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History and Critical Social Theory

The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of  
Functionalist Reason. by Jurgen Habermas; Thomas McCarthy

Review by: Moishe Postone

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# Featured Essays

## History and Critical Social Theory

*The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, by JÜRGEN HABERMAS. Trans. by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. 457 pp. \$37.50 cloth. \$15.95 paper.

MOISHE POSTONE  
*University of Chicago*

### I

*The Theory of Communicative Action* represents the culmination to date of Jürgen Habermas' efforts to develop a new critical theory of modern society. This massive two-volume study weaves together the many social scientific and philosophic themes and approaches with which he has been concerned for several decades in a complex argument of remarkable breadth, depth, and intellectual rigor. It is a major work of contemporary social theory.

Habermas describes his project to reconstitute a critical theory adequate for contemporary postliberal society as a "second attempt to appropriate Weber in the spirit of Western Marxism" (II, p. 302). His approach attempts to avoid what he regards as the theoretical weaknesses of the earlier critical appropriation of Weber's analysis undertaken by Georg Lukács and Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, and others associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Indeed, many distinctive aspects of Habermas' attempt at a new critical theory can be understood with reference to his interpretation of the trajectory and limitations of that strand of Western Marxism.

Habermas argues that a new theoretical approach able to get beyond those limitations cannot be developed simply by modifying the older approach; instead, it necessitates a fundamental reorientation of social theory. He attempts such a reorientation by means of his conception of communicative action. On that basis he undertakes to transform the categorical framework of social theory from one resting upon the subject-object paradigm—and, hence, a notion of action as essentially purposive-rational—to one resting upon a paradigm of intersubjectivity.

As Habermas states at the outset of his work, his general intentions are three-fold (I,

p. xl). First, he wishes to ground theoretically the possibility of a social critique. The standpoint of a critical theory, according to Habermas, must be universalistic and based upon reason—which, for him, means that it must be nonrelativistic. Nevertheless, he seeks to ground the possibility of such a standpoint socially rather than transcendently. To this end, Habermas formulates a social theory of rationality. He distinguishes various forms of reason by developing a concept of communicative rationality that is different from, even opposed to, cognitive-instrumental rationality. He roots both forms of reason in determinate modes of social action and, on that basis, formulates a theory of historical development in terms of two distinguishable processes of rationalization (rather than in terms of the development of purposive rationalization alone). Habermas then seeks to ground critical theory in the development of communicative reason. He simultaneously defends (communicative) reason against postmodernist and poststructuralist positions, which he regards as irrationalist, and provides a critique of the growing domination of cognitive-instrumental forms of rationality in postliberal capitalism.

Habermas' second major concern is to grasp modern society by means of a two-level approach, based on his differentiation of forms of action and of reason, seeking to integrate approaches that understand social life in terms of a "lifeworld"—a conception deriving from the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions—with approaches that grasp society as a "system." He argues that modern society should be conceptualized as having both dimensions as differentiated aspects of social life, and relates each of those dimensions to a determinate form of action and rationality ("communicative" and "cognitive-instrumental"). He attempts to do

justice to the notion of people as social actors, as well as to the idea that it is characteristic precisely of modern society that forms of social integration have emerged (e.g., the capitalist economy, the modern state) which function quasi-independently of actors' intentions and, frequently, of their awareness and understanding.

Habermas' third concern is to construct a theory of postliberal modern society on the basis of this approach, which understands the historical development of modernity as a process of rationalization and differentiation, and yet also views critically the negative, "pathological" aspects of existing forms of modern society. Habermas interprets such "pathologies" (which Weber understood as expressing paradoxes of societal rationalization and Lukács as expressing reification) in terms of a selective process of rationalization that leads to the growing domination and penetration of the communicatively structured lifeworld by quasi-autonomous, formally organized systems of action.

These three topic complexes delineate the contours of a theory, based on the conception of communicative action, that allows Habermas to criticize the main theoretical tendencies in contemporary social scientific inquiry as well as the tradition of Western Marxism. Habermas attempts to redeem the intentions of that latter tradition, of which he clearly considers himself to be an heir, by calling into question some of its fundamental theoretical propositions. He "begins anew," as it were. Marx appropriated the most important intellectual currents of his age in German philosophy, British political economy, and French socialist thought, in order to constitute a critical theory of modern society. Similarly, Habermas appropriates major currents of twentieth-century philosophy and social theory—speech-act theory and analytic philosophy, classical social theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, developmental psychology, systems theory—in order to transform the basic paradigm of social theory and to formulate a critical theory adequate to the contemporary world. The results are very impressive. Nevertheless, in the process of appropriation, Habermas adopts many presuppositions that are in tension with and, it could be argued, ultimately weaken the critical thrust of his theory. This, in turn, raises the question whether a socially grounded critical

theory that overcomes the limitations of earlier Critical Theory requires the sort of social ontology and evolutionary approach that Habermas proposes.

## II

Habermas begins this work with a preliminary consideration of approaches to the problem of rationality in the social sciences, followed by chapters on Weber, speech-act theory, and Western Marxism. His immanent critique of Weber's theory of rationalization and its reception by Lukács, Horkheimer, and Adorno serves as the point of departure for his approach to an adequate critical theory of modernity.

Weber analyzed modernization as a process of societal rationalization, entailing the institutionalization of purposive-rational action in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (I, p. 216). This development, for Weber, presupposed a process of cultural rationalization involving the differentiation of individual value spheres—of science, art, and legal and moral representations—which began to follow their own independent and autonomous logics (I, pp. 166, 175). The paradoxical result of these processes of rationalization, in Weber's account, is that modern life increasingly becomes an "iron cage" characterized by a loss of meaning, or any theoretical and ethical unification of the world, and a loss of freedom, resulting from the institutionalization of cognitive-instrumental rationality in the economy and the state (I, p. 241).

Habermas adopts Weber's analysis of processes of rationalization, but maintains that the "iron cage" Weber described is not a necessary feature of all forms of modern society. Rather, what Weber attributed to rationalization should be grasped as a selective pattern of rationalization in capitalism that leads to the dominance of purposive rationality (I, pp. 181–83). Weber's own theory, according to Habermas, implicitly presupposed a more complex notion of reason on the basis of which the increasing dominance of purposive rationality was criticized, but never explicitly clarified its own standpoint (I, pp. 220–22).

Habermas thus reconstructs the theory of cultural rationalization suggested by Weber's treatment of the world religions (I, pp. 166,

195). His two-stage theory postulates a universal-historical process of the rationalization of worldviews, leading to the differentiation of value spheres, which precedes the historically specific transposition of cultural rationalization into social rationalization in the West (I, pp. 174–77).

Habermas adopts and modifies this evolutionary theory of worldview development. First, he argues that the theory suggests a universal inner logic of the historical development of the structures of worldviews that should be distinguished from the empirical dynamic of worldview development, which is dependent on external factors (I, pp. 179–97). Second, Habermas claims that Weber's focus in analyzing modernization was too narrow: he did not adequately consider the implications of the differentiation of value spheres, each characterized by one universal validity claim (truth, normative rightness, beauty) and form of rationality (cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic) (I, pp. 177–97).

This critical appropriation of Weber's approach suggests a broader conception of rationality, rooted in the logic of rationalization and differentiation. It allows Habermas to distinguish what was empirically actualized in capitalist society from the possibilities contained in the modern structures of consciousness resulting from disenchantment (I, p. 198). He is thus able to grasp the pre-eminence of cognitive-instrumental rationality at the expense of moral-practical and aesthetic-practical rationality, as an expression of the partial character of rationalization in capitalism, rather than of rationalization *per se* (I, p. 233).

Habermas addresses the grounds for Weber's failure to realize the explanatory potential of his own theory, arguing that Weber's theory of action was based on a model of purposive action and cognitive-instrumental rationality. The notion of the rationalization of worldviews could only be fully developed, however, on the basis of another theory of action—one of communicative action. Moreover, a theory of modern society cannot be based on a theory of action alone. What characterizes modern society is that important dimensions of social life (e.g., the economy and the state) become integrated in a quasi-objective manner. They cannot be grasped by action theory, but must be understood systemically.

On the basis of this immanent critique, Habermas indicates that his goal of reconstructing Weber's diagnosis of modernity requires a theory of communicative action as well as a theory of society able to combine an action-theoretic with a systems-theoretic approach (I, p. 270).

Lukács and members of the Frankfurt School did not attempt to embed Weber's analysis of rationalization within the framework of a theory of systemic integration. Nevertheless, according to Habermas, their efforts were ultimately not successful. Central to those attempts was Lukács' concept of "reification" with which he sought, based on Marx's analysis of the commodity, to separate Weber's analysis of societal rationalization from its action-theoretical framework, and relate it to anonymous processes of capital realization (I, p. 354). Lukács thus argued that economic rationalization is not an example of a more general process, but that commodity production and exchange underlie the basic phenomenon of societal rationalization (I, p. 359). The latter, therefore, should not be considered a linear and irreversible process.

Habermas does not confront directly Lukács' Marxian analysis of rationalization; instead, he criticizes his Hegelian "solution" to the problem, which entailed a dogmatic deification of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history (I, p. 364). This Hegelian logic was also rejected by Horkheimer and Adorno in their attempt to develop further a critical theory based on the concept of reification (I, p. 369). As Habermas notes, however, their critique of instrumental reason in the 1940s raised problems regarding the normative foundations of the theory. They assumed that the rationalization of the world had become total, and also rejected Lukács' appeal to objective reason. Consequently, they no longer grounded reification in a historically specific and transformable form (the commodity), but rooted it transhistorically in the labor-mediated confrontation of humanity with nature. Habermas points out that with this turn Critical Theory no longer could articulate the standards of its critique (I, pp. 377–83).

The problem with all of these attempts, Habermas claims, is that they remained bound to the subject-object paradigm (which he calls the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness). Their theoretical difficulties

reveal the ultimate limits of any social theory based on that paradigm, and indicate the need for a fundamental theoretical change to a paradigm of intersubjective communication (I, p. 390).

Habermas lays the groundwork for such a change by developing the concepts of communicative reason and communicative action. He argues that the modern understanding of the world—which, unlike mythic forms of thought, is reflexively aware of itself, and entails the differentiation of objective, social, and subjective worlds—is socially grounded and yet has universal significance (I, pp. 48, 64–70). It results from a universal-historical process of the rationalization of worldviews (I, pp. 67–69). The process of rationalization entails not only cognitive-instrumental rationality, but also the development of communicative rationality. Habermas grasps the latter in procedural (not content) terms and roots it in the nature of linguistically mediated communication itself (I, pp. 70–74). A decentered understanding of the world depends on the possibility of communication based on uncoerced agreement.

Using speech-act theory, Habermas distinguishes action oriented to success from action oriented to reaching understanding: Reaching understanding is the most essential aspect of language, although not every linguistically mediated interaction aims for that end (I, pp. 287–88). Speech acts can coordinate interactions rationally, that is, independent of external forces (such as sanctions and traditional norms) when the validity claims they raise are criticizable (I, pp. 297–305). Finally, in coming to an understanding, actors necessarily embed their speech acts in three world relations (objective, social, subjective) and claim validity for them under these aspects (propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness) (I, pp. 305–08).

In other words, Habermas roots communicative rationality in the very nature of language-mediated communication, and thereby implicitly claims that it has universal significance. It represents that more complex form of reason which would critique the one-sided form of rationalization Habermas deems characteristic of capitalist society. Indeed, the potential for critique is built into the very structure of communicative action, which does not allow separation of questions

of meaning from those of validity (I, pp. 104–06; 295–305).

Habermas then attempts to provide a genetic account of the development of communicative rationality, and to apprehend the universal-historical rationalization process as the rationalization of the lifeworld using concepts outside the subject-object paradigm (I, pp. 70, 336). He appropriates Mead's communication-theoretic approach and modifies it by examining the effects of intermeshing the three components of speech acts. He thereby refines his notion that communicative rationality is grounded in language-mediated communication by showing how, as a result of that intermeshing, language is potentially able to effect understanding, the coordination of action, and the socialization of actors (II, pp. 10–13; 61–74).

Habermas brilliantly interweaves this discussion with an analysis of Durkheim's notion of the sacred roots of morality and his account of the change in the form of societal integration from mechanical to organic solidarity. He thus develops a theory of the inner logic of sociocultural development as a process of the "linguistification of the sacred" (II, pp. 46, 110). Habermas characterizes this process as one in which the rationality potential of communicative action is released; such action then supersedes the older sacred normative core as that which effects cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. This process results in a rationalized lifeworld—in the rationalization of worldviews, the generalization of moral and legal norms, the growth of individuation, and the growing reflexivity of symbolic reproduction (II, pp. 46, 77, 107, 146).

Habermas, in other words, conceptualizes the development of the modern worldview in terms of a process by which linguistically mediated communication increasingly "realizes itself" (like Hegel's *Geist*) and comes into its own as that which structures the lifeworld. The actuality of modern development can be judged with reference to this logic of social evolution (II, p. 110). The standpoint of the critique, then, is universal. Although social, it essentially is not formed culturally, socially, and historically, but can be seen as rooted ultimately in the ontological character of communicative action as it unfolds in time.

Although the approach outlined does entail

a change of paradigm within the theory of action, it grasps only one dimension of modern society, according to Habermas. It can explain the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld, but not the reproduction of society as a whole. Actions, as Habermas notes, are coordinated not only by processes of reaching understanding, but also through functional interconnections that are not intended and frequently not perceived (II, pp. 113, 150). He therefore proposes that society be conceptualized as an entity that, in the course of evolution, gets differentiated both as a system and as a lifeworld.

Habermas outlines a theory of social evolution according to which system and lifeworld become differentiated internally and from one another (II, p. 153ff). He distinguishes the rationalization of the lifeworld from systemic evolution, which is measured by increases in a society's steering capacity, but claims that increases in systemic complexity ultimately depend on the structural differentiation of the lifeworld. Habermas grounds the latter in an evolutionary development of moral consciousness that can be embodied in legal institutions (which serve as the crystallization point for new mechanisms of systemic differentiation), and that releases the rationality potential in communicative action (II, p. 173ff).

This development eventually undermines the normative steering of social interactions. Consequently, interaction becomes coordinated in two very different ways: either by means of explicit communication, or by means of what Parsons characterized as the steering media of money and power—quasi-objective social mediations that encode purposive-rational attitudes and detach interchange processes from the normative contexts of the lifeworld. The result, then, is an uncoupling of system integration (effected by the steering media of money and power) from social integration (effected by communicative action). This uncoupling of system and lifeworld entails the differentiation of state and economy and characterizes the modern world (II, pp. 154, 180ff).

After presenting this two-level approach, Habermas notes that most approaches in social theory have been one-sided, in that they seek to grasp modern society with concepts that apply only to one of its two characterizing dimensions. He implicitly pre-

sents his own approach as the third major attempt, after those of Marx and Parsons, to do justice to both aspects of modern social life. Although Marx's theory of value, says Habermas, attempted to connect the systemic dimension of anonymous interdependencies with the lifeworld context of actors, it ultimately reduced the former to the latter, inasmuch as it considered the systemic dimension of capitalism to be no more than the fetishized form of class relations. Hence, Marx could neither see the positive aspects of systemic differentiation nor deal adequately with bureaucratization (II, pp. 202, 336ff). Habermas then turns to Parsons' attempt to bring together system-theoretic and action-theoretic paradigms. He tries to embed that attempt within the framework of a more critical approach that reconceptualizes action theory and that, unlike Parsons', addresses the "pathological" aspects of capitalist modernization (II, p. 199ff).

In the last chapter of this work, Habermas outlines a critical theory of postliberal capitalism based on his two-level approach. He first returns to Weber's diagnosis of modernity and his thesis of the paradox of rationalization, rejecting conservative positions that attribute the pathologies of modernity either to the secularization of world views or to the structural differentiation of society (II, p. 330). Instead, Habermas distinguishes between the "normal" modernization process as a "mediatization" of the lifeworld by system imperatives, whereby a progressively rationalized lifeworld is both uncoupled from and made dependent upon increasingly complex, formally organized domains of action (like the economy and the state), and the "pathological" form, or the "colonization" of the lifeworld. Characterizing the latter is that cognitive-instrumental rationality, through monetarization and bureaucratization, extends beyond the economy and the state into other spheres and achieves dominance at the expense of moral-practical and aesthetic-practical rationality. This results in disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld (II, p. 303ff). Habermas reformulates Weber's notion of the loss of meaning and loss of freedom in terms of his thesis that the lifeworld is colonized by the system world, which advances his analysis of postliberal capitalism (II, p. 318ff).

This reinterpretation of the developmental

logic suggested by Weber elucidates why the phenomena he observed should be regarded as pathologies, according to Habermas. Moreover, the concept of communicative rationality gives an inner logic to resistance against the colonization of the lifeworld (II, p. 333). Nevertheless, in order to understand the developmental dynamics of the situation—to explain why such pathologies appear—he must adopt from Marx the notion of an accumulation process uncoupled from orientations to use-values to become an end in itself (II, p. 328). Habermas therefore builds the dynamic of capital accumulation into his model of the interchange relations between system and lifeworld. He addresses issues in late capitalism that have eluded more orthodox Marxist attempts, such as state interventionism, mass democracy, the welfare state, and the fragmented consciousness of everyday life (II, p. 343ff). He concludes—“full circle,” as it were—by stating the tasks of a critical theory of society, taking up some of the themes developed in the 1930s as the research program of the (Frankfurt) Institute for Social Research.

### III

In spite of the breadth, sophistication, and brilliance of Habermas' exposition, some aspects of his general theoretical framework are problematic. It attempts to apprehend a two-fold social reality by bringing together two approaches that are essentially one-sided. Habermas criticizes Parsons for projecting an uncritical picture of developed capitalist societies (II p. 299), and attributes this view to a theoretical construction that blurs the distinction between system and lifeworld. He does not, however, seem to consider that the very attempt to conceptualize “economy” and “state” in systems-theoretic terms (“steering media”) limits the scope of a social critique. The categories of “money” and “power” do not grasp the determinate structure of the economy and polity, but simply express the fact that they exist in quasi-objective form, not as mere projections of the lifeworld. The nature of production, or of the developmental dynamic of the social formation, cannot, for example, be elucidated with those categories. Moreover, they do not allow for a critique of existing forms of production and administra-

tion. Hence, although Habermas does presuppose capital accumulation and state development and is critical of the existing organization of the economy and public administration, the systems-theoretic framework he has adopted does not allow him to ground those presuppositions and critical attitudes.

Habermas wishes to indicate that any complex society requires some form of “economy” and “state.” However, by adopting the notion of “steering media,” and by interpreting Marx's critique of capitalism as quasi-romantic, he presents the existing forms of those spheres of modern social life as necessary. His critique of state and economy is restricted to situations where their organizing principle oversteps its bounds. The notion of a quasi-ontological boundary between those aspects of life that safely can be “mediatized” and those that only can be “colonized” is itself very problematic, and raises many issues that cannot be dealt with in this essay.

Habermas' decision to grasp modern economic and political processes in system-theoretic terms complements his attempt to conceptualize modern forms of morality, legality, culture, and socialization in terms of a rationalized lifeworld, constituted by communicative action. He apparently conceives of the cultural and social constitution of worldviews and forms of life only with reference to overt (“traditional” and “religious”) sociocultural forms. Hence—aside from whether relating the modern world view logically to formal properties of linguistically mediated communication necessarily indicates that it actually is so structured—Habermas' conception of the rationalized lifeworld is extremely underspecified as an approach to modern life. It does not allow for an analysis of the great changes in consciousness, norms, and values that have occurred within modern society in the course of the past centuries—changes that cannot be grasped simply in terms of such oppositions as “traditional” and “modern” or “religious” and “secular.” Habermas' framework also does not allow for a theory of secular ideologies. Moreover, inasmuch as Habermas grasps system and lifeworld as two very different ontological principles, it is difficult to see how his theory can explain interrelated historical developments in economy, politics,

culture, science, and the structure of everyday social life.

At the heart of many of these problems is Habermas' insistence on distinguishing between developmental logic and historical dynamic and, relatedly, his evolutionary theory. I cannot address directly these complex issues here (in particular, the problems involved in applying Piaget's ontogenetic developmental theory to human phylogenetic development) but would like to draw attention to these implicit assumptions: Habermas clearly distinguishes between historical logic and dynamic in order to ground his social critique of postliberal society. This, in turn, implies that he presupposes that such a critique cannot be grounded in the nature of modern capitalism itself. In his discussion of Critical Theory, Habermas points out the limitations of the subject-object paradigm upon which it was based. What he apparently has retained from that tradition, however, is the thesis that capitalism is "one-dimensional"—that it is a unitary, negative whole that does not give rise immanently to the possibility of a social critique. The latter, then, could only be grounded by positing a social realm (e.g., one constituted by communicative action) that exists in, but purportedly is not intrinsically part of, capitalist society. Such

an approach, which considers communicative action analogous to traditional Marxist treatments of labor, apprehends capitalism only as pathological and therefore must ground itself in a quasi-ontological manner, outside of the social and historical specificity of that form of society. This however, raises many difficulties, several of which have been touched upon in this review.

Another possible approach would reconsider the presupposition of "one-dimensionality." This would allow for a critical social theory that, in grounding itself socially and historically, could dispense with the last vestiges of Hegel's philosophy of history.

Nevertheless, this is a magnificent work. Habermas argues very powerfully that the most coherent form of social theory is a critical theory. By synthesizing a tremendous range of approaches and elucidating their implications and interconnectedness, he has reformulated the discourse of social theory in a challenging manner that demands serious engagement and response.

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## The Future of Abortion Politics

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JONATHAN B. IMBER  
Wellesley College

Ten years ago I reviewed ten books on abortion (Imber 1979), referring to the legacies and strategies that were dominant at the end of that decade. At that time, abortion had been legal nationwide for only six years. Now, after sixteen years, a glacial shift is underway in this country, the consequences of which are not yet fully clear; but I propose

here, by way of reviewing three recent works, to sift through the added sediment and to offer a reappraisal.

No one familiar with the burgeoning literature on abortion should conclude that there has been a corresponding growth of knowledge on the subject. On the contrary, except for Taussig (1936), Callahan (1970),