The theorization of analytical principles has been an increasingly important concern of those working in the fields of the humanities and social sciences in recent years, leading to far more sophisticated and philosophically informed styles of critical analysis being developed. In this chapter, we shall be surveying the rise of critical theory from the later nineteenth century onwards, from Marxism and structuralism to poststructuralism, postmodernism, and feminism, and considering its impact both on academic disciplines and public life. The basic principles of the main schools of critical theory will be mapped out, as well as their rationale for adopting these, with close attention being paid to the social and political contexts involved in each case. The sceptical bias of the more recent critical theories, namely poststructuralism and postmodernism, will be emphasized, and the implications of such attitudes for coaching will be touched on, prior to a more extended treatment of the topic of scepticism, and its role in public life, in Chapter 6.

Critical theory in academic life and public life

Critical theory is an analytical tool that enables academics to construct a range of methods of interpretation. The same phenomenon can look very different indeed if viewed from a Marxist, feminist, or postmodernist standpoint – to cite just some of the many possibilities available to practitioners these days. Interpretation of phenomena is, of course, one of the primary concerns of an academic discipline, and critical theory as a body of work serves to expedite this. In terms of
business studies, critical theory provides a means of interpreting organizations, and depending on the theory used, different insights can be gained about the effectiveness and efficiency of any given organization. Clearly, this has important implications for how coaching is conducted; especially since, as we noted earlier, organizations can vary quite considerably in what they require, or expect to receive, from coaching.

As its application to business studies shows, critical theory can reach out well beyond the academic ghetto with its essentially intellectual concerns. Critical theory has something to contribute to the way we live in the most general sense, and we wish to develop that aspect of it in terms of coaching. There are few things more public after all, than the world of work; almost all of us are involved in that at some point or other of our lives, and how we relate to, and operate within, our own particular organization is a matter of some social importance. It is not just a question of making ourselves more efficient at tasks delegated to us from above (still many people’s experience in the workplace), but of how our input can help the organization to adapt and develop in response to a constantly changing socio-political climate. And the credit crunch has put a premium on such flexibility, demolishing many of our long-established assumptions about how the business world should operate. New models are urgently needed if we are to reconstruct this sector such that it regains not just the trust of the general public, but of its own employees as well. As the financial crisis has starkly revealed, we are all stakeholders in the business world: what happens there affects everyone.

Critical theory: A history

Critical theory has its roots in the history of Western philosophy, which means that we can trace back many of its concerns to classical Greek thought; in particular, as far as current trends go, to the tradition of scepticism that grew out of that cultural milieu. Critical theory might be broken down into two main groups: system-building and system-challenging (a further division that is made is between the formalist and the sociological, and we shall come back to that). The more recent critical theories tend to be less concerned with system-building, which was the focus of many of the earlier movements in the modern period, than with conducting a critique of systems