspapers and appearing on television. Faced with the onward march of marketisation he became a trenchant critic of neoliberalism's impact on culture and communication. Some of these interventions are assembled in collections with deliberately confrontational titles: *Sociology as a Combat Sport* and *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. But he reached the largest general audience through a series of television programs and a book, issued in English as *On Television*. It is an extended lament for the erosion of journalistic autonomy and the corruption of professional values. For the first time in his work, he engages with themes familiar from decades of research in Critical Political Economy; the accelerating concentration of corporate power and control over public communications and the impact of audience maximisation strategies on news agendas and expression. Better late than never but he adds nothing new.

His major influence on cultural and communication studies has been on studies of consumption drawing on the revisionist model of class developed in *Distinction*, his seminal study of the stratification of French cultural tastes. Class positions in this conception are generated by the unequal possession of three clusters of resources, or 'capitals': the material assets that constitute economic capital, the personal networks

of support and advancement that comprise social capital, and mastery of the officially valued knowledge and expertise that defines cultural capital. As you rightly note Christian, this opens the way for class to be defined primarily in cultural terms, marginalising its fundamental base in the system of production. Some writers have certainly moved in that direction. Bourdieu's analysis remains an essential point of reference for studies of cultural consumption, but I have also found his ideas and arguments useful in developing work in three other areas.

Firstly, the unequal class distribution of social and cultural capital helps to explain the class composition of professionalised cultural labour. Recent British research on key occupations within the media and cultural industries reveals stark class differentials in opportunities for entry and advancement. A survey conducted in 2018 found that only 6% of working journalists came from families in the two lowest classes which make up almost a quarter (22%) of the general population. A survey two years later recoded 75% of journalists coming from professional and managerial families.

The dynamics of inheritance have been a central theme in Bourdieu's work since his seminal 1970 study *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture*. He sees the initial material and cultural advantages of growing up in an affluent household confirmed by school systems which assume a familiarity with officially valued culture and a facility with language which privileged pupils already possess but working-class pupils lack. This advantage is reinforced in Britain by an extensive network of private schools (misleadingly called public schools) with superior resources to state schools. A 2019 study found that 44% of newspaper columnists and 43% of journalists in leading positions in print and broadcasting had attended a fee-paying school compared to only 7% of the general population. The advantages of private education are reinforced by selective entry to elite universities. Research reveals that 56% of leading journalists had studied at either Oxford or Cambridge.

The perpetuation of privilege is not new, but it has been reinforced in recent years by increasing demands that entrants have prior relevant work experience from an internship, often unpaid. Access to opportunities is unequally distributed. Applicants from affluent families can call on economic subsidies to cover expenses, on networks of parental contacts, and on the social ease that comes from command of valued cultural capital. Without these capitals applicants from working class backgrounds are placed at a permanent structural disadvantage. The result is a continuing closure of cultural production around a restricted recruitment base.

Bourdieu's emphasis on differential holdings of social capital is also helpful in understanding the organisation of television production under conditions where programme-making has been progressively transferred to independent production companies and operating on a project-by-project basis, placing a premium on social contacts and professional reputation in securing employment.

A second area where I have found Bourdieu's class analysis helpful is in explaining the recent political resurgence of market populism. Bourdieu places particular emphasis on the division within the dominant class between two factions. The first, typified by self-made entrepreneurs educated in the 'university of life' rather than the groves of academia, have high levels of economic capital but low levels of cultural capital. The second, typified by intellectuals and professionals, possess high levels of cultural capital but often relatively low stocks of economic capital. It is precisely this schism that market populism has mobilised so effectively. As I mentioned earlier, in this hall of ideological mirrors, intellectuals and experts are cast as elitist, self-serving enemies of 'the people' while entrepreneurs and financiers are celebrated as no-nonsense practitioners, creating jobs, boosting consumption and sharing popular cultural tastes.

Donald Trump is the archetypal example as is Nigel Farage, a key figure in the successful Brexit campaign to take Britain out of the EU. He didn't attend university, worked as a metal trader in the City and is habitually photographed holding a pint in a pub.

A third strand in Bourdieu's work I have been following in my work on the climate and environmental crises comes out of his early writings on Algeria. In 1955 Bourdieu was conscripted into the army to fight in France's savage military response to Algeria's struggle for independence. He stayed on to conduct ethnographic research on the transformation of village life and the lives of migrants into the cities. In a major contribution to visual anthropology, his field notes were supplemented by an extensive archive of photographs, a selection of which have appeared as *Picturing Algeria* (2012). The results of his research, detailed in *Sociologie d'Algerie* (1958) and *Algeria 1960* (1978) are underpinned by a passionate critique of the dominant rhetoric of 'modernisation'. He chronicles the pain and dislocation caused when ways of life rooted in reciprocity and respect for the natural world are torn up by the roots and replaced by the instrumentalities of market relations. He sees this process of deracination as simultaneously material and cultural, coining the term 'symbolic violence' to describe the lack of recognition and respect accorded to tradition and its characterisation as an impediment to progress to be overcome.

This process has been repeated countless times across the globe before and after colonisation as indigenous peoples have had their lands and resources appropriated and their cultures dismissed. This denigration is now being reversed. Ecological thinking is retrieving the conception, central to many indigenous cosmologies, of people as one life form among many, participants in a single living system dependent on shared sources of life. This imposes both the practical imperative of sustainability and the moral duty of care and custodianship that Marx, in the third volume of *Capital* I mentioned earlier, nominates as essential to any comprehensive alternative to capitalism.

**Christian:** There are also certain parallels between the political implications of Bourdieu's works and the political implications of your works. You have stressed a lot that we need and should foster a public culture that benefits everyone including the working class, we need strong Public Service Media and so on. I think in Bourdieu's works, it's a bit like this. He advances a critique of culture that just benefits the bourgeoisie and that creates cultural differences. The implication is that we need a public culture that benefits everyone including the working class.

**Graham:** Corporate digital enclosure must be met by building a cultural and information commons. Some advocates of a digital commons, strongly influenced by anarchist ideas, see it as a third space entirely separate from both markets and states. This ignores the extensive range of essential cultural resources already in the public domain and supported financially by local and national governments. I have argued for drawing on both the major moral economies operating outside the commodity system: the public cultural goods paid for collectively out of taxation and available free at the point of use and the gift economies mobilising voluntary contributions of time, energy and money to support collaborative production of shared artefacts and services. How best to organise a digital commons is open to debate but I support initiatives to reimagine Public Service Broadcasting institutions as central nodes in a network of connections linking programmes to the digital resources provided by public libraries, museums, archives, universities and spaces of online information and deliberation that abide by agreed standards of accuracy and respect for disagreement.

One of the key departure points for thinking about this project is the continuing debate around the constitution of deliberative democracy sparked by Jürgen Habermas's writings on the public sphere. Bourdieu has been almost entirely absent from this debate. Throughout his work, the state appears more as an agent of repression and discipline than an essential provider of public resources for self-realisation and agency. It is both. Attempts to transform public service broadcasting into state broadcasting are written into its history from the outset. Programme makers' freedom to exercise their professional autonomy has always been relative and contested, but continuing struggles for diversity of representation, both inside and outside broadcasting organisations, have opened spaces of expression and participation beyond the commercial mainstream. In pursuing this project, public service organisations enjoy one major advantage: they command higher levels of trust. In an online landscape increasingly saturated by misinformation, hate speech, and deep fakes, this is a valuable resource.

**Christian:** One is wondering what the future of politics, media, and culture will look like. If it continues like now, then there might be a big conflict at the world level between the colliding forces. There might be a new world war even. Or, if those forces are driven back, some kind of global democratic socialist alternative emerges.

**Graham:** We have reached a hinge moment in history. We are faced with multiple crises in which the serial contradictions of capitalist modernity are being played out. Processes that have unfolded over different loops of time are converging.

The first contradiction, and in my view the most profound, is generated by the intensified global warming, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss from the CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions generated by burning fossil fuels and from intensified agriculture. These processes, set in motion in the first phase of industrialisation, have accelerated markedly since the expansion of global consumerism from 1980 onwards. The machines and ways of life aggressively promoted as essential sources of convenience, pleasure and self-realisation are shortening life expectancies, reducing areas of liveability, and prompting mass migrations to less affected regions.

The immediate priority is to stop burning fossil fuels and move to renewable sources of energy. While this would significantly reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and atmospheric pollution it would also, if no other changes are made, exacerbate pressures elsewhere. All transformations create new contradictions. Take electric vehicles (EVs). Their mass adoption may well increase the attractions of driving, putting more cars on the roads and confirming their priority in urban and transport planning, reducing the scope for new communal spaces. The obvious solution of expanding public transport has been a continuing focus of political contest since the arrival of the internal combustion engine and the ascendancy of the oil industry. Electrification's dependence on batteries for storing power, while weakening the bargaining power of the major oil-producing companies and countries, will redraw the map of global political tensions. EVs use ten times more critical raw materials than conventional cars. A recent UN study estimates that global calls on raw materials will increase by 60% by 2060. This will very significantly increase the strategic importance of countries with major deposits of essential metals and materials and, if present impacts are not addressed, compound the negative environmental impacts and labour exploitation of the extraction industries.

The second contradiction arises from marketisation's radical restructuring of capital-state relations, again from 1980 onwards. Across the capitalist West, the ascendancy of neoliberal ideology has dismantled the social contract that sustained welfare

capitalism for the three decades after World War II. Under the political bargains struck then accumulation was tempered by progressive taxation, public interest oversight of corporate activity, state management of core resources, and substantial investment in public goods. The expanded personal opportunities and choices promised by champions of minimal state intervention have been comprehensively contradicted by the realities of increasing concentrations of wealth and income at the top of the social scale, intensified insecurity and immiseration at the bottom, and radically reduced access to shared resources. The political map of popular mobilisation is currently being redrawn by the resurgence of reactionary nationalist and populist movements. Countering them requires the construction of new red-green coalitions promoting both social justice and ecological sustainability.

The third contradiction stems from the realignment of the world political order. Early assumptions that the collapse of the Soviet Union would leave the United States as the sole global power and China would introduce market competition into the political sphere alongside the turn to the market in the economy, have both proved unfounded. China has emerged as a second pole of global power setting in motion an intensified competition for spheres of influence. In a political arena where America's rhetorical defence of human rights is undermined by its selective application, China's authoritarian variant of capitalism may gain increasing traction across the Global South.

Precisely because they are now so securely woven into the organisation of economic, social, and cultural life at every level, developments in digital communication will play a central role in determining how these contradictions play out and the organisation of responses. Faced with this, Critical Political Economy is more essential than ever as both a concerted challenge to prevailing systems and a resource for imagining and building alternatives.

## About the Author

### *Graham Murdock*

Graham Murdock, Emeritus Professor of Culture and Economy at Loughborough University, has published widely in the Sociology and Political Economy of Culture and Communications. He has held visiting professorships at the Universities of Auckland, California at San Diego, Mexico City, Curtin, Bergen, the Free University of Brussels, and Stockholm and is currently a Guest Professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. His work has been translated into 21 languages. Recent books include as co-editor, *Money Talks: Media, Markets, Crisis* (2015), *New Media and Metropolitan Life: Connecting, Consuming, Creating* (in Chinese) (2015) and *Carbon Capitalism and Communication: Confronting Climate Change* (2017). He was a founding member of the International Association for Media and Communication Research's (IAMCR) Political Economy Section and served as IAMCR Vice-President. After graduating from the London School of Economics with a First Class Honours in Sociology, Professor Murdock went on to graduate studies in the sociology of art and literature at the University of Sussex before joining the pioneering Centre for Mass Communication Research at Leicester University. Here, Professor Murdock played a leading role in developing the first master's degrees in Communication and Media Studies in the British university system, and developing the doctoral programme. Professor Murdock later moved to Loughborough University to launch the teaching and research programme in media and cultural analysis within the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Loughborough (East Midlands) campus. Professor Murdock joined the Institute of Media and Creative Industries on Loughborough's London campus in its launch year to help establish the teaching programme.