To the many students with whom I've worked. Your questions and concerns have given form to words that follow.

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IMAGES OF DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL
A Sociological History

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CHAPTER 10

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES:

Toward a Power-Reflexive Deconstruction of Deviance and Difference

So you can see I have powers. I recommend these powers because they impart control. But they can also drive you insane. It is imperative to remember that... power lies in the words, the symbols, and not in the self... I get into lots of trouble... for my frequent assertion that the boundary between the legal and the illegitimate is just a metaphysical scripting of negotiated power.

Patricia J. Williams

Without critical thought we are bound to the only form of social life we know—that which currently exists. We are unable to choose a better life; our only activity is in further support of the system in which we are enslaved.

Richard Quinney

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I received a phone call from a reporter for Time. The reporter, a white male journalist with a cover story on his mind, was involved in researching the so-called War on Drugs. He wanted my opinion. He was particularly concerned with crack cocaine. Viewing me as an expert on "deviant behavior," he asked whether I favored stricter punishments or thought that treatment was the answer.

These were the only options the reporter wanted me to comment upon. Instead, as a sociologist concerned with the ways that power shapes both our desires and our moral perceptions, I tried to offer the journalist an alternative perspective. I suggested that an exclusive focus on either punishment or rehabilitation ignores the more complex and contradictory context of contemporary drug use. I was speaking about the mass marketing of both legal and illegal drugs as a solution to the widespread experience of powerlessness, social alienation, and personal anxiety.
The reporter expressed uncertainty about what I was saying: "Does that mean you favor treatment?" Treatment programs, I explained, attempt to help people to break the hold of various psychic and chemical addictions. This is important. This is also why it is disturbing to see treatment programs vastly underfunded in comparison with programs aimed at arresting and imprisoning persons involved with illegal drugs. Still, by themselves, neither programs of treatment nor stricter punishment are likely to alter the historical and social structural conditions that today make illegal drug use so appealing.

"What do you mean by historical and structural conditions?" asked the reporter. I was thinking about sociological concerns that lie at the core of critical perspectives on deviance and social control. I explained that if our society really wanted to reduce the abuse of illegal drugs then we would have to shift our focus from the sale and consumption of "controlled substances" to what makes the highs offered by such drugs so appealing. This is particularly important when considering the attraction of drugs, such as crack cocaine, to people living in blighted inner-city neighborhoods. For people trying to survive the oppressive constraints of relative economic powerlessness, racism, and sexualized terror, cocaine-induced feelings of self-control and bodily pleasure may provide short-term relief from the pains of everyday life. From one crack-induced high to another the agony of powerlessness may momentarily be abated.

*Feel the power! Take the power! Let the power take you!* Messages such as these blast away at the poor, the racially oppressed, and the sexually terrorized, who are denied access to legitimate structures of power. The feeling of power promised by illegal drugs may operate as a seductive lure to the relatively powerless. Moreover, in areas scarred by unemployment, and particularly where rates of unemployment for young black and Latino males may reach upward of 50 percent, it is no accident that the financial incentives offered by the marketing of crack are today at a premium. These are historical and structural conditions. Such conditions have everything to do with the everyday social realities of drug use.

Historical and structural conditions also have everything to do with social power and the ways that power affects our perceptions of the most appropriate ways to act. Nevertheless, the practical importance of such conditions is routinely ignored by officials who are charged with finding solutions to "the drug problem" in terms of either treatment or punishment. Thus, efforts aimed at reducing the social and personal costs of illegal drug use are doomed to failure. The reason is simple. Such problems are never purely individualistic. They are also problems of social justice—problems concerning how various psychic and material resources are made both scarce and legitimately more available to some groups than to others.

By aiming to change individuals without also changing the ways in which relations of power give form to individuals' experience, isolated strategies of treatment or punishment may perpetuate rather than reduce the problems they hope to solve. On the other hand, to incorporate questions concerning power and social justice into efforts aimed at reducing the problems of drug abuse (or, for that matter, any other form of social deviance) is to widen the scope for both studying and responding to nonconformity. This, I suggested to the reporter, is what I had in mind when referring to historical and structural conditions. To deal seriously with questions about historical power and structures of social inequality is to also widen society's political approach to deviance. It is not enough to demand that deviants change. It is also necessary to radically transform the ritual organization of power in society as a whole.

Much of what I was saying still seemed rather abstract to the *Time* journalist. To be more concrete, I pointed to well-documented (if under-publicized) evidence of the U.S. government's own complicity in the marketing of illegal cocaine. Indeed, following a congressional ban on funding to support the Contras in Nicaragua during the 1980s, secret agents within the U.S. government had cut deals with various South American cocaine cartels, guaranteeing the safe passage of illegal drugs into the U.S. in exchange for money and guns to arm "our" Contra allies. The Contras, although they were called "freedom fighters" by the Reagan and Bush administrations, were, in actuality, U.S.-paid terrorists. Their mission was to undermine the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, following that country's 1979 overthrow of the brutal U.S.-backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza. U.S. actions on behalf of the Contras—including the mining of Nicaragua's harbors by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—had been declared illegal by the World Court in Geneva. In response to mounting criticism, both by the international community and by U.S. citizens, Congress voted to cut off Contra funding. Nevertheless, bent on bringing Nicaragua back in line with U.S. economic interests, the Reagan and Bush administrations continued to support the Contras through illegal means.

One of the means chosen was the international drug trade—a major source of economic survival for impoverished South American countries, such as Peru and Colombia, and a secret avenue by which the United States could continue to fund its campaign of terror against Nicaragua. The details of such high-level "government deviance" are recounted in such important studies as Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall's *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies and the C.I.A. in Central America.* The implications for the social control of drugs are enormous. In order to covertly advance its own illegal campaigns against resistive third world countries, the United States made alliances with criminals it labeled "narco-terrorists." This helped to increase the supply and lower the price of cocaine being imported into the United States.

This, I explained to the journalist from *Time,* is another way of making structural connections between individual drug use and the organization of power in society as a whole. At this point, I was speaking of historical connections between the structure of poverty in the third world (where illegal cocaine is produced) and impoverishment in the United States (on the part of the people who are most caught up in the marketing and consumption of
cocaine). I asked the reporter whether any of this made sense. I wondered if he now understood why I felt it unwise to discuss issues pertaining to punishment or treatment without linking these to wider questions of power. An uncomfortable silence haunted the telephone wires that connected us.

After a time the journalist responded with yet another question. "This is all very interesting, Professor, but do you think there's anyone else in this country who shares your particular viewpoint? I mean, I've been talking to a lot of experts, but what you're saying seems quite different. Is there somebody else you could refer me to who might offer a related perspective?"

I gave the reporter the names of a few books and articles he might read. But not a word of our nearly forty-five-minute conversation made it into the special issue of his magazine. There was a lot about punishment and quite a bit about treatment, but virtually nothing connecting desires for drugs to contradictory historical structures of power. It was as if all we had talked about had disappeared into the transnational airwaves of power itself. And maybe it had?

I wonder if my words will affect you any differently. Perhaps, if you've journeyed with me this far in this text, you might make something more of my words than the reporter did. This is a hope offered by critical theoretical perspectives on deviance and control—a hope that together we may begin to make theoretical sense of the troubling and contradictory social conditions in which we find ourselves historically positioned in relation to others—and that out of such reflexive sense-making we may move toward the construction of more just and more generous forms of both power and knowledge.

**THEORETICAL IMAGES**

Critical perspectives on deviance and social control are rooted in both theoretical and practical concerns. Theoretically, critical perspectives attempt to make sense of the relationship between human struggles for power in history and the ritual construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of normative social boundaries. Practically, people who engage in critical theorizing ally themselves with people who are committed to the uprooting of hierarchical social forms and the realization of social justice. This combination of theoretical and practical concerns leads critical theorists to examine the material and symbolic relationships between power, social control, and actions which resist control. How might we best imagine the relationship between particular forms of power and the historical organization of both social control and resistance? How do powerful rituals of control affect the human rights, dignity, and material well-being of all people? In what ways do control rituals favor the economic, sex or gender, and/or racialized interests of some people to the exclusion of others? Such questions guide the sociological imaginations of critical theorists.

I am referring to critical perspectives in the plural. This is no accident. Critical perspectives are unlike other perspectives examined in this text in that there is no one definitive version of critical theorizing. This is true not only because critical theory is today still emerging as a major conceptual framework. Critical thinking about the relationship between social hierarchies and historically specific forms of knowledge has long haunted the most influential theories about deviance, theories whose more comfortable relations to power have earned them considerable prestige and privilege. Nor is it true simply because no one version of critical theory is capable of addressing the multiple and contradictory faces of hierarchical power. The lack of a single standard for critical theory is no loss for people who recognize that social justice is better realized by a reciprocal convergence of different social standpoints than by the unilateral imposition of one conceptual framework to the exclusion of others. By emphasizing the multiplicity of critical perspectives I mean also to underscore the awareness, on the part of critical theorists, that even our own theoretical frameworks must be understood as but partial elements of the contradictory scenes of power in which we too are struggling in history.

Critical perspectives continue to conduct a passionate dialogue with the multiple social worlds that we, as theorists, embody. Critical thought acknowledges itself as socially situated thought; its own form and content are forever partial, provisional, and reflexively open to ongoing historical modifications. Thus, while critical theorists may seek to rigorously conceptualize and relentlessly challenge the multiple faces of hierarchical power, they nevertheless approach the study of deviance and social control with the recognition that there is never one absolutely correct theoretical or political framework by which to regulate critical thought and practice. To act upon this awareness is no easy task. It demands reflexive self-critique, as well as a commitment to complex historical, cultural, and experiential sociological analysis.

The general concerns of critical theorizing should, by now, be relatively familiar to many of you as readers. They have guided much of what I have written in this text. In Chapter 1 the story of deviance and social control was pictured as a story of battle, a story of struggles to define what is socially viewed as "normal." In each subsequent chapter I have attempted to raise questions about the diverse ways in which theoretical images of deviance arise out of and feed upon the social organization of power at different points in history. In this chapter I will try to make the theoretical basis of these concerns more explicit.

**Power and Knowledge Hierarchies and the Ritual Control of Deviance**

Critical theories about deviance and social control arise from multiple historical roots. In this chapter I ask you to consider the particular importance of Marxist, anarchist, feminist, and radical multicultural standpoints in the construction of critical theory and practice. Each of these perspectives labors to both interpret and change the social dynamics of hierarchical power. Each
also recognizes that power and knowledge (about the role of power in shaping deviance and social control) are mutually constitutive—that neither exists nor can exist independently of its relations to the other.

For Marxist scholars this means that it is impossible to imagine either power or knowledge separately from the way that each is mediated by the contradictory social relations through which we human animals secure the material and imaginary conditions of our economic survival. For anarchists, feminists, and multicultural critics, the material and imaginary character of such mediations is even more complex. Anarchists weave critical theoretical stories about how rituals of authority transform the situated character of historically constructed hierarchies into seemingly “natural” or “timeless” factual realities. Feminist and multicultural critics underscore the sexually differentiated and racially coded violence embodied within ritual pretensions to a universalistic viewpoint.

Each of these critical standpoints also directs attention to the way in which hegemonic ritual interaction constructs both historically material and symbolic relations between power and knowledge. Power, knowledge, historical materiality, symbolic social controls, and hegemonic ritual interactions: it is at the crossroads of these five concepts that critical perspectives typically stake their theoretical challenge. Before examining the historical context and multiple contributions of Marxism, anarchism, feminism, and radical multicultural perspectives to the development of critical thought, I will first present an overview of each of these critical theoretical concepts.

**Power: The Transformative Character of Social Control**

The word power is derived from the Latin verb *potere*, meaning “to be able.” Power is the ability to make things happen. A dynamic characteristic of all productive human animal relations, power affects both people and what happens between people. Power gives our imaginary and material relations to others their social forms. Power both enables and constrains us. It permits us to recognize and act toward each other in socially patterned ways. As Michel Foucault points out, this is what makes power a transformative social force. Power sets into place and continually replaces the fields of force in which we find ourselves embodied with and/or against others. Though power is an omnipresent feature of social life, it is, nevertheless, structured differently in different times and places in history. Thus, while it is possible (and perhaps even critically necessary) to imagine relatively equal or reciprocal forms of power, such forms are far from the reality of the economically exploitative, authoritarian, racist, and heterosexist hierarchies in which most of us currently live.

Power affects the way we are attracted to certain forms of relations while being repulsed by others. Power opens the door for some types of social experiences while prohibiting or imprisoning others. As such, power is a contradictory (and often unequal) feature of all orderly social forms. Power is the aspect of our ritual relations to others that is capable of transforming fluid and open-ended possibilities into something we may perceive as solid, fixed, or objective. Power works through, upon, and between our bodies, ceaselessly constructing and reconstructing the boundaries and limits of what we experience as real. To experience power is to recognize the diverse ways in which our actions control (and are controlled by) our relations to others. In this way, the experience of power is a fundamental human experience. According to psychologist Rollo May, “Being” itself is to experience “Being” as unique. It is to experience a basic feature of our human-animal nature—the ability to create or procreate, the ability to exercise one’s being in relation to others.

In his book *Power and Innocence*, May examines what happens when something blocks the experience of power, when the ritual structure of human relations suppresses our “power to be.” When this occurs we tend to search for alternative means by which to affirm, assert, or even aggressively realize the experience of power. Sometimes even these alternative avenues of power are denied us. When this is the case we may resort to violence. Violence is thus a power-play, a final and dramatic gesture through which we assert control over a world which appears to escape our grasp.

May’s perspective on the relationship between power, powerlessness, and violence helps us to understand the social meaning of violence in a world in which power is unevenly distributed. People who are ritually positioned so as to exercise unequal power may use violence or threats of violence to defend their own abilities to transform the world. Thus, powerful governments, organizations, and individuals may deploy violence against others who resist their efforts to construct particular versions of social reality. This is evident in such violent defenses of hierarchy as recent U.S. foreign policy aimed at countering movements for social justice in Central America and the Caribbean, the suppression of democratic resistance in Communist China, and the denial of basic civil liberties to Palestinians living in Israeli-occupied territories. The state-supported oppression of Irish citizens living under British military rule and the long-term domination of black South Africans by the white racist institutions of apartheid are other examples of the use of violence to defend established hierarchies.

By using violence, the people most privileged by power attempt to defend themselves against threats to their own hierarchical controls. In societies characterized by heterosexist, economic, and racist hierarchies, the presence or threat of violence may form a backdrop for even the most mundane relations between men and women, between straight people and “queers,” between the rich and the impoverished, and between peoples divided by the cultural privileging of certain shades of skin color over others. Although the violence of hierarchical power is most dramatic when it is physical and overt, as in men’s violence against women or in white police violence against racial minorities, it may also take forms in which it is subtler and easier to deny. Think, for instance, of the psychic violence felt daily by women subjected to the unwanted catcalls of men. Consider also the implicit violence in pictures
of female bodies pinned up for male pornographic pleasure and in the presence of ritualized sexual harassment at school and at work.

Related forms of psychic violence may be felt by gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, whose "queer" erotic preferences are daily greeted by brutal forms of discrimination on the part of defensive straight people. And what about the psychic violence experienced by people who must bear the stigma of AIDS, poverty, or homelessness? Or that felt by American Indians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos? These peoples have been ritually bombarded during more than 500 years of North American history, which speaks of freedom while ignoring both the lack of freedom and the cultural accomplishments of Americans who are not white. Strengthened by a variety of feminist, "queer," multicultural, and class-based movements for social justice, critical theorists of deviance and social control have become deeply concerned about the psychically and even bodily sickening consequences of these subtle forms of hierarchical violence.

May's conception of the relationship between power and violence is applicable also to violence by the relatively powerless. Consider people who find few experiences of power in the public world of social, economic, and political life. The people I have in mind may be unemployed or may work in jobs which provide very low income and even less prestige. Experiencing little control over their public destinies, such people may concentrate their search for power in the private sphere, in relation to spouses, lovers, children, or other intimate acquaintances. In so doing, they may be placing too many eggs in the same basket. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that powerlessness in the public sphere generates additional stress in private life. Crowded living spaces, inadequate health care, and limited provisions for recreation or other sources of tension release may narrow publicly impoverished persons' options for private power. Small interpersonal tensions or relatively minor disagreements can quickly escalate into big challenges to such persons' sense of power. This is a structural liability when the search for power is concentrated in the sphere of private, interpersonal relationships. These relationships become overburdened with power. The result may be higher rates of interpersonal and family violence.

So far, I have been discussing May's ideas about power in relation to violence. May suggests that where we find the smoke of violence we are also likely to find the fire of a power struggle. But what about the more general categories of deviance and social control? Are these related to power in a similar way? Such is certainly the case with social control. After all, what is social control but the ability to make things happen in some ways but not others? Social control is always an exercise of power. Does this mean that social control is always an exercise of power by some people over others—-a hierarchical exercise of power such that some have more at the expense of those who have less? If this be the case, then deviance is always a power struggle too, an effort to reassert or regain power in relation to controllers who limit one's access to power in the first place.

Conceived of in this fashion, deviance appears to be a strategy of resistance, a way of asserting lost power, a mode of reestablishing the ability to make things happen, to transform things according to one's will. Social control is the opposite. It is the labor of the powerful to keep the powerless in positions of relative disadvantage. Deviance and social control are thus the twin blades of a power struggle, each like a razor slashing into the other's ability to transform the world into its own image and likeness. Moreover, just as with other power struggles, the trump card of both sides in the battle of deviance and social control is violence—the use of violent force to curtail the behavior of those who trespass upon the other's claim to power.

This is a fairly dramatic way of looking at deviance. Is social control truly to be conceived of as a struggle to deviantize people whose thoughts, feelings, or actions challenge those in positions of greater power? This is a troubling question. If Rollo May is correct that power is a basic feature of all human action, then to answer such questions we must critically examine the very core of our human social existence. In struggling with others over power, we must ask whether it is inevitable that one side must triumph while the other is branded deviant. Or is it possible to exert power without exerting restrictive control over the power of others? Is it possible, in other words, to ritually structure power such that power relations may be more reciprocal than hierarchical, such that power struggles may be resolved by reconciliation rather than by conquest, such that power may be collectively shared instead of institutionally stratified? To ask such questions is to begin to approach the study of deviance and social control from a critical perspective.

**Knowledge: The Historical Materiality of Symbolic Power**

Critical perspectives propose that, in a society stratified by hierarchical power, the social control of deviance will be governed by the interests of those most privileged by power. To classify certain behaviors as deviant is to suppress the resistance of those who threaten such privilege. This is to produce a knowledge of the world that is thoroughly mediated by power. To partake of such knowledge is to actively reproduce hierarchy. The social construction of such knowledge is as important to a critical understanding of deviance as is the social construction of power. Knowledge and power: each operates as the flip side of the other.

Knowledge, however, is no simple servant of power. Knowledge is supplementary to power. It feeds back upon power in either of two distinct ways: it either amplifies or subverts power's most dominant effects. In the first instance, knowledge may itself become a form of power. It exerts itself. It stabilizes the field of social relations secured by power. When this happens, knowledge may take on a life of its own, magnifying the effects of power by acting to symbolically control the relations out of which power arose.

Knowledge may also subvert power. By channeling the flow of relations in some directions but not in others, power surrounds itself with what it excludes. In this sense, all relations of power are haunted relations, contradic-
tory relations made uneasy by what they repress. Out of such hauntings, power may engender deviant forms of knowledge. These resist the smooth operation of power, as relations repressed by power return with a vengeance. Such subversive forms of knowledge often appear in disguise, hovering around power but in unspoken, unconscious, or intuitive ways. Think, for instance, of the ways by which women may know that they are oppressed by patriarchy, even if such knowledge is not clearly formulated or theoretically framed. Prior to putting such knowledge into words, women may simply “feel” that something is not quite right about the way that their male teachers, employers, or lovers act in their presence. Although such feelings may be dismissed by most men as “hysterical” and “deviant,” they are, nevertheless, real sources of knowledge about how power works within and upon women’s bodily relations to others.

In order for such subversive forms of knowledge to counter the reproduction of hierarchy, it is necessary that they be collectively recognized as truthful. An important contribution of feminism and other movements to social justice is the public authorization of knowledge that challenges hierarchy. Even when resistive forms of knowledge are not publicly acknowledged, they may still detour, jam up, or slow down the working of hierarchy. This happens whenever subversive knowledge assumes such subtle political shapes as sickness, emotional disturbance, tardiness, or ironic detachment.

Whether amplifying or subverting power, the relationship between knowledge and power operates at multiple experiential levels. At a cognitive level, knowledge may function to either rationalize or resist power. Think, for instance, of the ways in which traditional Christian knowledge often portrayed women as deviant “gateways” to the charms of the devil. As pointed out in Chapter 2, such cognitions served to rationalize the continuance of patriarchy. In a related way, the “hedonistic rationality” guiding the eighteenth-century cognitions of classical theorists (discussed in Chapter 3) channeled people’s perceptions of deviance in such a way that calculated choice was seen behind every act of nonconformity. This vision arose to the exclusion of others. It blinded classical theorists to the contradictory social situations in which people made real-life choices to obey or break with existing social norms. In this sense, cognitive knowledge functions as a filtering device or a logical control mechanism affecting our perceptions of deviant acts and actors.

The reverse may occur in the case of resistive cognitions. For instance, once someone begins to interpret the world through the critical standpoint of feminism, a wide range of previously taken-for-granted social experiences may assume new political meanings. For instance, when men and women share the same classroom, who talks more frequently and with what tone of voice? Who typically interrupts whom? Who uses certain metaphors or figures of speech? How, moreover, do such everyday social events connect to the reproduction or change of traditional gender hierarchies?

Moral and bodily levels of knowledge operate in a related manner. In using the term moral knowledge, I refer to the evaluative feelings and emotional tones that surround our judgments of what is right and wrong. For example, in the heterosexist society in which we currently live, many persons feel that there is something morally wrong with gay, lesbian, and bisexual conduct, even though few come up with logical reasons by which to cognitively rationalize such judgmental emotions. When questioned, some will say that they simply “know in their hearts” that homosexual behaviors are wrong. Such “heartfelt” moral or evaluative knowledge is an important form of social control. So, too, might it be a form of resistance. Another example is the disgust that many poor people feel toward even the best-meant gestures of the rich. This disgust represents a significant—if relatively undertheorized—form of knowledge about power’s most insidious effects.

Like cognitive knowledge, moral knowledge filters the world through relations of power. So do bodily forms of knowledge. By bodily knowledge I mean “truths” that manifest themselves through physical or carnal sensations. When confronted with behaviors they sense as deviant, people may experience a wide variety of physical states: agitation, rage, queasiness, or even sickened repulsion. In a racist society such as our own, persons sometimes feel physically disturbed by the sight of interracial couples, though they may find nothing cognitively or morally wrong with interracial dating. People who are acting in resistance to power also may recognize its operations in such bodily ways. Thus, an interracial couple out on a date may literally sense others’ discomfort at a physical level, even when the people who are made uncomfortable by the couple’s “deviance” offer cognitive or moral disclaimers. In this way, knowledge of power operates in bodily ways that are never exactly equal to cognitive and moral knowledge. Power and knowledge function simultaneously at all three levels when they are most controlling or most subversive.

To “know” that somebody is a deviant—regardless of whether that knowledge is cognitive, moral, or bodily—is to exercise power. This may result in the reproduction of social inequality. If the “have-nots” had to constantly use force to keep an upper hand over the “have-nots,” life would be little more than a war between opposing interests. But what if those most privileged by power manage the production of social knowledge in such a way that the relatively powerless are perceived as the cause of their own troubles? In this case, efforts aimed at controlling the resistance of disadvantaged persons might appear natural or necessary. The likelihood of an overt state of war would be reduced. This, of course, is exactly what happens when those who resist power become known as deviant. The label of deviance depoliticizes the maintenance of social hierarchy.

Stereotypical knowledge of deviance, implying as it does a class of troubled or defective persons, can both hide and advance the interests of those in positions of power. As George Jackson, the militant African-American prison
writer, stated shortly before his 1971 assassination in California’s San Quentin Prison, “The textbooks on criminology like to advance the idea that prisoners are mentally defective. There is only the merest suggestion that the system is at fault.” The U.S. society in which Jackson lived was stamped unalterably by racism and by rigid structural divisions between rich and poor. Reflecting on his own life, Jackson realized that state control of knowledge about who and what is deviant is a complex political act.

Jackson’s analysis challenges us to see knowledge about deviance as structurally related to the organization of power. This understanding is crucial to critical standpoints on deviance and social control. By reflexively politicizing all forms of knowledge, critical perspectives hope to “denaturalize” the otherwise taken-for-granted character of its valuation and protection by the forces of control. In this way, critical perspectives contribute to the deconstruction of unequal arrangements of power and knowledge, and to the reconstruction of more just and reciprocal forms of social order. But what is it that sociologically connects power and knowledge? In addressing this question, critical theorists emphasize the historical materiality and the symbolic character of hegemonic ritual interactions.

**Historical Materiality: The Economic Basis of Power and Knowledge** For critical theorists the way in which knowledge operates in conjunction with power is at once *historically material* and *symbolic*. By pointing to the historically materiality of knowledge I mean to connote the diverse ways in which our perceptions of deviance are both constrained and facilitated by our economic relations to others. Thus, the materiality of a slave’s economic vantage point will give that person access to knowledge (as unwelcome and accursed as this knowledge may be) that lies outside the historical limits of what the slave’s master might know, or even imagine knowing. As a more contemporary example, consider a complaint commonly voiced by women in discussing sexual harassment. According to many women, “Men just don’t get it.” Why? Are men less able to cognitively comprehend the deviant character of harassing behaviors? Or does men’s occupation of more privileged relations to power literally—that is, physically and materially—shape our perceptions in ways that conflict with women’s? This is a key issue for critical theorists. From the standpoint of critical theory, power and knowledge historically condition each other in the most material of ways.

**Symbolic Social Controls: The Ritual Force of Language** For critical theorists, the inseparability of power and knowledge is also rooted in the symbolic character of our human-animal natures. We humans are a particularly precarious species of animals. Like other species, we must establish a certain measure of power in relation to our environments, simply to survive. As animals, we depend on orderly forms of social interaction to enable us to meet basic demands for food, shelter, sexual recreation, and so forth. But unlike other species, we do not find the necessary technologies for such stable orderings within our own bodies. We lack innate, instinctual, or biologically imprinted technologies for survival. In other words, our bodies are not structured so as to secure stable relations with our environment by biology alone. This puts us at a deficit in comparison to most other species of animals. We must find the power to establish relatively stable relations—the power to survive economically—in technology. This technology is not outside the human body but supplementary to it. It is a social power that works through our bodies without being either biologically determined or in transcendence of the flesh.

Fortunately, our bodies carry within them the possibilities for such a supplementary technology of power. This technology we call language. By virtue of a highly developed central nervous system, our bodies permit us to create through signs, images, and gestures. Through such symbolic or linguistic practices we classify and interpret the world around us. In so doing, we exercise the power of language. This form of power operates materially in history. Rooted in our bodily capabilities, the power of language is also historically situated. As such, language is a technology which enables us to historically compensate for what we lack in the biological realm alone. Through language, we act symbolically to reduce the chaos of experiential flux to relatively stable categories of cultural meaning. This is crucial for human-animal survival. Without the symbolic power of language we would not have a stable social environment. Language is also what makes symbolic knowledge a material sociological double of power. Power and knowledge are at all times economically and symbolically interconnected. Neither is ever present without the other.

By linking power and knowledge to the general economic and symbolic conditions of our survival as a species of animals, critical theorists interpret the social world in ways that are, at once, historical and material. This is to recognize that, as sign-making human animals, we are embodied beings. In a sense, we do not actually have bodies. Rather, we live in and through bodies, bodies that are economically mediated by the languages we use to describe them. We are, as it were, spirits in a material world.

**Hegemonic Ritual Interactions: Constructing “Common Sense”** Rituals are patterned social interactions that are material in their effects and symbolic in the ways in which they connect us to a mythic sense of social life as *readymade* or already structured. By repetitively engaging in ritual, we produce the sensation that the world we experience is ordered in ways that are timeless and/or natural. This is untrue. The world we experience is artificially given to us by the material and symbolic power of ritual. By artificially engaging in ritual we produce imaginary solutions to real demands for social order. In this sense, rituals coordinate our material and symbolic relations, constructing cultural substitutes for what, in other animals, may be given by nature alone. Without the artificial or cultural power of rituals we would be at a loss for orderly ways of interacting with others. Even though powerful rituals are artificial (or
socially constructed), they are no less effective than instinct in controlling our perceptions, our evaluations, and our interactions with others. Rituals may operate with such material and symbolic force that the imaginary solutions they represent appear as if they were natural or timeless. This is an important lesson in the study of social control.

Rituals, including the rituals that guide the construction of theories about deviance, connect us to senses of what things are and should be. This is what I mean by saying that rituals lead to mythic senses of the world. The successful enactment of ritual informs us about what is real and how we should act toward what is real. Rituals are social structuring practices—interactional devices that channel people’s perceptions of the world. Rituals oppress just as they enable. They enact regimes of power just as they produce sensations of truth. Thus, when studying deviance, it is important to examine how rituals make certain things possible, while excluding others. As Peter McLaren observes:

All of us are under ritual’s sway; absolutely none of us stands outside of ritual’s symbolic jurisdiction. In fact, humanity has no other option. . . . [T]o engage in ritual is, for men and women, a human necessity. We cannot divest ourselves of our ritual rhythms since they [operate at] the very core of our central nervous systems. The roots of ritual in any society are the distilled meanings embodied in rhythms and gestures. . . . Rituals suffuse our biogenetic, political, economic, artistic, and educational life. To engage in ritual is to achieve. . . . historical-cultural existence. . . . Our entire social structure has a pre-emotive dependence on ritual for transmitting the symbolic codes of the dominant culture.8

Rituals are situated at the sociological crossroads of biographical understanding and historical constraint. The successful performance of ritual draws us into cognitive, moral, and bodily relations to things that carry us beyond raw physical sensations of the world-influx. In this sense, ritual is a core feature of all social control processes. Rituals transform fluid social relations into fixed or stereotypical social categories. By engaging in ritualized interactions we come to recognize and feel toward certain ways of doing things as if they were natural or undeniably real. They are not, but ritual makes them seem that way. Ritual removes things from the specific historical context in which they are socially constructed and provides them with an aura of being realities unto themselves. At the same time, everything that lies outside the boundaries of ritual is made to appear as if it were unnatural or deviant. This is what gives rituals their power: a classificatory power, a power that blesses some forms of experience as normal, while condemning others as impure, improper, or wrong.

Ritual actions are also inherently political actions. Rituals politically channel our sensations of what is real and what is to be expected from what is real. In this sense, even the most personal of rituals are political events. When we dress a certain way, or eat specific foods, or repetitively perform particular forms of work, artistic, or sexual activity, we are engaging in ritual. Rituals of eating, dwelling, dressing, working, sexing, and so forth permeate the entirety of social existence. When heterosexual men in our capitalist society bite into the leg of a chicken instead of a human, claim objects as private rather than shared property, wear pants instead of a skirt, seek to maximize the profits of time invested in labor, and engage in erotic acts with women instead of roosters (or “Heaven forbid,” other men), they enact rituals which partially control what they take for granted about themselves and others. Things are not this way simply because they are imagined to be this way. This is “really” the way things are and should be! Or, so such stereotypical men are informed by ritual. Of course, things need not be this way, but under the constraints of ritual, this is how they appear to be.

In breaking rituals we may become disoriented. Our orderly world may suddenly become uninged. This is evidence of the power of rituals as forms of social control. Life without ritual is life in a meaningless void; life without fixed objects of perception or desire; life amid an ever-shifting array of free-floating forms, none experienced as more solid than the next. Without ritual, we may lose all of reality and be overwhelmed by anxiety.

Such panicky losses of reality are reported by sociologist Harold Garfinkel. During the mid-1960s, Garfinkel asked students to breach some of the subtle, everyday rituals that guide interactions with families, friends, and associates. For example: Engage someone in conversation, but act on the assumption that the other’s words are guided by hidden motives. Interact with your parents as if you were a “polite stranger” who just happened to be boarding at your parents’ home. Enter into conversation with friends but refuse to let anything pass, don’t allow anything to be taken for granted. ("What do you mean, ‘How am I feeling?’” “What do you mean, ‘You had a flat tire?’”) Even these simple breaches created great disturbances. As Garfinkel points out:

[Most people] were stupefied. They vigorously sought to make the strange actions intelligible and to restore the situation to normal appearances. Reports were filled with accounts of astonishment, bewilderment, shock, anxiety, embarrassment, and anger.9

To break powerful rituals is to deviate from common sense. Such deviance led Garfinkel’s students to recognize the cultural fragility of things they had previously taken for granted. For many, this was shocking. Like “culturally shaken” travelers suddenly finding themselves on foreign terrain, they had become separated from what had previously seemed meaningful. Many were terrified, experiencing anxieties not unlike those reported by naive or fearful users of hallucinogenic drugs. Indeed, the bewilderment of Garfinkel’s students closely resemble the terror experienced by the unsuspecting subjects of CIA experiments with lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and other “controlled substances.”10 Such persons experienced a terrifying distance from the rituals governing routine social encounters. Such experiences also parallel the onset of madness. Indeed, without the support of ritual, we may lose all perspective and begin to feel we are beside ourselves, homeless and alone. This is the
fate awaiting deviants in a society where strict conformity holds sway: to be cast abjectly beyond the ritually constructed boundaries of social reality. The point is this: what we experience as “real” is, at all times, mediated by the material and symbolic power of ritual.

For rituals to be most effective, people must feel that they are actively choosing to participate in such patterned social actions. Still, there are always situational filters that limit and/or amplify the freedom of people’s choices. Ritual exists as but one element at the crossroads of the five interrelated critical concepts mentioned above. The force of ritual is never independent of the way that its experiential effects are filtered by power, knowledge, historical materiality, and symbolic controls. Together these several elements constitute something like a ritual field of social forces, in which each of these aspects of social control both affects and is affected by the others. Each, in other words, is decentered in relation to the others; each both facilitates and constrains the operation of the others.

This critical conception of ritual is related to Antonio Gramsci’s use of the term hegemony. Gramsci was a Marxist theorist and social activist struggling to counter both economic oppression and the appeal of fascism in early-twentieth-century Italy. Of central concern to Gramsci was why members of the Italian working class often collaborated with, rather than resisted, social forces leading to their own disempowerment. Gramsci used the term hegemony to significantly modify orthodox Marxist thinking. For orthodox Marxists, the realm of culture was likened to an “ideological superstructure” resting upon a determinant “base” of economic reality. Like a railway car constrained by the rails upon which it runs, cultural rituals were said to be determined by the mode of economic production in which they were set. More about the terminology of Marxism later; for the moment, it is sufficient to point out that Gramsci’s notions about hegemony (a concept he borrowed from Lenin) went a long way toward freeing critical Marxist thought from the narrowness of its “economically determinate” orthodoxy.¹¹

Rather than viewing cultural rituals as ideological by-products of economic reality, Gramsci developed a notion of ideology as itself a material historical force. This force was contingent upon the ritual welding together of otherwise contradictory political, economic, and social realities. In this sense, hegemony might be understood as the ritual production of an always only apparent and forever contestable social consensus, a “moving equilibrium” between classes of people divided by unequal access to power.¹²

To link ritual to the concept of hegemony is to recognize that while power may occasionally operate by brute force or physical coercion, more often than not it works by seducing our consent. Hegemonic power draws us into imaginary spaces where things may seem “as if” natural.¹³ In this way, hegemony limits our moral imagination and makes other ways of interpreting the world unthinkable.¹⁴ This is a complex and more subtle way of thinking about power. Unlike “orthodox” Marxist thought, which theorizes ideology as forced upon people by their economic relations, the concept of hegemony suggests that domination often involves the active participation of the domi-

nated. How does this happen? Why do those oppressed by hierarchical power sometimes or often actively comply with structures that constrain them?

Think, for instance, of the different rituals by which men and women fashion their bodies in contemporary society. Why is it that so many women, but not so many men, engage in elaborate and often painful rites of dieting or rituals of purging the body of all traces of food? Why do such rites of extreme self-discipline so often proceed to the point of sickness? Why do women bend, contort, or force their bodies into overly tight jeans, uncomfortably short skirts, painfully high heels, and other so-called feminine apparel? In what ways are such rites disempowering for women? Or empowering, but only on terms defined by men—terms that demand that women make over their bodies in keeping with the advertised fantasies of men?

Even though such rites of fashion ultimately disempower women, few are physically coerced into disciplining their bodies in such a manner. Nevertheless, whether women are seduced by the prospect of being granted male approval and economic support or whether they are terrorized by the prospect of being denied these benefits, a great many women do in fact ritually make themselves over in this way. Why? Approaching such questions from the standpoint of hegemony may help us to better understand the gender-specific dynamics of social control. But before further exploring this and other issues, let us first examine the historical context and the separate (if interrelated) contributions of Marxism, anarchism, feminism, and multicultural perspectives to the development of critical theorizing.

**Historical Background: Questioning the Powers That Be**

When colonial white society invades and occupies our territories, these are not called criminal acts. But when Native people stand up and resist, these acts are considered criminal. But these are not crimes. They are political acts in which our people stand up for their rights of self-determination, self-dignity, and self-respect against the cruel and oppressive might of another nation.

Leonard Peltier¹⁵

Crime existed only to the degree that the law cooperated with it. . . . In the country’s entire social, political and economic structure, the criminal, the law, and the politicians were actually inseparable partners.

Malcolm X¹⁶

The occurrence of crime is inevitable in a society in which wealth is distributed unequally. . . . [Crime is at once a protest against society and a desire to partake in its exploitative content.

Angela Davis¹⁷