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Critical Hermeneutics Versus Neoparsonianism?

by Dieter Misgeld

A Critique of the Distinction between System
and Lifeworld in Habermas' Theory of
Communicative Action (Vol. II)¹

Introduction

This essay aims at the restoration of a central feature of Habermas' social theory, most clearly articulated in his writings preceding his incorporation of sociological systems-theory into the design of a critical theory of late capitalist societies and also preceding his programmatic essays on the reconstruction of historical materialism and on the theory of language (universal pragmatics).² The feature in question is the claim that a critical theory of society is to be a theory which can be practically enlightening. I understand this claim to mean that the ultimate test for the validity of a critical theory of society consists in the possibility of the incorporation of its insights into practically consequential interpretations of social situations. A critical theory of society is a theory which cannot control the determination of the validity of its insights, simply by referring to standards of theoretical cogency, and of conceptual and explanatory adequacy.

In the final analysis, its truth can only be ascertained if relevant groups in the society can integrate its claims into their practical deliberation, carried out under conditions of the need to act, and thus transform theoretical insights into practically consequential interpretations of their situation.³ Habermas' *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (both

1. I wish to acknowledge the support of a leave fellowship for the completion of this essay, received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. I also would like to thank John Forester for his comments on the first draft of this essay.

2. I am referring to the essays collected on *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, transl. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

3. My comments are meant to account for the meaning of some of the passages in

volumes) is a difficult and problematic work when judged from this perspective. Habermas not only openly declares it to be a work in social theory, of primary interest to “professional” social theorists.⁴ But in the work he also proceeds to integrate critical theory with the tradition of classical sociological theory (from Durkheim and Weber to Parsons). Thus many of his claims about certain conflicts and dangers emerging in contemporary late capitalist (post-liberal and “post-modern”) societies only arise from a detailed consideration of elaborate theoretical positions and in the form of an immanent critique of these positions.

Thus the question whether these positions or Habermas’ own can lead to practically enlightening interpretations of actual social situations never acquires much force. This is not to say that the “Theory of Communicative Action” contains no interpretative suggestions with

Habermas’ introduction to the fourth edition of *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971). Cf. *Theory and Practice*, transl. J. Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 38/39.

Cf. especially Habermas’ statement that ‘the organization of enlightenment initiates processes of reflection.’ Theoretical interpretations of this kind bring a process of formation (“*Bildungsprozess*”) to consciousness (p. 38).

Habermas also clearly refers to the status of his own theory (and, I take it, of critical theory in principle) when he says, that it is a theory ‘designed for enlightenment’ (p. 37). Habermas vigorously defends the autonomy of theory (cf. his critique of Giegel on p. 38), arguing for tests of critical theories on several levels. But one of these tests is practical in the sense that “autonomously” produced objectivating theories do open up tentative practical perspectives (pp. 39/40). My interpretation abstracts from Habermas’ emphasis upon *universal* enlightenment as the ultimate validation of a critical theory. I regard this perspective to be unattainable. It condemns a critical theory to practical inefficacy. This is part of the theme of this paper. I also have doubts about the strict separation between strategic action, communication and theory. Here I agree with the proposal made by Michael Ryan (*NGC*, 22 [Winter 1981], 160): He thinks that critical theory can be fruitfully combined with the deconstructionist critique of “metaphysical” notions of the subject, consciousness, meaning, etc. I would add that this critique should also be applied to the belief in the autonomy of theory. It also has implications for the distinction between communicative and strategic action.

4. On p. X7ii in his preface to *Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. I. Translated by Thomas McCarthy), Habermas says that the book was written for those “who have a professional interest in the foundations of social theory.” But in his preface, he gives an account of his political and critical motives for writing the book. In fact, the work frequently returns to these motives, e.g. with the theme of the “colonization of the lifeworld.” It is not clear to me how this could be a theme for those who only have a “professional” interest in social theory. And given Habermas’ critique of the dominance of expert-culture in Vol. II, and his proposals for its mediation with the “lifeworld,” I wonder whether he is consistent in emphasizing the “professional” nature of his work. This also seems to contradict his emphasis upon the public sphere and the contribution which TCA makes to its further socially critical conceptualization. (Cf. Peter U. Hohendahl’s essay in this issue.)

respect to the present historical situation. Quite to the contrary. The work is designed to identify actual and possible conflicts in the present situation.⁵

Indeed, it is meant to connect the major positions of classical sociological theory with the tradition of Western Marxism, thus employing each of these traditions as a corrective of the other. As a consequence, innovative interpretations are provided of the phenomena of anomie and reification, of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of society and its relation to social (material) reproduction. But these are tasks of interpretation and analysis which follow from the design of a theory of society which is meant to be exhaustive and comprehensive,⁶ thus making any attempt to provide practically suggestive interpretations of the present historical situation (which, at some point, can be acted upon in some manner) entirely dependent upon one's acceptance of Habermas' entire theory.

It follows that any attempt to justify particular kinds of social intervention (for example by social movements) either needs to be transformed into a highly theoretical activity, *or* it remains bound by the exigencies of practical and political intervention. In the first case (which is Habermas'), systematic and comprehensive theorizing takes the place of reflection accompanying attempts to come to terms with particular social issues. In the second case (that of movement theorists, for example), justifications of actions by social movements may become self-serving and take on the character of rationalizations (in the Freudian sense) for already made commitments no longer treated as open to critical scrutiny.

Habermas' earlier formulations at least contained the suggestion that social theory might hold an intermediate position between comprehensive theorizing only committed to standards of theoretical (and "scientific" in the broadcast sense) adequacy and cogency, and haphazard or merely strategic reflection on already endorsed practical and political commitments.

A theory holding such an intermediate position (which I would regard as a form of critical hermeneutics, a term applying to parts of Habermas' work) could very well have insisted on the need for principled and systematic reflection. But it would also have recognized that, in the end, it can only be regarded as valid if it informs the relevant

5. Cf. pages 445 to 594 of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Vol. II). From here on, I shall refer to the work as either TCA(1) or TCA(2).

6. Habermas still refers to his work, even TCA, as a research program. But given the huge set of topics which he addresses, this can only mean that he aims at a comprehensive and pretty much all-inclusive social theory.

actors and groups in society about their possibilities for enlightened action. And this statement holds even if the theory may not be invoked as a direct justification of actions and social interventions which test the limits of late capitalist modes of social organization in particular domains. It may not take on ideological functions. Habermas, in any case, always argued that any theory he might develop would not be a theory justifying social revolution in the classical sense of Marx.

The conception of a theory located between the demands of large-scale social theory and of an experimental practice testing the limits of existing social arrangements certainly seemed to be contained in Habermas' claim that theories of the socially critical type (such as "critical" theory) are theories which need to be examined with respect to their internal relation to social practice. They must intend to be practically enlightening. The structure of their discourse rests on the distinctiveness of this intention.

This certainly is *one* feature which distinguishes a critical theory of society from, let us say, sociological theory. Sociological theory may be regarded as a form of scientific theorizing which abstracts from conceivable internal relations to social practice. It merely objectifies this domain and is merely concerned with the development of sociology as a discipline.

But TCA, while critical of the objectivating attitude of sociological theory, no longer seems to provide sufficient grounds for the distinctive feature of a critical theory of society just mentioned. Thus, the neo-functional sociological theorist Jeffrey C. Alexander treats TCA as a work belonging to the tradition of Parsonian theory. When he refers to Habermas' "critical Parsonianism," he can easily reduce the meaning of "critical" in this phrase to Habermas' diagnosis of a conflict, in late capitalist societies, between "lifeworlds — worlds of experience and symbolic discourse — and system or structure."⁷

Thus, the critical theory of society is treated as merely another⁸

7. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Parsons Revival in German Sociology," p. 400. In: R. Collins, ed., *Sociological Theory* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

8. Alexander places Habermas into what he regards as a primarily German tradition of social theory and sociology. For him, German theory wants modern societies either to be utilitarian and modern *or* romantic (in either the conservative or the radical sense). For him, Habermas reintroduces the dichotomies of idealism into social theory, which Parsons sought to overcome. *Ibid.* pp. 398, 400. I do not see how this applies to Habermas. For Habermas certainly bridges the utilitarian and "romantic" aspects of society. But more importantly, the division between lifeworld and system follows from a distinction between two methodological attitudes. The distinction does not primarily arise from substantive commitments. It may nevertheless be true that TCA translates a Hegelian (Marxian) form of social theory into a Neoparsonian and into

attempt to respond to Parsons' argument, that modern society includes both community and society, "that different combinations of rationality and affectivity" exist "in different institutional spheres."⁹ The differences between Parsons and Habermas reduce to the difference between a highly general explanatory sociological theory (Parsons) and a social theory which is also philosophically illuminating.

In what follows, I shall raise some questions about Habermas' incorporation of functionalist systems-theory into the redesign of a critical theory of society. I do so, because its use gives rise to the interpretation just mentioned and because this interpretation precludes any possibility of accounting for a critical theory of society as contributing to a clarification of the action-orienting self-understanding of social groups.¹⁰ It misses the movement back and forth between theory and social practice unavoidable for social groups committed to emancipation from "unnecessary" forms of suffering, coerciveness or repression.

My criticisms of Habermas' use of systems-theory will be quite broad. I will not always pay attention to the highly complex and frequently fascinating discussions in which systems-theory and structural functionalist sociology are addressed.

Thus I primarily concentrate on the distinction between "system" and "lifeworld" which is quite predominant in the second volume of TCA. I shall argue that the term "lifeworld" and the use to which it is put by Habermas could have given rise to suggestions for the analysis of particular situations and particular practices in the society, which might have practical consequences: These analyses could have become part of a process in which the action-orientations of social groups come into question. The theory could have been made to address these conflicts, not merely in order to arbitrate between them, but in order to take a position on particular claims and to provide argumentative support with respect to those positions which appear to be most promising from the perspective that social progress is still possible. For, after all, TCA contains the major argument that under present conditions in developed societies social progress can only occur in the dimension of communicative rationalization.

But as matters stand in the work at issue, this sort of critical *and* reflective partisanship¹¹ is not regarded as a possible position for a

other frameworks and thus depends on a tradition of social theory prevalent in Germany. This tradition is, of course, that of critical theory. This is a feature of Habermas' work which Alexander ignores.

9. Alexander, as quoted, p. 398.

10. Here, as elsewhere in this paper, I use a Habermasian phrase, in order to indicate that I build my argument on aspects of Habermas' own position.

11. Habermas usually argues that theory can only be partisan to reason. It may

critical theory of society, designed as a theory of communicative action. Arguments which might have addressed this form of critical reflection are constrained by the analysis of society as a system, in the manner of sociological theory. Thus the term “lifeworld” predominantly takes on the meaning of a dimension of society as a system. It serves as the vehicle for analyses belonging to a comprehensive theory of society.

In the subsequent discussion, I shall put forward the view that the systematically upheld distinction between “system” and “lifeworld” defended by Habermas as a means for examining comprehensive theories of society (such as the ones developed in classical sociological theory) is misleading. It detracts from the practical point of the theory and blocks reflection upon actual social situations in the relevant societies of our times. Finally, I arrive at skeptical conclusions with respect to a comprehensive theory of society and a comprehensive theory of modernity (the “modern” project).

1. System and Lifeworld: A Statement of the Issues

Habermas’ “Theory of Communicative Action” constitutes the determined effort to assemble a corpus of theoretical knowledge which can be brought to bear on central problems of social reproduction in late capitalist societies. Indeed, in assembling this corpus, Habermas generates a strong sense of these problems for his readers.

As a theoretical (and philosophical) work, TCA is concerned with fundamental concepts of agency and communicative competence, thus attempting to account for the capacities of humans to coordinate their actions through communication. Provocative conclusions are attached to the basic arguments. They provide grounds for rather challenging assumptions about the nature of socialization, the integration of people as acting and communicating individuals and groups into the forms of association to the existence of which they at least contribute with their actions and speech.

only enclose a universal emancipatory perspective. I argue that this is impossible without taking sides in a more concrete sense, i.e. by responding to the needs and concerns of particular groups and people, living in particular situations. Cf. the remarks referred to in Ryan, *NGC*, 22 and S. Benhabib, “Die Moderne und die Aporien der kritischen Theorie,” p. 163. In: W. Bonss, A. Honneth (eds.): *Sozialforschung als Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982). (The essay was previously published in *Telos* 1981). Benhabib argues that a theory of communicative reason needs to be more responsive to the critiques of modernity developed in social movements such as the womens’ movement and the ecology movement. This entails less emphasis upon universal history for critical theory and greater independence from the legacy of Hegel’s and Marx’s philosophies of history. Cf. also S. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*. To be published in 1985 (New York: Columbia University Press).

The sociological objectives of the work are best brought into focus, I believe, if one considers the implications of the following claim: Societies must be simultaneously conceived as system and lifeworld. Society, Habermas says, is to be treated as an “entity,” which in the course of social evolution has been differentiated into system and lifeworld. We have to refer to the process of social evolution, Habermas believes, in order to show the compellingness of this concept of society. The concept of social evolution at issue contains the premise that society as a system becomes transformed, in the course of history, differently than society as lifeworld. In other words: We are to distinguish between the rationalization of the lifeworld and increases in the complexity of social systems. We need to speak of rationalization because rationalization is a theme, not merely of sociological theory such as Weber’s and Parsons’, but because it is a fact of social organization in present-day modern societies. Members of modern societies are confronted with its effect everyday and themselves engaged in further rationalizing efforts.¹²

The analysis of society as a system clearly depends on sociological theory. The analysis of society as lifeworld draws upon the language-theoretical argument of the work, its distinctions between concepts of rationality and its conceptual analysis of methodological orientations in sociology which already employ at least rudimentary concepts of communicative action (such as ethnomethodology and hermeneutics).¹³

The overarching perspective of the work is indeed its “critical” perspective, i.e. the question of whether modernization processes are only conceivable as capitalist modernization processes or whether it is conceivable that a new “principle” of sociation may become acceptable and prevail in late capitalist societies, which gives precedence to processes of communicative rationalization over against the growth of systems-rationality.

A secondary, although quite prominent, feature of the work is the argument that, at present, the lifeworld of communicative action is in jeopardy. Here the old theme of distorted communication is addressed, under the title: pathologies of modernity.¹⁴

12. This perspective only emerges at the end of TCA(2), especially in the interesting discussion of “*Tendenzen zur Verrechtlichung*,” pp. 522-547. It is also part of Habermas’ interpretation of Marx’s concept of “*Realabstraktion*.”

13. Cf. TCA(1), pp. 75-142.

14. Above comments may be summarized by arguing that Habermas operates with two notions of critique: a utopian (redemptive) one and a diagnostic one. Following Habermas’ interpretation of Benjamin, Benhabib has systematically addressed this distinction in her book-manuscript on *Critique, Norm and Utopia*.

These considerations lead to the adoption of the concept of the lifeworld as a pivotal notion. It serves as a conceptual and rhetorical guide to the arguments critical of those forms of capitalist modernization which occur by means of ever increasing systems-rationalization. The analysis of society as lifeworld proceeds from an action-theoretic perspective. "From the participant's perspective of the acting subject," society is conceived "as the lifeworld of the social group." Society as a "system of actions" only becomes accessible from the external perspective of an observer. The observer can note how "functional significance accrues to a given action according to its contribution to system maintenance." The lifeworld is integrated through "normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus." Analytically speaking, it is the domain of social integration. Society as a system can be thought to be integrated by means of a "non-normative regulation of individual decisions that goes beyond the actor's consciousness."¹⁵ Thus, the distinctions system/lifeworld, observer/participant, social integration/systems-integration are linked.¹⁶ But Habermas argues that in principle at least the "lifeworld approach to society"¹⁷ has analytic priority: "The entities which are to be subsumed under systems-theoretic concepts from the perspective of an observer, have first to be identified as the lifeworlds of social groups and understood in their symbolic structures."¹⁸ Thus, there are (at least) two conceptions of the relation between system and lifeworld operative in TCA. The first entails that society must be analyzed simultaneously as system and lifeworld. While society is an entity to be divided between these two approaches and indeed is said to have divided itself ("differentiated" itself) correspondingly in the course of social evolution, and while the distinction between two methodological positions corresponds to this division, system and lifeworld are only "analytically distinguishable aspects of any concrete society."¹⁹

But given that the lifeworld dimension of societies only is introduced as a means for developing a set of concepts to be applicable to *societies in general*, the identification of this dimension only serves as a method for securing explanatory adequacy for a theory of societies in general. But societies in general, i.e. general mechanisms for their maintenance and self-differentiation, can only be analyzed at the level

15. TCA(2), p. 179. The translation is Thomas McCarthy's.

16. Here I follow Th. McCarthy's systematic and detailed critical interpretation of TCA, Cf. Thomas McCarthy, "Complexity and Democracy, or the Seductions of Systems Theory," in this issue.

17. This is also a formulation occurring in McCarthy's paper.

18. TCA(2), p. 227. Transl. by Thomas McCarthy.

19. McCarthy, *ibid.*

of systems-theoretical abstractions. The concrete historical lifeworlds of particular societies cannot serve as a starting point for reflection on social development. Therefore I argue that Habermas subordinates the lifeworld approach to systems-theoretical arguments. In this case, the explanations sought after are not motivated by practical questions. Their point is to give objective knowledge of the society, or even of social reproduction in general, independently from any consideration of how this knowledge can orient our actions always taking place within particular societies.

The second conception of the relation between system and lifeworld is primarily practical and critical. It asks whether the present state of conflict between formally rationalized systems of action, such as the economy, public administration (“bureaucracy”), and practical orientation dependent upon communication can be overcome. Here the expectation is entertained that growth in practical-communicative knowledge is needed in late capitalist societies, if people living in these societies are to remain capable of making claims and beliefs problematic in discourse. These developments are required if people are to remain in possession of their critical capacities and to be able to act in the society on the basis of insight and argument. They are also needed so that people can be self-determined, yet also cooperate in the arrangement of their social relations.

My argument is meant to strengthen this second conception of the relation between system and lifeworld. In order to do so, I propose to proceed by way of a “hermeneutical”²⁰ reintegration of the distinction between system and lifeworld. Thus I argue that *the systemic aspects of coordinated social action can become available in the lifeworld* and can be interpreted as such.

The force of these interpretations is not to be supplanted by comprehensive explanations of the process of social reproduction which rest on the categorical separation of system and lifeworld. I am suggesting, in other words, that knowledge of the society in the final analysis always is knowledge gained *in* the lifeworld.

I am proposing that Habermas, rather than taking this view, develops a theory *of* the lifeworld, of its *function* for social reproduction. Such a theory subordinates knowledge of the society gained in the lifeworld to

20. My use of the term “hermeneutical” merely is meant to suggest that the two concepts at issue are linked to each other in a number of complicated ways which cannot be surveyed from one perspective. The emphasis upon the situatedness of understanding, typical of hermeneutics since the early Heidegger and Gadamer, presents itself as a basis for interpretatively reappropriating the distinctions which Habermas intends as rigorous ones. One can do so without subscribing to either Heidegger’s or Gadamer’s ontological views.

systems-theoretical considerations geared toward the *explanation* of social reproduction in terms of general systems-maintaining and systems-transforming mechanisms. Contrary to Habermas I argue that systemic constraints operative on social action are accessible *from the lifeworld* and are accounted for in it, even if they are not explained. But the expectation of cogent causal explanations in this domain may be misleading. The division of lifeworld and system is, as I understand it, primarily warranted on three grounds:

- a) For Habermas, societies are systems of social action integrated by way of normative consensus or communicatively achieved consensus. When looking at society this way, we are approaching it analytically with concepts derived from the situated understandings which subjects themselves develop while actively participating in the production of these situations of their lifeworld: We are, in short, presupposing — in theoretical analysis — the perspective of participants.
- b) Societies are systems of social action which are functionally integrated: In this respect, action orientations are coordinated, i.e. stabilized, by functional relations of interdependence which do not refer back to the intentional organization of social relations. Systems-integrative mechanisms interlace consequences of action which are not intended as such by participants (societal members actively constructing them). Their particular decisions are made interdependent with reference to mechanisms which can dispense of a foundation in processes of normative deliberation.
- c) The separation of system and lifeworld is also argued for on the grounds that the rationalization of the lifeworld and increases in the complexity of social systems are to be regarded as two distinctive processes. This is the position of TCA functioning as a *corrective* to conceptions of rationalization available in sociological theory (cf. the significance of Weber for the overall argument). We might call it Weberian Marxism (i.e. the employment of Marx and of some aspects of classical critical theory for the sake of redressing Weber's exclusive concern with formal purposive rationality, but in a framework first established by Weber). It is argued that "the transition to modernity is characterized by a differentiation of spheres of value and structures of consciousness that makes possible a critical transformation of traditional knowledge in relation to specifically given validity claims."²¹

The distinction between social integration and systems-integration

21. TCA(1), p. 340.

mentioned under a) and b) is made because these two forms of integration represent two analytically distinct social processes: They correspond to different aspects of society itself. Society as the object of analysis imposes the distinction.

For whether society is regarded as integrated by way of the intentional coordination of social action or whether it is regarded as functionally integrated, by way of the unintentionally achieved interlocking of action-consequences, is not a matter to be decided by the social theorist with respect to contingent analytic purposes. For Habermas, if we do *not* make the distinction, we have failed to grasp real distinctions in the object of analysis. We have failed to comprehend the *evolution* of society.

It follows that a theory of society adequate to its object has to be comprehensive and explanatory. The reconstruction of evolutionary development, identifying specific transformations of the relation *between* system and lifeworld, for example, is the *explanans*, the social structure of modern societies is the *explanandum*: The separation of lifeworld and system is said to be a necessary condition for the transition from one type of society to another, thus making the relation between forms of social and forms of systems-integration available for empirical analysis.

As I understand it, the theory provides something like conceptual grounds and logical conditions for the possibility of explaining specific historical processes. But it also argues that these grounds lie in the nature of the object itself. It has the explanation of capitalist modernization as its aim. Here, we may say, the lifeworld is analysed from the perspective of systems theory.

The argument mentioned under point c) proceeds from abstract premises of the theory of communicative action (such as the theory of three worlds, of language and argumentation as developed in vol. I). By inserting Weber's (— communications — theoretically reformulated —) theory of rationalization into phenomenological and hermeneutical accounts of the constitution of meaning in social action, it arrives at a concept of the lifeworld which makes processes of systems-differentiation available *from* the position of the lifeworld, in particular the distinction between increases in systems-complexity and the rationalization of the lifeworld.

On first sight, this is an appealing construction; for it suggests that we can analyse the same processes from two separate, but complementary, perspectives, an explanatory one (which invokes the counter-intuitive evidence of the social sciences²²) and an interpretive-critical

22. This is a statement occurring somewhere in the discussion of Durkheim, I believe. TCA(2), pp. 118-180.

one which relies on intuitively grounded categories making up the stock of knowledge of societal members determining the meaning of situations of action in communicatively regulated exchanges. The two perspectives (internal and external perspective of analysis) are also dialectically mediated (vol. II, p. 293). The theory of communicative action in its philosophical form is to achieve this; for it identifies formal, i.e. universal, conditions for the coordination of social action in communication. This knowledge lies beyond the internal as well as the external perspective of analysis.

The analysis of formal conditions for communicative action, i.e. the analysis of conditions for the *success* of the coordination of social action in communication, also identifies distortions of the processes in question, which may be identified as the presence of structurally grounded force or coerciveness ("*strukturelle Gewalt*").²³

Therefore, a Habermasian critical theory argues from the internal as well as the external perspective. Only this third metaperspective permits us to argue that increases in systems-complexity are *not* the same as the becoming more rational of communicative practices. Thus the practical conjecture is warranted that increasing systems-complexity must be brought under the control of acting and communicating members of society, i.e. under the control of communicative rationalization. This, however, can only happen when the lifeworld has been sufficiently differentiated to permit *argumentation* to come to the fore as a procedure for the coordination of social action. (Normative beliefs, cultural traditions can be treated as hypothetical.)

Normative validity claims become visible as the foundation of communication. This attitude toward the use of language for the coordination of social action can be institutionalized. Here the theory becomes normative. From general theoretical grounds regarding the notion of speech at issue,²⁴ it proceeds to the outline of a theory of reason.²⁵ But the practical plausibility of the theory arises from the critique of functionalist reason, the critique of the confusion of increases in systems-complexity with the (possible) rationalization of the lifeworld (i.e. the becoming hypothetical of action-orienting beliefs grounded in cultural traditions which conceal the exercise of normative force).

The question is whether this practical plausibility is best secured by relying on the procedure outlined, according to which the approach of a critical theory of society depends on the possibility of alternating between the external and internal perspectives. It is conceivable, after all,

23. TCA(2), p. 278.

24. TCA(1), pp. 1-22.

25. TCA(2), pp. 583-588.

that societal members may very well adopt an objectivating attitude in some instances of practical deliberation about courses of action to be chosen. But this “theoretical knowledge” would belong *in* the lifeworld, because it would arise from a background of interpretative knowledge and be limited by it. This is due simply to the fact that people living in their society ususally primarily analyse (and evaluate) it from a practical perspective. Thus, the critical theorist might be better off analysing the critical (and emancipatory) dimensions of everyday knowledge *in* the lifeworld, than single out fundamental concepts of action and basic systems-attributes of society in general. It is this perspective which I implicitly propose in my subsequent critical discussion.

2. System and Lifeworld: Critical Appraisal

The systematic distinction between system and lifeworld can only be persistently upheld, I believe, as long as systems theoretical arguments predominate over a lifeworld approach. Systems theoretical considerations predominate, in Habermas’ case, because TCA builds on a conception of society and of its nature which does not naturally arise from the interpretations and deliberations of societal members in practically constrained or, more generally, experienced social situations. It does not even build on the history of particular societies, but primarily on the tradition of classical sociology (and, of course, on Marx and on classical critical theory), all of which, for Habermas, have aimed at theories of modernity as a whole and have had the crisis of “bourgeois society”²⁶ as a theme.

The concept society is taken to stand for a comprehensive whole, given, so to speak, independently from those interpretive and common analytic practices which all societal members usually employ in their practical situations, including the theoretical analyst who also is a practical subject acting and deliberating in a particular historical situation.²⁷

26. TCA(1), p. 4.

27. Habermas recognized this, insofar as the communications theoretical argument of TCA analyses the performative attitude of participants in communication. As long as participants retain this attitude — as they mostly do — they cannot hold an ‘extramundane position’ in relation to language. TCA(2), p. 190. This also means that they recognize the dependence of successful communication on the maintenance of conditions for saying yes or no to various types of utterances. They must assume reciprocally that their utterances make sense and that they can give reasons for the beliefs expressed in their utterances (or that reasons can be asked for).

I believe, however, that even this argument is insufficiently contextual. It ignores that what people mean by reasons and can accept as reasons for something done or said, is deeply dependent upon particular conditions for the intelligibility of actions or utterances. Habermas only focuses on universal competences.

Because Habermas ignores the embeddedness of large-scale social theorizing in mundane practices of deliberation, his arguments critical of some of the effects of capitalist modernization appear to be too dependent on a systems theoretical strategy of analysis. It addresses the encroachment of formal (and apparently almost self-contained) action-systems, such as “the” economy and “the” system of bureaucratic administration, upon the lifeworld of communication (what Jeffrey Alexander calls the “overly moralized” lifeworlds of culture and experience — standing over against a “depersonalized” social system²⁸) on the basis of the belief, that these two dimensions of society (system and lifeworld) can be pulled apart and need to be, in order to make the reifying and culturally impoverishing effects of the encroachments mentioned visible. The critique of functionalist reason (while certainly an immanent critique and as such magnificently compelling, as in the critique of Parsons) relies on a functionalist procedure of analysis.

The lifeworld, and its transformations, are seen from the perspective of an evolutionary theory which identifies the *correlates in the lifeworld* as mirror images, so to speak, of processes analysed to occur on the level of systems-differentiation. Thus the illusion is conveyed that social development, such as the differentiation between system and lifeworld, can actually be explained.²⁹ Explanation means here: Evolutionary history can be reconstructed, its basic mechanisms can be identified, so that we can see through history leading up to modernity: We can *then* clearly say what has been *missing* in this history so far. We can believe that a new *principle* for the organization of social relations is needed which, while certainly building on already accepted practices (the normative basis of speech, for example, already institutionalized in *some* areas) actually is to provide more cogent, i.e. universal and theoretically identified “foundations” for these practices.

When raising questions about this program by criticizing its propensity toward systems theoretical argumentation, I am merely pointing out that actual achievements of practical *and* socially critical knowledge *in* the society are neglected. (This is what I mean by: the neglect of the perspective of the lifeworld.) And this particular criticism is important because it raises the question whether we need a theory of history

28. Jeffrey C. Alexander, “The Parsons Revival in German Sociology,” p. 400.

29. Cf. TCA(2), p. 180. Here Habermas employs a very conventional concept of theory. A theory of social evolution in Habermas’s sense will explain (“*greifbar machen*”) the relation between forms of social integration and levels of system-differentiation, so that empirical analysis can proceed from there. This is very much how Parsons had thought of the relation between theory and research. So does most conventional sociology.

in its entirety (the theory of social evolution) in order to defend a normative *and* tentatively held commitment to social emancipation from experienced forms of defeat, humiliation and extreme impoverishment and renunciation. Thus my critique suggests the conjecture that emancipation is a practical-moral concept belonging within the context of the reasoning we do about the society all the time while living in it. It cannot be made stronger by way of a theory which puts the society before us in its entirety.

However, I shall not engage in an analysis of concepts of emancipatory reasoning in this paper. I merely take a preliminary step toward such an analysis by illustrating further what I mean by my claim that Habermas neglects achievements of practical and socially critical knowledge in the society, primarily accessible from the position of a participant in the life of the society. It is quite natural to assume, for example, that most members of various "Western" societies are participants in the debate about nuclear strategies, at least in some sense. (This may also hold for their relation to the women's movement). No matter how active or passive they are as participants in the relevant debates and controversies, their primary knowledge of the issues is acquired not because they stand back from the debates and "observe" them, but because they have been drawn into them: They have to take a position or, indeed, have a position, even without having accounted for it in detailed theoretical argument and systematic deliberation.

Thus people may express their apprehensions with respect to the continuing arms-race in terms resembling those of expert-critics of further escalation in the arms-race between the two dominant global powers. This holds, even if most of us are not able to predict the specific consequences of the deployment of particular weapons-systems which are internal to the "logic" of escalation. Experts, on the other hand, cannot properly judge the arms-race unless they include some of the general sense of its uncontrollability in their deliberations.

Interviews show that even many high school students display a readiness to weigh arguments and to consider the implications of various positions.³⁰ This also applies to the demands of women, first articulated by the women's movement, which have now entered the thinking about living arrangements and relationships among sections of the population. In all these cases the knowledge at issue is the knowledge of participants in daily life. It is not as far apart from expert knowledge, as Habermas is inclined to believe.³¹ It also contains obser-

30. Interviews show this which explore audience reactions to a British film on the consequences of nuclear war. Veronica Schild, Unpublished consultants' report. Television Ontario (Educational TV), Toronto, Ontario, Canada. March 1985.

31. Cf. his allusions to a possible mediation between both. TCA(2), p. 586.

vational elements: Thus people may refer to what they have seen, observed and learned, for example, about the peace-movement or the women's movement. Even people who have not participated in either movement will, however, *rarely* argue that they are merely "observers." Discussions in informal situations do not require the adoption of the position of a disinterested observer as a position equal to that of the involved participant. Whenever this step is taken, one usually refers to experts, i.e. a specific position in the social organization of knowledge which is attached to particular institutional roles and still has to demonstrate its "validity" in terms accessible to common and ordinary discourse. But in everyday discussions we do not merely operate with the position of the involved participant either. There is room for the reporting of observations, for critical commentary, and generally for evaluations of actions and belief with reference to such activities. Thus, the two attitudes which Habermas separates (the internal and the external perspective) for the sake of a comprehensive theory of society, are far from separate in the context of commonly occurring discourse: The two attitudes or perspectives are quite naturally intertwined, but always rely on the primacy of the participant's attitude. Habermas grants this in some instances.

But given his comprehensive analytic perspective, he will proceed by separating the two perspectives as soon as major systemic constraints on social action (and, as he would argue, on interpretively generated knowledge of the society) are at issue. Here the two most prominent constraints are the effects of money and power on the organization of social interaction. I shall merely discuss money and inquire, whether it is correct to say, as Habermas does, that money is a medium of social exchange which codifies and standardizes relations of interaction.³²

In adapting Parsons' and Luhmann's systems-theoretically conceived theories of generalized media of social exchange to his own purposes, Habermas argues that money can be regarded as a "steering medium" which codifies and standardizes relations of interaction. By means of media of exchange (such as money and power), the functional domains of *material* reproduction can be isolated ("*ausdifferenziert*") from the lifeworld of communication.³³ By functioning as means for the purposive rational employment of calculable amounts of value,

32. I recognize that Habermas mostly follows Parsons when he discusses money. He is primarily interested in identifying problems which arise when the functionalist concept of a medium as a mechanism for the coordination of actions is also applied to power and other domains of action in the social system. But this entire discussion takes place in a systems-theoretical framework.

33. TCA(2), p. 391.

they make possible the use of generalized strategies for securing influence upon the decisions made by (other) participants in social interaction.³⁴ Thus, money (and in some respects also power) can replace linguistic communication in specific situations and in specific respects, as Habermas says. This substitution can reduce the need to engage in interpretative efforts. It may also minimize the risks involved in attempting to secure agreement (consensus).³⁵

In addition to these functional advantages provided by money as a generalized means of social exchange, the use of money in the sense described can also have the effect that the lifeworld of linguistic communication is “no longer needed for the coordination of actions.” In this case, we speak of the *technical* reorganization of the lifeworld (“*Technisierung der Lebenswelt*”).³⁶ The *monetarization* of social exchanges is a case in point.

In some respects, the institutionalization of money as a generalized medium of social exchange may have the consequence that the “symbolic structures of the lifeworld would have become deformed and reified,” due to the penetration of the lifeworld of communicative action by imperatives emanating from the sub-systems of society formed around money and power. This certainly is one feature of capitalist modernization for Habermas; it revokes, so to speak, the evolutionary gains achieved in modernity as a consequence of the “uncoupling” of system and lifeworld.

Developments toward the differentiation of social (and cognitive) processes go too far in the course of capitalist modernization, thus either leading to the complete splitting off of particular “techniques” for the regulation of social relations from broader context of communication, or having the consequence that these contexts are made subject to dysfunctional and thus destructive imperatives. Here we speak of the colonization of the lifeworld.

Habermas has painted a compelling picture of capitalist modernization in the chapters of TCA to which I just referred. But it is difficult to identify its contours, especially as Habermas’ own position and his critical claims are buried in a detailed critique of Parsons, Luhmann, and others. The general characteristics of this picture also have to be extracted from the interesting comparison of money and power as topics of systems-theoretical media-theory.³⁷

But for my purposes it matters most that this entire analysis purports

34. *Ibid.*, p. 418.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 418.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 400-407.

to be carried out — and indeed is carried out — from the position of the disinterested analyst of the reproduction of social systems. Habermas only turns to participants' knowledge in the relevant passages, when he contrasts systems-theoretical conceptions of power (*Macht*) for example with a communications-theoretical conception of the power to command. But he does not consider *money* in terms of the various meanings money may have to people acting in ordinary circumstances. Thus money, and together with it “the economy” (which Habermas discusses when considering various institutions and processes having to do with money, such as banking, civil law, etc.) appear to stand outside the context of the lifeworld; they are set apart from and stand above the activities of ordinary life which we may properly (and on closer inspection) designate as “economic.”

A critical perspective on capitalist modernization is severed from those processes of interpretation and criticism which are very much part of everyday life in highly “monetarized” (and possibly “bureaucratized”) societies. Habermas simply puts the entire realm of critical commentary aside which reaches from ordinary conversation to commentary in the media of communication (TV, etc.), to organized criticism in political institutions. I take it he does not believe that these “folk” versions of criticism explain much.³⁸

I argue that his systems-theoretical categorizations are mere reformulations of explanations which are already part of the “folk” knowledge just referred to. I would claim that before we can even know whether there is an “economy as a whole,” an organized “sub-system” of the society, we need to understand better what an “economic activity” consists of and what the ordinary meanings of these activities could be. Otherwise, we will not be able to decide whether the notion of an “economy” does not constitute a conceptual fiction (even if this fiction is regularly employed in some forms of public discourse and may even be practically consequential).

Habermas does not seem to have any difficulties with the view that

38. Here I go along with Richard Rorty who has argued that we need not make hard and fast distinctions between social science, philosophy, literature and newspaper reporting, when it comes to understanding the society — if we get rid of traditional notions of objectivity and scientific method. Rorty says that it is with reference to *practical* concerns, rather than putative ontological status, that we should draw the lines between different subject matters of inquiry. This, of course, is not Habermas' view. Cf. R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

I am also persuaded by Richard Bernstein's critique of Habermas' universal pragmatics. Cf. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism. Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

there is something like an “economy” in existence in modern capitalist (or state-socialist) societies which functions as a definite sub-system in the society having definite parameters and boundaries. He would also argue, I believe, that this is a sphere which is regulated by purely “economic” criteria.

It also seems to follow that the criteria defining the boundaries of this “sub-system” of society cannot be perceived from within the situations in which societal members act and about which they have common understandings. Thus the introduction of the approach of the disinterested observer is made mandatory. I do not believe this is a plausible way to proceed, however. For it imposes a conceptual organization on phenomena before they have been described. If one were to aim at descriptions, one could proceed as follows: From within the lifeworld, i.e., the commonly known world of everyday action and communication (in which we all live) money may not be very different from many other matters with which we must cope. Money enables us to pursue our aims, lack of it frustrates these pursuits. Money, in its everyday sense, may be a blessing in one case, a disaster in another. Having no money may be terrible, but also an advantage, etc. We do not know what money means, in *this* sense, short of inspecting the situations, circumstances and exigencies to which people refer and which they know about and with respect to which they form intentions. Money, however, also is capital. Capital seems to be in the possession of banks, large enterprises. Governments appear to regulate its use. We hear from economists that shortage of investment capital may lead to a slowdown of the economy. When one knows the problems of small businesses or of public agencies, one knows that shortage of money or capital may mean bankruptcy or the elimination of programs.

But in any and every case, what money means depends on our practical knowledge of the life-circumstances of social agents. *The economy as such is only visible as deeply embedded in daily life.* It only appears to stand outside it, insofar as we agree to the formulations of certain specialists (economists) who describe the economy largely without referring very much to what people do, but by referring to abstract mechanisms. However, we may *experience* the economy as standing outside daily life. This is the case when one is subject to incomprehensible events, such as the loss of employment, etc. But we need to examine this view of the economic dimensions of life as dependent upon certain circumstances and experiences. We should not turn toward highly general concepts too quickly, which may reify the experiences in question. For the experience of daily life, i.e. from the perspective of the lifeworld (not a theory of the lifeworld) the economy will only appear as a self-contained sphere of activity *under certain circumstances.* Without considering these

circumstances, I believe, we cannot argue that the economy is a sub-system of society split off from communication.

Habermas is right in saying, I believe, that money *can* become a substitute for communication. He is wrong in saying that money as a medium of social exchange, which standardizes it with respect to certain purposes, can do what it does because in the development of modern societies the market has become a self-regulating institution, a sub-system of society, which is *only accessible to systems-theoretical-functional analysis*.

When Habermas argues that money may make communication superfluous, he can be taken to argue that in many cases where it is institutionally sanctioned as a regulator of social exchange, it perhaps ought not to be. This would be quite sufficient for a critical theory of society, I believe. And this is not at all like saying that it is morally wrong for money to play this role. Rather it is like saying that the increased use of money as not merely a means but a measure of and a substitute for satisfaction is a systematically induced error, an error which deceives people (or they deceive themselves) about what is good for them. It may make them also forget that discussing more, speaking with one another can be as good or better than the pursuit of private fortunes. *We could add a number of similar practically formulated arguments to begin a discourse on what money can do and cannot do.* In addition, we could then examine whether the limits placed upon the significance of money for social life which we may have discovered are generally recognized or not. If not, we might have identified grounds for resistance or even further reaching programs of change — always, however, beginning from experience articulated in discourse.

Habermas, of course, would not be satisfied with *this* position. For in his case, the issue is larger — or so it appears: It is the issue of the limits of capitalist modernization, i.e. the identification of the *dysfunctionalities* of modernization due to its being *capitalist modernization*. But here we are back to a functionalist argument, to systems-theory. It is employed, by Habermas, against the imperialist generalizations of systems-theory, its own internal lack of differentiations.

Dysfunctionalities are the unintentional consequences of functionally coordinated actions in society, which have coalesced into systemic entities no longer attributable to particular agents, acting and deliberating in particular situations. They have split themselves off from the lifeworld. This is how they are described. But even for Habermas, dysfunctionalities appear *in* the lifeworld, in the form of various kinds of experienced disturbances, frustrations, dislocations. They

are also known for what they are through the reactions of social movements.³⁹

But the systems-theoretical terminology remains quite metaphorical here. It has the additional disadvantage that it suggests possibilities for causal explanation, where all we can rely on are more or less tentative interpretations and the powers of resistance built into the modes of reasoning which still exist (in everyday life).⁴⁰

I am proposing, therefore, that we unravel the metaphors in question and strip them of those connotations which suggest that compelling explanations can be found formulated from the position of the uninvolved observer. As participants in the economy, for example, (which we all are) we encounter dysfunctionalities in the form of recessions, shortages of goods, inflation, the incessant attempts of business enterprises, rackets, etc. to turn things and attributes of people into commodities.

But seen from this perspective, dysfunctionalities are not the anonymous, impersonal processes which they sound like in Habermas' efforts of turning functionalism against itself. One can always know, in general terms, who does what, i.e. that particular individuals and groups⁴¹ act in ways which may cause this or that problem. It is also known, in general terms, that these individuals and groups act under constraints, as do ordinary citizens. It is only to the extent that certain kinds of experts present a picture which conceals the involvement of particular persons, groups, and institutions, and their *interests*, that the economy *appears* as a self-regulating system.

Habermas makes processes appear to be much stronger than they actually are when viewed from the present. Thus the critical edge of his theory directed toward the present is blunted, and it becomes futuristic. It expresses the visionary belief that communication as a medium for the coordination of social action may be suppressed

39. Cf. TCA(2), pp. 575-583.

40. Cf. D. Misgeld, "Education and Cultural Invasion: Critical Social Theory, Education as Instruction, and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed," especially the section on Freire and Habermas. In J. Forester (ed.), *Critical Theory and Public Life* (Boston: MIT Press. To be published in fall 1985) Cf. also the editor's introduction.

41. The dissolution of apparently anonymous processes in the society into the activities of particular groups and people, and into particular practices is part of Dorothy E. Smith's reformulation of Marx's method of ideology-critique. Her interpretation of the German Ideology tends toward a deconstruction of concepts, which are treated as entities, such as the systems-theoretical concepts at issue in this paper. Her work predates Derrida's deconstructionism. Cf. Dorothy E. Smith, "The Ideological Practice of Sociology," *Catalyst*, 8. (1974), 39-54.

altogether.⁴² Due to this far ranging perspective, the actual wealth of practically generated, historically situated interpretations is missed, in which the apparent self-sufficiency of the economy has become a theme of public contestation. Because of the (quasi) explanatory formulation of his theory, Habermas is inclined to exaggerate certain features of the present economic organization of developed capitalist societies and their institutions, which only have their place next to other features.

My examples were meant to illustrate that it is hard to identify anything like the “economy” as a sub-system of society possessing definite boundaries. This holds, because whatever the economy is, it consists of a variety of activities which we may describe as economic in some respects and in some situations. But in other respects and in other situations, these activities may be described quite differently. In this second set of cases, whatever counts as economic is also open to moral or political evaluation. This holds, for example, for present tendencies to once again organize economic activities around the conception of a free market society and for policies of deregulation of corporate and business activities. These measures take place in a field of public contestation and debate. And frequently even expert rationales for the encouragement of economic growth recommending the removal of governmental regulation will be called into question by groups entertaining different conceptions of economic activity and public welfare. In all these cases, moral and political considerations are applied to topics which some economists would like to regard as purely economic matters.

We would be hard pressed to identify any activity as “purely” economic, as soon as we have learned to be skeptical with respect to the claims of investment planners and other economic experts. And certainly skepticism is widespread.

There can be no question, of course, that phenomenologically speaking, Habermas has identified a number of features of money which do characterize generally relied upon conceptions of it. Thus, most people will argue that “money talks”: There is an increasing number of cases, for example, where payments of money have become accepted as compensation for personal and non-financial loss or even grief.⁴³ Life-insurance policies may have this function, even if they may not be overtly designed for it. Yet money also remains an everyday topic of conversation, commentary, and interpretation. As such, it is far from becoming a medium which can

42. TCA(2), p. 593.

43. This, at least, is the case in the U.S.

make communication superfluous. *I contend that it merely alters the nature of communication.* It may do so differently depending on how a society is equipped to respond to its use and what practices and institutions are available as background for the mundane interpretations of the place of money in the society.

It follows that according to this position Habermas is neither entirely right nor wrong. He is right in arguing that money, under conditions of capitalist modernization, may have become too powerful a regulator of social relations in their entirety. He is wrong in believing, in my view, that this phenomenon can be the subject of a rigorous theory taking the place, let us say, of social-historical accounts of the rise of money (capital) in the course of the historical emergence of a business economy relying on investment capital. In other words: Had his claims been part of an account interpreting the development of capitalist economies in historical terms, they could be quite plausible and could very well be employed as a background to what we mean by activities which we may call economic in our present everyday world.

I also believe, of course, that he is wrong when he claims that money can make the lifeworld of communicative action superfluous. For this sounds as if the “symbolic reproduction” (to use one of his terms) of society might become superfluous or could be torn asunder under the impact of systems-imperatives. This, I believe, is too bleak and too coherent a picture. It is not even imaginable what would be meant by it. It is just as plausible to assume that present economic and financial policies may not work at all anymore, due perhaps to the limits of continued deficit-financing. But there is no reason to assume that such a situation could at all be analysed in the terms set out in the relevant sections of TCA. What it could mean to say that an “economy” doesn’t work anymore would require the examination of a number of practical evaluations of particular activities and an analysis of the extensive commentary developing around such issues in practical life.

3. Participant, Observer and the Rationalization of the Lifeworld

At this point, a final glance at the relation between the attitudes of the disinterested observer (or analyst of society) and of the participant is in order. For Habermas, both attitudes can be adopted at will, so to speak, and as the need arises for a transition from the one to the other in terms of the problems at hand for the theorist. As all of social reality is at issue for Habermas (and the entire set of conceivable conceptual determinations applicable to societies and their evolution), it follows that the attitudes appear like two forms of methodological procedure, always available to the theorist of society.

I had already argued, however, that this view of the relation between

the external and internal perspectives on society is highly artificial. If my description of Habermas' position is correct, he may be taken to follow a classical procedure in the study of society: The conceptual determinations required for it are prefigured in society as the object. Thus methods are chosen in terms of the requirements imposed by the object of inquiry. But we might very well want to argue that this is a mistaken view: As theorists, we must begin from the knowledge of society which we already possess as participants in social life and in the reasoning constitutive of all activities ("mundane reasoning").

I had also already argued that 'objectivating' practices may very well be part of the everyday attitude toward situations in the society. But they presuppose *the primacy of the participant's attitude*, i.e. *the primacy of practical orientation* (as I would say). Thus we should consider further what the relation between observer and participant may look like from the perspective of the lifeworld: There are many ways of participating in social life and many forms of observing it. As participants in the maintenance of organizational processes,⁴⁴ for example, we will often act in terms of rules, the adequacy of which we take for granted. But sometimes we may want to reexamine them. This cannot be done unless suitable circumstances arise or are brought about (even if we form our resolve to change a procedure in private). When we doubt the validity of a procedure or object to it, we may do so on the grounds that we have observed it to misfire, that we have noted inconsistencies, that various contingently arising problems have been recorded. In all these instances, the terms "observe," "note," "record" are interchangeable. The term "observation" does not possess boundaries which firmly inscribe it into a purely theoretical space. Yet it is clear that observing, noting, etc. are activities in the lifeworld, are everyday practices of accounting for the organizational realities of society, for example, which we employ in order to support certain claims to knowledge with respect to the society.

In fact, observing, recording, etc. may be activities specifically warranted by particular institutional settings. In these cases, rules for the production of records, for example, may function as instructions. They usually circumscribe an activity, thus permitting the distinction between observations made for the purpose of record-keeping and more informal or casual kinds of observation. In all these cases, rules function as general policies or guides for the activity, but not as fixed standards or criteria which require of the activity that it conform to the presumably unambiguous standards of an idealized form of scientific

44. Here I mean processes with varying degrees of formal organization.

or "pure" inquiry. Certainly ethnomethodological studies of communicative processes in organizations have shown as much. They have documented the primacy of practical orientation in the organization of everyday activities in organizational settings such as hospitals, prison wards, halfway-houses, etc. But they have shown similar conceptions of rules, instructions, and policies to hold in less formally organized settings as well, thus offering a broad range of sociological accounts of practical reasoning *in* the lifeworld.⁴⁵ But what would the systematic, uninvolved observation of society look like, as it is required by Habermas' formulation of the objectivating attitude? It could rely on none of the practices for the interpretation of rules mentioned so far. For they consist, after all, of continuous efforts to adapt rules to various contingencies at hand, yet to maintain the applicability of the rules in question to future events.

It is quite unclear how the attitude of the uninvolved observer burdened with tasks of wideranging theoretical analysis such as Habermas assigns to this attitude, could ever acquire the flexibility characteristic of the just described pragmatic attitude of everyday life. Indeed, it *may* not be flexible in this sense, as it is to fix the systems-dimensions of societies in some conclusive sense.

Therefore, we may conclude that systematic, uninvolved observation of the society as a whole is inconceivable from the position of the lifeworld. And more than this: It is not clear what it could be, *how it could be carried out as an activity at all*, as it is not clear in what way it would address the actualities of particular societies (and the particulars of these actualities). In all likelihood, the objectivating theorist, as Habermas conceives of him, will not address any of this, but largely only provide a set of highly general concepts, suitable, perhaps, for the formulation of specific hypotheses.

However, at this point, we would have returned to a form of social theory which can hardly be made compatible with the comprehension of everyday realities in the society, society in its *actual* form. Even if the attitude of the disinterested observer focussing on entire societies in broad outline was conceivable in terms of a set of practices to be followed by the inquirer in question, there would still remain the problem of how this knowledge can be brought back into the horizon of the lifeworld. To speak with the earlier Habermas, we might ask: How can the picture of society thus acquired be brought back into the domain of acting and communicating subjects, of citizens?

45. Cf. H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967) and Roy Turner (ed.), *Ethnomethodology* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1974). Cf. also D. Misgeld, "Ultimate Self-Responsibility, Practical Reasoning, and Practical Action," *Human Studies*, 3 (1980), 255-278.

As it stands now, TCA offers a theory of capitalist modernization and its conflicts, which hovers above the heads of acting and communicating citizens. For it to become practically enlightening (in some sense), they need to translate it into the situated contexts of their practically organized lives. When they do so, however, they may find it to be uninformative with respect to the contingencies they must cope with. Or they will interpret it according to their practical interests, thus refashioning it considerably. In both cases, the theory loses much of the critical force it is supposed to contain. For the theory is designed to bring before us, in its entirety, the evolutionary history of modern societies, albeit in a highly conjectural form. But it is not clear that this kind of knowledge can even make sense under conditions of life in society, for which practical exigencies always come first. At most, it can serve as a narrative picture of the societal past, possible present contingencies, and a conceivable future, to be anticipated on some grounds.

But it cannot serve as a cogent explanatory theory. In this sense, it is doubtful that giving critical theory a rigorous form, as Habermas attempts to do, amounts to a great advance over the evocative force of, let us say, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment." While this work may have been methodologically naive from Habermas' perspective and certainly subject to the deceptions Habermas criticizes,⁴⁶ it at least had the force of an immediate, direct response to historical experience. While it presented itself as objective theory, it can also be read as an imaginative, frequently startling narrative interpretation of the fate of modernity which provokes more questions, so to speak, than a theory can achieve which relies on procedures for the systematic objectification of social experience and then has to find methods for the translation of its findings back into the world of acting and communicating societal members.

The emancipatory ideal becomes purely formal, we might say, as a consequence of the adoption of an archimedian point⁴⁷ for social theory: This is the contribution of the systems-theoretical argumentation. The component of the theory which builds on participants' understanding of their social situation, as a consequence is locked into a competition which it can only lose. And only an empty principle remains of the notion of emancipation once saturated with historical experience.

46. TCA(2), pp. 548-583.

47. For a critique of the archimedian point in sociology cf. Dorothy E. Smith, "A Sociology for Women," in J. A. Sherman and E. Torton Beck (eds.), *The Prison of Sex. Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) and my use of her position in D. Misgeld, "Habermas' Retreat from Hermeneutics," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 5:1-2 (1981), 8-44.

Therefore, it might be preferable to demand less rigour of a theory of society than Habermas requires. By doing so, one might gain in substance. Of course, this may not be done by overlooking the numerous methodological qualifications which Habermas has put in the way of a critical theory of society which proceeds as if the society, as its object of analysis, was directly and immediately available to the theorist. One may not avoid the question, on what grounds the theorist has access to the society; this question has been forcefully placed before us by Habermas' twofold strategy of social analysis and his arguments on behalf of the adoption of two fundamentally complementary approaches in the theory of society.

But we may still feel free to ask whether our interpretations of the societies we live in and our critical reflection upon various "ways of life" and forms of social organization available in these societies need to be mediated by explanatory circuitousness in the form of a reconstruction of social evolution and systems-analysis. Perhaps critical reflection and, for example, historical interpretation can work hand in hand, by reflecting on present experiences, cultivating historical memory and by entertaining loosely structured conceptions of the future: to be kept as flexible and pragmatically open as can be.

I conclude, therefore, that Habermas' diagnosis of our times, concentrated in the formula that the lifeworld of communication is being or is about to be colonized by imperatives of the formally structured sub-systems of the society, really is an argument in favour of the openness of communication: It can be taken to stand for the general principle that the more communication there is in developed or late capitalist societies, the more opportunities there are for non-violent and mutually agreed upon change in these societies.

But then an important question remains unanswered: Late capitalist societies are societies in which communication (and its technologies) abound. There seems to be more talk, and talk about talk, than ever. What then are the significant forms of communication which are not developed under these conditions? Which experiences are not and cannot be expressed or entered into common discourse? Short of addressing this question, I do not think we know what it could mean to speak of the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld. We do not know in what way a theory critical of a society in which the principle of communicative reason is not fully realized can be practically enlightening.

While offering a utopian perspective, by arguing for the permeability (and translatability) of aesthetic, moral, and scientific discourse, one into the other,⁴⁸ the theory does not show what it would

48. TCA(2), p. 585.

mean for people, as inhabitants of the lifeworlds of present-day societies, to make this utopian perspective their own. We do not know what would become of this utopian perspective, as long as we do not know how to translate it into something which we can practically pursue. Without knowing this, however, we do not really know whether it is true (even if perhaps desirable). We are left with the uncertainties of our actual — and practically determined — condition.

Thus TCA may aim too high and too far. It is an all-encompassing theory. My suggestion is that it be interpreted (and criticized) in the direction of a critical hermeneutical explication of the “lifeworlds” of contemporary societies. This approach requires that we recognize that our knowledge of the society as a whole is much less certain than our understanding of particular social situations and practices. But knowledge of society as a whole is not absent from the knowledge of practical situations. Still following Hegel, Habermas proceeds as if knowledge of the whole (entire societies, history) can and must come first.

For him, society is not known unless it is known in its entirety, no matter how hypothetical this knowledge is (as it is for Habermas). But perhaps theories of this kind, even if they were possible or “successful,” do not properly recognize the embeddedness of theorizing into actual histories and in the practical organization of society. They need to be made to fit the scale and range of knowledge about the society, which can arise from daily life and feed back into its practical organization.

When one adopts this perspective, one may no longer be inclined to argue for the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld as a whole or for the realization of communicative reason in all domains of society. One will select the most pressing cases of the suppression of communication and proceed from there to other cases. A distrust of highly general arguments is built into this position.