

Systematized Definitions of Constructs in Social Theory

Many theories share constructs (the boxes, blocks, or key concepts). However, different theories will assign a different meaning to these constructs. It is not that one is “right” and the others “wrong.” These are simply different definitions and the body of theory and people who develop this theory create and assign meaning. We do this all the time and in daily conversation and the distinction between meanings of a single term is quite clear in context. The term “law” is an example. The term means completely different things in the following two statements. “The law is to stop on a red light.” “The second law of thermodynamics means that only a small amount of the energy in gasoline actually goes into moving a car.” We have to be much more precise about this when we use terms that refer to theoretical concepts. As both practitioners and researchers, we must make sure that we use the definition of the term the way the theoretical framework **means for it to be used**. Put another way, it is not useful to apply the definition of law as a “legal requirement” when we’re talking about energy transformations. You have to know the different ways the terms (constructs) are defined and make sure you adopt the appropriate definition when you talk about the construct from different theoretical perspectives. The construct of “commodification,” first introduced by Karl Marx & Max Weber, provides an example. Here are four **different** systematized definitions of this key social construct:

Definition 1: Commodification is the development of economic mechanisms and institutions that permit the widespread use of universal exchange media (money) for products. (Modernization theory & globalization theory)

Definition 2: Commodification is the development of rationalized systems of production, distribution and sale to increase the availability and lower the cost of products. (Institutional economics & rationalization theory)

Definition 3: Commodification is the expropriation of a product from those whose labor produced it by those who own and control the means of production. (conflict and critical theory)

Definition 4: Commodification is the application of capital and technology to replace artisanal production with mass production. (Evolutionary theory & specialization theory)

Note that the conflict and critical definitions definitely place the definition of commodification within the framework of class relationships. If you look at conflict & critical theory in general, and especially at Marx’s early work, you will see that commodification takes on a somewhat “negative” aspect. Marx sees commodification as a part of the process of exploitation. The rational exchange approach, on the other hand (originating with Weber), does not do this at all. Rather, commodification in this definition focuses on the growth of institutions and mechanisms that allow people to trade one “universal media” – money – for any product rather than trading product for product, or labor for product. For Weber, commodification is deeply rooted in the process of bureaucratization, by which he means the development of social institutions and mechanisms that allows people to interact by a “set of rules” that give confidence in the exchanges that occur. Examine the other definitions of this construct and explore the implications of the different meanings for everyday things you hear and see. For example, in the contemporary discussion about food (buy local, buy organic, etc.), a relatively new concept that is gaining ground is the idea of “artisanal products.” You even see it in commercials. Look at definition 4 above. What are people and companies who argue that “artisanal products are better” saying from a theoretical perspective?