PART I

Developing a Critical Approach to Organizational Communication
Perhaps at no other time in human history have organizations and communication been more central to our lives than they are now. We go to work, attend college and church, do volunteer work, join social groups, shop at numerous stores, internalize thousands of commercials from large corporations, and participate in social media. Human beings are communicating, organizing creatures, and we define ourselves largely through our various organizational memberships and communicative connections.

As simple as this assertion is, it hides a rather complex reality. The organizations that define who we are—and our relationship to them—have become increasingly complicated. Indeed, as systems of communication, we largely take for granted organizations and their role in our lives. We’re like the two young fish that one day pass an older fish. The older fish says to them, “Mornin’, boys. How’s the water?” After he has swum away, one young fish turns to the other and says, “What’s water?” Communication and organizations are both a bit like water—we navigate them without really paying much attention to how fundamental they are to our daily lives.

One purpose of this book, then, is to provide you with a map to navigate the water we all swim in and to figure out the complexities of organizational communication processes.
In part, we will be exploring different theories and management perspectives and discussing their strengths and limitations, similarities and differences. But each perspective is more than just an abstract theory that has little to do with the “real world.” In many ways, each of them has profoundly shaped the organizational world in which all of us are deeply enmeshed. Indeed, I would suggest that each of these perspectives has, in different ways, shaped who we are as people—a grand claim, I know, but one we will unpack in detail as we move through this book.

In order to lay the groundwork for this claim I want first to identify a common theme that runs throughout these theories—a theme that bears directly on my claim and that will serve as a basic construct in our attempt to understand organizational communication processes. This is the theme of organizational control. As a starting point we can define organizational control as “the dynamic communication process through which organizational stakeholders (employees, managers, owners, shareholders, etc.) struggle to maximize their stake in an organization.” In this book, then, we will examine organizations as communicative structures of control. Let’s explore this focus in more detail below.

**ORGANIZATIONS AS COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURES OF CONTROL**

In discussing the various theories that have emerged in the fields of management and organizational communication over the past 100 years or so, we will explore how, at its core, each theory is motivated by the problems associated with controlling large numbers of people in specific settings. Beginning in the late 19th century, as capitalism became the dominant economic system, the new corporate organization and its employees became a focal point of study for social scientists in various academic fields. For more than 100 years, researchers have developed various ways of explaining how people can be motivated to come together to perform specific tasks when, more often than not, they would rather be somewhere else doing something different. Such has been the centrality of this problem for social scientists that sociologist Charles Perrow (1986) has claimed, “The problems advanced by social scientists have been primarily the problems of human relations in an authoritarian setting” (p. 53).

This problem of “human relations” in organizations is a complex one, as we will see in the course of this book. One of the defining features of an organization is that it coordinates the behavior of its members so they can work collectively. But while coordination is a nice concept in theory, it is surprisingly difficult to achieve in practice. Particularly in for-profit organizations (where most people work), a number of factors work against the perfect coordination of a large number of people. One of the most important factors is the tensions between the goals, beliefs, and desires of individual organization members and those of the larger organization (see Table 1.1). Because these goals often conflict, they have to be resolved in some way. Telephone company executive Chester Barnard (1938) was among the first to recognize that the way this fundamental tension, or conflict, is usually resolved is by subordinating the goals and beliefs of individual organization members to those of the larger organization.
In this context, the issue of control becomes central. All organizational and management theories address the individual–organization tension in some way. As such, all organizational theories implicitly pose the question, “How do we get organization members to engage in behavior that they may not spontaneously engage in and that may even be contrary to their best interests?” In other words, “How can we exercise control over employees and get them to function in a coordinated manner?” In many ways, the history of management thought is the history of efforts to develop more and more sophisticated answers to this question. One of the earliest social scientists to focus explicitly on the issue of organizational control was Arthur Tannenbaum (1968), who stated:

Organization implies control. A social organization is an ordered arrangement of individual human interactions. Control processes help circumscribe idiosyncratic behaviors and keep them conformant to the rational plan of organization. . . . The co-ordination and order created out of the diverse interests and potentially diffuse behaviors of members is largely a function of control. (p. 3)

However, organization members are not simply passive recipients of control mechanisms, blithely accepting each new form of control as it is implemented. On the contrary, the history of management thought is also a history of struggle, as employees have individually and collectively resisted management efforts to limit their autonomy in the workplace (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). In this sense, we will examine control as a dialectical process. That is, control is never a linear, cause-and-effect phenomenon (like one billiard ball hitting another) but is complex and ambiguous; organizational control mechanisms often produce creative employee responses that produce unintended outcomes for the

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organization. For example, corporate efforts to engineer organizational culture and instill certain values in employees are sometimes hijacked by employees for their own ends, or else employees create their own countercultures in the organization, rejecting the values communicated by management (e.g., Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

Before we can examine these different organization theories through the lens of control, however, we need to do two things. First, we need to develop a coherent and clear notion of what *organizational communication* means. Second, we must develop an overarching framework that allows us to compare the competing perspectives that make up the field of organizational communication. Such perspectives are not conjured out of thin air by scholars and practitioners but emerge out of particular and long-standing research traditions, each with its own agenda. As this book unfolds, we will see that all the research traditions in organizational communication are at least partially explicable in terms of the particular social, political, and economic conditions of the time in which they emerged.

**DEFINING “ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION”**

One of the problems in defining the term *organizational communication* is that we are dealing with two phenomena—*organization* and *communication*—that are, individually, extremely complex. Placed in a dynamic relationship with each other, the level of complexity increases greatly. W. Charles Redding (1988)—widely regarded as the founder of the field of organizational communication—provides us with a useful starting point for defining *organization*. While acknowledging the difficulty of providing any universal definition, he argues that all complex organizations (i.e., social structures large enough to make face-to-face communication among all members impossible at all times) exhibit the following four essential features: (1) interdependence, (2) differentiation of tasks and functions, (3) goal orientation, and (4) control. Surprisingly, Redding does not include communication as a specific feature, so our fifth defining characteristic of complex organizations is communication processes. We will discuss each of these features in detail.

**Interdependence**

Organizations exhibit interdependence insofar as no member can function without affecting, and being affected by, other organization members. All complex organizations consist of intricate webs of interconnected communication activities, the integration of which determines the success or failure of the organization. Universities, for example, consist of complex webs of students, faculty, departments, schools, staff, and administrators, each group shaping and being shaped by all the others. While students may seem to be the group with the least agency (i.e., ability to influence others), they nevertheless heavily shape the behavior of the other groups (e.g., by making courses popular or unpopular through enrollment), especially given their role as the primary “customers” of universities.

As organizations have become increasingly complex and global in the past 20 or 30 years, interdependence has become an even more significant and defining feature of organizational life. Many large organizations depend on a complicated array of subsidiaries,
outsourcing processes, communication technologies, and leveraged financial structures in order to flourish. Any change in one aspect of this complex system of interdependence can create changes in the entire system. As we saw in 2008, the collapse of several financial institutions had a profound effect not only on the employees of those institutions but on almost everyone in the world, as the global economy went into recession as a result of these failures. The concept of interdependence will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5 on systems theory.

**Differentiation of Tasks and Functions**

All organizations, however large or small, operate according to the principle of division of labor, in which members specialize in particular tasks and the organization as a whole is divided into various departments. As the 18th century economist Adam Smith illustrated through his description of pin manufacture, many more pins can be produced when the manufacturing process is divided into many specialized tasks than if all the
tasks are performed by a single individual (Smith, 1776/1937). This feature of organizations truly came into its own in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the introduction of scientific management principles into most large organizations (Taylor, 1911/1934)—a perspective we will examine in detail in Chapter 3. While the emergence of the “postbureaucratic” organization (see Chapter 8) and job enrichment has somewhat modified this principle, it is still as applicable to today’s organizations as it was 200 years ago and remains a basic feature of modern capitalism. Anyone who has worked on a production line or in a fast-food restaurant (e.g., Subway, Taco Bell, McDonald’s, etc.) will be well aware of this principle.

**Goal Orientation**

Organizations, whether nonprofit or for profit, are oriented toward particular goals. Indeed, one could argue that the goals of an organization are what provide it with its particular character, coalescing its members into something more than a random group of individuals. Barnard (1938) makes this goal orientation explicit in his definition of an organization: “An organization comes into being when (1) there are persons able to communicate with each other (2) who are willing to contribute to action (3) to accomplish a common purpose” (p. 82). Universities have education and research as their overarching goals; for-profit companies aim for excellence in their products and, thus, a large market share.

Of course, organizations often have multiple and competing goals, making Barnard’s idea of a “common purpose” a complex one. Within a large software company, for example, there may be conflict between the respective goals of the research and development (R&D) and marketing departments. The former might want to spend extra months perfecting a new software program, while the latter might be more interested in getting it to customers quickly and working the bugs out in later versions.

Sometimes company goals can conflict with those of other interest groups, such as community members, employees, or shareholders. In its goal to increase profits, a company might pollute the environment, lay off workers, overlook safety regulations (think BP and deep sea oil drilling) or move its production facilities to countries where labor is cheaper. In recent years shareholder groups have increased their power in publicly traded organizations; in consequence, the “quarterly report” has become a key marker of corporate success, with significant pressure on organizations to produce quick results. In her study of Wall Street investment banking, anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) shows how increased shareholder power has caused many corporations to move away from long-term planning and toward short-term returns on investment—a shift that has had negative consequences for the stability of the economy.

**Control Mechanisms**

Control is a central, defining feature of complex organizations. As we discussed earlier, the goals and interests of employees and the larger organization frequently conflict, and so various forms of control are necessary to achieve coordinated, goal-oriented behavior. Organizational control is not, by definition, problematic; however, it can often have negative consequences for employees, as we will see below and in later chapters. While Redding
presents two forms of control (hierarchy of authority and rules, plans, and roles), I will outline five different control mechanisms that function in the contemporary organization.

**Direct Control**

The simplest way to control employees is to direct them in explicit ways and then monitor their behavior to make sure they are performing adequately. As such, many organizations function through superior–subordinate relations, where the former has the authority to coerce the latter into working in specific ways. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, supervisors have been employed to make sure that workers diligently perform their tasks rather than take long breaks or talk to coworkers. As we will see in Chapter 3, in the early stages of industrialization such coercive forms of control were deployed to direct workers who were not used to working in factory settings where “clock time” ruled.

Such close supervision, however, is hardly a relic of 19th and early 20th century factories. Many of you have probably had jobs where your work was closely monitored by a supervisor. In their cleverly titled book, *Void Where Prohibited*, Linder and Nygaard (1998) document restrictions on factory workers’ rest and toilet breaks, arguing that such restrictions are more widespread now than they were in the early 20th century. The authors even document cases of workers wearing adult diapers on the production line because of the company’s tight restrictions on toilet breaks! In one high-profile case, the Jim Beam company was cited for violating Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations, when in 2001 the company implemented a policy severely restricting the time and frequency of employee toilet breaks. Direct supervisory control of workers, then, is still very much a feature of the modern organization.

**Technological Control**

A somewhat less direct form of control is exercised on employees through various kinds of organizational technology (Edwards, 1979). Such technology usually controls both the kinds of work people do and the speed at which they work. Henry Ford’s introduction of the moving production line in automobile manufacturing in 1913 is the classic example of such control. From a management perspective, this form of control has the dual benefit of being able to dictate the workers’ rate of production and also confining the worker to a particular location (thus limiting the worker’s ability to socialize with other workers).

As our economy has shifted from heavy production to a service economy, the forms of technological control have changed. The fast-food industry is a good example of a modern form of technological control, where computer technology carefully regulates (down to the second) every task performed by the employee. At McDonald’s, for example, even the dispensing of soda is controlled to make sure exactly the right quantity is released into the cup—the employee has no room at all to exercise discretion (Ritzer, 2000).

In our increasingly service-oriented economy, customers, too, are subject to technological control. In fast-food restaurants, hard seats encourage customers to “eat and run,” and menu items are placed in highly visible locations so the customers are ready to deliver their orders as soon as they arrive at the head of the line (Leidner, 1993). In addition, customers are “trained” to line up to place orders and to bus their own trays in order to
increase efficiency and productivity. Airport check-in is now mostly self-service, with customers doing the work that used to be done by airline employees—a significant cost savings for the airlines. And many companies (e.g., AT&T and Comcast) are now using online customer discussion forums that enable customers to solve technical problems for each other, thus significantly reducing customer service expenses (Manjoo, 2011).

Technological forms of control often shift work from employees to customers as a way to increase efficiency and profitability.

Finally, technological control in the form of electronic surveillance is widespread in organizations. With such technology, employees can never be certain when they are being monitored and thus are forced to behave at all times as if they are under surveillance. The philosopher Michel Foucault (1979) has referred to this form of control as panopticism, after the Panopticon—a prison designed by the 19th century utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham. Bentham’s prison was designed in a circular fashion so a guard in the central watchtower could observe all the prisoners without being visible himself. As such, the prisoners engaged in a form of self-policing. People working in telemarketing, for example, are subject to such surveillance by an invisible supervisor who can eavesdrop on their calls. Similarly, employees doing data-entry jobs often have their keystrokes counted, allowing employers to collect data on their productivity remotely. (See Critical Technologies 1.1 for more on communication technology.)
Bureaucratic Control

Despite a shift away from bureaucratic organizational forms toward more flexible, less formal structures, bureaucratic control is still common in many organizations (Edwards, 1979). As we will see in Chapter 3, the bureaucratic form is a central—perhaps defining—feature of Western democratic societies, enabling organization members to gain advancement on merit rather than based on one’s connections. As a form of control, organizational bureaucracy exists as a system of rules, formal structures, and roles that both enable and constrain the activities of organization members. Concerns about bureaucratic “red tape” aside, bureaucracy can be a highly effective means of coordinating and controlling organizational activity (Du Gay, 2000; Perrow, 1986). For example, the smooth running of your day on campus as you move from class to class would be impossible without an efficient bureaucratic system that carefully coordinates the schedule—timed to the minute—of every single student and faculty member. In this sense, organizational life is unimaginable without at least some level of bureaucracy.

Ideological Control

Ideological control refers to the development of a system of values and beliefs with which employees are expected to identify strongly. From a management perspective, the beauty
of ideological control is that it requires little direct supervision of employees. Instead, if employees have been appropriately socialized into the organization’s system of beliefs and values, then they should have internalized a taken-for-granted understanding of what it means to work in the best interests of the organization.

In many respects, the “corporate-culture” movement that first emerged in the 1980s (see Chapter 6) represents an attempt by companies to exert ideological control over employees (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Companies often carefully vet potential employees to make sure they “fit” the culture, and then make explicit and carefully calibrated efforts to indoctrinate new employees through training programs such as “culture boot camp.” For example, Disney employees are put through an intensive training program where they learn how to maintain the seamless fantasy that is the hallmark of Disney theme parks. Disney keeps a tight rein on its corporate culture; indeed, the Disney employee handbook even dictates the appropriate length and style of sideburns! Similarly, companies such as IBM, Whole Foods, and Southwest Airlines are recognized for their distinctive cultures. The success of Southwest as a low-cost airline has been attributed in no small part to management’s cultivation of a culture of fun amongst employees at all levels (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996).

While this form of control can be an effective means of creating an engaged, energized workforce, it can also be quite oppressive to many organization members, particularly as it often asks the employee to invest his or her very identity, or sense of self, in the company. However, it is a form of oppression that is often disguised as something else—for example, being a “team” or “family” member. Employees who don’t fit with the culture may feel alienated from their work. Management scholar John Van Maanen’s (1991) account of his experience working at Disneyland is a great example of someone who resists the ideological control to which he is subjected—and loses his job as a result!

Disciplinary Control

Disciplinary control has emerged relatively recently as organizations have shifted from hierarchical, bureaucratic structures to flatter, decentralized systems of decision making. While ideological control is still, in many respects, top-down—with management attempting to impose a particular culture and value system on employees—disciplinary control is distinguished as a “bottom-up” form of control that focuses on employees’ own production of a particular sense of self and work identity.

Disciplinary control has emerged as the relationship between organizations and employees has shifted away from the post-World War II social contract of stable, lifetime employment and toward “free agency” and a climate of much greater instability in the job market. This instability is reflected not only in people’s high mobility in the job market but also in the fact that “the self” (the identity of each employee) has become a project each individual must constantly work on. Because the project of the self is never finished and must be continuously monitored and improved (in order to meet an ever more competitive work environment), people live in a perpetual state of anxiety about the value of their individual “brand.” Thus, individuals constantly engage in forms of self-discipline in which the creation and continual improvement of an “entrepreneurial self” is the goal (Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000).
Think, for example, about your own day-to-day lives as college students. With adjustment for your own particular college context, I imagine that many of you have schedules similar to the ones reported by journalist David Brooks (2001) in an article called “The Organization Kid,” in which he interviewed students at Princeton University: “crew practice at dawn, classes in the morning, resident-adviser duty, lunch, study groups, classes in the afternoon, tutoring disadvantaged kids in Trenton, a cappella practice, dinner, study, science lab, prayer session, hit the StairMaster, study a few hours more.” Brooks indicates that some students even make appointments to meet with friends, lest they lose touch. Does this kind of daily schedule sound familiar to you?

Brooks’s point is that students willingly (and happily) pursue these punishing schedules because they see it as necessary for the continual process of career advancement; they are basically spending 4 years as professional, goal-oriented students whose goal is continuous self-improvement. I suspect that a high percentage of you are engaged in precisely this kind of self-disciplinary activity in an effort to distinguish yourselves from one another and make yourselves marketable to potential employers.

In disciplinary forms of control, then, the individual is both the subject (autonomously making his or her own decisions and choice of goals) and object (the target of both self-discipline and corporate and other institutional efforts to shape identity) of knowledge. That is, control is exercised through “the constitution of the very person who makes decisions” (Fleming & Spicer, 2007, p. 23). Following the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1979, 1980b), control (or power, as he calls it) does not limit people’s options or oppress them but, rather, creates the very conditions of possibility in which we act. We see ourselves, for example, as career-oriented, not because humans are “naturally” predisposed to having careers (after all, the idea of a “career” is a pretty recent historical phenomenon) but because there are numerous societal discourses, bodies of knowledge, and experts (who create bodies of knowledge) that construct us as career-oriented (think about the shelves full of books giving “expert” advice on career success at any bookstore, all of which claim to have the answer). As such, we become our own entrepreneurial project in which “career” is a defining construct around which life decisions are made.

To understand these five forms of control, it is important to keep three points in mind. First, many organizations use multiple forms of control. For example, an employee might be subject to direct control and bureaucratic control, and be heavily indoctrinated into the company’s ideology. Furthermore, while analytically distinct, these forms of control overlap in practice in the workplace—technological control in the form of employee surveillance, for example, may result in employees engaging in forms of self-discipline that render the technology unnecessary.

Second, these forms of control operate with decreasing levels of direct coercion and increasing levels of participation by employees in their own control (control by active consent, if you will). Thus, direct control is the most coercive (telling someone exactly what to do), while disciplinary control is the least coercive (autonomous employee behavior and decision making). However, the development of less explicit and coercive forms of control does not mean that control is no longer an important issue in daily organizational life. Indeed, the development of more sophisticated forms of control suggests a greater need to understand the everyday dynamics of such control and its impact on the lives of organization members (i.e., you and me).
Third, the increasingly sophisticated forms of organizational control require a similarly sophisticated understanding of the role of communication in these control processes. Direct control relies on a simple understanding of how communication works (a message is transmitted from A [supervisor] to B [employee], instructing him or her how to behave), while ideological and disciplinary forms of control depend on a view of communication as complex and central to the construction of employee identities and organizational meaning systems—issues that figure prominently in this book. To get a better sense of this, let’s now turn to a brief discussion of communication and its relation to organization.

Communication Processes

Clearly, communication is an important and defining feature of organizations. The fact that this book is called *Organizational Communication* strongly suggests that the terms *organization* and *communication* are closely linked. Indeed, the position we will take in this book is that *communication constitutes organization*—an idea referred to by some organizational communication scholars as the “CCO” approach to organizations (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2008). Put simply, this means that communication activities are the basic, defining “stuff” of organizational life. Without communication, organizations cease to exist as meaningful human collectives. In this sense, organizations are not simply physical containers within which people communicate; rather, organizations exist because people communicate, creating the complex systems of meaning that we call “organizations.”

Similarly, the communication activities of organization members are both made possible and constrained by the institutionalized rules and structures that organizations develop over time (Giddens, 1979). A useful way of thinking about organizations is to view them as complex patterns of communication habits. Just as individuals develop habitual, routine behaviors that enable them to negotiate daily life, so large groups of people develop patterns of communication behavior that enable coordination and collective, goal-oriented activity. A meeting, for example, is a communication phenomenon that is meaningful precisely because it is structured around rules for what counts as a meeting (and which differentiate it from a casual hallway conversation).

Although there are multiple definitions and conceptions of communication, in this book we will adopt a “meaning-centered” perspective, viewing communication as the basic, constitutive process through which people come to experience and make sense of the world in which they live. In other words, communication does not just describe an already existing reality but actually creates people’s social reality. For example, organization members who talk about themselves as a “family” create a quite different social reality from that of an organization where a “machine” metaphor is dominant and organization members see themselves simply as cogs in that machine (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

From such a perspective, we can define communication as follows: *the dynamic, ongoing process of creating and negotiating meanings through interactional symbolic (verbal and nonverbal) practices, including conversation, metaphors, rituals, stories, dress, and space.* As we will see in later chapters, this definition is not accepted by all theories of organizational communication. However, it provides a useful benchmark against which we can examine and critique other perspectives.
Following from the above definition of communication, we can define organizational communication in the following way: the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals. Again, this definition attempts to capture the dynamic relationship between communication and organization, showing how each produces, and is produced by, the other. While the exact nature of this relationship may be a little fuzzy at the moment, we will continue to return to it throughout the book.

Having identified the main features of the phenomenon that is the subject of this book, we now need to develop a framework from which to examine the various approaches to organizational communication. In the next section of this chapter we will develop this framework in some detail.

**FRAMING THEORIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

In order to be able to compare different perspectives on organizational communication, we will develop a metatheoretical framework—in other words, a “theory about theories”—that allows us to examine the underlying assumptions on which different theories are based. For example, what assumptions does a particular theory make about how we come to know things (epistemological assumptions)? What assumptions does a theory make about the nature of reality (ontological assumptions)? What assumptions about communication does a particular theory make? Scholars have developed a number of frameworks, each of which has utility in providing a coherent picture of the connections and differences amongst the various research traditions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 2001; Krone, 2005).

However, the central organizing principle of my framework is the notion that we are living in an age characterized by a "crisis of representation" (Jameson, 1984). This phrase can be understood at two levels. First, the idea of “representation” refers to knowledge claims that researchers in various disciplines make about the world. In this context, the term has an epistemological dimension (that is, how we come to know things), reflecting some scholars’ belief in the possibility of making knowledge claims that accurately reflect, or represent, an objectively existing world. Such a view of knowledge is dominant in the social sciences. The notion of a “crisis” thus reflects the recent emergence of challenges to this dominant model. In the past 30 years or so, multiple and competing ways of knowing have arisen, with each one setting out alternatives to the representational model.

Second, the notion of “representation” can be understood to refer to the issue of “voice.” That is, which groups in our society have the opportunity and resources to speak and to represent their own interests and the interests of other groups? This issue has become increasingly complex as society has become more diverse. In the 1950s life was apparently much simpler. Shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* portrayed a homogeneous national culture with clearly defined values and social roles. In this vision, divorce was almost unheard of, everyone lived in the suburbs, and dad was the all-knowing authority figure who could solve any problem and who had a steady office job that supported the whole family. Mom, of course, was the nurturing housewife who was ready with pipe, slippers, and a home-cooked meal when dad came home from work.
Not only did such a life really exist only in its “ideal” form on TV, but its existence also was rooted in fundamental inequalities. The 1950s was a time of national stability and prosperity for a fairly small segment of the U.S. population—basically, white males. Simply by virtue of their race and/or gender, large segments of the population were denied any voice or even basic human rights such as employment and educational opportunities. The civil rights and feminist movements not only created opportunities for previously disenfranchised groups but also helped shape a worldview in which issues of identity and difference became central. Thus, with the emergence of challenges to a single (white, male) vision of society, various groups began to voice their own visions of the social order that fundamentally rewrote previously accepted premises about what is good, right, and possible. For example, gay rights organizations have challenged dominant definitions of “family,” and the feminist movement has helped change long-held beliefs about women’s roles in society.

Clearly, the two conceptions of “representation” discussed here are related. As the issue of “voice” has become more complex in the 21st century, so, too, have epistemological issues regarding what counts as acceptable knowledge claims. Where the scientific method once reigned supreme as the tried and tested way to generate universal knowledge, we now have competing perspectives and theories that aim to capture the richness and complexity of human social activity in ways the scientific method cannot.

How does this discussion of the “crisis of representation” relate to my attempt to lay out a useful framework for understanding theories of organizational communication? One way of thinking about the competing worldviews in the social sciences is to see them as presenting increasingly complex challenges to the representational model of knowledge discussed above. Below, I discuss five such worldviews. Each represents a progressive deepening of the “crisis of representation” in the social sciences generally and, more important for us, in the field of organizational communication.

For our purposes I will call these perspectives discourses. This term captures the idea that any worldview is made up of a community of scholars who communicate with one another about their research and debate the strengths and weaknesses of the theories they develop. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972, 1980b) uses the term discourse to describe a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge. That is, what are the rules of a particular discourse that regulate what counts as a legitimate knowledge claim?

The five discourses I discuss are the following:

1. Functionalism: a discourse of representation
2. Interpretivism: a discourse of understanding
3. Critical theory: a discourse of suspicion
4. Postmodernism: a discourse of vulnerability
5. Feminism: a discourse of empowerment

Each of these discourses takes a particular relationship to what is called the modernist tradition. Broadly speaking, modernism refers to both a historical epoch and a way of thinking in which science, rationality, and progress are the dominant themes. Inspired by Enlightenment thought as represented in philosopher Immanuel Kant’s Latin injunction,
“Sapere Aude” (“Dare to Know”), modernism is a period in which myth and superstition give way to the idea that each individual, through rational thought, can come to understand the world.

Science represents the pinnacle of modernism in its development of human rational faculties, leading to emancipation from the constraints of the natural world. In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the human sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.) are seen as further evidence of the positive effects of modernism on the human condition. Indeed, modernist principles are at the root of Western-style democratic principles. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “Declaration of the Rights of Man” (which helped inspire the French Revolution in 1792) embodies the notion that each individual has the right to liberty, regardless of his or her station in life. Such a concept was unthinkable in premodern societies, where authority rested with priests and kings by virtue of their God-given right to rule, and everyone was born into a social status that they occupied “naturally” for their entire lives.

Modernism, then, fundamentally altered humans’ relationship to the world. Some scholars even argue that modernism is where the very notion of the individual as a rational, thinking being came into existence (e.g., Foucault, 1973). Moreover, the organization as an institutional form is very much a product of modernism; the organization as a bureaucratic structure was the mechanism that helped institutionalize modernist ways of thinking and enabled industrial capitalism to flourish.

Below, I discuss each discourse in greater detail, identifying the model of communication embodied in each.

**Functionalism: The Discourse of Representation**

This discourse embodies the basic modernist principles in the most straightforward, unproblematic way. The practitioners of this discourse believe that progress and emancipation can best be achieved through a process of discovery, in which the application of scientific principles gradually and progressively illuminates the world for us. This is the dominant discourse in the social sciences today, in which the researcher conducts carefully controlled experiments in order to make causal claims about human behavior. In literature, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s character Sherlock Holmes is the perfect embodiment of these principles, employing his powers of observation and deduction to solve crimes. The Sherlock Holmes stories were written in the late 19th century, precisely at the time when the idea of Science as the way to Truth and a Better Life was taking a strong hold on society.

In organizational communication, much of the research over the past several decades has been dominated by this discourse. Certainly, early management theories such as scientific management, bureaucracy, and human relations theory were built on the principles of functionalism. In addition, much contemporary research into topic areas such as leadership (Barrett, 2011; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Yukl, 2006), superior–subordinate communication, organizational socialization (Jablin, 2001), and communication technology draws on this discourse. The goal in such research is to make predictive and generalizable claims about human behavior in organizations. For example, in her research on the relationship between gender and leadership, psychologist Alice Eagly is concerned with trying to measure quantitatively, and make generalizable claims about, the differences and similarities between male and female leaders in organizations.
What assumptions about communication are embedded in this discourse? True to the discourse of representation, communication is conceived as the means by which internal ideas are externalized. In this sense, communication is a vehicle, or conduit, through which thoughts and knowledge about the world can be expressed and shared. Thus, communication about the world and the world itself are two separate entities.

These assumptions are best exemplified by Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) widely cited mathematical model of communication. As researchers for Bell Telephone Laboratories, Shannon and Weaver were interested in developing highly efficient systems for transmitting information from senders to receivers. As they state, “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point” (p. 3). But because Shannon and Weaver were engineers, they defined communication largely as an engineering problem, having to do with the relationship amongst such issues as information, noise, channel capacity, and redundancy. Thus, although their model does not do a good job of representing actual face-to-face social interaction, it was for a long time dominant in various areas of communication research. Even today, although frequently criticized by scholars (e.g., Smith, 1970), it still dominates everyday understandings of how communication works.

Management scholar Stephen Axley (1984) has effectively illustrated some of the assumptions of this conduit model, along with its negative consequences for organizational communication processes (see Critical Case Study 1.1). For example, the conduit model ignores significant communication issues such as (1) the potential ambiguity of meaning in all communication acts, (2) the communication by speakers of unintentional meanings, (3) the role of receivers creating the meaning of any communication act, and (4) the need for redundancy in making sure messages are understood by others. In fact, Axley makes a strong case that the conduit metaphor lulls us into the belief that communication is a fairly easy and unproblematic activity that requires little effort. This “success-without-effort” orientation can have severe repercussions in organizations, where the degree of complexity of structures and meaning systems makes good communication a priority. When communication is conceived as relatively effortless and simple, then it is frequently overlooked as the cause of organizational problems. Or, when managers do identify “communication problems” in organizations, they frequently apply overly simplistic solutions that overlook the complexity of the communication process.

Interpretivism: The Discourse of Understanding

The interpretive discourse provides an alternative to the representational discourse of functionalism. While interpretivism has had an impact on organizational communication research only in the past 30 years, its roots are much older. Sometimes referred to as social constructionism, this perspective sees a direct relationship between communication processes and who we are as human beings. In other words, rather than viewing communication simply as a conduit, or vehicle, for expressing already formed ideas about an objective world, interpretivism sees communication as actually constituting that world. An example of this interpretive perspective is the CCO (communication constitutes organization) theory of communication mentioned earlier in the chapter.
As you can perhaps see, this alternative perspective complicates the dominant representational model of human behavior. If communication constitutes human identity and reality, then we can no longer easily separate self, other, and world on the one hand and communicating about those things on the other hand. Suddenly, the representational
model of knowledge is not quite as unproblematic as it at first appeared to be. No longer is there an objective Truth “out there” waiting to be discovered. Instead, human beings create realities as they interact together. Thus, the belief in predictive, generalizable models of human behavior gives way to a concern with generating deep understandings of the ways in which humans create complex systems of meaning. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) encapsulates this view of language and communication when he states, “Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all” (p. 443).

The interpretive discourse, then, claims a close connection between communication and social reality—a view that has had a profound influence on the field of organizational communication over the past 30 years. Most significantly, there has been a shift from viewing communication as something that occurs within organizations to seeing communication as a dynamic process that actually creates organizations (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). This is best illustrated in the emergence of a body of research referred to as “organizational culture” studies. We will be devoting Chapter 6 to this research, but it is worth briefly mentioning here to demonstrate the influence of the interpretive perspective.

The study of organizations as “cultures” has focused heavily on the everyday behavior of organization members, showing how their ordinary communicative practices are the basic “stuff” of what organizations are. In other words, such mundane communication events are seen as constituting organizations. Thus, researchers study phenomena such as stories (Boudens, 2005; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Phillips, 1995; Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987), rituals (Trice & Beyer, 1984), metaphors (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006), and workplace humor (Lynch, 2002; Rhodes & Westwood, 2007). In each case, these communication activities are seen as fundamental to how organization members collectively shape their social reality. Furthermore, researchers in this tradition tend to reject quantitative methods in favor of qualitative forms of research, including oral interviews and participant-observation studies (where the researcher becomes a member of the organization being studied). Here, the goal is to allow organization members’ own understanding of organizational life to come to the fore, rather than imposing predetermined categories on members’ attitudes and behaviors.

In a study of Disneyland, for example, Ruth Smith and Eric Eisenberg (1987) use oral interviews to show how managers and employees use competing metaphors to characterize their understanding of Disneyland as a place to work. The authors argue that the competing metaphors of Disneyland as a “drama” (held by managers) and as a “family” (held by employees) lie at the root of an industrial dispute that threatens to tear apart the carefully cultivated image of Disneyland as “the happiest place on earth.” One of the most interesting features of this study is that it shows how these metaphors are not just ways of talking about life at Disneyland (a representational view) but are fundamental to the shaping of employee identity and experience (an interpretive view). Thus, employees do not just talk about Disneyland as a family organization but actually experience it through this symbolic structure.

From the interpretive perspective, then, the real world is a symbolic world, and those symbols allow us to live a meaningful, coherent existence. Indeed, many interpretivists would argue that the symbolic world is the only world we can possibly know—we have no direct access to the world around us, which is always mediated by language, symbols,
communicative practices. Similarly, organizations are viewed not as structured containers within which communication (as information transfer) occurs but, rather, as communication phenomena that come into being through the everyday communication practices of their members.

**Critical Theory: The Discourse of Suspicion**

Like the interpretive approach, the critical perspective views reality as a product of the collective communication practices of social actors. Where it differs, however, is in its focus on the role of power, or control, in the process of reality construction. Critical theorists believe that different social groups have different levels of access to symbolic and communication resources; thus, the way reality gets constructed reflects the ability of powerful groups to shape this process. The notion of critical theory as a “discourse of suspicion” therefore focuses on the idea that the exercise of power is often hidden. That is, power is not always exercised coercively by the more powerful on the less powerful but, instead, works in subtle ways to shape the way in which people think about and experience the world.

Critical organizational communication researchers are interested in the ways that communication and power intersect in complex ways (Mumby, 1988). Building on the interpretive view that sees organizations as constituted through communication, critical scholars argue that the process of organizational meaning construction cannot be understood without examining organizations as political structures where power plays a central role. Different interest groups vie to shape the organizational meanings that constitute reality for members; management, for example, might attempt to engineer a certain organizational culture they expect employees to internalize, while employees may actively work to resist that culture (e.g., by making jokes about it or ironically following its principles) because they see it as an effort to manipulate them into working harder (Kunda, 1992). Critical researchers thus ask themselves how certain meaning systems are created through the communication and symbolic practices of organization members and how these meanings, in turn, sustain or resist certain organizational power relations (Deetz & Mumby, 1990).

For example, in my own research on a story told at IBM about a confrontation between a female security guard and Tom Watson, the CEO, I show how this story—while on the surface appearing to celebrate the ability of a low-level employee to “put one over” on the top guy—actually reinforces the strong sense of hierarchy and importance of rule following at IBM (Mumby, 1987). The story creates a social reality for organization members that subtly reinforces what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In a similar vein, critical management scholar Michael Rosen (1985, 1988) has studied corporate rituals to show how carefully orchestrated events such as company Christmas parties and corporate breakfasts can function to subtly reassert the worldview of the management élite in the organization.

Placed in the larger context of the modernist project, the critical perspective recognizes that the ideas of progress and emancipation that are so central to the Enlightenment actually represent a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the past 150 years have featured immense progress in science and technology, leading to longer and qualitatively better lives
for people. On the other hand, this same progress has resulted in increasingly sophisticated forms of control that subtly exploit people for profit. To use organizational communication scholar Stan Deetz’s (1992a) phrase, we live in an age of “corporate colonization” where our identities are heavily shaped by the corporate world. In this sense, the critical perspective aims to critique the voice of “managerialism” that dominates the field of management, and tries to give voice to those in organization who have relatively little power.

Postmodernism: The Discourse of Vulnerability

As an approach to knowledge, postmodernism poses the biggest challenge to the representational discourse. Of all the perspectives we have discussed so far, postmodernism is the one that questions most vigorously our common-sense understandings about what we know, and how we know what we know. In this sense, our common-sense view of the world is “vulnerable” to multiple alternative perspectives.

To understand what some scholars have referred to as “the postmodern condition” (Lyotard, 1984), we need to distinguish between two different but related terms. First, postmodernity is generally taken to refer to a specific historical period that, as the term suggests, comes after modernity. Precisely when the postmodern era began is open to wide interpretation (some scholars argue that it has yet to begin, that we are still in the modernist era). Some place its roots in the late 19th century with the writings of Nietzsche and his announcement of the “death of God” (i.e., the death of any universal, objective truth and the rise of multiple perspectives on the world). Others regard postmodernity as a much more recent phenomenon.

Architect Charles Jencks, for example, places the postmodern era’s symbolic birth at 3:33 p.m. on July 18, 1973—the moment when the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis was demolished (Harvey, 1989). Why does this particular moment signal the birth of postmodernity? Jencks argues that the demolition of this housing project symbolically represents the failure of the main hallmark of modernity—the application of rational principles to human, social problems. Certainly, building huge, identical towering structures to provide cheap, low-income housing seemed on the face of it to be a sensible solution to the problem of urban growth. It also satisfied the modernist concern for certainty and control by creating predictable, homogeneous environments. However, the designers of such projects failed to recognize the extent to which such “rational” structures would be deeply alienating to people. With little or no sense of community, these structures functioned more like prisons than homes. There is no better example of the darker side of modernity than this attempt by planners and bureaucrats to develop, in the name of efficiency, an organizational system that almost completely eliminated from people’s lives what makes us most human.

The second term associated with the postmodern condition is postmodernism. This term refers not to a particular historical period but to a particular way of thinking about the world. Postmodernism is closely associated with an intellectual movement that originated in the 1960s with a group of French scholars—most notably, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Amongst other things, this movement questions some of the most deeply held principles of modernism. Most significantly, postmodernism challenges and rejects the modernist belief that rationality and science inevitably lead to progress and emancipation. Indeed, many postmodernists argue that it is precisely this unwavering and unquestioning
belief in the scientific method and rational principles of investigation that has contributed to human suffering. The Pruitt-Igoe housing project discussed previously is such an instance of modernist principles being the problem rather than the solution.

What do postmodern scholars believe in? Part of the problem in answering this question is that laying out a set of foundational postmodern principles actually violates a basic postmodern tenet; that is, there are no foundations! The idea of “no foundations” is an attempt to get at the idea that there are multiple ways of looking at the world and, therefore, multiple potential realities. The influence of this position can be seen in debates over university curricula, where challenges to the so-called “Western canon” argue for the expansion of what counts as knowledge. Instead of requiring students to read only the “Great Books” (written almost exclusively by dead white males), it is argued that students should also be exposed to writers who traditionally have been marginalized by the dominance of Western ideas about Truth. Thus, African American, Asian, Chicana/o, women, gay, and lesbian writers have been integrated into many university curricula.

For postmodernists, then, there is not one, single “grand narrative” that reveals the truth about the world but, rather, many “little stories,” each of which constitutes a particular way of seeing. Such multiple stories, postmodernists argue, create alternative realities that challenge the dominant modernist view of Truth as singular and universal.

How do postmodernists view communication? It should be no surprise that they reject the representational view discussed earlier. Indeed, postmodernists do their best to break any connection between communication and the world “out there.” In other words,
postmodernists reject any “correspondence” view of communication, in which statements somehow reflect an actually existing set of conditions in the world. In fact, some postmodernists reverse the common-sense relationship between communication and reality, arguing that rather than communication being the symbolic representation of a real world, communication is what is real, with the world having a secondary status. In French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s (1976) famous words, “there is nothing outside of the text” (p. 157). In other words, all we have access to is discourse—that is what is real to us.

An example will help clarify this notion. Paris Hilton is a famous person, known by millions, perhaps billions—but why? She has no apparent talent. She isn’t a sports star, a celebrated author, or a singer. The simple, postmodern answer is that she’s famous for being famous. She has no substance as such, other than the way she has been carefully “branded,” with a particular identity constructed for her (we’ll talk in detail about branding in Chapter 12). Now, many stars are “branded,” and no one completely escapes the postmodern juggernaut of created meanings, but we could argue that Paris Hilton is the nearest thing there is to pure text, pure discourse! Her fame is totally dependent on her ability to remain in the public eye, on her appearing regularly on my favorite show, Access Hollywood; in other words, her fame depends totally on her (in)famy. She is, in this sense, postmodernism personified.

Of course, these days Paris Hilton is passé and other postmodern personalities have usurped her—the entire Kardashian family, The Situation, Snooki, and so on ad nauseam. What all these “celebrities” have in common is that they are all almost purely “text”—they don’t really exist outside of the media reality that created them.

How does this translate into the study of organizations? Several postmodern organization scholars have done close analyses of organizational texts, such as stories, to show how they impose a particular meaning on organization members and obscure other possibilities (Boje, 1995; Boje & Rosile, 1994; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Martin, 1990). Sometimes called deconstruction—a term coined by Derrida—these interpretive analyses attempt to illustrate how organizations are not the stable structures they appear to be but are actually relatively precarious systems of meaning fixed more by the dominance of a particular worldview.

In addition, many postmodern organization scholars examine the forms of disciplinary control (discussed earlier) that shape the postmodern (sometimes called post-Fordist or postbureaucratic) organizational environment. Scholars examine everything from management theories (how do they construct particular kinds of employee identity?) to the everyday dynamics of workplace control and resistance peculiar to the “culture of enterprise” in the (post)modern organization (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Knights & McCabe, 2000b; Townley, 1993b). We will discuss the postmodern, post-Fordist approach to organizational communication in Chapter 8.

**Feminism: The Discourse of Empowerment**

The feminist approach to organizations is the one that has been around the shortest amount of time, coming to prominence in the 1990s. In terms of the crisis of representation, the most distinctive feature of feminism is how it addresses the question of “voice.” For the most part, feminist scholars argue, organization researchers have been “blind and deaf” to the question of gender (Wilson, 1996). In other words, for most of its history, the field of management has examined organizational life as if only one
gender—men—existed. Moreover, organizations themselves have, until relatively recently, systematically excluded women from anything other than low-paid, entry-level positions.

One of the goals of feminist approaches to organizational communication, then, is to address the exclusion of women’s voices from organizational life and to develop research approaches that highlight women’s voices (Buzzanell, 1994). However, as we will see in Chapter 9 of this book, there are in reality multiple feminist perspectives, each of which has a different view of the role of women and men in organizations. Liberal feminism, for example, argues for creating a level playing field to provide women voice and opportunity in organizations. Radical feminism argues that creating a level playing field simply leaves patriarchy (male domination) intact, and women need to create alternative organizational forms free from male oppression. Finally, critical feminism takes the position that organizations are “gendered” structures of power; gender is an everyday, constitutive feature of organizational life that implicates both women and men.

From an organizational communication perspective, then, feminist research has focused on exploring the relationships among gender, power, and organization in order to develop more equitable organizational practices and structures. In this sense, feminism is a discourse of empowerment with a specific focus on gender as a construct around which power is exercised. For example, management scholar Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s (1977) classic book *Men and Women of the Corporation* was the first to examine closely how the structure of organizations tends to exclude women from managerial positions by hiring them as “tokens” who are set up for failure in a male-dominated environment. Her book documents how men are not necessarily consciously sexist (though in the 1970s many were); rather, the communication environment of corporations—premised on the need to maintain effectiveness and efficiency by hiring and promoting employees who fit in (i.e., white men)—is what puts women at a distinct disadvantage.

As we will see later on, much feminist research has moved away from focusing exclusively on women and is much more interested in how power and organizational communication interact to create different kinds of gendered identities, including both femininity and masculinity. Today, then, and unlike its popular conception, feminism is a long way from its “male-bashing” stereotype and is much more interested in understanding how both women and men are “prisoners of gender” (Flax, 1990). In this sense, many feminist researchers are interested in how both men and women “do gender” (i.e., perform gendered identities) in their everyday organizational lives (Ashcraft, 2005; Collinson, 1988; Mumby, 1998).

In sum, the five perspectives discussed here show an increasing tendency toward questioning our common-sense understanding of the world. Starting from the widely held premise that we communicate in ways that represent or reflect a stable, objective world, we have gradually moved to a position in which the relationship between communication and the world we live in has been rendered complex and problematic. For our purposes, the main consequence of this discussion has been to undermine any simple understanding of the relationship between communication and organization. As I stated early in this chapter, we fail to appreciate fully the difficulties and complexities associated with organizational communication if we view this phenomenon as simply “communication in organizations.” By calling into question this widely accepted view, we are better able to “think differently” about organizations and how they function in relation to our everyday lives. Table 1.2 provides a helpful summary of the five perspectives.
Table 1.2  Five Perspectives on Organizational Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Model of Communication</th>
<th>View of Organization</th>
<th>Conception of Comm-Org Relationship</th>
<th>Conception of Truth/ Knowledge</th>
<th>Representative Metaphors</th>
<th>Research Goals</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionalist</td>
<td>Communication as information transmission; conduit model</td>
<td>Goal-oriented structures independent from members’ actions</td>
<td>Comm takes place in organizations; organization as container for communication</td>
<td>External to humans, waiting to be discovered; truth universal and generalizable</td>
<td>Machine, Mirror, Rational mind, Conduit</td>
<td>Prediction and control Generalizable knowledge claims Establish causal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Communication as dialogic creation of meaning systems</td>
<td>Social/symbolic creations of collective and coordinated actions</td>
<td>Organizations and communication coproduced</td>
<td>Intersubjectively produced by members of a community; emerges through consensus</td>
<td>Culture, Community, Web, Dialogue, Narrative</td>
<td>Develop “thick descriptions” of cultures Insight and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Communication as creation of ideological meaning systems mediated by power relations</td>
<td>Social/symbolic products of different political interests and power struggles</td>
<td>Organizations and communication coproduced; both are medium and product of deep structure power relations</td>
<td>Intersubjectively produced through ideology critique; truth as rational consensus free from ideological distortion</td>
<td>Political system, Psychic prison, Justice, Conflict</td>
<td>Critique of unfair systems of power Emancipation from oppressive organizational structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern</td>
<td>Communication as unstable and shifting system of meanings</td>
<td>Organizations consist of multiple, competing, and fragmented realities</td>
<td>Organizations as products of shifting and unstable systems of signification and texts</td>
<td>Multiple truths from different discourses and social groups; truth is local, not universal; “there’s nothing outside of the text.”</td>
<td>Carnival, Hyperreality, Rhizome, Pastiche</td>
<td>Deconstruction and destabilization of common-sense views of the world Rejection of “grand narratives” and promotion of “little narratives”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>Communication as creation of gendered meanings and identities; humans “do gender” through communication</td>
<td>Organizations as gendered, coordinated systems of power relations and patriarchal structures</td>
<td>Communication as accomplishment of gendered, collective structures and practices</td>
<td>Privileging of women’s experience; “the personal is political”; men and women as “prisoners of gender”</td>
<td>Gender, Empowerment, Nurturance, Connection, Difference, Patriarchy</td>
<td>Gender equality Revaluing of “women’s ways of knowing” Undermining of patriarchal logic Transcending binary thinking</td>
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This chapter laid out some of the basic assumptions about organizational communication as a field of study. Any time we attempt to understand a particular field, we need to get a picture of the various assumptions on which different perspectives are built. Clearly, organizational communication studies draws on a number of different traditions, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon we are attempting to understand.

As a way of understanding the field, I presented five different research traditions, or discourses—functionalism, interpretivism, critical theory, postmodernism, and feminism—each of which operates on a different set of assumptions about the nature of communication, organizations, and truth. With these research traditions as a context, we are now in a position to examine more closely the specific research traditions in organizational communication that have emerged in the past several decades.

However, while this chapter has provided us with a sense of the “big picture,” we do not yet have a detailed sense of the specific lens or perspective we will use to examine these different theories and bodies of research. As will become clear in the course of this book, it is impossible to examine theory and research without adopting a position oneself (even though many textbooks tend to adopt a “God's-eye view,” a view from “nowhere and everywhere”). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, this book is written explicitly from a critical perspective, and so Chapter 2 will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this perspective. We will discuss the history of the critical perspective and its underlying assumptions, goals, and values. By the end of the chapter, we will have a useful set of principles with which to make sense of the complex terrain that constitutes the field of organizational communication studies.

1. Individually or in groups, identify the different forms of control addressed in this chapter. Think about instances where you have experienced these forms of control. Some will be routine and everywhere; others will be more unusual. How did they make you feel? What were your responses to these experiences? To what degree do you take these control mechanisms for granted? Are there situations where you have tried to resist or circumvent organizational control mechanisms?

2. Discuss the five different perspectives on organizational communication addressed in this chapter. What are their defining features? Using a single organization with which you are familiar, choose three of the perspectives and use the principles of each to analyze the organization. What features of the organization are highlighted and hidden by each perspective? What does this tell you about the nature of research and knowledge generation?
## KEY TERMS

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In Chapter 1 we framed the field of organizational communication by providing a broad overview of several current research traditions. In this chapter we will take a much more detailed look at the perspective that will be our guide for the rest of this book—the critical approach. By the end of this chapter, you will have the analytic tools that will enable you to understand and critique the various theories, research traditions, and organizational processes we will be examining in the remaining chapters of this book. In developing these analytic tools my goal is to help you become “organizationally literate” such that you can better understand the expanding role of organizations in creating the world in which we live. Being “organizationally literate” enables us to become better organizational citizens, attending more critically to the important organizational processes and practices that shape both our working and leisure activities.

So, we must develop in detail the perspective that provides the guiding assumptions for this book. You may have noticed that the subtitle of this book is “A Critical Approach.” In this context, the term critical refers not to the everyday, negative sense of that term but, rather, to a perspective on organizations that has emerged in the past 30 years. From this perspective, organizations are viewed as political systems where different interest groups...
compete for control of organizational resources (Morgan, 2006). The critical approach highlights the goal of making organizations more participatory and democratic structures that are more responsive to the needs of their multiple stakeholders (Deetz, 1995). As we examine different organizational and management theories through the course of this book, we will assess them with this critical approach as our guidepost.

The first goal of this chapter, then, is to provide you with a sense of the various influences and schools of thought that have helped establish a body of critical research in the field of organizational communication. Thus, we will take a historical lens to examine the emergence of the critical approach. A second goal of this chapter is to explain in some detail the principal elements of the critical approach. What are its assumptions? How does it view organizations and organizing practices? How does it conceive of communication? What are its goals and purposes? A third and final goal of this chapter is to show how the critical approach can be used as a way to examine and critique other ways of understanding organizations. As we move forward in the book, each perspective we address will be examined critically.

First, let us turn to an examination of the various historical influences that have led to the emergence of the critical approach.

THE CRITICAL APPROACH: A HISTORY

While there are a number of different historical influences on the critical approach, one common thread tends to run through all these influences—the work of Karl Marx (1967; Marx & Engels, 1947). In the past 100 years or so, Marx’s large body of writings has profoundly influenced modern social thought. Indeed, along with sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, Marx is considered to be a foundational thinker in our understanding of how society functions culturally, politically, and economically. However, the difficulty of Marx’s work has led over the decades to a number of different interpretations of his ideas. These different interpretations have, in turn, resulted in the establishment of different research traditions and schools of thought that expand on Marx’s original ideas and attempt to make them relevant to contemporary society.

In this section we will first discuss some of the basic elements of Marx’s theory of society. Then, we will take a look at two schools of thought that are strongly influenced by Marx but that, at the same time, critique some of the limitations of his work and attempt to provide alternative views of society. These two schools of thought are (1) The Institute for Social Research (commonly known as the Frankfurt School) and (2) cultural studies.

Karl Marx

If we discuss Marx’s work in the context of the framework developed in Chapter 1, we can say he was very much a critical modernist (indeed, one could argue that he is the principal founder of the critical modernist perspective). Why is he a critical modernist, and what is the importance of his work for the development of the critical approach?

During his life (1818–1883), Marx was witness to major economic and political upheaval in Europe, as capitalism became the dominant economic and political system.
Unlike earlier theorists such as Adam Smith (author of *The Wealth of Nations*, who we will talk about more in Chapter 3), Marx did not celebrate the emergence of capitalism but, rather, criticized the ways in which it exploited working people. As Marx (1967) showed in his most famous work, *Capital*, despite the 19th century’s unprecedented growth in production and, hence, in wealth, most of this wealth was concentrated in the hands of a very small minority of people he called capitalists. Even more significantly, Marx showed that this wealth was not directly produced by capitalists but was generated through the exploitation of the laborers who worked for the capitalists in their factories. Marx is a critical modernist, then, in that he both critiques capitalism as an economic and political system of domination and exploitation and outlines an alternative political and economic system (socialism). Thus, he believes in the Enlightenment principle of emancipation and freedom for everyone, regardless of their economic or political status.

How does Marx arrive at this analysis of capitalism as an exploitative system? While his work is immense in volume and extremely complex, we can identify some basic issues.

**Marx’s Key Issues**

First, Marx provides a detailed analysis of the historical development of different economic systems, or forms of ownership. These he describes as tribal, ancient, feudal, and capitalist. Each of these periods represents increasing levels of societal complexity in terms of how goods are produced, the forms of property ownership that exist, and the system of class relations—or social hierarchy—in place. For example, tribal societies featured a hunter-gatherer system of production, little division of labor, and no class system insofar as tribal property was communal. Ancient societies, such as Greece and Rome, were city-states organized around agriculture, with a developed civil and political system. In addition, the
class structure consisted of male citizens, women, and slaves, with slaves doing all the
direct labor. In the feudal system production was concentrated in agriculture, ownership
was in the hands of an aristocratic class that had stewardship over the land, and the class
system consisted of serfs who performed labor and the aristocrats who had rights over the
serfs.

It was in capitalism, however, that the economic system took on its most complex—and
most exploitative—form. Here, production shifted from the countryside to the town and,
due to the passing of a series of “Enclosure Laws” that privatized “common land” (which
everyone could use) for the exclusive use of the aristocracy, commoners were coercively
removed from this land (where they kept livestock and grew produce) and forced to migrate
to the developing cities, thus creating a large pool of wage labor for the new factories.

Marx is famous for developing a theory called historical materialism—an idea that
analyzes history according to different modes of production, each involving shifting forms
of property ownership and class relations. Thus, Marx identifies these different modes as
common ownership (tribal society), citizen–slave (ancient society), aristocrat–serf (feudal
society), and capitalist–wage laborer (capitalist society). In the last three cases, Marx shows
that each system consists of an exploiting and an exploited class, with the former living off
and dependent on the labor of the latter.

But what does Marx identify as being particularly exploitative about capitalism?
Certainly, in the context of early 21st century society, capitalism is usually associated with
democracy and freedom, and it has certainly been a driving force behind huge increases
in our standard of living over the past 100 years or more. What was it, then, that Marx found
so objectionable about this economic and political system?

In his analysis of capitalism, Marx identifies three elements peculiar to this particular
economic system.

1. Under capitalism, workers are no longer able to produce for themselves what they
need to live. In Marx’s terms, they do not possess their own “means of production”
(land, tools, animals, machinery, etc.). Because the advent of capitalism in Europe
saw the forcible removal of large populations from common land, these dislocated
people were forced to sell at the going market rate the only thing that remained to
them—their labor power. In this sense, the non-owners of the means of
production (workers) are forced to satisfy their own economic needs by selling
their labor power to the dominant group (the capitalists). Thus, workers actually
perform the economic maintenance of the capitalist class.

2. Marx identifies capitalism as the only system of economic production in which
the very foundation of the system is not to make goods in order to produce even
more goods but, rather, to turn money into even more money. In this sense, the
product a particular company makes becomes largely irrelevant, as long as that
company continues to make a strong “return on investment.” Thus, the actual “use
value” of the product is much less important than its “exchange value.”

This is even truer today than it was in Marx’s time. For example, companies such
as Procter and Gamble produce everything from bars of soap to potato chips, and
media barons such as Rupert Murdoch own companies as diverse as television
stations, newspapers, and sports teams. Moreover, financial markets such as Wall
Street do not even make products as such but leverage money itself many times over to make more money. The issue in all these cases is not whether such products are useful but whether, through their exchange value, they can create more wealth for investors. As Marx shows, this means that under capitalism, everything—including workers—becomes a commodity to be bought and sold.

3. The exploitative nature of capitalism is hidden. That is, when workers sell their labor power to capitalists they are not selling a specific amount of labor but, rather, a certain capacity to labor for a particular period of time. For example, a worker may be hired to work 10 hours a day at a particular hourly rate (say, $10). The capitalist’s goal is to extract as much labor as possible from the worker during that 10-hour period (e.g., by constant supervision, speeding up the work process, etc.). As Marx points out, this means that the labor of the worker produces more value than that at which it is purchased (indeed, the value of the labor is infinitely expandable, limited only by technology, machine efficiency, and the worker’s physical capacity). Marx refers to this difference between the value of the labor power, as purchased by the capitalist, and the actual value produced by the laborer as surplus value. This is the source of profit for the capitalist. Surplus value is hidden because the worker appears to be paid for a full day’s work. However, as Marx shows, the worker is paid for only that portion of the working day that is necessary to maintain the worker, that is, feed and clothe him or her—what Marx calls “necessary labor.” The rest of the working day is surplus labor and is actually unpaid.

Summarizing Marx’s analysis, sociologist Ken Morrison (1995, p. 81) describes the features of surplus value in the following manner:

1. It is created by the surplus labor of the worker.
2. It is unpaid and hence creates value for the capitalist.
3. It represents deception because it claims to be paid labor.
4. It is at the heart of capitalist exploitation since the worker is not paid for the wealth created.

While Marx was obviously addressing the conditions that existed in 19th century factories, the same principles—and in some cases working conditions—still exist today (indeed, one of the reasons many companies move production overseas is that labor laws regarding minimum wage, length of working day, workplace safety, and so on are less strict or even nonexistent, thus creating more surplus value).

In her participant-observation study of Subaru-Isuzu Automotive, for example, sociologist Laurie Graham (1993) shows how contemporary capitalist organizations attempt to increase the amount of surplus value that workers produce. Graham discusses how workers are grouped into teams and required to perform a long list of tasks on a moving production line. When the plant first opened, the workers struggled to complete the tasks (22 in all) in the designated 5-minute time period. However, through increased efficiency and line speed up, the same tasks were soon performed in 3 minutes and 40 seconds. As Graham indicates,
“Everyone was expected to continually make his or her job more efficient, striving to work to maximum capacity” (p. 160). In Marx’s terms, we can say that the workers are producing an increasing amount of surplus value, while the value they accrue to themselves in the form of wages remains the same.

This example is interesting because the workers are apparently happy to work ever harder while receiving no reward for this extra work (except perhaps a pat on the back, although there is a long history of companies firing employees as they become more efficient—hence, paradoxically, it is not always in employees’ best interests to work hard!). This apparent willingness to put up with a system of exploitation brings us to the next crucial aspect of Marx’s critique of capitalism—his theory of ideology. This concept will play an important role in later chapters of this book, so it is important to get a basic understanding of it now.

Marx uses the notion of ideology to show how the economic structure of society directly impacts the system of ideas that prevails at particular points in history. True to his materialist and economic orientation, Marx saw ideas as the outcome of economic activity. Marx argues that not only does our social existence shape how we see the world, but how we see reality depends on the ideas of those who control the means of production. In capitalism, of course, this is the ruling capitalist class. In one of his most famous passages, Marx says the following:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx & Engels, 1947, p. 39)

Ideology, then, is the system of attitudes, beliefs, ideas, perceptions, and values that shape the reality of people in society. However, ideology does not simply reflect reality as it exists but also shapes reality to favor the interests of the dominant class and stands in a relationship of opposition, or contradiction, to the working class. What does this mean? In the case of capitalism, it means that, for example, framing the labor process as “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” ideologically legitimates the accumulation of surplus value by capitalists. As we have seen, however, capitalism obscures the exploitative features of the labor process.

Other examples of ideologies at work include (1) continuous attempts through the 19th and 20th centuries to construct a perception of women as unable to do “men’s work” (except during times of war, of course); (2) development of a “myth of individualism,” in which success is seen as purely the product of hard work and intelligence (the “Horatio Alger” myth) and failure becomes the responsibility of the individual; and (3) the historical creation of white racial superiority over non-white races (in a later chapter we’ll look at how the issue of what groups get to count themselves as white has been fiercely contested during the history of the United States). There are many more such examples, but all function to structure reality in a way that serves the interests of the dominant class. Thus, while Marx shows that economic interests structure ideologies, he also shows that such ideologies
take on a life of their own, inverting reality in a way that marginalizes some groups and
privileges other, dominant groups.

In sum, Marx’s writings have had a profound impact on our understanding of the rela-
tionships among economics, social reality, and the class structure of society. Taken together,
his ideas of historical materialism, worker exploitation, and ideology demonstrated the
importance of looking beneath “mere appearances” to examine the underlying social rela-
tions in capitalist society. In this sense, he provided an incisive critique of how capitalism
turned everything into commodities (including workers themselves) and alienated people
from natural productive activity.

Finally, we must remember that Marx was not only an economist and philosopher but
also a revolutionary. Indeed, he saw one of the principal goals of philosophy as social
change. In one of his most frequently quoted passages, he states, “The philosophers have
only interpreted the world differently, the point is to change it” (Marx & Engels, 1947,
p. 199). With Frederick Engels, he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, an explicit call to work-
ers around the world to engage in revolutionary struggle, containing the memorable line,
“Working men of all countries unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!” (Marx &
Engels, 2008).

**Critiquing Marx**

While Marx’s work is central to an understanding of the critical approach, his work also
has significant limitations that have led scholars to revise his ideas over the past 100 years.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, criticism is his belief in the evolutionary nature of
the economic model of history that he developed. Marx believed that he had developed a
set of universal principles that, much like Darwin’s theory of the evolution of species,
explained the inevitable development of political and economic systems around the world.
Thus, for Marx and his followers, just as feudalism had naturally evolved into capitalism,
so capitalism would evolve into socialism.

The belief in the inevitability of this process was rooted partly in Marx’s contention that
capitalism was so exploitative and so beset with problems and paradoxes that it was bound
to fail. Like slavery and feudalism before it, an economic system that kept the vast majority
of people in poverty for the benefit of a few surely could not continue to survive. Marx
argued that the basic contradictions of capitalism (e.g., that while the working class *produ-
duced* wealth directly through their labor, the capitalist class *accumulated* that wealth exclu-
sively for itself) would eventually become so apparent that people would revolt. Indeed, in
the middle of the 19th century, conditions in English factories had become so appallingly
oppressive and poverty was so widespread that strong revolutionary movements gained
considerable support amongst the general population. Similarly, in the United States, the
late 19th and early 20th centuries saw massive wealth, poverty, and social unrest existing
side by side. Trade unionism had strongly increased its membership, and the women’s
movement was actively demanding social and political reform.

However, as we all know, capitalism did not collapse (at least not in Western Europe and
the United States). In fact, the one major revolution of the early 20th century took place in
a country—Russia—that was relatively underdeveloped industrially (thus violating Marx’s
principle that revolution would occur only in advanced capitalist countries). Despite a
number of crises, including the Depression of the 1930s, capitalism continued to be the dominant economic system. So, from a historical point of view, Marx’s “evolutionary” position has proven problematic.

A second—and related—criticism of Marx is his almost exclusive focus on the economic features of capitalism. While his development of an economic, materialist view of society is important, he tends to overemphasize the extent to which the economic structure of a society determines its cultural, political, and ideological features. As later scholars showed, there is no easy one-to-one correspondence between economics and social reality. One cannot say, for example, that all members of the working class will develop a similar ideological point of view. As we know, there are many working-class people who share a conservative ideology and many upper-class people who have radical ideologies (the billionaire businessman George Soros would be a good current example). In this sense, while Marx’s model suggests that economics determines class, which in turn determines ideology, later scholars have shown this position to be extremely suspect.

Finally, because he was writing in the middle of the 19th century, Marx was unable to foresee the significant changes that capitalism would go through in the next 100 years or so. As we have said, capitalism did not collapse as Marx predicted, and later scholars would have to account for the ways in which capitalism was able to adapt to changing economic and political circumstances. While subsequent generations of Marxist scholars would not abandon principles of social change, they nevertheless needed to develop theories that would explain why capitalism continued to reign supreme despite the continued existence of poverty and exploitation.

In the next two sections we will discuss two “neo-Marxist” schools of thought that have strongly influenced both social theory generally and critical organizational communication studies more specifically. Both schools have critiqued Marx’s original writings and attempted to adapt his work to the analysis of modern capitalism.

The Institute for Social Research (the Frankfurt School)

The Institute for Social Research, founded in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923, has had a major impact on European and U.S. theory and research over the past several decades. In the past 30 years it has grown in importance for scholars in the field of communication, particularly those studying mass media, rhetoric, and organizational communication. Established by a group of radical German Jewish intellectuals, most of whom came from well-to-do backgrounds, the work of this school was an attempt to reinterpret Marxist thought in the light of 20th century changes in capitalism. In particular, Frankfurt School members were interested in understanding capitalism not only as an economic system (which, as we have seen, was Marx’s main focus) but also as a cultural and ideological system that had a significant impact on the way people thought about and experienced the world. Important Frankfurt School members included Max Horkheimer (who was the school’s most influential director), Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse (who became a significant figure in the 1960s student movement), and Walter Benjamin.

These researchers were concerned that, in the 40 years since Marx’s death, Marxist theory had become overly dogmatic. Indeed, the basic tenets of Marxist thought had become akin to a system of religious principles seen as universally and indisputably true. For Frankfurt School members, “the true object of Marxism . . . was not the uncovering of immutable truths, but the fostering of social change” (Jay, 1973, p. 46). In broad terms,
then, the work of the Frankfurt School was an attempt to make Marxist theory relevant to
the changing nature of capitalism in the 20th century (Kellner, 1989).

In responding to Marxism’s apparent failure to predict the demise of capitalism, the
scholars of the Frankfurt School embarked on a research agenda that attempted both to
retain the spirit of Marxism and to move beyond its rather simplistic model of inevitable
economic evolution. In short, the Frankfurt School wanted to continue the examination
and critique of capitalism that Marx had begun, but they decided to take this project in a
different direction than that pursued by Marx and his followers.

What was this new direction? While the scholars of the Frankfurt School pursued many
diverse research agendas, there are two themes around which much of their work tended
to coalesce. First, the Frankfurt School researchers believed that orthodox Marxism was in
error in focusing principally on the economic aspects of capitalism. While the economic
foundations of a society strongly influence the structure and processes of that society,
Frankfurt Schoolers believed it was just one element in a more complex model of society.
As such, they rejected the model of **economic determinism** (which argued that the nature
of society was causally determined by its economic foundation) of orthodox Marxism. In
its place, Frankfurt Schoolers developed a **dialectical theory** through which they viewed
society as the product of the interrelationships among its cultural, ideological, and eco-
nomic aspects. This theory became known as **critical theory**—a term still used today to
describe a great deal of neo-Marxist theory and research.

Second, Frankfurt School members were interested more broadly in the nature of
knowledge itself and in examining the course that modernist, Enlightenment thought was
taking in the 20th century. While they believed in the Enlightenment-inspired ideals of
human emancipation and happiness, many were concerned that the 20th century had
witnessed the perversion of these ideals. As we will see below, many Frankfurt School
researchers developed a profound skepticism about the possibilities for fulfilling the goals
of the Enlightenment project. Both of these themes are discussed next.

**Critical Theory and the Critique of Capitalism**

Given the failure of classical Marxism to predict the demise of capitalism, the Frankfurt
School turned its attention to studying the processes by which capitalism was able to
legitimate and sustain itself despite the existence of paradoxes and contradictions that
Marx argued would lead to its overthrow. This shift in focus involved turning away from the
traditional Marxist “base-superstructure” model of society (in which the economic base is
seen as determining the ideological and political superstructure). In its place, the Frankfurt
School developed a “dialectical” model, arguing for an interdependent relationship between
the cultural and ideological elements of society on the one hand and the economic founda-
tions of society on the other.

In their examination of the cultural and ideological aspects of society, Frankfurt School
researchers were particularly interested in the then-recent emergence of various forms of
mass media such as radio, television, film, and popular music. Frankfurt School scholars
made the claim that these media functioned as control mechanisms through which general
consent to capitalism was maintained. Horkheimer and Adorno (1988) coined the term
**culture industry** to describe the coming together of popular forms of mass culture, the
media, and advertising to create a “totally administered society” that left individuals little room for critical thought. For example, in describing the role of advertising in consumerism, Horkheimer and Adorno state:

What is decisive today is . . . the necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible. The principle states that he should be shown all his needs as capable of fulfillment, but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry. . . . The paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery. (pp. 141–142)

According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1988), the development of the culture industry was one of the principal means by which capitalism could simultaneously perpetuate itself through the continuous creation of new needs and produce a mass consciousness that “buys into” the ideological beliefs of capitalist consumer society. As Jacques (1996, p. 153) states, “The same industrial processes which have resulted in the mass production of goods and services have been applied to the mass production of needs themselves.”

Thus, the term *culture industry* suggests three ideas: (a) popular culture is mass-produced just like cars, laundry detergent, and candy; (b) it is administered from above and imposed on people rather than being generated by them spontaneously; and (c) it creates needs in people that would not otherwise exist but are nevertheless essential for the continued survival and expansion of capitalism and maintenance of the status quo. (See Critical Case Study 2.1 for an example of how this process works.) These ideas will be taken up in much more detail in Chapter 12 when we discuss branding and consumption.

**Critical Theory and the Critique of Enlightenment Thought**

In addition to developing a critical theory of society and capitalism, Frankfurt School members sought to analyze the relationship between Enlightenment thought and 20th century forms of science and rationality. Although they saw themselves very much working in the tradition of Enlightenment rationality, they considered that the confluence of capitalist modernity, science, and instrumental forms of thinking had led to the perversion of the Enlightenment project. In one of their most famous statements on the 20th century’s “fall from grace,” Horkheimer and Adorno (1988) comment, “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (p. 3).

Critical theory thus involves an examination of why—particularly in the 20th century—humankind, “instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1988, p. xi). For Frankfurt School researchers, the main answer to this question lies with the emergence of science and technology and the dominance of instrumental reasoning. While Adorno and Horkheimer do not argue that science and technology are bad *per se*, they suggest that society’s focus on objectification and quantification has led to an extremely narrow conception of knowledge that is unreflective. In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that Enlightenment thought has become totalitarian, serving the interests of domination and supplanting more radical forms of thought (Kellner, 1989, p. 89). Indeed, where the Enlightenment supposedly
Critical Case Study 2.1
McDonaldizing “Fridays”

You are probably familiar with the Rebecca Black song “Friday.” It’s the one that went viral on YouTube in early 2011 with more than 160 million hits and was dubbed by some the worst pop song of all time (I won’t post a link here, as I don’t want to further rot anyone’s brain, but you shouldn’t have any trouble finding it online). My interest here is not in the song itself but in the organization that released it. Ark Music Factory (AMF) is a company that specializes in producing and marketing music sung by teens to a teen audience. On its website (arkmusicfactory.com) it actively recruits teens (mainly teenage girls, as far as I can tell) who want to become pop stars. For a fee, AMF will provide “a song made specifically” for the wannabe pop star and will also create a music video. When I went to the company’s website, AMF was marketing a 14-year-old girl called Lexi St. George, who was getting the full “will she be the next big pop star?” treatment. By the time you read this, she will probably have disappeared into obscurity.

In many respects, AMF is a perfect example of how the “culture industry” operates. Music is reduced from a creative act to a rationalized, McDonaldized formula in which a product is carefully tailored to appeal to a particular set of audience demographics. In some ways, the actual song is unimportant—what matters is its manufacture as a commodity that will be widely consumed. Moreover, the singer is rationalized, too—she is provided with a carefully pre-packaged image that will be eagerly consumed by the target audience. Indeed, I was struck by the similarity between Rebecca Black’s and Lexi St. George’s videos, right down to the synthesized, electronic quality of their voices.

At their best, art and music provide insight into the human condition; rationalized, mass-produced pop culture is intended to narcotize us and encourage us to part with our hard-earned money—critical thinking is the last thing it needs.

Discussion Questions

1. What's your opinion of the kind of pop culture artifacts that companies such as AMF produce? Are they harmless fluff, or do they have a wider social impact?
2. Identify other examples of mass-produced, rationalized activities or items; what impact do they have on your daily life?
3. Take an “inventory” of your day from getting up to going to bed. How many times a day do you engage in activities that involve rationalization processes? What, if anything, does this tell you about your life?
4. Can you identify any activities you engage in that do not involve rationalization processes?
5. In groups, discuss the possibilities for “enchanting a disenchanted world” (Ritzer, 2005)—that is, for having experiences not rationalized through mass production and calculation. How easy is it to have these experiences?

stands for progress and greater freedom, Horkheimer and Adorno see a logical progression from factories to prisons to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany (keep in mind that they are writing as Jewish intellectuals in the immediate aftermath of World War II).

In summary, we can say that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School was both a critique of the existing conditions of capitalist society and an instrument of social transformation aimed at increasing human freedom, happiness, and well-being (Kellner, 1989, p. 32). However, like the classical Marxism it critiques, the Frankfurt School version of critical theory also possesses some limitations. We will briefly address these limitations next.

Critiquing the Frankfurt School

The most problematic element in Frankfurt School research is its narrow conception of the role of mass culture in society. It is probably fair to say that Adorno and many of his
colleagues had a rather elitist notion of what counted as “culture,” developing a rather rigid distinction between “high” and “mass” culture. For Adorno, only “high” culture was authentic, being able to produce the kind of insight and critical reflection that would result in social transformation. On the other hand, he saw the mass-produced culture of the “culture industry” as completely without redeeming value and as simply reproducing the status quo in capitalist society.

But this rigid separation of high and mass culture ironically ran counter to Adorno’s (1973) espousal of a dialectical approach to the study of society. Through this polar opposition, Adorno and his colleagues overlooked the possibility that mass, popular culture could function as other than instruments of social control. Missing from the Frankfurt School’s approach to popular culture was the idea that perhaps the consumers of the culture industry were more than simply unwitting dupes who accepted at face value everything the mass media produced. As later scholars show, there is no single “culture industry,” nor is there one way in which people interpret the products of that industry. Indeed, one could argue that popular culture is a “contested terrain” in which conservative and radical meanings and interpretations compete together for dominance.

For example, hip-hop music is arguably both a multimillion dollar production of the culture industry and a means by which marginalized members of society—particularly young, African American men—express their frustration at social and political injustice. But this music does not have a singular meaning. To the politically conservative it represents a threat to traditional family values. To many women—both black and white—it is seen as an example of the violence and misogyny often aimed at women.

Thus, Frankfurt School researchers both overestimated the power of the culture industry to create a “totally administered society” in support of capitalism and underestimated the ability of the average person to develop interpretations that contest “administered” meanings. However, there is little doubt that the culture industry represents an extremely powerful and dominant force in modern society, and its effects are widespread. How else can one explain the fact that more people vote in American Idol than during a presidential election? Or how many people follow Ashton Kutcher’s tweets? In this sense, while the Frankfurt School certainly overestimated the power of the culture industry, we should not underestimate its ability to influence social reality and shape meaning in society.

In sum, the Frankfurt School represents an important contribution to our understanding of the relationships among capitalism, culture, and power. It is central to our attempts to understand how people’s experiences of the world are shaped at an everyday level. As we will see in later chapters, modern organizations have become extremely adept at shaping our perceptions, feelings, and identities, both as organization members and as consumers of corporate products. The reality is that we live and work in a corporate world, and very little of who we are is not affected in some fashion by corporate structures, processes, and systems of communication.

**Cultural Studies**

The research tradition known as cultural studies has had a major impact on scholars in a wide variety of fields, including English, media studies, sociology, and communication. In
this section we will examine some of the principal elements of this work and discuss its implications for a critical approach to organizational communication.

As we saw earlier, Frankfurt School scholars used the term *culture industry* to describe the emergence and negative effects of popular culture in society, but scholars associated with cultural studies use the term *culture* in a different way. They critique the distinction between “high” and “low” culture, arguing that such an opposition was not only elitist but also limited the ways in which popular (“mass”) culture could be conceptualized. Thus, over the past four decades, researchers in the cultural studies tradition have taken popular culture as a serious object of study, examining the complex ways in which it structures social reality. Researchers have studied cultural phenomena such as soap operas (Gledhill, 1997), teenage girls’ magazines (McRobbie, 2000), and shopping malls (Fiske, 1989; Morris, 1998).

How, then, do researchers in the cultural studies tradition define the notion of “culture”? In its most basic sense, “culture” refers to the system of shared meanings that unites members of a particular group or community. Such shared meanings are developed through “systems of representation” (Hall, 1997a, 1997b) that enable us to make sense of the world in particular ways. The language we speak is the most obvious example of a representational system, but others include the clothing we wear, music, films, photography, and so forth. Indeed, everything has the potential to become part of a system of representation and thus come to “mean” something to a particular community.

Drawing on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Culler, 1976) and French philosopher Roland Barthes (1972), cultural studies researchers show that the elements or signs that make up these systems of representation are both arbitrary and conventional. In other words, there is no natural or intrinsic meaning associated with a particular sign, and its meaning rests on an agreed-on set of rules, or conventions, that govern how the signs are coded. De Saussure further showed that the meaning of a sign does not depend on what that sign refers to (e.g., “tree” and the object that grows in your garden) but on its relationship to other signs in the same system of representation. In this sense, meaning arises out of difference. De Saussure referred to this scientific study of systems of representation as *semiology* (today, the term *semiotics* is most used to describe this area of study).

Let’s take a simple, everyday example to illustrate this principle. As drivers, we are all dependent on traffic lights to regulate our driving behavior, and our understanding of traffic lights depends on our ability to learn the coding system that translates the lights into meaningful signs. Thus, red means “stop,” yellow means “get ready to stop” (or, to some people, “drive faster”), and green means “go.” However, there is nothing natural about these meanings or about the relationship between the colors and what they refer to. Such meanings are arbitrary and conventional and only work because everyone agrees on their meanings. If everyone agreed to use a blue light to mean “stop,” then this system of representation would work just as well. But there’s another important principle at work here. Not only is the connection between the lights and what they refer to arbitrary, but their meaning is determined by the lights’ relationship to, and difference from, each other. Thus, red means, or signifies, “stop” only because it can be differentiated from yellow and green. In this sense, meaning arises within a system of differences. This principle is borne out by the fact that in Britain the “representational system” of traffic lights is slightly more complex. Even though the same colors are used, an extra element of difference is added through the lighting of red and yellow together after the red—this combination of colors
means “get ready to go” and prepares drivers for the appearance of the green light. Again, however, this combination is meaningful only in its difference from red, yellow, and green as they appear separately.

One of de Saussure’s great achievements was to show that language—or any system of representation—is not something that arises from within us but, instead, is fundamentally social, requiring that we participate in the system of rules and conventions in order to be understood and share meaning. In this sense, systems of representation are what create the very possibility for culture and society and what—in a very real and concrete sense—create who we are as people (i.e., they create our identities).

Cultural studies researchers have taken up and explored these basic principles in studying the various systems of representation that constitute culture and society. However, as their work illustrates, most systems are much more complex than the traffic light example above. One of their findings has been that the meaning of particular signs or the combination of signs is not fixed but can change over time, or can function simultaneously with multiple meanings, depending on the ways in which signs are combined. Thus, we are not passive receivers of representational processes; instead, we have to interpret and make sense of them actively. Indeed, signs are not meaningful until they have been interpreted in some fashion. Again, an example will help explain this point.

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Capitalism needs to expand continually into new markets to survive.
The McDonald’s “Golden Arches” is one of the most instantly recognizable signs in the United States, perhaps in the world. But what does this sign mean? At its most simple level, the sign is associated with a particular product—hamburgers and fries. But that is probably the most insignificant part of its meaning. As a corporation, McDonald’s spends millions of dollars in advertising, attempting to “fix” the meaning of the golden arches in particular ways. Thus, they produce image advertising to create associations of efficiency, cleanliness, affordability, and quality of product. Through advertising, the arches also have become synonymous with family and solid American values. The golden arches have also come to represent the connection between capitalism and democracy. In the 1990s the opening of McDonald’s stores in former Soviet Bloc countries was portrayed in the media as the triumph of free-market capitalism and democracy over planned economies and totalitarian governments. There’s even a political theory that claims that no two countries where McDonald’s stores have opened have ever gone to war (this theory held true until Israel invaded Lebanon in 2006)!

However, as cultural studies researchers have shown, the meaning of a sign is never fixed or final, being subject to constant slippage and contestation between different interest groups. While the McDonald’s corporation would love to be able to control and fix the meaning of the arches fully and absolutely, the arbitrariness of signs and the active interpretive processes of different people make this impossible. Thus, interpretations have arisen that resist and challenge the process of meaning production in which McDonald’s engages. For example, environmental groups have targeted McDonald’s for its unsound ecological practices, such as clearing large areas of forest to raise cattle for hamburger meat. Similarly, health groups have criticized the high fat content of McDonald’s food, despite the latter’s efforts to present itself as catering to health-conscious customers. Critics of the impact of McDonald’s on society have even coined a new term—McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2000)—to describe the proliferation of prepackaged, instant, easily consumable products and lifestyles. In this context, McDonald’s is seen as an icon for the ways in which capitalism has contributed to a fragmented, soulless way of life. In fact, the term culture industry would apply quite well to this process of McDonaldization.

Researchers in the cultural studies tradition, then, analyze the systems of representation that make up the cultures in which we live. In this sense, they are interested in the process of “meaning construction”—that is, in the various ways people collectively use different signifying practices or discourses to produce the social reality in which they live. However, as cultural studies scholars have shown, these processes do not occur randomly, spontaneously, or even consensually. The reality is that some people or groups of people have greater influence over the “meaning construction” process and are better able to get others to share in their view of the world. To use a cultural studies term, such groups have greater “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) in the sense that they have extensive economic, political, and symbolic resources at their disposal through which to influence the structure of social reality.

In the next section, then, we will examine how these principles can be used to examine organizations as communication phenomena. In other words, what insights can we gain into organizations by thinking of them as sites for complex and collective acts of meaning construction? From a critical perspective, what does it mean to view organizations as sites of everyday culture? Table 2.1 which follows compares the three critical perspectives we have discussed in this chapter.
**PART I \ DEVELOPING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

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**Table 2.1** Comparing Marx, the Frankfurt School, and Cultural Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Marx</th>
<th>Frankfurt School</th>
<th>Cultural Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>View of capitalism</td>
<td>• System of exploitation through wage labor</td>
<td>• Economic, political, and cultural system of exploitation</td>
<td>• Close relation between economics and systems of representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mode of production that will fail, to be replaced by socialism</td>
<td>• Highly adaptable to change</td>
<td>• Capitalism neither inevitable nor bound to fail; contested through alternative meanings and subcultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exchange value over use value</td>
<td>• Creates narrow, instrumental view of knowledge that serves status quo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception of culture</td>
<td>• Determined by economic system</td>
<td>• Popular culture administered from above through culture industry</td>
<td>• High/low culture distinction rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ideology works to create dominant meanings/ideas that serve ruling class (capitalists)</td>
<td>• Only high culture has meaning</td>
<td>• Culture produced through everyday life and creative activity of knowing actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of ideology</td>
<td>• Maintains status quo: “Ideas of ruling class are ruling ideas”</td>
<td>• Works through culture industry to maintain status quo</td>
<td>• Place where meanings are contested; change can occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibilities for resistance and/or social change</td>
<td>• Inevitable because of contradictions in capitalism</td>
<td>• Unlikely because of dominance of culture industry</td>
<td>• Resistance occurs at everyday level in subcultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Workers will unite and overthrow capitalism, creating socialist system</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Capitalism not overthrown but reformed through incremental change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The critical approach adopts a number of assumptions about organizations as communicative phenomena. In this section we will examine those assumptions in detail.

**Organizations Are Socially Constructed Through Communication Processes**

In the past 30 years or so there has been wide acceptance of the idea that organizations are not “objective” structures but, rather, exist as a result of the collective and coordinated
communication processes of its members. Communication is not something that happens “in” organizations; rather, organizations come into being through communication processes (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Putnam, 1983; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Such a position is often referred to as a “social constructionist” approach because of its belief that language and communication do not simply reflect reality but actually create the realities in which we live. Consistent with the interpretive perspective discussed in Chapter 1, this position views “organizational reality” as a linguistic and communicative construction.

From this perspective, scholars study various forms of symbolic practice such as storytelling, metaphors, and humor in an attempt to understand the role they play in creating
the reality that organization members experience (e.g., Browning, 1992; Lynch, 2002; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987; Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987). Like the cultural studies tradition, this work is concerned with the ways in which people collectively create systems of meaning. Thus, an underlying premise of this research is that social actors are active participants in the communicative construction of reality. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, in recent years a group of organizational communication scholars have developed what is called the CCO approach—the communicative construction of organization—that looks at how routine organizational conversations and texts (reports, mission statement, etc.) shape organizational reality (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2000). From this perspective, documents are viewed not as simple providers of information but as themselves having agency that shapes people’s behaviors in significant ways (Brummans, 2007).

Organizations Are Political Sites of Power and Control

Not only are organizations communicatively constructed, such construction processes are influenced by processes of power and control. In other words, organizational meanings do not simply arise spontaneously but are shaped by the various actors and stakeholder interests. In this context, the critical approach to organizations explores the relationship between the social construction process discussed above and the exercise of power.

There are many ways to conceive of organizational power (e.g., Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 1974; Pfeffer, 1981b), and we will examine some of these in more detail in Chapter 7. However, the critical approach views power as the process by which organization members’ identities are shaped to accept and actively support certain issues, values, and interests. Thus, the critical approach’s view of power is consistent with Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony. For Gramsci, the notion of hegemony referred to the struggle over the establishment of certain meanings and ideas in society. He suggested that the process by which reality was shaped was always a contested process and that the hegemony of a particular group depended on its ability to articulate ideas that are actively taken up and pursued by members of other groups. In his own words, Gramsci defines hegemony as

the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (p. 12)

As we saw in discussing control in Chapter 1, organizations for the most part do not exercise power coercively but rather through developing consensus about various issues. According to organizational communication scholars Phil Tompkins and George Cheney, organizations engage in “unobtrusive control” in which members come to accept the value premises on which their organization operates and actively adopt those premises in their organizational behavior (Cheney, 1991; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Another way to think of this process is that organizational power is exercised when members experience strong identification with that organization (Barker, 1993, 1999).
However, the critical approach does not argue that processes such as concertive control and identification are by definition problematic. Clearly, collective action and members’ identification with an organization are necessary for that organization to thrive. Rather, the concern is with the extent to which the assumptions identification and control are based on are open to examination and freely arrived at. Whose interests do these assumptions serve? Are organization members identifying with and taking on value systems that, when closely examined, work against their own best interests?

As Stan Deetz has shown, organizations consist of multiple stakeholders (managers, workers, shareholders, community members, customers, etc.), but rarely are these multiple and competing interests represented in organizational decision making (Deetz, 1995; Deetz & Brown, 2004). For example, while a corporation may reap huge profits from moving its operations to a country where labor is cheap, such a move can be devastating (economically, culturally, and psychologically) for the community left behind. Who gets to define the premises on which such a decision is made? What right do host communities have to expect responsible behavior from resident corporations? Who gets to define “responsible behavior”?

Thus, the conception of power with which the critical approach operates is one that emphasizes the “deep structure” of organizational life (Giddens, 1979). That is, what are the underlying interests, values, and assumptions that make some forms of organizational reality and member choices possible and foreclose the possibility of other choices and realities? Furthermore, how are these underlying interests shaped through the communication practices of the organization?

Therefore, when we say organizations are political sites, we mean that they consist of different underlying vested interests, each of which has different consequences for organizational stakeholders. The dominant interests are those that are best able to utilize political, cultural, and communicative resources to shape organizational reality in a way that supports those interests. These dominant interests often engage in forms of “discursive closure” (Deetz, 1992a) that limit the ways in which people can think, feel, experience, speak, and act in their organizations. This leads us to the third critical assumption about organizations.

**Organizations Are Key Sites of Human Identity Formation in Modern Society**

Following a number of scholars in management and organization studies, we can argue that organizations are not just places where people work but, more fundamentally, function as important sites for the creation of human identity (Deetz, 1992a; Knights & Willmott, 1999; Kuhn, 2006; Kuhn et al., 2008). Deetz, for example, argues that the modern corporation has become the primary institution for the development of our identities, surpassing the family, church, government, and education system in this role. In this sense, we are all subject to processes of corporate colonization—a concept that reflects the extent to which corporate ideologies and discourses pervade our lives (we’ll discuss corporate colonization in more detail in Chapter 7).

Several researchers have examined how the boundaries between work and other aspects of our lives are becoming increasingly blurry and, thus, harder to manage. The
emergence of “no-collar” work (usually creative “knowledge work” that occurs in decentralized organizations with flexible but highly demanding work schedules) in the past 15 to 20 years has put even more pressure on a coherent, stable sense of identity because it breaks down the boundaries between work and other spheres of life almost completely (Ross, 2003). As Andrew Ross has shown, while such no-collar work often occurs in humane, participative organizational environments, the hidden costs to our sense of self (in terms of losing any sense of identity independent from work) can be high. We will look more closely at this issue in Chapters 8 and 14.

Organizations Are Important Sites of Collective Decision Making and Democracy

The above three defining features of the modern organization situate it as a central institution of contemporary society. As such, we can argue that the workplace not only is an important context in which people’s identities are constructed but also represents one of the principal—if not the principal—social and political realms within which decisions that affect our daily lives get made. There are two ways in which the critical approach examines issues of decision making and organizational democracy.

First, several researchers in organizational communication and related fields have begun to question traditional, hierarchical organizational structures, arguing that the quality of organizational life is enhanced with the development of more participatory structures (Cheney, 1995; Harrison, 1994; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Rothschild-Whitt (1979), for example, compares the traditional, bureaucratic organization with what she calls the “collectivist” organization—a structure that emphasizes shared power and widely dispersed decision-making responsibilities. And George Cheney (1995) has conducted field research on the Mondragón system of worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain, examining the democratic decision processes by which they operate. Most of this research emphasizes both the need to develop more humane and democratic workplace practices and also argues that greater democracy can be more effective for the organization in its utilization of human resources.

Second, the critical approach moves beyond the immediate workplace and examines how organizations shape the meaning systems with which we make sense of the world. In this sense, the critical study of organizations is not only about the cultures of organizations but also about the organization of culture (Carlone & Taylor, 1998). Similar to Deetz’s notion of “corporate colonization,” this work examines how the modern corporation has shaped people’s values, interests, and beliefs; that is, how do organizations structure our experience of the world? What are the consequences of these structuring processes for our identities as human beings? We will examine this issue in later chapters on identity and the meaning of work, and branding and consumption.

Organizations Are Sites of Ethical Issues and Dilemmas

Finally, because the critical approach argues for a close relationship between organizations and democracy, it is, by definition, concerned with organizational ethics (Lyon & Mirivel, 2010; May, Cooren, & Munshi, 2009). In this sense, “ethics” is not an issue that can be
addressed or not but is rather a fundamental feature of organizational life. A critical approach to organizational ethics argues that, by virtue of their structure as systems of competing interests and power relations, organizations are continuously in the process of making decisions that affect people's lives in often fundamental ways.

Of course, we are all familiar with situations, often reported in the media, where organizations behave in unethical ways, usually by placing profits before the welfare of their employees or members of the public. The tobacco industry's failure to make public the harmful effects of smoking is perhaps the most extreme example of this kind of unethical behavior. More recently, pharmaceutical companies such as Merck have aggressively marketed antidepress drugs with the full knowledge that clinical trials had shown them to put many patients at risk of heart attack (Lyon, 2011). However, many ethical questions are much more complex and difficult to figure out. For example, is it ethical for organizations to introduce a policy of random drug testing for employees? In this instance, how does one balance the right to privacy against a company's right to curtail behaviors that may negatively affect employee performance? What are the ethical dilemmas involved in acts of whistle-blowing (Jensen, 1996)? How does a whistle-blower manage the tensions between loyalty to his or her company and responsibility to the larger community or society?

From the perspective adopted in this book, ethics are part of the fabric of everyday organizational life. In this sense, ethics are closely tied to communication issues and systems of power (Kersten, 1991; Mumby, 2011a). Thus, ethics are political in that while there are certainly different and conflicting ethical positions in organizations, some ethical systems come to dominate over others. In such circumstances, the choice of one set of ethics over another often has less to do with its ethical superiority than with the political power of those who espouse the dominant ethical position. As Kersten (1991) states, "The critical questions here are not only 'Whose ethics are dominant?,' but also 'What are the consequences of this dominance?'

What, then, constitutes ethical communication? We can say that communication is ethical when it (a) promotes genuine dialogue and understanding amongst different organizational stakeholders, (b) contributes to individual and relational growth amongst organization members, (c) recognizes the possibility of different organizational realities operating simultaneously, (d) acknowledges the multiple and often conflicting interests of different organizational stakeholders, and (e) facilitates democratic and participatory decision-making processes across all levels of the organization.

Of course, such criteria for ethical communication are relatively easy to state but much more difficult to achieve in practice. And, certainly, by such standards much of the communication of everyday organizational life would be considered unethical. However, simply because these goals are difficult to achieve does not mean they are not worth striving for. Indeed, such criteria are quite consistent with models of organizational practice being developed by a number of researchers in U.S. business schools (e.g., Fletcher, 1998).

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide you with an overview of the major characteristics of the critical approach to organizational communication—an approach that is
the foundation for the rest of the book. As such, we discussed some of the major theorists and traditions associated with the critical approach. First, we examined the writings of the most famous exponent of the critical approach, Karl Marx, focusing mainly on his critique of 19th century capitalism. Second, we explored the limitations of Marx’s ideas and suggested the need to “modernize” his perspective to account for 20th century changes in the capitalist system. Third, we saw how such changes are reflected in the writings of two later critical traditions—the Institute for Social Research (better known as the Frankfurt School) and the cultural studies tradition.

Both these schools of thought shift their attention to the cultural and ideological features of capitalism, examining the relationships between capitalism and popular culture. While the Frankfurt School adopted a rather elitist perspective, clearly distinguishing between “high” and “mass” culture (the “culture industry”), the cultural studies school focused more on the radical potential of popular culture and its possibilities for resisting the dominant values of commodity capitalism. We also brought our discussion back to focus more directly on organizational issues, examining the features of organizational communication as viewed from a critical perspective.

We are now in a position to examine the various theories and bodies of research that make up the field of organizational communication. Armed with the analytic tools we have discussed in these first two chapters, we can begin to get to grips with the long history of organizational communication as a field of study and to understand the historical, cultural, and political forces that have shaped the role of organizations in our society.

**CRITICAL APPLICATIONS**

1. Reflect on your relationship to popular culture. What are some of the ways you participate in and/or consume it? How invested are you in various aspects of popular culture (music, fashion, etc.)? Would you describe your relationship to popular culture as better described by the Frankfurt School perspective or the cultural studies perspective? Why?
2. Develop as complete a list as possible of the various organizations to which you belong. How would you describe your membership and participation in each? To what extent do they shape your identity as a person?
3. Examine the series of dots below. Try to connect them all with no more than four straight lines and without taking your pencil off the paper. How difficult was this to accomplish? How does this exercise reflect the way in which ideology works?

•
•
•
•
KEY TERMS

capitalism 30  dialectical theory 37  ideology 34
corporate colonization 47  economic determinism 37  organizational ethics 49
cultural studies 40  hegemony 46  semiotics/semiotics 41
culture industry 37  historical materialism 32  surplus value 33

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