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. More particularly, we begin with the work of four founding figures in sociology, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel, and two other thinkers from roughly the same period, Friedrich Nietzsche and W. E. B. DuBois. While these last two have not traditionally been classified among the founding figures in the emergence of the discipline of sociology, they nonetheless made contributions to the sociological study of culture that have been widely and increasingly recognized in the past few decades, Friedrich Nietzsche and W. E. B. DuBois. Many current debates are shot through with foundational themes, problems, and perspectives that originate in the works of these six scholars. As thinkers with powerful minds, they provided a set of core concepts and tools that are still serviceable 100 years or more 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.

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,

he 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 super-structure 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 [1848]: 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**.

The materialist Marx of "scientific socialism" that we find in *Das Kapital* is perhaps the best known. However, in his earliest writings that were more strongly influenced by the thinking of the German idealist philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), 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. While 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).

Karl Marx (1818–83)

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 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 initiated by Marx, while also attempting to move beyond a narrow mechanistic determinism. Efforts have been made to explore further 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 chapters 3 and 16, 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, 14, and 15.

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, while organic solidarity saw punishment aimed at the reintegration of the individual into the group.

Looking at the sweep of history, Durkheim suggested that, although the increasing division of labor had opened up the potential for greater individual freedom and

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Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Durkheim was born into the tight-knit Jewish community of north-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

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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 their 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, while 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 eager 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

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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 recreating 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: "sciences of the spirit") rather than the natural sciences (see also pp. ••).

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. He expressed these ideas most clearly in his monumental *Economy and Society* (1968 [1922]). 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" (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). His discussions on *Verstehen* and on the forms of social action have provided significant philosophical support for advocates of interpretative sociology. While 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, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958 [1904]). In this, he argues against materialist views of the origins of capitalism, asserting that religious beliefs also played a part. He 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: 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, he 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.

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 preindustrial 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 that 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** characterizes 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.

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, he was recognized as a leading intellectual in his country.

Reference: Coser 1971

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" (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

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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 his 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).
- Weber's 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 think further 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.

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 related to 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.

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

Reference: Frisby 1984

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. He 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, *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 and advertisements, traffic signs, and other such messages, as in the photograph of Manhattan's Times Square, shown in figure 1.1. 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

Figure 1.1   Times Square, Manhattan, New York

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 Simmel 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 not to 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 *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 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. ••). 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. ••). 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.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche has traditionally not been understood as a thinker concerned with culture in a social scientific sense, but nevertheless a grasp of the basic elements of his thought is crucial to understanding some of the most important contemporary cultural theory, especially some of the developments in poststructuralist and postmodernist thought and theory about the body (see chapters 7, 13, 14, and 16). Even some of the theorists discussed above were profoundly marked by their encounters with Nietzsche's work. Weber's work on religion and rationality clearly bears the traces of that encounter, while Simmel (1986 [1907]) dedicated an entire book to a discussion of the relationship of Nietzsche's thought to the ideas of one of Nietzsche's own influences, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.

While Nietzsche is perhaps best known for his proclamation that "God is dead," which he immediately complicated by asking "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?" (1974 [1887]: 181), the core of Nietzsche's contribution to cultural theory is found in his project for the "**revaluation of all values**" that sought to challenge existing modern morality by showing that "the so-called goodness of modern man is not virtuous, that his so-called religion is not religious, and that his so-called truths are not truthful" (Kaufmann 1959 [1950]: 97). The central source of modern morality, in Nietzsche's account, is Judeo-Christian culture, and so he mounts a profound critique

of its methods for assigning moral value. Judeo-Christian culture is based in a framework for the construction of identity and the understanding of history that is quite different from the Greek culture which it superseded. In the latter, Nietzsche argues, the self is **active**, seeking through rigorous self-examination and a spiritualized, aestheticized experience of pleasure to make itself into a higher type of human being, something that is culturally produced but still in tune with the basic natural drive that orients human beings, the **will to power**. This is an important concept that has been defined in many ways since Nietzsche's death, some of them directly contradictory to others. It can be understood as the basic drive of an organism or a force to perpetuate itself, to enhance and expand its purview and its frame of existence. As Nietzsche put it in *The Gay Science*: "The great and small struggle always revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power – in accordance with the will to power which is the will to life" (1974: 292). This may in some cases involve conquering other forces, but it also requires formidable control of self-destructive instincts within the organism or entity itself. It is the drive in a force or entity to distinguish itself and to resist being reduced to likeness with other forces and entities, thereby expressing its **difference**. Entities with high quanta of the will to power are active rather than **reactive**, motivated by and at peace with internal drives and values rather than directed outward to the values of others.

In Judaism and, later, in a still more distorted form in Christianity, a different kind of self emerges, according to Nietzsche. Instead of seeking its meaning via the will to power and the effort to transform and direct itself, the self engages in what Nietzsche famously labeled with the French term ***ressentiment***. A culture of *ressentiment* is based in an outward-directed, reactive morality that starts with an assumption of suffering on the part of the subject that is seen as caused by some external agent. For Jewish and Christian culture, Nietzsche contends in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that there is the need for a "hostile external world . . . [and] external stimuli in order to act at all" (1967 [1887]: 37). And there are always external enemies, the Godless who have not accepted the one true God, who seek to enslave them, or who have already done so, e.g., in the Old Testament narrative of Pharaoh and the Exodus. Members of Judeo-Christian culture do not see themselves as morally good and proceed from there, as is the case with the Greeks, in Nietzsche's account. They see their purported tormentors as evil, understand themselves then as the victims of that evil, and build a moral culture on this basis.

The outcome for Nietzsche is a culture in which superior examples of human being, those who assert their difference and are uninterested in the values of the masses, are attacked and destroyed as evil victimizers. Culture becomes a repressive weapon for fighting the purported evil opponent instead of a training program for the creation of higher human beings. The self is thoroughly domesticated and leveled, and the differences between selves are denied and attacked. This Christian culture becomes, even in a secular form (socialism is for Nietzsche the secular political form where Christian cultural influence is the most direct, but we see it in any humanitarianism that emphasizes identification and allegiance with the weak), the basis of modern democratic culture, and the depletion of creative activity that follows its establishment in modernity is inevitable.

If to this point Nietzsche's perspective on culture might seem to resonate with some of the elitist and pre-social scientific definitions we discussed in the introduction, other elements of his thought make clear close connections to some very contemporary perspectives and concerns in cultural theory. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1967 [1872]), is an investigation of the relationship of tragic art forms to ritual. The cultural genius of Greek civilization, according to his argument, was rooted in a recognition of the falsehood of the "*principium individuationis*," or the idea that the human condition is fundamentally determined by individualization. Instead, Nietzsche shows how the cultural practice of primitive ritual festival and frenzy reveals the true collective and pre-rational nature of human experience and then traces the evolution of ritual through the development of the dramatic form of tragedy. Greek tragic culture is superior to the Judeo-Christian culture that will follow it in Nietzsche's view because it embraces the idea that "all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end" with no possibility of redemption in a supernatural world (1967 [1872]: 104). Ritual, and later tragedy, are the cultural practices by which humans can affirm a joyful acceptance of life in all its many facets, including the fact of its own inevitable end. This interest in ritual and dramatic performance in social life would be taken up by many later cultural theorists (see chapters 5 and 11). In another early work (1873), this one much less well known than the book on tragedy, Nietzsche made an argument about the relationship between language and reality that would serve, a century or so later, as a fundamental claim of poststructuralist theory. Language, he contended, does not simply reflect an objective reality beyond itself. It actually obscures the reality of the irreducibility of any one thing to another by providing us with general concepts that hide that difference. The word "leaf," for example, refers to a vast number of objects that are not identical, but the very existence of the word leads us to believe in that non-existing identity. This theory of language leads one to the epistemological observation that "truth" as expressed in language is never anything more than a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 1954 [1873]). Many linguists and anthropologists of language have followed Nietzsche's position here in arguing that the categories of a given language powerfully affect the ways in which subjects who speak that language can conceive of the world around them.

Finally, Nietzsche contributed important insights to the cultural sociology of the body in his examination of the relationship between *ressentiment* and a certain attitude to the body and its drives. He argues that a particular form of physically sickly asceticism that rejects the body as evil has come to dominate in the West with the triumph of Judeo-Christian culture, and its effects have been extensive. In the place of this self-destructively ascetic approach to the body, Nietzsche proposed that the truly cultivated individual would embrace embodiment and pursue physical desires and pleasures as part of the expression of his will to power. In remarks written in the last productive year of his life, he noted the profound importance of nutrition for the intellectual, linking philosophical profundity to particular climates and cuisines (Germany fared badly here, while north-western Italy rated first place). However sketchy and anecdotal these notes might seem, they certainly demonstrate a clear appreciation for the embodiment of even the most traditionally ideal of human practices that has been tapped into in much contemporary cultural theory (see chapters 7, 8, and 16).

We can summarize the contributions Nietzsche makes to cultural theory as follows:

- emphasis on the notion of difference that would become so important in later cultural work;
- attachment to the kind of cultural relativist perspective in his critique of Judeo-Christian tradition that would later become *de rigueur* in the social scientific perspective on culture;
- positioning of drama and narrative as fundamental to the social;
- significant interest in embodiment and an early sociology of the body;
- focus on the role of irrational motivations and emotional drivers of action.

Criticisms of Nietzsche's understanding of morality and culture have frequently relied on distortions of his work by the Nazi regime, which explicitly set about to make him into a philosopher of fascism despite the many explicit examples in his writing of his hatred of the "anti-cultural sickness" of racist nationalism (1967 [1888]: 321). More reasoned criticisms touch on the fact that his critical perspective can seem to fall into relativism when pushed sufficiently. Nonetheless, his work has been invoked and adapted by some very influential contemporary cultural thinkers on the political left. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and other poststructuralist thinkers, for example, have very deliberately used Nietzschean concepts to launch a systematic critique from the left of what they saw as the static culture of European social democracy.

FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE (1844–1900)

Nietzsche was born in Röcken, Germany (then Prussia) into a family of Lutheran ministers – his father and both grandfathers were members of the clergy. Even before he had received his doctorate in philology from the University at Leipzig, he was appointed to a post at the University of Basel, where he taught from 1869 to 1879. He was not yet 30 when he published *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872. The book attracted attention outside the university, among artists and musicians such as the composer Richard Wagner, but was attacked by traditional philologists. Health problems and his dissatisfaction with the conservative nature of academic scholarship led to Nietzsche's departure from university life. From 1879 until his nervous breakdown (likely caused by syphilis) in January 1889, he lived the nomadic life of the isolated philosopher, moving from one boarding house to another in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy as the seasons changed. He produced a vast amount of work in this 10-year period, including *The Gay Science, Beyond Good and Evil,* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. He lived another decade after falling ill, finally dying in 1900 in the care of his sister Elisabeth. She assumed sole rights over his work, including unpublished notes, and later turned it over to the Nazi regime, where it was selectively edited, thereby posthumously turning Nietzsche into the intellectual spokesman for an anti-Semitic movement he had denounced during his lifetime.

Reference: Kaufmann 1959

W. E. B. DuBois

DuBois focused most of his intellectual attention during his long life on the element of culture that so profoundly affected his own life and career: the question of **race and racial identity**. Despite a Harvard PhD (his was the first doctoral degree ever awarded by the institution to an Afro-American) and experience studying in Germany with Max Weber and other prestigious German social scientists of the late nineteenth century, DuBois was not offered an academic position at any leading university and had to settle for teaching Latin, Greek, German, and English at a small Afro-American college in Ohio. In 1896, however, he was invited to Philadelphia to carry out a study of the Afro-American community there. The result was a classic and enduring treatment of race in America: *The Philadelphia Negro* (1996 [1899]).

In the 1890s, the reigning paradigm for understanding race was squarely biological in orientation. Although there was considerable disagreement as to how many basic human racial types existed, it was broadly accepted that race was fundamentally a phenomenon rooted in objective physical differences with concomitant behavioral characteristics that emerged from those biological facts. DuBois radically challenged this paradigm by pointing to the cultural factors that drove and differentiated the Afro-American population of Philadelphia. Afro-American criminal activity and the formulation of a political response to it formed one of the central motivations for the study on the part of those who funded it, who likely shared at least some of the notions of the nature of Afro-Americans presented by the biological racist theories of the time (Lewis 1993: 188–9). DuBois immediately complicated the analysis of this phenomenon by showing that the vast bulk of that crime was committed by a very small minority of this larger population, and that it was driven by non-biological factors. He argued that Afro-Americans could be divided into four distinct sub-groups, based in part on occupational and economic considerations but also on cultural factors. In a narrative that presages more recent social scientific formulations of the **black underclass**, DuBois showed how biological arguments about racial identity and character fell apart in the face of evidence that the upper class, the laborers, and the morally respectable poor of the Afro-American population did not engage in criminal activity in any greater propensity than did Euro-Americans, and "a distinct class of habitual criminals" that he called "the submerged tenth" were in fact responsible for the great bulk of Afro-American crime (DuBois 1996: 259, 311). Structural facts such as poverty, racial discrimination in the job market, and competition for jobs from European immigrants were strong factors in the production of the criminality of this group, but their cultural values, which distinguished them from other poor Afro-Americans in precisely the way Elijah Anderson has famously formulated as the difference between the "decent" and the "street" (see chapter 15), also played a significant role. A central legacy of slavery, in DuBois's analysis, had to do with the emergence of Afro-American familial practices that prevented full integration into American culture. The strongly monogamous familial culture of early America had been only partially adopted by Afro-Americans, who, at the time DuBois was writing, were only a few generations removed from the polygamous family structures of their African origins. Plantation slavery created a

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powerful barrier to the adoption of monogamy and led to "practically unregulated polygamy and polyandry" (1996: 192). In the wake of liberation, then, the poorest Afro-Americans largely experienced sexual couplings in two forms: unmarried and temporary cohabitation, and "the keeping of men," where young men from the criminal underclass used machismo and sexual prowess to control and exploit numerous young women at the same time. DuBois recognized that efforts to aid the poorest Afro-Americans would have to focus on these familial issues.

DuBois also described the profound importance of the Afro-American churches in Philadelphia. These institutions had taken on a particular significance as a result of the dual character of their African cultural heritage. The Afro-American church was, in DuBois's reading, both a preserve of tribal organization and a surrogate family. Ultimately, though, it had proven incapable of effectively diverting poor Afro-American youth from the amusements of the gambling and dance halls and DuBois believed that a reinforcement of the Afro-American family would necessarily mean a decrease in the influence of the Afro-American church. Insofar as the church's role as a social meeting place was at least as significant as its role as a religious institution in the Afro-American community, it served as a setting for some of the status ranking competition that DuBois saw as harmful to the economic advance of Afro-Americans. Much money was, in his view, frivolously wasted on, e.g., showy clothing for church attendance and decoration of the churches themselves when it should have been directed toward education, the buying of homes, and the possibility of the arrival of "a rainy day" (1996: 392).

In later work, DuBois continued his investigation of racial identity, albeit with a political focus that transitioned gradually from reformism based on the ideas of Booker T. Washington to support for the international communist movement and especially for Third World communism. Perhaps his most well-known theoretical contribution is the notion of the **double consciousness**, which is found in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1961 [1903]). Afro-Americans, according to DuBois, experience identity in a complex, even contradictory manner, quite different from that experienced by Euro-Americans. They are constantly aware of being both American and of African descent, and they constantly see themselves not only from their own situated perspective but also from the perspective of the broader, Euro-American-dominated society which so cruelly dominates them. The end result is that Afro-American self-awareness is at once richer and more fragile than Euro-American identity. Afro-Americans can see more (and in chapter 15 we will examine how standpoint theorists of race have expanded on this point), but they are also constantly in danger of losing their hold on their own self-conception and succumbing to the racist gaze to which they are subjected by those around them, essentially internalizing racist hatred as a form of self-disgust.

It is widely recognized that DuBois did not fully reject the role of the biological in racial identity and in this sense he did not go as far as contemporary cultural theorists of race would go to present race as a constructed category (see chapter 15). Nonetheless, he is almost certainly the central figure in the initiation of the intellectual movement to see race as a cultural category that has dominated much social science in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

W(ILLIAM) E(DWARD) B(URGHARDT) DuBois (1868–1963)

DuBois was born and spent his early life in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a small New England town of 5,000 inhabitants. As a youth there, he later wrote, he perceived almost no racial discrimination and what he did find he tended to attribute to social class distinctions. As his family lacked resources, others in the community helped raise money to send DuBois to Fisk University (an Afro-American college) in Tennessee in 1884. There, in the American South, he saw racism at its most vicious, in the form of the hundreds of Afro-Americans lynched throughout the South each year during this period. He later studied at Harvard and then at the University of Berlin, where he met Max Weber, Heinrich von Treitschke, and other celebrated figures of the German intellectual world. His Harvard dissertation focused on the suppression of the African slave trade. His subsequent teaching career at Afro-American colleges further brought home to him the intransigence of the American racial problem and he began to direct his attention more fully to political activism. In 1905, he formed the Niagara Movement, which soon transformed itself into the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). DuBois dedicated much of his energy to this organization through the mid-1930s. He grew steadily more politically radical and eventually became sympathetic to the global communist movement, visiting with Mao Zedong during the Chinese Great Leap Forward and expressing admiration for Stalin. His long and eventful life came to an end in Ghana the day before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the civil rights march on Washington of August 1963.

Reference: DeMarco 1983

Suggested Further Reading

More than 35 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 in locating specialist volumes dedicated to each of these scholars. Among the more accessible original works by each of these authors are Weber's study of the Protestant ethic, Simmel's 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. The Nietzschean concepts discussed in this chapter are laid out most clearly in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* is accessible and rich in detail, even if much of that detail is now historically dated. Elijah Anderson's essay, "Drugs and Violence in the Inner City" in the edited volume *W. E. B. DuBois, Race, and the City*, shows clearly how DuBois's perspective on race and culture prefigured much of the more complex study of race today, including Anderson's own recent work on the "code of the streets."