

“The concentration of power, represented by current prevailing media conditions, is and ought to be open to challenge.” An interview with Peter Golding.

*Jernej Amon Prodnik**; *Sašo Brlek Slaček**; *Peter Golding***.

* *Social Communication Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, jernej.amon-prodnik@fdv.uni-lj, saso.brlek-slacek@fdv.uni-lj.si.*

** *Northumbria University and Newcastle University.*

Abstract: Interview with Peter Golding, Emeritus Professor at Northumbria University, Visiting Professor in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University and one of the crucial figures in Critical Political Economy of Communication. In the interview we discuss the role of critical scholarship, the sometimes troubled relationship between cultural studies and critical political economy of communication, the importance of a sociological perspective in studying media, and the impact of broader socio-political trends on academia.

Keywords: Critical Political Economy of Communication; Cultural Studies; Critical Scholarship, Marxism, neoliberalism

Peter Golding is Emeritus Professor at Northumbria University and Visiting Professor in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University. He is one of the most important scholars in critical political economy of communication since 1970s, often known for his groundbreaking work with Graham Murdock, with his work also encompassing other fields, such as media sociology. His books and edited volumes amongst others include *The Mass Media* (1974); *Making The News* (with Philip Elliott, 1979); *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty* (with Sue Middleton, 1982), *Communicating Politics: Mass Communications and the Political Process* (ed. volume with Graham Murdock and Philip Schlesinger, 1986), two volumes of *The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (edited with Graham Murdock), *Cultural Studies in Question* (ed. volume with Marjorie Ferguson, 1997), *Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalization, Communication and the New International Order* (ed. volume with Phil Harris, 1997), *European Culture and The Media* (ed. volume with Ib Bondebjerg, 2004), *Digital Divides* (ed. volume with Graham Murdock, 2010).

Professor Golding is also an editor of the European Journal of Communication, Honorary Chair of the European Sociological Association's Research Network 18 – Sociology of Communications and Media Research, and was Co-Chair of the European Science Foundation Programme 'Changing Media, Changing Europe'. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). He was founder Chair of the subject association for his field, the Standing Conference on Cultural, Communications and Media Studies from 1993-1999, since when he has been Honorary Secretary of its successor body, MeCCSA (Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association). He chairs a task force for the European Communications Research and Education Association (ECREA) on changes in support for media research across Europe.

We spoke at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, in December 2015, where Professor Golding had given a lecture on “Why Studying the Media Needs a Sociological Perspective”.



(Photo: Sašo Slaček Brlek)

Sašo: You started as a sociologist, what then drew you to media and especially to critical approaches to media and communication?

Peter: I started as a sociologist and I still think I am a sociologist, which is a very broad category of scholarship. But I am a sociologist with a particular interest in the media as institutions and communication as a social process. And I suppose my interest in that grew as it always does: partly by accident. It would be wrong to pretend that it was a carefully thought through process. I was always interested in journalism and indeed I was editor of a student newspaper at my university when I was a student. But I decided fairly early on that I wanted to be a sociologist studying the media, rather than a practitioner. My interest in the media grew because at that time television viewing and newspaper reading were growing very fast, and their influence and importance were very great. I just felt this was something I wanted to focus my attention on as a sociologist.

Sašo: What were the institutional conditions for critical scholarship at that time?

Peter: They were perhaps better than they are now, but nonetheless, it was not an easy position to take and it certainly wasn't the standard position. Sociology was thought of as critical discipline in those days. We're talking about 1960s and 1970s when a lot of Europe was undergoing quite radical social change. At least there was a lot of radical, critical, political critique in the public domain and the rapid growth of intellectual work. And not least of course in universities and among student populations in my country and in most European countries this was very great and by large that emphasised critical commentary. That wouldn't be true now, but it was true then.

So it was possible to construct critical scholarship around the media. But it was also necessary, it didn't exist and the largely American influence as it was then, was not very critical. It was, to take very old distinction that came out of American scholarship in the 1940's and 1950's, there was much more administrative research than there was critical research.

Sašo: Would you say that these political changes that were going on were crucial in awakening the interest in academia?

Peter: Yes, they were. I wouldn't overstate the amount of critical work that was being done. It was still true then and it is certainly true now that the majority of work in social science generally, not just in sociology and certainly not just in studying the media, was not critical... either in the sense of being well grounded in critique, in theory, or critical in a more conventional sense of being politically questioning and oppositional and morally founded. I think that was always a minority position and I still think it is a minority position. I would say that although I was obviously involved with a few other people in creating a political economy of the media certainly in the UK, we all knew each other and we could probably sit around the table and have coffee. It wasn't a large movement.

Jernej: But it was easier, you were mentioning USA, it was easier in the UK than it was in the USA, because especially in the 1950s and 1960s it was nearly impossible to do any sort of critical research in the USA ...

Peter: I think that is true. I think that people who became major figures in critical political economy of media in the United States were probably bolder, more dissident and more visible than we were. I'm thinking particularly of the older generation, people like Herb Schiller and later people like Dan Schiller, his son, and Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko and many others who were not large in number and they are not large in number now. They were never a major or dominant voice then and they are not now, so I would not want to overstate the role of critical political economy within media studies either in the USA or UK.

Yes, it was easier in the UK, because there was slightly more of a vacuum, whereas the established scholarship in the United States was mostly of course vocational and professional journalism schools and so on. In the United Kingdom the dominant voice was probably coming from the humanities, not from social sciences, and it was coming in the form of cultural studies – and we always think of the Birmingham school, so called, and Stuart Hall – but that was the exception ... By and large and on the whole media studies, the study of the mainstream media, of the dominant canon, was uncritical.

Jernej: Was this because for example in the UK you had also different political contexts? For example you had the Labour Party in power after the Second World War. Was this political context in any way important or was it just the institutional differences in academia?

Peter: I don't think it's immediately relevant or important in shaping the intellectual firmament. Universities in the UK, then and now, tend to lead a more distant life from political life than in many European countries. And certainly in the 1960s, for example, only 7 or 8 percent of the population went to university. It wasn't a major part of

most people's lives. That's changed very much. It is true that we had prevailing Conservative governments – with few exceptions, you mentioned a Labour government in the period after the Second World War – but mostly in the post war period, we had Conservative governments. And all governments, Labour and Conservative, have moved to the right. Without getting into a discussion about British politics now, the prevailing culture is largely on the right, even or perhaps especially within the Labour Party, which has never been a voice in British politics for shall we say radical democratic socialism.

Sašo: So what drew you to critical political economy in particular, among critical approaches to the media?

Peter: I suppose most obviously the realisation of the massive concentration of ownership within British newspapers especially, and increasingly within commercial television. And also the growing evidence of horizontal integration between companies working in different sectors. So it became increasingly obvious to those of us with the interest that the power was held by fewer and fewer corporate interests. This had enormous consequences. So that in looking at the range of not just news, but even entertainment that was available, we were struck – and by 'we', I mean small number of people – we were struck by how few voices there were and how narrow the range was. I think that created the need to formulate a theory, to try and at least describe, if not explain, all of that. And critical political economy was absolutely the right way forward.

Jernej: Who were the scholars and also people that influenced you at the start?

Peter: Well, that's a difficult one to answer. I mean, there were scholars who were enormously influential in shaping my understanding of sociology and I would certainly include among those Peter Townsend and David Lockwood – amongst then contemporary leading figures in British social science.

But I would also say I was enormously influenced by colleagues working much more closely, and I would name certainly two: Philip Elliott and Graham Murdock. Philip Elliott I worked with very closely when I first became a media researcher, but he died in 1983 at a tragically young age. Graham Murdock and I of course have continued to work together throughout our academic careers and I'd like to think we've influenced each other. But I think most importantly Graham most certainly influenced me and we're talking right at the beginning, when we were both very young. We worked together really to try and create critical political economy, the first expression of which was in an article published as long ago as in 1973. I don't think we realised then – it just wasn't obvious to us at all, you never realise at the time – just how influential this would become and how much was then going to grow within the next 20 years.

Jernej: How did it happen that you collaborated with Graham so much? Because in most of your works, it's Peter Golding and Graham Murdock ... Everyone already expects that when you see one name, there would be the other as well ... *(laughter)*

Peter: Yes, it's quite worrying. *(laughter)* We once received a letter from an American department addressed to the 'Golding P. Murdock research centre' and people used to make jokes about never seeing us traveling together and so on.

The easy and obvious answer to your question is that we worked in the same university department. The Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester was opened in 1966. Graham went there as a research assistant in 1968, working initially on a study of media coverage of the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. I went there just under two years later. But it meant therefore we were both working in the same research centre at a very formative period of our early academic careers. So that's how we met and found that we were both interested in the same things and had very similar intellectual formation and attitudes. Inevitably we developed working habits together and they grew to the point where now we still write together and this is two hundred years later or whatever it is (*laughter*).

Jernej: This question may perhaps be a little personal, but how has this collaboration worked? I mean, you already know what Graham will be able to cover and ...

Peter: I write the music and he writes the words (*laughter*). No, I'm not sure there is a formula, I mean obviously if you work with someone over many years, you get used to ways of working. Usually we certainly discuss... if we had something we agree we are going to write together, we discuss it, we formulate a focus and the main themes that will appear in an article. And then we agree a division of labour. You will be, I'm sure, very quick to notice how many of our articles are in four parts (*laughter*); that's not an accident. And usually we are responsible, each of us, for different sections and then of course we do what everybody does when they write together... We exchange drafts and we comment on each other's drafts and then we finally arrive at something that we can both at least agree to disagree about.

Jernej: But your thought processes have to be quite similar, in much of the collaborative work there is a clear distinction, you can clearly see where one author finished writing and the other started to write. And I don't see this clear distinction when I read your work.

Peter: Well, many people have tried and sometimes they get it right and sometimes they get it wrong. I think we have... I wouldn't say identical perceptions, but they are sufficiently similar to allow us to work together. I'm sure if you were a very subtle discourse analyst you could work out which section has been primarily written by which person, but normally by the time we start writing, we have already agreed what the main areas to cover will be and what the main argument is and how it will be presented. The writing is almost the last thing to do. I wouldn't say that it doesn't matter, but by the time you get to write the article, everything is already discussed and agreed.

Jernej: In your research you point out that it is necessary to assess media as a part of a whole society, as a part of social totality basically. Why do you think this is the case?

Peter: I suppose I would almost put that upside down and say: how could it be otherwise? I mean, I can't imagine studying, let's say, education or health or social policy or crime without a wider understanding of the society and the political economy within which they work. I don't find it necessary to argue... Well, I do find it necessary to argue that the media should be studied as part of social totality, but for me, that is a necessary part of any social theory. My worry is the extent, to which people talk

about constructing analysis of the media as though it was something apart. That is the danger, but to situate the media as parts of wider social processes seems to me essential, necessary and unavoidable, not something to argue about.

Sašo: But still, you focused yesterday's lecture exactly to an appeal to take the sociological perspective into account in studying media, to address issues like inequality and power. Why do you think it is still necessary? I completely agree, it should be self-evident, but why is it still necessary to argue this?

Peter: For the reasons I gave in the discussion after the lecture, which is that although I believe we should study the media within that wider context, it's not what always happens. Media studies is often quite enclosed and separated and I think there's an extraordinary amount of myopia within media studies in many countries, where it has become separated from the wider studies of culture, society and economy. So that is why it needs to be argued, because it doesn't always happen.

For me it needs to be argued because it ought to be obvious. I wish it was, but it isn't. You have to make it obvious, you have to explain that ... I have interviewed candidates who wish to have an academic position, who are enormously knowledgeable and creative about media theory and about advanced, let say, semiotic analysis. And then I find they've hardly ever heard of Rupert Murdoch. Or one person once said to me that the BBC was a commercial organisation. Well of course he wasn't being subtle in suggesting that the BBC has been forced to be commercial, he just had no understanding that it was a public corporation. And I just thought it's worrying when people have such subtle understanding within some narrow parts of media studies, but such naivety and ignorance of wider questions. So my answer to your question is that the reality, the intellectual and academic and institutional reality, is of a growing separation of media studies from other things. By 'media studies' I'm using that as a short-hand for lots of different things. And that, I think, is not good for students or for social understanding.

Sašo: Why do you think this is? Is it because of the division of scientific disciplines?

Peter: Yes, that is obviously a part of it, it has to do with institutional history of academia, the growing separation of different areas. I mean today in many countries we argue about the virtues of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. Such arguments would not have been necessary or even meaningful in past ages. A separation between what we now call sociology and economics, for example, was unthinkable.

For me, one of the most damaging divisions in UK academia was the separation in the 1940s and 1950s, between sociology and social policy. So that social policy became the study of what is sometimes called public or social administration, as though that had nothing to do with wider questions of power and equality and so on and so forth. Of course it's absolutely essential that those two are linked and parts of the same study. And that kind of separation I think is always damaging. It doesn't mean we have to study everything all the time. That is not humanly possible, but it does mean being very aware of those divisions and trying to cross them whenever possible.

Jernej: In one of his articles, it was basically a plenary talk, Wolfgang Streeck starts with this brilliant statement: 'Once upon a time sociologists knew that modern society is capitalist society'... But this is basically it. It's also naturalising certain social rela-

tions as though they have been here since always. As though they are natural. And of course capitalism is one of ...

Peter: Exactly, I agree.

Jernej: And this is also present in sociology.

Peter: Yes it is. Political economy grew out of an attempt to understand the emergence of capitalism 300 years ago and sociology is a very much later separation. I suppose in the late 19th century – with particularly an attempt to understand very rapid social changes going on, in the growth of cities and the growth of the distinction between rural and urban life and so on – it became separated from what used to be called political economy, which was a very wide and embracing term, rather different from the way we now describe it. If you talk about the political economy of the media, a phrase we sometimes use, it would be meaningless to political economists in the 19th century. But what it draws attention to, and clearly what it is designed to draw attention to, is that the capitalist formation of most media and communications institutions is not a necessary development or an inevitable one. It's a particular formation that has increasingly been supported and encouraged and in many ways subsidized – which is a general term – because of political and economic decisions. It's not given. So Streeck's statement is absolutely right in that sense.

Jernej: This is also why you probably pointed out that it's necessary to focus on history and change, including the power relations in this change, because without this it's impossible to understand that the media of course are private media corporations and so on.

Peter: Yes, yes ...

Jernej: I mean, you can understand it very abstractly, but ...

Peter: Yes, I agree. That is certainly why I argue that a historical dimension is necessary. In fact it has too frequently been removed, but if we want to understand anything about social formation, about the emergence of capitalism and the media within it, then we need a historical dimension to understand the growth of corporations, the growth of private ownership, the growth of media as private corporations, which is not a necessary and inevitable development. In the media we of course always have the alternative models that are available in fields like public service broadcasting. We do not need to think of the media as only possible in the form of private capitalist corporations.

Jernej: Isn't it strange or somewhat odd and peculiar that especially in a time when historical inequalities are so high and the power asymmetries are rising this naturalization of certain relations is so blatant and so obviously present also in academia when wider perspective should be possible?

Peter: Well, I don't know, it's puzzling on one level, because it relates to what it always seems to me the fundamental question for social scientists and also for sociologists, which is 'How is it that societies, which are hugely unequal, persist?', in other words, 'Why don't those, who are the least provided with cultural, economic

and other resources, try to change the society in which they live?'. And of course there we fall back on problems of ideology. But that is a fundamental question, 'Why is it that people accept or even support a social structure and economic structure, in which they lose?' It's a very simple question, but the answer is very complex and we don't have one. Clearly attempts by Marx, Gramsci and others to formulate explanations – even Durkheim with *conscience collective* – have helped us. But it remains a fundamental conundrum. And we live now in the second decade of the 21st century, at the time of the most – certainly in Western Europe – growing and huge inequality and yet we see politically in many countries at the moment a movement to the right, which is very sceptical and oppositional to radical change in favour of the dispossessed. That poses political problems, not just for the intellectual and the analysts, it poses very real political problems for the political parties of the so called left in Europe. But here, we're moving to another question I think.

Jernej: In the past in academia and also in political practice these questions were more present, do you think this is also connected to the fact that the 'really-existing socialisms' have fallen and that it was basically portrayed as though this is the end of history and that all of the big questions of humanity and society have been answered now?

Peter: Well I'm not sure that it is true that they were much more present. There was clearly a time when there was a great belief in the Soviet model, if you like, the East-European model as demonstrating the effectiveness and possibility of an actually existing socialism. And the disappointment that arose with the historical evolution of these societies was clearly palpable and destructive on the left in Western Europe and the United States... so far as there is such a thing as a left movement in the United States. But I don't think there were ever other than marginal or particularly influential movements nor were they powerful movements within academia or intellectual understanding of the media. So analysis of the media, analysis of society generally, has always by and large been relatively conservative in most European societies. Sociology is a surprisingly conservative discipline, despite its popular perception in many countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

So I don't think there ever was that great power for grasp or potential for change, modelled by Eastern Europe. But of course two things then happened: one was the evident failure – as people interpreted it – of the actually existing socialism in Eastern Europe, and the other was the claim that 'We have won', as Warren Buffett often put it. You've heard Warren Buffet, the famous American venture capitalist not long ago, saying very enjoyably really: 'Yes of course there's a class war and my class has won'. And it's difficult to disagree with him. But it's only a more emotive way of putting the argument of so many analysts, that we have reached "the end of ideology" and the perfect society, namely something like the capitalist United States, has been created.

I think that has begun to fall apart, even though it was very powerful between say 1990 and 2005, and even in the last five or ten years. Now however, there are many things going very evidently wrong in Western Societies: growing evidence and awareness of massive inequality, things like climate change, the growing scepticism about the ability of nation states to provide publicly funded and publicly provided services of one kind or another.

So I think we are living through – if I could be objective about it – a very interesting period, but I can't be objective about it, because I'm also living through it.

Sašo: Ok, we definitely agree that the mainstream of media research has almost always been more conservative, but I think there *were* periods when critical approaches and political economy in particular were much more influential, for example in the 1970s ... At least more than they were later or than they are now.

Peter: Yes. Although again, I'm not sure how powerful that was. I mean, clearly, if you think about the MacBride commission and the debate about NWICO [The New World Information and Communication Order], there *have* been moments, very important moments, where radical alternatives and the evident inequities created by capitalist media formation have been quite prominent. But I wouldn't overstate that. My feeling is that for the last 50 years, although media studies in most countries have grown very fast, the intellectual and the academic study of the media has not in itself had an enormous influence on the institutional growth of public or corporate media. And within academic studies I don't think the critical political economy approach has ever been ... It's become more or less fashionable, but it's never been more than marginal. Certainly in the Anglophone areas, which I am more aware of, certainly in the UK and in the United States, critical political economy or even critical cultural studies, which is *wrongly* sometimes thought of as a critical approach, has never been more than marginal. And the dominant, overwhelmingly dominant form of teaching and research, is largely a conservative one.

Sašo: You said that cultural studies are wrongly thought of as a critical approach, could you explain?

Peter: Well, I thought you'd pick that up. (*laughter*) Let me talk about the UK, because that's what I know best and it's what people often focus on. Cultural studies in the United Kingdom of course grew out of classic humanities studies, not social sciences, and the work associated especially with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and Stuart Hall, was always enormously important, of course, but a small part of cultural studies and it occupied a particular moment. Stuart Hall sadly is no longer with us and he left the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, I don't know, 35 years ago, as did most of the people who were the sort of heroic founding figures ... They never agreed with each other. And we should not overstate the influence of Marxism on cultural studies – the political theme of cultural studies in the United Kingdom then and now has often been a largely conservative one.

And I have to say, as an editor of a journal – not like TripleC which has a very particular audience and purpose, but a more general one – European Journal of Communication, we receive a very large number of articles submitted, written by people who are working from within cultural studies rather than social studies or indeed media studies. And the prevailing tone of those is not especially critical in the sense of related to a materialist critique of culture in any way. It's surprisingly often celebratory of the growth of corporate activity and consumerism and the like.

Jernej: Why do you think it's like that? The Birmingham school that you were mentioning after all started from Marxism and Marx and also from this materialist approach to cultural studies. Why do you think this huge shift appeared? Was it a shift or was it just a specific period, with the cultural studies mainstream before and after that?

Peter: I think more the latter. I think most of the people – the names you would now be familiar with, who grew out of that period, of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – were mostly not social scientists, they were humanities scholars. They were enormously erudite and creative, but not particularly rooted in a materialist or a structural or societal analysis, because that wasn't their intellectual formation. What they did, I think very heroically and importantly, was to rescue the study of popular culture and of working class culture as a major focus of necessary study, whereas humanities scholarship up until then have been rooted very much in a sort of prevailing, dominant, particularly middle class or upper class canon. They also interrogated and expanded the range of behaviour and activities embraced by 'culture' in extremely important and valuable ways.

So what it did, in focusing on working class culture, on popular television, on popular newspapers and so on, was to create a whole new area of study. And it did that with a very self-conscious, Marxist flavoured and influenced understanding of the power and potential of working class culture. But it was a moment. An important moment and a lengthy moment, but nonetheless... When the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies ceased to be influential and then of course ceased to exist at all, and that's nearly a generation ago, while cultural studies has continued since then to be often very creative and important, but I would say the moment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Birmingham School – if there ever was a school – has passed.

Sašo: So how do you see the relationship between the truly critical materialist cultural studies and critical political economy of the media?

Peter: It was never as oppositional as it is sometimes portrayed. I mean, there was a period when you could read every week a new article on the distinction between cultural studies and critical political economy as though they were some kind of boxing opponents. It was never like that, because what they shared was enormously important, which was a profound belief in the importance of working class and radical culture, a profound distrust and critique of the growing corporate power of major media corporations, and a profound critique of the content, of the substance, of the prevailing cultural forms of the major newspapers and popular television. So all of that was common ground and I don't think there was ever that huge, major opposition.

But the difference – and it was an important one – was in how to analyse those things and what to do as a consequence. And I think it was often argued within cultural studies that a very important place to start – and they did it supremely well often – was in the analysis of popular response in consumption, in audiences, whereas critical political economy was not always best in doing that work. But I don't think there was any fundamental analytical difference in understanding those things. The danger for cultural studies became that its focus on consumption became a celebration of consumption and the old cliché that 'A thousand housewives can't be wrong' ... Well, it was never quite all that naïve, of course, but nonetheless it left cultural studies with no very adequate understanding of the problem of ideology that we mentioned earlier. And Stuart Hall, who was interested in a creative development of a Gramscian analysis, was the exception rather than the rule. I he and one or two other people, were working against the grain. It wasn't where most of cultural studies was going.

Jernej: I found it very interesting when I read an interview with Dallas Smythe, which was done at the start of the 1990s, where he was asked about this relationship with cultural studies, and he basically says that he sees this as a very important critical approach, which has a lot of similarities with political economy. But after that, basically throughout the 1990s, it was portrayed as a hugely antagonistic relationship. I mean, materialist cultural studies and political economy have much more in common, as you say, than the things that would separate them for example. One would focus on production and the other one more on consumption, and these are just different moments in the capitalist accumulation process that both have to be analysed.

Peter: I agree with that entirely. I mean, when people like Dallas Smythe, who was after all writing in an environment where cultural studies was not *that* developed ... I mean there never was and hasn't ever been a major cultural studies – of left or right, of radical critique or of conservative tenor – in the United States or Canada. Some, but not very much. And you are quite right to say there is more in common than there is difference between them.

I'm not sure I would entirely agree with the idea that cultural studies has predominantly been interested in consumption and critical political economy in production. Actually, if you look at the work that they do, that is not the distinction between them and it never was. So I think the sort of commentary from outside, 'Here are these kind of warring gangs, one called cultural studies and one called political economy,' was not how those of us in the ring ever experienced it, and it never really felt like that.

You asked me earlier about the people who had influenced me throughout my career and I would certainly put Stuart Hall amongst the three or four names of the people whose work I found most enormously helpful and influential. I think many people in cultural studies ... I remember Angela McRobbie, for example, who is of course an important central figure in those early days of the Centre for the Contemporary Cultural Studies. I appointed her to a position in my social science department when I was at Loughborough University and we worked very well together and remain good friends. It's the cliché that some of my best friends are cultural studies people and I think that, you're right, we have much more in common than it is sometimes apparent from the outside.

Sašo: So could you say that materialist cultural studies have more in common with critical political economy than they have with affirmative cultural studies?

Peter: Probably. (*laughter*) Well, one can oversimplify it, but if you look at the actually existing cultural studies, what people actually are interested in, and you say: 'Why are you studying twenty people using Facebook?' ... It's rare that someone from a cultural studies perspective would say it's because they're enormously interested in the growth of this megacorporation called Facebook, which now owns massive amounts of private data and it's related to politics and economics, or the development of communications corporations ... That's not what drives cultural studies. So I think there is a difference in motivation if you like, or underpinning interest or purpose, between what goes on within cultural studies now, and what goes on in critical political economy now. But where there is common interest and common purpose, why is it called critical cultural studies – analysts want to analyse, let's say, popular cultural consumption – it's because they believe that it is related to this question, which we posed earlier, about people's apparent willingness to accept huge and

growing amounts of inequality, where they are themselves the least well favoured. And how do we explain that? I don't know the answer, but I do know that many people that work within cultural studies are hugely interested and appalled by that question and struggling to try and develop an understanding.

Jernej: How did you observe these debates in the 1990s, which tried to basically *promote* the antagonism between these two approaches? And then we will finish with this question ...

Peter: (*laughter*) Yes.

Jernej: For example Graham [Murdock] tried to intervene in this debate as well, to find a middle ground, while [Nicholas] Garnham and [Lawrence] Grossberg were on completely separate sides...

Peter: Yes, but those are rare occasions. Yes, Graham [Murdock] developed that fascinating dialogue with Dallas Smythe that you may be referring to, and then I edited a book with Marjorie Ferguson, which was about cultural studies. And I had a fascinating private dialogue with Stuart Hall about that book, because it was always intended to focus on strengths as well as the weaknesses – as we saw them – of cultural studies. It wasn't a sort of massive onslaught and certainly not intended to be – and I hope not really understood to be ... But that period, when there was this apparent antagonism between cultural studies and political economy, was partly artificially manufactured and certainly very ephemeral. I wouldn't now see it historically as crucially what that story has been about. I think your point earlier, about there being more in common than to separate them, is the important one.

And the real worry now is how whether it's cultural studies or let's say social critical political economy, that both are in minority positions within the general study of media and communications.

Jernej: But he saw – you were talking about Stuart Hall – he saw that edited volume as an attack on cultural studies?

Peter: I think he did, at the time when he was understandably quite sensitive to critique about cultural studies. Not just from within academia, of course, I mean, we would need to get into the details of the sort of micro-politics of what was going on in, for example, the University of Birmingham.

So I think he was understandably and rightly worried about any apparent critique. But many of the contributors to that book were of course themselves people working from within cultural studies and what they were trying to do was evolve and develop cultural studies, not critique it ... Or critique it in a constructive and positive way. And I have to say that beyond that moment dialogue was much more amicable and constructive.

Jernej: What was the influence of Margaret Thatcher, when she came into power, on academia? I mean, did her government have any influence on it? If I remember correctly, the Birmingham School was under fierce attack?

Peter: Yes. There's always been both a helpful and an unhelpful gap between British intellectual and academic life and British political life. There isn't much traffic of peo-

ple between them. So I mean, I would say the influence of government policy now on British academic life is much more profound and damaging – and frankly quite frightening – than it ever was under Margaret Thatcher. If you wanted me to summarise what Margaret Thatcher did to British society ... Well, I'm not sure I could do it very quickly, but I don't think academia was a major target. The professions generally were a target, certainly, including media professionals and academics, but also health professionals and educational professionals within the schools.

Margaret Thatcher was very sceptical about professional judgement and autonomy. But the changes that she made in terms of the re-marketization within society, the resurgence of a capitalist understanding of what I think you described earlier as a sort of normalisation of capitalist relations, was profound and influential and still is ... But I don't think the academy, universities, were a primary or major target.

Sašo: But she did introduce a simulation of market mechanisms into institutions of higher education, for example competing for funds, which is still going on and has become more and more entrenched.

Peter: Yes, you are right, but I would say those changes have been so marked in the last five or ten years – and even now – that there are people on the left in British academic life, who say 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to go back to the time of Margaret Thatcher', because now that seems like a quite comfortable social democratic position, compared to the intense and rapid marketization that is going on now. British universities are being hugely marketized since the massive growth of student tuition fees – we are not supposed to call them students, we're supposed to call them customers – and it's a simple market relationship: the customer buys a product. The product is the university education or perhaps more correctly accreditation, which gives you a licence into the marketplace, the labour marketplace. We academics are the providers of that product.

Not long ago I sat in a discussion about a new university teaching programme that was being introduced, but what we were discussing was called 'product development' and it took me a little while to realize that's what discussion was about. 'Product development' was the phrase being used; the biggest department in many universities now is the marketing department. The minister for higher education four or five years ago said that the most important thing for universities to understand now is that they are in the private sector, they are not in the public sector. They are selling a product to consumers. The consumers are students and their products have to be audited, which is why we have something called The Research Excellence Framework or The Research Assessment Exercise, as it used to be called. We're now getting a teaching equivalent, where employers and consumers – students as we used to call them – have to audit the product that they're buying. And it's a very expensive product they're buying.

Fees as you probably know are going up very fast, quite commonly now they are about ten thousand euros per year and it will rise for the undergraduate level, whereas I think it is still free here in Slovenia – but not for postgraduates – and that is an enormous change. It's also the case that in many countries undergraduate programmes are being required to become much more 'market friendly', as the phrase is used. I was in Finland not very long ago, where they are being told that all their undergraduate programmes, in every single module, must demonstrate how they are vocationally useful, how they can be applied directly and immediately in the marketplace outside, beyond universities.

So I think these changes and I won't say a lot more – but there is a lot more going on in British university life – have accelerated very, very fast over the past five or ten years. Margaret Thatcher had sown the seeds, for sure, but the most important changes, I'm sad to say, were under the last Labour government, seven or eight years ago, and they have accelerated massively in the last five or six years, since we've had a Conservative government.

Sašo: Who was it again that said how Tony Blair was the greatest achievement of Margaret Thatcher?

Peter: Margaret Thatcher said that! (*laughter*). 'My greatest achievement was New Labour and Tony Blair.' New Labour in fact, as it became to be known, is a form of Thatcherism. Well it was Margaret Thatcher's greatest 'achievement' and she had the insight to know that and say it. And it's clearly true. This is not an interview about current British politics, but clearly the debate going on – if one can call it a debate – within the British labour party now, is a debate between the inheritance of that Margaret Thatcher creation, New Labour, which is essentially another form of The Conservative Party, and the remnants of a social democratic party – not even a socialist party – which is formed around the current leader of The Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. But at the moment clearly it's a minority movement.

But as far as that relates to academic policy, it's to do with a notion of students-as-customers, universities as private institutions. The government has just published a policy paper – we call it a Green Paper, which is a set of proposals of what will happen to our university education system – and one of its main proposals is the introduction of what are called alternative providers, which is to say private institutions, who charge fees, make profits and will be allowed to call themselves universities. And this is seen as an important innovation both in itself and also as a challenge to the old style public universities, the currently existing universities. So there are enormous changes going on in British academia and I think Margaret Thatcher was only the beginning of that. It's happened mostly in the past four, five or six years.

Sašo: So how do you see the impact on teaching and research? Because I imagine that if the common assumption in the University has become 'We must teach the students for the labour market', it then becomes weird if you have people doing Marxist research ...

Peter: There aren't many. (*laughter*)

Sašo: ... critically researching this same relationship that universities seemingly accept unquestioningly.

Peter: Yes, all of that is correct. The answer is that there is less and less critical research being done and the worry is that this will continue to be more true. Universities are very keen to demonstrate that their research is valued and useful and in the last Research Assessment Exercise – the most recent one was in 2014 – the research undertaken by universities was assessed in part on something called 'its impact', which has never been true before. And what is meant by 'impact' is its application in the wider society. So the best way you could score points was to show that your research had been adopted by a private company, and the perfect model for research would be: you the researcher work in a laboratory, you invent a piece of

machinery, the company then licences it and sells it, they make a lot of money, you make a lot of money and you've acted as the research and development wing of British industry. That is the perfect model and that is what is valued.

I was until recently a Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research, which meant I was a university research manager for research across all disciplines, not just my own. And in not my most recent university, but the previous one, I remember having a meeting with the research director of a very large private corporation, who offered me a very simple syllogism, which he absolutely believed: 'We pay taxes, taxes pay for universities, universities should do research for us', was his little syllogism. Now, I didn't like to point out, but at least two of those three arguments are simply empirically wrong.

Jernej: ...Because they don't pay taxes.

Peter: (*laughter*) Exactly. They don't pay as much tax as they should and taxes don't pay for universities. (*laughter*) However, we didn't get into an argument about that, because there was no irony in there and that was his simple view: that the purpose of university research was to act as a subsidized research and development component of British industry and commerce. That is a common view and it's a view commonly held by many senior university managers too. That the way to receive acclaim is to do the kind of research that you and I would probably describe as applied or uncritical, which is increasingly what is funded.

If you get money to do research from a national Research Council in the UK, you have to demonstrate what are called Pathways to Impact, meaning how will the research be applied, how will it be used. And the best thing you can do is to get a large employer or industry to say: 'Yes, this is the research we've been waiting for, we will help them with it and they are working with us to do it'. That's the perfect model.

So your question, 'How is it possible to continue to do critical or theoretical or useless research', is that ... with difficulty. There is not much of it and there is less and less.

Sašo: So if you say for example: 'This research will help unions to call a massive general strike and bring down the system', that's not really considered an impact? (*laughter*)

Peter: I wouldn't recommend it. (*laughter*)

Sašo: But to give a less controversial example: 'That it will help', I don't know, 'the BBC to provide a better service to citizens', that's not on the same level as if you say, 'This will help to increase the profits of a private corporation'?

Peter: Yes. (*laughter*) That is correct. How you formulate your research funding application is a very great skill that researchers are learning and of course in learning how to articulate the purpose of research in those terms, those terms can become normalized again: that the researcher begins to think that way. And the successful researcher of course is the one who is most successful in applying those kinds of norms. So it's a self-fulfilling prophecy that the most successful researchers, who probably then become major research entrepreneurs and university managers, are the people who most successfully digested that kind of an approach to research in the first place.

Jernej: Do you find it odd that especially after the 1990s critical scholars, who were always a minority, as you pointed out – but that so many of them have turned away from this critical approach and internalized this logic? For example in critical media scholarship, Nicholas Garnham, who was a true Marxist so to say and he very much says the opposite things now, that the market should actually be taken for granted ... Do you find it odd that so many people have turned away from it?

Peter: Well I'm not sure how true that is, I mean, you mentioned Nick Garnham, who of course is now retired and no longer has a university position, who's always been something of an intellectual maverick ... Which is not meant to be disrespectful, I think it's an indication of a particularly independent manner of thinking and of course he was a practitioner before he became an academic. I don't think he would argue that his enthusiasm for markets has turned him into a kind of Thatcherite market entrepreneur. I think his impatience is often with what he sees as the limited understanding of people on the so-called Marxist left. I don't think he would himself say that he's given up all that kind of radical critique, quite the opposite. He would argue that the radical critique has itself become ineffective and short-sighted. What he is doing is, he's standing still, while other people are oscillating. Now I can't speak for him, so that wouldn't be fair, but I don't think he's typical. There is a common assumption that people move to the right in the course of their biography. I don't think that's generally true for most critical political economists working within sociology or media studies that I'm familiar with. It's just that there never were many of them and now there still are few of them.

Jernej: How would you describe yourself? Would it be possible to do something like that? I mean, also in a historical sense, if you could do something like an autobiography?

Peter: That's very difficult. I certainly ... I hope I haven't sort of drifted to the right as it were. What many people on the left in Britain – whether in the academic world or elsewhere – feel is they have stood still and the rest of the world has moved right. So people who once thought of themselves as quite middle or moderate or not particularly politically radical, suddenly find the world seem to have gone so far to the right and left them looking like radical revolutionaries. I'm not sure I feel that. I mean, although one is sometimes embarrassed a little bit to read things you wrote twenty, thirty or even forty years ago, there is nothing in any of that work I would say that I have changed my mind completely now.

Like most people on the intellectual academic left in Britain, I've always worked also outside of the universities. This is where Graham [Murdock] and I differ a bit, not because we have a different way of working: My own interest is primarily in social policy, so I've often worked with welfare and poverty groups and the like and there certainly was a time – I guess in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps even up to 2000s – when I was doing as much of that as I was doing within the university. I was being politically active in a way that simply took a lot of time and was a major focus. That has changed, I don't do that much of it now. But that is a change in personal energy rather than attitude or political vision.

It's always better that other people make these judgements, it's difficult to write your own biography, but I don't think intellectually or analytically I have changed very much. I hope I've learned something (*laughter*), but the starting point remains much the same, which is the one I articulated earlier: I remain as fascinated and worried

now, as I was forty years ago, by that big question: ‘How is it that we live in a society with such huge inequalities and we’re not living through a revolution?’ How is that possible? How is it that people who can barely – even in a rich society, like mine – who don’t have enough food, whose children don’t have clothes, who die ten years earlier than people who live in the wealthier parts of the country, who have constant health problems for which there are no public services and so on and so on ... How is all that possible? And yet they vote for UKIP [The UK Independence Party], which is the English nationalist anti-immigrant party, or they vote Conservative? Why do people accept or even acclaim an inegalitarian structure in which they are themselves so much the losers? That is for me still a fundamental question and I don’t have an answer. I do know, I’m sure, the media are an important, probably central part of understanding that.

Sašo: How do you think we can find the answer, which approaches are the best suited for finding it? What kind of research is best suited to answer this question?

Peter: Well, research that starts with that question is the answer. I’d like to think empirical political economy – I think it needs research, by which I mean intellectual as well as out in the field type of research – is needed trying to understand that. For example there are probably two beginning explanations in my own country: One is that there isn’t a political vehicle to articulate a radical critique, so that The Labour Party and now the current Labour Party and New Labour – and all of that – has never been a vehicle for a radical critique. Ralph Miliband, the father of the last leader of the labour party, Ed Miliband, was a Belgian-born political scientist and Marxist, who wrote some wonderful books including analysis of why the British Labour Party will never in his judgement be a vehicle for democratic socialism. And those books and their analysis have never seemed more apposite than now, in the second decade of the 21st century. So one side of the argument is there seems to be no political vehicle articulating a radical critique to which people can respond or at least listen.

And secondly, the media, of course. People’s cultural environment, if we take the BBC, the main commercial broadcasters, the main national press – most of which is owned by a very small number of major, often overseas located, corporate dominant entrepreneurs – articulates a consistent critique of *anything* mildly radical or critical of the current dominant British political culture. So the question is sometimes asked: ‘How is it even possible we ever had a Labour government, never mind something to the left, which is almost unthinkable’?

So part of the answer to your question is research that shows, how there is an absence of certain kinds of critical ideology – there is neither in political discourse nor in media discourse any kind of popular analysis, radical critical analysis, of currently prevailing political and economic conditions. So it’s not surprising there is no mass movement around those critical analyses, because they don’t exist.

Jernej: You already described yourself as a political economist – as well as other things of course – so what would you say are the main constituents of this approach to studying media and communication? What are its key aspects?

Peter: I think firstly – not in order of priority – it has a historical perspective. It understands the evolution of media and communications, certainly within the understanding of the evolution of capitalism. That’s a necessary starting point.

Secondly, I would describe myself as *critical* political economist and by critical I don't just mean negative about current conditions, I mean critical in the sense of being related to *critique*, to having a theoretical understanding of that which is being analysed.

Thirdly, I think it has a moral dimension, it clearly has a sense of some things being better and some things being worse. It starts with a question about the lack of ability of popular discourse to evolve a critique for example. It starts with the enormous axiomatic understanding that the concentration of power, represented by current prevailing media conditions, is and ought to be open to challenge and has negative consequences. So there is certainly a moral dimension to critical political economy.

And perhaps fourthly, that it is axiomatically understood that there is a relationship – a problematic and complex relationship – between culture and material conditions. It's not a simple base-superstructure relationship, but nonetheless it's not one that says culture operates autonomously. Clearly an understanding of the material conditions, within which culture is produced, distributed and consumed, is necessary to understand how that culture works.

At least those four conditions are necessary parts of a critical political economy. Whether they sufficiently define it, I'm not sure, but it should at least manifest those.

Jernej: This is something I wanted to ask you earlier, when you were talking about materialism. What is your understanding of materialism, when you say that something is materialist? Does for example this matrix of base and superstructure still hold some relevance? You were writing on this issue together with Graham Murdock in the chapter that we recently translated into Slovene¹ ...

Peter: Some relevance, yes. I mean, it's been much criticized and written about, of course. And I don't have a simple formula, which explains my own understanding of how the base and superstructure model should or does work, nor a simple definition of materialism. Except to say that, when I use that as a shorthand, that what I'm really saying – as I said about critical political economy – I cannot begin to understand or analyse the transmission or production of content of culture, without a necessary understanding of the material conditions. By material conditions I mean both market and workplace conditions, what are the prevailing distribution and control of resources.

Jernej: Basically relations of production?

Peter: Certainly relations of production, but not only relations of production. But without understanding those, I cannot begin to understand the content of British newspapers or the output of broadcasters and so on. I have to know something about the relations of production, but also the contextual market conditions, in order to begin to understand and explain what those cultural substances are and why they are the way they are.

¹ We are referring to the text "Ideology and the Mass Media: The Question of Determination", which was first published as part of the edited volume *Ideology and Cultural Production* (edited by M. Barrett, P. Corrigan, A. Kuhn and J. Wolff), published in 1978 by Croom Helm in London.

Jernej: Political economy is often still described as being deterministic and reductionist. How do you answer, when someone says something like that to you ...

Peter: I think it's a caricature, I never understood that critique. Well, I've understood it, but I've always felt it was utterly unrelated to actually existing critical political economy. To come back to biography, take the example of Graham Murdock and myself: Most of our research has always been about the complex relationships of production, how journalists work, how teachers work, how in my case people working in the welfare system operate. I had never read any worthwhile political economy of the media, which – as it were – *reads off* the content or substance of media products from an analysis of the mere material conditions, in a way that suggests it's determined. Determinant only in the sense of setting limits, but not determined.

Jernej: Relative autonomy?

Peter: Yeah, *relative* autonomy, but the argument that if you know the material conditions, you know the inevitable and necessary and determined output, is not a claim I have ever seen in any worthwhile political economy. It's a caricature.

Jernej: But it's pretty ironic that in a time when neoliberal doctrine has been so influential – I mean, basically everything has been integrated into the market, it really determines so many things – that there is still this caricature, as you say, about determinism and reductionism ... When the market *really* is determining and reducing so many things to its very *particular* logic.

Peter: I think that's right and I think behind it is the remarkable success – ideologically – of the equation of free market with liberty. That is to say, if market conditions prevail, there is almost infinite choice for infinite people; and therefore what many democratic socialists would wish for – the infinite opportunity for people to live life as they would wish to – is best created by free market conditions, obviously bracketing out *completely* the nature of market conditions, which don't allow equal participation of or access to either knowledge or resources. As we saw in my lecture yesterday, if you look at the growing cost and price of being an informed citizen, with the growing unequal material resources people have to get those resources, then it's a very simple conclusion: the free market does not exist, it never has and it has never been less free than in most capitalist societies now. So the ideological triumph of neo-liberalism is precisely to make all of that critique invisible.

Sašo: How important do you think the Marxist approach is to critical political economy?

Peter: Well this is a big one, I had this discussion with Christian [Fuchs] of course ... It depends on what you mean. If we're talking about classic Marxism, you know, as developed in Britain a century and a half ago, of course it needs to be adapted and evolved. And many people have worked hard to do that over many decades. I think that it is important and powerful and necessary work to be done. If you mean by 'Marxist work' work produced by Marx, *je ne suis pas marxiste*, you know the classic sort of notion that Marxism is not what Marx wrote, Marxism is what was created by people later, then it's a difficult question to answer. I think if we use Marxism as a kind of shorthand for political materialism, for a materialist understanding of cultural

production and consumption, for a critical political economy, then the answer to your question is: absolutely vital. If you mean something much narrower: Marxism as produced by Marx, then of course it needs to be hugely developed and evolved. But the primary insights – into the importance of the evolution of capitalism, the importance of the circulation of capital and so on – remain powerful and important. And I totally applaud the efforts of people like Christian Fuchs to develop and evolve and apply the insights of Marxism. But I think it's the development, the application and the evolution that's important. There isn't some – heaven forbid – some kind of necessity to sort of preserve intact an intellectual legacy from over century ago, that would be a mistake. We aren't conservationists; that would be a crazy thing to do.

Sašo: I think Friedrich Engels already warned that Marx's writing should not be used as a substitute for research.

Peter: Exactly.

Jernej: I'll be a little provocative and this is back to the previous question ... In the seventies you would probably describe yourself as a Marxist, would you still be willing to say so?

Peter: I was always worried then about what that meant.

Jernej: Labelling?

Peter: Because to be a Marxist meant what? Did it mean you subscribe to some kind of particular political creed? I mean, obviously not. Marxist only then – with a small 'm' – in the sense of trying to construct something different from the prevailing, fairly anti-Marxist and certainly non-Marxist, growing media and cultural analysis. So the labels wouldn't worry me too much. I don't think I would describe myself as a Marxist, but only because I think the label is so imprecise. It's not that I would want to argue very clearly 'I'm not a Marxist because of one ... two ... three'. If it's a shorthand and imprecise label then I have no problems with it, but I think it is actually very imprecise and dynamic at any given moment ... What do we mean by Marxism? It's – broadly speaking – an analysis, which makes certain kind of axiomatic assumptions about the importance of material condition, of the evolution of capitalism and so on. And I subscribe to all of those axioms. Whether they add up to something that then says 'Well that that means you're Marxist', I'm not sure that I know and I'm not sure I care either.

Jernej: Perhaps a question on the development of the political economy of communication approach. We could for example describe two important strands, the UK approach and the North American approach, with Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and of course Vincent Mosco. Do you think there are any considerable differences between these two approaches that could be detected?

Peter: Not really, I think the people you've mentioned were in many ways more European in their thinking. They were isolated individuals and they still are. The critical political economy section of American media scholarship has always been about ten people whose names we could all name. I mean, they could all sit around – and they *did* (*laughter*) – sit around a table and have a coffee with each other. It's not a

body of work in the sense of being a block, there are particular prevailing currents of thought, but if you look at the work of let's say Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky and the work of Herb Schiller and the work of Vinnie Mosco, or in another mode Bob McChesney ... These people were working quite separately from each other.

Herb is no longer with us, Dan Schiller has recently retired though he remains very active – his work I think is terrific, I'm a great fan and friend, but he's very different from Herb Schiller, his father, an enormously influential worker and writer. Herb – who was an economist by training, a finance economist really, a bit like Ed Herman – provided the kind of evidence that people found insufficient. If you look at the footnotes of Herb's work, 90% of them are clippings from the New York Times or whatever and it was a style of work that I thought was imaginative, inventive, influential and important, but very different from the kind of work done by Dan Schiller. Vincent Mosco is perhaps closer to the European style of work, not least because he's written so much about it as a historian of political economy. Janet Wasko, another Europhile, working mainly on the film industry, but although based in the Western United States, is very often in Europe.

But this begins to be almost sort of biographical, that's the nature of the beast, I think, of the critical political economy of media in America. I think between the three of us we can probably come up with about ten names and that almost is it. So they wouldn't claim to be a dominant or coherent single body of work. I don't think it's even been like that in the United States, more so in Europe, but only to a point.

Sašo: Would you say the researchers in Northern America were more focused on commercial media and the impact of advertising, did this situation have an influence? I mean in Europe, there are strong public service broadcasters, while in Northern America the environment is almost completely commercial, would you agree there was a difference in the focus because of that?

Peter: Yes, I suppose that is inevitable. Whereas public service broadcasters – not least the BBC – loom very large in our consciousness, public service broadcasting really doesn't exist in a significant, or a powerful and important way in the United States, therefore that particular approach was not enormously important to critical political economists. They're often more interested in what we talked about earlier: the relations of production. People like Vinnie Mosco, again, he is very interested in the labour unions and their role in the media production. That has often been a quite important aspect of the work of people working in the United States. They have invaluable added a historical perspective, understanding for example the declining and relatively unimportant role of public regulations, the FCC [The Federal Communications Commission], in not having an influence on communications that equivalent bodies have had in Europe. I think they are aware of this European media history as often being for them a sort of touchstone for the analysis of the political economy of media. Yes, the different historical conditions have had an impact on the way they analyse the media, for sure.

So there is a different emphasis and it is partly shaped by the conditions of American higher education, but partly by different conditions of the newspaper and broadcasting market, inevitably. And the film industry has been – I would say – more important to them, because obviously of the importance of Hollywood, than it has to European media researchers, including ... There aren't many critical political economy analyses of the European film and cinema market, which is a shame, but it's understandable, whereas if you look at the United States some people have worked

on that. Inevitably, because Hollywood has been so prominent in their thinking and in their experience.

Jernej: I would like to end this interview with another a little provocative question.

Peter: *(laughter)*

Jernej: With all that's been said and what you said in your lecture yesterday, do you think we live in a democracy ...

Peter: *(laughter)*.

Jernej: ...or not? Colin Crouch is for example writing about post-democracy and so on. What's your view on that?

Peter: Well, I don't think it's a question that can be answered by a yes or no. But if by democracy we mean society in which political, social and economic conditions are determined by the mass of the population making collective and informed decisions, then of course the answer would have to be no. And less and less so. Because we're back to the question I keep repeating, which is the one that continues to keep me awake at nights, which is: 'Why do people applaud and acclaim and support or – at the very best – at least not critique a society in which they are materially and culturally and politically the losers'? And I ask that question, because it is the case that we live in hugely unequal societies, which are in most of Western Europe and in United States becoming more unequal and yet the critique of that inequality, a challenge to it, is less and less evident. So if all of that is true, then it would suggest that if we live in a democracy, it's not a very efficient or effective one.

The answer to your question, if you force me to say yes or no, is more likely to be 'No'. But if I'm allowed to be a little evasive, I would say 'By and large on the whole no and it could be a great deal more democratic than it is'.

Sašo: Can critical scholarship change this situation or contribute to changing it? And if it can, how?

Peter: Contribute, yes. Certainly not on its own. I think it is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. One of the things that worries me – to go back to an earlier question about changes in the, if you like, the political economy of higher education, in my own country especially, but I see it happening in many other countries too – is the containment and elimination of radical critique. And if universities are not places where radical critique is possible and allowed to be articulated and injected into public debate, then where is? I think in any democratic or civilized society, it's absolutely essential that critique is possible, free and made available to the mass of the population.

So, number one: you need universities that can do, undertake, and wish to do radical critique. Number two: you need the means of communication, so that those critiques don't remain just within the universities. They need to be present in publicly consumed and popularly consumed communication vehicles. Now, neither of those conditions are fulfilled in most European societies and my worry is that they're getting worse rather than better. So the answer to your question is, 'Academic critique is an

important and necessary and at the moment rather threatened part of the critique of the way in which political conditions prevail’.

One thing I’m currently doing, if I’m allowed to just mention this: The European Communication Research and Education Association, ECREA, has – largely as a result of my persuasion, I have to say – set up a task force to look at changes in the funding and support of media research across Europe, in different countries. And the reason for doing that is because of the worry that in many countries, including international, research funding, for the example by the EU, of critical and theoretically informed political economy research is becoming less and less supported, with administrative, applied and uncritical research becoming more common, including industrial and pragmatic ‘administrative’ research. Now that’s why we set up the task force, to see if that is true or is it not. My belief is that it is true and I’m attempting now, with the help of many others, including Professor Slavko Splichal here, to try and document that, and of course the purpose of documenting it is in order to say: ‘It shouldn’t be like this and we must try and do something about it’.

So, sorry, that’s a very long answer to a very simple, but important question. Academic critique can be, and my worry is, is *not currently*, a necessary part of producing that widely available critique of the conditions in which we live.

Sašo: So if a young Marx said that the critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique, could we say today that the critique of the existing university is the prerequisite of critique?

Peter: Yes, yes. I think there is a danger that without critique of, let’s say the conditions of intellectual production, then intellectual production whether it’s at universities or anywhere else, becomes very narrow, constrained and probably ideologically homogeneous. So there have to be conditions allowing for continuous and comprehensive critique of both higher education and indeed religion – and indeed any other form of ideological production.