

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 a century or so ago. 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 materialism**. Such a position is most clearly advocated in his late masterwork *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 determinant 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 is 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 springing 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 “opium” 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 *Kapital* and Marx’s other writing 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 exiled. 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.

Reference: Tucker 1978.

The materialist Marx of “scientific socialism” that we find in *Das Kapital* is perhaps the best known. However, in his earliest post-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 (1978a) developed a more humanistic vision with an emphasis on the mental 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 communism and the end of private property, there would once again be an end to alienation. Whilst the ideas of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are often rather metaphysical and difficult to apply in empirical research, they have exerted a major influence on critical cultural theory (see chapter 3).

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 deterministic 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 agendas 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 reciprocities between 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 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 moral 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 (1984 [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 tend to think alike as they all do 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 punishment of deviants. Such episodes documented collective outrage and were expressive as much as practical 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.

EMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

Durkheim was born into the tight-knit Jewish community of eastern France. He was the son of a rabbi and he studied Hebrew and scripture alongside his regular schooling. While this background was repudiated by his embrace of secular modernity and civic morality, it may have influenced his later religious sociology. Early in his academic career Durkheim taught philosophy and obtained a position at the University of Bordeaux. The publication of *The Division of Labour in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide* in the 1890s moved him to the front of the French intellectual stage and established sociology as an academic discipline in France. He moved to Paris in 1902 and founded a school around the journal *L'Année Sociologique*. During World War One, Durkheim's son and many of his promising students died. His health suffered as a consequence of these losses and he died in 1917.

Reference: Coser 1971.

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 **anomie** had resulted. This is a situation of social dislocation where customary and cultural controls on action are not very strong. In his study of *Suicide*, Durkheim (1966 [1897]) looked at suicide data in order to document the social conditions under which an individual will 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 volition. These are collective or “social” in nature and are external and constraining on the individual. Durkheim suggested that sentiments, moralities, and behaviors could be explained away as social facts that were linked to other objective features of society like social organization, societal differentiation, and social change. There is a tendency toward reductionism here which undercuts his emphasis on the moral and normative aspects of social life. That is to say, sentiments and beliefs, like other dimensions of the social, are accounted for as a response to social structural forms and needs. In particular they tend 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 later book is less reductionist than his earlier work. Durkheim sees religion more as a *sui generis*

phenomenon 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 beneficent and is often 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 provided 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 effervescence**. This provides a strong sense of group belonging. Durkheim, to conclude, argued that the reconstruction of social bonds was the real reason for the existence of religion and ritual – not the worship 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 moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals . . . reaffirm in 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 promulgating the decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal 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 needs and 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.

Durkheimian 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, which elaborated Durkheim's functionalist understandings of the reciprocal relationship of culture and society. Chapter 5, by

contrast, has at its center explorations of ritual, classification, morality, and symbolism that have built mostly on the legacy of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Max Weber

Max Weber is a complex author whose work covered a vast historical and theoretical territory. It is arguably the case that Weber's *oeuvre* does not amount to a systematic social theory, but rather consists of scattered, brilliant insights. Much of his work is quite materialist, pointing to the role of power, military force, and organizational forms in maintaining social order. However, there is also a strong idealist streak in some of his writings and we will focus on this here.

At the center of Weber's relevance for cultural theory is his understanding of human action. Weber's thinking on this topic, like his religious sociology (see below), was decisively influenced by the German hermeneutic tradition (see Coser 1971: 244ff.). This, in turn, was a specification of the German idealist tradition of Kant and Hegel. Kant had argued that we needed to make a radical distinction between the mind and the body. While the latter was constrained, the former was free from determination. Consequently human life was very much about freedom. This emphasis on the power of the ideal had influenced thinkers like Hegel, who saw the development of history as the spontaneous unfolding of *Geist*, or "spirit." As a young man Marx had shared this view. As we have seen, he later reacted against idealism of this kind by developing a rigorous materialist explanation of cultural and mental life. Weber, by contrast, tried to learn from idealist philosophy at the same time as acknowledging realities of power, economic development, and so on. In thinking through this issue he was influenced by the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who was a powerful figure in the German hermeneutic tradition of the nineteenth century. Dilthey argued that knowledge concerning humans had to take account of the meaningful nature of action. What was required was **Verstehen**, or understanding. This requires the observer to try to reconstruct the subjective meanings that influenced a particular line of action – an activity that could involve re-creating shared cultural values as well as empathizing 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 *Verstehen* 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 motive 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. **Wertrational**, 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, aesthetic, religious or other form of behavior” (Weber 1968: 25). By contrast, **Zweckrational**, or goal-oriented action (also known in cultural theory as purposive rationality, means–ends rationality, and instrumental action), was driven by norms of efficiency. These emphasized the need to calculate precise means of attaining specified ends, but lacked the ability to identify overarching moral directions and culturally specified goals. Weber suggested that as we entered modernity *zweckrational* action was becoming more common (see below). Weber’s discussions on *Verstehen* 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, the broader community of cultural sociologists 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 part. Weber looked at the role of the doctrine of predestination held by early Protestants. This argued that fate with respect to heaven and hell was determined before birth. **Salvation** could not be bought or sold or earned by good deeds. According to Weber, this led to feelings of unease. Protestants looked for signs that they had been chosen to be saved by God. Economic success was one such sign. The unintended consequence of the doctrine of predestination was a rational and planned acquisition of wealth with an associated **protestant ethic** about the need for methodical and disciplined hard work. Over time the religious foundations of capitalist accumulation dropped from view, leaving a field characterized by a shallow, unfulfilling, and constraining *zweckrational* mode of action and an economic order of “pure utilitarianism” organized around thrift, profit, and constraint. Weber writes: “The Puritan wanted to work in 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 idealist 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 organizational factors as well as religious motivations and opposed one-sided explanations, whether material or ideal in nature (see Weber 1958: 183). Seen 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 “this-worldly asceticism” which promoted evangelical activism and world-transforming activity. By contrast, the religions 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 innovation and social dynamism to be found in Europe at the same time.

Clear affinities exist between Weber and Durkheim in that both point to the centrality of religion as a core dimension of culture. However, Weber’s approach places a greater emphasis on the intellectual content of abstract belief systems, while Durkheim foregrounds visceral, embodied emotions. 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 ties and sacred goals were of vital importance in today’s world. Weber, by contrast, advanced a thesis of **disenchantment**. This asserted that with the onset of modernity, meaning was being emptied out of the world. We are living in an age of bureaucracy, where the focus is placed on efficiency and rationality rather than on attaining some kind of transcendence or pursuing ultimate meanings. In Weber’s terms the *Zweckrational* was coming to replace the *Wertrational*. Life had lost its sense of purpose, and people had 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 interests and reading were diverse, and included history, law, and philosophy. Unlike Simmel (see below), his talent was recognized early and he obtained a prestigious chair at Heidelberg at a young age. Weber's mental and personal life was very complex. He never consummated his marriage and in 1897 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.

Reference: Coser 1971.

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: 215ff.) 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 antithetical to economic considerations. A key feature of charismatic authority is its instability. According to Weber the charismatic leader is under constant pressure to produce signs of their power. If they fail to produce results, their charismatic power can evaporate. Further problems revolve 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 inevitably routinized and replaced by a bureaucratic mode of domination. While charisma has generally been treated as a psychological or interpersonal phenomenon, it can also be understood in more cultural terms. Weber's writings discuss religion, prophecy, salvation, and redemption as much as group psychology and so the concept has much to offer those interested in the role of symbolic patterns in political life (for further discussion see Smith 2000). **Legal-rational authority** character-

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 arises as 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 order. Weber provides examples such as entrepreneurs, laborers, and *rentiers*. Status, which is of most interest here, refers to groups with a common "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 privileges such as monopolies and sinecures. 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: 306).

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 near-universal significance of religious beliefs in human life, he creates space for the autonomy of culture. His theories also foreground 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 disenchantment of the modern world and on the routinized and rationalized qualities of contemporary life with a corresponding instrumental (rather than normative) regulation of human sociality. It is almost as if Weber is arguing that culture was 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 antisemitism, 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.

Reference: Frisby 1984.

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 modernization. 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 sociality. 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 face a tension between our need to remain inconspicuous 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 respond to cultural needs rather than practical ones. Hemlines and colors make little difference to our survival chances – their 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 collectivity. 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 collectivity. On the other they can use it to express their individuality, perhaps by only subtle adjustments to 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: 189). 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 seen him marked out as a pioneer in this area. He is being increasingly reread 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 unsurpassed 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 more accessible original works by each of these authors are 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. Dipping into *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* offers perhaps the best opportunity to glimpse Durkheim's distinctive vision of the spiritual dimensions of society.
