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Review Essay: Habermas's New Critical Theory: Its Promise and Problems

The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. By Jürgen Habermas. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon, 1984. Pp. xlii + 465. \$29.95.

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In December 1981, *The Theory of Communicative Action* was published in Germany. It sold out its first edition of 10,000 copies within the month. Germans take their theory seriously. It was not for nothing that Marx called them a nation of philosophers. However, the extraordinary reception of Jürgen Habermas's book signifies something else as well. It is a great work. With its publication (the first volume is now available in English), Habermas has broken through some of the major limitations of neo-Marxist critical theory. He has now become one of the world's leading social theorists, critical or otherwise. To explain how he has done so, and why his break with neo-Marxism is still not sharp enough, is a long story.

Every critical social theory is faced with the problem of constituting its grounds for critique. Of course, even empirical, "positive" social theory contains an ideological dimension, but because its main ambition is explanatory rather than evaluative, it can—indeed, must—leave this normative source in an implicit, diffuse state. For critical theory the situation is quite different. It is explicitly political, seeking to draw readers toward a normative position and often to a political stance. Because this is so, its grounds for moral judgment are explicitly called into question.

There seem to be three ways that the grounds for critical theory can be constituted. First, the theorist can adopt a purely relativist position: "I criticize society because it violates my principles." This is relativistic because the sources of critique are presented in purely subjective, personal terms. Here is the "humanistic" position that became so popular in the non-Marxist critical sociology of the late sixties and early seventies, the "self-reflexive" sociology that calls on the theorist to be forthright about his or her own personal values.

In intellectual and political terms, however, this relativist position has usually seemed unsatisfactory. Critical theorists have usually sought a position that at least appears to be more objective and, hence, less challengeable. The alternative strategy has been to seek an immanent cri-

tique, to try to demonstrate that the standard of critique grows naturally and inevitably out of the conditions of the society against which the critique is aimed. Two kinds of immanent justification have been offered, the objective and the subjective. Marx is the great exemplar of the former. The communist demands of the proletariat, he insisted, grow not from the head of this or that philosopher or from some free-floating idealistic hope but from the concrete conditions of real social life. Although the dominant thrust of capitalist society is irrational, a more rational form of social organization can, in fact, be gleaned from the actual social conditions of capitalism, from its objectivity, its cosmopolitanism, its universalism, and the egalitarian cooperation it forces upon its working class. Hegel represents the great exemplar of the alternative approach, seeking immanent justification in subjective, idealist form. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, he laid out a developmental sequence that was simultaneously logical, psychological, and historical, and he argued that the sources for moving beyond each stage would inevitably be discovered in the experienced inadequacies (illogic, frustrations, social tensions) of each state itself. For both Marx and Hegel, then, an appropriate standard of critical reason was immanent at every historical stage.

The tradition of 20th-century theory associated with the Frankfurt school of Marxism, initiated by Horkheimer and Adorno and associated most famously with the political theories of Herbert Marcuse, must be credited with making this issue of critical justification completely explicit. Rather than Marxist or Hegelian, it called itself quite simply "critical theory," and it explicitly adopted a transcendent criterion of "rationality" as the basis for its anticapitalist critique. This critique clearly followed in the normative tradition; the Frankfurt school found only moral bankruptcy in objectivist theories like those of the orthodox Marx. However, because the Frankfurt Marxists had abandoned Hegel's faith in God, they had no firm basis for their own moral criticism. Though they postulated an immanent rationality, their work became mystical and arbitrary when they tried to define this rationality's source. Perhaps inevitably, the source came to be associated with the prerogative of intellectuals. With this development the universalistic ambition of this Frankfurt Marxist criticism came to seem more and more particularistic. This became an increasingly serious problem in the 1960s, when Marcuse defended critical reason by opposing "pure tolerance" and at least appeared to apologize for revolutionary coercion in Western societies in a manner that paralleled Fanon's defense of it in the Third World.

It is in the context of this historical and theoretical juncture that Jürgen Habermas's work must be understood. Habermas is a radical, but he is not a revolutionary. Whereas Marcuse celebrated the excesses of the 1960s, Habermas was appalled by them, and he earned the permanent contempt of some German student radicals for his public opposition. As a left-wing humanist and democrat, Habermas has always been acutely aware of the theoretical and political degeneration of Critical Theory. In a recent "Reply to My Critics," many of whom were orthodox representa-

tives of the critical school, Habermas insists that "revolutionary self-confidence and theoretical self-certainty are gone" (1982, p. 222). To regain them, critical theory must find a way to justify its standard of immanent rationality. This is what Habermas set out to do.

To restore universality to critical rationality and to cleanse the critical tradition of its elitism, Habermas seeks to return to Marx's original strategy. He does not do so by embracing an objectivist criterion, for he maintains the moral tone of the "Western Marxist" tradition. Rather, he returns to Marx in the sense of embracing empirical social science and empirically based philosophy. Earlier generations of the Frankfurt school attacked social science as inevitably "positive," bourgeois, and conservative. In contrast, Habermas embraces the most advanced empirical theorizing of his day. As Marx sought to turn political economy against itself in the name of socialism, so Habermas seeks to demonstrate that the empirical processes illuminated by contemporary theories—processes there for all to see—carry inside themselves the potential for critique and transcendence of the status quo.

I

Over the past 15 years there have been three traditions of empirical social theory on which Habermas has drawn. Perhaps the least remarked on by either Habermas or his interpreters is the Parsonian. Habermas began teaching Parsons in the early 1960s, and, though rarely footnoted, Parsonian themes like systems, pattern-variables, and the centrality of socialization permeate his thought. Only in the 1980s has Habermas made this debt explicit, as his work has taken a formidable Parsonian turn. As he remarks in the second, not yet translated, volume of the work currently under review, "though Parsons's later work has at times been pushed into the background by hermeneutically and critically-oriented investigations, no social theory can be taken seriously today which does not—at the very least—clarify the relationship to Parsons" (1981, p. 297). But Habermas does more than simply clarify the relationship; he takes Parsons's work as embodying the highest level of contemporary theoretical work. "As it stands today," he writes, "the work is unparalleled in regard to its level of abstraction, internal differentiation, theoretical breadth and systematicity—all of which is, simultaneously, connected to the literature of each particular empirical field" (1981, p. 297). In fact, he issues a warning to any "neo-Marxism which wishes simply to bypass Parsons," averring that "in the history of social science errors of this type are normally quickly corrected" (1981, p. 297).

Habermas sees that Parsons was centrally concerned with sociological conditions for the development of universalism, which is, as Hegel clearly saw, perhaps the most crucial dimension of rationality. More recently, Habermas has relied heavily on the historical twist that Parsons gave to his sociology of universalism in his evolutionary theory. Terms like

“learning processes” and “normative integration” have become central to Habermas’s critical vocabulary. In the book of essays that adumbrated the present work, Habermas wrote, “I would even defend the thesis that the development of . . . normative structures is the pacemaker of social evolution” (1979, p. 120). He is aware that this Parsonian theme turns the tables on Marx: “Whereas Marx localized the learning processes important for evolution in the dimension of objectivating thought—of technical and organizational knowledge, of instrumental and strategic action, in short, of productive forces—there are good reasons meanwhile for assuming that learning processes also . . . are deposited in more mature forms of social integration, in new productive relations, and that these in turn first make possible the introduction of new productive forces” (Habermas 1979, p. 98).

The second line of empirical theorizing on which Habermas has drawn is Piaget’s work on cognitive and moral development. Whereas Parsons allows Habermas to claim that universalistic and solidary relationships are grounded in the historical development of real societies, Piaget allows him to argue that universalistic, critical thought is grounded in the normal development of the human mind. The internal emphasis of Piaget—the vocabulary of “interiorization,” “representation,” “generalization”—complements the normative reference of Habermas’s critique; it also clearly articulates with the Freudian vocabulary of Parsons’s socialization theory, on which Habermas also relies (for his interweaving of these traditions, see 1979, pp. 81–88). Indeed, Habermas uses Piagetian theory to conceptualize a point that Parsons’s critics have somehow seemed unable to grasp: developmental theory conceives socialization as learning to be rational and autonomous, not dependent and submissive. Piaget insists that human intelligence moves from the concrete to the formal and, in the process, gains a critical distance from and mastery over the objects in its environment. These are precisely the qualities that allow Habermas to extend his empirical theory of an immanent source of critical rationality. By the mid-1970s, the key terms of Piagetian theory were thoroughly incorporated into Habermas’s discussion of contemporary reality: consciousness is “decentered” and “objective”; it “goes beyond reality” to think the “possible”; it seeks universal, generalizable principles, “the rules behind rules” (cf., e.g., Piaget 1972, with Habermas 1979, pp. 69–94). Finally, Piaget’s emphasis on the pragmatic, concrete character of the developmental crises that promote learning allows Habermas to conceptualize the immanent growth of mental rationality without falling into the trap of Hegel’s idealism.

What Habermas takes from Parsons and Piaget is not simply a theory of the empirical development of rationality, but also the notion that a great deal of rationality is already realized in the world as structured today. This is the price of buying into empirical theorizing, and it is the very price that earlier generations of critical theorists were unwilling to pay. Horkheimer and Adorno learned a great deal from Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, but they seem to have stopped learning after his discussion of the

Enlightenment, which Hegel criticized for its mechanistic version of rationality. For Horkheimer and Adorno, Western cultural development evidently stopped at that point, hence their equation Enlightenment = Capitalism = Instrumental Reason. Hegel, in contrast, believed that the reigning conception of reason continued to grow in the course of subsequent Western development. By passing through later phases of expressive, ethical, and eventually religious experience, the conception of rationality became enriched and multivalent. Habermas follows Hegel himself rather than the Horkheimer/Adorno caricature, though he does not follow him to the point of believing that a completely satisfactory "rationality" is enshrined in the status quo. Having learned from Parsons and Piaget, Habermas can describe how cognitive, expressive, and moral rationality have developed in the present day. He can also argue, in the light of his own more critical ambitions, that their theories provide an explanation not only of contemporary society but of a rational standpoint from which to go beyond it.

However, neither Parsons nor Piaget plays a central role in the first volume of Habermas's most recent and most systematic work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Parsons receives major consideration in the second volume; Piaget is discussed only passing in both volumes, though his ideas continue to permeate Habermas's theoretical vocabulary. In this volume, pride of place is given to the third empirical tradition that Habermas uses to remake his critical theory—the "speech act" theory that derives from ordinary language philosophy. To "scientific" sociologists, it may seem strange to claim a modern philosophical tradition as an empirical, or at least empirically related, theory. However, speech act theory and the "analytic" movement out of which it grew are directed toward the study of empirical processes in a way that is antithetical to the metaphysical traditions of continental philosophy. This contrast, of course, is exactly what attracts Habermas. By developing a theory of "communicative action," he wants to use speech act theory to extend his empirical analysis of immanent rationality.

Habermas uses this later current of analytic philosophy to root his standard of rationality in the nature of ordinary language itself. He claims that in ordinary speech actors make implicit claims about the validity of their statements, claims that, in a crunch, they are prepared to justify through argument. On these grounds, he suggests that rationality "is ingrained in the very structure of action oriented toward reaching understanding" (p. 130).

In terms of this linguistic turn, Habermas defines rationality as the quality that makes action "defendable against criticism" (p. 16). To be rational, acts must rest on "criticizable validity claims" (p. 15) rather than on unchallengeable authority or physical force. If challenged, then, a rational actor will cite potentially consensual grounds that justify his statements or actions. In doing so, he will be engaging in "argumentation." Argumentation is speech that "thematizes" contested validity claims, explicitly supporting or criticizing them. Ordinary language,

Habermas believes, can rest on four kinds of implicit validity claims, each of which in the ideal speech situation can be justified through argument. These claims refer to cognitive, moral, and expressive dimensions. In instrumental and strategic action (which Habermas also calls teleological), the claim is made for efficiency; the discourse that thematizes this action—though it is rarely, in fact, subject to such argumentation—is empirical. Related to this, but more generalized, is the kind of speech act that Habermas calls the assertive or constative. This comprises statements of fact, referring to actions that rest on purely factual claims and are ultimately validated by claims to truth in the cognitive sense. The discourse that thematizes this claim Habermas calls theoretical. Although both strategic and constative speech acts are located within the cognitive dimension, Habermas differentiates them by suggesting that strategic action is almost never thematized. This is what makes it, in his view, instrumentally rather than communicatively rational—a distinction that, as we will see, plays a central and often problematic role in his understanding. The third distinct mode of action is expressive, referring to both emotional and esthetic statements. The claim put forward here is not truth but “truthfulness,” which concerns sincerity and authenticity in a subjective sense. The discourse that thematizes this claim Habermas sometimes calls therapeutic, and other times esthetic. Finally, there is moral action, which invokes neither efficiency, truth, nor truthfulness. Its claim is to “rightness”—the claim that it is justified in relation to a normative context that is legitimate in the sense of reflecting some moral interest common to all concerned. It is practical discourse that thematizes this claim to validity.

This communication theory—to which I will return—takes up sizable chunks of Habermas's book (see esp. pp. 8–42, 75–101, 273–337; for the first and most concise statement of this position, see 1979, pp. 1–68). Habermas's analysis of Weber takes up another. In view of Habermas's concern with the empirical immanence of rationality and his commitment to communicative argument, Weber certainly seems an appropriate reference. While Habermas suggests that rational argument is an implicit part of everyday speech, he thinks this has not always been so. Communicative action can be more or less rational, and the further back we go in examining traditional and primitive societies, the less rational it appears. The point about rational communication is that understanding cannot be conceived *a priori*. It cannot—and here Habermas gives a communicative twist to Parsons's famous pattern-variable dichotomy—be “normatively ascribed” (p. 70); instead, it must be “communicatively achieved.” Social rationalization, then, can be defined as the elimination of factors that “prevent conscious settlement of conflicts” (p. 119). Here lies the significance of Weber. His historical analysis of the cultural and social processes that produce rationalization can be seen as describing the movement toward communicative rationality. Habermas's communication theory leads him to incorporate Weber and, equally important, to correct him.

II

Although his reading of Weber's corpus is by no means systematic or complete, Habermas presents the most sophisticated and original interpretation of certain key sections of which I am aware. In the positive phase of his reading, Habermas focuses on elements of Weber's cultural history that have not yet received sufficient attention, particularly on "The Social Psychology of World Religions" and "Religious Rejections of the World" as they relate to *The Protestant Ethic*. His interpretive perspective is unique because it combines his interest in communication with a late-Parsonian interest in cultural differentiation. Here he is influenced by Schluchter, whose own work reflects a similar orientation. Although Habermas uses the culture/society/personality distinction as an overall framework, he focuses less on differentiation among these three systems than on differentiation among the cognitive, expressive, and moral dimensions of cultural life. He suggests that this separation (see Parsons 1961) has allowed processes of justification to occur in more rational, less ascribed ways because this cultural differentiation has meant that objective knowledge, expressive/esthetic life, and morality increasingly can be conceived without reference to an overarching religious cosmos. "The devout attachment to concrete orders of life secured in tradition," Habermas writes, can "be superseded in favor of a free orientation to universal principles" (p. 213).

Yet whereas Parsons always felt that Weber had sustained this level of insight throughout the breadth of his work—his only failure having been the occasional resort to "type atomism"—Habermas sees significant reductionist tendencies also at work. I have suggested that Weber's reductionism emerges forcefully in the historical sociology of precapitalist societies (Alexander 1983). Habermas, in contrast, historicizes the reductionism, seeing it as emerging only in Weber's work in the transition from the earlier phases of cultural differentiation to modernity itself. In a marvelous passage, Habermas suggests that there were three paths that Weber could have taken after he had established the rational potential of Western cultural development (p. 217). First, he could have studied the social movements, like democratic revolutions and socialist movements, that sought to institutionalize such rationality. Second, he could have developed a cultural sociology of this new, more rationalized contemporary order. Third, he could have studied the institutionalization of one subtype of modern rationality—purposively rational action. He suggests that Weber took up only the third possibility, concentrating on the origins and operation of instrumental capitalism and bureaucracy. This decision was an unfortunate one because it meant that "Weber takes into consideration the horizon of possibilities opened up by the modern understanding of the world only to the extent that it serves to explain the core phenomenon he identified in advance" (p. 221). In other words, by focusing only on the purposively rational institutions of capitalism and bureaucracy, Weber drastically narrowed his thinking about the nature of modern

understanding, an issue whose possibilities had been genially opened by Weber's analysis of cultural differentiation in the earlier period.

Is there empirical justification for Weber's choice, or did it result from a theoretical mistake? Some of each, in Habermas's view. Certainly "the institutionalization of purposive-rational entrepreneurial activity is, from a function point of view, actually of central importance for modern societies" (p. 221). At the same time, however, there has been "a noticeable and consequential narrowing of the concept of rationality in Weber's action theory."

By exploring the presuppositional reasons behind Weber's narrowed treatment, Habermas offers an extraordinary account of what Weber's cultural sociology of modernity might have been. Weber's pessimism about modernity was, in Habermas's view, as much the result of his theoretical inability to understand the sources of continuing rationality as the result of his empirical insight and ideological sensibility. Weber described all the newly autonomous spheres of modern culture—science, art and sexuality, and political morality—as doomed to irrationality. The earlier sense of the rationality of these endeavors, or at least their meaningful validity, had come from their connection to overarching religious principles. But with the victory of science over religion, Weber believed, they could no longer be related to any general principles at all. This is just what Habermas contests. Why can these modern cultural spheres not be seen as related to secular rather than religious principles? His point is worth quoting in full: "[Weber's] explanation of the self-destructive pattern of societal rationalization is unsatisfactory because [he] still owes us a demonstration that a moral consciousness guided by principles can survive only in a religious context. He would have to explain why embedding a principled ethic in a salvation religion, why joining moral consciousness to interests in salvation, are just as indispensable for the *preservation* of moral consciousness as, from a genetic standpoint, they undoubtedly were for the *emergence* of this stage of moral consciousness" (p. 229).

Weber, in Habermas's opinion, offers no empirical justification for this claim. His research program, which was supposed "to make it possible to estimate 'the cultural significance of Protestantism in relation to the other plastic elements of modern culture,' was never carried through" (p. 229). If it had been, Weber would have had to include the ethical influence of humanism and of both philosophical and scientific empiricism on modern culture. Combined with the influence of Protestantism, these traditions "flowed into the rationalism of the Enlightenment and promoted a secularized, lay morality in bourgeois strata." This latter development promoted what Weber claimed was impossible: the emergence of a "principled ethic that is removed from religious contexts, and through which the bourgeois strata set themselves off from both the clergy and from the common people caught up in naive piety" (p. 230).

Indeed, as we have seen earlier, Habermas himself demonstrates that principled ethics do survive in a postreligious context, that substantive

rationality is pervasive in the modern world. To reintroduce this argument, Habermas argues that "Weber goes too far when he infers from the loss of the substantial unity of reason, a polytheism of gods and demons struggling with one another, with their irreconcilability rooted in a pluralism of incompatible validity claims" (p. 249). Habermas suggests, to the contrary, that if one looks closely at differentiated cultural life, one can see that there is a "unity of rationality in the multiplicity of value spheres." Though each sphere is anchored in concretely different values—hence their immediate irreconcilability—each conceives itself as justifiable via rational argument. Science seeks justification through propositional truth, expressive and artistic life through sincerity and authenticity, morality through its claim to normative rightness. The medium for common understanding between these spheres—the source of their higher reconcilability—is precisely the fact that they make such claims to validity, and they can thematize these claims through rational argumentation. This is not to say that the interrelationship between these spheres is smooth or integrative. There remains "the problem of where, in the communicative practice of everyday life, 'switching stations' have to be brought into operation so that individuals can shift their action orientations from one complex to another" (p. 250).

This is the general argument through which Habermas demonstrates that, in his words, Weber "does not apply the comprehensive concept of rationality upon which he bases his investigations of cultural tradition" to his own sociology of modern life. He builds a more concrete case for this criticism through his detailed consideration of Weber's approach to modern law. More than any interpreter since Parsons, Habermas sees the absolute centrality of law to Weber's theory of modern society. If Weber is to make a convincing case that purposive-rational action can, indeed, be cut off from higher moral grounding, he must show that the self-regulation and stability of rational systems can be achieved through an equally rational and valueless law. If Weber wants to sustain his narrowed conception of modernity, therefore, he must succeed "in uncoupling the development of modern law from the fate of moral-practical rationality and conceptualizing it as just a further embodiment of cognitive-instrumental rationality" (p. 242).

Weber accomplishes this by focusing exclusively on how the systematicity, formality, and logicity of modern law allow it to be eminently calculable (pp. 254ff). But Weber is mistaken. Although the formal qualities of modern law are functional for instrumental systems like the economy, this says nothing about how such legal structures are constituted in themselves. To understand the latter, it is necessary to see that contemporary law embodies certain kinds of moral justifications. Weber resisted the connection of law and morality on the grounds that it denies what is precisely the major innovation of modern legality, namely, its differentiation from any explicit and substantive moral position. Habermas replies, ironically, that this separation can be maintained only by justifying it with reference to a more general abstract moral consciousness: "The par-

ticular accomplishment of the positivization of the legal order consists in *displacing* problems of justification, that is, in relieving the technical administration of the law of such problems over broad expanses—but not in doing away with them. Precisely the post-traditional structure of legal consciousness sharpens the problem of justification into a question of principle that is shifted to the foundations but not thereby made to disappear” (p. 261).

Habermas lists a whole series of extralegal principles that form the justifying foundation for modern law, characterizing them under the general Piagetian rubric of “post-conventional” morality: the notion that a compact between free and legal partners makes contractual obligations possible, the concept of the abstract legal subject’s general competency, the very distinction between norms and principles, and so forth. This insistence on the substantive foundations of legal rationality leads him, quite rightly in my view, to emphasize the significance of political constitutions, institutions that Weber almost completely ignored. “The catalog of basic rights contained in bourgeois constitutions,” Habermas suggests, is one of the “expressions of this justification that has become structurally necessary” (p. 261). He criticizes Schluchter for presenting Weber’s legal sociology as if it implied such legal principles and for suggesting that these principles supply a link in Weber’s work between this theory of positive law and his discussion of the ethic of responsibility. Such principles, Habermas counters, “are a foreign element within Weber’s systematic construction” (p. 438, n. 34).

This completes Habermas’s reconstruction of what Weber’s cultural sociology of modernity might have looked like if Weber had not unduly narrowed his conception of rationality. To explain the impoverishment of Weber’s actual account of the contemporary order, Habermas faults Weber’s understanding of social action. Weber, he suggests, operated with an intentionalist rather than a linguistic conception of action (p. 280). He saw meaning as the result of actors trying to gain the understanding of others in a purposive way. From such an intentionalist perspective, action is rationalizable only in terms of means/ends relations, invoking the criteria of actual effectiveness and empirical truth. Value and emotion-related actions are, then, not rationalizable by definition, and it is for this reason that Weber so sharply opposes *Zweck* to *Wert-rationalität*.

What is the alternative to such an intentionalist, utilitarian view? We have seen it clearly if we have followed Habermas’s argument all along. It is the understanding of action as, in the first instance, an act of communication. Action must be conceived on the model of ordinary language, either as carried on through the medium of language or as modeled on it. For ordinary language, we have seen, is almost always carried on within the restricting framework of implicit modes of validation. Even if it is strategic, therefore, it is subject to some extraintentional control. It is these moral foundations that provide the basis for rationalization in something other than an instrumental sense.

III

In view of the matters discussed above, which take up nearly two-thirds of the book, it may come as a surprise to the reader—it certainly came as a great surprise to me—to learn that there is not much communicative rationality in the modern world after all. Beginning with the fourth section (I will consider the short, but highly interesting, third section below), Habermas seems to bring his theoretical enterprise of the first 270 pages to a screeching halt and laboriously to change directions. He now suggests that communicative rationality is actually limited to a very small section of contemporary society called the “lifeworld.” His definition of this lifeworld is distressingly vague—it certainly differs, in my view, from Heidegger’s and Schutz’s—but he does indicate that it is where “everyday practice” and “everyday communication” occur. Whereas it seemed to be his intention in the first two-thirds of his work to suggest that such “lifeworld” practices as ordinary language are the *basis* for institutional behavior, he is now intent on isolating these practices. He portrays them as vulnerable islands of feeling and thought surrounded by hostile oceans of rationalized “systems.” Systems are defined as organizations of purely strategic actions, organizations that employ a “functionalist” reason that has nothing to do with human norms or concerns. The capitalist economic system, the legal-rational political system, even the modern mass communications system (p. 372), Habermas claims, do not rely on the medium of language but employ media like money and power (and influence?) in a coercive, anticommunicative way.

At first, Habermas speaks of the relation between systems and lifeworld as “counteracting tendencies” (p. 341). Almost immediately, however, he puts the relation into the stronger, Marxian language of “contradiction.” “The contradiction arises,” he writes, “between, on the one hand, a rationalization of everyday communication that is tied to the structures of intersubjectivity of the lifeworld, in which language counts as the genuine and irreplaceable medium of reaching an understanding, and, on the other hand, the growing complexity of subsystems of purposive-rational action, in which actions are coordinated through steering media such as money and power” (p. 342). Soon he is speaking about the “colonization of the lifeworld” by modern society’s rationalized systems: “An unleashed functionalist reason of systems maintenance disregards and overrides the claim to reason ingrained in communicative sociation and lets the rationalization of the lifeworld run idle” (p. 399).

An abrupt change indeed. If Habermas were to seek to justify this shift in a thoroughgoing way, he would have to go back and refute, point by point, his entire discussion of Weber. In that discussion, he himself developed a systematic argument against an instrumental reading of modern social institutions. It was he who argued against Weber that instrumental rationality was not the only form of rationality to be institutionalized in the modern world, and he pointed directly to political systems and their

legal foundations as his foremost examples. Is he not now arguing directly against this earlier stance?

Although Habermas does not try to refute himself, he turns to earlier members of the Frankfurt school to do much the same thing. In this volume's fourth and concluding section, "From Lukács to Adorno: Rationalization as Reification," he presents this strand of Western Marxism as, simultaneously, a reading of Weber and an accurate description of Western society. This Frankfurt tradition, of course, did rely heavily on Weber's work, but its reading of him was precisely the one-sided, instrumentalized version that Habermas warned us against. Armed with the earlier interpretation, we are in a position to say that these Western Marxists picked up on the wrong Weber. By doing so, moreover, they allowed their picture of Western society to become so heavily instrumentalized that they missed the opportunity to root their own alternative vision of rationality in an immanent, empirical way. The latter, of course, is precisely the ambition of Habermas's new work. Yet Habermas applauds them. He uses this earlier generation of Marxists—the criticism of whose very approach to critical theory has been the implicit starting point for his own work—to steer Weber back to Marx. I said earlier that the Frankfurt theorists stopped reading Hegel's *Phenomenology* after his chapter on the Enlightenment and that in the earlier parts of his book Habermas showed us an empirical way to join the more sophisticated Hegel of the post-Enlightenment discussion. But after showing us this promised land, Habermas wants to take us back to the desert. To do this, he must distort Weber's understanding of modern rationality as badly as the Frankfurt school distorted Hegel's.

"Capitalism" now becomes a satisfactory way of defining the present era, and Lukács becomes the theorist who succeeded in producing the best definition. Lukács claimed that Marx's conception of commodity fetishism, which conceptualized the capitalist world as totally dominated by exchange value, meant much the same thing as Weber's rationalization theory. Habermas welcomes Lukács's convergence thesis and tries to restate commodity fetishism in terms of his own communications theory. He writes that Lukács "conceives of the reification of lifeworld contexts, which sets in when workers coordinate their interactions by way of the de-linguistified medium of exchange value rather than through norms and values, as the other side of a rationalization of their action orientations" (p. 359). In other words, (1) Weber demonstrated that modern actions are only purposively rational and that action orientations have been rationalized and do not appeal to values or norms; (2) Lukács showed that the interrelation of workers through an exchange of commodities—the "de-linguistified medium of exchange"—rested on the same thing; (3) Lukács's conclusion, that the lifeworld of capitalism is reified, is valid. Habermas praises Lukács for showing that in capitalist society, association is so instrumental that it can form only systems, not lifeworlds: "He makes the system-forming effects of sociation established through the

medium of exchange value intelligible from the perspective of action theory" (p. 359). "To the degree that the commodity form becomes the form of objectivity and rules the relations of individuals to one another as well as their dealings with external nature and with internal subjective nature, the lifeworld has to become reified and individuals degraded—as systems theory foresees—into an 'environment' for a society that has become external to them, that has abstracted from them and become independent of them. Lukács shares this perspective with Weber" (p. 361).

Does he? Only to the degree that Weber himself is guilty of reducing his presupposition about action to an instrumental form. Once this has occurred, collective order, be it capitalist or socialist, can hardly be portrayed as anything other than external and coercive. Habermas proves this when he demonstrates that Weber's externalist perspective on the rationality of contemporary political and legal institutions can be challenged dramatically if the conception of action he employed for his contemporary theorizing would be made more compatible with the multivalent, "communicative" approach of his writing on cultural history. The "critical theorists" from Lukács onward picked up precisely on Weber's theoretical mistake; given their own predispositions, they saw this mistake as a statement of empirical fact.

We might say, then, that there is an empirical error behind Habermas's abrupt reversal. Modern political life and economic life are never simply instrumental. They are always coded by deep structures of cultural life. To mistake this is to confuse the fact of differentiation—which allows relative strategic freedom from ascribed value positions—with the absence of moral foundations altogether. Neither are the modern worlds of values, norms, and solidarities ever such simple, intimate, and intuitive lifeworlds as Habermas describes. They are themselves also systems subject to organization on levels that individuals scarcely intuit, and these systems participate through exchange processes with other cultural and strategic areas of social life.

But there is probably also an ideological source for Habermas's insistence on the modern isolation of the lifeworld. This is the continuing influence on his work of the German Idealist tradition (Alexander 1984b), by which Western Marxism itself has been very much affected. This tradition is organized around the dichotomy of ideal versus material things, and it has always perceived the threat to posttraditional society to be one of deracination. Habermas follows this tradition. Despite his occasional avowals about the positive character of differentiation, in his work the oppressive and dangerous parts of modern society almost always emerge from rationalized, material systems, whereas the "good parts" are associated with the personal intimacy of moral life. For someone outside the Idealist tradition, however, this ideological dichotomy has little intuitive appeal. The problems of modern society, it seems to me, have emerged as much from the lifeworlds of intimate relations—from the authoritarian family, religious sect, and peer group—as they have from

administrative and economic systems. They have been rooted as much in values and norms—in *Volk* culture, racism, and submissive beliefs—as in force and coercion. Indeed, in the history of Western societies it has often been the case that a society's "idealistic" refusal to allow the depersonalization of economic and political life has signaled its decline into irrationality and despair.

Finally, it seems to me that Habermas has made an error on the theoretical, presuppositional level itself. This error, moreover, is much like the one he criticized Weber for committing. It is a problem in the conception of action—more specifically, in the manner in which his communications theory is conceived. We turn here to the "Intermediate Reflections" on "Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication" that constitute Habermas's third section.

IV

In the third section of this volume, Habermas offers his own theory of communicative action. The discussion serves two purposes. On the one hand, it supplies the communicative approach to action that Habermas has just finished chastising Weber for being unable to provide. On the other hand, it is a transition to Habermas's argument, which unfolds in the section that follows, about the contradiction between system and lifeworld produced by the instrumentalization of the modern world. These purposes, however, are incompatible.

How can a theory of communicative action buttress and elaborate Habermas's critique of Weber? It can do so by demonstrating (1) that virtually all action assumes communication; (2) that communication assumes some extrastrategic "understanding" between actors; and (3) that this understanding usually makes an inherent claim to rational justification. As I have suggested earlier, this is just what Habermas argues in the discussions of communication theory that precede the Weber analysis (pp. 8–42, 75–101). In his third section, which is a more technical "revisit" to communications, Habermas continues to insist that communication involves understanding and that understanding points to rationality (points 2 and 3 above). In this sense, he expands on his critique of Weber's approach. However, considered as a whole, this later discussion actually points in quite a different direction. Instead of elaborating on the role of communicative rationality, Habermas now devotes himself to communication's limited domain (contra point 1 above). He does so by developing the contrast between communication and instrumental behavior. In his earlier discussion, he had allowed that strategic, instrumental behavior, though conducted with reference to justifying criteria like efficiency and effectiveness, is not, in fact, usually subject to thematization and rational argument. The point of that earlier discussion, however, was that most action was so subject. Now, in contrast, it is the purported lack of argumentation in strategic behavior that preoccupies him. Instead

of presenting a theory of communicative action to supplement Weber, he produces a concept of anticom communicative action to supplement the anti-normative description of modern life that is to be the focus of his fourth section.

To argue that substantive rationality does not often occur in the principal institutional spheres of contemporary life, as he does in the fourth section, Habermas must demonstrate that communicative action is sharply bounded. He must show that instrumental-strategic action involves neither shared understanding nor the intent to communicate, which depends on such understanding. This attempt is what his third section is all about. Habermas constructs an ideal-typical dichotomy of "instrumental-versus-communicative action," and he overloads this contrast with heavy conflationary baggage. All actions can be distinguished, he insists, according to whether they are oriented to success (i.e., strategic considerations) or understanding (i.e., communication). If action is oriented to understanding, he maintains, it is motivated by the desire to create a harmonious relation between the actor and his environment: "In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions" (p. 288). To communicate, then, is the same as to agree: "Reaching understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement among speaking and acting subjects." Now, because strategic, instrumental action implies competition and often conflict, it cannot be termed communicative. Habermas describes it as "the noncommunicative employment of knowledge" (p. 10).

This dichotomy does not seem valid. It seems to reflect a theoretical overreaction that conflates empirical, ideological, and epistemological issues. First, the distinction has a clear ideological intent. Habermas maintains that "the utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals" (p. 398). His definition of communication, in other words, is a scarcely concealed translation of the requisites for ideal political democracy. In contrast to strategic action where force and deception may be used, in communicative action participants are said to pursue their aims "without reservation in order to arrive at an agreement that will provide the basis for a consensual coordination of individually pursued plans of action" (pp. 295-96). Or again, as Habermas writes at an earlier point, "This concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech" (p. 10).

My point is not that such ideological ambitions are illegitimate. Far from it. Rather I am suggesting that Habermas's desire to achieve such unconstrained and cooperative social relationships is not presented as an evaluative position but as part of the very definition of his presuppositions about action. Communications = agreement is a wishful equation. Shorn of the ideological hopes placed in it, communication qua communi-

cations does not necessitate cooperation. Nor do conflict and strategizing necessarily imply a lack of understanding. Certainly there are some acts, like war and murder, that do not “depend on” understanding in the traditional sense. A bomb can be dropped and murder can be committed against people who do not have the slightest idea what the meaning of this act is for the perpetrator. Such acts, moreover, can be affected whether those subject to them have any understanding or not. However, even in these physically coercive acts, understanding still plays a vital role. Murder and war are usually carried out within a “meaningful” perspective because murderers and soldiers usually understand their acts in specific ways. The issue, then, is not lack of understanding but lack of reciprocal or mutual understanding. Habermas claims an epistemological difference: whether knowledge involves understanding. But what is really at stake is an empirical difference: the degree to which understanding is mutual and supportive. The inevitable analytic interpenetration of interpretation and strategizing is even more clearly illustrated with acts that are not physically coercive, with strategic actions like huckstering and deceit. The success of these actions depends not only on the perpetrator’s intricate understanding of the meaning of his victim’s actions but on the victim’s understanding of his interlocutor’s actions in an “objectively interpretable” way. Again, what is lacking is not understanding or communication, but reciprocal understanding and supportive communication.

Actions form an empirically variable continuum in which constant analytic dimensions are given different weights. Understanding is a component of all action; so is strategic consideration (Alexander 1984a). Whether action will be cooperative or conflictual depends on how these dimensions are filled in, on what concrete empirical form they take in specific historical situations. We can understand, now, why Habermas goes out of his way to reject an “analytic” approach to the distinction between understanding and strategy. “In identifying strategic action and communicative action types,” he writes, “I am assuming that concrete actions can be classified from these points of view. I do not want to use the terms ‘strategic’ and ‘communicative’ only to designate two analytic aspects under which the same action could be described” (p. 286; see also p. 292).

It is as if Habermas misconstrues the very distinction between cultural and social systems that informed his discussion of Weber. For Parsons these were analytic distinctions, culture referring to the meaningful organization of the symbols that inform human action, and society to the actual behavior of real people. To abstract the “understanding” of partners in a real interaction is to point toward the analytic dimension of the cultural system. To describe their degree of conflict or cooperation is to refer to issues that result from the organization of the social system itself. In his discussion of communication, it seems, Habermas wants to tie social system processes directly to cultural ones. He erases the analytic distinction by a rhetorical device that occurs throughout his third section.

Writing about speech, he refers repeatedly to its "binding (or bonding) effect" (e.g., see p. 294). Speech not only binds people to an understanding (through their participation in the cultural system); it also bonds them together in solidarity (through their integration in the social system). In his first systematic elaboration of his communication theory, written in the mid-1970s, this conflation is already apparent. "I shall speak of the success of a speech act," he wrote, "only when the hearer not only understands the meaning of the sentence uttered but also actually enters into the relationship intended by the speaker" (1979, p. 59). Meaning is cultural; relationships are social. They need not necessarily be the same.

It is not at all clear to me, moreover, that this radical distinction is justified by the very analytic philosophy on which Habermas draws. Habermas legitimates the strategic/communicative dichotomy through a certain reading of Austin's work. One of the pioneers of ordinary language philosophy, Austin developed a contrast between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Habermas equates illocutionary with communicative and perlocutionary with strategic, suggesting that Austin's dichotomy parallels, explains, and supports his own. Two questions immediately present themselves. First, does Habermas's dichotomy fairly capture what Austin meant to do? Second, is Austin's original intention relevant anyway? Without claiming to present an authoritative interpretation of what remains an enormously complex philosophical discussion, I would like to suggest that the answer to the first question is no, but to the second, yes.

It is very important not to forget Austin's original claim that speaking is doing. It was for this reason that he introduced into language philosophy the term "performative utterances," and it is this notion that forms the background for the famous set of lectures, *How to Do Things with Words*, which provides the most significant reference for Habermas's work. Austin insists at the outset of these lectures that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (1962, p. 6). In performing speech, actors have intentions, and they want to achieve goals. Because they speak in circumstances, or situations, they must communicate in ways that are appropriate. To do so, their purposive action is thoroughly enmeshed in convention.

If Austin never abandons this basic conception, why does he introduce the distinction between actions that are illocutionary and those that are perlocutionary? Perhaps because he starts from the assumption that most acts are speeches and not simply that most speeches are acts. He wants, therefore, to distinguish, within the rubric of performative utterances, different kinds of acts (see, e.g., Austin 1962, pp. 108, 109, and *passim*). Illocutionary acts refer to utterances, such as informing, ordering, warning, and undertaking, that have in themselves—as words enmeshed in conventions—a certain force. Perlocutionary acts, in contrast, are utterances that by being said bring about or achieve something outside of the speech situation. Thus, an illocutionary act can be captured in the statement "In saying it I was warning him," whereas a perlocutionary act is

described in the statement "By saying it I convinced him, or surprised him, or got him to stop" (Austin 1962, p. 109). Austin himself remarks that "it is the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions which seems likeliest to give trouble" (1962, p. 109), and his attempt to make the distinction initiated an argument that has by no means subsided. For our purposes, however, certain points seem relatively clear.

Although the differences between these categories relate to their intended reference to extra-speech act effects, this is not the same as the distinction that Habermas evokes to separate strategic and communicative action. In the first place, the extraspeech effects of perlocutionary actions depend on a listener's understanding of the content of the speech. This means that strategic action, which Habermas equates with perlocutionary, could not, in fact, succeed without communication and understanding. To establish just such a connection actually seems to be Austin's intention when he first introduces the distinction. There is a sense, he writes, in which to perform "an illocutionary act, may also be to perform an act of another kind": "Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, of the speaker, or of other persons; and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an action in the nomenclature of which reference is made either only obliquely, or not at all, to the performance of the illocutionary act. We shall call the performance of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act" (Austin 1962, p. 101). The gist of this statement is that illocutionary and perlocutionary acts can only be analytically differentiated. Illocutionary acts "normally" have consequential effects on the environment. If these effects are the principal intention of the speaker, if the act of creating understanding is significant to the speaker only as a vehicle for realizing this effect, then this act can be called perlocutionary.

But if strategic or perlocutionary acts are intended by Austin to include understanding, so also are communicative, or illocutionary, acts intended to include strategizing. Whereas Habermas defines communicative understanding as completely divorced from the strategic calculation of effects, Austin defines illocution as a type of performance. "I must point out," he insists after an initial effort at distinguishing perlocution from illocution, "that the illocutionary act as distinct from the perlocutionary is connected with the production of effects in a certain sense" (1962, p. 115). He goes on to emphasize that "unless a certain effect is achieved, the illocutionary act will not have been happily, successfully performed." True, successful effect is defined here as "bringing about the understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution" (1962, p. 116) rather than as an effect on the environment separated from speech. But Austin insists that in illocution "an effect must still be achieved." Illocutionary understanding, then, can never occur without the calculation of effects and the purposive direction of action toward that end.

Because Habermas is an acute reader of texts and himself a splendid

philosopher, it is not surprising that one can find in his discussion the implicit recognition that Austin's categories may not, after all, support his own. For example, introducing Austin's statement (which I quoted above) that illocutionary acts "normally produce certain consequential effects," Habermas alters the meaning of this statement by writing that Austin is suggesting that this happens "sometimes" (p. 289). And he turns it quite inside out by describing the phenomenon that "sometimes" occurs as illocution having a role within perlocution rather than vice versa. Then, after developing his argument, which he claims is based on Austin's own illocution/perlocution distinction, Habermas suggests that Austin was confused because he did not make the distinction as cleanly and radically as Habermas himself. "Austin confuses the picture," he suggests, "by not treating those interactions . . . as different in type" (p. 294). But was this a confusion on Austin's part or a powerful insight? In attempting to justify his own claim, Habermas inadvertently justifies Austin's position. "Austin did not keep these two cases separate as different types of interaction," he writes, "because he was inclined to identify acts of communication, that is, acts of reaching understanding, with the interactions coordinated by speech acts" (p. 295). This was, indeed, exactly Austin's point. Most speech acts are performative, and illocutions certainly are concerned with interactive effects.

It can even be argued that Habermas himself recognizes the validity of Austin's logic, for in the course of criticizing Austin he introduces residual categories that undermine his own more radical position. Describing an actor engaging in different types of illocution, for example, Habermas suggests that the person "is acting communicatively and cannot at all produce perlocutionary effects *at the same level of interaction*" (p. 294). Does this not imply that instead of distinguishing types of actions, one should distinguish among different levels within an action? If illocution and perlocution are simply different levels of a single act, is this not an analytic rather than a concrete distinction? In fact, Habermas later acknowledges the "problem" of "distinguishing and identifying in natural situations actions oriented to understanding from actions oriented to success" (p. 331). The problem seems to be that "not only do illocutions appear in strategic-action contexts, but perlocutions appear in contexts of communicative action" (p. 331). In an apparent effort to explain this anomaly, he introduces the notion of "phases" of the interaction process, trying to convince us that "strategic *elements* within a use of language oriented to reaching understanding can be distinguished from strategic *actions*" (p. 331). Such ad hoc reasoning may avoid explicit acknowledgment of the analytical interpenetration of strategy and communication, but it amounts to an implicit recognition.

V

In my discussion thus far I have sketched both a positive and a negative side to Habermas's effort to ground critical rationality in ordinary lan-

guage. In a positive vein, his insight into the validity claims of ordinary language allows him to see how substantively rational behavior actually permeates the modern world. This insight allows Habermas not only to transcend the reductionist and ultimately elitist approach of the orthodox Frankfurt school but also—in combination with the other theoretical traditions that he employs—to move beyond Weber's rationalization theory in a decisive sense. All of this allows him to insert a more critical edge into the normative-evolutionary tradition associated with Parsons. We have just seen, however, that there is also a negative side to Habermas's communication theory because he also uses it, ironically, to reduce the scope of rationality: first by eliminating understanding from strategic action and second by idealizing understanding in an impractical way. Instead of elaborating the potential of Weberian theory and transcending "critical" orthodoxy, this negative utilization of language theory undermines Weber's rationalization theory by pushing it back toward orthodox critical theory itself.

However, Habermas's communication theory also, in my view, suffers from quite another problem, even when it embraces rationality in the more acceptable, expanded sense. By considering what I will call the "cultural weakness" of Habermas's work, I will not only be engaging in one final interpretive criticism; I will, in addition, try to show how his theory's most far-reaching points must be extended in an important way.

From the beginning of his work on communication, Habermas has claimed that engaging in communication assumes the capacity for reaching rational agreement. Understanding is identified with agreement, and agreement is identified with "unconstrained cooperation." Agreement, understanding, and the lack of constraint add up to rationality. Lack of constraint is a crucial qualification, because it implies that the actors involved in communication are fully conscious of what they say and do. Not only are they free from external material constraints; they are also free from internalized controls that would place the meaning and the origins of their behavior out of their conscious reach. If they are not depicted as the complete masters of their behavior, they cannot confidently be described as able to alter it in a manner that can ensure cooperative understanding.

Why does Habermas make this claim, and how does he justify it? In the background, of course, there is his commitment to traditional democratic theory about voluntary cooperation: people must be endowed with conscious rationality if their contracts are to be conceived as having been voluntarily entered into. A more direct justification for this insistence comes from Piaget. The point of Piaget's formal-operational stage, and the stage of "moral consciousness" that Kohlberg associated with it, is that individuals become capable of rethinking the foundations of their actions and are no longer subordinate to socially given meanings as such. In this sense, Piaget is part of the rationalist tradition that starts with Descartes—his contribution having been to revolutionize our under-

standing of the social and mental preparation on which the rationality of an adult depends.

Habermas shares this rationalist emphasis on conscious activity. His early description of "thematization"—the ability to argue rationally about the foundations of behavior—strikingly resembles Piaget's. "Moral consciousness," he writes, "signifies the ability to make use of interactive competence for *consciously* processing morally relevant conflicts (1979, p. 88). What is left unsaid, but remains, in my view, enormously important, is that this conscious thematization does not have a cultural base. It is rooted in the cognitive and moral capacities of actors, capacities that are the result of developmental encounters that have, pragmatically and experientially, changed the objective structure of the self. In this same early discussion, for example, Habermas finds a parallel to his own notion of communicative agreement in Gouldner's theory that reciprocity underlies all interactions. In view of his own commitment to the capacity for absolute consciousness, however, Habermas feels compelled to qualify even Gouldner's theory in an anticulturalist way. He insists that Gouldner's expression, "the norm of reciprocity," is not "entirely apt." Why not? Because "reciprocity is not a norm but is fixed in the general structures of possible interaction" (1979, p. 88).

If understanding means unconstrained, conscious, rational agreement, can it be related to systems of signs, to symbols that are patterned by deep structures or codes? It would seem that it cannot, and for this reason it seems to me that communications theory has an antagonistic relationship to the theory of culture. This antagonism becomes paramount in the second volume of Habermas's book, where he interprets Durkheim not as the originator of a symbolic sociology that formed one of the bases for structuralism and semiotics but as a theorist who explained how modernity's "communicative liquification" of the sacred allows rational discourse. The elements of such an antisemiotic approach can already be seen in the volume under review, particularly in the early discussion of the contrast between "mythical" and "modern" modes of thought.

Habermas turns to this contrast to demonstrate that his communication theory is not ahistorical, as some Marxist critics have claimed. What he actually succeeds in demonstrating, in my view, is that his theory is overly historicist. He portrays the movement of modern society away from mythical thought in a manner that supports his contention that communicative rationality allows conscious mastery of thought and action. The problem with mythical thought, he believes, is that it fuses, and therefore confuses, the personal world of the actor, the objective world of society, and the subjective world of thought and ideas. Myth, for example, is based on "the concretistic relation between meaning of expressions and the states-of-affairs represented [by them]" (p. 49). This confusion is clear in magic, where the names of objects are invoked as if they were directly connected to the objects themselves. This confusing intermingling of worlds is also evident in the mythical belief that "moral failure is conceptually interwoven with physical failure, as is evil with the

harmful, and good with the healthy and the advantageous" (p. 48). The problem with such intermingling is that it prevents the differentiation of self, morality, and society on which all critical thinking is based. "A linguistically constituted worldview," Habermas writes, "can be identified with the world-order itself to such an extent that it cannot be perceived *as* an interpretation of the world that is subject to error and open to criticism." In this sense, "the concept of the world is dogmatically invested with a specific content" (pp. 50–51). Rational rather than mythical communication becomes possible, Habermas believes, only when such mythical intermingling has ended. "Actors who raise validity claims," he writes, "have to avoid materially prejudicing the relation between language and reality" (pp. 50–51). Only if this prejudice is avoided can "the content of a linguistic worldview . . . be detached from the assumed world-order itself." At a later point, Habermas makes this antithesis between rationality and mythical thought even more pointed. The cultural tradition, he writes, "must be so far stripped of its dogmatism as to permit in principle that interpretation stored in tradition be placed in question and subjected to critical revision" (p. 71).

But this antithesis, like several others Habermas has described, is overdrawn. It is true and not true at the same time. There has certainly been an enormous differentiation of culture, society, and personality, and it is this differentiation that has allowed consciousness and rationality to emerge in the modern sense. The "problem" for social theories of modernity, however, is that the arbitrary, unconscious, fused, and, yes, irrational elements of culture have not at the same time disappeared. Language and worldview continue to predefine our understanding of the object world before we even begin to subject it to our conscious rationality. Nor can we regard our linguistically structured worldviews as simply humanly constructed interpretations, which are therefore completely open to criticism, since our "regard" is, ineluctably, conditioned by the preconscious world itself. It follows, then, that there is an inevitable investment of the world of things and the world of ideas with some kind of dogmatic, uncritical status. Modern, rational people continue to infuse values, institutions, and even mundane physical locations with the mystery and awe of the sacred. It is for this reason that physical, social, and moral reality is organized into centers and peripheries. Even for modern people, moreover, there continues to be some intermingling of biological and social life. We "concretize" moral rules by equating their violation with pollution, dividing the "forces" of morality into the pure and the dangerous. We also concretize abstract relationships by constantly evoking metaphors and other tropes. Finally, there seems to be abundant evidence that moderns still seek to understand the contingency of everyday life in terms of narrative traditions whose simplicity and resistance to change make them hard to distinguish from myths.

None of this implies the elimination of rationality in Habermas's sense. What it does mean is that there is much, much more besides. It means that deeply held conceptions of self, nature, society, beauty, and goodness

continue to structure modern action in a relatively arbitrary way. Yes, these convictions can be thematized and subjected to rational argument, but such demands for justification must proceed within the confines of some given cultural parameters. Rationality, moreover, is not simply the psychological capacity for such arguments. It is itself a system of significations. For rationality to develop, it must be invested with cultural power. This is usually done by connecting "rationality" to the sacred centers of a modern society through mythical stories about the society's "rational" origins. The Maoist conception of rationality connected its neo-Confucian understanding of value and will to a revolutionary Marxist theory of material inequality as producing change. The French Left's conception of rationality is more solidaristic, linking communal notions from Catholicism with more rationalist principles from the Revolution. American rationality cannot be separated from commonwealth ideas about republican virtue, Puritan ideas about individual rights, and revolutionary distrust of power. These examples are only suggestive. For obvious, but nonetheless regrettable, reasons, the relation between rationality and tradition is an enormously complex problem. The ideological complexes of "enlightenment" and "reaction" have ensured, moreover, that the problem has scarcely begun to be understood.

That the relation exists, however, points to a serious weakness not only in Habermas's account of contemporary society but also in his theory of communicative action itself. We are not faced with a contrast between, on the one hand, constraint through institutional coercion (established via media like money and power) and, on the other, voluntary cooperation freed from constraint altogether. To the extent that cooperation is achieved, it is voluntary only in a very conditional sense. It is always mediated by cultural constraints outside any single actor's conscious control and, for that matter, by institutionally coercive processes that can never be completely superseded. We are fortunate that rationality has recently become more available for resolving disputes, but it is neither theoretically justifiable nor politically necessary to envision this rationality in a culturally and institutionally free-floating way.

CONCLUSION: THE MARXIAN DILEMMA

In the second volume of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, I suggest that the most original theorists of 20th-century Marxism have been caught inside the "Marxian dilemma" (1982, pp. 345–70). Faced with Marx's instrumental approach to action and his deterministic understanding of order, these theorists have sought a more normative and subjective theory of action and a more voluntaristic, multidimensional theory of order. It is from this desire that the notions of action as "praxis" and superstructures as "relatively autonomous" have emerged. But if these theorists were to remain within the Marxist tradition, they could not step entirely outside the boundaries of Marx's thought. To avoid this, they have done two

things: first, they have usually introduced some notion of determinism “in the last instance”; second, they have left their revisions of Marx so extraordinarily ambiguous that they can be construed only as residual categories. These options form the horns of the Marxist dilemma. In this century, Marxist thought has careened between the Scylla of indeterminacy and the Charybdis of the last instance. The dilemma can only be resolved, and a systematic, multidimensional theory obtained, by stepping outside Marxism itself.

With the publication of *Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas intends to do just that. He seeks to step outside Marxism and create a new theoretical tradition. In his earlier work, he struggled with the Marxian dilemma, his loyalty eventually leading him down the path of the last instance and indeterminacy. His theory of communication, in contrast, allows him to offer a systematic alternative to the impoverished “action” of traditional Marxism, and his developmental theory of normative rationality—which brings together Piaget, Parsons, and speech theory—allows him to describe social order in a much more rich and complex way. These presuppositional revisions have also allowed him to avoid one of the central ideological embarrassments of 20th-century Marxism because he can root his critical perspective in immanent processes that are both empirical and “rational” at the same time.

My complaint has been that Habermas does not go quite far enough. His residual loyalty to the Frankfurt school’s *Weltanschauung* leads him to reintroduce themes of instrumental rationality and the determination of lifeworlds by material systems (in the last instance to be sure). For this reason, Habermas is forced to qualify the multidimensional theory he has introduced, so much so that at various points these innovations become only ambiguously related, and sometimes downright residual, to the argument at hand. But if Habermas has not gone far enough for me, he has certainly gone much too far for others. It is far enough to have created a remarkable book.

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