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1. CULTURAL THEORY: An Introduction

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Introduction:
What is Culture? What is Cultural Theory?

At the start of any text it can be useful to define the central concept. In the case of "culture" this has proven to be surprisingly, even notoriously, difficult. According to one expert, Raymond Williams, "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language ... because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct systems of thought" (1976: 76–7). An illustration of this diversity is the fact that, writing way back in the 1950s, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) were already able to assemble an astonishing number of definitions of culture from popular and academic sources. Tracing these diverse understandings provides an important way to delimit the scope of our inquiry.

In its early uses in English, culture was associated with the "cultivation" of animals and crops and with religious worship (hence the word "cult"). From the sixteenth century until the nineteenth the term began to be widely applied to the improvement of the individual human mind and personal manners through learning. This was a metaphorical extension of the idea of improving land and farming practices. For this reason we can still speak of someone as being "cultured" or, if they are uncouth, as "having no culture." During this period, the term began to refer also to the improvement of society as a whole, with culture being used as a value-laden synonym for "civilization." A typical usage of the time might compare the nations of Europe that had "culture" with the "barbarism" of Asia. Such an expression would have included technological differences as well as those of morals and manners. However, with the rise of Romanticism in the Industrial Revolution, culture began to be used to designate spiritual development alone and to contrast this with material and infrastructural change. Along with Romantic nationalism in the late nineteenth century, there came inferences which accentuated tradition and everyday life as dimensions...
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of culture. These were captured in the ideas of "folk culture" and "national culture," which emerged around this time.

According to Williams (1976: 80), these various historical shifts are dimly reflected in the three current uses of the term "culture."

1. To refer to the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development of an individual, group, or society.

2. To capture a range of intellectual and artistic activities and their products (film, art, theater). In this usage culture is more or less synonymous with "the Arts," hence we can speak of a "Minister for Culture."

3. To designate the entire way of life, activities, beliefs, and customs of a people, group, or society.

Until very recently the first and second of these uses were the most common, and more often syncretized with intellectual and aesthetic concerns. Critics like Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and E. R. Leavis used the term to refer to works of high art which could educate, edify, and improve those who came into contact with them. Arnold, for example, wrote that culture was "a pursuit of partial perfection by means of getting to know...the best which has been thought and said in the world...culture is, or ought to be, the study or pursuit of perfection...sweetness and light...an assured condition of mind and spirit" (quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 29). The German concept of Kultur also tapped into this theme by broadly equating culture with civilization and with individual or collective moral progress. Such uses are often highly value-laden and elitist, seeking to validate artistic products that experts and dominant social groups consider as important or interesting. The third usage of culture was championed by many anthropologists in the first part of the century and remains central to that discipline today. It is an interpretation that is more neutral and analytic. It asserts that "culture" is to be found everywhere and not just in the high arts or in Western "civilization."

In their study of the meanings of "culture," the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) centered their attentions on this last field. They collected an incredible number of academic definitions of culture, most of them by other anthropologists. Although there was a good deal of overlap between the various definitions, they managed to identify six main understandings.

1. Descriptive definitions tend to see culture as a comprehensive totality making up the sum of social life and to list the various fields making up culture. An influential starting point for this understanding was a definition by Tylor from 1871. He suggested that: "Culture or civ-

2. Historical definitions tended to see culture as a heritage which is passed on over time through the generations. For example, in 1921 Park and Burgess wrote: "The culture of a group is the sum total and organization of the social heritages that it has acquired a social meaning because of racial temperament and of the historical fate of the group" (quoted in ibid.: 47).

3. Normative definitions. These could take two forms. The first suggested culture was a rule or way of life that shaped patterns of concrete behavior and action. For example: "The mode of life followed by the community or by the tribe is regarded as a culture...the aggregates of standardized beliefs and practices followed by this tribe" (Whorf, quoted in ibid.: 50). The second form emphasized the role of values without reference to behavior. W. I. Thomas, for example, suggested in 1931 that culture was "the material and social values of any group of people, whether savages or civilized" (ibid.: 53).

4. Psychological definitions of culture emphasized its role as a problem-solving device, allowing people to communicate, learn, or fulfill material and emotional needs.

5. Structural definitions pointed to the "organized interrelation of the isolable aspects of culture" (ibid.: 61) and highlighted the fact that culture was an abstraction that was different from concrete behavior. In this respect such definitions could be contrasted with those which simply listed the things that were culture and made no distinction between the ideal and the behavioral (e.g., that of Tyler given above).

6. Genetic definitions defined culture in terms of how it came to exist or continued existing. Some had little to do with biology, but rather explained culture as arising from human interaction or continuing to exist as the product of inter-generational transmission.

While all of these definitions have remained current in the half-century since Kroeber and Kluckhohn's work, understandings of culture have shifted in subtle ways within the field of cultural theory. Insofar as it is possible to isolate a core usage today, it revolves around the following themes.

- Culture tends to be opposed to the material, technological, and social structural. While it is recognized there may be complex empirical relations between them, it is also argued that we need to understand culture
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Looking back at William's discussion, this prevailing understanding combines the anti-essentialism, value-neutrality, and relativism of the anthropologist that are derived from nineteenth-century idealist and Romantic philosophy. It can also be seen as an emergent product of developments in cultural theory itself, especially the works of Parsons and subsequent innovations from structuralism, poststructuralism, and hermeneutics (we come to these later on in this text), which emphasized the autonomy of culture from other aspects of social life. From yet another point of view, this definition can be seen as drawing upon trends that were nascent at the time that Kroeber and Kluckhohn conducted their reckoning. It builds in particular from the second "normative" definition and on the "structural" definition. In combination these highlighted the way that culture was an abstract, organized, ideal system that needed to be distinguished from empirical behavior and custom. While they have been marginalized by this current trend, the "psychological" and "genetic" understandings of culture remain important for those in theoretical schools such as symbolic interactionism who wish to highlight the creative role of human actors. "Theory" is a word that is perhaps as difficult to define as "culture." We can defer to the dictionary here and define theory as "A supposition or system of ideas explaining something, especially one based on general principles independent of facts" (Concise Oxford English Dictionary 1980: 1:201). Theory, then, is more than a description of, or generalization about, the empirical world. Rather, it consists of abstract and systematically ordered understandings and models that can be used to account for what actually goes on in the world. "Cultural theory," the topic of this book, can be thought of as a literature aiming to develop such tools in a specific domain—explaining the nature of culture and its implications for social life. As we shall see, there is a broad and astonishingly diverse literature. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify three core issues that are absolutely pivotal to debates in the field and which provide an underlying thematic continuity.

- **Content.** Theories provide tools for understanding the make-up of culture. As we shall see, divergent traditions have understood culture as values, codes, narratives, ideologies, pathologies, discourses, and common sense as well as in many other ways. Each of these understandings has its own repercussions for interpreting the ways that culture works and how we should study it.
- **Social Implications.** Here theory is concerned with offering models of the influence that culture exerts on social structure and social life. Theorists attempt to explain the role of culture in providing stability, solidarity, and opportunity or in sustaining conflict, power, and inequality. Cultural theory also suggests divergent mechanisms through which this influence is channeled, ranging from individual-level socialization through to macro-level institutions and social systems.
- **Agency, self.** The connection between culture and the individual is what is at stake here. The most critical issue concerns the ways in which culture shapes human action. Some thinkers stress the constraining nature of culture, while others point to its ability to enable action. Issues relating to the cultural construction of the self, motivation, and identity are fundamental to both sets of arguments.

Throughout this text we will find these overlapping but analytically distinct themes taking a central role as theories are described and evaluated. Chapter 1 begins this exploration with a brief survey of the role of culture in what has come to be known as classical social theory.
CHAPTER ONE

Culture in Classical Social Theory

In a letter of 1675 the scientist Isaac Newton wrote: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." The point he was making was that his own contribution to knowledge would not have been possible without those of his intellectual predecessors. Likewise, contemporary cultural theory has been made possible by significant earlier work. Coming to an understanding of this foundation is therefore a step of great importance. While we could begin this process with a discussion of thinkers extending back through the Enlightenment and on to Ancient Greece, perhaps the most useful place to start is in the body of literature generally thought of as classical social theory, and more particularly the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. Many current debates are shot through with foundational themes, problems, and perspectives that originate in their works. As thinkers with powerful minds, these scholars provided a set of core concepts and tools that are still serviceable around a hundred years after they were developed. When they are not drawing directly upon them, current authors as likely as not are revising, refining, or critiquing lines of thinking that originated around this era or later. We forget history at our peril, and so knowledge of these resources provides an essential starting point and common ground for all cultural theorists. Many excellent texts already exist on the so-called "founding fathers." Consequently, this chapter does not pretend to offer a comprehensive introduction to their work, but rather it aims to briefly highlight some of the key concepts and themes in their approaches to culture.

Karl Marx

One of the greatest minds of the Victorian era, Karl Marx is generally thought of as an anticultural theorist. This is certainly the case when we focus on his historical materialist. Such a position is most clearly advocated in his late masterpiece Das Kapital (Capital), the first volume of which was published in 1867 (Marx 1956). Here Marx advocated what has become known as the base/superstructure model of society. According to this perspective, the real motor in capitalist society was the mode of production (very roughly the economy) that was concerned with providing for material needs. He identified as key aspects of this sphere the private ownership of the means of production (e.g., factories, machine technology) and a system of relations of production that pivoted around the exploitation of productive labor. Arising from these was a broader social structure organized around a class system. This divided society into owners and workers. Under this materialist understanding of industrial society, culture (along with politics and the law) was seen as an epiphenomenal superstructure built upon a determinate economic base. For Marx, culture in industrial society operates as a dominant ideology. This has several characteristics:

- It reflects the views and interests of the bourgeoisie (the ruling, capitalist class of owners) and serves to legitimate their authority.
- It arises from and expresses underlying relations of production. As Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto, "Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property" (1978: 487).
- It makes that which 'a conventional and socially constructed (e.g., wage labor, the commodity form) seem natural and inevitable. It transformed into 'eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms sprouting from [the]... present mode of production and form of property' (1978: 487).
- It engenders a mistaken or distorted view of reality. This condition, sometimes known as false consciousness, allows people to feel happy with their miserable lot. Religion, for example, was an "opacity" which prevented the formation of class consciousness (awareness of a common class identity and interests) among the proletariat (workers).

The broad perspective marked out in Capital and Marx's other writings remains foundational for writers in the tradition of critical cultural studies, whether or not they are specifically Marxist in orientation. To this day scholars writing from such a position suggest that we should read cultural forms as reflections of hidden interests and social forces. As a counter to the insidious power of ideology, the duty of the analyst is to expose distortions and reveal a more rational and true picture of the world - a process known as demystification.
Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx was born in Prussia and studied philosophy, languages, law, and history at university. He then worked as a journalist and was a member of a circle of Young Hegelians—a group of idealist intellectuals influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Hegel. His radical opinions attracted disapproval from the Prussian authorities, and he was accused of treason and sedition. During the 1840s he shifted from Hegelian idealism to a materialist position. He began to publish his major works and developed a lifelong friendship with Friedrich Engels, who was later to support him financially. Marx lived in Paris, Brussels, and eventually London. Here he spent much of his time reading in the library of the British Museum and writing in the area of history and political philosophy. When not engaged in his academic work, he assisted in the formation of the Communist movement. He died in March 1883.


The materialist Marx of "scientific socialism" that we find in Das Kapital is perhaps the best known. However, in his earliest pre-Hegelian writings, Marx provided indications of a more culturally sensitive vision of social life. Writing in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (also known as the Paris manuscripts), Marx (1976a) developed a more humanistic vision with an emphasis on the natural life of the subject. He spoke of species being as a form of solidarity toward which people aspire. He also wrote about alienation. This complex term had multiple meanings. Some were economic, referring to the objective exploitation of labor power (e.g., not being paid a fair wage) and the rise of the commodity. In other contexts, it refers to separation from fellow humans, sentiments of isolation, and an inability to live in a fulfilling community. Marx drew contrasts between the authentic life possible in organic and craft settings and the subjective alienation that was experienced under industrial capitalism. He suggested that with the arrival of consumption and the end of private property, there would once again be an alienation. Within the ideas of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts are often rather metaphorical and difficult to apply in empirical research; they have exerted a major influence on critical cultural theory (see chapter 1).

The great strength of Marx's thinking has been his ability to connect culture to power and economic life in systematic ways. The price of this, it is generally agreed, has been an inability to theorize the autonomy of culture and a tendency, especially in his later work, to view human action in a determinist framework. Under the Marxist vision the economy seems to drive both collective ideology and individual behavior with a clockwork precision. Marxist thought in the twentieth century massively elaborated upon the agenda he initiated whilst also attempting to move beyond a narrow mechanistic determinism. Efforts have been made to further explore the links between culture, class, and domination, but in ways that emphasize the centrality of the ideal as well as the material in maintaining capitalism. As we will see in chapter 3, the concepts of alienation and commodification have proven useful tools in this quest to think through the recipes that capitalism, human subjectivity, and ideological forces. More recently, post-Marxist critical theory has challenged the class-driven focus of traditional Marxism and argued that social divisions are centered on gender, sexuality, and race are equally important. We explore such alternatives in chapters 7, 9, and 14.

Emile Durkheim

For much of the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim was best known as an advocate of functionalism and positivism. This is the Durkheim who advocates "social facts," the systemic integration of society, and the need for objective data that tests laws and hypotheses. Yet an increasingly prominent way of thinking about him is as an advocate of cultural analysis. Central to this reading is Durkheim's insistence that society was very much a social phenomenon, held together by sentiments of solidarity. These played their part in ensuring the survival of a smoothly functioning, well-integrated society in which every piece had its role.

In his doctoral thesis, The Division of Labor in Society, Durkheim (1893) argued that simple and industrial societies were characterized by different kinds of solidarity. In the former, people were more alike and performed the same tasks. The result was mechanical solidarity. In industrial societies, by contrast, there was a division of labor and organic solidarity. Durkheim suggested that under mechanical solidarity people tended to think alike as they did the same work. There is little tolerance for deviance, and conformity is the norm. Within organic solidarity there is more tolerance for difference thanks to the role diversity that comes from the increased division of labor. Durkheim used the term collective conscience when talking about the shared moral awareness and emotional life in a society. According to Durkheim the collective conscience could be seen very clearly during the punishments of deviants. Such episodes documented collective outrage and were expensive as much as preserved in orientation. He argued that in societies with mechanical solidarity, punishments tended to be harsh and violent, whilst organic solidarity saw punishment aimed at the reintegration of the individual into the group.
Looking at the sweep of history, Durkheim suggested that although the increasing division of labor had opened up the potential for greater individual freedom and happiness, we have not managed this transition very well. He suggested that "assimilation had resulted. This is a situation of social dislocation where customary and cultural controls on action are no longer very strong. In his study of Suicide, Durkheim (1895:1897) looked at suicide data in order to document the social conditions under which an individual would experience anomie. He suggested that lack of social integration and rapid social change could be key factors in this process." The Division of Labour in Society and Suicide are similar in approach in that Durkheim argues for the centrality of social facts over individual will. These arguments mark a shift in thought from seeing group behavior as the result of individual motivations to seeing behavior as the result of collective action and collective consciousness. Durkheim suggested that sentiments, norms, and behaviors could be explained away as social facts that were linked to the objective features of society like social organization, societal differentiation, and social change. There is a tendency toward rationalism here which undercuts his emphasis on the social and normative aspects of social life. Thus to say that sentiments and beliefs, like other dimensions of the social, are accounted for as a response to social structural forms and needs. In particular they lead to work to generate social order and social integration. This vision of a stable society made up of mutually reinforcing institutions, sentiments, and roles is known as functionalism. In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim (1968 [1915]) turned to the study of religion in order to explain processes of social integration. Some scholars have argued that this late book is less reductionist than his earlier work. Durkheim sees religious views as a set of general phenomena that needs to be explained on its own terms. Consequently, he produces a picture of culture as a dynamic and motivating force in society rather than as simply a response to social needs for organization and harmony. Durkheim claimed that all religions revolved around a distinction between the sacred and the profane. The sacred involves feelings of awe, fear, and reverence and is set apart from the everyday or profane. The sacred is potentially dangerous as well as beneficial and is sometimes separated from the profane by special taboos. Whilst its power is regulated by special rites (e.g., ritual, prayer, sacrifice). Durkheim suggested that "a society can neither create nor re-create itself without at the same time creating an ideal" (1968:422). The point is that the sets of symbols and beliefs in religious systems provide societies with a way of thinking about and concentrating their diffuse moral sentiments and feelings of common identity. According to Durkheim the purely ideal power of symbol systems is complemented by concrete acts of observance. He pointed out that societies periodically come together in ritual in order to fulfill the need to worship the sacred. These events involve the use of bodies and symbols and further help to integrate society in that they bring people into proximity with each other. With the aid of music, chants, and incantations they generate collective emotional excitement or collective excesescence. This provides a strong sense of group belonging. Durkheim, in conclusion, argued that the reconstruction of social bonds was the main reason for the existence of religion and ritual — not the wish of gods. He writes: "There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality. Now this need remains cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals . . . reaffirm to common their common sentiments." (1968:427). Durkheim's study was largely based upon ethnographic data collected from Aboriginal Australia. However, he was anxious to argue that it had wider applicability to contemporary settings. These might be more complex than those of a small-scale society but the fundamental role of religion was the same. He asserted that even the seemingly secular had a moral basis that was essentially religious in nature. He asks: "What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or reenacting the dialogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or 'egal system or some great event in national life'? (1968:427). For Durkheim, of course, there was very little difference. Certainly he believed that the religious vision of society he had developed was one with universal relevance.
Major criticisms of Durkheim's cultural sociology usually elaborate on one or another of the following points.

- He assumes culture brings social consensus or social integration and therefore cannot account for its role in generating conflict or sustaining social exclusion. As David Lockwood (1996: 23) puts it, his "interest in consensus does not extend to include the question of whether strength of commitment to collective beliefs is related to inequalities of power and status."

- His perspective is one-sided in an idealist direction. It privileges the role of culture in generating social stability and patterns of social interaction. He has little to say about the role of force; power, interest, or necessity as key variables influencing social life (see Tilly 1981).

- His evolutionary perspective is often empirically wrong and denies the complexity of traditional societies and their beliefs by assuming that they are somehow more "basic" or "elementary" than those of industrial settings.

- There is a mechanistic tendency in his works thanks to the influence of functionalism. This sees patterns of action, belief, and sentiment (culture) arising from the functional organization of the social structure rather than from the agent's choice or interpretation of the social world. As we have seen, Durkheim speaks of social facts as external and constraining on individuals rather than as enabling creativity and agency.

On the positive side, Durkheim's advocates suggest that his later thinking provides a key resource for linking culture with social structure in a way that resists materialist reductionism. Society for Durkheim was an idea or belief as much as a concrete collection of individuals and actions. Writing about religion, for example, he insisted that it "is not merely a system of practices, but also a system of ideas whose object is to explain the world" (1968: 428). By placing the study of such idea systems at the center of his analysis, in addition to the study of practices, Durkheim's work marks an important early call for a more culturally sensitive form of social inquiry.

Durkheim's cultural work in the twentieth century listened to this call and expanded on a number of themes in his work while, in many cases, also trying to compensate for the perceived errors in his thinking. We return to look at this literature in later chapters and demonstrate the continuing vitality of the Durkheimian tradition. In chapter 2 we examine the work of Talcott Parsons, who elaborated Durkheim's functionalist understandings of the reciprocal relationship of culture and society. Chapter 5, by contrast, tries to reconstitute the subjective meanings that influenced a particular line of action — an activity that could involve re-creating shared cultural values as well as empathising with individual psychologies and life histories. Dilthey argued that the study of human life belonged to the Geisteswissenschaften (literally: "science of the spirit") rather than the natural sciences (see also pp. 197-8).

Drawing upon Dilthey, Weber also advocated a Verstehens approach to social analysis and suggested that human agents be thought of as active and meaning-driven. These ideas are expressed most clearly in the monu-
mental Economy and Society (Weber 1968). Weber insists that it is the job of the analyst to try to uncover the motley or subjective intent behind an action: "for a science which is concerned with the subjective meaning of action, explanation requires a grasp of the complex of meaning in which an actual course of understandable action thus interpreted belongs" (1968: 9).

As a start in this direction, Weber drew attention to two contrasting modes of action. *Wertorientational*, or value-rational action, was driven by cultural beliefs and goals, such as the search for religious salvation. Here there is a "conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, religious or other form of behavior" (Weber 1968: 25). By contrast, *Zweckrational*, or goal-oriented action (also known in cultural theory as purpose-rationality, means-ends rationality, and instrumental action), was driven by norms of efficiency. Thereby the need to calculate precise means of attaining specified ends, but failed the ability to identify overarching moral directions and culturally specified goals. Weber sug-gested that as we entered modernity *zwecrational* action was becoming more common (see below). Weber’s discussions on Durkheim and on the forms of social action have provided significant philosophical support for advocates of interpretative sociology. Whilst many of these have been "micro" in orientation, this emphasis of the sociologist has also built upon Weber’s conceptual edifice and argued that we need to interpret the social world rather than subject it to positivist, "scientific" scrutiny.

In cultural circles Weber is probably best known for his work on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1958/1904). Here he argues against materialist views of the origins of capitalism, asserting that religious beliefs also played a role in the development of capitalism. This thesis that capitalistic accumulation is rational and planned acquisition of wealth is based, according to Weber, on the Protestant Ethic, on the rationalist ethic about the need for methodological and disciplined hard work. Over time the religious foundations of capitalist accumulation dropped from view, leaving a field characterised by a shallow self-satisfaction, the constraining *zwecrational* mode of action and an economic order of "pure utilitarianism" organized around thrift, profit, and constraint. Weber writes: "The Puritan wanted to work to a calling; we are forced to do so..." [The modern economic order] is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today

determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism" (1958/1904: 181).

The protestant ethic book has often been misunderstood as an individual argument. In point of fact, Weber was an admirer of Marx as much as of German Idealism. When we look at Weber’s "total oeuvre", we find an account of the rise of capitalism that is complex and multidimensional. Weber argued for the importance of economic and organisational factors as well as religious motivations and opposed one-sided explanations, whether material or ideal in nature (see below). Weber’s "total oeuvre" is a testament to the complexity of this task. In this light, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is part of a larger jigsaw of explanation.

Although the protestant ethic thesis is perhaps Weber’s best-known work, it is perhaps misleadingly so. Other texts in his study of the great religions of the world are arguably better researched and more comprehensive. Certainly Weber himself saw his study of the protestant ethic as only a small component of a much wider and more systematic research agenda. In his monumental comparative inquiry, Weber emphasized the universality of the problem of salvation in all known religions. He suggested that the Judeo-Christian tradition was characterized by a "worldly asceticism" which protected popular morality and worldview-constituting activity. By contrast, the religious of the Orient, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Hinduism, suggested that salvation could come from withdrawal from the world, conformity to tradition, and contemplation. Weber saw these differences as contributing to the rise of industrial modernity in the West. Even though China had been technologically advanced in the Middle Ages, its religious values had prevented the emergence of the entrepreneurial inno-vation and social dynamism to be found in Europe at the same time.

Clear affinities exist between Weber and Durkheim in both point to the centrality of religion as a core dimension of culture. However, Weber’s approach places a greater emphasis on the intellectual and cultural factors within abstract belief systems, while Durkheim foregrounds structural, embedded elements of society. A more significant difference is in their attitude toward the role of religion in contemporary societies. As we have seen Durkheim was very clear that moral roles and sacred goals were of major importance in today’s world. Weber, by contrast, advanced a thesis of disenchanted. This asserted that with the loss of modernity, meaning was being emptied out of the world. We are living in an age of bureaucracy, which puts an emphasis on efficiency and rationality rather than on attaining some kind of transcendence or pursuing ultimate meanings. In Weber’s terms the *zwecrational* mode was becoming to replace the *Wertorientational*. Life has lost its sense of purpose, and people have become trapped in what he called an *iron cage* of meaningless bureaucracy and rationalism.
Max Weber (1864–1920)
Weber grew up in an affluent but rather repressive Protestant family. He attended Heidelberg University as an undergraduate and participated in its masculine culture of drinking and dueling. He later studied at the University of Berlin. Here he adopted a more ascetic lifestyle and studied obsessively. His interest and reading were diverse, and included history, law, and philosophy. Ulrike Simmel was one of his students. Weber described himself as a Critical Realist and was elected to the prestigious chair at Heidelberg at a young age. Weber's mental and personal life was very complex. He never consummated his marriage and in 1877 had a mental breakdown after an argument with his authoritarian father. Restored to health in 1903, he began writing again and also speaking out on public issues. Weber was highly critical of Germany's conservative elites, yet he never fully embraced radical politics. By the time of his death in 1920, Weber was recognized as a leading intellectual in his country.


Two other themes remain to be addressed in this all-too-brief review of Weber's contribution to cultural theory. The first is the discussion of the forms of authority or legitimate domination (Herrschaft). Weber (1968: 215f) insisted that rule was justified by reference to broader structures of meaning, and suggested three ideal types (models or simplified versions of reality) to understand this process. Traditional authority was based on the idea that things should be as they always had been. Weber had little to say about this, but suggested it was prominent in small-scale and pre-industrial societies. A problem here is for the ruler to introduce change. Charismatic authority is organized around the belief that a ruler possesses exceptional powers or some kind of divine gift. Weber argues this form of authority is linked to social dislocation and social change and is associated with economic conditions. A key feature of charismatic authority is its instability. According to Weber, the charismatic leader is under constant pressure to produce signs of power, if they fail to produce results, their charismatic power can evaporate. Further problems arise around the issue of succession. Once the charismatic figure dies, a power vacuum can arise. For these reasons Weber suggested that over the long term charisma was inherently routinized and replaced by a bureaucratic mode of domination. A key feature of bureaucratic authority is its rationality and impersonal nature. Weber suggested that this form was also associated with the rising of urbanization and industrialization in Europe. The development of a rational-technical character.

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izes highly bureaucratized contemporary societies. It emphasizes the role of law, procedure, and efficiency as standards against which administrative acts are judged. According to Weber, disenchantment of this form of authority replaces the more religiously and symbolically meaningful forms associated with tradition and charisma.

The final concept from Weber to be considered is that of status. In contrast to Marx's class-driven model of social organization, Weber distinguished between class and status. Class refers to position in the economic system; Weber provides examples such as entrepreneurs, laborers, and creditors. Status, which is much more diverse, refers here to a general 'style of life' and a shared level of social prestige. Weber pointed to the ways that the authority of elites often depended upon their distinctive culture and value system. They might share customs, conventions, and educational training. These could be used as the basis of obtaining deference or other kinds of special privilege such as sycophants and stooges. Weber argued, that class and status could interact in complex ways. He claimed there was no necessary reason why a group with economic power would also enjoy the other forms of power, as Marx had argued. He notes that a student, a civil servant, and an army officer might have very different class locations and yet share a common status 'since upbringing and education create a common style of life' (Weber 1968: 316).

Weber's work has a number of attractive features. He provides a compelling argument for the centrality of human agency to sociological explanation. In highlighting the pivotal and non-universal significance of religious beliefs in human life, he creates space for the autonomy of culture. His theories are grounded in questions of power and domination and link these in definite ways to culture. These attractive features, however, are perhaps undercut by an insistence on the displacement of the modern world and on the routinized and rationalized qualities of contemporary life with a corresponding instrumental (rather than normative) regulation of human society. It is almost as if Weber is arguing that culture is once important, but now needs to be excluded from social analysis. Perhaps for this reason, it is rather difficult to identify a Weberian school or camp in contemporary cultural theory. To follow Weber to the letter is to insist on the weakness of meaning in contemporary society and the decline of religious and normative motivations for action.

Unlike Durkheim and Marx, both of whom founded self-defining and comparatively bounded traditions. Weber's work has had a diffuse impact in a number of fields. This reflects Weber's own scholarly diversity. Work influenced by Weber has taken some of the following paths.

- Research has taken place on the social implications of religious beliefs, including those relating to political legitimation and political
culture. Durkheimians like Edward Shils, for example, have made use of Weber's ideas in this area (see chapter 5).

* His writing on Verstehen and the forms of social action have provided an extremely useful charter for qualitative inquiry, especially where issues of social action are being considered. They also influenced Parsons's discussions of the bases of agency in *The Structure of Social Action* (see chapter 2).

* Studies of stratification which wish to escape from the straitjacket of class theory have often turned to Weber for help. Many investigations of cultural capital and social status count Weber as an important intellectual heir. Discussions of "fields" and habitus in Bourdieu, for example, have distinct Weberian parallels (see chapter 8).

* Explorations of societal rationalization as a component of modernity and modern culture take Weber as a keystone. Many scholars working in this area are Marxists who use Weber to further think through the impacts of alienation and bureaucratic control on modern life. We review some of these theories in chapter 3.

**Georg Simmel**

According to his core of enthusiastic devotees, Georg Simmel deserves to be ranked alongside Marx, Weber, and Durkheim in the pantheon of founding fathers. Efforts to elevate his status have been hampered by Simmel's tendency to avoid systematic theory. He wrote in an essayistic style on a bewildering variety of topics. Although his writings are universally acknowledged to be brilliant and insightful, they have also been considered to be lacking in the persistent intellectual focus that was required of a really major figure. Since the 1980s this perception has slowly been changing and Simmel is now widely understood as a thinker whose work needs to be taken very seriously.

**Georg Simmel** (1858–1918)

Simmel was born in Berlin in 1858, and was to spend much of his life in that city. He had a prodigious output of some twenty-five books, in fields ranging from sociology to psychology, to philosophy and aesthetics. Despite this scholarship, he found it difficult to obtain academic advancement. This seems to have been due to anti-semitism, disapproval of his socialist sympathies, and jealousy at the large numbers attending his lectures. It probably did not help that he championed the cause of women and other minority students in the university system. After failing to obtain senior positions in Berlin and Heidelberg, Simmel eventually obtained a chair at the provincial University of Strasbourg.


**Culture in Classical Social Theory**

Simmel's model of society differs radically from the more collectivistic one proposed by Durkheim. For Simmel, society was essentially the product of the ceaseless interactions of individuals. He argued that the task of sociology was to describe the ways that people came together, the ways they formed groups, and how these interacted with each other. His overall position was to favor empirical observation over the construction of a priori models and elaborate conceptual categories. According to Simmel we should be looking at patterns of concrete interaction rather than developing abstract models of society. Aside from this distinctive vision, Simmel's interest for cultural theory lies in a number of studies providing diverse views on modern life. In various ways these foreground the importance of interaction patterns and modernity for the self and for sociality. Simmel argued that the self had become more free thanks to the removal of customary constraints upon action in the course of societal modernisation. Yet at the same time our relationships have become more anonymous, and our lives mediated by science, technology, commodities, and other social phenomena that appear alien to us.

These themes are taken up in *The Philosophy of Money* (1978 [1900]), perhaps Simmel's most important work. Here he explores the ways that money has transformed human interactions by making it possible for them to be impersonal. Simmel argued that the economy was really about interactions focused on exchange rather than production, thus providing a distinctive alternative to Marxian understandings. Yet at the same time, he agrees that contemporary life is characterized by something like alienation. He notes that money makes our interactions more instrumental and calculable in character, and that acquiring money can become an end in itself. The result has been a subtle transformation of human sociability. Individuality and care are removed from interactions, to be replaced by hardness, a matter-of-fact attitude, and a "calculative exactness of practical life" (Simmel 1997: 177).

This idea that contemporary life had become more impersonal was extended in a famous essay on *The Metropolis and Mental Life* first published in 1903. Here Simmel asserts that in the contemporary city (he was drawing on his experience of Berlin circa 1900) we are constantly bombarded by information and there is an "intensification of nervous stimulation" (1997: 175). Everything is new, rapid, and ephemeral, and citizens are surrounded by strangers. Simmel sees these various aspects of urban life as threatening to our sense of self and our ability to operate as autonomous subjects in the metropolitan environment. He writes: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces" (1997: 174–5).
In order to cope with this situation, we have to shut down some of our emotional responses and develop what he calls a blasé attitude. This involves remaining cool, aloof, and distant from other people and from the streetscape around us. There is a tendency to respond to everything in the same way and to not take an interest in any one thing in the urban environment. According to Simmel, we are a tension between our need to remain inopportunistic in such settings, and the need to assert our identity (if only to ourselves) or to be noticed.

In his writing on the Philosophy of Fashion, dating from 1905, Simmel maintained a similar line of analysis that revolved around issues of modernity and identity. He suggests that the codes of fashion are arbitrary and that they respond to cultural needs rather than practical ones. Hennlines and colors make little difference to our survival chances—they are a primary function is social, not material. He argues that fashion is a response to our desire to modulate the tension between the expression of the individual self and belonging to a larger collective. The success of fashion as an institution arises from its unique ability to fulfill both simultaneously. On the one hand, people can imitate others and thus have the psychological security of being members of a collective. On the other they can use it to express their individuality, perhaps by only subtle adjustments in a given style.

Simmel also notes that fashion plays a role in the stratification system and tends to exist only in societies that are highly stratified. “Fashion is... a product of class division and operates... the double function of holding a given circle together and at the same time closing it off from others” (1997: 149). It responds to the needs of high-status groups to symbolize their difference from those of lower status, and allows those of lower-status groups to make claims to higher status. The result is a never-ending game of catch-up. Once fashions trickle down to the lower groups, those of higher status will abandon them in favor of new styles. The image he presents here is of consumer goods and cultural tastes being used as a marker of distinction—a theme that anticipates the later work of Bourdieu (see chapter 8). Simmel’s impact on subsequent cultural theory has been diverse. His work on money deeply impressed Max Weber and influenced his thinking about the Protestant ethic (see above). For a period of time Georg Lukács was a student of Simmel’s, and it is no surprise that there are parallels between Simmel’s work and Lukács’s studies of the rationalization of modern life (see pp. 37–9). As he rejected reified, grandiose visions of society and centered attention on concrete interactions, Simmel has been an important influence on interactionist approaches to culture. Early translations of his essays in the American Journal of Sociology helped to shape the Chicago School approach to spatial and community studies in urban settings. His attention to the characteristics of life in the metropolis was to also influence more critical theorists, such as Walter Benjamin (see pp. 43–5). More recently, Simmel’s interest in exchange, consumption, and the self has been seen him marked out as a pioneer in this area. He is being increasingly reevaluated not so much as the founding father of interactionism (as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s) or as a critical theorist of modernity, but rather as a pioneer in the cultural analysis of consumerism.

Suggested Further Reading
Some thirty years after its initial publication, Lewis Coser’s Masters of Sociological Thought (1971) still provides an encyclopedic brief introduction to the lives and works of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. After reading Coser, those wishing to gain further knowledge should have no difficulty locating specialist volumes dedicated to each of these scholars. Among the most accessible original works are each of these authors’ or Weber’s (1958) study of the protestant ethic, Simmel’s (1997) essay on the city and mental life, and the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels. Stepping into The Elementary Forms of Religious Life offers perhaps the best opportunity to glimpse Durkheim’s distinctive vision of the spiritual dimensions of society.