Cultural Theory
An Introduction

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general, however, we can detect two major strands. One of these is concerned with systems theory. The idea here is to develop, adapt, or improve Parsons's models from the 1950s and 1960s. A senior empirical for this field has come from the interest expressed by Jürgen Habermas (see the next chapter) in the work of Parsons on social systems, social integration, and media of exchange. The second strand is more concerned with culture, agency, and the need to develop multidimensional explanations of concrete historical events (see Alexander and Smith, 1993). Significant inputs into this area have come from various models of culture discussed later in this book (Goffman, structuralism, Durkheimian theory, and so on). An emphasis is placed on the need to move beyond Parsons's impoverished model of culture (as norms, values, etc.) and his insistence on the integrative effects of culture.

Suggested Further Reading

Parsons himself can be very difficult to read. Some of the essays in The Social System, and in particular the discussion of the sick role, are sufficiently empirical to be accessible. The opening statement of Toward a General Theory of Action provides an elegant and time-efficient way to become familiar with his middle-period systems theory. For a remarkably clear and broadly sympathetic reading of Parsons see Chapters 2 through 6 in Jeffrey Alexander's Twenty Lessons. Still the most cutting critique of Parsons is the denunciation of "Grand Theory" in C. Wright Mills's The Sociological Imagination. For an accessible and brief description of the response of cultural theory to the Parsons model of value analysis, see the opening few pages of Alexander and Smith (1993).

CHAPTER THREE

Culture as Ideology in Western Marxism

As we saw in chapter 1, Marx's thinking was characterized by a materialist bias. The result was a treatment of culture as generally unimportant and as the dependent product of an underlying economic base. A substantial proportion of twentieth-century Marxist thought reacted against this dimension of his work. In looking at what it sometimes thought of as the Western Marxist tradition we can detect several common features.

- There has been an attempt to assimilate cultural explanation within a Marxian framework. The aim has been to provide culture with an active and autonomous role in the regulation of social life and the maintenance of the capitalist economic order.
- A major concern is to explain the non-arrival of the revolution that Marx predicted was inevitable. Whilst other Marxist theorists developed elaborate theories of colonizations and the state to account for this, the writers we are interested in here pointed to the centrality of ideology in preventing the emergence of working-class radicalism.
- There is a strong humanistic element to work in this tradition. Drawing on Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, there is an interest in human experiences, consciousness, freedom, collective association, alienation, creativity, and subjective well-being. This orientation contrasts with the harsher, more structural Marxism that is inspired by De Kapital with its "science" of historical materialism, structural models of society, and visions of "iron laws" of social development.

Georg Lukács

Born in Hungary, Georg Lukács (1885–1971) was a brilliant student who studied with Samuel and Weber, among others. He had wide-ranging intel-
lectural interests, writing both within and outside of Marxist frameworks. Lukács's own spin on Marxism was developed in the first decades of the century. It draws heavily on Marx's discussions of commodity fetishism and alienation as well as upon readings of Weber, Simmel, Hegel, and Dilthey, and embraces most of the themes that were to become central to Western Marxism later on. Most important of all, Lukács played a major role in the "rediscovery" of the almost forgotten Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (Marx 1978a [1844]), thereby providing a legitimating charter for a more cultural Marxism. For this reason he is often seen as a pivotal figure in the tradition.

Lukács's (1971) major work, History and Class Consciousness, is a collection of essays written between 1938 and 1930. Here he describes the ways that capitalism was colonizing more and more dimensions of social life. He claims that commodity relations have impoverished the world and denuded it of authentic meaning. According to Lukács, social relationships, activities and human worth are increasingly defined in terms of an alienating and objectifying monetary exchange value - a process known as commodification. Drawing on Marx's analysis of wage labor, Lukács paints a bleak picture of contemporary life: "[The worker's fate is] typical of society as whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation." (1971: 92).

Operating in parallel, and driven by the logic of industrial capitalist production, were processes of rationalization and standardization of the kind that Weber wrote about in his analysis of bureaucracy. As a result, "the principle of rational mechanism and calculability must embrace every aspect of life" (1971: 91). According to Lukács, the commodification of the social world is linked to a process of reification. This leads to a false perception of the social world as driven by objective forces that are beyond human control, and as demeans the impact of human agency and creativity. An associated process of commodity fetishism helps build an economy structured around market exchange and to an uncritical stance toward the sale of goods and labor power. As a consequence of reification and commodity fetishism people are unable to grasp the totality of the capitalist system and its effects upon them (something they could only do). Lukács tells us, if they came to embrace Marxism. Consequently their understanding of social life was fragmented or incomplete. Reacting against determinism, Marxism, Lukács (like many Western Marxists after him) emphasized the importance of human agency, writing that; "History is at its least automatic when it is the consciousness of the proletariat that is at issue" (1971: 208). He argued that a sense of class identity and political activism, or class consciousness, was needed among the proletariat. This could only come about through critical self-awareness and relativity about the ideological effects of capitalism.

Antonio Gramsci Writing slightly later than Lukács, Antonio Gramsci also perceived the need for greater interpretative sensitivity in Marxist analysis. His own work simultaneously addressed two lacunae in Marx's own thought - the neglect of politics and the neglect of culture. With the exception of essayistic works like The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx (1978b [1852]) never really came to terms with the need for political strategy in advancing the cause of communism. Nor did he think about the role of the state in regulating social life and maintaining the necessary conditions for the perpetuation of capitalism. His deterministic framework seemed to proclaim that revolution was inevitable - all that needed was to wait until the right economic conditions were in place. It was not until the twentieth century that Marxist political strategists like Lenin and Gramsci began to ask how culture and politics might promote or hold back an "inevitable" revolutionary change.

Gramsci's work is important precisely because it points to the links between politics, culture, and socialist strategy. In his Prison Notebooks (Gramsci 1992 [1929-33]), he argued that domination was not simply rooted in the economic sphere, but also had a major political and cultural component. He claimed that in Italy the objective conditions for revolution had been present for some years - an advanced capitalist economy in crisis, a large proletariat, and so on - and yet it had not come to pass. In seeking to explain this paradox he pointed to the role of the state, the role of intellectuals, and the role of ideas. According to Gramsci, the state was growing rapidly in power and invading civil society. Gramsci saw institutions like the church and trade unions, which had previously been independent, being taken over and regulated by governmental agencies. In Gramsci's view the state was not a disinterested, self-consuming bureaucracy (à la Weber), but rather an instrument of class domination. In particular, it represented the interests of capital and the bourgeoisie.

Culture comes into the picture when it is realized that a major component of state power was the control of ideas, as well as the use of physical force (e.g., by the police). The key concept here is hegemony. This is the ability of the state and the ruling class to regulate beliefs within civil society. Hegemonic beliefs are dominant cultural norms which reinforce inequality and which short-circuit attempts at critical thinking. They allow dominant groups to rule more efficiently so they permit a reduction in the level of force required to maintain social order.
Gramsci claimed that the activities of organic intellectuals were central to the propagation of hegemonic beliefs. These are people like priests and journalists who translate complex philosophical and political issues into everyday language and who offer guidance to the masses on how to act. Intellectuals also played a role in making possible the establishment of a hegemonic bloc. This was an alliance of dominant forces in society (e.g., industrialists, the aristocracy, the petty bourgeoisie). Typically, he asserted, these groups were held together by a hegemonic ideology that incorporated aspects of nationalism and common-sense thinking and used this to paper over divergent interests and class locations.

**ANTONIO GRAMSCI (1891–1937)**

Gramsci was born in Sardinia, Italy, into a middle-class family. Although he did well at university, he quit before graduating and became involved in left-wing journalism. Aside from being an intellectual, Gramsci was also an activist. His role as a leading figure in the Italian Communist Party saw him targeted by Mussolini’s Fascists. In June 1928, Gramsci was sentenced to twenty years in prison after a show trial. While in prison, he studied and wrote his famous Prison Notebooks (sometimes known by their Italian title, the Quaderni del carcere). These consist of handwritten entries on diverse themes, and range in length from single sentences to complex essays. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage after years of ill health exacerbated by prison conditions.


Gramsci argues that breaking down hegemony is a fundamental precondition for mobilizing latent socialist tendencies and initiating a revolutionary consciousness. Converting organic intellectuals or providing socialist ones was a step in this task. Other important tasks involved establishing alliances within subordinate classes (e.g., between peasants and industrial workers) and also between classes (e.g., between intellectuals and the proletariat).

His hope was that in this way a solidaristic bloc could emerge in contradiction to the dominant one. Rebuilding the autonomy of institutions in civil society would also contribute to the formation of an effective resistance movement. According to Gramsci, it was the church which provided the major hegemonic force in the Italy of his time, thanks to its moral authority among the proletariat. He believed that a significant political gain could be made if the church and its teachings could be changed so that it could provide moral and intellectual leadership for subordinate classes, rather than operating as a tool of the bourgeoisie. The overall picture of political life Gramsci painted was of a war of position in which the Left should try to outmaneuver hegemonic forces on cultural and political fronts, rather than engaging in an immediate full-scale revolutionary attack.

**GRAMSCI: AN EVALUATION**

Many of Gramsci’s ideas bear the hallmark of his life experiences. It was an eye-witness to the rise of Italian Fascism, a political force whose corporatist ideas attacked distinctions between state and civil society, and whose success rested on a large extent on the populist appeal of its ideologies. Yet his thinking has a wider applicability than just early-twentieth-century Italy. Gramsci’s major contribution is arguably in the area of Marxist political praxis. In pointing to the importance of strategic alliances and the state in maintaining and challenging the capitalist system, he contributed to a major shift away from deterministic materialist thinking. His work suggests that we need to move away from a cookie-cutter model of class relations and revolutionary process to explore the contingent, historically, and nationally specific ways in which alliances are constructed and broken down in various settings. His thinking also provides a major role for creative political activists who are able to seize opportunities and construct innovative political strategies in so doing he affords a refreshing antidote to Marxist fatalism.

Gramsci’s views on culture are equally important to critical thinkers and probably of more interest to readers of this text. His central achievement is in thinking about the role and operation of culture rather than in content. The emphasis on the flexible and actively constructed nature of political ideologies, captured by the concept of hegemony, provides an alternative to visions of monolithically dominant ideologies which automatically fall into place and which will automatically be replaced by those of socialism. His work also calls for detailed and situated, comparative and historical analyses of particular settings and ideological constellations rather than global denunciations of capitalist ideologies. Gramsci’s attention to the state, civil society intellectuals, and institutional life is also significant in that it suggests that hegemonic ideals cannot exist without organizational and infrastructural support. This helps to anchor culture in concrete structures and in the work of concrete actors.

These manifold virtues were to see Gramsci elevated to the pantheon of major Marxist thinkers as the twentieth century came to an end. The New Left intellectuals of the 1960s found in him a prototype and justification for the kind of political and cultural activity in which they saw themselves engaged. During the 1970s Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony were combined with more powerful interpretative tools by the British cultural studies movement and underpinned their efforts to understand the mass media and
everyday life (see chapter 5). It was only during the 1990s, perhaps, that Gramsci's star began to wane at the critical mass among left-wing cultural theorists begin to shift from Marxist to poststructural understandings of culture and society.

**The Frankfurt School**

"The Frankfurt School" is a name given to a group of German-speaking intellectuals who had an association with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt—an establishment founded in the early 1920s. However, the group was diverse in terms of research interests so that it is not immediately clear what benefits are to be had from thinking of them as a "school." Moreover, they were dispersed with the rise of Nazi Germany, many moving up in the United States. So the name is of very little geographical use either. When we look closely, however, we can detect a common theme in their methodological stance toward rationality and their critiques of capitalist modernity. Drawing on Lukács on Weber's writings as well as on Marx's cultural critiques, they argued that formal rationality (Zwangsrationalität) was an insidious force in society because it means rather than ultimate goals or ends. Consequently what was required was an intellectual approach grounded in human values such as freedom, and which evaluated society in terms of its ability to further or frustrate that end. Members of the School vigorously attacked the idea of value-free social research, and denounced positivist analyses as purposeless exercises lacking in "critical reason." This attack on Zwangsrationalität was to also inform their critiques of the bureaucratic enterprise, consumerism, and the culture industries, which are discussed below. Aside from the assault on formal rationality, we can discern various other dimensions of a family resemblance within the Frankfurt School.

- A concern with the impact of technology on social life, specifically in the reproduction of popular culture.
- A concern with the impact of popular culture upon the mass populace.
- An interest in human sexuality and personality formation that was strongly informed by Freud (this work is discussed in chapter 5.2).
- A concern with identifying conditions under which human consciousness was either "fractured" or able to comprehend "totality" (i.e., able to attain a neo-Marxian understanding of the world and with a true freedom).

There are many figures associated with the Frankfurt School, including Adorno, Benjamin, Frobenius, Horkheimer, Lowenthal, Mannheim, and...

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**Marxism**

Marxists' respective reputations have varied widely during their careers. At the time of writing Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin seem to stand out as the most accomplished and creative intellectuals within the group. In the discussion that follows we focus on their work before going on to explore the important work of Jurgen Habermas, the current heir to the Frankfurt legacy. Pross and Marcuse are reviewed in chapter 12.

**Walter Benjamin**

Walter Benjamin is highly respected as a cultural critic and aesthete as well as for his contributions to social theory. His reputation lies mainly in a series of essays that, arguably, do not amount to a systematic vision of culture and society. Rather they provide points of insight into diverse topics. The great appeal of Benjamin's work is that it exhibits a "mystical" or sensibility to culture that far surpasses the best efforts of his Frankfurt School colleagues. He is a fine interpreter and writer and his essays provide an enriching aesthetic experience as much as an intellectual one.

Perhaps Benjamin's most influential essay was his seminal study on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In this text Benjamin (1973 [1936]) is clearly influenced by Marx's writing on alienation and his praxis theory. This understood human creativity to be embodied in the products of human labor. Benjamin argues that with the rise of industrial capitalism, cultural products—and especially art objects—undergo a radical transformation. In post-capitalist societies their production is shot through with rich textures of meaning. They are organic products of social relationships and are invested with a sacred spiritual character. They might be the object of a cult (as in a medieval religious icon) or be understood as in some way connected with genius, authenticity, and creativity. According to Benjamin, while hand-crafted artistic products are genuine and embody an aura, reproductions are somehow debased. He writes: "The presence of the original is the concept to the priority of... that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (1973: 214-15).

Technology, then, has removed the aesthetic quality from contemporary cultural products. They lose their unique value and meaningfulness, becoming routinized and standardized (there are strong affinities here with Weber's disenchantment thesis). Benjamin asserted that unified audience responses tended to be evoked by the artistic products of the machine age. The temptation of an original painting used to be a private and individual activity. By contrast with a product such as a movie, "individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response" (1973: 227-8) thanks to...
the simultaneous collective experience of its consumption. The result was a general desensitizing of critical and intellectual faculties. “The public,” he writes, “is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (1975: 234).

WALTER BENJAMIN (1892-1940)

Benjamin was born into an affluent Jewish family in Berlin. In his early life he appears to have been a gambler and a lay about with a passion for books and fine arts. He had liked illness to avoid conscription in World War One and to continue his university studies. After failing to obtain a university post in the 1920s he started writing high-quality essays and journalism. He continued in a Bohemian existence, living and travelling off his wages and becoming a close member of the German left-wing avant-garde. He fled the country after the Nazi rise to power and drifted around Europe, supported in part with funds from the Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt School), arranged by his friend Theodor Adorno. Following the German invasion of France, Benjamin attempted to flee to Spain. As a Jew, left-wing intellectual his life chances in Nazi-occupied Europe were not very good. Finding the border closed, he committed suicide. Shocked by this experience, the Spanish border guards let his companion pass through.


A further and increasingly important aspect of Benjamin’s work was what has subsequently been reconstructed as a study of consumer sites, consumer behavior, and urban form. Benjamin (1997 [1935-8]) had a great interest in the work of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, whose work he translated and championed. He uses Baudelaire’s poems as a window through which to capture the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Paris. Perhaps the closest equivalent to this end-state is Bakhtin’s use of Rabbelíus to reconstruct the aesthetics of the medieval carnival (see chapter 11).

Benjamin shows how many of Baudelaire’s poems reflected a new urban experience of fleeting interpersonal contacts, decadent sensuality, shady underworlds of conspiracy and poverty, flashy commodities and their display, and the shifting movements of crowds and people through streets and arcades. Benjamin’s central contention is that the world of the capitalist city is one where strangers, goods, and appearances became central to human activity and subjectivity in new and surprising ways. A pivotal concept in this vision is that of the flâneur. This person is a wandering urban spectator who engages with urban spaces, crowds, and shop windows as a disinterested, strolling voyeur. As Benjamin (1997: 36) puts it, he “goes botanizing on the asphault.” The flâneur actively seeks out the life of

secrets and wonders around the city, joining in with the crowd and moving through consumption spaces with a sense that is at once ironic and appreciative. In this process the flâneur surrenders to the “intoxication of the commodity around which hovers the stream of consumers” (1997: 55). The image Benjamin presents here is a complex one. On the one hand the flâneur is an active agent, behaving rather like a detective and engaging in the non-conventional study of human nature. On the other, he is an alienated individual seeking superficial solace in the anonymous crowd, the faible of the commodity, and the relentless quest for novelty.

Benjamin emphasized the close links between flâneur and the built forms of capitalism. His unifying and coherent project was to explore the ways in which ideology and urban fabric of nineteenth-century Paris were interconnected. While this work was to remain uncompleted, the suggestive sketches that survive remain influential for those studying consumerism and urban form. Benjamin suggests that the seductive powers of commodity fetishism were enhanced by new architectural forms.

The arcade emerged during the 1820s and 1830s. These enclosed spaces constructed of glass and iron, lit by gas and used to display luxury goods. Unlike the bustling street, they provided a safe place for the strolling flâneur, whose gaze was stimulated by the display of commodities. According to Benjamin, this relationship between subjectivity and space, and the commodity was to continue with the department store, which “made use of flânerie in order to sell goods” (1997: 170). These sorts of ideas have subsequently exerted a considerable influence on research in the arena of leisure and consumption, most notably in the burgeoning literature on the shopping mall.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer

Like Benjamin, Theodor Adorno was a diverse author who was highly respected by the German cultural elite. He was noted music critic and friend of leading composers like Alban Berg, outside of philosophical circles Adorno is best remembered for his discussion of the “culture industries” and for his critique of mass culture. The first essay, “Dialectic of the Enlightenment,” was written in 1940 by the Frankfurt School member Max Horkheimer (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 [1947]). This text provides a damming indictment of the mass entertainment culture of consumer capitalism. It is widely read, that Adorno’s exile in Los Angeles (now Hollywood) during the 1940s may well have influenced his perspective on these issues. Probably equally important was an awareness of the popular mass culture produced in Germany during the Nazi era under the watchful eyes of Goebbels’s propaganda ministry. For the first time this
output was aimed not so much at political indoctrination, but rather at superficial entertainment.

In *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the project of the Enlightenment has reached a dead end. It was supposed to bring human freedom and encourage critical thinking. Yet rationality, reason, and scientific knowledge have brought with them the instrumental control of social life. Instead of leading to an intelligent and caring society, the Enlightenment has resulted in a world that is shaped by a narrow, pragmatic form of rationality. Bureaucratic, technological, and ideological forces have limited human freedom and created a mass society of passive, uniform consumers. Social scientists, by contrasts, have conspired to limit their power thanks to these shifts.

Horkheimer and Adorno claim that a Weberian *Zwangskrationalität* has combined with capitalism in the culture industry. These are major entertainment and media corporations. In the United States at the time he was writing there would have been organizations like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Twentieth Century-Fox, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). Were he alive today, Adorno would probably point to companies like Disney, Sony Pictures. Time Warner and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation with interests in the production and distribution of entertainment products. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, such organizations produce goods with the intention of maximizing profit rather than enhancing critical thinking and human freedom. In doing this they are guided by a narrow means—ends rationality and take on the characteristics of bureaucratic and industrial combine rather than allowing for true artistic creativity. There has been "a repression of enlightenment to ideology which finds its typical expression in cinema and radio. Here enlightenment consists above all in the calculation of effectiveness and of the techniques of production and distribution" (1972: 23).

The result of this process has been a production line approach to culture. Movies, music, and so on are assembled like any other manufactured product with standardized tasks divided up between workers. Accountants and balance sheets play a major role in determining what and how culture is produced. The final product is stereotyped and formulaic and is ultimately empty of authentic meaning. It will involve stylized plots, lines and animated characters and is designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry plays a major role in the reproduction of capitalism. It produces stultified and content consumers without any critical faculties. As they put it: "No independent thinking must be expected from the audience" (1972: 137), central to this process is the manufacture of superficial amusements and fun, something that Horkheimer and Adorno claim allows the audience "a flight from a wretched reality" (1972: 144) and prevents resistance.

**Theodor Adorno (1903–1969)**

Adorno came from a wealthy Jewish-Catholic background. As a child he showed musical and intellectual gifts. When he entered university he had already published two articles, and he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree at the age of twenty-one. During the 1920s he studied with the composer Arnold Schoenberg and began an association with the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. Following the Nazi rise to power he fled to Paris, Oxford, and then to the United States. Returning to Germany after the war. Always aloof from practical politics, he continued to write extensively on culture, sociology, and aesthetics from a left-wing perspective until his death in 1969.


Aside from evoking a numb-like and relatively amused mass society, the culture industries also actively propagate pro-capitalist ideologies. Movings about the need to conform, to consume, to work hard, and to achieve individuality are a typical feature of culture industry products. These help to motivate the workforce and prevent collective action.

Taken as a whole, Adorno's orientation to popular culture is innovative. He saw it as superficial, trivial, manipulative, and pernicious. Jazz music and popular film in particular are condemned. By contrast, his orientation towards "high art," especially avant-garde modernism, is for the most part, appreciative. He believed that it was superior in terms of its intellectual values and could encourage reflectivity and critical thinking. This orientation has since become fashionable. The school of British cultural studies, for example, has championed the political validity of the popular. Empirical research into audience reception of mass culture also suggests that ordinary people are more critical and discerning than Adorno thought (for discussion of these points see chapters 9 and 10). For the most part Adorno's thinking in this area belongs more properly to aesthetic theory than to the kind of cultural theory that is current today. More useful is his general insistence that business and money are centrally involved in much cultural production, and we need to be alert to the consequences of this fact.

**Jürgen Habermas**

Jürgen Habermas is often considered to be the last member of the Frankfurt School. A generation younger than the others, Habermas was in his youth.
a student of the leading figures in the circle. Consequently their ideas have exerted a decisive influence on his thinking. While his work has undergone many phases and transformations, a common thread is the critique of capitalism and instrumental reason. Like his teachers such as Horkheimer and Adorno, he sees these as corrosive forces which prevent liberating, ethical, and democratic forms of human association. As we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno saw the Enlightenment as having led to a dead end of control and oppression. Habermas has continued this critique, but has also attempted to salvage the Enlightenment project by defining "reason" in new ways.

The Public Sphere

These sorts of themes are apparent even in his early work. Habermas's (1980) doctoral thesis, on The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, was written during the 1960s, it was a largely forgotten text during the 1970s and 1980s, but was rediscovered by a substantial intellectual audience in the 1990s. An impulse for this new interest came from the "velvet revolutions" in East-European Europe. These saw popular demonstrations against communist regimes leading to the collapse of authoritarian state power and the rise of democracy. Social scientists read this as a sign that civil society (the citizenry and non-state sphere of social life) could stand up to the state through the active construction of a public sphere of debate and civic activism.

Habermas argues that during the eighteenth century there had been an active public sphere consisting of debate and the intelligent exchange of ideas on fundamental questions concerning philosophy, economics, politics, and social organization. This activity had the potential to impact upon formal politics. People met at the coffeehouse as a core location for public-sphere engagement. People would meet here and discuss topical issues with friends and strangers alike. Also important was the rise of print media. Through early newspapers and affordable pamphlets, ordinary members of the community were able to publicize and share their views.

Habermas sees things going wrong with the rise of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. He suggests that the public sphere was replaced by a "biebliche Gesellschaft". This term, which had also been used by Marx, is a polemical one that refers, roughly speaking, to a "bourgeois association." The implication is that the public sphere was hijacked by a particular class interest. He sees on to suggest that with the shift to the contemporary era the public sphere has disappeared altogether, thanks to the impact of the mass media and the institutional differentiation of politics from broader social life. People became talked to, rather than being talkers actively creating the society in which they lived.

The concept of the public sphere is an important one. It has rechristened a good deal of social research on the role of discourse in arenas that are outside of formal political life. Critics acknowledge these benefits while pointing to problems with Habermas's argument (for an overview see Calhoun, 1993). Perhaps the most important of these is a kind of idealization of the public sphere (something that also influences his concept of "lifeworld," below). Habermas tends to eulogize the nineteenth-century public sphere but is relatively inattentive to the forms of exclusion that took place. In reality, coffeehouses were chiefly frequented by educated and affluent men. By formal or informal terms the working class, women, and minorities were largely excluded from participation. A related problem is that Habermas tends to depict a single, unified public sphere. In complex and differentiated societies it may be more useful to think about multiple public spheres organized around communities defined by race, gender, sexuality, and religion. These are sometimes overlapping, sometimes separate.

Knowledge and Human Interests

In his middle-period work on Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas (1979) expanded on the familiar Frankfurt School attack on positivism and natural science. He argued that they allow only for the solution of narrow technical problems and fail to ask the more important questions that would allow for a radical rethinking of social relations and ideas about the nature of the good society. The interpretative discourse of the arts are deemed equally inadequate in that these major concerns is increasing mutual understanding rather than dis-covering the conditions for human emancipation. Only critical social sciences, Habermas claims, are able to combine the quest for knowledge with a profound understanding that human interests lie in maximizing freedom through the implementation or fundamental social change.

The Theory of Communicative Action

Whilst Knowledge and Human Interests tours over familiar Frankfurt School territory, Habermas was to take a more innovative approach in his later work. He returns in detail to themes present in his study of the public sphere, looking in particular at the potential for human communication to enhance human freedom. His major publication of the 1980s, The Theory
of Communicative Action is a long and densely argued work that is difficult to summarize without risking triviality. Habermas (1984) draws on authors as diverse as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, and Mead in constructing his position. Perhaps the best starting point, however, is to realize that Habermas is working in the Frankfurt School tradition and is building on the legacy of Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialektik der Enlightenment (see McCarthy 1990). As we have seen, in that work they had argued that reason had reached a dead end and in the bureaucratic rationalization of society. A fatalistic pessimism pervaded their thinking to the point where they could not see how reason could provide the foundation for emancipation.

Habermas suggests that the Enlightenment project (which saw reason as leading to emancipation) could be saved if reason was redefined in a novel way. He asserts that we need to work with a concept of Communicative Action, consisting of the undistorted activities of people attempting in a genuine way to attain clear mutual understanding. The problem, as he sees it, is that the rise of modernity took a wrong turn. On the one hand, it allowed for the possibility of clearer communication as the conventional restraints of tradition were removed. Central to this was the process of differentiation as described by Durkheim and Parsons. This entails a new generalization, an increased autonomy for various forms of social life and a potential ability for them to reflexively self-regulate. To the other hand, processes of bureaucratization and commodification became too powerful. They cut institutional life from community inputs—essentially those relating to substantive values (e.g., equality, democracy, human solidarity). The result was a society driven by impersonal and alienating forces, especially those of capital and Weberian Zweckrationalität. These obeyed their own logic and no longer required value-inputs from human agents.

Habermas's analysis is in many ways similar to that of Lukács, who had written on the subject some years before (see pp. 17-25). An important conceptual elaboration that allows him to move beyond such previous approaches is his extensive use of systems theory and in particular the concept of systems world and lifeworld. The lifeworld consists of solidarity, face-to-face contact, family, community, and substantive value commitments. Habermas paints a picture in which the system world has been progressively "invading" or "colonizing" the lifeworld as modernity has unfolded. He draws loosely on Parsons's John model (see chapter 2) to understand this process, but suggests that it presents "too banal" a picture, because it does not have the "herewithal to provide a plausible explanation of pathological patterns of development" (McCarthy 1984: 203). Thus far, we have seen, argued that society involved more or less equal inputs from its various subsystems. Habermas, by contrast, claims that the "modus of exchange" of the system world is money and power have become dominant and have prevented true communicative rationality. They now trespass where they do not belong and are replacing ethical, emotional, and value-commitments in key players in the organization of the lifeworld. This process has involved for the extraction of the public sphere at the hands of a capitalist mass media, the growth of meaningless Kafkaesque bureaucracies, the subversion of democracy by big business, constraining inequality, and the substitution of passive workers, taxpayers, and consumers for active deontics and communicators. Habermas seeks a way of revitalizing the lifeworld and allowing it to fight back against the colonizing forces of subordination and bureaucratic rationalization. The answer lies in his theory of communicative rationality. This consists of open, honest, and informed debate between individuals which is free from the distorting constraints of ideology and power.

CRITIQUES OF THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas's argument has been criticized on various fronts. Poststructural critics like Foucault question whether the Enlightenment project can, or indeed should, be salvaged. Others have pointed to the utopian aspect of Habermas's work. Feminists comment that he idealizes the lifeworld of the domestic sphere rather than seeing it as a fundamental locus of patriarchal oppression. For many feminists fixed system-level intervention in the family and private life (e.g., domestic violence, child support payments) has been a positive rather than negative dimension of social change. Utopian thinking is also evident in the way that Habermas's diagnosis of the ills of modern society is more convincing than his cure. He has relatively little to say about concrete ways to build a better world. It is here that his theory has faced two main problems. First, that he has been unable to identify the possibility of communicative rationality, thus making it possible for people to freely choose. In other words, this perspective is utopian. Second, that he has not been able to support this kind of activity. These might include a diverse mass media, grass-roots social movements, civic activism, and so on.

Louis Althusser

Like other cultural Marxists, the French philosopher Louis Althusser attempted to incorporate a more nuanced understanding of culture and
human subjectivity into the legacy of Marxian thinking. Where he differs from writers like Lukács and the Frankfurt School is that he did not embrace the humanist, intellectual, and individualist tradition of Western Marxism. Althusser argued that Marx and his works and ideas were humanistic and subjectivistic and were not sufficiently disenchanted with Hegelian idealism. By contrast, in his later work, Althusser advocated an objective and scientific approach. Althusser believes this later, more materialist vision is the superstructure of society. He saw it as broadly structuralized in orientation and therefore, as more intellectually powerful. In a sense this was a faithful and intellectual step. It cut Althusser off from reference to Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844). By abandoning this resource as an intellectual and subjective dimension of Marx’s thought, Althusser left himself with the difficult task of developing a cultural theory from the later works constructed from within the traditional historical materialism. In order to do so he turned towards structuralism for a solution. Althusser (1971) reads Marx’s later works very carefully and claims to derive from them the basis for a structural model of society which gave culture and politics an independent role. He asserted that there was an economic base (the mode of production, means of production, etc.) and a superstructure (consisting of a political and legal structure (the state and legal system) and an ideological structure (the church, political parties, etc.). According to Althusser, the superstructure worked to help generate the conditions necessary for the survival of capitalism - its major function, thus, was to allow for the reproduction of capitalism. The state and legal system are a machine of repression which enables the ruling classes... to ensure their domination over the working class (1971: 137). They are concerned with regulating the supply of labor, dealing with social discontent, and ensuring that the economy runs in ways that facilitate the accumulation of capital by the dominant class. The ideological system (we return to this later) provided legitimations for capitalism and offered people identities and roles that were necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist system. Taking a structuralist position, Althusser stressed that the conditions of the superstructure were interrelated, each one performing a vital social function and each one meshing with the others to form a seamless, smoothly functioning, industrial capitalist society. So far this seems like orthodox, materialist Marxism with its base-superstructure model of social life, albeit with a twist of left-wing functionalism (see p. 7. 256-9). Althusser, however, wished to give more power to the superstructure than was given to his supporters termed “cultural materialism.” In order to do this he developed some significant (and controversial) concepts. He argued that the superstructure had a “relative autonomy” (1971: 135) from the base. This is a complex and much debated term and Althusser was never really clear what he meant by it. He implies that the superstructure could have an impact of its own upon social life and that the economic base provided only broad limits and guidelines for the forms of institutions and ideologies that could emerge within it. Another term that Althusser used to explain his thinking was that of “determination in the last instance” (1971: 135). This, again, is generally taken to mean that there are complex, reciprocal relationships between the base and superstructure and that at the end of such complex webs and chains of causation we will find an economic cause.
Althusser’s efforts to escape from the ironclutches of simplistic economic determinism whilst working within a structural model of social relations denote one key feature of his work. Another was his attention to the role of the state in cultural life. In his collection entitled Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, Althusser (1971) argues that in working to reproduce capitalism the state makes use of two kinds of systems. The repressive state apparatus (RSA) consisted of institutions which made use of coercive force. Examples include the police, the military, and prisons. These might be used to crush protest and dissent on the streets, to break strikes, and to suppress left-wing military insurrections. The ideological state apparatus (ISA) consisted of institutions that promulgated illusions about the nature and organization of society. These included the media, the church, and above all the school. All of these have links to the state via legislation, funding, or administration. While the church was the most important ISA in pre-capitalist societies, today this role is played by the educational system. It provided the inbred, passive, and compliant workforce required by the capitalist enterprise.

By linking concepts of ideological reproduction to the operation of the state in this way, Althusser’s work points to specific loci of ideological production. In this respect his work (like Gramsci’s) is important in adding specificity to Marxist ideas which, often tend to posit somewhat freewheeling and dominant ideologies. The concept of the ISA helps us to see these ideologies as concrete agencies and processes or at least to look for ties in specific locations.

Althusser argued that the role of the ISA was to provide agents with false concepts about society and their place in it. Rather than understanding their true role in society and the nature of the capitalist system, Althusser sees actors living their lives in a false, subjective world. As he puts it: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1971: 162). So, as people go about their daily business, they have illusory relations to others and to the capitalist system, rather than having a complete and scientific understanding of what is really going on. Thanks to the influence of Jacques Lacan on his thinking (see chapter 12), Althusser sees self-identity as playing a crucial role in this process. According to Althusser the needs of the economic base determine the kind of “functions” that individuals must fulfill—to work, administer, and so on. People, however, are generally unaware of their objective identities as functionaries within a capitalist system. Instead they inhabit illusory subject positions and identities which are re-opposed and allocated by the ISA. As he puts it: “All ideology has the function... of constituting concrete individuals as subjects” (1971: 171). Althusser stresses the ways that people voluntarily subscribe to particular identities such as these and the ways that they mesh with the objective needs of the system to reproduce. The subjectivity that people occupy seem “natural” and so ideology is not recognized as such.

Critiques of Althusser

Althusser should be praised for the systematic nature of much of his thought and for attempting to attenuate an understanding of culture and cultural autonomy within a structural Marxist framework. This is arguably a task of much greater difficulty than the more common humanist Marxist approach. It is no surprise, therefore, that this critique generally argues that Althusser’s work fails to reconcile historical materialism with an understanding of the autonomy of culture and subjectivity. Perhaps the most compelling argument along these lines is a famous essay entitled “The Poverty of Theory” by the British neo-Marxian historian E. P. Thompson (1958), which launches a sustained and vitriolic attack on Althusser’s work. The agenda behind this attack was a desire to defend the tradition of humanist, empirical Marxism and to prevent theoretical structuralist thought from hijacking the Marxist legacy. Thompson’s critique has several strands. He argues that:

- Althusser’s work was too abstract and failed to engage with concrete data about the real struggles of real people.
- Althusser was master of complex word games, but failed to deliver genuine theoretical innovation.
- Althusser’s vision of social process was too deterministic. His concepts, such as "relative autonomy," merely substituted a complex deterministic mechanism for a simple one. Drawing on a point and analogy, Thompson suggests that Althusser has replaced the clock-like determinism of vulgar materialism with an epistemologically flawed system of mechanistic ideas that tracks not only time but also the movements of the sun, moon, stars, and planets—Thompson’s point is that even though the model may be more complex, the underlying mechanism is still one of clockwork determinism.
- In the final analysis, Althusser’s vision of social life was one which denied the potential for human freedom and creativity—specifically, the potential for people to make their own history.

Gaardian writers during the 1980s also attacked Althusser. Whilst they were somewhat sympathetic to his political orientation, they also used his thinking as a foil with which to distinguish their approach. Stuart Hall...


56 Culture as Ideology in Western Marxism

(1980s: 32–5), or, more precisely, pointed to the superior capacity of Gramscian models to acknowledge contingency, flexibility, agency, and cultural autonomy. Viewed in this light, Althusser begins to look like a rigid and doctrinaire systems theorist, whose abstract models are unable to come to terms with the complexities of the real world.

Althusser’s work reached its peak of influence in the late 1960s and 1970s among left-wing academics, before being replaced by the rising stars of Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu during the 1980s. However, it was still possible to find large numbers of enthusiastic graduate student and faculty devotees up to the late 1980s. The reasons for Althusser’s fall from grace are manifold. Some relate to the general decline of structuralist thinking and the need to incorporate agency into cultural explanation. Others relate to growing academic interest in the autonomy of culture and the inability of his approach to unambiguously acknowledge this possibility. Still more reasons reflect changes in the organization of society, such as the apparent decline of class as an organizing principle in post-industrial society. In the last instance, Althusser’s theory was deemed less able to deal with each of these shifts than those of his major competitors within the camp of critical social science.

The demise and future of Western Marxism

Western Marxism today is not the force it once was. For much of the twentieth century it was a magnet for critical thinkers, its reputation enhanced by the plethora of great minds who worked in the tradition. Today its energy seems to have been dissipated. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the mainstreaming of West European socialist parties during the 1980s and 1990s took the wind out of the Western Marxist sails. Nobody else seemed to believe in the socialist alternative they were advocating. During the 1970s and 1980s a smorgasbord of critical paradigms (e.g., feminism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism) came into common currency and compounded this isolation. These provided critical thinkers with ways to talk about power, culture, and inequality without carrying the Marxist baggage of class analysis, materialism, omnipotence, and socialism. As a result many cultural theorists on the left abandoned Marxism for pastures new. Finally, Western Marxism has become routinized into an academic trade. The era of charismatic leaders, intellectual giants, and world-historical struggles has passed. Its appeal now is pronic rather than mesiastic, leaving ideas to compete on their own merits for an audience in what is an increasingly competitive marketplace of ideas. The future of Western Marxism will depend on its ability to adapt to this changed environment while retaining a minimally Marxist identity.

Suggested Further Reading

The discourse of the Western Marxists is often dense, abstract, and philosophical; it can also be quite intransigent, with authors debating the finer points of Marxism among themselves in an "enchanted language" (Anderson 1979: 32, 53–4). While these debates might be important for insiders, they can be rather off-putting for outsiders. Perry Anderson’s Considerations on Western Marxism offers an efficient and sympathetic introduction to the area by a leading proponent.

The philosopher Richard Rorty says that when he cannot understand Habermas he reads interpretations of his work by Thomas McCarthy. I recommend the same strategy. Thomas McCarthy’s introduction to his translation of Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action covers the main points of a monumental work in only thirty-two pages and will prepare the reader for the hundreds of pages that are to follow. Ted Benton’s (1984) book on structural Marxism provides a fair summary of Althusser’s distinctive approach. The well-known writings by Benjamin, Althusser, and Adorno discussed here are also just about within the scope of novice readers. A hard-to-find book by Roger Scruton entitled Thinkers of the New Left will amuse those who dislike critical theory and enrage those who are devotees. Scruton is a conservative philosopher who argues, in a somewhat flippancy way, not only that the much cultural Marxism is hopelessly confused and simplistic, but also that it is merely old Marxism in drag. I hesitate to recommend this book, but even if it is sometimes inaccurate and rather acid, at least it is lively and provocative.