and criticisms of cultural texts and the societies in which they originate and operate. Most of the selections are “radical” in the sense that they go to the roots of the situation (the meaning of the Latin term *radix*), showing, for example, how media and culture are grounded in a social system and its conflicts. All of the perspectives we have selected are “sociological” in the sense that they show, in varying ways, how media and cultural texts are rooted in a particular system of political economy like capitalism, or in the dominant media and cultural forms of a particular social order based on relations of domination and subordination in the arenas of gender, race, and class. The roots of media and cultural texts are consequently embedded in social reproduction and conflict, part and parcel of our social life.

The theorists and writings chosen accordingly provide critical understandings and interpretations of media and culture, showing how they are often constructed to serve specific social interests and functions—and yet can be read, enjoyed, and interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. We conceive of KeyWorks as a toolkit that enables individuals to produce their own understandings, meanings, and critiques of contemporary culture, media, and society. We will try to make these often complex perspectives on media and culture accessible and to make our text “user-friendly” by, first, explaining in the sections that follow the key concepts and methods deployed in the leading competing approaches to the study of media and culture, and by introducing the theorists presented in our reader. And then, before each section, we provide more detailed contextualizing of both the particular topics through which we have organized the collection and the theorists and texts chosen. While the book was designed to be employed in classroom situations, we also hope that enterprising readers will use it on their own to become more competent cultural consumers and critics; hence, we also hope that it will prove valuable to people who wish to educate themselves in the theories and methods of cultural and media criticism. Consequently, we begin with discussion of the origins and meanings of some key concepts, to start the trek toward a more empowering cultural and media literacy that will enable people to make better sense of their world and to become more competent actors within it.

**Culture, Ideology, and Hegemony**

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.

– Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Contemporary criticism has forced students and teachers to see that there are no innocent texts, that all artifacts of the established culture and society are laden with
meaning, values, biases, and messages that advance relations of power and subordination. There is no pure entertainment that does not contain representations, often extremely prejudicial, of class, gender, race, sexuality, and myriad social categories and groupings. Cultural texts are saturated with social meanings, they generate political effects, reproducing or opposing governing social institutions and relations of domination and subordination. Culture can also embody specific political discourses – liberal, conservative, oppositional, or mixed – advancing competing political positions on issues like the family and sexuality, masculinity or femininity, or violence and war. Cultural representations often transcode major political discourses and perspectives presenting, for instance, an array of positions on topics like sexuality, the state, or religion.

Culture in today’s societies thus constitutes a set of discourses, stories, images, spectacles, and varying cultural forms and practices that generate meaning, identities, and political effects. Culture includes artifacts such as newspapers, television programs, movies, and popular music, but also practices like shopping, watching sports events, going to a club, or hanging out in the local coffee shop. Culture is ordinary, a familiar part of everyday life, yet special cultural artifacts are extraordinary, helping people to see and understand things they’ve never quite perceived, like certain novels or films that change your view of the world. Or, we would hope that some of the challenging theoretical texts included here will provide novel and transformative understandings of culture, media, and society.

The concept of ideology, for example, forces readers to perceive that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social groups. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coined the term “ideology” in the 1840s to describe the dominant ideas and representations in a given social order. On their analysis, during the feudal period, ideas of piety, honor, valor, and military chivalry were the ruling ideas of the hegemonic aristocratic classes. During the capitalist era, values of individualism, profit, competition, and the market became dominant, articulating the ideology of the emergent bourgeois class which was consolidating its class power. Today, in our high-tech and global capitalism, ideas that promote globalization, digital technologies, and an unrestrained market society are becoming the prevailing ideas – conceptions that further the interests of the governing elites in the global economy.

As we note below, feminists, multiculturalists, and members of a wide range of subordinate groups, detected that ideologies also reproduced relations of domination in the arenas of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and further domains of everyday life. Feminists, for example, criticized sexist ideologies that advanced the domination of women by men and social institutions and practices that propagated male supremacy. Racist ideologies were criticized that furthered the subordination of specific races and ethnicities. In a broad sense, therefore, ideologies reproduce social domination, they legitimate rule by the prevailing groups over subordinate ones, and help replicate the existing inequalities and hierarchies of power and control.

Ideologies appear natural, they seem to be common sense, and are often invisible and elude criticism. Marx and Engels began a critique of ideology, attempting to
show how ruling ideas reproduce dominant societal interests serving to naturalize, idealize, and legitimate the existing society and its institutions and values. In a competitive and atomistic capitalist society, it appears natural to assert that human beings are primarily self-interested and competitive by nature, just as in a communist society it is natural to assert that people are cooperative by nature. In fact, human beings and societies are extremely complex and contradictory, but ideology smooths over conflicts and negative features, idealizing human or social traits like individuality and competition which are elevated into governing conceptions and values.

For classical Marxism, the ruling classes employ intellectuals and cultural producers who both produce ideas that glorify the dominant institutions and ways of life, and propagate these governing ideas in cultural forms like literature, the press, or, in our day, film and television. The concept of ideology accordingly makes us question the naturalness of cultural texts and to see that prevailing ideas are not self-evident and obvious, but are constructed, biased, and contestable. This notion makes us suspicious and critical, putting into question regnant ideas which often serve the interests of governing groups. Moreover, the more one studies cultural forms and representations, the more one sees the presence of ideologies that support the interests of the reigning economic, gender, race, or social groups who are presented positively and idealized, while subordinate groups are often presented negatively and prejudicially.

The Italian Marxian thinker Antonio Gramsci developed these ideas further, arguing that diverse social groups attained “hegemony,” or dominance, at different times through inducing the consent of the majority of subaltern, or subordinate, groups to a given sociopolitical constellation. He points out that while the unity of prevailing groups is usually created through the state (as in the American revolution, or unification of Italy in the nineteenth century), the institutions of “civil society” also play a role in establishing hegemony. Civil society, in this discourse, involves institutions of the church, schooling, the media and forms of popular culture, among others. It mediates between the private sphere of personal economic interests and the family and the public authority of the state, serving as the locus of what Habermas described as “the public sphere.”

For Gramsci, societies maintained their stability through a combination of “domination,” or force, and “hegemony,” defined as consent to “intellectual and moral leadership.” In this conception, social orders are founded and reproduced with some institutions and groups violently exerting power and domination to maintain social boundaries and rules (i.e. the police, military, vigilante groups, etc.), while other institutions (like religion, schooling, or the media) induce consent to the dominant order through establishing the hegemony, or ideological dominance, of a distinctive type of social order (i.e. market capitalism, fascism, communism, and so on). In addition, societies establish the hegemony of males and certain races through the institutionalizing of male dominance or the rule of a specific race or ethnicity over subordinate groups.

Hegemony theory for Gramsci involves both analysis of current forces of domination and the ways that particular political forces achieved hegemonic authority, and the delineation of counterhegemonic forces, groups, and ideas that could contest
and overthrow the existing hegemony. An analysis, for instance, of how the conservative regimes of Margaret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s won power would dissect how conservative groups gained dominance through control of the state, and the use of media, new technologies, and cultural institutions such as think-tanks and fund-raising and political action groups. Explaining the Thatcher–Reagan conservative hegemony of the 1980s would require analysis of how conservative ideas became dominant in the media, schools, and culture at large. It would discuss how on a global level the market rather than the state was seen as the source of all wealth and solution to social problems, while the state was pictured as a source of excessive taxation, overregulation, and bureaucratic inertia.

A cultural hegemony analysis would therefore show how particular media, technologies, or institutions contributed to a broader sociopolitical domination by forces like fascism, communism, or market capitalism. A Gramscian theory would also discuss how a hegemonic social order is always contested by counterhegemonic forces, such as during the 1980s, when conservative rule was contested, and the 1990s, when it was in part overthrown with a resurgence of liberalism and social-democratic movements and regimes, as well as an upsurge of oppositional social movements. Such analysis, however, would also have to show how the more liberal hegemonic groups compromised with the dominant conservative forces, whereby liberal democrats like Bill Clinton, or social democrats like Tony Blair, would themselves take conservative positions in curbing welfare, cutting social spending, or unleashing military intervention.

Hegemony theory thus calls for historically specific sociocultural analysis of particular contexts and forces, requiring dissection of how culture and a variety of social institutions from the media to the university facilitate broader social and political ends. Analyses of hegemony emphasize that a wide array of cultural institutions function within social reproduction including the church, schools, traditional and elite culture, sports, and the entertainment media. The approach requires social contextualization of all ideas, representations, and cultural forms; it enjoins seeing societies as a locus of social contestation between competing groups who seek dominance and who manipulate reigning institutions and culture to promote their ends.

Theories of hegemony and ideology were further developed by a group of thinkers who were organized around the German Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in the 1930s. Their core members were Jewish radicals who later went into exile to the United States after Hitler’s rise to power. Establishing themselves in a small institute in New York affiliated with Columbia University, the Institute for Social Research, they developed analyses of the culture industries which had emerged as key institutions of social hegemony in the era that they called state-monopoly capitalism. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, who was loosely affiliated with the Institute, analyzed the new forms of corporate and state power during a time in which giant corporations ruled the capitalist economies and the might of the state grew significantly under the guise of fascism, Russian communism, and the state capitalism of Roosevelt’s New Deal which required a sustained government response to the crisis of the economic
Depression in the 1930s. In this conjuncture, ideology played an increasingly important role in inducing consent to a diversity of social systems.

To a large extent, the Frankfurt school inaugurated critical studies of mass communication and culture, showing in detail how the media were controlled by groups who employed them to further their own interests and domination. They were the first social theorists to see the importance of what they called the “culture industries” in the reproduction of contemporary societies, in which so-called mass culture and communications stand in the center of leisure activity, are important agents of socialization and mediators of political reality, and should be seen as primary institutions of contemporary societies with a variety of economic, political, cultural, and social effects.

Having experienced the rise of fascism and fascist use of the media in Germany in the 1930s, they noted during their exile in the United States how the culture industry was controlled by predominant capitalist economic interests and functioned to reproduce the established market society and democratic polity. The Frankfurt school developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communications studies, combining critique of political economy of the media, analysis of texts, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications. They coined the term “culture industry” to signify the process of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives which drove the system. The critical theorists analyzed all mass-mediated cultural artifacts within the context of industrial production, in which the commodities of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other products of mass production: commodification, standardization, and massification. The culture industries had the singular function, however, of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into the framework of the capitalist system.

Furthermore, the critical theorists investigated the cultural industries in a political context as a form of the integration of the working class into capitalist societies. The Frankfurt school were one of the first neo-Marxian groups to examine the effects of mass culture and the rise of the consumer society on the working classes which were to be vehicles of revolution in the classical Marxian scenario. They also analyzed the ways that the culture industries were stabilizing contemporary capitalism, and accordingly they sought new strategies for political change, agencies of social transformation, and models for human emancipation that could serve as norms of social critique and goals for political struggle.

Thus, in their theories of the culture industries and critiques of mass culture, the Frankfurt school were the first to systematically analyze and criticize mass-mediated culture and communications within critical social theory. Their approach suggests that to properly understand any specific form of media or culture, one must understand how it is produced and distributed in a given society and how it is situated in relation to the dominant social structure. The Frankfurt school thought, for the most part, that media culture simply reproduced the existing society and manipulated mass audiences into obedience.

One of their members, however, Walter Benjamin, had a more optimistic and activist view of the potential of media, such as film, to promote progressive political
ends than his colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin argued that film, sports, and other forms of mass entertainment were creating a new kind of spectator, able to critically dissect cultural forms and to render intelligent judgment on them. For Benjamin, the decline of the aura of the work of art – the sense of originality, uniqueness, and authenticity – under the pressures of mechanical reproduction helped produce a public able to more actively engage a wide range of cultural phenomena. He argued that, for instance, the spectators of sports events were discriminating judges of athletic activity, able to criticize and analyze plays, athletes, strategies, and so on. Likewise, Benjamin postulated that film audiences as well can become experts of criticism and ably dissect the construction, meanings, and ideologies of film.

Benjamin saw that politics were being aestheticized in the contemporary era, deploying techniques of mystification and cultural manipulation to produce media spectacles to gain mass assent to specific political candidates and groups. He was one of the first to dissect the new public spheres that were emerging in the period when the fascist party and state used organs of public communication like the film, radio, or political rally to promote their ends. Moreover, Benjamin’s work is also important for focusing on the technology of cultural reproduction, seeing the changes in new media techniques, and carrying out political critique, while calling for democratic transformation of media technology and institutions.

A second-generation member of the Frankfurt school, Jürgen Habermas, grew up under German fascism, found it repellent, and undertook life-long investigations of contemporary society and culture, in part motivated by desire to prevent the recurrence of fascism. After studying with Horkheimer and Adorno in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1950s, Habermas investigated in his early work the ways that a new public sphere emerged during the time of the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions, and how it promoted political discussion and debate. Habermas’s concept of the public sphere described a space of institutions and practices between private and public interests. The public sphere mediated for Habermas between the domains of the family and the workplace (where private interests prevail), and the state, which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. What Habermas called the “bourgeois public sphere” consisted of the realm of public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, literary salons, and meeting halls where citizens gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public authority. The public sphere was nurtured by newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and books which were read and discussed in social sites like pubs and coffee houses.

Habermas notes that newspapers were initially commercial sheets that disseminated “news” (i.e. what was novel and contemporary), but then were transformed into instruments of political debate under the pressures of the American and French Revolutions and the organization of political groups to revolutionize society. Yet newspapers also fell prey to commercial imperatives and often put profit and business interests above political opinion, selling advertising and papers via tabloid sensationalism and entertainment rather than disseminating political information and
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ideas. Moreover, as the society became more dominated by mass media, powerful corporations came to control major institutions like newspapers, radio, film, and television. These arms of the culture industry served the interests of the media conglomerates and the corporations and advertisers who financed them. In this conjuncture, the public sphere was colonized by big media which came to dominate public life and which recast the public sphere from a locus of information and debate to a site of manipulation by corporate powers.

In retrospect, the theorists discussed so far articulate ascending stages of modern Western societies. While Habermas’s theory of the public sphere describes the earlier phase of liberal bourgeois society, Marx and Engels analyze the consolidation of the class rule of the bourgeoisie and hegemony of capitalism during the mid-nineteenth century. Gramsci in turn presents the transition from liberal capitalism to fascism in Italy in the 1930s, while the work of Horkheimer and Adorno can be read as an articulation of a theory of the state and monopoly capitalism which became dominant throughout the world during the 1930s. This era constituted a form of “organized capitalism,” in which the state and mammoth corporations managed the economy and in which individuals submitted to state and corporate control.

The period is often described as “Fordism” to designate the system of mass production and the homogenizing regime of capital which sought to produce mass desires, tastes, and behavior. The culture industries discussed by Horkheimer and Adorno were the form of cultural organization parallel to Fordism as a mode of industrial production. Just as American automobiles were produced on assembly lines according to a well-organized plan and division of labor, so too were film, broadcasting, magazines, and assorted forms of media culture generated according to types and with a well-organized division of labor.

The decades following the Second World War were a period of mass production and consumption characterized by uniformity and homogeneity of needs, thought, and behavior, constituting a “mass society” and what the Frankfurt school described as “the end of the individual.” No longer was personal thought and action the motor of social and cultural progress; instead gigantic organizations and institutions overpowered individuals. The period corresponds to the staid, ascetic, conformist, and conservative world of corporate capitalism that was dominant in the 1950s with its organization men, its conspicuous consumption, and its mass culture.

During this period, mass culture and communication were essential in generating the modes of thought and behavior appropriate to a highly organized and homogenized social order. Hence, the Frankfurt-school theory of “the culture industries” articulates a vital historical shift to an epoch in which mass consumption and culture were indispensable to producing a consumer society based on uniform needs and desires for mass-produced products and a mass society based on social organization and conformity. It is culturally the time in the United States of strongly controlled network radio and television, insipid top-40 pop music, glossy Hollywood films, national magazines, largely conservative newspapers, and other mass-produced cultural artifacts. In the Soviet communist bloc, and other sectors where state-controlled broadcasting prevailed, systems of broadcasting were intended to reproduce the dominant
national culture or state ideology, while serving as instruments of social integration and conformity.

Of course, media culture was never as massified and homogeneous as in the Frankfurt-school model, and one could argue that the model was flawed even during its time of origin and influence and that other models were preferable (such as those of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, and others of the Weimar generation and, later, British cultural studies, as we suggest below). Yet the original Frankfurt-School theory of the culture industry articulated the important social roles of media culture during a particular sociohistorical epoch and provided a model, still of use, of an exceedingly commercial and technologically advanced culture that promotes the needs of dominant corporate interests, plays a principal role in ideological reproduction, and enculturates the populace into the dominant system of needs, thought, and behavior.

With the economic boom of the 1960s and proliferation of new products and ideas, structuralism became the intellectual vogue in France. Theories of structure (linguistic, anthropological, social) emerged from an age of burgeoning technology and influenced the Marxist revisionism of French philosopher Louis Althusser. Beginning with Marx’s thesis that the mode of production determines the character of social, intellectual, and cultural life, Althusser sees ideology as an effect of the structure of society, a force in which economic, political-legal, cultural, and ideological practices are interrelated to shape social consciousness. In Althusser’s version of “structural Marxism,” “ideological state apparatuses” (schooling, media, the judiciary, etc.) “interpellated” individuals into preconceived forms of subjectivity that left no space for opposition or resistance. On this account, subjects were constructed as preconstituted individuals, men or women, members of a specific class, and were induced to identify with the roles, behavior, values, and practices of the existing state-capitalist society. In fact, it is Althusser who advanced the idea that ideology operates via everyday practices, rather than through some form of externally imposed doctrine. Combining psychoanalysis, Marxism, and structuralism, Althusser thus analyzed how individuals were incorporated into specific social systems and functioned to reproduce contemporary capitalist societies. A strain of Althusserian structural Marxism is evident in the early period of British cultural studies.

Following the lines of this narrative, we will argue through the Introduction that the subsequent forms of cultural and media analysis respond to developments within Western capitalist societies from the end of the Second World War until the present. Cultural theories analyze historical metamorphosis and novelties, and articulate sociohistorical conditions, practices, and transformations. Theories provide maps of social orders and tools to understand and transform them. The proliferation of theories in the past two decades itself highlights the increasing differentiation and fragmentation of Western societies during an epoch of intense social struggle and turbulent change. Accordingly, we will map the vicissitudes of theory in the post-Second World War conjuncture in the remainder of the introduction, providing an overview of the emergence of leading theories, methods, and themes within the terrain of media and cultural studies.