

The “Austrian School of Critical Political Economy”? A Review of Thomas Allmer’s Book “Towards a Critical Theory of Surveillance in Informational Capitalism”*

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* **Allmer, Thomas. 2012. *Towards a Critical Theory of Surveillance in Informational Capitalism*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, New York, Oxford [...]: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-3-631-63220-8, 136 pages.**

Abstract: This article is a review of Thomas Allmer’s book “Towards a Critical Theory of Surveillance in Informational Capitalism”. The book was published in 2012 by the publishing house Peter Lang (in Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, New York, Oxford [...]). In the start of the article the author also poses the question whether there is a new school of thought emerging, namely the “Austrian School of Critical Political Economy”.

Keywords: Thomas Allmer, Political Economy of Communication, Karl Marx, Critique of Political Economy, Michel Foucault, Panopticon, Surveillance, Economic Surveillance, Internet, Accumulation Process, Austrian School of Critical Political Economy

Thomas Allmer is a part of what could be called the “Austrian School of Critical Political Economy”, which focuses primarily on communication and information studies from the epistemological perspective of materialist critical theory. This relatively small, but intellectually very active group has been forming itself under the intellectual tutelage of Christian Fuchs (to a large extent it was also influenced by social systems theorist Wolfgang Hofkirchner and critical political economist Manfred Knoche) and is now becoming international in its character, because Fuchs moved from Austria first to Sweden and now to UK. It mostly consists of young scholars who are also a part of the Unified Theory of Information (UTI) Research Group, which is the publisher of the scholarly journal tripleC (which you are momentarily reading). This youthful group of critical authors mainly draws its inspiration from Marxian critique of political economy, upgrades his theoretical and conceptual apparatus to the changes brought about by the new information and communication technologies. It includes, amongst others, Marisol Sandoval (e.g. 2012), Sebastian Sevignani (e.g. 2012), and Verena Kreiling, all of which participated in a collaborative reading and study of Marx’s critique of political economy with Christian Fuchs.

The “Salzburg Approach” to ICTs and society has now been developing for almost a decade. It was started in 2004 with the newly-established “Center for Advanced Studies and Research in ICTs and Society” at the University of Salzburg (see Hofkirchner et al. 2007). But it seems that only recently, with the influential studies published by Fuchs (see 2008; 2011), a significant part of the Salzburg scholars has also turned with all due seriousness to the critique of political economy (of communication), with its foundations in Marx’s critical theory. It is therefore perhaps the right time to ask the question: “*Is there an ‘Austrian School of Critical Political Economy’ emerging?*” It is possible we will have to wait for a more conclusive answer, as it is quite likely it will depend on whether these scholars will be able to continue their research in the future. In any case, Allmer’s first book, with its primary focus on economic surveillance, can be seen as providing an important contribution to the growing ensemble of varied literature produced by this group.

As Allmer writes in the conclusion of his book, the overall aim of his analysis is:

“To clarify how we can theorize and systemize surveillance in general and Internet surveillance in particular in the modern economy. [...] As shown in this work, economical actors such as corporations use (Internet) surveillance in the spheres of production, circulation, and consumption. Corporations exercise violence in order to control a certain behaviour of people and in most cases people do not know that they are surveilled. Economical actors control the economic behaviour of people and coerce individuals in order to produce or buy specific commodities for guaranteeing the

production of surplus value and for accumulating profit. Corporations and state institutions are the most powerful actors in society and are able to undertake mass-surveillance extensively and intensively, because available resources decide surveillance dimensions.” (Allmer 2012a, 115, 123)

The book is divided into six chapters. Following the introductory chapter, the second chapter *Foundations of Surveillance Theory* aims to define what different existing notions of surveillance have in common and what separates them. On the basis of these theories Allmer constructs a typology that differentiates between non-panoptic and panoptic notions of surveillance. In chapter three, entitled *A Critical Contribution to Surveillance Studies*, a further systematization is done with a theoretical typology of economic surveillance. It is based on a critique of political economy and distinguishes between the production, circulation and consumption sphere within capitalist economy. In chapter four, *Foundations of Internet Surveillance Theory* are laid out, by presenting how Internet surveillance is defined in the existing literature. The typology that was constructed in the previous chapters is applied to the Internet. In the chapter five, entitled *A Critical Contribution to Internet Surveillance Studies*, Allmer analyses economic mode of Internet surveillance building on the typology from chapter three. He applies this theory to the changed social and technical circumstances.

Before looking more closely at Allmer’s book, it is sensible to give a detailed definition of how Fuchs looks at political economy. After all, the theoretical foundations that he provided have been influential for the whole group of the “Salzburg School of Political Economy” scholars. It could be claimed that in a manner comparable to Mosco’s – who provided an expansive, almost all-encompassing definition of political economy¹ –, Fuchs’ definition of the critique of political economy of communication is a very comprehensive one. As he points out:

“Political economy focuses on the analysis of the inner constitution and dynamics of the economic system. It is political economy, because it sees political interests at work in modern economy. In critical political economy, these interests are conceived as contradictory class interests. Critique of the political economy aims to show the limitations, contradictions, and problems of the capitalist economy; it questions the legitimacy and logic of academic approaches that conceive capitalist phenomena (such as the commodity, exchange value, profit, money, capital, the division of labour, etc.) as universal and not as historically contingent and changeable; and it questions the modes of thinking that postulate the endlessness and reification of existing reality (ideology critique).” (Fuchs 2012, 36-37)

The expansiveness of Fuchs’ approach is in a large sense replicated and well demonstrated by Allmer in his study on surveillance in informational capitalism. This is especially evident when he points at the changing nature of surveillance with the rise of the new information and communication technologies and when he then applies his categorical apparatus and newly constructed typology to the Internet (chapters four and five). Allmer draws from numerous authors working in surveillance studies (both critical and non-critical) and demonstrates how surveillance went through *qualitative* change, which primarily occurred because of *quantitative* changes. These were enabled by the emerging possibilities provided by the new technologies. Technological advances of new ICT led to an immense change in methods of collecting data, both in the sense of options provided by the storing of the collected data and in the sense of the relative simplicity of watching over the previously almost unimaginable plethora of social life: “With the help of new surveillance technologies such as the Internet it is possible to undertake large-scale surveillance extensively and intensively, because every worker can be controlled every time by a minimum number of supervisors.” (Allmer 2012a, 99) The more data there is available to those that own it, the more precise and effective their surveillance can be in all possible aspects.

There was an obvious extension of surveillance in the last decades. These processes need to be connected not only to the new technologies, which enabled them, but also to the asymmetries of power that have intensified after the 1970s, when neoliberal doctrine started its political rise in the Western world. Similarly to how Fuchs defines the approach of political economy, Allmer indicates that there are, indeed, political interests connected to economic surveillance in capitalism (as was already recognized by Marx): they stem from the need to exploit labourers in the production process as effectively as possible, resulting in a more successful capitalist extraction of surplus value, and especially in the (at least indirect) production and reproduction of the existing class relations. The need for effectiveness of the labouring process was primarily served by putting labourers under ever more effective surveillance, which was later also assisted by different scientific methods of

¹ According to Vincent Mosco, the pre-eminent scholar of political economy of communication, political economy is not only “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (Mosco 2009, 2), which is a narrow definition of it, but can in the widest sense also mean “the study of control and survival in social life” (Mosco 2009, 3).

surveillance (i.e. Taylor's time-management methods, which were carried over to the Fordist type of production at the start of the 20th century). In contemporary circumstances of post-Fordist production, labourers never know when they are actually watched, because new technical forms of surveillance make possible constant monitoring with small resources; these new options of surveillance consequently often induce self-surveillance. At the same time their wages are in most cases directly connected to how much they produce. As pointed out by Allmer (2012a, 99):

“Surveillance now works primarily invisibly, autonomously, and indirectly. Not every worker is observed at any moment, but no one knows if she or he is monitored. Observation is possible anytime. As a result, everyone acts as if kept under surveillance all the time – individuals discipline and control themselves.”

The production sphere is, of course, not the only area where capital is nowadays able to put human beings under more and more surveillance; surveillance in this sphere is after all as old as capitalist economy itself (see Allmer 2012a, 52). Drawing from Marx's (i.e. Grundrisse, 1993/1973) division of the capitalist accumulation process into the three inter-connected and dialectically mediated spheres – production sphere, circulation sphere (distribution and exchange), and consumption sphere – Allmer (see chapter three) constructs a typology of surveillance, which enables him to demonstrate how surveillance is carried out in each of the mentioned spheres with more and more efficiency and vigour. In circulation sphere surveillance is carried out when: a) capital is purchasing labour power in the stage of money capital (applicant surveillance in search of suitable labour power); b) in purchasing means of production, and c) with the surveillance of produced commodities in the stage of commodity capital (Allmer 2012a, 58-62). Surveillance also extends to the consumption sphere, which is increasing in importance, because there is a constant possibility of overproduction because of the rise of mass consumption. Advertising consequently became an important instrument of realizing profit (Ibid., 62) and capitalists have to use targeted advertising to help them sell the products they have produced: “[Mass consumption] requires knowledge of consuming activities in order to stimulate and steer consumption. [...] Consumer surveillance can be seen as a product of the capitalistic economy.” (Allmer 2012a, 62) When it comes to the surveillance of consumption, Allmer comes to one of his most pertinent observations. He points out that it is also the consumer surveillance that helps with the production and re-production of social classes in modern society (Ibid., 63): “Consumerist methods of surveillance are a contradictory form of social inclusion of qualified and desired consumers and social exclusion of disqualified and undesired consumers.” Even though consumer data was important for target advertising from the start of this business, commodification of privacy via the Internet has enabled online target advertising, which has intensified and extended because of the technical possibilities (Ibid., 106).

What makes Allmer's approach a critical one is not only his reliance on Marx's critique of political economy, which helps him to uncover the important processes in economic surveillance, but also the distinction he draws between panoptic and non-panoptic theories of surveillance (chapter two). This helps him in the construction of the basic typology of critical (i.e. panoptic) notions of surveillance based on Foucault, and non-critical (non-panoptic) theories, which he deems as using “neutral and general notions of surveillance, where everyone has the opportunity to surveil. [...] In contrast, panoptic notions consider surveillance to be negative and being connected to coercion, repression, discipline, power, and domination.” (Allmer 2012a, 41)

By further developing the political-economy approach to surveillance, which was started in the “Internet and surveillance” volume (see Fuchs et al. 2012; Allmer 2012b; also Prodnik 2012), Allmer's main contributions are a detailed and a systematic typology of economic surveillance, which is largely influenced by Marx, and a critical observation of the existing surveillance studies that have in the past often overlooked the economic aspect of surveillance. Even when this aspect was taken into consideration, it was, as Allmer correctly points out, often without a solid theoretical criterion for a certain typology. This is why a more theoretically grounded typology was constructed by Allmer through a separation between spheres of production, circulation, and consumption (chapter three), which were then transferred onto economic surveillance. Allmer used this typology not only to classify the existing literature, but also to demonstrate, through several illustrative examples (of how, for example, surveillance is conducted on the Internet), what is missing in the existing theories for them to seriously consider the economic type of surveillance. This apparent under-theorization, when it comes to economic surveillance, which was significantly amended by Allmer, is especially problematic as this type of surveillance is a central aspect of modern surveillance societies (as pointed out in the book). This problem of ignoring the economic aspect becomes particularly obvious in the non-critical approaches to surveillance, because it is, of course, especially the critique of political economy that can best demonstrate the increasing asymmetries when it comes to the possibilities of surveillance via the new technologies. As pointed out by Allmer (2012a, 117):

“Corporations control the economic behaviour of people and coerce individuals in order to produce or buy specific commodities for accumulating profit and for guaranteeing the production of surplus value. Corporations and state institutions are the most powerful actors in society and are able to undertake mass-surveillance extensively and intensively (such as for example the collection and gathering of information on Internet user profiles in order to implement targeted advertising), because available resources decide surveillance dimensions.”

When considering these increasing disparities between the haves and have-nots, it becomes obvious there is little left of the emancipatory potentials of surveillance (simplistic mantra how ‘everyone can surveil’ today promoted in the non-panoptic theories). Non-critical approaches are basically idealist in their considerations of power-relations in existing society, they “tend to mix up very heterogeneous phenomena on one level of analysis,” (Ibid., 117) and in its essence overlook or ignore the fact that private actors are not able to conduct mass-surveillance like the biggest corporations and state institutions are.

Allmer’s book is an apt continuation of critique of surveillance in the age of the Internet (see Fuchs et al. 2012; Allmer 2012b; also Prodnik 2012). It also proves that both the critique of political economy of communication and Marxism are indeed alive and kicking in the field of communication studies, even though they have been already dismissed and relegated to the obscurity, because history supposedly proved them wrong. As numerous contributions to the special issue of tripleC on Marx (Vol. 10, No. 2, edited by Fuchs and Mosco) and several new books in this field of enquiry have demonstrated, such theoretically improper observations could hardly be more wrong. Indeed, it was exactly history and the destructive nature of capitalism that proved them wrong.

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