Humans are organizational animals; modern life is defined by organizations and corporations.

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# 1 WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION?



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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**1.1** Explain the differences between studying "communication in organizations" and "organizations as communication."

**1.2** Classify the five forms of power (direct, technological, bureaucratic, ideological, and biocratic) that underlie organizational communication processes.

**1.3** Discuss the changing nature of work and organizations in contemporary society.

We humans are communicating, organizing creatures, and we define ourselves largely through the social and organizational connections that we create. We work, attend college, belong to a faith community, volunteer, join social groups, and participate in social media, among many other organizing behaviors. However, in recent years what counts as "organizing" and "communicating" has become more dynamic and fluid; we have witnessed the emergence of an increasingly complex communication landscape, greater social and political division, and a more fractured work environment as "remote," "flexible," and "gig" work (Ravenelle, 2019) have become more widespread. The recently coined term, the "nowhere office" (Hobsbawm, 2021) recognizes that many of us no longer "go" to a single, clearly defined work location, nor do we work within specific time parameters. Thus, the idea that the field of organizational communication is simply the study of communication "in" organizations is increasingly unsustainable.

Moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic not only further problematized our traditional notion of work but also brought into sharp focus its many inequities. For many "knowledge workers" (like Tim and Dennis), lockdown mostly meant learning how to use Zoom and perhaps adapting to homeschooling. For others, it meant being required to perform essential services under the constant threat of infection. But, for many millions of workers, the COVID-19 pandemic created job loss as well as anxiety about when gainful employment would return. In this sense, the focus on equality and inequality in the work sphere became, and continues to be, as strong as it has been in the last 100 years.

One of the most significant organizational outcomes of the pandemic, however, is people's changing attitudes toward work and their relationship to it. Management scholar Anthony Klotz coined the term "the great resignation" (see Morgan, 2023) to refer to the millions of workers who, in the wake of the pandemic, voluntarily left their jobs in search of something different. Although workers are not leaving the workforce altogether (we all need to put food on the table, after all—so some observers think the "the great reshuffle" is a better term), this movement does reflect a shift in attitudes toward work and its place in our lives. Moreover, the term "quiet quitting" has recently entered the work lexicon. First used by TikTokker Bryan Creely in March 2022, "quiet quitting" reflects the idea that many workers are no longer putting their heart and soul into their work, simply doing enough to get by. In other words, they quit psychologically and emotionally, making the decision to put their energies into more fulfilling activities outside work.

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Thus, in the aftermath of the pandemic, there has been a significant shift in the place of work in people's lives. For many years we were told we had to love our work; we had to be passionate about it and devote all our energies to it if we were to be successful. But increasingly, workers are seeking a greater balance between work and life as well as work that is more fulfilling. Indeed, Anthony Klotz, the management scholar who coined the term "the great resignation," has suggested that although the number of workers leaving their current jobs may abate, these changes in work are here for good; employers increasingly are acceding to workers' demands for more fulfilling, more flexible, and better paid work. This is an issue that we will return to throughout the book.

In addition to this shift in the nature of work and organizing, our communication landscape has also changed considerably in the last 10 years (and not only because we all had to learn how to use Zoom!). When former Coca-Cola CMO Sergio Zyman stated in 2003 that "everything communicates," he was acknowledging the centrality of communication in corporations' development of relationships with customers; managing meaning through communication is, as we will see in this book, a defining feature of what organizations and their members do. But the last 10 years or so have also witnessed a significant increase in the complexity of communication processes and how people relate to each other, both individually and in groups. Social and political turmoil, sparked by events as seemingly disparate as the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, claims of a "stolen" 2020 presidential election, the U.S. Capitol insurrection, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and "debates" over "wokism," Critical Race Theory, and LGBTQIA rights have helped lay bare divisions in society that seem to threaten the fabric of democracy. Our everyday discourse has seemingly become more polarized, and it sometimes feels impossible to have a civil conversation with anyone who has a different political viewpoint from our own. Although communication is complex and full of nuance, the divisions that currently characterize society are often rendered in simplistic and unhelpful ways, leading inevitably to even more division and a retreat into our fiercely held perspectives.

It is in this different social, political, and cultural landscape that we situate our efforts to explore organizational communication. And, in the next chapter, we explore how that shifting landscape has led organizational communication scholars to question some of our own foundational assumptions. We think this work is essential because the stakes have never been higher in exploring the relationship between communication and organizations. Indeed, we would even argue that the nature of democracy itself may be at stake. As two scholars who have a combined total of more than 60 years in the academic field (yes, we're both old), we firmly believe that understanding the complexities of organizational communication is key to being good citizens who can engage productively and positively with one another and the institutions (including work organizations) that shape society.

In this first chapter, then, our goal is to lay out some of the central concepts and issues that will inform our efforts to place organizational communication front and center in the current social, political, and cultural landscape. To begin, we want to provide you with a discussion of the term "organizational communication," exploring the relationship between "communication" and "organization." Then, we will turn to the concept of power, exploring its relationship

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to organizational communication. Power is a concept that will feature prominently throughout the book, so it's important that you have at least a basic understanding of its many functions. Finally, we will end this chapter with a brief discussion of the place of work in our lives.

## DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: THE COMMUNICATION–ORGANIZATION RELATIONSHIP

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. Although there are a number of different ways to think about the organization–communication relationship (Smith, 1992), two have been particularly influential in the history of organizational communication: 1) The "**communication in organizations**" perspective and 2) the "**organizations as communication**" perspective. Let's discuss these two perspectives.

### Communication in Organizations

This perspective views organizations as relatively stable, physical structures within which communication occurs; here, communication is equated with information transmission. In this sense, organizations are containers for communication processes, and people send information to each other from their positions in the organization. In many respects, this has been the dominant model of organizational communication for much of the history of the field. Its approach is largely technical, focusing on questions of efficiency and clarity. Some of the main questions at issue here are: 1) How can communication be made more accurate, 2) How do communication breakdowns occur, 3) How can we make sure that the message sent is the message that is received, and 4) What is the most appropriate medium through which to send messages? Here, issues related to noise (factors that distort message reception), channel (the medium of communication), information content (what is new in the message), and redundancy (repetitive elements that increase the possibility of accurate message reception) are seen as key factors to take into account when thinking about effective organizational communication. In this approach, we can think about the communication–organization relationship as one in which communication occurs *inside* organizations and where communication is about sending and receiving messages.

This perspective on the communication–organization relationship has its place, especially if one is primarily interested in questions of clarity and accuracy, but it also has serious limitations. First, by treating communication simply as an information transmission process within an already established organizational structure, it tends to downplay the significance of communication in the optimal performance of organizations. Communication becomes one organizational variable among many and thus is easy to overlook. Indeed, management scholar Stephen Axley (1984) argued that managers (and management textbooks) tend to operate via the information transmission model (what he called the "conduit" model of communication), leading to the assumption that "good" communication is seen as relatively easy to accomplish and thus not deserving of much attention or adequate resources.

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Second, this conduit model overlooks the complexity of the communication process. Communication is not only a means for transferring information from one person or location to another; rather, it is the process through which we create meaning. When we think of communication merely as information transfer, we are unable to recognize and take into account the complexity and ambiguity that is inherent in communication as a meaning creation process. For instance, prominent business consultant and author Robert Murray (2017) has argued that "effective communication" *should* be simple and straightforward; communication of this sort is accomplished when people avoid using specialized language (e.g., not using technical terms when interacting with nonexperts) and refuse to engage in office politics. Although this conception of communication might sound appealing, it ignores the fact that multiple meanings are present in almost every communication context, that "politics" might well be the name we give to the power that is inevitable in all human activity, and that the use of any symbol system—specialist or otherwise—hinges upon ambiguities that are impossible to eliminate (and, because ambiguity can leave options open, it can actually be quite beneficial when flexibility is needed).

Third, we have a sense of who we are, our connections to others, and our place in the world because we are communicating beings. Indeed, everything—words, stories, the shape of a building, or even a rainy day—has the potential to communicate to us (and communicate in potentially multiple ways). By way of example, think of the dress code at a workplace: Whether the standard is blue jeans and T-shirts, power suits and ties, or company-issued uniforms, attire (and the choice making around it) conveys something about the work and the person's orientation to it.

Finally, this information transmission view of communication is a problem because it tends to treat organizations as given, existing independently of our work to create and sustain them. When we think of organizational communication as the process of communicating *in* organizations, the organizations themselves tend to be taken for granted. They become relatively fixed, unproblematic structures that exist apart from the communication processes that occur within them. This makes it tough to understand how those structures have been created and thus difficult to imagine how our actions might alter them when we need to. A useful YouTube video titled, "What Is Organizational Communication?" (produced by organizational communication scholar Matt Koschmann) that critiques this "container" model is available by searching for this title.

## Organizations as Communication

The second perspective, and the one that we will adopt throughout this book, has a much more robust conception of communication in framing the communication–organization relationship. This perspective argues that *communication constitutes organization*—an idea referred to by some organizational communication scholars as the CCO approach to organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Put simply, this means that communication activities are the basic defining stuff of organizational life. If communication generates meaning, organizations cannot exist as meaningful human collectives *without* communication. In this sense, organizations are not simply physical containers within which people

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communicate; rather, organizations exist because people communicatively create the complex systems of meaning that we call "organizations." From this perspective, communication is more than simply one factor among many of organizational life; rather, organizations are seen as fundamentally communicative.

A useful way of thinking about organizations from this perspective is to view them as complex patterns of communication habits. Just as individuals develop habitual, routine behaviors that enable them to negotiate daily life, large groups of people develop patterns of communication activity that enable coordination and generate goal-oriented activity. A meeting, for example, is a communication phenomenon that is meaningful and significant precisely because it is structured around rules for what counts as a meeting and features more formal and ritualized communication patterns regarding things like turn-taking, decision-making, and so forth, all of which differentiate it from a casual hallway conversation.

One upshot of thinking of organizations this way—as complex patterns of communication habits—is that it broadens what we can pay attention to. When most people think of organizations, their minds turn to *businesses*: for-profit workplaces. Those are certainly important (and we'll be spending a good deal of time in this book exploring them), but we can also consider social movement organizations, houses of worship, co-working sites, activist groups, universities, temporary aid efforts, and the like. And new and interesting questions emerge, like who and what are "inside" and "outside" these patterns of communication habits. For instance, many years ago, Tim volunteered at a men's homeless shelter, which was run in a church basement and employed only three paid staff members. Depending on how one conceptualizes patterns of communication habits, we might consider the many volunteers, the church, the men experiencing homelessness, the neighborhood, the employees, the physical space, and/or the contributors to homelessness (among other things) to be part of "the" organization. From this perspective on the communication–organization relationship, there's no single right answer to the question of what's inside and outside an organization; instead, a communicative stance broadens the definition of what we might consider to be organizational.

Although there are multiple definitions and conceptions of communication, in this book we will adopt this "meaning-centered" perspective, viewing communication as the constitutive process through which people come to experience and make sense of the world in which they live. In other words, communication does not only describe an already existing reality but actually *creates* people's social realities. 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 device (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.

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Following from this 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*. This definition moves away from the idea of organizations as objective structures within which people communicate and emphasizes the notion that organizations are, in many respects, nothing but the collective communication behaviors of their members. Of course, these collective communication behaviors do not occur randomly but are coordinated in particular ways. Organizations are, after all, complex entities, often with hundreds or thousands of employees (so we also shouldn't assume that those collective, coordinated systems of meaning are fully shared by all members). In this sense, we need to think about organizational communication processes as fundamentally involving the complex exercise of power and control. Power, we would argue, is a defining feature of everyday organizational life, and an issue with which all perspectives on organizational communication must grapple. Indeed, so fundamental is power to our understanding of how organizations function that management researchers Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips (2006) have claimed, "Power is to organizations as oxygen is to breathing" (p. 3). What does it mean to make this claim, and what are its implications for how we live our lives as organizational beings?

## ORGANIZATIONS AS COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURES OF POWER

Beginning in the late 19th century, as industrial 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. In the 150 years since then, researchers have developed theories to explain 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) argued, "The problems advanced by social scientists have been primarily the problems of human relations in an authoritarian setting" (p. 53). For Perrow, the primary "authoritarian setting" is the workplace.

This problem of human relations in organizations is a complex one, as we will see in this book. One of the defining features of an organization is that it coordinates the behaviors of its members so that they can work collectively. But although coordination is a nice concept in theory, it is surprisingly complicated to achieve in practice. Particularly in for-profit organizations (where most people work), one of the principal factors that limits such coordination is the tension between a human desire for autonomy and agency on the one hand and organizational efforts to shape the will of employees to serve its goals on the other. Philosopher of work Joanne Ciulla (2000) nicely expressed this tension: "The struggle for freedom and power or control has long been the struggle between masters and slaves, lords and serfs, and employers and employees. It is the central problem of work" (p. 70). Table 1.1 summarizes some of the ways in which, in the modern workplace, this tension between employee autonomy and managerial control is manifested.

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**TABLE 1.1 ■ Some Tensions Between Employee Autonomy and Managerial Control**

| *Employee Goals* | | *Employer Goals* |
|---|---|---|
| Maximizing salary | ←------------------------→ | Minimizing costs |
| Job stability | ←------------------------→ | Organizational flexibility and change |
| Maximizing leisure time | ←------------------------→ | Maximizing work time |
| Behaving spontaneously | ←------------------------→ | Behaving predictably |
| Asserting individual values | ←------------------------→ | Asserting collective values |
| Developing personal relationships | ←------------------------→ | Developing professional relationships |
| Creativity | ←------------------------→ | Efficiency |
| Relaxing the labor process | ←------------------------→ | Intensifying the labor process |

As the table suggests, there is an inherent tension between an employee's desire to maximize their salary and an employer's desire to minimize costs and maintain profitability. The proliferation of companies that outsource many of their manufacturing jobs to other countries that provide cheaper labor is testament to this fact. Similarly, most workers would prefer job stability and be able to rely on a consistent paycheck, but this goes against the trend over the last 30 years of companies maintaining flexibility by reengineering, getting rid of nonessential jobs (e.g., outsourcing janitorial work), and focusing on only the core of a company's business (Weil, 2014). Thus, job instability has become the order of the day for millions of workers.

Of course, not all these tensions exist in simple opposition to each other. For example, although organizations largely function as rational systems, employee expression of emotions at work is hardly taboo; if you have ever worked in retail, you know that providing customers with a positive experience involves expressions of warmth, positivity, and happiness. However, employee emotional expression is often carefully prescribed by organizations to meet their goals (a phenomenon called "emotional labor," which we will discuss in a later chapter). In this sense, then, the tension derives from the ways that a natural human trait (emotional expression) is co-opted by the organization to increase profits. In other words, human emotions are rationalized (i.e., made to serve the instrumental and efficiency goals of the organization) in ways that may not be comfortable for the employee (as anyone will attest who is required to smile throughout an 8-hour shift regardless of how customers treat them). Similarly, companies increasingly rely on employee creativity to maintain their edge over competitors. Company work environments (like Google's fun and casual corporate culture) emphasize worker agency and freedom to encourage innovative thinking (although typically it is only white collar workers who enjoy such freedoms).

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Our point here is that these tensions must be resolved, and generally speaking, they are resolved in ways that are consistent with managerial rather than individual goals. Telephone company executive Chester Barnard (1938) was among the first to argue that organizations are successful to the extent that they can subordinate the goals and beliefs of individual organization members to those of the larger organization. All organizational and management theories thus implicitly pose the question: How do we get organization members to behave in ways that they may not spontaneously engage in, and that may even be against their best interests, but that serve the company's interests? In many ways, the history of management thought is the history of efforts to develop more sophisticated answers to this question.

However, organization members do not passively accept these efforts to control their behavior. 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, 2014a; Mumby et al., 2017; Paulsen, 2014). These forms of resistance run the gamut from striking, sit-ins, and sabotage of machinery (called "Luddism" in the 19th century) to more creative acts of resistance. In the early days of industrial capitalism, for example, workers fought for safer working conditions and an 8-hour workday by striking and picketing. In more recent times, corporate efforts to create organizational culture and instill certain values in employees are sometimes hijacked by employees for their own ends, and sometimes employees even create their own countercultures in the organization, rejecting the values established by management (e.g., Ezzamel et al., 2001; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987). Thus, it is important to think about **power** as a *dynamic process of struggle that rests on a complex relationship between control and resistance*. That is, organizational control is never a simple cause–effect phenomenon (like one billiard ball hitting another); it often produces creative employee responses that produce unintended outcomes for the organization. Thus, when we describe organizations as "communicative structures of power," we are talking about how the tensions between employee autonomy and organizational control efforts play out dynamically through communication processes. And, in subsequent chapters, we will examine how different theories of work have managed these dynamics in various ways.

Power is therefore a complex phenomenon that is manifest in multiple organizational control processes. Next, we lay out what we view as the five most important forms of organizational control, examining how they operate to shape organization members' behavior (keeping in mind, of course, that employee resistance is the complement to these control processes).

## Control Processes

In the process of pursuing organizational goals, the interests of employees and managers frequently conflict. Hence, 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 in what follows and in later chapters. The five different control processes have evolved since the emergence of the industrial capitalist organization in the late 19th century in response to employee efforts to exercise autonomy (Edwards, 1979). Each successive form of control can be thought of as an attempt to overcome the limitations of earlier control methods; to the degree that certain forms of control were unable to

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adequately corral worker autonomy and resistance (at least to the satisfaction of owners and managers), they were superseded by newer, more sophisticated forms. Let's begin with the earliest, most explicit form of control—direct control. From there we will move on to technological, bureaucratic, ideological, and biocratic forms of control.

## Direct Control

Workers are subject to **direct control** when their behavior is closely supervised 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 consigned to 19th and early 20th century factories. 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) documented 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! Indeed, in 2014 a call center worker in the UK had £50 deducted from their pay for using the bathroom—a case that become known as the "toilet tax," and raised questions in the UK parliament about fair treatment of workers. Direct supervisory control of workers, then, is still very much a feature of the modern organization.

However, one of the limitations of this form of control is that supervisors are not always able to directly control worker productivity. Certainly, supervisors can monitor the presence and absence of workers, and reward or punish them accordingly, but getting them to work faster is not as easy as it might appear. For example, particularly in the early days of capitalism, workers often knew more about the work than their supervisors and were able to disguise their level of productivity. Indeed, many groups of workers deliberately engaged in output restriction (partly as a way of preserving their jobs or preventing their piece-rate from being cut—an issue we will discuss in depth in Chapter 3). Moreover, as organizations grew in size, it became increasingly difficult to directly monitor and control the work of employees. Technological control, then, was in part an effort to overcome the problems with direct forms of control.

## Technological Control

As the name suggests, **technological control** involves the implementation of forms of organizational technology to control worker productivity (Edwards, 1979). Henry Ford's introduction of the moving production line in automobile manufacturing in 1913 is the classic and most important example of such control. Indeed, this innovation revolutionized the production process in early industrial capitalism and helped usher in an era that we now refer to as "Fordism" (Chapter 3 will discuss this important development). Certainly, the moving production line

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was a more efficient system of production, but it also had the additional benefit (at least from a management perspective) of limiting workers' autonomy and their ability to control the rate of production; workers became largely an appendage to the assembly line at which they worked.

The production line is a classic example of technological control.

Bettmann/Getty Images

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, 2015). Employees who work from home—an ever-increasing population—often are subject to electronic surveillance via tracking of their keystrokes and GPS-based cell phone locations to make sure they're actually working (Satariano, 2020). In such circumstances employees typically engage in self-monitoring because they never know when they are being surveilled and so must always act as if they are (a phenomenon that the philosopher Michel Foucault (1979) calls *Panopticism*, after the Panopticon—a prison designed by the 18th-century English social reformer, Jeremy Bentham.

Many retail companies use software that allows them to schedule employees to work shifts exactly when and where algorithms decide they're needed (Kantor, 2014). Big box stores like Walmart use such software to schedule more workers when there's a surge in sales or send them home when sales are flagging. Although this system is efficient and cost saving (employees aren't being paid when there's little work for them to do), it can have a damaging effect on the personal lives of the workers who are subject to this software. For example, scheduling childcare can be difficult if one is called into work at short notice, and making plans with friends or loved ones becomes difficult (not to mention planning on a consistent paycheck). Moreover, many of the employees subject to this software tend to be low-wage service industry workers who have little job security, making complaining about such a system difficult or dangerous to one's employment status.

In a 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 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 to increase efficiency and productivity. Many fast-food restaurants, including McDonald's, now provide touch screens that enable customers to place orders

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without even speaking to a live person, and the global COVID-19 pandemic has pushed this trend even further, with a massive spike in "contactless" ordering, pickup, and delivery. Finally, recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and social media algorithms mean that companies can curate content in ever more individualized ways for customers, heavily shaping their social media consumption and purchasing behavior.

## Bureaucratic Control

**Bureaucratic control** has been a feature of organizations since the early 20th century, and despite the recent shift to "post-bureaucratic" structures, it is still common in many organizations (Edwards, 1979). It emerged in part as a mechanism to counter some of the excesses of early capitalism, characterized by boom-and-bust cycles in which little long-range planning occurred (Sennett, 2006). 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. Indeed, one of the problems with technological control (particularly assembly line work at places like Ford) was that it brought thousands of workers together under one roof in difficult and alienating working conditions; many of these workers agitated for unionization of the workforce to improve pay and working conditions. The creation of bureaucratic control mechanisms—systems of formal rules, structures, job descriptions, merit systems, and so forth—thus promoted a more democratic workplace where employees were less subject to the arbitrary whims of supervisors.

In addition, bureaucracies tend to promote taken-for-granted ways of behaving—an effective mechanism of control. By and large we don't think too much about the rules and regulations that shape our organizational lives, but they 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 student and faculty member. In this sense, life in complex organizations is unimaginable without at least some level of bureaucracy.

Of course, as we all know, bureaucratic systems can also be alienating. It is easy to feel like a number when we are trying to accomplish goals but are constantly thwarted by the red tape of bureaucracy. Although bureaucratic forms of control were particularly dominant in the three decades after World War II, both workers and managers alike began to experience them as oppressive, constraining, and often inflexible. Bureaucratic organizations tended to be hierarchical, slow to change, and unsuited to an increasingly volatile global environment. Indeed, the 1970s was a period of stagnation for large U.S. and European corporations, and many workers engaged in industrial action against reduced benefits, layoffs, and the lack of a voice at work. This led to the emergence of a new form of control.

## Ideological Control

As a response to the increasing employee resistance that bureaucratic control faced, we see the emergence of **ideological control**. This refers to the development of a system of values, beliefs, and meanings 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

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employees. Instead, if employees have been appropriately socialized into the organization's system of beliefs and values, then they have internalized what it means to work in the best interests of the organization. The focus of ideological control, then, is not the behavior of employees per se but rather their sense of self. Some researchers have even referred to the development of this form of control as an effort to develop employee "designer selves" that reflect the goals and values of the company for which they work (Casey, 1995). For example, Nike employees who get a "swoosh" tattoo on their bodies—usually on the sides of their feet, right where it would be on the shoe—might be said to have a strong connection between their personal and corporate sense of self (tattooed Nike employees who "evangelize" for the culture of the company call themselves "Ekins"—Nike spelled backward).

Ideological control emerged along with the "corporate culture" movement that became popular in U.S. organizations in the 1980s (Peters & Waterman, 1982). This movement developed as an effort to charge work with meaning and overcome the sense of alienation in bureaucratic organizations. Companies that promote a strong corporate culture often carefully vet potential employees to make sure they fit the culture and then make 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; 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 among employees at all levels (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996).

One of the interesting features of corporate culture and ideological control is that they often focus more on the values, meanings, and emotions connected to work than they do on the technical aspects of the job. Although direct, technological, and bureaucratic forms of control all attempt to shape how work actually gets done, ideological control tends to focus more on cultivating in employees a set of feelings that connect them emotionally to the organization. In this sense, ideological control aims to develop strong "corporate clans" with employees having a strong sense of connection to the clan's belief system.

Although 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 because it often asks the employee to invest their 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 team or family 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! In fact, one of the main problems with ideological control and corporate culture is precisely that employees often see through these thinly veiled efforts to manipulate their feelings. Management scholar Gideon Kunda's (1992) famous study, *Engineering Culture*, for example, shows how seasoned employees viewed the strong culture of a high-tech corporation with a great deal of cynicism. And David Collinson's (1988) study of a UK engineering firm shows how the shop floor workers dismissed management efforts to introduce a new corporate culture as a "let's be pals" act aimed at co-opting workers.

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Thus, although ideological control and corporate culture were introduced to revitalize the workplace and tap into employees' desire for more meaningful work, it ended up imposing a new system of conformity that tried to get all employees to share the same values and beliefs. Interestingly, the corporate culture model emerged at the time when a new organizational form—post-Fordism—was beginning to emerge, and it also signaled a shift to a new form of organizational control.

### Biocratic Control

Although ideological control rests on the assumption that a company needs to create a strong internal culture with which employees identify, **biocratic control** shifts the focus away from such conformity, instead attempting to capture the diversity of its workforce. Thinking of organizations as "biocracies" (Fleming, 2014b) focuses on the idea that in the current, post-Fordist organization (which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 7), it is "life itself" (bios) that companies are attempting to capture. What do we mean by this? For most of the history of industrial capitalism, there has been a clear separation between work and other aspects of people's lives. Indeed, Fordist capitalism pretty much insisted that the two realms were kept separate (although Henry Ford himself did take a strong interest in his employees' private lives, only hiring workers who abided by his strict moral code of sobriety and fidelity in marriage). For example, sociologist Hugh Beynon's (1973) study, *Working for Ford*, reported the following workplace motto: "When we are at work, we ought to be at work. When we are at play, we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two." Today's post-Fordist organization has, in many respects, overturned this principle, introducing work into home and play and home and play into the workplace. Many people work from home, and play has become a serious business; in turn, companies are increasingly creating organizational environments that draw on the creative energies and leisure activities that people have typically reserved for life away from work.

Biocratic control erases the work–life distinction.

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Management scholar Peter Fleming (2014b) coined the term "biocracy" to capture this new form of organizational control. Drawing from philosopher Michel Foucault's (2008) notion of "biopower" (or power over "life itself"), Fleming argued that today's organizations have largely erased the distinction between work and home or leisure, capturing parts of our lives not typically associated with work. Now, rather than attempting to limit worker autonomy through forms of control, companies aim to enlist the whole employee, asking workers to "just be yourself" while at work (Fleming, 2014a, p. 87). Millennials and members of Generation Z often report that they seek jobs where they can bring their "whole self" to work, which usually means that these workers want jobs that allow them to exhibit their "true" selves in the workplace, along with an expectation that managers support them in doing so (Robbins, 2018). However, biocracy does not simply mean bringing personal authenticity to work but also thinking of one's *entire life* as framed by work.

Think, for example, about your own day-to-day life as a college student. With adjustment for your own particular college context, we 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 indicated 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. But this self-improvement is less about shaping one's intrinsic sense of well-being and more about preparing oneself for a highly competitive market in which one's "brand" must stand out. We suspect that a high percentage of you are engaged in precisely this kind of self-disciplinary activity to distinguish yourselves and make you more marketable to potential employers.

Biocratic 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 that everyone must constantly work on—and not only at work. Because the project of the self is never finished and must be continuously monitored and improved (to meet an ever more competitive work environment), people live in a persistent state of anxiety about the value of their individual brand. Thus, individuals constantly engage in behaviors where the creation and continual improvement of an "entrepreneurial self" is the goal (Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). Our entire lives are therefore framed through work in the sense that everything we do becomes an extension of our desire to be economically competitive. As Lair and Wieland (2012) show, college students have to strategically defend their choice of major to justify how employable it makes them (Have you had to defend your choice of major to family and friends? We've certainly had to do something similar as communication professors.). As such, we become our own entrepreneurial projects in which career is a defining construct around which life decisions are made. In its most extreme form,

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the constant efforts to manage and maintain an entrepreneurial self has led to a concern with "instafame" (Marwick, 2015) in which everyone is trying to develop a presence in the "attention economy." People post TikTok videos of themselves, tweet, create Instagram stories, and engage in whatever behavior might attract eyeballs and hence add to one's brand (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). And those not looking to "go viral" are told to be careful about what they post in their personal online accounts because future potential employers have been known to examine these sites and refuse to hire someone with offensive posts or risqué photos, even those from years in the past. In other words, one's personal life gets linked to employability.

Fleming argued that within the current system of biocratic control, the employee "is probably one of the most micro-managed of all time" (2014a, p. 37). Although the previous forms of control we discussed provide opportunities for resistance and autonomy, biocratic control is more difficult to escape precisely because it encompasses all aspects of life and is largely taken for granted. We now live in an economic and political system—neoliberalism—in which the individual (rather than the social) reigns supreme, and every behavior is evaluated in terms of its potential to be marketized (i.e., turned into economic value). Our work and social identities are increasingly inseparable, leading some scholars to speak of the "social factory" (Gill & Pratt, 2008), that is, the notion that work has spilled outside of the organization, and economic value is no longer created only in organizations but also by the everyday activities in which we routinely engage. For example, every time we post something on our Facebook account, we create data points for Facebook that can be analyzed and sold to marketers so that they can target us with advertising that fits our tastes (Cote & Pybus, 2011).

## Summarizing the Five Forms of Control

Given the centrality of the ideas of power and control in this book, it is important to keep several issues in mind. First, many organizations use multiple forms of control at the same time. For example, an employee might be subject to direct and bureaucratic control while also being heavily indoctrinated into the company's ideology. Furthermore, although analytically distinct, these forms of control overlap in practice in the workplace: an organization's culture (ideological control) might emphasize a value system based on the importance of hierarchy and rule following (bureaucratic control), as is the case with military organizations.

Second, these forms of control operate on a continuum from most coercive (direct control) to least coercive and most participative, involving autonomous employee behavior and decision-making (biocratic control). 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 our lives as organization members.

Third, as we have indicated, each form of control tends to develop in response to the failure of earlier forms of control to adequately deal with employee autonomy and resistance. In this sense, we can view each new form of control as building on earlier forms.

Finally, the increasing sophistication of organizational control requires a similarly sophisticated understanding of the role of communication in these control processes. Direct, technological, and bureaucratic forms of control rely mainly on a simple understanding of communication as information transmission, whereas ideological and biocratic forms of control

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treat communication as complex and central to the construction of employee identities and organizational meaning systems—issues that figure prominently in this book. In other words, ideological and biocratic forms of control can be understood only through the constitutive conception of the communication–organization relationship that we have discussed.

In the final section we turn to a discussion of the relationships among communication, organization, and work. Because most of you reading this book are at the beginning of your professional careers and are probably thinking less about organizations per se and more about jobs, it is important that the topics discussed in this book address how work has changed over the last 30 years. In this sense, the work world that you will be entering is quite different from the one that your parents or grandparents entered.

## COMMUNICATION, ORGANIZATIONS, AND WORK

The comedian George Carlin once quipped, "Oh, you hate your job? Why didn't you say so? There's a support group for that. It's called *everybody*, and they meet at the bar." Everyone can relate to the essential truth of Carlin's joke; we all hate our jobs, at least part of the time. However, this "essential truth" flies in the face of a dominant societal narrative (especially in the United States), which insists that we should love our work and recognize it as an important source of self-fulfillment. But the idea that we should love our jobs is—at least historically speaking—a relatively recent phenomenon. As philosopher Alain De Botton (2009) pointed out, unlike preindustrial societies (where the real sign of status was a life free from work), modern society has elevated work such that it has become central to a positive sense of self.

For the last 100 years or more, then, work has been central to our sense of self-worth and achievement. It is a dominant part of the "social imaginary" (the ideas, values, and institutions that define us as a society) that shapes who we are and our connection to the broader society in which we live (Weeks, 2011). Indeed, in the last 30 years or so this dominant narrative of work has become even stronger, particularly with the emergence of an economic and political system called "neoliberalism" (a topic we will explore in detail in Chapter 7). Under neoliberalism, not only is the individual the dominant unit in society, but work as an activity is elevated above all others; we are even supposed to work hard at "nonwork," leisure activities ("Just Do It"). Because it has become so central to our lives, it has become increasingly important to us that our work is meaningful and satisfying.

However, at the same time that work has been elevated in our social imaginary, it has also become increasingly insecure and unsatisfying for a large percentage of the workforce. As much as work defines who we are, many of us are unhappy with our jobs (as Carlin so hilariously pointed out). Consider the following statistics:

- The Conference Board's 2020 annual report on job satisfaction among U.S. workers indicated that only 47.7% of workers are satisfied with their jobs—down from a 61.1% job satisfaction rate when the annual survey began in 1987.
- A 2022 Gallup survey found that globally only 21% of employees are engaged with their work (i.e., found work interesting with opportunities for participation in decision-making).

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- A 2021 Gallup survey indicated that only 36% of U.S. workers feel engaged by their jobs, whereas 15% are actively disengaged from those jobs (leaving around 50% of workers who are neither engaged nor disengaged).
- A 2018 Gallup survey reported that although 68% of Germans are satisfied with their jobs, only 15% feel engaged by their work.
- A 2018 Gallup report stated that engaged and talented workers with at least 10 years of tenure at one company constitute only 5% of the workforce.

We are faced, then, with an interesting contradiction—*most of us are heavily invested in and defined by our work, but a majority of us is dissatisfied with the work we do*. We often experience it as alienating, meaningless and—increasingly in the last 30 years—insecure. In addition, as the last statistic suggests, few people are staying in one job for a long time. Work is therefore a taken-for-granted aspect of modern society, and yet it is a condition that many of us struggle with and against.

It is important, then, that we think carefully about our relationship to work. Yes, we are, by definition, organizational beings, but to what degree does that mean that we are *defined* by our work? The German sociologist Max Weber pointed out that in traditional, pre-capitalist societies, people worked to live; that is, they worked only to the degree that they could produce or earn what they needed to maintain themselves and their families. Today, however, we live to work. Our jobs have become much more than the means through which we reproduce ourselves and have instead become invested with all kinds of symbolic value, levels of prestige, and psychological motivations (Gini, 2001). We are consumed by work and committed to an ethic that says if we are not working hard and pursuing successful careers, then we are failing to realize our potential as human beings.

But in the 21st century, work has become more problematic as a defining feature of life. Although everyone is expected to pursue jobs and a career (and experience negative sanctions by society if they don't), the economic system that dominated much of the 20th century has undergone changes that render the place of work in our social imaginary more problematic. A few years ago two articles appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on the same day. One article reported that since 2010 fully half of the jobs created in the European Union have been temporary work, with young job seekers stuck in a constant cycle of seeking jobs (Alderman, 2017). The other article reported that around 40% of U.S. workers in their 20s receive some kind of financial support from their parents—the product of an increasingly insecure work environment, exacerbated by the fact that skilled knowledge work is increasingly concentrated in urban areas, where rent and living expenses are high. When you are moving around from one temporary job to another, it's difficult to establish financial stability (Bui, 2017). Taken together, these two stories capture much about the nature of contemporary work and the shift toward a gig economy, in which people take on multiple low-paying jobs with few or no benefits.

As of 2023 there are about 73 million people in the United States who work in the gig economy as either their primary or secondary job (up from 57 million before the pandemic). Companies like Uber, TaskRabbit, Airbnb, and Etsy offer the opportunity for people to "be their own boss" and work when they want (opening possibilities for greater work–life balance). But although the possibility of greater work autonomy and lifestyle flexibility is a potential

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positive effect, there are a number of problems with this kind of work. For example, workers in the gig economy do not get the benefits typically associated with full-time employment—health care, pension plan, vacation days, and so forth. Indeed, people who work for companies like Uber are not actually employed by Uber; they are independent contractors who work for themselves and pay Uber a commission on each fare. Moreover, gig economy work tends to be low paid (earning on average 58% less than full-time employees), and such workers tend to have multiple jobs, undermining the idea that the gig economy leads to more balance between work and life. A good sign of the instability of gig work is that 52% of gig workers lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some authors (e.g., Livingston, 2016) have argued that the labor market in 21st-century capitalism has broken down to the point where it no longer provides opportunities for productive and fulfilled lives, and thus we need to radically rethink our relationship to work. The ongoing effects of technology, outsourcing, globalization processes, and the shifts away from manufacturing to service and knowledge work mean that, in many respects, the job as we traditionally know it is disappearing. Mulcahy (2016), for example, has argued that many companies now see hiring full-time employees as an act of last resort and instead develop business models that rely heavily on contract and part-time workers. Recognizing this economic reality, Mulcahy said that she tells her MBA students that they should stop looking for a *job* and instead look for *work*; in other words, they should develop an independent mindset and a repertoire of critical skills that are flexible and applicable to a wide array of work opportunities rather than honed for a specific job or career trajectory. However, a recent *Harvard Business Review* article made the significant point that the hardest thing about working in the gig economy for which Mulcahy coaches her students is that it's difficult to create a cohesive sense of self. Because our identities are so closely tied to our work, "those engaged in multiple jobs may find themselves plagued with issues of authenticity: who am 'I' really, if I'm all these things at once?" (Caza et al., 2017).

So, many workers today face a basic contradiction: on the one hand, work in the gig economy is, by definition, insecure; on the other hand, we want work to be meaningful and satisfying and to provide us with a strong sense of identity. How do we develop this strong and coherent sense of self when the work we invest in is insecure and contingent? Social philosopher André Gorz (1999) has argued that we live an age of "generalized insecurity," in which the traditional touchstones of stability and identity—family, community, work, religious affiliation, and so on—have become increasingly unstable. This issue is becoming particularly acute because the topic of meaningful work has exploded in the last few years. Most people don't just want a job; they want work that they love, that is meaningful and rewarding. However, in her recent book, journalist Sarah Jaffe (2021) warned us that *Work Won't Love You Back.* She argued, "The labor of love is a con" (p. 2) because devotion to work leads to worker exploitation and exhaustion as employers heap more demands on their employees. Thus, although workers may love their work, that feeling will not be reciprocated by one's employer. Jaffe suggested that millions of workers are rejecting the "neoliberal lie" that work requires complete devotion and passion and are searching for a more balanced life (and certainly the "great resignation" and "quiet quitting" support this view).

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## CRITICAL RESEARCH 1.1

**Südkamp, C. M., & Dempsey, S. E. (2021). Resistant transparency and nonprofit labor: Challenging precarity in the art+museum wage transparency campaign. *Management Communication Quarterly, 35*, 341–367.**

Carolin Südkamp and Sarah Dempsey's study helps us think about several things we have addressed in this first chapter, namely, the contemporary world of work and its insecurities, the struggle between employers and employees, and the role of communication in shaping that struggle—and, for good measure, social media plays a key role in the study.

Südkamp and Dempsey examined the plight of low-paid employees in a specific part of the nonprofit sector—museum work. They argued that studying the nonprofit sector is important for a couple of reasons: first, because nonprofits are a key provider of social services, taking over the traditional role of government in many instances and, second, because nonprofits have become central to the societal narrative about meaningful work (e.g., doing volunteer work). The study focused on a group of workers called *Arts+Museum Transparency* and their efforts to draw attention to the low pay and precarious employment that they experience in the arts and museum sector.

Südkamp and Dempsey used the term "resistant transparency" to describe a communication strategy that the workers used to challenge industry norms of self-sacrifice and low-paid labor. They defined resistant transparency as "communication aimed at revealing or publicizing previously obscured or hidden data and information to challenge powerful actors" (p. 358). Using a Twitter account (@AMTransparency) and an anonymous crowdsourced Google spreadsheet documenting wages in different arts and museum organizations (data that are typically not made public), the workers shared wage information among themselves and called nonprofits to account via Twitter for their lack of wage transparency. This sharing of wage information enabled arts and museum workers to engage in more collective forms of organizing and bargaining with employers.

Employees were thus able to develop collective solidarity by sharing experiences of poor wages and insecure work, build coalitions across workplaces, and strengthen their employee voice. In this sense, they directly targeted institutional power. As the authors stated, "Our analysis develops how transparency functions as a resistant communicative practice with potential for increasing worker voice and furthering the goals of collective resistance to precarious work" (pp. 358–359). An important conclusion of the study was that although the discourse of meaningful work often functions as compensation for low-wage, precarious work, through collective organizing workers can push back to lobby for *both* meaningful work *and* well-paid, secure work.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever had a job volunteering or in the nonprofit sector? What was your experience like? How was it different from paid or for-profit work?
2. What does it mean to you to have "meaningful" work? How do you think about the tradeoff between work that is meaningful (and thus often poorly paid or insecure) and work that is well paid and secure but not fulfilling? If you were forced to choose between the two, which would you choose? Why?
3. What are some of your anxieties about your future work life? What is the source of these anxieties? How do you try and deal with these anxieties?

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How is this discussion of contemporary work connected to communication issues? We suggest that as organizations are communicatively constructed, so is work. Indeed, we would argue that in 21st-century capitalism, work and communication are intimately connected in that we: a) make sense of work through communicative processes and b) do work through communication (Kuhn et al., 2017). As we will see in Chapter 10 on branding, for example, communication (rather than manufacturing products) is now the primary medium of profit for many companies. How we understand work and our relationship to it is intimately related to our connections to others—friends, family, community, and so forth. Work as a social imaginary is communicated to us through group, cultural, and societal discourses that shape its place in our lives and how it figures in our sense of self (e.g., the idea that we must see work as a passion is one such social imaginary—an issue we will address in Chapter 14). In this sense, we construct and negotiate our relationship to work through these discourses—discourses that, as we will see in the course of this book, change over time.

Thus, as you work through this book, it's important to keep in mind that although work and organizations are defining features of our lives, how we experience them is not natural or inevitable. Organizations and work in the 21st century emerged from centuries of human struggle over what society and our place in it should be like. This book is an effort to help you understand the complexities of that struggle, the better to engage with it.

## CRITICAL CASE STUDY 1.1: A CONDUIT MODEL OF EDUCATION

In a real sense, how we *think about* communication has consequences for how we *behave and communicate* with others. Stephen Axley (1984) illustrated this powerfully in an argument regarding the dominance of the "conduit metaphor" in organizations. Following linguist Michael Reddy, Axley suggested that everyday talk about communication is dominated by an information transmission model that operates according to four implicit assumptions: 1) Language transfers thoughts and feelings among people, 2) speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words, 3) words contain those thoughts and feelings, and 4) listeners and readers extract those thoughts and feelings from the words (p. 429). This model is implicit in everyday expressions such as "He couldn't get his ideas across" and "She tried hard to put her thoughts into words." Let's look at the consequences of this model for the education process.

Many U.S. colleges and universities operate on a model of large class sizes with hundreds of students enrolled. The educational principles embedded in this tendency operate according to a conduit, transmission model of communication. Large class sizes mean that any interaction between professor and students is highly limited, with the dominant discourse being a monologue by the professor. In keeping with this monologue, students view themselves as the passive recipients of information transmitted by the professor. Knowledge consists of information inserted into words and transmitted from the professor's mouth to the students' brains, with lecture notes operating as the repository of such information. Professors try to ensure effective transmission of information by introducing redundancy into the system via the use of PowerPoint, repeating main issues, creating podcasts, putting lectures online, and so forth.

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But the conduit model completely undermines any conception of education as an active and dynamic process in which students and professors engage in dialogues about interpretive possibilities. With pedagogy reduced to the transmission of hard, nonnegotiable facts, we are unable to recognize the extent to which knowledge production is actually a highly contested, contingent, and ever-changing process. The unhappy result is that by the time students do finally get to participate in classes of 20 or 30 (usually in their senior years) they have become little more than efficient note-takers. They simply want to know what the truth (at least in test-taking terms) is so they can write it down. Many students have thus been trained to apply a monologic model to a dialogic context.

Moreover, one might argue that the dialogic model is inefficient and unproductive in a context where students have become professional self-entrepreneurs who view education as a means to improve their personal "brand equity." The knowledge acquired in courses is useful only if translated into a stellar GPA and well-rounded transcript.

### Discussion Questions

1. In groups or individually, develop a definition of communication. In what sense is it similar to or different from the conduit model of communication?
2. To what extent has your experience of college education been similar to the one described here? How has it been different?
3. If you were to create the ideal educational environment, what would it look like? Identify some principles of organizational communication discussed in this chapter that might help you formulate this ideal.
4. Do you agree or disagree with the view of today's students as discussed under biocratic control? Why or why not? How would you describe your own student identity?

## CONCLUSION

In this first chapter we have tried to raise some questions about our commonsense understandings of organizations and work. By adopting a critical communication perspective, we can move away from thinking of organizations as formal structures within which we communicate toward thinking of organizations as existing only because of the collective communication processes in which people engage. In this sense, *communication constitutes organization*—a principle that will guide us throughout this book and that is foundational to the critical communication perspective on organizations and work that this book adopts. From this perspective, communication is not only a thing to be explained but a frame through which to understand and explain the world, including organizations and organizing (Kuhn et al., 2017).

As we have discussed, such a critical communication perspective views organizations as communicative structures of power in which organizations attempt to manage the tension between individual and organizational goals and values. Indeed, one of the claims that underlies this book is the idea that all management theories from the early 20th century to the present are premised on the understanding of the need to manage this crucial tension.

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Although 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 management and organization theories and bodies of research. As will become clear, 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 we mentioned earlier in this chapter, this book is written explicitly from a *critical* communication perspective, and so Chapter 2 will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this approach. 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.

### Critical Applications

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. Choose a news story that features some aspect of organizational life, and explore how you might take a communication perspective on the issue that the news story explores.
3. In small groups, discuss how you think about the place of work in your lives. How much pressure do you feel to find a career that you love? What anxieties do you have about work?
4. Discuss with a classmate (or someone else who'll listen) the case of someone you know—a relative, friend, and so on—who shifts jobs, or even careers, frequently. Why does that person do so? Are there larger structural forces making those shifts happen? Are those shifts good or bad for that person? And what are the implications for the organizations this person enters and leaves?

## KEY TERMS

biocratic control
bureaucratic control
communication
communication in organizations
direct control
ideological control
organizational communication
organizational control
organizations as communication
power
technological control

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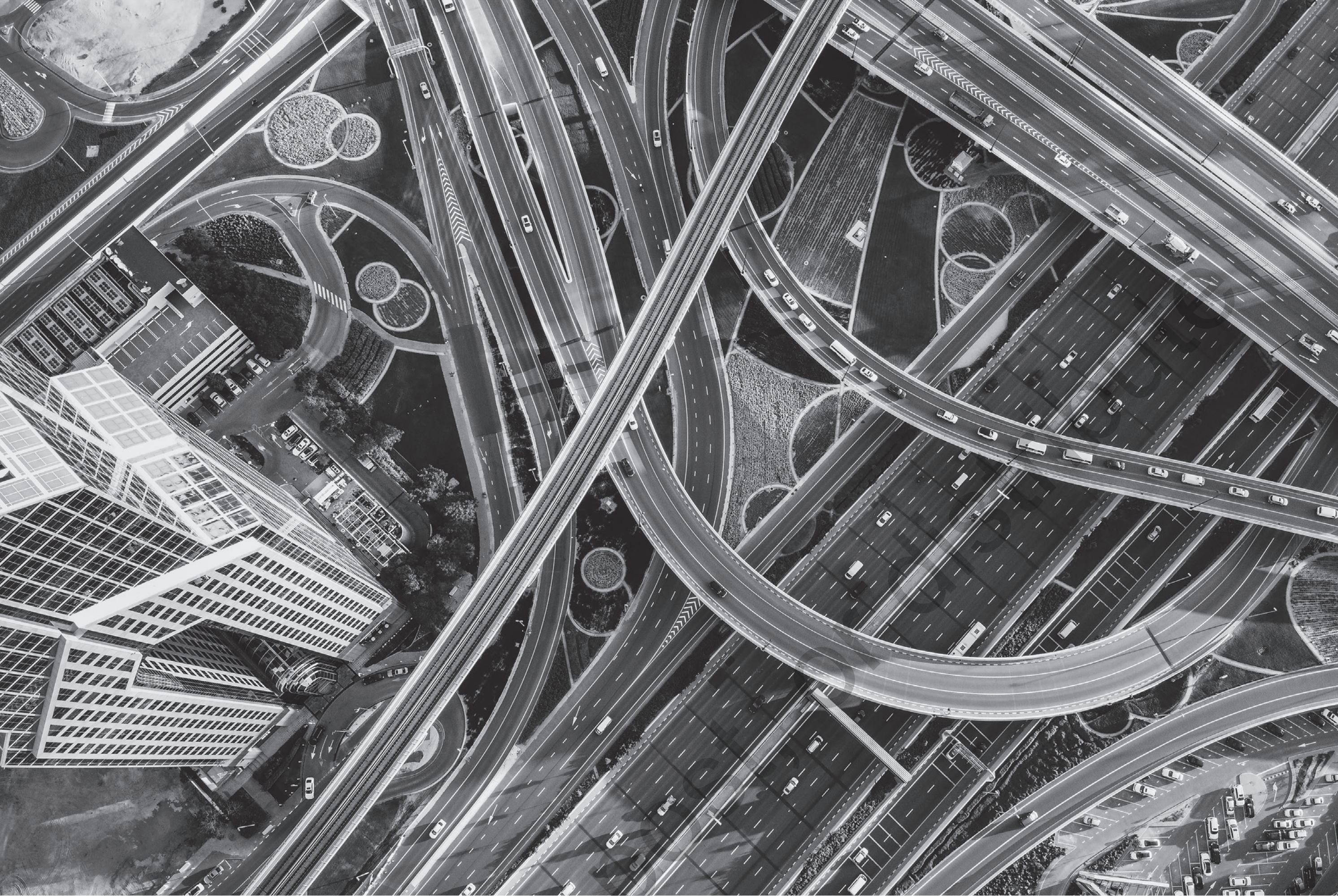

The critical approach can enable you to navigate the complexities of organizational life.

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# 2 STUDYING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION CRITICALLY

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**2.1** Summarize the different research traditions that make up the critical approach.

**2.2** Review how the critical approach informs the study of organizational communication.

**2.3** Describe the importance of theory in shaping how we see and analyze the world, including organizations and work.

In Chapter 1 we addressed the question, "What is organizational communication?" In this chapter we will discuss the perspective underlying the answer we gave to that question—the critical approach. By the end of this chapter, you will have the analytic tools to understand and critique the theories, research traditions, and organizational processes we will be examining in the remaining chapters of this book. In developing these analytic tools, our goal is to help you become "organizationally literate" and thus better able to understand the expanding role of organizations in creating the world in which we live. Being organizationally literate enables us to become better organizational citizen-scholars, attending more critically to the important organizational processes and practices that shape both our working and leisure activities.

In our approach, the term *critical* does not refer to the everyday, negative sense of that term but, rather, to a perspective on organizations that has emerged in the past three or four decades. From this perspective, organizations are viewed as political systems where different interest groups compete for 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 enable you to understand the idea of taking a "critical approach" to the study of organizations. As such, we will examine the influences and schools of thought that have helped establish the critical tradition in the field of organizational communication. 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 organizational communication and organizing practices? What are its goals and purposes? A third and final goal of this chapter is to show how the critical approach can be used 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's turn to an examination of why theory—despite its frequent complexity—is an important tool for understanding organizations and their place in the world around us.

## UNDERSTANDING THEORY IN THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

For many of you the term *theory* is likely to send you to sleep. Theories typically seem abstract and largely inapplicable to everyday life (as reflected in the phrase, "That's all well and good in theory, but . . ."). However, theories are indispensable to everyday life, and we couldn't get along

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without them. As the psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951) once said, "There's nothing so practical as good theory" (p. 169). At an everyday level we operate with "implicit" or common-sense theories that enable us to navigate the world. We do not typically subject these theories to careful reflection, except in instances where they fail us in some way.

For example, many people operate with the implicit theory that success is an individual thing; achievement is due to individual abilities and hard work. This may be partly true, but it overlooks the fact that everyone is positioned in societies and social structures that both enable and constrain their opportunities and shape their worldviews. For example, women are more likely to attribute their success to external factors such as mentors, supportive friends, and plain luck; men, in contrast, are more likely to attribute their success to their own abilities. Does this tell us more about men's and women's psychological makeup or more about the broader social structures that shape men's and women's life chances (and which may indeed shape psychological makeup)? The point is that although our implicit theories enable us to negotiate the world around us, they are often not good at getting us to rethink our relationship to the world or, indeed, getting us to question how the world itself is structured.

Thus, implicit theories tend to maintain taken-for-granted, commonsense understandings of the world. However, we suggest that theory can also be understood as the systematic development of a particular mode of inquiry that enables the examination and critique of the *commonsense* understandings of the world that become taken for granted. Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea (2013) defined "commonsense" in the following way:

> A form of "everyday thinking" which offers frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of the 'common people' for practical guidance and advice. (p. 1)

Commonsense thinking is often uncritical, reflecting tradition and reproducing the status quo—the "ways things are." Part of the challenge of good theory, then, is to help people develop their **critical communication capacities** so that they can question commonsense thinking and interrogate our "direct" experience of the world. We never have direct access to the world around us because it is shaped by communication processes that are both the medium and expression of different institutional structures, including class, education, mass and social media, organizations, religion, family, and so forth. In this sense, all our experience is mediated in some fashion. Systematically developed theory, then, enables us to explore *how* our world is communicationally mediated and constructed and helps us understand the consequences of that construction process for ourselves and others.

The way things are, then, is both socially constructed and difficult to change; it is created by humans but also endures for a long time as it becomes sedimented in institutions and organizations. It's therefore easy to hold intuitive, commonsense views of the world in part because it takes less effort than challenging the institutional forms and social structures that many people accept as natural. Moreover, the reality of power is that those who have it don't willingly give it up; powerful people—in whatever sphere—create economic, political, and communication

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systems that maintain that power. Change does occur, however, but typically only with the emergence of oppositional social movements (the labor movement, feminism, civil rights, gay rights, etc.) that challenge the ways things are and create an alternate vision of how the world might work. Over time a critical mass of people internalize this new vision such that it becomes taken for granted by the majority of people.

For example, the feminist movement has, over the last 150 years, regularly challenged structures of power and created new ways of thinking about and acting in the world. The first wave of feminism advocated for women's suffrage; the second wave of feminism fought for bodily autonomy and equal employment opportunities; the third wave of feminism challenged commonsense ideas about gender, sexuality, and identity (e.g., the idea that there are only two fixed and natural genders). Of course, it often takes a long time for sedimented views of the world and structures of power to change. It took 72 years between the launching of the first wave of the feminist movement at a conference in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 and the granting of the vote for women in 1920 (at least in the United States). Similarly, the second wave of feminism, which began in the mid-1960s, began to have a significant impact on women's representation in the work sphere only in the 1980s and 1990s (and in many ways equal pay and representation are still ongoing struggles in many spheres of work and public life). Finally, we are currently in the middle of debates about definitions of gender, sexuality, and identity, with evolving ideas regarding accepted and commonsense definitions.

By and large, then, commonsense assumptions about the world tend to reflect the existing structures of power and privilege in society. What we think of as direct experience is heavily rooted in and mediated by those structures and institutions of power, which are difficult to transform. Thus, although most people see women's right to vote as a defining (and perhaps obvious) element of democracy, that wasn't always commonsense thinking, and it took many decades of struggle to make it so. Similarly, most people are comfortable with women in the workplace, or having a female boss, but not so long ago, the idea of a woman as, for example, an airline pilot was literally seen as unnatural (because they were viewed as too emotional in emergencies).

Thus, one of the ways that these transformations can occur is by the systematic questioning of commonsense assumptions about the world through the development of critical communication capacities in each of us. Such capacities can be nurtured by the careful development of systematic forms of inquiry in questioning common sense. The more we understand how theory and systematic inquiry work, the better sense we have of the multiple ways the world around us gets constructed. For example, in this book we will examine multiple organization and management theories, many of which have had a profound effect on the nature of work in organizational life. It is important that we have the tools that will enable us to understand and critique the implications of these theories for how work is carried out as well as for how each theory constructs us as human beings in relationship to work.

We want you to think of this entire book, then, as an effort to challenge your commonsense understandings of the world of work and organizations through the development of a critical approach to organizational communication. By the end of the book, our hope is that you will possess a set of critical communication capacities—what we might call a "communicative imagination" (Kuhn, 2017a)—that will enable you to interrogate your relationship to work and organizational life. In the rest of this chapter, we will unpack the principles and concepts that make up the critical approach.

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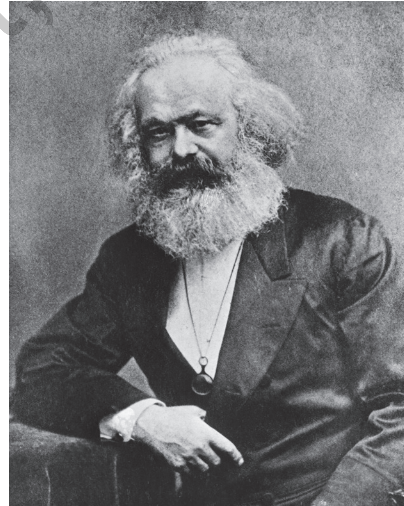
## UNPACKING THE CRITICAL APPROACH

Although 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 (1961, 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 Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, Marx is considered a foundational thinker in our understanding of how society functions culturally, politically, and economically. However, the complexity of Marx's work has led over the decades to many 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 examine three 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 schools of thought are 1) The Institute for Social Research (commonly known as the Frankfurt School), 2) cultural studies, and 3) postcolonial studies.

### Karl Marx

During his life (1818–1883), **Marx** witnessed 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 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.



Karl Marx's writings have significantly influenced how we understand capitalist organizations.

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How does Marx arrive at this analysis of capitalism as an exploitative system? Let's identify some basic issues.

#### Marx's Key Issues

First, Marx provided a detailed analysis of the historical development of different economic systems, or forms of ownership. These he described as tribal, ancient, feudal, and capitalist.

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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 comprised male citizens, noncitizen women, and slaves (who did 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 comprised serfs who performed labor and the aristocrats who had rights over the serfs.

Marx argued that, out of all these forms of ownership, capitalism constituted the most complex and exploitative economic system. 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, hunted game, 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 approach that analyzes history according to different modes of production, each involving shifting forms of property ownership and class relations. Marx identifies these different forms 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 showed that each system comprised 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 critiqued about this economic and political system?

In his analysis of capitalism, Marx identified four elements peculiar to this 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 the "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 the only thing that remained to them—their labor power. In this sense, the nonowners of the means of production (workers) are forced to satisfy their own economic needs by selling their labor power to the owners of the means of production (the capitalists). Thus, workers maintain the capitalist class economically and are reduced to commodities in the process.

2. Marx identified capitalism as the only system of economic production in which the foundation of the system is not to make goods to produce even more goods but, rather, to turn money into even more money. In this sense, a particular company's product is largely irrelevant, provided the company continues to make a strong return on its capital investment. Thus, the actual "use value" (the utility of a good or service) of the

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product is much less important than its "exchange value" (the commodities, such as money, you could get for the product if you sold or traded it). This is even truer today than it was in Marx's time. For example, financial service companies (Citigroup, American Express, etc.) do not even make tangible products as such but manage money itself to make more money. As Marx shows, this means that under capitalism, everything—including workers—can become a commodity, a "good" with exchange value, 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 time period. 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 pointed out, this means that the labor of the worker produces more value than its purchase price (indeed, the value of the labor is infinitely expandable, limited only by technology, machine efficiency, and the worker's physical capacity). Marx referred 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 showed, the worker is paid for only that portion of the working day that is necessary to maintain the worker, that is, to feed and clothe them—what Marx called "necessary labor." The rest of the working day is surplus labor and is unpaid.

4. Related, Marx pointed out that because capitalists were not purchasing a fixed amount of labor but a *capacity* to labor through the purchase of labor *time*, the actual amount that workers worked during that time (e.g., an 8-hour day) was largely indeterminate. As such, the capitalist labor process always involves an ongoing process of struggle (still part of work today) between capitalists who try to intensify the labor process as much as possible and workers who try to maintain at least some sense of autonomy and control over how much and how fast they work. Thus, the forms of control that we discussed in Chapter 1 (direct, technological, etc.) are very much about managerial efforts to turn the indeterminacy of labor power into a determinate amount of productivity, often in the face of worker resistance.

Perhaps Marx's most important point was that because workers under capitalism must sell their labor power and work for someone else, they are alienated from both themselves and their own labor. As Marx stated:

> In his work … [the worker] does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. (Marx, 1961, p. 37)

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As we saw in Chapter 1 and will see in subsequent chapters, the whole question of worker **alienation** is a key issue in how organizations manage work and employees. For Marx, good, fulfilling work is free from alienation, but work under capitalism is *inherently* alienating because it deprives workers of the ability to experience it as an embodiment of their own creativity and skills; they are forced to work for someone else and largely become appendages to the machines at which they work.

Although 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). As we reported in Chapter 1, survey data have suggested that a low percentage of workers worldwide feel engaged at work—a statistic that suggests that alienation is still a significant problem over a century after Marx's death.

If capitalism is so exploitive, then, why do workers continue to participate in this system? Why don't they revolt and overthrow it? Marx explained this conundrum with his notion of **ideology**. Marx used this notion to show how the economic structure of society directly affects 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 argued 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 said 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—it is not *merely* an outcome of economic activity—but also shapes reality to favor the interests of the dominant class (while standing 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 that operate in society include 1) continuous attempts through the 19th and 20th centuries to construct a perception of women (e.g., the 19th-century "Cult of Domesticity") as unable to do "men's work" (except during times of war, of course) and 2) the 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. There are many more such examples, but all function to structure reality in a way that serves the interests of the dominant class. Thus, whereas Marx showed that economic interests structure ideologies, he also showed that such ideologies take on a life of their own, inverting reality in a way that marginalizes some groups and privileges other, dominant groups.

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In sum, Marx's writings have had a profound impact on our understanding of the relationships 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 relations 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.

### Critiquing Marx

Although 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 criticism is his belief in the evolutionary nature of the economic model of history. 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, 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—despite its strong ideology—it was bound to fail. Like slavery and feudalism before it, an economic system that kept most 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 although the working class *produced* wealth directly through their labor, the capitalist class *accumulated* most of that wealth 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 (e.g., the Chartists) gained considerable support among 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 (the so-called Gilded Age). 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 several crises (e.g., 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. Although his development of an economic, materialist view of society is important, he tended 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 it's not unheard of for upper-class people to have liberal ideologies (the billionaire businessman George Soros would be a good current example, and Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels, came from a wealthy family

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of cotton mill owners). In this sense, whereas Marx's model suggests that economics determines class, which in turn determines ideology, later scholars have shown this position to be 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 it successfully adapted to changing economic and political circumstances. Although 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 prevail despite the continued existence of poverty and exploitation.

In the rest of this chapter we will discuss three "neo-Marxist" schools of thought that have strongly influenced both social theory generally and critical organizational communication studies more specifically. All three 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 (Jeffries, 2016). In the past 40 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 (another example of how class doesn't determine ideology), the school reinterpreted 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 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 retained the spirit of Marxism but moved beyond its simplistic model of inevitable economic revolution. In short, the Frankfurt School wanted to continue the examination and critique of capitalism that Marx had begun, but they took this project in a different direction than that pursued by Marx and his followers.

What was this new direction? Although the scholars of the Frankfurt School pursued many diverse research agendas, there are two themes around which much of their work coalesced. First, Frankfurt School researchers believed that orthodox Marxism was in error in focusing principally on the economic aspects of capitalism. Although the economic foundations of

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a society strongly influence the structure and processes of that society, Frankfurt Schoolers believed it was only 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 economic 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. Although 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, many Frankfurt School researchers developed a profound skepticism about the possibilities for fulfilling the goals of the Enlightenment project.

## Critical Theory and the Critique of Capitalism

Given the failure of classical Marxism to predict the demise of capitalism, the Frankfurt School turned to studying how capitalism legitimated and sustained itself despite the existence of paradoxes and contradictions that Marx argued would lead to its overthrow. This new focus rejected the traditional Marxist "base-superstructure" model of society (in which the economic base, the capitalist–laborer relations of production, is portrayed 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 foundations of society on the other.

In their examination of culture and ideology, Frankfurt School researchers were particularly interested in the then-recent emergence of mass media such as radio, television, film, and popular music. Frankfurt School scholars argued that these media functioned as control mechanisms that maintained popular consent to capitalism. 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. According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1988), the development of the culture industry was one of the principal ways capitalism could both 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) stated, "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 like cars, laundry detergent, and candy; b) it is administered "from above" and imposed on people rather than being generated by them organically; and c) it creates needs in people that would not otherwise exist but which are essential for the expansion of capitalism and maintenance of the status quo. These ideas will be taken up in much more detail in Chapter 10 on branding.

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## 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 capitalism, 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. Although Adorno and Horkheimer did not argue that science and technology were bad per se, they suggested that society's focus on objectification and quantification had led to an extremely narrow conception of knowledge that is unreflective. In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno claimed that Enlightenment thought had become totalitarian, serving those in power and supplanting more radical forms of thought (Kellner, 1989, p. 89). Indeed, where the Enlightenment supposedly stands for progress and greater freedom, Horkheimer and Adorno saw a logical progression from factories to prisons to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany (keep in mind that they were 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 is *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. In contrast, 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 more complex 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.

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As later scholars show, there is no single culture industry, nor is there only 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 progressive meanings and interpretations compete for dominance. This is even more true in today's social media environment, where anyone with a smartphone can participate in the creation of media products; people are no longer simply passive consumers of carefully marketed media messages.

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. In Chapter 10, for example, we will examine the emergence of corporate branding over the last 30 years and explore how strategically companies use branding to shape people's experience of themselves and the world. In this sense, although the Frankfurt School certainly overestimates 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 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, 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.

The cultural studies tradition began in the United Kingdom in the late 1950s (Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1958) and is most famously associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the UK, established in 1964. 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 this opposition is not only elitist but also limits how everyday culture could be conceptualized. Thus, over the past several decades cultural studies researchers have taken everyday culture as a serious object of study, examining its many complexities. Indeed, Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies, defines culture simply as "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined" (Hall, 2016, p. 16). Researchers have studied people's engagement with cultural phenomena including soap operas (Gledhill, 1997), teenage girls' magazines (McRobbie, 2000), shopping malls (Fiske, 1989), and many others as ways to try and understand how people live, interpret, and define their experience.

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In studying everyday experience, then, cultural studies researchers explore the systems of shared meanings that connect members of a particular group or community. Such shared meanings are developed through "systems of representation" (Hall, 1997a, b) that enable communities to make sense of the world in particular ways. Systems of representation involve, most obviously, language (spoken and written) but also include clothing, music, nonverbal behaviors, space (architects construct buildings to convey particular meanings), and so forth.

Because of their tendency to focus on often marginalized subcultures, many cultural studies researchers have examined how such subcultures make sense of their marginality through resistant and oppositional representational practices. For example, Dick Hebdige's (1979) well-known study of 1960s and 1970s U.K youth subcultures (groups he called mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks) focused on the importance of dress as a system of representation that distinguished these groups from both each other and from the mainstream culture. Another cultural studies researcher, Paul Willis (1977) studied a subculture of working-class kids ("the lads") at a UK high school who developed their own jargon and ways of behaving (fighting, stealing, "having a laff") as a way of resisting the middle-class culture of the school. More recently, Angela McRobbie (2016) has studied the way workers in the "new culture industries" (jobs in media design, advertising, public relations, etc.) use the idea of creativity as a way of making sense of and coming to terms with the insecurity of their employment. Defining themselves as "creative" enables the workers to make sense of their string of temporary "gig" work positions as a necessary sacrifice in developing their "personal brands."

In each of these studies, culture is examined both as part of everyday life and as comprising systems of representation that enable people to collectively make meaning. People appropriate signs and symbols in ways that enable them to construct a secure sense of identity in contexts that are not always secure: Hebdige's and Willis's subcultures exist on the margins of society, and McRobbie's workers try to construct stable work identities in an economy where work is precarious. In each case (and in the cultural studies tradition generally) the focus is typically on how people make sense of and negotiate life—both individually and collectively—in the context of systems of power and resistance. From a cultural studies perspective, this involves a focus on ideology and processes of *ideological struggle*. Although Marx argued, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," cultural studies researchers have focused more on how such "ruling ideas" play out in everyday life as people conform to, accommodate, resist, and challenge them. The notion that the "ruling class" (whatever that might mean) simply imposes its ideology on an unwitting, oppressed population is thus rejected by cultural studies researchers as they unpack how social groups make meaning in the face of dominant ideologies. For example, Hebdige's and Willis's groups have clearly rejected the dominant 1970s ideology (of middle-class jobs and conspicuous consumption) and created their identities in explicit opposition to it, whereas McRobbie's workers have tried to make sense of and accommodate the dominant 21st-century ideology of "neoliberalism" and "enterprise selves" (that we will discuss in Chapter 7). Thus, whereas the Frankfurt School paid little attention to the possibilities for culture as a site of struggle, cultural studies has taken this possibility up in a systematic way.

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## CRITICAL RESEARCH 2.1

**Collinson, D. (1988). "Engineering humor': Masculinity, joking and conflict in shop-floor relations." Organization Studies, 9, 181–199.**

Critical management scholar David Collinson's study is an excellent example of how adopting a critical lens moves us beyond commonsense understandings of organizational communication processes. The essay took us inside "Slavs"—a truck manufacturing plant in the industrial north of the UK. The plant is characterized by a hostile and divided workplace where the workers express a deep distrust of management. The shop-floor workers are a good example of what Marx called "alienated labor"; they feel little connection to the work they do and see themselves as having no voice in the factory. Collinson's study explored how the workers have developed an informal shop-floor culture in which (often crude) humor is a defining feature, functioning to help the workers regain a sense of agency in the factory.

Collinson's analysis showed that the workers employ humor in three ways: 1) as resistance, 2) as conformity, and 3) as control. First, humor is used to resist both workplace alienation and boredom and to resist management efforts to impose a new corporate culture. Much of the workers' humor is directed at management, making fun of them for not doing "real work" (i.e., hard, physical labor). Second, humor is used to create a culture of conformity on the shop floor. To be accepted, all workers must participate in the informal culture of pranks and "piss-taking" (i.e., making fun of other workers); otherwise, they are viewed as not "real men." Finally, humor is used as control to make sure that all the workers pull their weight equally (the group incentive pay system means that one slacker can affect everyone's pay). Workers are made fun of mercilessly if they are viewed as lazy.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever worked in an organization where humor was a feature of work? How was it used?
2. Have you ever felt exploited in a job you held? What was the source of that feeling? Did you try and do anything about it?
3. Have you ever felt alienated from a job you have had? What was it about the work that left you feeling alienated? What about the job would have needed to change for you to feel more connected to the work?

### Critiquing Cultural Studies

In many respects, the cultural studies tradition is compatible with our own critical approach to organizational communication. Its focus on everyday processes of sense making and identity management in the context of relations of power and resistance fits well with how we think about work and organizational communication. Work and organizations are sites of meaning and identity production (Deetz, 1992); people spend much of their lives thinking about, engaging in, and constructing personal identities in relation to work.

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Ironically, however, the cultural studies tradition has tended to ignore work and organizations as important sites of "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined." Like the Frankfurt School, their research has tended to study people and their experiences when they are not at work, analyzing popular culture and mass media, and with some exceptions (e.g., McRobbie, 2016), they have overlooked work as a significant site for the communicative construction of meaning, identity, and ideological struggle.

Thus, whereas strictly speaking we would not define ourselves as cultural studies researchers, we have great affinity with that work and want to bring much of its insights to the study of work and organizational communication.

The final perspective that we will address in this chapter is postcolonial studies. This perspective has much in common with (and, indeed, overlaps with) cultural studies but challenges the Western assumptions upon which most organizational communication research is based.

## CRITICAL CASE STUDY 2.1: MAKING SENSE OF TRAFFIC LIGHTS

Drawing on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1960) and French philosopher Roland Barthes (1972), cultural studies researchers have shown that the elements or signs that make up 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 work only 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.

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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 to be understood and share meaning. In this sense, systems of representation create the possibility for culture and society and—in a real and concrete sense—create who we are as people (i.e., they create our identities).

Cultural studies researchers have taken up these basic principles in studying the systems of representation that constitute culture and society. However, as their work illustrates, most systems are much more complex than the traffic light example. 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. Stuart Hall (1985), for an example, showed how "black" as a signifier of race meant different things in his native Jamaica compared with his adopted nation of Britain, and he had to learn a whole new system of racial representation when he moved there in the 1950s (when Britain was still racially homogeneous and experiencing the arrival of its first group of immigrants from the West Indies). Thus, we are not passive receivers of representational processes; instead, we must interpret and make sense of them actively. Indeed, signs are not meaningful until they occur in a specific cultural context and have been interpreted in some fashion.

## Discussion Questions:

1. Beyond traffic lights, what other systems of representation can you think of? What elements of difference do they rely on to generate meaning?
2. In our society, what are the "differences that make a difference?" In other words, what differences "count" and are ascribed meaning in ways that affect our lives?
3. What systems of representation and forms of difference are important in work and organizational contexts?

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Capitalism needs to expand continually into new markets to survive.

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## Postcolonial Studies

The term *postcolonial* literally means "after colonialism." **Postcolonial studies** refer to efforts to understand the impact of the colonial period (lasting roughly from 1500 to the middle of the 20th century) on contemporary culture, politics, and economics. Although the period of geographic colonialism and imperialism by countries like Great Britain, the United States, Spain, and France may be over (most countries that were colonies of the major world powers are now independent, sovereign nations), many scholars have argued that we need to better understand the many legacies of colonialism in society today, particularly the effects of contemporary capitalism on the Global South and its citizens.

Postcolonial studies emerged in fields in the United States and the UK in the 1980s, but only in the last 20 years has it begun to influence the field of communication (Shome & Hegde, 2002) and the study of work and organizational communication (Broadfoot et al., 2008; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, 2014; Cruz, 2015; Cruz & Sodeke, 2021; Dutta & Pal, 2020; Munshi et al., 2017; Pal, 2016). In the field of organizational communication specifically, postcolonial scholars have sought to "resist mainstream narratives of organizing and communicating" (Munshi et al., 2017, p. 1). What does this mean?

First, postcolonial scholarship has expanded the scope of what the field of organizational communication has typically studied. Although historically the field has focused on work and organizations in Western (mostly U.S.) contexts, postcolonial researchers have examined work and organizing in the Global South (a term that refers to geopolitical regions outside North America and Europe). Such research ranges from the study of workers in the Global South employed by Western companies, such as call center workers (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013), to alternative forms of organizing that don't fit the Western model (Cruz, 2014, 2015), to studies of anti-colonial movements that resist globalization processes (Ganesh et al., 2005; Pal, 2016). In this sense, postcolonial studies have provided an important widening of the rather narrow focus of U.S.-based research on work in professional Western contexts.

This expansion of the scope of organizational communication research includes a focus on the broader political and economic context of work and organizing. In particular, postcolonial researchers examine work and organizing as shaped by both the history of colonialism and ongoing capitalist globalization processes. As Western companies have outsourced many organizational functions to the Global South (e.g., manufacturing and customer services), researchers have studied how local workers have both adapted to and challenged the effects of globalization. For example, organizational communication scholar Mahuya Pal's (2016) study of farmers in the Singur region of India explored how the farmers organized to resist their forced removal from agricultural land where a car manufacturing plant was to be built. Pal's focus was not on what we would typically think of as an organization but rather on how the farmers organized resistance to corporate and government practices that deprived them of their livelihoods. Two things are important about Pal's study. First, she addressed the larger political and economic issues that have led to the farmers' deprivation (an economically depressed region selling land to a multinational corporation and depriving 12,000 farmers of their land, with compensation to the landowners being a fraction of the value of the land to their livelihoods). Second, she conducted the study from the perspective of the "subaltern," that is, those whose

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voices are typically not heard because they have little power and are often "stripped of their history, erased from mainstream society, and absent from structures of knowledge production" (2016, p. 422). In this case, the farmers are very much subaltern in terms of their lack of voice and exclusion from the decision-making process that took their land away. Pal explored how the farmers' resistance efforts focus on self-organizing with decentralized decision-making and little hierarchy.

Second, postcolonial studies have challenged what counts as knowledge about work and organizations. As we have seen, although the Frankfurt School questioned the direction in which the Enlightenment was headed (and, importantly, wanted to change its direction), postcolonial studies question the dominance of Western thought, arguing that alternatives to Western forms of knowledge have been marginalized. Postcolonial researchers have argued that colonial people have been defined by their Western colonizers, and thus one objective of postcolonial studies is to correct this narrow view of colonial people and provide different ways of knowing. In this sense, postcolonial studies is about *de*colonization, not only geographically but culturally, politically, and epistemologically (i.e., what counts as knowledge). For example, Joëlle Cruz and Chigozirim Sodeke's (2021) study of street traders in Nigeria and Liberia highlighted how their own traditional understanding of organization (relatively stable, fixed in location, clear boundaries, etc.) could not account for the mobility of the street traders' organizing process, working as they did in an "informal economy" that was not recognized as legitimate by the city government. Thus, Cruz and Sodeke had to develop a new conceptual vocabulary ("fluidity," "mobility," "permeability") that better captured organizing at the margins of society, thus broadening the analytic tools available for the study of work and organizations.

Third, postcolonial research has focused greater attention on issues of difference and "otherness" in the field of organizational communication. Although colonialism has tended to define non-Western people as "the other" (i.e., less civilized, dependent, in need of aid, etc.), decolonization involves, as organizational communication scholars Kristen Broadfoot and Debashish Munshi (2014) put it, "The force by which people claim their own future" (p. 160). In this sense, the postcolonial approach involves three elements: 1) drawing attention to difference (race, ethnicity, class, etc.); 2) showing how such differences are key elements in the communicative construction of inequitable structures of power; and 3) exploring ways to reclaim identities in ways that are not defined by existing structures of power. For example, the recent #communicationsowhite movement (Ng et al., 2020) has drawn attention to the field of communication's historic whiteness and its marginalization of researchers of color. Postcolonial and queer scholars in organizational communication issued a "manifestx" calling for the field to "#ToneUP" (in response to a senior scholar publicly telling one of its members to "tone down" her language in a paper about White supremacy in the field) and have forcefully argued for the upending of the field's institutionalized power structures and norms for what counts as excellent or "groundbreaking" research (#ToneUpOrgCommCollective, 2020).

In sum, the goal of postcolonial studies is decolonization, involving "transformative struggles that grow out of dominant organizational spaces—political, economic, cultural and, indeed, epistemological" (Pal et al., 2022, p. 548). It situates its critiques in broad historical, political, and economic contexts and provides an important alternative to mainstream views of organizational life. We will take up some of its concerns in later chapters.

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Table 2.1 provides a comparison of the four perspectives we have discussed in this chapter.

**TABLE 2.1 ■ Comparing Marx, the Frankfurt School, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonial Studies**

| Issue | Marx | Frankfurt School | Cultural Studies | Postcolonial Studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| View of capitalism | • System of exploitation through wage labor<br>• Mode of production that will fail, to be replaced by socialism<br>• Exchange value privileged over use value | • Economic, political, and cultural system of exploitation<br>• Highly adaptable to change<br>• Creates narrow, instrumental view of knowledge that serves status quo | • Close relation between economics and systems of representation<br>• Capitalism neither inevitable nor bound to fail; contested through alternative meanings and subcultures | • Exploitation of non-Western people and lands<br>• Globalization at heart of capital accumulation<br>• Race and capitalism are intertwined |
| Conception of culture | • Determined by economic system<br>• Ideology works to create dominant meanings/ideas that serve ruling class (capitalists) | • Popular culture administered from above through culture industry<br>• Only high culture has meaning and can resist capitalism | • High/low culture distinction rejected<br>• Culture produced through everyday life and creative activity of knowing actors | • Culture has been shaped by colonialism and must be decolonized<br>• Decolonized culture enables reclaiming of identity |
| Role of ideology | • Maintains status quo: "Ideas of ruling class are ruling ideas" | • Works through culture industry to maintain status quo | • Place where meanings are contested; change can occur | • Critique ideology of colonization and globalization<br>• Develop alternative ideologies rooted in indigenous knowledge |

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| Issue | Marx | Frankfurt School | Cultural Studies | Postcolonial Studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Possibilities for resistance and/or social change | • Inevitable because of contradictions in capitalism<br>• Workers will unite and overthrow capitalism, creating socialist system | • Unlikely because of capitalist culture industry and its ideology administered from above<br>• Proletariat reduced to cultural "dupes" | • Resistance occurs at everyday level in subcultures<br>• Capitalism not overthrown but reformed through incremental change | • Resistance "from below" to create possibilities for decolonization<br>• Connect local resistance to global change efforts<br>• Create solidarity across decolonizing movements |

## UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The four perspectives addressed in this chapter provide the framework for the critical examination of organizational communication that we undertake in this book, and it's important that you think of them not as separate and opposing perspectives but as overlapping and complementary. For example, the Frankfurt School kept many of the premises of Marx's thought but developed and extended his concept of ideology into analyses of mass media and their effects on people's consciousness. Similarly, cultural studies kept the Frankfurt School's focus on ideology but developed the idea that popular culture could develop resistance to mainstream ideology. Finally, postcolonial studies shares much in common with cultural studies but focuses on power and resistance in efforts to reclaim the voices of subaltern groups under global capitalism. What remains for us in this chapter is to address how these four perspectives enable us to think about organizational communication. There are four points of focus, which we unpack briefly as follows.

### Organizations Are Created Through Communication Processes

Communication is not something that happens "in" organizations; rather, as we discussed in Chapter 1 and will address in more detail in Chapter 5, organizations come into being through communication processes (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Kuhn et al., 2017; Putnam, 1983). The critical perspective explores how *organization members are active participants in the communicative construction of organizational life*. Cultural studies and postcolonial studies are particularly helpful in highlighting this process, focusing on the ways that people collectively create systems of meaning, often exploring how marginalized social actors construct

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their own alternative subcultures. Willis's (1977) study of "the lads" and Cruz and Sodeke's (2021) exploration of the "liquid organizing" of street traders in Liberia and Nigeria are good examples of this. Although they are quite different studies, each pointed to how people make meaning through communication and organizing, often negotiating the boundaries of traditional forms of organization. However, this meaning making does not take place under conditions of communication equality; that is, not all people or groups have access to the same communication resources in the meaning-making process, so frequently there is struggle among different stakeholder groups over which meanings count. This brings us to the second point of focus.

## Organizations Are Sites of Power

Not only are organizations communicatively constructed, but 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 actors and stakeholder groups (employees, managers, owners, community members, etc.). Thus, the critical approach views power as the dynamic process by which stakeholders struggle to secure and maintain their interests and meanings in particular contexts. In different but overlapping ways, each perspective attempts to explore this struggle for meaning within structures of power and control. Marx was concerned with how the struggle between workers and capitalists played out in the workplace; the Frankfurt School focused on how capitalism maintained its legitimacy through the creation of mass culture administered from above; cultural studies has explored the role of organically created popular culture in creating spheres of meaning and identity that reject the culture industry; and postcolonial studies has examined how people organize when they live life on the margins with little power of their own.

This 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 shaping of reality is always a contested process and that the hegemony of a particular group (i.e., the group in power) depends on its ability to develop ideas that are actively taken up and pursued by members of other groups, even if those ideas are not in the interests of those taking them up. For example, the idea that work should be our passion, taking precedence over everything else, serves the interests of the organizations that employ us but may not be in our best interests in terms of work–life balance, physical and mental health, and so forth. As we explore work and organization in this book, we will examine how power and communication processes interrelate, shaping the way people engage with work, organizations, and each other.

## Organizations Are Key Sites of Identity and Difference in Modern Society

Organizations are not only places where people work but, more fundamentally, function as important sites for the creation of personal identity (Brown, 2015; Larson & Gill, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018; Werth & Brownlow, 2017). Organizational communication scholar Stan Deetz argued 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

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role. In this sense, we are all subject to processes of **corporate colonization** (Deetz, 1992)—a concept that reflects the extent to which corporate ideologies and discourses pervade our lives.

Organizations are also sites of difference (Allen, 2017; Parker, 2014). Indeed, identity and difference are closely connected. As the critical case study, "Making Sense of Traffic Lights," suggested, meaning is dependent on the "differences that make a difference" in society. As key sites of meaning creation in contemporary society, organizations are important places where the differences that make a difference play out. Key forms of difference in work and organizations include, but are not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and age. It's important to think of these forms of difference not as fixed in their meaning but as contingent on context and history and as intersecting in multiple ways. We will address this issue in detail in Chapter 9.

### Organizations Are Important Sites of Collective Decision-Making and Democracy

These three features of the modern organization situate it as a central institution of contemporary society. The workplace is not only an important context in which people's identities are constructed but also represents one of the principal realms where decisions that affect our daily lives get made. Large corporations are, in many respects, more powerful than governments. They can dictate news agendas (Fox, CNN, MSNBC, etc.), shape our tastes (most of us prefer certain brands over others), and heavily influence state and federal legislation (e.g., by lobbying for or against particular laws).

Moreover, organizations vary hugely in the degree to which employees have a say in how business is conducted. Twentieth-century organizations were notorious for their hierarchical, centralized decision-making by a small elite (something we will talk about in Chapter 3), whereas 21st-century organizations tend to be less hierarchical, more flexible, and involve more participative decision-making (a topic we will take up in Chapter 7). Organizations, then, are key institutions that shape how we think, act, and view the world. However, this influence works both ways; people can profoundly shape organizational behavior. For example, the environmental movement has pushed organizations to be more environmentally and socially responsible, the feminist movement has changed the hiring practices of organizations, and the union movement has historically improved the working conditions of people.

## 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 three later critical traditions—the Institute for Social Research (better known as the Frankfurt School), the cultural studies tradition, and postcolonial studies.

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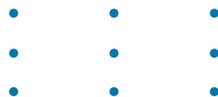
All three of these schools of thought shifted their attention to the cultural and ideological features of capitalism. Whereas the Frankfurt School adopted a rather elitist perspective, clearly distinguishing between high and mass culture (the culture industry), the cultural studies school focused more on the radical potential of popular culture and its possibilities for resisting the dominant values of commodity capitalism. Finally, postcolonial studies has critiqued Western-centric forms of knowledge and focused on the global nature of capitalism and its impact on subaltern groups. 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 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 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 aspects of popular culture (music, fashion, etc.)? Would you say your relationship to popular culture is better described by the Frankfurt School perspective or the cultural studies perspective? Why?
2. Develop as complete a list as possible of the 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? What are the differences that make a difference in your organizational memberships?
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

alienation
capitalism
corporate colonization
critical theory
critical communication capacities
cultural studies
culture industry
dialectical theory
economic determinism
Frankfurt School
hegemony
historical materialism
ideology
Marx
postcolonial studies
semiology/semiotics
surplus value

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