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Jürgen Habermas

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This chapter provides a summary of the main intellectual contributions that the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas has made to contemporary social theory. To this end, it is divided into six parts. The first part gives an overview of Habermas's life and career. The second part offers a synopsis of Habermas's principal areas of research, drawing attention to his key works. The third part sheds light on the epistemological assumptions underlying Habermas's conception of critical theory. The fourth part explains the central features of Habermas's interpretation of three intellectual traditions that are crucial to his own theoretical project. The fifth part elucidates the core elements of Habermas's plea for a paradigm shift – commonly known as the “linguistic turn” – in critical theory. The sixth part grapples with the main limitations and shortcomings of Habermas's *oeuvre*, notably with regard to his theory of communicative action.

Habermas's Life and Career

Jürgen Habermas was born on June 18, 1929, in Düsseldorf, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Three biographical elements played a formative role in his early life: First, owing to his cleft palate, for which he underwent corrective surgery twice during his childhood, he found it challenging to build social relationships. Due to this medical condition, he had great difficulty in uttering words and sentences clearly, for which he was frequently teased and bullied at school. Experiencing the psychosocial consequences of living with a speech disability, he became highly sensitive to the existential centrality of communicative processes and the formation of meaningful intersubjective relations. Because of his personal experience of discrimination related to his cleft palate, his preferred method of communication soon became the written, rather than the spoken, word. Undoubtedly, his early exposure to marginalization processes had a profound impact upon his intellectual interests, notably his sustained concern with the nature of linguistically mediated communication.

Second, Habermas was deeply affected by Germany's attempt to come to terms with its recent past – above all, with the atrocities of the Second World War, National Socialism, and the Holocaust. Throughout his career, the “dark side” of modernity has been a major object of inquiry in Habermas's thinking. An enthusiastic defender of “the unfinished project of modernity” in general and of the Enlightenment in

particular, Habermas, insisting that it would be a mistake to “throw out the baby with the bath water,” has sought to expose the sociohistorical conditions that led to the rise of authoritarianism, fascism, imperialism, and large-scale conflicts (Habermas, 1989a, 1996a, 1996b).

Third, Habermas grew up in a middle-class, Protestant, and rather conservative family. He described his father, Ernst Habermas, former Executive Director of the Cologne Chamber of Industry and Commerce, as a Nazi sympathizer. His grandfather was the Director of the Protestant seminary in Gummersbach. The staunchly conventional, Protestant, and value-conservative milieu in which Habermas was raised left a profound mark on him, providing him with firsthand insights into the political culture of postwar Germany, especially in relation to the tension-laden mixture of collective guilt, memory, and denial.

Habermas studied philosophy, psychology, history, German literature, and economics at the Universities of Göttingen (1949–1950), Zürich (1950–1951), and Bonn (1951–1954). He obtained a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Bonn (1954); his dissertation, supervised by Erick Rothacker, was entitled *Das Absolute und die Geschichte. Von der Zwiespältigkeit in Schellings Denken* (*The Absolute and History: On the Schism in Schelling's Thought*) (Habermas, 1954). After completing his doctoral studies, Habermas began to work as a researcher under Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno at the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main (1956–1961). Habermas enjoyed Adorno's strong support; yet, Horkheimer was less enthusiastic about the young scholar's research, arguing his *Habilitationsschrift* had to be thoroughly revised.

As a result of this intellectual disagreement, Habermas decided to complete his *Habilitationsschrift* at Marburg University, under the supervision of the Marxist scholar Wolfgang Abendroth. This work – entitled *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*) – turned out to be one of Habermas's (1989b [1962]) most influential studies. In 1961, he took on the role of Privatdozent at Marburg University, before moving to Heidelberg, where, at the instigation of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith, in 1962 he obtained the position of “Extraordinary Professor” (the equivalent of a Professor without a Chair) in Philosophy. It was in the same year that Habermas, for the first time in his academic career, was granted significant public recognition, owing to the publication of his *Habilitationsschrift*.

In 1964, Habermas – strongly encouraged by Adorno – moved back to Frankfurt to take over the Chair in Philosophy and Sociology previously held by Horkheimer, a position that he would hold until 1971. Between 1966 and 1970, the philosopher Albrecht Wellmer worked with Habermas as his academic assistant. In 1971, Habermas accepted the position of Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Scientific-Technical World in Starnberg (close to Munich), where he worked until 1983 and where he completed his magnum opus *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (*The Theory of Communicative Action*) (Habermas, 1987a [1981]). In 1984, he was elected a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of

Arts and Sciences. Eventually, Habermas returned to Frankfurt, where he took up his Chair at the University, in addition to becoming the Director of the Institute for Social Research. Since retiring in 1993, he has continued to be a prolific writer.

Habermas holds the position of Permanent Visiting Professor at Northwestern University as well as the position of Theodor Heuss Professor at the New School for Social Research. Among other awards, he received the Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz-Preis of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in Germany (1986), the Premio Príncipe de Asturias in Spain (2003), the Kyoto Laureate in the Arts and Philosophy Section in Japan (2004), and the Holberg International Memorial Prize in Norway (2005). Habermas is widely regarded as the most prominent German social philosopher of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Habermas has taught, supervised, and mentored a number of scholars, who, in their subsequent careers, have become influential in their own right. Among his most famous disciples are Herbert Schnädelbach (1936–), Claus Offe (1940–), Jóhann P. Árnason (1940–), Hans-Herbert Kögler (1960–), Hans Joas (1948–), Axel Honneth (1949–), and Rainer Forst (1964–).

Habermas's Principal Areas of Research

One of the most striking features of Habermas's work is that it draws upon numerous traditions of thought. His engagement with wide-ranging sources of analysis is reflected in the depth and breadth of his intellectual profile, which has been profoundly shaped by the following fields of inquiry (and canonical thinkers): (1) philosophy (Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Dilthey, Husserl, Gadamer); (2) sociology (Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Mead, Parsons, Luhmann); (3) critical theory (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse); (4) linguistic philosophy (Wittgenstein, Austin, Strawson, Toulmin, Searle, Chomsky); (5) psychology (Piaget, Kohlberg); and (6) history (Nolte, Hildebrand, Stürmer, Hillgruber).

One of the most prolific writers of his generation, Habermas has produced an impressively large volume of books, book chapters, and journal and newspaper articles. The assumption underlying much of his work is that communicative action – that is, action oriented toward reaching mutual understanding – constitutes the ontological cornerstone of social order. Put differently,

social order is possible only as a communicative order, the purposive reproduction of humanity is unthinkable without the communicative coordination of society, and the substantive impact of social transformation always depends on the coordinative power of communicative interaction. (Susen, 2010: 104)

Given the extensive scope and eclectic constitution of Habermas's writings, it is difficult to offer a comprehensive overview capable of doing justice to the complexity of his *oeuvre*. It is possible, however, to identify at least ten areas of research that are central to Habermas's communication-theoretic undertaking: (1) the public sphere, (2) knowledge, (3) language and communication, (4) morality, (5) ethics and law, (6) social evolution, (7) legitimation, (8) democracy, (9) religion, and (10) modernity.

The concern with linguistically mediated communication is central to Habermas's engagement with these areas of investigation:

1. *Public spheres* are sustained by processes of linguistically mediated communication, in which, in principle, all citizens – as legally recognized subjects capable of speech and actions – can participate.
2. *Knowledge claims* – irrespective of whether they refer primarily to states of objectivity, normativity, or subjectivity – are conceivable only as linguistically articulated validity claims.
3. *Human language* is a product of human communication, that is, of our species-constitutive capacity to establish a symbolically mediated relation to reality by raising assertive, regulative, and expressive claims to validity.
4. *Morality* cannot be dissociated from the discursive force of communicative rationality, since humans have the ability to make informed judgments, and to take responsibility for their actions, insofar as they – as reasoning beings – are capable of speech, justification, and reflection.
5. *Ethical and judicial* conventions vary across different life-forms, illustrating that socially constructed realities are regulated by historically specific sets of communicatively sustained, and discursively negotiated, normativities.
6. *Social evolution* is crucially shaped by language, which, as a species-constitutive tool, has provided humanity with one of its most powerful civilizational resources.
7. *Legitimacy* – regardless of whether it is social, cultural, or political – is unattainable without its carriers' ability to reach a minimal degree of rational acceptability.
8. *Democracy* relies on linguistically equipped citizens, willing to coordinate their actions and decisions by engaging in communicative discourse, by means of which they reach mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) and, if necessary, agreements (*Einverständnisse*).
9. *Religion*, notwithstanding the projective power of its metaphysical imaginaries, is produced and reproduced on the basis of communicative processes between those who adhere to it, just as it may be discursively challenged by those who are critical of it.
10. *Modernity* cannot be divorced from communicative rationality, whose empowering potential is reflected in its capacity to contribute to both individual and collective emancipation from mechanisms of social domination.

Considering that his work is firmly situated within the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School, it is no surprise that Habermas attributes great importance to the role of social critique (*Sozialkritik*) in relation to the aforementioned fields of inquiry (Susen, 2010: 106–117):

1. *Public spheres* are shaped by public critique. Intersubjective processes of reasoning, arguing, debating, and disagreeing are essential to the construction of democratically constituted public spheres.

2. *Knowledge claims*, since they constitute assertions concerning both epistemic validity and social legitimacy, are criticizable. By virtue of their critical capacity, which is embedded in their linguistic competence, human actors are able to make judgments not only about the acceptability of claims to epistemic validity but also about the bias stemming from the presence, or the lack, of social legitimacy.
3. *Human language* has developed, and continues to develop, out of human communication. If our ability to make critical judgments about objective, normative, and subjective aspects of reality is inextricably linked to our capacity to establish a linguistically mediated relation to other members of society, then our reflexivity is part and parcel of our daily search for different forms and different degrees of intelligibility. Critique constitutes an integral component of human language.
4. *Morality* is, by definition, subject to critique. The existence of individual autonomy and responsibility illustrates our species-distinctive ability to convert our critical capacity into the ultimate resource for decision-making processes, guided by the certainty that our actions possess ethical value only insofar as they can be regarded as morally defensible.
5. *Ethical and judicial conventions* change across time and space. Their acceptability is constantly being assessed and reassessed by those who produce, reproduce, and transform them by virtue of their critical capacity. The normative parameters underlying the interactions taking place in our lifeworlds are always – at least potentially – open to scrutiny and revision.
6. *Social evolution*, because it is mediated by linguistic processes, is crucially influenced by human actors' ability to make judgments about reality that are structured by the evaluative resources of their critical capacity. This disposition equips human beings with the species-distinctive faculty to convert objective reason (*Verstand*), normative reason (*Vernunft*), and subjective judgment (*Urteilkraft*) into motivational driving forces of history.
7. *Legitimacy* – notably, political legitimacy – is contingent upon its defenders' efforts to ensure that it enjoys a minimal degree of rational acceptability. As critical entities, human actors are endowed with the ability to make the legitimacy of social arrangements conditional upon the discursive power inherent in communicative rationality.
8. The consolidation of substantive variants of *democracy* constitutes one of the most noteworthy civilizational achievements of humanity. There is no genuine democracy without critique, since collective decision-making processes possess no genuine legitimacy unless those who are involved in, as well directly or indirectly affected by them engage in intersubjective processes of opinion- and will-formation.
9. *Religion* continues to be a dominant force in the contemporary world. Religious and nonreligious citizens need to enter into critical dialogue and engage with one another if they seek to take on the challenge of building, and living within, a pluralistically structured society. Mobilizing the evaluative resources of their critical capacity, they are obliged to accept that, when determining the course of

their practices in accordance with the forceless force of the better argument, the grounds for rational validity are irreducible to metaphysical imaginaries.

10. The term *modernity* describes a historical condition that converts the emancipatory potential of communicative rationality into the cornerstone of its own possibility. As such, it constitutes a discursively mediated reality, whose development is contingent upon its inhabitants' ability to determine their destiny by engaging in debate and controversy. Ever since it came into existence, the presence of modernity has been intimately interrelated with the critique of the multiple tension-laden elements that have made its existence possible in the first place.

Habermas's Epistemology

When reflecting on the epistemological assumptions underlying Habermas's conception of critical theory, we need to consider the relationship between (a) knowledge and critique, (b) knowledge and interest, and (c) knowledge and language (Susen, 2007).

The relationship between knowledge and critique concerns the possibility of questioning the taken-for-grantedness of behavioral, ideological, or institutional patterns of social existence. Owing to their critical capacity, human subjects are able to distance themselves from the objective, normative, and subjective elements of reality. To the extent that critical capacity is embedded in communicative competence, the normative foundations of social critique can be located in the rational foundations of ordinary language. As critical entities, human actors can reflect upon the physical, cultural, and personal dimensions of their existence.

Far from representing a straightforward affair, however, critical reflection is characterized by the epistemological ambivalence of immanence and transcendence. All individuals, irrespective of their respective degree of critical reflexivity, are situated within society. At the same time, as actors equipped with hermeneutic resources of judgment, individuals have the cognitive and evaluative ability to step back from their everyday spheres of existential immersion, thereby converting the validity of their common-sense assumptions into an object of scrutiny. One of the principal objectives of critical theory is to shed light on the tension between emancipation and domination, that is, between every individual's self-empowering potential and society's coercive power to undermine this potential.

Yet, "how can critical theory justify itself; how does it ground its own normative standpoint" (Pleasant, 1999: 155)? If they are serious about their endeavor, critical theorists must seek to identify the normative foundations of their own undertaking (see Finke, 2001 and Held, 1980). Discursively motivated actors may wish to defend seemingly universal values (such as "liberty," "equality," or "fraternity"), particular forms of governance (such as direct or representational democracy), or specific sets of rights (such as civil, political, social, cultural, sexual, or human rights). From a Habermasian perspective, it is imperative to

provide normative foundations on which to justify the civilizational significance of each of these concerns.

To the extent that “[e]very critical social theory is faced with the problem of constituting its grounds for critique” (Alexander, 1991: 49), critical social theorists need to concede that they are always already part of the conglomerate of human relations whose repressive features they aim to challenge. There is no such thing as a neutral, value-free, or disinterested form of critique, articulated from the privileged, pristine, and pure position of an untainted subject. All human actors – including the seemingly most critical ones – are situated within social networks of power.

To be clear, critical capacity can be regarded as both a *species-constitutive* and a *species-generative* capacity:

- As a *species-constitutive* capacity, it represents an anthropological invariant and, hence, a distinctively human competence. The ability to reflect upon the physical, cultural, and personal facets of our existence constitutes a unique faculty that, in a fundamental sense, forms part and parcel of what it means to be human. To be exact, critical capacity stands for both an interpretive and an interactive treasure of meaning-laden experience. As “an *interpretive* competence,” it permits us to attribute meaning to the world by reflecting on the way in which it presents itself to us in a contemplative manner; as an “*interactive* competence,” it enables us to attach meaning to the world by sharing and exchanging our perceptions, representations, and interpretations of reality with our fellow human beings (Habermas, 1987a [1981]: 118, 130).
- As a *species-generative* capacity, it constitutes an anthropological driving force and, thus, a distinctively self-formative competence. In this sense, it possesses concrete – that is, sociohistorical – relevance for who we are and who we have become as a species as well as, more importantly, for the degree to which we have been able to determine who we are and who we have become as a species by influencing the course of history. Critical capacity, on this account, constitutes an integral element of our ability to shape both our personal and our collective life-histories. Our “rational will that allows itself to be determined by good reasons” (Habermas, 2000: 328) puts us in the anthropologically privileged position of being able to claim authorship for both our individual and our social life-histories. “Insofar as the historical subjects, as mature and responsible [*mündig*] individuals, are in essence the subject of history,” their “reflective capacity of judgment constructs the progress of history” (Habermas, 1988a: 246). In short, we are a socio-constructive species able to write history by virtue of the purposive and imaginative resources inherent in critical capacity.

The relationship between knowledge and interest concerns the nexus between human cognition and human action. Our knowledge-constitutive interests (*Erkenntnisinteressen*) are embedded in our life-constitutive interests (*Lebensinteressen*). Our interest in generating knowledge about the world cannot be dissociated from our interest in determining our place within the world. The interpenetration of knowledge and interest is context-transcendent, in the sense that

these two constitutive elements of human life depend on one another in any social formation, past and present, lying at the core of the civilizational processes that shape the development of human life-forms (Susen, 2015: 140).

According to the early Habermas, the modern world is characterized by the emergence of three scientific spheres, whose existence emanates from three cognitive interests that are firmly embedded in the human condition: (1) the empirical-analytic sciences are driven by the technical cognitive interest in producing predictive knowledge, permitting the human subject to provide insightful explanations about, and to gain a substantial amount of methodically exercised control over, the physical world; (2) the historical-hermeneutic sciences are guided by the “practical cognitive interest [. . .] in the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding,” allowing for “a possible consensus among actors”; and (3) the critically oriented sciences are motivated by the “emancipatory cognitive interest” in human liberation from “dependence on hypostatized powers,” enabling actors not only to pursue but also to realize their “human interest in autonomy and responsibility [*Mündigkeit*]” (Habermas, 1987b: 308–311).

As purposive entities, we develop an instrumental relation to the world. As communicative entities, we establish an intelligible relation to the world. As reflective entities, we aim to build a self-empowering relation to the world. In short, the pursuit of utility, comprehensibility, and sovereignty is central to the daily construction of human reality.

In light of this tripartite constitution of the relationship between knowledge and interest, it seems necessary to draw a distinction between traditional theory and critical theory. In terms of their aims and goals, they possess a distinctive teleology. Traditional theories seek to explain and control particular aspects of the world, driven by instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). Critical theories endeavor to contribute to the enlightenment and emancipation of human actors, motivated by substantive rationality (*Wertrationalität*). In terms of their logical and cognitive structure, they possess a distinctive epistemology. Traditional theories are objectifying in the sense that they seek to detach themselves from their object of study, whereas critical theories seek to be reflective and self-referential in the sense that they concede that their production of knowledge is no less influenced by power relations than the social domain they set out to scrutinize.

In terms of their source of evidence, they possess a distinctive methodology. Traditional theories “require empirical confirmation through observation and experiment,” while critical theories posit that every claim to epistemic validity is embedded in structures of social legitimacy (Geuss, 1981: 55). The former purport to be committed to the ideal of objectively established, empirically substantiated, and universally defensible knowledge acquisition. The latter reject the scientific pursuit of objectivity, positivity, and universality, arguing that all “validity claims” are “legitimacy claims” (Susen, 2007: 257, Susen, 2015: 55, 200).

The relationship between knowledge and language concerns the symbolically mediated constitution of human existence. As linguistic entities, we attribute meaning to the world by virtue of language. Our daily use of, and immersion in, language

can be described as a paradoxical affair in that it constitutes a vehicle of both existential immanence and existential transcendence.

In terms of immanence, language provides a symbolically – that is, semantically, syntactically, and pragmatically – structured universe through which we encounter, and attach meaning to, the world. In terms of transcendence, language permits us to situate ourselves above and beyond our existence, enabling us to construct an interpretive domain shaped by the hermeneutic – that is, assertive, coordinative, expressive, communicative, and imaginative – functions inherent in the human search for meaning and intelligibility (Habermas, 1987b: 314). As linguistic beings, we can develop a sense of individual or collective autonomy, responsibility, intentionality, rationality, intelligibility, and agreeability. Moreover, as linguistic beings, we can build a sense of individual or collective *utopia*, anticipating that the ideal speech situation of unconstrained discourse is inherent in our communicative actions.

Our linguistic condition, then, is a hermeneutic condition: our involvement in life is inextricably linked to our daily search for meaning on the basis of different forms of understanding. Hermeneutics is universal because “understanding is the fundamental way in which human beings participate in the world” (Outhwaite, 1987: 62). We position ourselves within, and in relation to, the world by attributing meaning to the multiple aspects permeating, as well as surrounding, our existence. The search for symbolically mediated and linguistically organized modes of intelligibility constitutes a fundamental characteristic of our value-laden immersion in reality. As Gadamer (1976 [1967]: 25) states, “The phenomenon of understanding [. . .] shows the universality of human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries *everything* within it [. . .] because everything [. . .] is included in the realm of ‘understandings’ and understandability in which we move.” Epistemologically speaking, we do not have direct access to the world because our relation to reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is mediated by the interpretive power of linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*). We mobilize our linguistic resources (1) to make assertions about the world, (2) to coordinate our actions within the world, (3) to express our thoughts and feelings concerning the world, and (4) to communicate with other inhabitants of the world.

Habermas’s Critique of Aporia

Attempting to develop his own conceptual framework, Habermas has sought to overcome the aporias of several intellectual traditions upon which he draws, and which he proposes to revise, within the parameters of his own theoretical project. In this respect, the following currents of thought take center stage: (1) historical materialism, (2) early critical theory, and (3) philosophical hermeneutics. Historical materialism represents a philosophical cornerstone of Habermas’s critical theory. Yet, as much as Habermas’s framework draws upon key insights provided by Marx’s approach, the former seeks to overcome the principal drawbacks and pitfalls of the latter. Put differently, Habermas’s critical theory is firmly situated *within* the philosophical horizon of historical materialism while, at the same time,

aiming to move *beyond* it. From a Habermasian perspective, the main source of conceptual reductionism within Marxian thought is the paradigm of labor. Within the Marxian architecture of the human universe, labor is interpreted as the most fundamental anthropological invariant and driving force, shaping – if not, determining – both the constitution and the evolution of human condition. According to Habermas (1987b: 44–47), however, this historical-materialist worldview suffers from at least three major fallacies:

- *Productivist reductionism*: The productivist fallacy consists in the tendency to reduce the symbolic to the material dimensions of social life by portraying the former as an epiphenomenal manifestation of the latter. On this account, the forces of production constitute the engine of history.
- *Instrumentalist reductionism*: The instrumentalist fallacy consists in the tendency to regard the human capacity to establish a purposive, and technologically driven, relation to the world as the primary source of civilizational empowerment. On this interpretation, it appears that humanity has succeeded in shaping the course of history, first and foremost, by virtue of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), rather than communicative rationality (*kommunikative Rationalität*).
- *Positivist reductionism*: The positivist fallacy consists in the tendency to fall into the trap of both ontological and methodological reductionism. At the ontological level, it is based on the assumption that both the natural world and the social world are governed by underlying laws. At the methodological level, it is founded on the assumption that the scientific tools that permit us to study the natural world can be used to study the social world and that, consequently, the natural sciences and the social sciences are not fundamentally different. On this view, Marx is guilty of flirting with the ideal of a unified science (*Einheitswissenschaft*), capable of crossing seemingly artificial disciplinary boundaries.

In light of the aforementioned reflections, Habermas (1987a: 383) has made it his task to “free historical materialism from its philosophical ballast,” thereby seeking to contribute to the fruitful reconstruction of Marxist social theory. In essence, he aims to accomplish this by arguing that “the developments that led to the specifically human form of reproducing life – and thus to the initial state of social evolution – first took place in the structures of labor *and* language” (Habermas, 1984: 137). Contrary to productivist reductionism, humanity has succeeded in constructing the conditions of its existence by means of both economic production *and* critical reflection. Contrary to instrumentalist reductionism, human development is driven by both purposive-rational *and* communicative action. Contrary to positivist reductionism, it is imperative to draw an ontological distinction between the natural world and the social world, as well as a methodological distinction between the natural sciences and the social sciences, because we are both tool-making *and* meaning-producing entities, whose species-distinctive uniqueness can be grasped by combining, rather than opposing, the paradigm of explanation (*Erklären*) and the paradigm of understanding (*Verstehen*).

Firmly situated within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, early critical theory is of fundamental significance to Habermas's own undertaking. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the influence of Horkheimer and Adorno's writings on his intellectual trajectory. Yet, as much as Habermas shares their diagnostic concern with the social pathologies of modernity, he rejects their – in his view – overly pessimistic stance, epitomized in their critique of instrumental rationality. To be sure, Habermas does not deny the powerful role, let alone the existence, of instrumental rationality in the context of modern society. He insists, however, that it is misleading to overestimate its capacity to permeate every single aspect of reality and to annihilate the possibility of challenging its ostensible ubiquity by virtue of the emancipatory force inherent in communicative rationality.

To be precise, the paradigmatic obsession with instrumental reason is problematic for at least three reasons. First, it is *historically* reductive, since it undervalues the pivotal role played by progressive forces, as well as the wider significance of major civilizational achievements, in the construction of modern societies. Second, it is *sociologically* reductive, since it overlooks the multilayered constitution of the modern world, which contains both bright and dark, empowering and disempowering, progressive and regressive, positive and negative aspects. Finally, it is *philosophically* reductive, since it fails to recognize that there is no point in uncovering and criticizing relations of domination without building on both individual and collective resources of emancipation.

Habermas's endeavor to issue a "passport for critique" is motivated by the conviction that communicative rationality, expressed in our ability to reach mutual understanding, lies at the core of all societies, including those whose key domains of action coordination are colonized by instrumental rationality.

The hermeneutical tradition in philosophy occupies a central place in Habermas's project. Yet, Habermas proposes to replace "philosophical hermeneutics" with "critical hermeneutics" (Bubner, 1988). This paradigmatic shift is motivated by several central presuppositions.

First, critical hermeneutics recognizes the complexity of the social, insisting that, although language constitutes a foundational element of human reality, the latter cannot be reduced to the former. The multilayered constitution of language makes it irreducible to a conglomerate of symbolic relations. Insofar as Habermas's hermeneutics is based on what Thompson (1981: 3–4) refers to as "the elaboration of a critical and rationally justified theory for the interpretation of human action," it is strongly opposed to any form of "hermeneutic idealism" or "linguistic transcendentalism" and, hence, to the reduction of human action to language (Habermas, 1988b: 132, 119).

Second, critical hermeneutics recognizes the immediacy of the social, positing that language constitutes a product of social practices, as illustrated in the civilizational significance of communicative action. "The approach of linguistic analysis to the realm of social action is plausible only if internal relationships among symbols always imply relationships among actions. The grammar of languages would then be, in accordance with its immanent sense, a system of rules that determines connections between communication and possible praxis." On this view, even the

most abstract, formalized, and codified modes of language use are ultimately derived from the concrete, spontaneous, and intuitive forms of symbolically mediated communication unfolding in ordinary life (Habermas, 1988b: 118, 135).

Third, critical hermeneutics recognizes the transformability of the social, drawing attention to the fact that language constitutes both a structuring and a structured structure. According to Habermas (1988b: 147), “Horizons are open, and they shift; we wander into them and they in turn move with us.” As much as language shapes us, we shape language. Just as language defines the semantically, syntactically, and pragmatically structured boundaries of our capacity to attribute meaning to the world, we constantly define and redefine these boundaries by inventing and reinventing the language we use when performing acts of interpretive engagement. Communicative actors, in order to be able to use language, need to draw upon the prejudgmental structure (*Vorurteilsstruktur*) of language, thereby mobilizing the interpretive resources provided by the sociocultural background in which they find themselves immersed. The “absolutization of tradition” (Lafont, 1999: 136), however, results in hermeneutic conservatism, which is problematic to the degree that it hypostatizes the structuring power of linguistic structures, while undervaluing the structuring power of speakers. In brief, subjects capable of speech and action both reproduce *and* transform language.

Fourth, critical hermeneutics recognizes the ubiquity of the social, maintaining that a comprehensive account of symbolic forms needs to take into account both the interpreted and the interpreting aspects of meaning production. On this view, there is no social critique (*Sozialkritik*) unless it involves self-critique (*Selbstkritik*). Even when hermeneutic scholars seek to make the implicit explicit, reflect upon the unreflected, problematize the unproblematized, and uncover the covered, they are caught up in the prejudgmental structure (*Vorurteilsstruktur*) of language. Every truly critical form of interpretation requires readiness to engage in self-interpretation (see Giddens, 1977: 135–164; Habermas, 1987a: 110). To the extent that we are prepared to face up to the omnipresence of the social, we are in a position to admit that *all* actors – including the conceptually and methodologically most sophisticated interpreters – are shaped by power relations.

Finally, critical hermeneutics recognizes the contestability of the social, exploring the interpenetration of power and language. Far from being reducible to a transcendental vehicle of pristine reflexivity, language represents a thoroughlygoingly social “dimension which may be deformed through the exercise of power” (Thompson, 1981: 3). Language cannot be dissociated from power relations because it is constructed and reconstructed within horizons of social practices.

Habermas’s “Linguistic Turn”

This section elucidates the fundamental elements of Habermas’ plea for a paradigm shift commonly known as the linguistic turn in critical theory. In this respect, two levels of analysis are crucial: lifeworld/system and language/communication.

Lifeworld and System

The lifeworld constitutes the ontological base of society. In the most general sense, it can be defined as the lived world (*Lebenswelt*) or the experienced world (*monde vécu*). As such, it represents the sociohistorically situated realm of ordinary coexistence, as it is experienced by human actors in their everyday lives (Habermas, 1987c: 299). According to Habermas, every human lifeworld has three pillars: culture, society, and personality. Culture constitutes the interpretive background of the lifeworld. Society forms the integrative background of the lifeworld. Personality provides the identitarian background of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987c: 343). The construction of social existence is inconceivable without the interpretive, integrative, and identitarian functions of the lifeworld. The lifeworld is tantamount to the cradle of communicative rationality, for it is sustained by actions oriented toward mutual intelligibility.

The system constitutes the ontological “superstructure” of society. In the most general sense, it can be conceived of as the institutionalized extension of the lifeworld, illustrating the fact that every society depends on a specific degree of structural differentiation and institutional regulation. Habermas (1987a: 152) writes, “Systemic evolution is measured by the increase in a society’s steering capacity,” that is, by the expansion of its ability to regulate the behavioral patterns followed by its members on the basis of instrumental rationality. While the existence of the system presupposes the existence of the lifeworld, the coercive influence of the former tends to undermine the autonomy of the latter. The lifeworld is founded on the linguistic power of communicative rationality, whereas the system is driven by the de-linguistified power of functionalist rationality (Habermas, 1987a: 153–155). To the degree that modern society is characterized by the predominance of the system, functionalist rationality succeeds in permeating almost every single sphere of social life.

Habermas’s systems-theoretic conception of modernization reflects the attempt to reconstruct historical materialism by endorsing a broader notion of societal development than the one advocated by defenders of orthodox Marxism. According to Habermas’s (1987a: 339) account, the prevalent imperatives driving social evolution are systemic forces. The preponderance of functionalist rationality in modern society is due to the far-reaching influence of the two principal components of the system: (1) the state and (2) the economy. The key feature that these two systemic spheres have in common is that they are driven by functionalist rationality. The main dimension that separates them from one another, however, is the fact that they possess different “steering-media”: (1) power and (2) money (Habermas, 1987a: 154–160). Owing to the hegemonic impact of the state and the economy upon the development of society, almost every facet of everyday life is driven by two main tendencies: bureaucratization and commodification (Habermas, 1987a: 318–326).

Both the lifeworld and the system serve an integrative function. Yet, whereas social integration is provided by communicatively sustained interactions within the lifeworld, functional integration is guaranteed by instrumentally driven interactions

derived from the system. Thus, these two modes of societal integration are fundamentally different. Maeve Cooke (1994: 134) writes, "Corresponding to the distinction between social (lifeworld) and functional (system) integration, we can distinguish between the rationalization of the lifeworld and the rationalization of the system."

At first glance, it may appear that the system constitutes an entirely nonnormative sphere. When scrutinizing its role and effects in more detail, however, it becomes evident that the system's tendency to impose its functionalist logic upon almost all spheres of society reflects its capacity to make large parts of modern existence operate in accordance with its own normativity, which is governed by the maximization of profit, utility, and efficiency.

The examination of the tension-laden relationship between *lifeworld* and *system* is crucial to Habermas's architecture of the social. From a Habermasian perspective, the antinomy between lifeworld and system can be regarded as the most fundamental tension pervading modern societies. This tension is illustrated in the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. In essence, the colonization of the lifeworld is due to the system's capacity to impose the functionalist logic underlying the state and the economy upon key spheres of social reality (Habermas, 1987a: 332–335, 374–375). Lifeworld and system, then, can be differentiated on several levels: social integration *vs.* system integration, linguistification *vs.* de-linguistification, communicative reason *vs.* functionalist reason. To the degree that the communicatively constituted "base" of society, the lifeworld, is gradually colonized by its functionally regulated "superstructure," the system, modernity is shot through with the tension between two diametrically opposed forms of rationality (Giddens, 1987: 239). The relative autonomy of the system – which is demonstrated in its capacity to colonize almost all spheres of society and in its tendency to trigger significant social pathologies, such as alienation and anomie – needs to be problematized in terms of its historical contingency. Indeed, the hegemony of the system can be, and has been, challenged by numerous individual and collective actors aiming to regain control over their lifeworlds (Habermas, 1987a: 395–396; see also Ray, 1993: vii–xxi, 57–77). This reflects what Habermas (1996a: 38) describes as the "unfinished project of modernity," marked by the tension-laden relationship between communicative and functionalist rationality.

Language and Communication

Habermas's paradigm shift is motivated by the conviction that critical theory needs to uncover the emancipatory potential inherent in communicative action. There is no society without linguistic communication because no action coordination between human subjects can take place unless they reach at least a minimal degree of mutual understanding. This insight lies at the core of Habermas's "universal pragmatics":

The task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding [*Verständigung*]. In other contexts one also speaks of "general presuppositions of communication," but I prefer to speak of general presuppositions of communicative action because I take the type of action aimed at reaching

understanding to be fundamental. Thus I start from the assumption (without undertaking to demonstrate it here) that other forms of social action – for example, conflict, compromise, strategic action in general – are derivatives of action oriented to reaching understanding [*verständigungsorientiert*]. (Habermas, 1984: 1)

Habermas proposes to locate the normative foundations of critical theory in the rational foundations of human language. The following conceptual elements are central to this undertaking: (a) universal pragmatics, (b) validity claims, (c) world, (d) mutual understanding, and (e) ideal speech situation.

Habermas's (1984: 5) universal pragmatics is aimed "at reconstructing the universal validity basis of speech." It is motivated by the "attempt to establish a normative foundation for critical theory through a reconstructive analysis of everyday speech" (Thompson, 1982: 116). Universal pragmatics is a paradoxical endeavor, in that it sheds light on both the context-transcendent and the context-immanent aspects of language. In Habermas's words (1988b: 139), a "general theory of ordinary language would combine both points of view: the advantages of a formalized language on the theoretical level, and respect for natural language games on the level of the data." The advantage of this complementary form of analysis is that it accounts for both the universal and the contingent dimensions of language without subscribing to transcendentalism or empiricism.

Drawing attention to the close nexus between the universality of language, referring to "language as structure," and the pragmatics of speech, referring to "speaking as process," Habermas (1984: 6) highlights the interdependence of competence and performance: the species-constitutive distinctiveness of human communication manifests itself in both language and speech. Language, or *langue*, represents a universal framework that makes communication possible by means of a set of symbolically mediated and grammatically defined rules. Speech, or *parole*, stands for the executive process that makes communication possible insofar as members of a particular linguistic community employ these rules in specific contexts. In brief, human communication is the combination of language-based speech and speech-based language.

On validity claims, Habermas (1984: 2) writes:

anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated [or redeemed: *einlösen*]. Insofar as he wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding, he cannot avoid raising the following – and indeed precisely the following – validity claims. He claims to be:

- a. Uttering something understandable;
- b. Giving [the hearer] *something* to understand;
- c. Making *himself* thereby understandable; and
- d. Coming to an understanding *with another person*.

In other words, as competent members of a linguistic community, we unavoidably raise four validity claims (*Geltungsansprüche*) in every speech act: truth (*Wahrheit*), correctness or rightness (*Richtigkeit*), truthfulness or sincerity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*), and comprehensibility or intelligibility (*Verständlichkeit*) (Habermas, 1984: 2–3).

The socio-ontological centrality of these validity claims is due to their omnipresence in communicatively regulated, and discursively negotiated, modes of existence. Both the constitution and the evolution of human society depend on its members' ability to engage in the daily search for linguistically articulated validity. Insofar as communication is ultimately oriented toward reaching understanding, comprehensibility constitutes the most fundamental validity claim. Rationally motivated claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity must possess a minimal amount of mutually shared comprehensibility in order to obtain a degree of implicitly or explicitly recognized validity. The intimate connection between comprehensibility and validity lies at the heart of communicative rationality, that is, it is reflected in the human capacity to learn how to reason by engaging in actions oriented toward mutual understanding.

As illustrated in the German word *Verständlichkeit* (comprehensibility), *Verstand* (reason) is inextricably linked to *Verständigung* (communication), which is ultimately oriented toward reaching a viable degree of *Verständlichkeit*. As a species striving for intelligibility, we acquire the capacity to reason by reasoning with and against one another. In principle, validity claims are always criticizable, illustrating that, insofar as their cogency and acceptability can be called into question, they are subject to scrutiny and to discursive contestability (see Habermas, 1987a: 125–126, 149–150; Habermas, 1982; Habermas, 2001a). To the extent that the unfolding of symbolically mediated, communicatively regulated, and rationally motivated interactions depends on the power of linguistic intelligibility, the existence of society cannot be dissociated from its members' quotidian search for, and claims to, validity.

Far from serving a merely abstract role, removed from everyday reality, validity claims are raised in relation to the world. Thus, Habermas stresses the intimate relationship between language and validity claims, on the one hand, and our immersion in and experience of the world, on the other. The relevance of language to the construction of human life-forms can be illustrated by examining validity claims in terms of the following dimensions: (1) domains of reality, (2) modes of attitude, (3) types of speech act, (4) themes, and (5) general functions.

- The first validity claim is truth. It refers to “the” world of external nature. It represents an objectivating attitude. It is articulated through a constative speech act. It enables the speaker to assert a propositional content (“speaking about”). And it is used for the representation of facts.
- The second validity claim is correctness. It refers to “our” world of society. It represents a norm-conformative attitude. It is articulated through a regulative speech act. It enables the speaker to establish an interpersonal relation (“speaking to”). And it is used for the establishment of legitimate social relations.
- The third validity claim is sincerity. It refers to “my” world of internal nature. It represents an expressive attitude. It is articulated through a representational speech act. It enables the speaker to expose his or her intentions (“speaking from”). And it serves to disclose the speaker's subjectivity.
- The fourth validity claim is comprehensibility. It refers to language in general. It represents an understanding-oriented attitude. It is articulated through

a communicative speech act. It enables the speaker to establish intelligible relations with other speakers (“speaking with one another”). And it allows for the very possibility of successful communication.

The existential significance of validity claims manifests itself in the nature of ordinary human action: language and action are two inseparable elements of human existence. Indeed, just as there are four main types of validity claim, there are four principal types of human action:

1. Teleological action, or purposive-rational action, is oriented toward success and aimed at the realization of a particular goal. Two main forms of purposive-rational action can be distinguished. Instrumental action is a non-social purposive-rational action, aimed at the technical “intervention into a complex of circumstances and events” (Habermas, 1987a: 285; see also Habermas, 1971). Strategic action is a social purposive-rational action, aimed at “influencing the decisions of a rational opponent” (Habermas, 1987a: 285). In both cases, the actor seeks to maximize the utility of his or her performance.

2. Normatively regulated action is guided by social values, roles, and expectations. Thus, “members of a social group ... orient their action to common valuesThe central concept of complying with a norm means fulfilling a generalized expectation of behaviour” (Habermas, 1987a: 85). There are no social interactions that are not embedded in culturally specific horizons of normativity, irrespective of the question of whether an actor complies with or deviates from a particular set of rules, conventions, and standards. The taken-for-grantedness of normative parameters can be challenged by virtue of communicative discourse (Habermas, 1987a: 85–86).

3. Dramaturgical action is motivated by the expressive self-presentation of the individual before other individuals. “The actor evokes in his public a certain image, an impression of himself, by more or less purposively disclosing his subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, feelings, and the like, to which only he has privileged access” (Habermas, 1987a: 85). As performative beings, we develop a sense of selfhood by engaging in social interactions. The “presentation of self” in everyday life is the precondition for the possibility of interactions between human beings. There is no enclosure in the social world without at least a minimum of representational disclosure of our subjective worlds. Intersubjectivity presupposes both the involvement and the unfolding of subjectivity.

4. Communicative action “refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement” (Habermas, 1987a: 86). Comprehensibility represents the most fundamental type of validity claim because assertions of truth, rightness, and sincerity, in order to be recognizable, require a minimal degree of intelligibility. Communicative action is the most fundamental type of social action because our teleological, normative, and dramaturgical actions, in order to be valuable, require a minimal degree of symbolically mediated reciprocity. Put another way: the constitution of social order depends on the purposive, regulative, and expressive power of teleological, normative, and dramaturgical actions; the possibility of social order depends on the coordinative power of communicative action. To regard communicative action as the most fundamental type of human action means to accept our socio-ontological dependence on the intersubjective coordination of our actions.

The preceding conceptual differentiation confirms the sociological centrality of validity claims in everyday life, illustrating the ineluctable link between rationality and human action (empirical relevance). It also provides a multidimensional, rather than a one-dimensional, account of human action, shedding light on its multi-layered motivational constitution (action-theoretic relevance). Furthermore, it demonstrates that it makes sense to regard intelligibility as the most fundamental validity claim and communicative action as the most fundamental form of human action (communication-theoretic relevance).

Mutual Understanding

Communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding constitutes the ontological cornerstone of society. Habermas (1987a: 290, 293) draws upon the Austinian distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts: whereas the former are driven by a “communicative intent,” the latter are “oriented to success.” “[I]llocutionary results are achieved at the level of interpersonal relations on which participants in communication come to an understanding with one another about something in the world.” By contrast, “[p]erlocutionary effects, like the results of teleological actions generally, are intended under the description of states of affairs brought about through intervention in the world” (Habermas, 1987a: 293; see also Habermas, 1985). This distinction is central to Habermas’s contention that “the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the original mode of language use,” upon which other – notably, strategic and instrumental – uses of language are parasitic (Habermas, 1987a: 288). Habermas’s (1984: 1) architecture of society is based on three interrelated presuppositions: (1) communicative action constitutes the most fundamental type of action (communication-theoretic foundationalism); (2) all other forms of action – such as strategic action – are derivatives of action oriented toward reaching understanding (communication-theoretic holism); and (3) to the extent that we can conceive of “reason as something that is in fact built into communicative relations, and that can in practice be seized upon” (Habermas, 1987a: 82), the normative grounds for critiquing disempowering aspects of asymmetrically structured societies can be derived from the discursive power inherent in communicative rationality (communication-theoretic criticism).

Ideal Speech Situation

According to Habermas, “in every discourse we are mutually required to presuppose an ideal speech situation,” implying that utopia, far from being reducible to a mental fantasy, is built into the structure of human language. Actors engage in the construction of the ideal speech situation if – and only if – “communication is impeded neither by external contingent forces nor, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication” (Habermas 2001b: 97).

More specifically, Habermas’s conviction that the ideal speech situation constitutes an implicit element of communicatively generated forms of discourse is based on

several assumptions. First, intersubjectively established agreements are possible. Secondly, genuine agreements can be distinguished from deceptive ones insofar as they are arrived at by the unforced force of the better argument. Third, agreements remain genuine to the degree that communication is not obstructed by internal or external constraints. Such communication presupposes the participants' symmetrical distribution of chances to select and employ constative, regulative, expressive, and communicative speech acts. A communicative condition in which this symmetrical distribution of chances is both guaranteed and realized can be characterized as an ideal speech situation (Susen, 2007: 88; Thompson, 1982: 128).

The concept of the ideal speech situation has five major theoretical implications. First, it locates the emancipatory potential of the social in every ordinary actor's capacity to engage in intersubjectively established processes of reasoning (*discursive power*). Second, it suggests that a utopian moment is always already present in every communicative speech act (*anticipatory power*). Third, by attributing an emancipatory status to the underlying presuppositions inherent in ordinary language, it detranscendentalizes the notion of counterfactuality (*ordinary power*). Fourth, it conceives of the "counterfactual conditions of the ideal speech situation . . . as necessary conditions of an emancipated form of life" (*foundational power*) (Habermas, 2001b: 99). Fifth, it serves as a yardstick for the critical analysis of systematically distorted communication (*normative power*).

This last point is crucial to Habermas's conviction that the effective critique of the factual distortion of language presupposes the possibility of its counterfactual non-distortion.

Systematically distorted communication occurs in the face of the preponderance of the following factors: (1) *success-driven*, rather than understanding-oriented, actions; (2) *deceptive*, rather than genuine, agreements; (3) *surreptitious*, rather than open, use of strategic action; (4) *coercive*, rather than inclusive, internal and external forces; (5) *asymmetrical*, rather than symmetrical, distribution of chances; and (6) *distorting*, rather than enlightening, communication (Habermas, 2001b: 154–155).

To the extent that the occurrence of systematically distorted communication is always parasitically dependent upon the understanding-oriented search for epistemic validity, the projection of the merely strategic community goes against the structure of language, whereas the "projection of the unlimited communication community is backed up by the structure of language itself" (Habermas, 1992: 188). The ideal speech situation concept plays a paradoxical role in Habermas's critical theory: it idealizes the structural conditions under which an emancipatory society could be realized; at the same time, it posits that these conditions are always already present in ordinary language. (Habermas, 1992: 184, 188)

Limitations and Shortcomings

While it is essential to acknowledge the valuable intellectual contributions that Habermas has made to contemporary social and political thought, it is no less important to grapple with the main limitations and shortcomings of his *oeuvre*,

notably with regard to his theory of communicative action. The purpose of this final section, therefore, is to shed light on some controversial issues that need to be addressed when reflecting on the weaknesses of Habermas's communication-theoretic framework (Susen, 2007).

Habermas on Marx

Habermas's reading of Marx's historical materialism is, at best, questionable and, at worst, deeply flawed. Habermas is right to express serious doubts about the validity of Marx's "demand for a natural science of man, with ... positivist overtones" (Habermas, 1987b: 46), illustrated in the epistemologically naïve assertion that "[n]atural science will eventually subsume the science of man just as the science of man will subsume natural science: there will be a *single science*" (Marx, quoted in Habermas 1987b: 46). In opposition to this view, it is vital to defend the *ontological* distinction between the natural world and the social world, as well as the *epistemological* distinction between the natural sciences and the social sciences. To the extent that the respective characteristics of each of these worlds are, on several levels, fundamentally different, both the conceptual and the methodological tools employed to study them need to prove capable of accounting for their specificity. Far from shying away from this task, however, the whole point of Marx's anthropology is to flesh out the species-constitutive uniqueness of humanity without advocating the positivist illusion of value-neutrality (Marx, 2000: 171–173). Marx, like Habermas, stresses that knowledge cannot be dissociated from human practices (Lenk, 1986: 262–277).

Habermas is right to take issue with economistic approaches insofar as they endorse the view that all social phenomena are ultimately derived from economic forces and that, consequently, the former can be explained by reference to the latter. While it is true that Marx's approach is motivated by the ambition to comprehend society in terms of historically constituted material foundations, this does not mean that it therefore ignores, let alone denies, the anthropological significance of the symbolic dimensions of human life-forms.

Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness ... ; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all man's consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him is the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. (Marx, 2000: 183)

From a Marxian point of view, society is constituted by labor and language, implying that the latter cannot be reduced to a mere manifestation of the former. Language is not reducible to a functional epiphenomenon of labor, in an economistic sense; it emerges because humans depend on the ordinary experience of meaning-generating interaction, in a coexistential sense.

Habermas is right to be wary of instrumental rationality. Yet, he is wrong to suggest that Marx tends to reduce labor to an instrumental form of action. In fact, one of the

main objectives of Marx's analysis of alienated labor is to criticize the reduction of labor to a largely instrumental form of action in class societies. Marx's four-dimensional examination of alienation is based on a multilayered, rather than a reductive, conception of labor. According to Marx's insightful account, the exploited worker is alienated from his or her product, other producers, the production process, and him- or herself as a species-being (Marx, 2000: 183). In other words, Marx "does not simply treat labor as a monologic relationship between society and nature" (Callinicos, 1989: 114). On the contrary, he conceives of labor as a multifaceted relationship between the producer and the natural world, the social world, the producer's subjective world, and the producer's human essence. In short, labor constitutes a purposive, normative, subjective, and species-constitutive activity.

In light of the above, it is surprising that Marx's four-dimensional approach to labor has not been systematically compared with Habermas's four-dimensional approach to language. Most commentators tend to focus on the substantial differences between these two accounts, drawing attention to Habermas's reductionist reading of Marx (Honneth, 1991; Roderick, 1986; Susen, 2007). These two explanatory frameworks are strikingly similar, however, in terms of the way in which they conceptualize their main paradigmatic category – language for Habermas and labor for Marx. When we speak, we unavoidably raise four validity claims (*Geltungsansprüche*): truth, correctness, sincerity, and comprehensibility. In a Habermasian sense, these validity claims are inherent in language. Analogously, when we work, we unavoidably raise four fulfillment claims (*Erfüllungsansprüche*): purposiveness, cooperativeness, creativity, and createdness (*Erschaffenheit*). In a Marxian sense, these fulfillment claims are inherent in labor (Susen, 2007: 106). Both validity claims and fulfillment claims fundamentally shape our relationship not only with realms of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity, but also, more generally, with humanity. Instead of opposing Habermas's paradigm of language and Marx's paradigm of production to one another, it is vital to recognize that both are based on a four-dimensional conceptualization of human existence.

Lifeworld-Idealism

Lifeworld-idealism represents one of the most problematic aspects of Habermas's social theory. Its centrality is reflected in three interrelated thematic dimensions: socio-ontological optimism, utopianism, and romanticism. The problem arising from Habermas's socio-ontological optimism is that it presupposes, rather than proves, the preponderance of communicative action in human lifeworlds. According to this presupposition, all forms of social action are derivatives of communicative action. On this interpretation, even the most radical forms of strategic action – such as betrayal, conflict, fights, and wars – are not only derived from but also parasitic upon our quasi-transcendental orientation toward reaching mutual understanding. This view suggests that communicative action constitutes the origin of all other modes of human action and that, consequently, "the fundamental norms of social action" (Habermas, 1972: 92) emanate from our daily search for mutual understanding.

It is far from obvious, however, whether or not it is possible to demonstrate, rather than to presuppose, “the parasitic dependence of the use of language ‘oriented toward success’ on that ‘oriented toward coming to an understanding,’ not only with respect to the *concealed* strategic use of language but also with respect to its *openly* strategic use” (Apel, 1992: 155). Irrespective of whether one favors a transcendental-pragmatic or a universal-pragmatic perspective, it is essential to provide a sound justification for this communication-theoretic optimism.

Indeed, socio-ontological pessimists may have good reason to argue that the opposite is true, by claiming that (1) communicative action is derived from, and parasitic upon, strategic action and that (2) even speech acts oriented toward mutual understanding are oriented toward success, since the communicative orientation that may, or may not, be built into language is precisely a motivational telos (Steinhoff, 2006). Socio-ontological optimism can be regarded as the cornerstone of Habermas’s conception of the lifeworld in particular and of human existence in general. As a presuppositional, rather than empirically substantiated, foundation, its validity needs to be proven, rather than taken for granted.

Unless ample evidence can be provided to support Habermas’s socio-ontological optimism, it seems naïve to posit that instrumental action is primarily derived from the systemic forces of the state and the economy. In fact, it may be more accurate to concede that the functionalist rationality of the system constitutes an extension of the strategic rationality of the lifeworld. This would oblige us to embrace a less rosy, but more realistic, conception of the social. Within such a revised version of Habermas’s dualistic architecture, the core problem of instrumental action would have to be located both in the system and in the lifeworld.

The problem arising from Habermas’s socio-ontological utopianism is epitomized in the concept of the ideal speech situation. Founded on the assumption that all forms of human action are ultimately derived from action oriented toward reaching understanding, the ideal speech situation represents a thought experiment that may be described as paradoxical. On the one hand, it is real insofar as its idealized conditions are supposed to be built into the understanding-oriented structure of language. On the other hand, it is unreal insofar as its idealized conditions clash with the power-laden structure of society. In other words, it permeates social reality, while being constantly undermined by it. On this account, utopia is both present and absent.

This structural tension between quasi-transcendental ideal and empirical reality transforms any notion of utopia into a contradictory project. If the inherent telos of communication is understanding and, consequently, a consensually coordinated form of coexistence, the question arises why the orientation toward intelligibility, which lies at the heart of the lifeworld, is perverted into an increasingly powerful orientation toward success, which is built into the system.

Drawing upon the dichotomous opposition between communicative and purposive rationality (Habermas, 1987a: 286–295) in order to approach this question, there are three main possible scenarios: first, all forms of social action are ultimately derived from communicative action (optimistic derivative argument); second, all forms of social action are ultimately derived from strategic action (pessimistic derivative argument); or, third, all forms of social action are ultimately derived

from both communicative and strategic action, that is, communicative action and strategic action are inseparably interrelated (realistic interpenetrative argument).

A utopian notion of the ideal speech situation that claims to be “quasi-transcendental” – that is, at once universal and pragmatic – needs to face up to all three possibilities. The first scenario would convert utopia into a difficult, but necessary and completely justifiable, project: speaking and acting, we create utopia. The second scenario would render utopia not only a difficult, but also an impossible, project: speaking and acting, we annihilate utopia. The third scenario would transform utopia into a difficult, but viable, project: speaking and acting, we both create and annihilate utopia. A genuinely critical account of the social has to be prepared to confront all three possibilities. To the extent that the lifeworld is based on one of these three options, society as a whole, including its systemic spheres, is shaped by the constitutive nature of one of these three scenarios. The nature of the lifeworld – be it in the optimistic derivative, pessimistic derivative, or realistic interpenetrative sense – reveals the nature of society insofar as the most differentiated complexity of the latter is entrenched in the ordinary immediacy of the former.

The ambitious theoretical attempt to ground the normative foundations of critique in the ontological foundations of the social has to recognize the inherent contradictoriness of human life-forms. If the profound ambivalence of modernity is rooted not in the tension between the lifeworld and the system but, rather, in the discrepancy between communicative and strategic action within the lifeworld, then the systemic manifestation of instrumental rationality is merely a symptomatic expression of the interpenetrative contradictoriness of the lifeworld itself. In other words, the problem stems from the ontological base of society, from human action as such. We are the problem. The schizophrenic relationship between consent-oriented and success-oriented action is indelible. Any utopian notion of the social has to confront the possibility of its own impossibility. Critical utopia is, and needs to be, critical of itself. The problem arising from Habermas’s socio-ontological romanticism is closely intertwined with his optimistic and utopian view of the lifeworld. Socio-ontological romanticism portrays the lifeworld as a power-free realm of pristine intersubjectivity. Such a romantic notion relegates the source of power relations to the systemic sphere of the social, instead of locating them in the lifeworld. Power is interpreted as a lifeworld-exogenous and system-endogenous mechanism. Such a romantic notion of the lifeworld, however, “fails to capture the processes of power that operate on a trans-subjective level *within the historical-cultural lifeworld itself*” (Kögler, 1996: 21).

Communicative rationality stands for the “power to do” something, that is, the power to perform an action oriented toward mutual understanding. Instrumental and strategic rationality concern the “power over” something or somebody, that is, the power to perform an action oriented toward success over something or somebody. To the extent that both our consent-oriented and our success-oriented forms of action originate from the lifeworld, rather than from the system, the realm of everyday social interactions constitutes a highly problematic, rather than an unproblematic, space of intersubjectivity (see Habermas, 1987c: 298, Habermas, 1991: 223). Granted, quotidian power relations may gain substantial control over social

interactions, when converted into systemic structures capable of colonizing people's lifeworlds. Yet, the fact that they can be *converted* – if not, *perverted* – implies that power relations constitute an integral component of the lifeworld itself and that, consequently, it would be misleading to relegate their *raison d'être* to the systemic level.

One of the principal aims of a socio-critical hermeneutics is to explore the extent to which all social relations are power relations. On this account, the challenge consists in scrutinizing the multiple ways in which power and the lifeworld – that is, power and language, power and discourse, power and subjectivity – interpenetrate one another before the power relations of the lifeworld are transformed by the power relations of the system, that is, before instrumental and strategic rationality are converted into functionalist rationality.

Such a perspective, which may be conceived of as socio-ontological realism, should not be confused with socio-ontological fatalism – that is, with the defeatist assumption that the omnipresence of power indicates its omnipotence. Rather, it acknowledges that our reflective capacity to question the power of success-oriented action – both in its instrumental or strategic forms in the lifeworld and in its functionalist forms as part of social systems – derives from the discursive resources inherent in communicative action, which is rooted in the lifeworld. In order to abandon a romantic notion of the lifeworld, we need to accept the contradictory nature of ordinary existence, including its power-laden constitution. Put differently, ordinary social relations are no less problematic, let alone less power-laden, than systemic structures. Critical theory needs to shed light on the emergence and development of power relations within both the systemic and the ordinary spheres of society if it seeks to take seriously the task of grounding its normative concerns in the tension-laden complexity of human reality.

Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, Habermas has made significant contributions to contemporary social theory. Both his supporters and his detractors tend to agree that, irrespective of the respective strengths and weaknesses of his intellectual project, he can be regarded as the most influential German social philosopher of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Arguably, the theory of communicative action can be considered his most original, and also most far-reaching, scholarly contribution. Given the interdisciplinary nature of his undertaking, Habermas's attempt to locate the normative foundations of critical theory in the rational foundations of language has inspired a vast amount of researchers in the humanities and social sciences – notably those who, while acknowledging the problematic features of modernity, aim to uncover the emancipatory potential inherent in the species-distinctive resources of humanity. Notwithstanding their various limitations and shortcomings, Habermas's writings have provided, and will continue to provide, a treasure of conceptual tools for the critical study of both the empowering and the disempowering aspects of modern societies.

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