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Every student of sociology rapidly becomes familiar with a litany of names, a roll call of classic theorists that invariably begins with Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, then extends to Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Blumer, C. Wright Mills, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman. With each name comes a theoretical approach that is distinctive and which makes each name unique in the progressive development of social theories: those blueprints that offer explanations of why things are as they are (and how they might be changed). Furthermore, with each name comes a collection of key texts students must grapple with to discern what these blueprints are, such as *Capital*, *The Division of Labour in Society*, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Sociological Imagination*, and *Women and Economics*. But, although such texts have formed the bedrock of sociology and sociological enquiry, they are also considered classics because they were written many years ago and in some instances are well over a century old. So, why continue to read them? Why give these now long-dead thinkers such primacy? Should we not simply pass quickly over them, acknowledge their legacy but move on to Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean Baudrillard, Dorothy Smith, Richard Sennett, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Manuel Castells, Donna Haraway, Ulrich Beck, or Harrison White? After all, these are theorists who have analysed (and in some instances continue to analyse) core aspects of society that remain readily observable, such as the impact of globalization on politics and economics, and the social effects of technology and media.

In his book, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction*, Alex Callinicos points to two challenges facing his enterprise of returning to the foundations of sociology: first, that social theory, especially classic social theory, is considered an outdated or old-fashioned subject; and second, social theory has been an increasingly marginalized subject in the wake of the popularity of cultural studies. However, the relationship between classic sociological theory and cultural studies need not be problematic. Quite the reverse: they go together in a dynamic fashion when related to the subject of much cultural analysis – popular culture. The issue of what culture is, and by extension what popular culture is, is a central factor within the academic analysis of the subject and typically includes discussions of the following ideas:
• the apparent division between high and low culture;
• popular culture as that which remains once the properties of high or ‘elite’
culture are defined (art, ballet, opera, classical/symphonic music, etc);
• popular culture as the result of the development of a mass media or mass
communication system and set of institutions;
• popular culture as just that, i.e. populist culture, ways of living that emerge
from folk culture;
• popular culture as the result of negotiations between the ‘people’ and the
forces of authority;
• popular culture as the result of a complex fusion of economic, technologi-
cal, political, social and cultural transformations. (Storey, 2009; Strinati,
1995; Guins and Cruz, 2005)

But popular culture is also (by way of Raymond Williams’ classic conception)
related to the products of intellectual and especially artistic activity, and it is
these cultural ‘texts’, be they soap operas, pop music bands or comic books
(Storey, 1997), that are the focus of this book – the ‘stuff’ of popular culture
and the ways in which they can be used critically to explore key ideas within clas-
sic social theory. So, returning to the perennial questions that many social
sciences students ask on first approaching classical social theory, such as ‘What
is the point of this in the twenty-first century?’ or ‘What do the thoughts of men
and women who have been dead for a century or more have to say about the
contemporary world?’, the answer is simple: they have much to say. The central
issues that underpin classic social thought – class, conflict, sexual oppression,
gender, power, consumerism, social relations and stability, ethnicity, the body,
economic systems and social status – are all factors that can be readily discerned
within the modern global world and everyday cultural life. Yet all of these factors
can also be located in a range of popular cultural texts from the worlds of popu-
lar music, cinema, celebrity, fashion, sport, television, body modification and
literature/popular fiction. Furthermore, the key themes of classic sociological
texts can also be illuminated through the ‘stuff’ of our culture. And that is
exactly what this book seeks to do: it selects examples from popular culture that
can be used to critically illustrate the essence of a particular social
theorist/theory, and demonstrates the ways in which contemporary popular
culture can acutely reflect classic social ideas and enhance understanding.

The linking of social theory (or social ideas) and cultural texts is not surpris-
ing, given that social ideas infuse popular culture. For me, this process occurred
long before my formal understanding of sociological theory in my introduction
to the fiction of Ayn Rand (the subject of Chapter 8) in the mid-1980s. At the
time I knew nothing about the libertarian economic and philosophical nature of
her work, but as an aficionado of the Canadian rock band Rush, and especially
their Ayn Rand-inspired concept album, 2112, I researched Rand to understand
the ways in which songs such as the 2112 suite, but also Anthem and Freewill
were directly inspired by her writings and philosophical outlook. The issue was
that in amongst the virtuoso musicianship and sci-fi themes was an articulation
of an economic ideology that was already gaining global momentum in the 1980s. But it was a different issue when (now fully furnished with a sociological mode of thinking), I made a conceptual link between semiotics and tattooing through watching the lives and work of tattoo artists who were the subject of the TV series *Miami Ink*. Acquainted with the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, as I watched the series I began to think about the ways in which the various customers utilized their bodies as a signifying ‘text’, as evidenced by the stories and rationales many of those who came to be tattooed told about their choice of design: that they were not merely for decorative purposes, but that they communicated precise ‘stories’ through specific symbols that *semiotically* communicated aspects of their identities. Furthermore, the connection between Karl Marx and hip hop/rap music emerged from an enthusiasm for the music of the US group, Public Enemy, which then developed (on the informed recommendation of another hip hop enthusiast) to seeking out further examples of radical political expression within the genre, such as the music of Immortal Technique. All these examples will be explored in this book.

The connections were made through an awareness of theory (as a sociology undergraduate, then a university lecturer in sociological and cultural theory), but also as a consumer and, in many cases, a fan. Moreover, this approach would become central within my own writing as an academic. For instance, in writing about the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) and his now classic concept of habitus (articulated in his 1984 text, *Distinction*), I related the concept, which explains how social order is maintained and is based upon culturally inscribed bodily techniques, modes of presentation, gendered patterns of dress and personal lifestyles, to fashion. However, rather than consider habitus and fashion in a broad sense, I examined Bourdieu’s theoretical approach with reference to the career of the British actress and model Elizabeth Hurley, with a particular focus on her emergence as a beachwear fashion designer. The study’s central concern was the consistent marketing and media focus on her image and body as an ‘aspirational’ cultural role model – as a representative of a distinctive habitus (Barron, 2007). In other work I have critically analysed post-colonial theories through a discussion of the charitable work undertaken by the Hollywood actress, Angelina Jolie, on behalf of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Barron, 2009). I have also charted the development of Western feminist thought via an analysis of the female companion character in the long-running British science fiction series, *Doctor Who* (1963–89, then re-commissioned in 2005), using the series as a longitudinal text illustrating changes in female representation on television (Barron, 2010).

This approach, therefore, informs the strategy of this book, looking, as it does, to the ways in which classic social theory can be identified, explored and understood through unlikely sources. In essence, this approach resonates with C. Wright Mills’ proposition in his seminal book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). In the section entitled ‘On Intellectual Craftsmanship’, Mills offers
instruction to fledgling sociologists as to how original sociological ideas can be generated. But, while consultation with literature is one part of the educational process, the other is to develop a reflective attitude to life; to be attuned to and use life experience, from overheard conversations to the content of dreams, and to translate this into academic work. Now, while this may involve monitoring the political issues of the day, it can also be extended to the products of the popular culture that dominates our leisure time. Thus, when listening to music, reading about celebrity, watching Oscar-winning films, assessing the fashion strategies of Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Beyoncé or Lady Gaga, reading the fiction of Ayn Rand (or listening to Rush), leafing through a tattoo magazine (or planning a tattoo design), and perusing tabloid coverage of the latest sport star’s wife or girlfriend, you can be stimulating the sociological imagination and, as I will illustrate in this book, reflexively and critically thinking about the thought of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Adorno, Gilman, Barthes, de Saussure and Milton Friedman.

In terms of approach, *Social Theory In Popular Culture* links each theorist/approach with an example drawn from popular culture and the media that illustrates the nature of the ideas, demonstrates their continuing cultural validity and explores the ways in which sociological theory, culture, and media can come together. Each chapter, therefore, synthesizes a sociological approach to an illustrative cultural example: case studies that have been deliberately chosen for their contemporary and enduring qualities and status, and that are accessible and culturally identifiable to students. Structurally, the chapters will be divided into three sections:

- The theory or theorist.
- The media example and how they illustrate the theoretical ideas.
- A critical appraisal of the theory/theorist.

Chapter 1 relates Marxism to music, examining the Marxist concepts of class, ideology and exploitation in detail through an analysis of popular music and rap and hip hop music, and critically engaging with key weaknesses of the Marxist approach to social inequality. With a strong seam of political characteristics and lyrical positioning, there are artists who clearly articulate critical political stances, for example, Public Enemy, and explicitly Marxist messages, notably The Coup and Immortal Technique, whose Marxist influences are apparent in album titles such as *Revolutionary Vol. 1* and *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. The chapter will demonstrate how Marx’s critical ideas are identifiable within a popular musical idiom. However, for all of the manifestly Marxist expressions in such music, the primacy of class is a critical issue, as is the centrality of ethnicity. At one level, segments of the hip hop recording ‘community’ seemingly collude with commodity fetishism and capitalist ideology in their apparent devotion to materialism. Yet critical rap is often caught in a dilemma between the primacy of class or racial inequality and expressions of revolution or social critique are expressed in ways that seemingly preclude any common ‘proletarian’ collective consciousness. In this way, such
differing expressions of inequality serve to problematize the ‘Marxist message’ and, with regard to gender and ethnicity, some inequalities are silenced altogether, with class inequality eclipsing all others, a source of long-standing feminist critique of Marx.

Chapter 2 examines the sociology of Max Weber in relation to film and develops the discussion of class in Chapter 1 in relation to Weber’s analysis of social class and the dynamics of class formation. Although retaining connections with Marx (the link between class and economic differences and inequalities between social groups), Weber extends class analysis to incorporate the idea of class positioning being linked to the individual’s relation to markets. However, a crucial aspect of Weber’s approach is the inclusion of the idea of status as an aspect of class identity and class positioning. In this respect, economic power might not be easily converted into class mobility due to an individual’s status. This aspect of Weber’s analysis of social and cultural class will be critically explored and illustrated through reference to Mean Girls, The Devil Wears Prada, and especially, Danny Boyle’s multi-Oscar Award-winning film Slumdog Millionaire.

Chapter 3 examines the sociological analysis of social solidarity as articulated by Émile Durkheim, using contemporary celebrity culture as the illustrative example. In this chapter the key aspects of Durkheim’s sociology relating to solidarity and the function of religious or ‘sacred’ ritual will be explored. However, in addition to examining Durkheim’s examples illustrating the ways in which societies hold together, the chapter will focus on the contemporary cultural and public interest in ‘celebrity’ to stress the applicability of his sociology to twenty-first-century modern societies. Hence, in addition to the division of labour, the hallmark of organic solidarity, shared celebrity discourse (arguably) becomes a common form of cultural and social ‘glue’ that can connect potentially ‘anomic’ individuals via consumption, ‘fandom’, gossip, or even mutual dislike.

Chapter 4 concerns the often unsung fourth ‘founding father’ of classic social thought, Georg Simmel, and examines his work in relation to fashion as worn by singers and marketed within contemporary pop music. The chapter will focus on Simmel’s conception of the Metropolis and fashion, which linked consumption to new ways of social life that were emerging in the large cities of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. Such heavily populated urban environments, argued Simmel, placed pressure on social actors to seek out ‘an appearance of individuality’, to ‘cultivate a blasé attitude’ and a form of individualism ‘through the pursuit of signs of status, fashion or marks of individual eccentricity’. A key factor in this process was the role of fashion as a visible means of either marking oneself out from other social actors via dress and style, or acting as a trend-setter and potential inspiration for imitation. The chapter will critically revisit Simmel’s approach in relation to pop celebrities such as Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Lady Gaga, Rihanna and others who are associated with a series of fashion-created ‘looks’ which have become key aspects of their cultural identities. So, the chapter suggest that such figures employ fashion
strategically to ‘stand out’ in a competitive musical market in a manner akin to 
Simmel’s metropolitan individual.

Chapter 5 focuses on a later theorist, Theodor Adorno, and his critiques of 
mass culture in consumer capitalism, analysing his work on the television indus-
try of the 1950s and its ideological function and conservative nature. To extend 
the analysis of Adorno, I will look at more contemporary trends within popular 
television, most notably talent and reality TV programmes such as American Idol 
and The X Factor (both syndicated globally). A crucial aspect of these 
programmes is the role and nature of the audience, in that it is they, via tele-
phone voting, who are the apparent deciders as to which contestant progresses 
through the shows, and which contestant will be the ultimate winner and gain 
a recording contract. Moreover, it is a sizeable portion of the audience who will 
ultimately become the consumers of the recorded product and the ‘fans’ of the 
winning performer. In this sense, The X Factor, American Idol and international 
versions of such shows (with regard to The X Factor, this includes Russian, 
Arabian, Australian and Indian versions) have established significant directions 
in contemporary popular music, directions that resonate with debates concern-
ing ‘authentic’ and ‘synthetic’ forms of music and the ‘disposable’ pop product 
(the winner’s first officially released song is invariably a cover version). 
However, the use of these television examples enables a critical evaluation of 
Adorno’s mass culture approach because, while the nature, marketing and 
consumption of programmes such as The X Factor do ostensibly appear to vali-
date the ‘critical theory’ view, they also arguably constitute a refutation that the 
‘mass audience’ is a powerless agent due to the intrinsically participatory role the 
audience plays.

Having focused upon a series of individuals, Chapter 6 tak es a broader view 
with the analysis of feminism and masculinity in relation to sport. However, the 
analysis still draws attention to a particular thinker in its examination of the clas-
ic feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her book, Women and Economics, 
first published in 1898. Gilman argued that there is a marked economic condi-
tion affecting the human race, that humans are the only animal species in which 
the sex relation is also an economic relation. For Gilman, within human society, 
an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and 
the economic status of the human race is governed mainly by the activities of the 
male, with the female obtaining ‘her share only through him’ (Gilman, 1998: 9). 
The chapter will discuss Gilman’s thought and the influence of her legacy on 
subsequent waves of feminist thought that arose to resist such a relation; however 
it will also critically apply her ideas in a contemporary cultural context in relation 
to sport, using examples of the ‘WAG’, a tabloid media cultural concept which 
initially referred to the England 2006 World Cup football team’s Wives And 
Girlfriends, a designation that has endured in media discourse ever since. The 
chapter will suggest that the WAG can be read as a category that forms a contin-
uum with Gilman’s analysis of women. However, this is not merely in terms of 
financial or lifestyle material issues, but ‘symbolically’ – that media attention will 
only continue with attachment to a male footballer. Consequently, the chapter
will draw on popular magazines and tabloid accounts of the WAG and relate this to the development of post-feminism in which fashion and consumption can be read as empowering factors. However, the chapter will also consider the importance of conceptions of masculinity in sport, principally the ways in which football has seen changes from ‘tough’ sporting masculinities to displays of ‘metrosexuality’ and more fashion-conscious representations of masculinity based upon conspicuous consumption (David Beckham, for example). The chapter will also stress the development of American football stars such as Tom Brady who have dominated the game, entered celebrity culture and represent a specific image of masculinity. The linking of feminism and masculinity will allow for a crucial analysis of the ways in which gender debates have developed and can critically come together in the area of sport.

Chapter 7 examines semiotics: the study of signs and how signs communicate meaning. The chapter will discuss theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Umberto Eco. However, the analysis goes beyond the habitual applications of semiotic analysis (cinema, art, advertising, etc.) in its focus on the practice of tattooing. As such, it will illustrate this semiotic process at the level of popular culture through a discussion of the Russian prison tattoo culture, whereby inmates communicate their life histories through tattoo designs, histories which can be deciphered and read by those who understand the symbols; reference to the plethora of documentary and reality television programmes devoted to tattooing (Miami Ink, LA Ink, London Ink, NY Ink); and the popularity and visibility of tattoo magazines (Tattoo, Tattoo Life, Total Tattoo, Skin Deep, to name but a few). In this way, the discussion uses the subject of body modification to identify critical issues in relation to semiotics but also critical reactions to semiotic denotations in which interpretations and readings of signs may be beyond the control of authors and open to multiple ‘deconstructions’.

Finally, Chapter 8 examines aspects of neoliberalism in relation to fiction. Discussing a wide-ranging and historically well established set of ideas, this final chapter will discuss the principles of Adam Smith, Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman which, although differing in intensity, broadly argued that the ideal society should be one that is economically organized in line with markets that are (aside from the issue of establishing security and defence) free from governmental and state intervention, propositions arguably initiated in the US by Ronald Reagan and in the UK by Margaret Thatcher. However, to fully explore and evaluate the nature of neoliberalist thought, the chapter will look at it through the prism of the fictional work of the émigré novelist, Ayn Rand (1905–82). Rand’s work, written in response to her early life in post-revolutionary Russia and her embrace of America and American capitalism (which she argued was the world’s ideal social system), represents an extreme (and controversial) celebration of capitalistic enterprise and free markets. Together with a credo that argued that humans are rational, self-interested, and pledged to individualism, Rand’s work, as expressed in her key novels Anthem, The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged, contains a mode of liberal and libertarian
thought that both reflected and influenced emergent neoliberalism. Indeed, in the wake of acute Western economic crises, sales of *Atlas Shrugged* have soared, buoyed by the opinion that the root of the economic problems was not that capitalism is a flawed system; that it is still not ‘pure’ enough and still over-fettered by state intervention; and that it should accord with Rand’s vision, an ethos foundational to the American Republican off-shoot political group, the Tea Party. Subsequently, the chapter will pose critical questions concerning neoliberalism and its cultural expression in fiction and wider economic culture, taking the book full circle back to Chapter 1 and Marx with a theoretical and economic system fundamentally opposed to Marxism, and popularized by works of fiction that castigate Marx and venerate capitalism as the ideal social system.
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