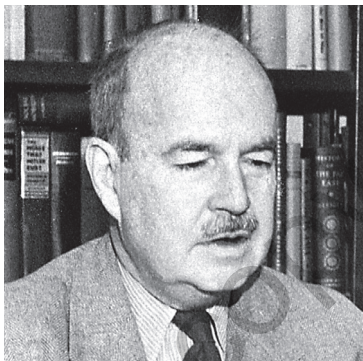


## Seeing Ahead

### Defining Moments in Twentieth Century Theory: Talcott Parsons and the Frankfurt School



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Talcott Parsons: Defining Sociology  
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Building Your Theory Toolbox

Part of what a classical theory text should do is prepare you for contemporary theory. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are essential, but we've done a little bit more than is usual by considering how their ideas help us to understand our contemporary late- or postmodern society. Race and gender have become significant contemporary issues, and you now have significant background in those as well. And to really grasp contemporary sociological social psychology, Mead and Simmel are essential. In addition, there are two major "events" in sociology's history that occurred around the middle of the twentieth century that dramatically impact contemporary theory: Talcott Parsons and the Frankfurt School. One of the

problems with these two is that they aren't classical and they aren't contemporary, so in terms of theory texts, it's difficult to know where to put them. I offer them here as a prelude to contemporary theory. Both were centrally concerned with culture: Parsons saw culture as the most important factor leading to social cohesion and harmony, while the Frankfurt School of theorists saw culture, especially popular culture, as producing false consciousness. Both have influenced contemporary theory beyond their specific ideas.

## Talcott Parsons: Defining Sociology

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Parsons began his university studies at Amherst (Massachusetts), planning to become a physician, but he later changed his major to economics. After receiving his BA in 1924, Parsons studied in Europe, completing his PhD work in sociology and economics at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. After teaching a short while at Amherst, Parsons obtained a lecturing position in 1931 at Harvard and was one of the first instructors in the new sociology department.

### Parsons's Vision for the Social Sciences

Parsons was a man with a grand vision. He wanted to unite the social and behavioral disciplines into a single social science and to create a single theoretical perspective. Parsons worked at this not only theoretically but also organizationally. In 1942, Parsons became department chair of the sociology department at Harvard University. One of the first things he did was to combine sociology, anthropology, and psychology into one department, the Department of Social Relations. The reason he did this was to break down the barriers between disciplines in order to create a general science of human action. His desire, then, wasn't simply to understand a portion of human action (as in sociology); he wanted, rather, to comprehend the totality of the human context and to offer a full and complete explanation of social action. The department existed from 1945 to 1972 and formed the basis of other interdisciplinary programs across the United States.

After 10 years of work, Parsons's first book was published in 1937: *The Structure of Social Action*. This book is characterized by Lewis Coser (1977) as a

watershed in the development of American sociology in general and sociological theory in particular . . . [which] set a new course—the course of functional analysis—that was to dominate theoretical developments from the early 1940s until the middle of the 1960s. (p. 562)

More than any other single book, it introduced European thinkers to American sociologists and gave birth to structural functionalism, which Desmond Ellis described in 1971 as “the major theoretical orientation in sociology today” (p. 692). Parsons's other prominent works include *The Social System*, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, *Economy and Society*, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, and *The American University*. For much of the twentieth century, Parsons was “the major

theoretical figure in English-speaking sociology, if not in world sociology” (Marshall, 1998, p. 480). As Victor Lidz (2000) notes, “Talcott Parsons . . . was, and remains, the pre-eminent American sociologist” (p. 388).

## Parsons’s Theoretical Project

There are at least three ways in which Parsons helped shape the center of sociological discourse in the twentieth century: the way he theorized, the problem he addressed, and the theory itself. We’ll start with his theorizing. Recall that science is built upon positivism and empiricism. As such, science assumes that the universe is empirical, it operates according to law-like principles, and humans can discover those laws through rigorous investigation. Science also has very specific goals, as do most knowledge systems. Through discovery, scientists want to explain, predict, and control phenomena. In addition, there are two other important issues in positivistic theory, which we find in the following quotes from prominent contemporary theorists:

The essence of science is precisely theory . . . as a *generalized* and coherent body of ideas, which explain the range of variations in the empirical world in terms of general principles. . . . [I]t is explicitly *cumulative and integrating*. (R. Collins, 1986a, p. 1345, emphasis added)

A true science *incorporates the ideas* of its early founders in introductory texts and moves on, giving over the analysis of its founders to history and philosophy. (Turner, 1993, p. ix, emphasis added)

The first thing I want us to glean from the preceding quotes is that scientific theory is *generalized*. To make an idea or concept general means to make it applicable to an entire group of similar things or people. As you’ll see when we consider Parsons’s theory, his concepts are very general (and thus fairly dry—but then, all scientific theory is that way). Scientific knowledge also involves both theory synthesis and cumulation. Synthesis involves bringing together two or more elements in order to form a new whole. For example, water is the synthesis of hydrogen and oxygen. *Theoretical synthesis*, then, involves bringing together elements from diverse theorists so as to form a theory that robustly explains a broader range of phenomena. Cumulation refers to the gradual building up of something, such as the cumulative effects of drinking alcohol. *Theory cumulation* specifically involves the building up of explanations over time. This incremental building is captured by Isaac Newton’s famous dictum, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Yet what isn’t clear in Newton’s quote is that the ultimate goal of theory cumulation is to forget its predecessors.

To make this clear, let’s compare the writings of two authors, Edgar Allan Poe and Albert Einstein. Here’s one of Poe’s famous stanzas, from “The Raven”:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

“Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door;  
Only this, and nothing more.”

Here’s one of Einstein’s famous quotes:

$$E = mc^2$$

There are some obvious differences between these two quotes: One is poetry and the other a mathematical equation. But I want you to see a bit more. Does it matter who wrote “Once upon a midnight dreary”? Yes, it does. A large part of understanding poetry is knowing who wrote it—who they were, how they lived, what their other works are like, what style they wrote in, and so on. These issues are part of what makes reading Poe different from reading Emily Dickinson. Now, does it matter who wrote  $E = mc^2$ ? Not really. You can understand everything you need to know about  $E = mc^2$  simply by understanding the equation. The author in this sense is immaterial.

One of the previous quotes is from Jonathan H. Turner’s book *Classical Sociological Theory: A Positivist’s Perspective*. Turner’s (1993) goal in that book was “to codify the wisdom of the masters so that we can move on and *make books on classical theory unnecessary*” (p. ix, emphasis added). That last highlighted section is the heart of theory cumulation: Cumulating theory implies that we do away with the individual authors and historical contexts and keep only the theoretical ideas that explain, predict, and control the social world. In that spirit, here’s a theoretical statement from Turner’s book:

The degree of differentiation among a population of actors is a gradual s-function of the level of competition among these actors, with the latter variable being an additive function of:

the size of this population of actors,  
the rate of growth in this population,  
the extent of economical concentration of this population, and  
the rate of mobility of actors in this population. (p. 80)

First notice how general the statement is: It can be applied to any group of people, living anywhere, at any time. Notice also that there’s no mention of from whom these ideas originally came. Now, you and I might know from whom this proposition comes (Durkheim), but does it matter? No. Like Einstein’s formula, it’s immaterial. If we are doing social science, what matters is whether or not we can show this statement to be false through scientific testing. If we can’t, then we can have a certain level of confidence that the proposition accurately reflects a general process in the social world. In science, authorship is superfluous; *it’s the explanatory power of the theory that matters*. The cumulation of these general statements is one of the main goals of scientific theory.

Of his groundbreaking work, Parsons (1949) says, “*The Structure of Social Action* was intended to be primarily a contribution to systematic social science and not to

history” (pp. A–B). His work is actually a synthesis of three theorists. Parsons (1961) notes how he used the work of each one:

for the conception of the social system and the bases of its integration, the work of Durkheim; for the comparative analysis of social structure and for the analysis of the borderline between social systems and culture, that of Max Weber; and for the articulation between social systems and personality, that of Freud. (p. 31)

Yet Parsons clearly wants us to forget the historical and personal origins of the theories—for science, it’s the power of the synthesized theory to illuminate and delineate social factors and processes that matters. This approach to theory is also what led to the three sociological perspectives or paradigms you were taught in your introduction to sociology courses: structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism. To say that someone is a functionalist, for example, is to pay more attention to the general features of the theory than what he or she contributes originally.

## Parsons and the Problem of Social Order

Parsons saw himself as responding to *the problem of social order* posed by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Parsons’s understanding of this Hobbesian problem of social order begins with the fact that all humans are ruled by passions. Moreover, all people are motivated to fulfill these passions, and more important, they have the *right* to fulfill them because “there is ‘no common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves’” (Hobbes, as cited in Parsons, 1949, p. 89). In other words, things aren’t good or bad in themselves, and people have different desires for diverse things—thus, there is no basis for a rule. In the absence of any rule, people will use the most efficient means possible to acquire their goals. As Parsons says, “These means are found in the last analysis to be force and fraud” (p. 90). Thus, the most natural state of humanity is the war of all against all. The question, then, is how is social order achieved? Parsons’s basic response is the normative order—social order achieved through norms. While some of the language might be new to you, most of Parsons’s response will probably feel familiar. The reason that’s probably the case is that Parsons’s answer to the problem of social order has become for many sociologists the basic answer given in introduction to sociology classes.

### *Voluntaristic Action*

In thinking about humans, it’s sometimes convenient to make the distinction between behavior and action: All living things behave; only humans have the potential to act. Action implies choice and decision, whereas behavior occurs without thought, as when a plant’s leaves reach for the sun. Of course, humans behave as well as act; there are a lot of things we do on autopilot, but we have the potential for action. Theory that focuses on this issue is referred to as *action theory*, which has been an interest of philosophy since the time of Aristotle. Parsons’s work on

action theory draws from Max Weber, who argued that action takes place when a person's behavior is meaningfully oriented toward other social actors, usually in terms of meaningful values or rational exchange. *Voluntaristic action*, then, is never purely individualistic: People choose to act voluntarily within a context of culture and social situations in order to meet individual goals. And because human needs are met socially, people develop shortcuts to action by creating norms and by patterning action through sets of ends and means.

Parsons calls this context of action *the unit act*. There are a variety of factors in the unit act. The first, and in some ways the most important, are the conditions of action. There are of course occasions when we have some control over the initial context—for example, you may decide to go to the movies on Saturday or study for a test. But once the choice is made, the actor has little immediate agency or choice over the conditions under which action takes place. Parsons has in mind such things as the presence of social institutions or organizations, as well as elements that might be specific to the situation, such as the social influence of particular people or physical constraints of the environment.

The second set of factors under which people act concerns the means and ends of action. Here we can see a fundamental difference between action and reaction: Action is goal oriented and involves choice. But for people to make choices among goals and means, the choices themselves must have different meanings. According to Parsons, the meanings of and relationships between means and ends are formed through shared value hierarchy. Cultural *values* are shared ideas and emotions regarding the worth of something, and values are always understood within a hierarchy, with some goals and means being more highly valued than others; otherwise it would be difficult to choose between one thing and another because you wouldn't care. Choices among means and ends are also guided by norms. *Norms* are actions that have sanctions (rewards or punishments) attached to them. Taken together, Parsons is arguing that human action is distinctly cultural and thus meaningful action.

#### *Patterning Voluntaristic Action*

While Parsons has now outlined the context wherein action takes place, the problem of social order isn't adequately answered. Two things need to be specifically addressed: First, Hobbes talked about a person's inner passions driving him or her; second, social order needs patterned behavior. Parsons argues that patterning action occurs on two levels: the structuring of patterned behaviors and individual internalization or socialization. Parsons understands internalization in Freudian terms. Freud's theory works like this: People are motivated by internal energies surrounding different need dispositions. As these different psychic motives encounter the social world, they have to conform in order to be satisfied. Conformity may be successful (well-adjusted) or unsuccessful (repressed), but the point to notice here is that the structure of the individual's personality changes as a result of this encounter between psychic energy and the social world. The superego is formed through these encounters. For Parsons, the important point is that cultural traditions become meaningful to and part of the need dispositions of individuals. The way we sense and fulfill our needs is structured internally by culture—notice how

Parsons reconceptualized Hobbes's concern for passions; in Parsons's scheme they are social rather than individual. For Parsons, then, the motivation to conform comes principally from within the individual through Freudian internalization patterns of value orientation and meaning.

Action is also structured socially through modes of orientation and types of action that have become institutionalized. Modes of orientation simply refer to the way we come into a social situation with specific motives and values. These motives and values come together and form three types of action: instrumental, expressive, and moral. *Instrumental action* is composed of the need for information and evaluation by objective criteria. *Expressive action* is motivated by the need for emotional attachment and the desire to be evaluated by artistic standards. *Moral action* is motivated by the need for assessment by ultimate notions of right and wrong. People will tend to be in contact with others who are interested in the same type of action.

As we interact over time with people who are likewise oriented, we produce patterns of interaction and a corresponding system of status positions, roles, and norms. Status positions tell us where we fit in the social hierarchy of esteem or honor; roles are sets of expected behaviors that generally correspond to a given status position (for example, a professor is expected to teach); and norms are expected behaviors that have positive and/or negative sanctions attached to them. Generally, these cluster together in institutions. For functionalists such as Parsons, institutions are enduring sets of roles, norms, status positions, and value patterns that are recognized as collectively meeting some societal need. In this context, then, institutionalization refers to the process through which behaviors, cognitions, and emotions become part of the taken-for-granted way of doing things in a society ("the way things are").

These clusters of institutions meet certain needs that society has—the institutions *function* to meet those needs. The most important set of institutions for Parsons are the ones that produce *latent pattern maintenance*. If something is latent, it's hidden and not noticed. Social patterns are maintained, then, through indirect management. For this task, society uses culture and socialization. The chief socializing agents in society are the structures that meet the requirement of latent pattern maintenance—structures such as religion, education, and family.

In addition to latent pattern maintenance, Parsons gives us three other requisite functions for a system: adaptation, goal attainment, and integration. The *adaptation* function is fulfilled by those structures that help a system to adapt to its environment. Adaptation draws in resources from the environment, converts them to usable elements, and distributes them throughout the system (the economy). *Goal attainment* is the subsystem that activates and guides all the other elements toward a specific goal (government). In Parsons's scheme, *integration* refers to the subsystems and structures that work to blend together and coordinate the various actions of other structures. In society, the structure most responsible for this overt coordination is the legal system. Together, these four functions are referred to as AGIL: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latent pattern maintenance. All of these functions are embedded within one another and form a bounded system that tends toward equilibrium or balance; in other words, they form society.

## The Frankfurt School: Critiquing Modernity

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Marxist theory greatly influenced two distinct theoretical approaches in contemporary theory. One approach focuses on conflict and class as general features of society. The intent is to analytically describe and explain conflict and power, which are understood as fundamental to society. And this approach is based on the same question as for Parsons: How is social order possible? The short version of Parsons's theory is that social order is achieved through commonly held norms, values, and beliefs. A norm, as we said above, "is a cultural rule that associates people's behavior or appearance with rewards or punishments" (Johnson, 2000, p. 209). This approach to understanding social order is sometimes called the "equilibrium model" because it's based on people internalizing the collective conscious. People do have selfish motivations, but they are offset by the collective conscious, thus creating a balance between individual desires and social needs. Conflict theorists, however, would point out that there is an element of power underlying norms. Notice in the definition that norms are founded upon an ability to reward or punish behavior, both of which are based on power. Conflict theorists also point out that the values and beliefs commonly held in society can be explained in terms of the interests of the elite. Thus, for conflict theorists, social order is the result of constraint rather than consensus, and power is thus an essential element of society. Conflict theorists take the same basic scientific approach as Parsons, seeking generalizable processes and building theory cumulatively.

The other theoretical approach that is inspired by and draws from Marx is critical theory. In general, *critical theory* "aims to dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions and masks that keep us from a full and true understanding of how the world works" (Johnson, 2000, p. 67). Critical theory doesn't simply explain how society operates. Rather, it uncovers the unseen or misrecognized ways in which society operates to oppress certain groups while maintaining the interests of others. Critical theory has one more defining feature: It is decidedly anti-positivistic. Thus, critical theory has a very clear agenda that stands in opposition to scientific sociology. This perspective was brought together by a group of scholars commonly called the Frankfurt School.

### Historical Roots

Briefly, the Frankfurt School (also known as the Institute of Social Research) began in the early 1920s at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. It was formed by a group of radical intellectuals, and ironically, financed by Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy German merchant. Weil's goal was to create "an institutionalization of Marxist discussion beyond the confines both of middle-class academia and the ideological narrow-mindedness of the Communist Party" (Wiggershaus, 1986/1995, p. 16). As the Nazis gained control in Germany, the scholars of the Frankfurt School were forced into exile in the 1930s—but one of them, Walter Benjamin, stayed behind, and when barred from crossing into Spain, committed suicide at the French border in 1940. The Institute was moved first to Switzerland, then New York, and eventually California.



In 1953, it was able to move back to its home university in Frankfurt. The various scholars associated with the school include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, and later Jürgen Habermas.

As it was for Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, the central issue for the Frankfurt School was to understand modernity and its consequences. But unlike them, the young scholars of the Frankfurt School lived through and survived a series of events that changed Europe. One was the Russian Revolution, which took place in 1917—at first it spurred idealistic hopes in the European intelligentsia, but later it became a source of concern about the rise of authoritarianism. The other was the emergence of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, which was followed by World War II. The Frankfurt School scholars were haunted by both Hitler's and Stalin's rise to power, and consequently set up to understand the processes by which fascism and authoritarianism could emerge and rise out of modern democratic societies. As Martin Jay (1973) says, "Critical Theory was applied to the most pressing problem of the time, the rise of fascism in Europe" (p. 116).

The two decades surrounding World War II were a watershed period for many disciplines. The propaganda machine in back of Nazism and the subsequent human atrocities left a world stunned at the human ability to act inhumanely—and for the next decades, it was left to scholars to try to explain what Hannah Arendt (1963/2006) called "the banality of evil." Stanley Milgram's 1961 experiments on authority (Milgram, 1974) as well as Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford prison experiment (Zimbardo, 1971) are two famous examples of such scholarship. For the Frankfurt School scholars, it was clear that what happened in Germany was made possible by, and rooted in, culture—and in its intentional use to control people's attitudes and actions, as formalized in 1933 with the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. And so it was necessary to study culture as an independent entity, something Marx didn't do. The Frankfurt School takes culture seriously and asks us to see ideology as more diffuse than Marx did, as not simply a direct tool of the elite, but rather, as a part of the cultural atmosphere that we breathe. Theoretically speaking, the overarching goal of the Frankfurt School is to bring together Marxist theory, Weberian sociology, and Freudian psychoanalysis in order to better explain modern societies. Like Marx, the Frankfurt School focuses on ideology; but unlike Marx, critical theory sees ideological production as linked to culture and knowledge rather than simply determined by class and the material relations of production. Ideology, according to critical theorists, is more broadly based and insidious than Marx supposed.

### **The Problem With Positivism: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno**

The clearest expression of early critical theory is found in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997), first published in 1944. Adorno was born in Germany on September 11, 1903. His father was a well-to-do wine merchant and musician. Adorno himself was a musician and even studied music composition between 1925 and 1928 in Vienna, after studying sociology and philosophy

at the University of Frankfurt. He finished his advanced degree in philosophy under Paul Tillich (a Christian socialist) in 1931 and started an informal association with the institute. Like most scholars of Jewish heritage, Adorno started to contemplate the possibility of leaving Germany after the Nazi Party took control of the German parliament in 1932. He moved to Merton College, Oxford, in 1934 and to New York City in 1938, where he fully affiliated with the Frankfurt School in exile. When the school returned to Germany, Adorno became assistant director under Max Horkheimer, who had served as director since 1930. Horkheimer was German, also Jewish, and born into a wealthy family on February 14, 1895. After World War I, Horkheimer studied psychology and philosophy, finishing his doctorate in philosophy in 1925 at the University of Frankfurt, where he became a lecturer and eventually met Adorno. Horkheimer became the second director of the Institute of Social Research in 1930 and continued in that position until 1958, when Adorno took the directorship.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) argue that the contradictions Marx saw in capitalism are eclipsed by the ones found in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment promises freedom through the use of reason, rationality, and the scientific method. But in the end it brings a new kind of oppression, not one that is linked to the externalities of life (such as class), but one that extinguishes the spirit and breath of human nature. “The enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997, p. 3).

As we’ve seen, positivism is based on reason and assumes the universe is empirical. Reason is employed to discover the laws of nature in order to predict and control it. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the very definition of scientific knowledge devalues the human questions of ethics, aesthetics, beauty, emotion, and the good life, all of which are written off by science as concerns only for literature, which under positivism isn’t valued as knowledge at all.

Through the Enlightenment and science, rationality has been enthroned as the supreme human trait. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno trace this ascendancy back to fear of the unknown. Rationality began in religion, as magicians, shamans, and priests began to organize and write doctrine, and this impetus toward safety and control accelerated as society relieved such people from the burden of daily work; spirit guides became professional. Their work systematized and provided control over rituals and capricious spirits. Eventually, God was rendered predictable through the ideas of sin and ritualized redemption, and the idea of direct cause and effect was established. Religious issues became universal, with one version of reality, one explanation of the cosmos and humankind’s place in it. The hierarchy of gods and individual responses were thus replaced by instrumental reason. The same fear of uncertainty was the motive behind science as well. The technical control of the physical world promised to relieve threats from disease, hunger, and pestilence. And to one degree or another it has done that. Yet science, like religion before it, takes on mythic form and reifies its own method: There is only one form of knowledge, only one way of knowing that is valid.

This unstoppable engine of rationality also extends to the control of everyday life (and we can see how much we’ve “progressed” in this since the time of Horkheimer and Adorno). The modern life is an *administered life*. Every aspect is open to experts and analysis and is cut off from real social contact and dependency.

People are isolated through technology, whether it's the technologies of travel (cars and planes), technologies of communication (such as phones and computers), or the technology of management (bureaucracies). People rationally manage time, space, and relationships, as well as their own self. Self-help is the prescription of the day, guided by experts of every kind. But what's lost is self-*actualization*—there are only remnants of a self that hasn't been administered, and even those are squashed in the name of the administered life.

Originally, the Enlightenment had an element of critical thought, where the process of thinking was examined. But what Weber called “the disenchantment of the world” soon became as mechanical as the technologies that it creates, and it denies other ways of knowing and being. Horkheimer and Adorno's story of the Enlightenment is, then, “an account of how humankind, in its efforts to free itself from subjugation to nature, has created new and more all-encompassing forms of domination and repression” (Alway, 1995, p. 33). Here, Horkheimer and Adorno also move away from Marx in a decisive way, denouncing *homo faber* as a reductionist understanding of humankind based on “the reification of nature as a field for human exploitation” (Jay 1973, p. 259).

The irony and problem is that the Enlightenment was to free humankind. Yet it has created a new kind of *unfreedom*, a binding of the mind that prevents it from perceiving its own chains of bondage. This of course is what Marx meant when he spoke of false consciousness, but for Horkheimer and Adorno, the blindness is ever more insidious. The very tools of thought that were to bring enlightenment instead bring the administered life. How is it possible to get out of this conundrum? This is precisely where critical theory comes in. Gone are the lofty goals of the Enlightenment, and the method of reason and rationality are useless as well. In back of this negation is a caution and realization. The caution is about being derailed again by believing that we've found *the way*—as Andrew Arato (1978) describes well, both the political theory and cultural analysis of the Frankfurt School “unanimously declared that all attempts to return to a supposed golden age were bankrupt and mortally dangerous” (pp. 207–208). Knowing this implies a second feature of critical theory: The way to freedom is through continual process and critical thinking. Notice that Adorno's reading of the culture industry is not intended as a systematic, objective, sociological study. Rather, it is an act of interrogation. But it is questioning with a purpose—in Adorno's case, to assess the potentials for integral freedom that popular culture provides. The image of integral freedom calls up many images, but among the most important are that freedom must be understood with reference to the whole human being—including social relations, economic achievement, spirituality, sensuality, aesthetics, and so on—and that its chief value is the dignity of the person. “Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by man” (Horkheimer, 2004, p. 120).

## An Analysis of Art and Culture

One of the most interesting developments in critical theory has been its analysis of culture, and especially popular culture. Not only did the scholars of the Frankfurt School innovate by bringing together Marx and Weber in order to better understand

culture, their analysis also speaks directly to our contemporary society, half a century later. Indeed, there is a parallel to be drawn between the technological revolution that impacted Western cultural forms between 1920 and 1940 (from color photography to film to the radio) and the one that is currently transforming the way we live and communicate in the deepest way (with the rise of digital technology and the Internet). This parallel makes the Frankfurt School's "cultural criticism" directly relevant today.

Adorno was himself a classical musician and a composer—in fact, his primary activity was music until the late 1920s. His harsh critique of postwar American popular music and especially jazz has to be understood within the broader research interest of the Frankfurt School: an analysis of modernity that centers on the rise of technology, science, and rationality and their consequences for human beings. For many of our classical theorists, including Max Weber and the Frankfurt School, the rise of modernity implies an increasing importance of *counting* in the social world because rationality relies almost exclusively on measure to know the world. Counting is indeed the basis for capitalism—it is necessary to the rationalization of production and exchange. Remember how Karl Marx describes the process of commodification as a substitution of money (an abstract, measurable entity) for social relations in the way in which we relate to objects—a process that eventually leads to the reification (or "thing-ification") of human life and social relations. When labor is reduced to the sale of labor-time, that is, of hours of work that are counted and made to correspond with wages, human activity becomes a measurable entity. And of course, the very goal of modern capitalism is a quantitative one: the accumulation of capital. We should think of Max Weber as well, and of his analysis of forms of authority: The use of numbers and of measurable elements is a necessary basis for bureaucratic systems—and for the processes of standardization and measurement that bureaucracies imply and rely on.

The scholars of the Frankfurt School had a lot to say about this gradual process of rationalization and quantification, which they saw as the most consequential component of modernity. One of the most interesting analyses comes from Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay on the work of art, which was preoccupied with the new technologies that made reproduction possible—in particular, photography and film. In contrast to painting or drawing, indeed, photography allows for the endless and almost immediate reproduction of the original. The emergence of photography and film was as life changing then as the emergence of digital technology has been in the past couple of decades. But why was reproduction such an issue for Benjamin?

He starts by trying to define art. In this book you have seen many definitions, and you now understand how central concept building is for social theory. You are also aware of the different ways in which theorists develop definitions: Some definitions are focused on the essence or content of a concept, while others are focused on the function or "how" of a concept rather than on "what it is," while yet others emphasize the relationship between two concepts. So what is art? The way in which Benjamin comes to define art is by looking at what differentiates a work of art from a reproduction:

In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. . . . The here and now of the original underlies the

concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 21)

A work of art is unique: It exists at the crossroads of specific time and place. A Picasso painting can be photocopied, reproduced, even painstakingly copied by a painter—but it would then lose something, including its value. For Benjamin, this is not a question of economic value within a system of exchange—we could argue that an original painting is more expensive than a copy because of its rarity—rather, it is a question of identity, and of what Benjamin calls *authenticity*.

We can extend this discussion to objects in general. Think about the production of a bowl by an actual ceramist in a pottery studio. The object produced is unique and reflects a moment in history as much as a human life. Now most of the bowls we buy are produced not by a human being but by machines, in a factory. They are standardized reproductions of one model of bowl: thousands of bowls, all identical, exist. Why would that be an issue, you might say? Are we not investing objects with feelings and meaning independent of the object itself? Isn't this what Durkheim said about sacred objects, for instance? Well, for Benjamin, things are a little more complicated. There exists in the object an authenticity that fades away when it is reproduced: "by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence," argues Benjamin (2008, p. 22), and by doing so the object's *aura* disappears.

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time. . . . To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 23)

The key idea here is uniqueness: The mountain range is unique, and it is also experienced and "followed with the eye" in a moment that cannot be repeated. In turn, Benjamin's focus on the idea of uniqueness leads to a profoundly humanistic understanding not just of human life but of what contemporary theorists might call the social life of objects. When we look at objects in a quantitative way, they lose their uniqueness. In contrast, Benjamin argues for a qualitative understanding of objects: In other words, a branch is not equivalent to just any other branch. When you use a bowl made (crafted) by a ceramist, you can enter a relationship with an object that has a history. But think about it: It also means that the bowl can never be replaced. If you break it, or give it away, the object is forever lost. In contrast, you can replace a standard, machine-made bowl by another one. I wonder how close we can get to arguing that a handmade ceramic bowl reflects and embodies life—which, as Freud would argue, is also about loss—while machine-made bowls comfort us in the fantasy that nothing ever ends, as in video games! This *lived* dimension of objects refers to what Benjamin calls an *aura*.

Recently, Benjamin's notion of *aura* was used by sociologists Bartmanski and Woodward (2013) to better understand the comeback of vinyl records. Ever since the appearance of digital music—first with the compact disc and now with MP3—it looked like vinyl records would go away, just like cassettes did. Yet they never

disappeared. Not only did they keep being produced in musical styles that make a heavy use of them in performances, such as techno/dance or reggae, more recently they have, in fact, known a renaissance across musical styles. Why would people start buying vinyl records again, even though they are more expensive and fragile than digital supports? For Bartmanski and Woodward, the renewed success of the vinyl record can be explained by its “auratic” quality: It is meaningful in ways that a compact disc, and especially an electronic file, cannot be. As an object, it is manipulated and cared for; and it bears the nicks of time and repeated use. In fact “ironically, its fragility and proneness to damage is reinterpreted as a strength endowed with human qualities, compared to digital formats which are endlessly reproducible and deletable at a keyboard stroke” (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2013, p. 20). It is not such an ironic statement. The uniqueness of an object also means it can be lost. History, time, space, and human experience all mark the object, sometimes the point of destroying it. And once destroyed, it cannot be replaced—unlike the thousands of similar, factory-produced bowls, easily replaced once broken. When compact discs appeared, they were thought to be so much better than vinyl records, if only because they were less fragile and more durable. But it turned out that they also became, for precisely this reason, less valuable and certainly less invested by human experience.

Adorno and Horkheimer followed up Benjamin’s analysis of art and technology with several essays on popular culture, and in particular on the postwar music industry. One aspect of the mass production of music is the repetition and reproduction that Benjamin analyzed in his 1936 essay on the work of art. For Adorno, the popular songs one could hear on the radio in the 1940s were all alike—and he would think the same of today’s pop music, manufactured on computers by a few “song makers” who put together hooks, rhythms, and melodies for best-selling singers. But another aspect is the commodification of music, as it becomes not just a practice, a performance, a creation, or entertainment, but a product to be bought and sold (e.g., a commodity). Does it matter? What happens to music (or art, or literature) when it becomes a commodity? The independence of art from the world of money is an old and thorny issue. Throughout history—for instance in Western Europe during the Renaissance or during the Ottoman Empire—artists and intellectuals have been supported by political leaders or wealthy families, a problematic relationship for creation. Today, even as the art market has reached financial heights for antiquities, modern art, and contemporary art alike, money is a salient question. Does art cease to be art when it is bought? Sold? Funded or sponsored? Here is Adorno (1978) on the fetish character of music—and you have to use your knowledge of Marxist theory when you’re reading him, and remember the distinction that Marx makes between the use-value of a commodity and its exchange-value:

This is the real secret of success. . . . The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. He has literally “made” the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it. But he has not “made” it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket. . . . The more inexorably the principle of exchange-value destroys use-value for human beings, the more deeply does exchange-value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment. (p. 279)

In other words, it is not art we are enjoying but its monetary value. Art becomes an object separated from its historical uniqueness, distinct from the human relations that allowed it to exist and produced it. It becomes reduced to the abstract identity it has in the art market. Adorno goes further and points to the crucial role played by advertising in this radical transformation of our relationship with objects—catching us unaware and gradually convincing us that what matters in life is not to be, but to have, to paraphrase the title of a 1976 book by another critical theorist, Erich Fromm: “*To have, or to be?*”

Let’s go back to the idea of counting, to the quantification that has become characteristic of modern life. In the past years, our world has known a frenzy of measurement, to a great extent linked to the rise of the electronic. It is a second technological revolution, perhaps, that follows the rise of the mechanical that was so problematic and consequential in the eyes of the Frankfurt School scholars. Think about it: It is not just the workplace or the state anymore that measure and count tirelessly—it is each of us, reaching to the deepest dimensions of our beings. We have gradually become more aware of how much measurable and countable data we are producing every day about our individual life through our use of cell phones, Internet, or credit cards. But paradoxically, while we worry about “big data” we also increasingly get to understand our personal life primarily through numbers, and we participate in producing ever more data about ourselves through our use of new technological devices—phones, watches, counters, and trackers of all sorts. We time our runs, count our steps, monitor our heartbeats, record our sleep patterns, and track the calories we ingest, as if they were the only way we have to know ourselves. And yet we know that human experience is not reducible to quantitative indicators: There is much more to running than minutes or steps, much more to health than heartbeat patterns, much more to sleep than what a machine can record, and much more to eating than nutrition *facts*.

This is exactly what the scholars of the Frankfurt School seek to unveil—that there is more to human life than what can be quantified. That there is more to human experience than what can be *known*. That uniqueness and individuality make human life valuable, while mass production alters it and reduces it to just a fraction of what it can be and mean.



### BUILDING YOUR THEORY TOOLBOX

- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms. Make your definitions as theoretically robust as possible (and don’t be afraid to consult other sources): generalized theory, theoretical synthesis, theory cumulation, the problem of social order, voluntaristic action, the unit act, values, norms, socialization, types of action,

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status positions, latent pattern maintenance, adaptation, goal attainment, integration, conflict theory, critical theory, administered life, unfreedom.

- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:
  1. Explain Parsons's vision for the social sciences.
  2. Describe the way in which Parsons theorized. Here I want you to write what we might think of as the ideal definition for social science.
  3. Explain how Parsons solves the problem of social order. In other words, according to Parsons, how are social actions patterned across time and space?
  4. Describe how and why the Frankfurt School came into existence.
  5. Explain critical theory's assessment of positivistic theory.