INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introduction is fourfold. Firstly, it aims to establish the context of the theory or ‘project’ of modernity for theorists such as Habermas. In broad terms, Habermas belongs to the tradition of the Enlightenment and its associated aspirations to progress and freedom. He believes that human beings are capable of rising above self-interest, prejudice and dogma through the exercise of reason. Moreover, Habermas maintains that modern societies denote a time and place in which there is an hitherto unprecedented opportunity for developing a rational way of life. This claim about the potential of modernity is much disputed. Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1981) account of the general issues involved is referred to as a useful way of locating the intellectual context in which thinkers such as Habermas work.

A prominent feature of modernity, in MacIntyre’s view, is that it has become very difficult to resolve moral conflicts and problems. This is because individuals and groups now live without an overarching consensus on basic values and principles. Habermas has been a pivotal figure in intellectual controversies about the meaning and implications of this moral indeterminacy. He has defended consistently the position that the theoretical and political traditions of the Enlightenment can resolve the problems involved. MacIntyre locates the specific tradition of Enlightenment thinking to which Habermas belongs. He emphasizes the defining importance of Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx for this tradition.

The second purpose of this chapter is to set out the principal features of the theory or project of modernity. This project may be understood as a philosophical and political enterprise that has three main imperatives or requirements. The first requirement is to delineate the universal characteristics of human life. The second task involves establishing the meaning intrinsic to history, a meaning which is held to consist of the gradual realization of universal human capacities. The third dimension comprises an understanding of how these capacities can be permanently and practically realized in the form of rational social and political institutions. The satisfaction of these requirements, it is argued, is the task of the theory or project of modernity. These requirements will also be described, as
explained further below, in terms of a ‘theory of the rational’ and a ‘theory of the irrational’.

The attempt to satisfy the three requirements of the project of modernity was a principal concern of the ‘critical theory’ of the ‘Frankfurt School’. Habermas’ relationship to this school will be briefly discussed. It will be argued that his commitment to a form of radical social democratic politics represents an effort to reestablish the original ambitions of this school of thought. Such a political commitment, it is maintained, is also what distinguishes his approach from other thinkers classified within the looser characterization of ‘critical theory’ current today.

The dissertation is concerned, then, with Habermas’ attempt to fulfil a set of self-imposed imperatives. My evaluation of his work takes the form of an internal critique. It is an assessment of how well Habermas accomplishes the tasks he sets for himself. The third purpose of this chapter is to introduce the primary arguments of this assessment. This involves, in addition, an explanation of the contribution of the dissertation to the critical literature surrounding Habermas’ work. Finally, there is a synopsis of the structure and content of the chapters which follow.

I THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT OF MODERNITY

Habermas’ confidence in the potential of reason endures despite the fact that much has happened in western society to undermine the Enlightenment tradition. Humans have certainly exercised reason but it is precisely this exercise which is now often criticized, as the cause of contemporary human problems.1 Questions have arisen as to whether there is any basis at all for reason to be used so as to further the interests of all. This part of the chapter uses MacIntyre’s (1981) account to set out the general nature of the problems confronting the project of modernity. It also sketches three broad responses to this predicament, of which the ‘project of modernity’ is one.

1 For a recent but more popular statement of this argument, see Saul (1992).
The crisis of modernity

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 6) portrays clearly the key problem of modernity. This problem involves the contemporary state of morality in both academic philosophy and modern society generally:

The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on – although they do – but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.

A prominent feature of the context of the project of modernity, then, is that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to reach moral agreement.

To illustrate this by example, we may refer to the long-standing debate between socialists and liberals. This debate often centres around the values of equality and liberty (Lukes 1991). A general claim of the socialists is that for each individual to find and enjoy their talents and abilities, there must be equal, universal and public provision of basic services such as education and health care. The liberals respond that this implies substantial intervention into society by the state, which must compromise the value of individual liberty. The question arises of whether there is a clear and rational way of resolving this disagreement? MacIntyre suggests that for this, and virtually all other moral disputes in modern society, there is not. The problems are fundamental because it is not simply a question of competition between two different principles whose meaning is the same for both parties. The conceptions of equality and of liberty, as well as their relationship to one another, vary. These differences can be traced back to contrasting philosophical assumptions about issues such as human nature and the reliability of knowledge. The liberals’ anxiety about state intervention, for example, might be grounded in a pessimistic
view of the motives of human action as well as the epistemic limits to understanding the consequences of such action.

Thus, despite the fact that appeals to objective, rational criteria are almost always made by both parties to moral disputes, substantive philosophical differences usually persist. The basic cause of this, argues MacIntyre, is that no prior agreement exists about the meaning of moral concepts and fundamental assumptions. Each party stays firm to its own, one-sided point of view:

From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion. Hence perhaps the slightly shrill tone of so much moral debate (MacIntyre 1981, 8).

MacIntyre describes the consequences of this state of affairs in terms of ‘emotivism’. Emotivism maintains that only in the area of factual questions are judgements of true and false possible. That is, we can easily come to an agreement on whether a chair is black or brown because all can generally acknowledge identifiable and objective criteria with which to measure such perceptions. In the realm of moral issues, however, we can come to no rational agreement. Emotivism holds that moral debate is constituted by influencing the feelings, attitudes and emotions of those involved. Any agreement reached is achieved via the harmonious production of non-rational effects in the participants. Given the considerable level of moral disagreement in modern societies, it is therefore not surprising that they are of a ‘shrill tone’.

Three ways out

MacIntyre argues there are three ways out of this crisis of modernity. My concern, here, is to indicate these very briefly for the purpose of situating Habermas’ commitment to the viability of the ‘project of modernity’ as one such way. It should be noted that I am referring to ideal models which overlap considerably in contemporary debates.
The first response to the crisis of modernity may be referred to as ‘liberal individualism’. It does not see in the contemporary moral crisis any real cause for intellectual or political concern. It argues that social harmony only requires a set of minimal rules and procedures for settling controversies. Shared conceptions of life and collective forms of action are held to constrain the individual’s own evaluation of their needs and how these can be achieved. Thus, the dominance of self-interest rather than mutual understanding is accepted as valuable and right. Widespread moral disagreement is seen to be an indicator of progress, as individuals are freed from traditions and embracing worldviews and are able to adopt their own moral standards. The conclusion drawn from this is that only when the state goes beyond its role as minimal arbiter and attempts to resolve conflicts intrusively is moral disagreement a problem. In such a situation, different groups think that the state should intervene for them and impose their moral outlook upon others. The way out requires a rigorous redrawing of the lines between public and private.

The second way out may be characterized as ‘communitarianism’. This approach assumes that shared understandings of life as a whole are necessary and important for human coexistence. It criticizes liberalism, including the more humanistic forms, for replacing holistic understandings of life with procedural rules, such as Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’: ‘Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’ (cited in Schneewind 1992, 320). MacIntyre endorses the communitarian approach because he argues that procedural rules can never provide conclusive answers to moral questions. They purport to be some kind of algorithm for generating ethical prescriptions. Theorists such as MacIntyre maintain that because they have no content of their own, however, these rules cannot adjudicate satisfactorily in concrete situations. Two people, with different worldviews, can follow such rules and yet produce completely opposite results. This recalls the general point made above regarding rival premises and assumptions. Procedural rules perform a rationalizing function in MacIntyre’s view: they justify the conception of life one already has and are unable to engender any shared understanding. Communitarians point out that moral concepts gain meaning only through clearly specified relationships with other concepts in the context of an overarching moral system. The only way out of moral crisis, then, is to re-establish a universal conception of the ‘good life’ in which various moral values have a role in its elaboration and preservation.
The bulk of MacIntyre’s account is organized around a contrast between liberal individualism and communitarianism. He constructs his philosophical narrative in the interest of defending the latter. MacIntyre (1981, 261) acknowledges, however, that this dichotomous approach tends to exclude a third possibility:

The most intellectually compelling exponents of this point of view are likely to be those who trace a genealogy of ideas from Kant and Hegel through Marx and claim that by means of Marxism the notion of human autonomy can be rescued from its original individualist formulations and restored within the context of an appeal to a possible form of community in which alienation has been overcome, false consciousness abolished and the values of equality and fraternity realized.

This tradition of thought tries to find a way ‘between’ liberalism and communitarianism. It attempts to preserve both the modern concept of individual freedom and the more classical understanding of an embracing ethical community. Jürgen Habermas is a member of this tradition (Bernstein 1980, 238-9, 1983, 178; Bronner 1994, 283; Ingram 1990, 1-26; Roderick 1986, 8-21; White 1988, 5-10). He has stated that his theoretical interests have always been determined ‘by those philosophical and sociotheoretical problems which arise out of the movement of thought from Kant through to Marx’ (AS, 149; see also TCA, I, xlii).

In this dissertation, the terms ‘theory of modernity’, ‘project of modernity’ and ‘critical theory’ are adopted to describe Habermas’ work and the tradition of thought to which it belongs. The term ‘critical theory’ has, in contemporary discussions, often been used to describe a wide variety of theorists and theoretical approaches. This is evidenced, for example, in two recent edition collections of ‘critical theory’ (Tallack 1995 and Wexler 1991). Hoy and McCarthy’s (1994) application of the term also indicates that it has come to denote to a range of quite diverse approaches. In this dissertation, I use it in a more restricted sense, to apply to a tradition of neo-Marxist interdisciplinary social scientific research which runs through the Frankfurt School to Habermas and others. Moreover, I

---

2 Outhwaite (1987, 108) includes with Habermas thinkers such as Karl-Otto Apel, Claus Offe, Alfred Schmidt and Albrecht Wellmer in his characterization of the ‘more diffuse form’ critical theory has taken since the
employ it to refer to a specific political project that has not always been upheld by thinkers involved in that tradition. Critical theory, in this sense, is an attempt to inform and guide a political practice which aims to radically reform existing social and political institutions in the interest of human emancipation. Habermas considers that, from an early stage, his central problem ‘was a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity, from the viewpoint of the realization – the deformed realization – of reason in history’ (AS, 98).

Habermas’ concern with the construction of an adequate critical theory and its connection with political practice is partly a response to the foundering of such a project in the writings of earlier critical thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno (AS, 56, 98-9). For various reasons, these predecessors to Habermas felt unable to sustain an adequate theoretical basis for a practical, reformist or revolutionary politics. The construction of stronger theoretical foundations in the form of a research program which links philosophy with science is, then, an integral part of reestablishing the credibility of political intentions of a Marxist kind. Habermas’ work, therefore, can be understood as contributing to the theoretical bases of a radical social democratic politics.3

II THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE THEORY OF MODERNITY

The purpose of this part of the chapter is to establish what is needed to construct a theory of modernity in Habermas’ sense. It is argued that three requirements must be satisfied if this theory is to establish the foundations of an emancipatory politics and practically reconcile the values of individual freedom and community. They are described under the headings, ‘universal characteristics of human life’, ‘meaning in history’ and ‘practical realization’. A clear delineation of these requirements provides a basis upon which Habermas’ contribution can be evaluated according to its own internal criteria.

deed of Theodor Adorno in 1969.
3 Kellner (1989, 212) argues that Habermas offers ‘a theoretical foundation for a Social Democratic reform strategy within contemporary capitalism’, even though his analyses are not presented ‘in precisely these terms’. In Kellner’s (1989, 262, fn 31) view, ‘[n]o one has adequately carried out an analysis of the specifically Social Democratic version of Critical Theory developed by Habermas’. This dissertation hopes to make a small contribution toward redressing this problem.
I argue that these requirements arise out of the tradition of critical theory. Within the limits of this chapter, however, this claim cannot be defended in a comprehensive fashion. It is not until chapter three that I justify this position in a systematic way. In that chapter, I follow Habermas’ reconstruction of concepts of ‘critique’ from Kant, Hegel and Marx. Concepts of critique, it is contended, are the means for satisfying the three requirements of the project of modernity. I maintain that each concept of critique was formed only in response to an awareness of the need to satisfy a corresponding theoretical requirement.

**Universal characteristics of human life**

One of the traditional tasks of philosophy has been to articulate the universal characteristics of the human species. It is on this basis that humanity is considered to possess the capacity for reason and can, thereby, be set apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Different philosophers and philosophical traditions have identified different substantive characteristics of the race which are enabling of its rationality. Whatever these characteristics are held to be, the basic meaning or goal of human existence is defined as the effort to fully realize this capacity for rationality. The identification of human reason, then, is fundamental to this requirement of the theory of modernity.

For Erich Fromm, an earlier critical theorist, the very function of philosophy in human life can be ascertained from this point of view. He argues that a fundamentally new task in the reproduction of existence arises with the emergence of the human species. In contrast to other races, human beings must identify consciously the aims and goals of their life. Fromm (1956, 25) describes this as follows:

Man’s evolution is based on the fact that he has lost his original home, nature – and that he can never return to it, can never become an animal again. There is only one way he can take: to emerge fully from his natural home, to find a new home – one which he creates, by making the world a human one and by becoming truly human himself.

In Fromm’s account, then, the human species is defined by an uncertainty about what it is to do with its existence. There are no automatic hereditary mechanisms or biological means
for answering the question, ‘how should we live?’. In comparison to nature, culture is variable and it is the responsibility of human beings to develop it.

An important role for philosophy, therefore, is to establish criteria of cultural progress. The identification of what human rationality consists provides guidelines for evaluating the present day and understanding how social and political institutions can be improved. It determines the normative foundations of critique. Habermas refers to this way of thinking when he notes ‘that philosophical thought originates in reflection on the reason embodied in cognition, speech, and action; and reason remains its basic theme’ (TCA, I, 1). A core motivation of his work is to sustain the tradition of critical theory by validating an adequate set of normative standards upon which this theory can rest.

It will be argued, in chapter three, that the identification of human rationality, as one element of the theory of modernity, is the responsibility of a method of critique first explicated by Kant. Kant provides a distinctive framework for identifying universal human characteristics in the context of modernity. In this respect, the dissertation will focus upon Habermas’ attempt to preserve Kant’s concept of critique as essential to this task.

**Meaning in history**

For the theory of modernity, the identification of universal human characteristics is closely interrelated with another task which entails understanding how these characteristics emerge and evolve in the course of history. Karl Löwith (1949) has brought out the issues involved in his analysis of a paradigmatic shift from a classical to a modern understanding of historical change. In the classical approach, the identification of the human potential for reason (outlined above) prescribed a fixed ideal to be striven for. Individuals, as well as public life, were oriented toward conforming to these standards. History was understood, in this context, as a threat to the realization of reason. It was seen as pure change which undermined the effort to create a rational human order. In the modern understanding, to the contrary, history is conceived as the very dimension within which human reason is brought to awareness and realized. History is not understood as a random succession of events which interferes with human efforts of construction. Historical events, themselves, are held to embody a transcendent meaning which manifests itself in ‘historical progress’.
Löwith identifies two factors in his explanation of this reorientation in philosophical approach. Firstly, rethinking the concept of history was prompted by the ‘break with tradition at the end of the eighteenth century’ (Löwith 1949, 193). The political and industrial revolutions of the time along with the growing power of the natural sciences provided a sense of human control over the environment. It became possible to think that history could be made actively rather than passively accepted as a tragic fate. Secondly, Löwith argues that this shift was justified and accelerated by the application of religious ideas, from the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, to the realm of secular history. ‘In the Hebrew and Christian view of history’, he argues, ‘the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful “preparation” for the future’ (1949, 6). While these ideas were once contained and understood within the context of a ‘sacred’ conception of history, the modern era prompted their application to the secular realm. History is then seen to embody an ‘ultimate meaning’ which points to a ‘final purpose or goal’.

A second requirement of critical theory is to establish that there is an intrinsic meaning to history. Habermas’ commitment to this theme is substantially different from the naïve views of inevitable progress promulgated by many of the early Enlightenment thinkers (Brand 1990, ix-xi). He insists, nonetheless, on its importance for the theory of modernity as a whole. ‘The relation of history to reason’, writes Habermas, ‘remains constitutive for the discourse of modernity – for better or worse’ (PDM, 392, fn 4).

In the course of chapter three, it will be argued that a method of critique introduced by Hegel is the means for establishing the idea of a meaning to historical processes. As a result, the dissertation will reflect upon Habermas’ efforts to retain and refine this dimension of critique in current intellectual and political circumstances. For, since Hegel’s time, the notion of historical meaning has become more difficult to defend.

**Practical realization**

In the tradition of thought to which Habermas belongs, then, history creates the scope for human realization. History on its own, however, does not guarantee a favourable outcome.
Human potentials can remain unfulfilled. Ultimately, individuals and groups must act on historical opportunities and practically achieve their potential for rationality. In this respect, a theory is required to guide social groups in the attempt to realize, in a concrete fashion, human emancipation. The task, here, is to fashion social and political institutions in which objective possibilities are maintained permanently so that issues and problems can be resolved with the complete application of human reason. The accomplishment of this aim involves a political struggle against various other groups and institutions which subvert historical possibilities.

Habermas’ recognition of, and commitment to, this requirement of the theory of modernity is evidenced in the following exchange:

Q: [Are you really] convinced that existing power structures can be broken by means of a theoretical analysis?

A: Yes, I’m firmly convinced that the Left in general, and the Marxist Left in particular, can claim one advantage over all other political forces. This is the belief in the possibility of introducing theoretical analysis with a middle- or long-range perspective into day-to-day politics. This is one tradition that should not be sacrificed. On the other hand, I also believe that now [1979], more than ever before, we lack convincing analyses (AS, 82-3).

Habermas suggests, then, that an adequate theory of radical social democracy must comprise an analysis which can link the short- and long-term dimensions of political struggle. Without such an analysis, as will be argued further in chapter three in a discussion of Habermas’ examination of Marx, the realization of reason in history must remain a mere wish. It is in this sense that I interpret Marx and Engels’ (1967, 106-18) critique of various kinds of socialists and communists who failed to base their proposals for social and political change on scientific foundations. Without entering a debate about the meaning of ‘science’ in this regard, a general requirement can be identified: a certain type of knowledge is necessary if radical social democratic political practice is to conduct its struggle prudently. The establishment, in the abstract, of the ideals which are to be striven
for by such a practice does not satisfy this need. While it may answer the question, ‘why fight?’, the issue of ‘how can we struggle?’ remains to be addressed.

In chapter three, it will be argued that Marx devised a method of critique in response to the need to identify how reason can be practically realized. The final part of that chapter will focus upon Habermas’ reconstruction of the elements of this third mode of critique.

To summarize the requirements of the theory of modernity, (1) the human potential for reason must be shown to (2) manifest itself in the course of human history so that, in modern societies, (3) it is at a stage of fruition that allows it to be more fully realized by social movements committed to this task. I will also refer to these three requirements, in the course of the dissertation, under the headings ‘theory of rationality’ and ‘theory of irrationality’. The theory of rationality comprises the first two requirements of the project of modernity. The theory of irrationality, meanwhile, is a response to the third requirement of practical realization. It is meant to inform political struggles oriented towards overcoming the remaining and persisting ‘irrationality’ present within individual minds and social institutions. Irrationality is a barrier to creating a more humane organization of life. It denotes, as I understand it, the ‘existing power structures’ which need to be ‘broken’ by a ‘theoretical analysis’ referred to in the question posed to Habermas cited above.

The relationships between the ‘theory of the rational’, the ‘theory of the irrational’ and the ‘three requirements of modernity’ are summarized in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 Two ways of categorizing the elements of the theory of modernity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of the rational</th>
<th>Universal human characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meaning in history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of the irrational</td>
<td>Practical realization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III A CRITIQUE OF HABERMAS

Habermas is one of the few theorists whose work has been guided by an interest in addressing the very broad range of issues involved in satisfying the requirements of the project of modernity. Few other scholars have produced a body of work which integrates so many disciplines of knowledge. Thomas McCarthy (1984, ix) has noted that Habermas’ contributions to philosophy and psychology, political science and sociology, the history of ideas and social theory are distinguished not only by their scope but by the unity of perspective that informs them. This unity derives from a vision of mankind, our history and our prospects, that is rooted in the tradition of German thought from Kant to Marx, a vision that draws its power as much from the moral-political intention that animates it as from the systematic form in which it is articulated.

This dissertation presents a critique of Habermas’ effort to provide such an adequate justification of the project of modernity. Its central contention is as follows. Habermas’ theory focuses upon providing a theory of the rational. Its defence of the rational potential of modern society is held to be formidable. This emphasis, however, tends to downplay and exclude a systematic development of a theory of the irrational. Habermas provides the rudiments of such a theory throughout his writings. It is argued, nonetheless, that he fails to elaborate this theory in an adequate way. While providing a robust defence of the project of modernity, he does not offer an equally convincing account of how this project can be practically realized. The dissertation seeks to indicate, in a general way, how the existing elements of Habermas’ theory of the irrational can be elaborated further and the adjustments to his overall approach that this requires. The basic steps in the argument can be summarized as follows.

The three requirements of the theory of modernity have become more difficult to satisfy since they were first formulated and refined by Kant, Hegel and Marx. A series of intellectual and historical trends have undermined the erstwhile confidence of Enlightenment philosophers. The project of modernity has been constantly and radically questioned. The problems encountered have prompted sceptics to ask whether Habermas’ efforts represent merely the ‘last gasp’ (Giddens 1985, 116) of such endeavours of
theoretical justification. The impact of these doubts is evident within the time-frame of Habermas’ own contributions which now span over four decades. His work has undergone significant change and evolution along with the recognition of perceived inadequacies in the earlier undertakings. It is true, as indicated by the passage cited from McCarthy above, that the underlying intentions guiding Habermas’ work have remained essentially the same. Stephen White (1995, 5, 14n7) has also emphasized this:

Beginning in the 1960s, [Habermas] charted a course for himself which, in its spirit and deepest moral commitments, has not changed in any fundamental sense ... . I would draw a distinction between this deepest level of commitment and the philosophical framework intended to make good on it. The former has not changed essentially; the latter, however, has been modified significantly.

I claim, nonetheless, that while Habermas’ overall moral commitment has displayed an incredible consistency, there is also present within this commitment a significant ambivalence. This ambivalence evinces an implicit set of priorities among Habermas’ intentions. When circumstances have become more inimical to his project, this set of priorities comes to the foreground. I argue that a ‘defensive’ attitude governs Habermas’ understanding of contemporary political problems. This influences his theory insofar as an emphasis upon a defence of the existing rationality of modern social and political institutions is manifested to the detriment of a more radical critique of liberal democracy. The result is, I contend, an incomplete justification of the project of modernity.

Habermas’ personal, intellectual and political experiences constitute an important part of this explanation. An account of these experiences is necessary for the task of understanding the dynamics of his theory. I make the assumption, in this respect, that guiding worldviews or moral intuitions are necessary and important in understanding any theoretical position (Kaufman-Osborn 1986; Stokes 1990; Wolin 1981). There is, I contend, a certain overdetermination of the theory by underlying ethical commitments. A theory cannot be understood entirely on its own terms. As Hesse (1978, 16) states,

the proposal of a social theory is more like the arguing of a political case than like a natural-science explanation. It should seek for and respect the facts when these are to
be had, but it cannot await a possibly unattainable total explanation. It must appeal explicitly to value judgements and may properly use persuasive rhetoric.

Any critical theory, then, as Habermas himself is well aware, must be evaluated according to its degree of self-consciousness about its embeddedness in various philosophical assumptions as well as evaluations of the political situation of the day. The theory must take this systematically into account in measuring the weight of its various claims. I will argue that Habermas’ political considerations enter his theory construction too implicitly and without adequate validation. The dissertation seeks to clarify the presence of these political assumptions in his work. It is argued that they are responsible for his defensive approach, an approach which leads him to draw theoretical conclusions at odds with the need for a more radical critique of liberal democracy.

The general argument can be put somewhat differently as follows. Each of the three requirements of the project of modernity exerts demands of its own. This can sometimes cause tension between them (Bernstein 1980, 238-9; Roderick 1986, 3). Furthermore, as this project has had to respond to constant criticism, revisions to its justification have sometimes exacerbated this tension. I submit that Habermas’ political preferences lead him to favour those requirements related to the defence of modernity to the neglect of those related to its practical realization. In theoretical terms, this means an emphasis upon the theory of the rational to the detriment of the theory of the irrational. I wish not only to identify this proclivity within Habermas’ theory, but also to argue that it can be overcome with theoretical resources in his own work, resources which establish a sounder basis for the theory of modernity.

Many theorists sympathetic to Habermas’ work have offered a similar critique, one which points to the absence of a necessary radicalism. Inspired by Hegelian and Marxist ways of thinking, these theorists claim there is a systematic one-sidedness to Habermas’ oeuvre. They argue that his position favours a liberal, Kantian perspective which fails to link adequately theory and practice. There is the suggestion that Habermas’ approach represents, in Whitebook’s (1988, 73) words, ‘a complacency toward the status quo rationalized as a theory of modernity’. This dissertation contributes in three main ways both to the understanding of Habermas’ work as a whole as well as this more specific critique.
Firstly, I seek to compose a comprehensive framework for grasping Habermas’ work, using
the notion of three theoretical requirements of the project of modernity and associated
concepts of critique. A number of critics have emphasized the importance of seeing his
writings in the context of the tradition of thought leading from Kant, Hegel and Marx (see
above). None, however, have carried out an analysis consistently from this point of view.
The point serves usually as a necessary backdrop to understanding Habermas’ contribution
without being applied in an exhaustive way. Others have noted that many critical appraisals
of Habermas are unhelpful because of the enormous scope and diversity of the theoretical
corpus being addressed (Joas 1991, 97; McCarthy 1984, x). Critics can be easily
sidetracked into examining specific aspects of the whole work without thinking through the
implications for the totality. There is a failure to understand how the various parts of
Habermas’ theory fit together and how defects in one area impact upon others. In providing
a simple and broad framework of interpretation, this dissertation claims to delineate a
picture of the whole which is useful for situating Habermas’ numerous theoretical claims.
The significance of various criticisms of his work can then be better understood.

Secondly, I emphasize a distinction in Habermas’ mature work between what he terms
‘identity claims’ and ‘validity claims’. The importance of this distinction, it is argued, has
generally gone unnoticed in the critical literature (cf. Warren 1995). On this basis, I argue
that many criticisms of Habermas’ theory of the rational are misplaced. I defend his
approach to the rational against thinkers of an Hegelian persuasion. These critics contend
that Habermas’ focus on procedural rules and his stress on the differentiation between
separate validity claims results in a conception of communicative ethics that is unable to
incorporate issues of meaning and happiness. Habermas, it is true, deliberately limits the
claims that philosophy can make regarding the ‘good life’. I insist that this is a defensible
strategy but if we take into account his understanding of ‘identity claims’, as well as those
of validity, we can see how his approach is more robust than some commentators have
made out. My defence of Habermas’ theory of the rational is part of the argument that the
more fundamental problems with his work involve his theory of the irrational.

Thirdly, I fill out in more detail this argument about the inadequacy of Habermas’ theory of
the irrational. I claim that the idea of ‘critique as crisis theory’ is the methodological means
for developing such a theory. The purpose of this theory is to guide social movements in a struggle aiming to practically realize the rational potential of modernity. This centres around the effort to link short-term, reformist endeavours with a long-term, revolutionary aim. I argue that there are two essential elements required to achieve this task. First, the material preconditions for social and political change must be identified. This involves identifying systematic crisis tendencies within the economic, political and cultural spheres of society. Crises offer opportunities to intervene in a system of domination which is unstable and contradictory. Second, the political strategies designed to capitalize on the opportunities presented by crises must be evaluated. Their advantages and disadvantages need to be rendered explicit, to assess which strategy is the most prudent in the circumstances. Together, these two elements of critique as crisis theory – of crisis and of strategy – form a basis upon which political struggle can be guided. Habermas has often emphasized the limits to such a theoretical guidance of practice. He argues that decisions about the political struggle must be left to those involved since they are the ones who must take the risks and be responsible for the consequences. I argue that the theoretical guidance of practice provided by critique as crisis theory does not violate this principle of responsibility. On this basis, I hold that his justification of the project of modernity does not go far enough in addressing the need for a theoretical understanding of how this project can be realized practically.

It should be noted that the general method adopted in advancing arguments about Habermas’ work is interpretive in nature. The criteria with which I evaluate the different aspects of his theory are not externally imposed. By reconstructing the general requirements of such a theory, as well as the framework of critique through which those requirements are to be satisfied, I adopt a standpoint which Habermas has freely imposed upon himself. The appraisal of his project, then, is of an internal kind, an assessment of its consistency, coherence and completeness.

The clarification and evaluation undertaken in this research contributes to a large and still growing literature. When Seyla Benhabib wrote her study of Habermas in 1986, she referred to books by Held (1981), Jay (1984) and McCarthy (1984) as the central resources in English for understanding Habermas’ work. Since that time, many other English language studies (some translated) have been written, both critical and descriptive (Braaten
1991; Brand 1990; Cooke 1994; Holub 1991; Honneth 1991; Ingram 1987; Oouthwaite 1994; Pusey 1987; Rasmussen 1990; Roderick 1986; White 1988). Several edited collections in which Habermas has sometimes included a reply to his critics have also contributed further to the literature (Benhabib and Dallmayr 1990; Bernstein 1985; Held and Thompson 1982; Honneth and Joas 1991; Honneth et al. 1992a, 1992b; White 1995). There have, as well, been attempts to use Habermas’ theory as a framework for the study of empirical processes, in areas such as higher education, public policy, and state capacities (Barnett 1990; Forester 1985, 1993; Pusey 1991). The object of study has, in the meantime, been expanded in size and scope by Habermas himself. The dissertation contributes to this literature by providing both an overall view of Habermas’ oeuvre as well as more specific criticisms whose weight and significance are located within the whole.

IV DISCUSSION STRUCTURE

Following this introduction, chapter two begins with a further clarification of the context of Habermas’ work by delineating a general shift in the understanding of the project of modernity.4 This involves a move from an optimistic, ambitious and radical understanding of the ideals of emancipation and enlightenment to a much more cautious and defensive outlook. I argue that this parallels an ambivalence within Habermas’ own intellectual and political perspective. Habermas seems to subscribe both to the ambitious and the cautious formulations of modernity. I explain this ‘divided perspective’ with reference to his formative political and intellectual experiences. In the final part of the chapter, I examine how this ambivalence manifests itself in Habermas’ substantive theory construction. I do so by delineating two broad conceptions of history present within his work. One conception emphasizes the dangers of the expansion of an instrumental or technical notion of reason in modernity and the threat this poses for free and open public discussion. Insofar as Habermas adopts this understanding, I suggest that he takes on a defensive posture and emphasizes the basic constitutional freedoms of liberal democracies. The other conception focuses upon new historical challenges in modernity which point beyond liberal democratic forms of economy, society and governance. Insofar as this other understanding is primary,

4 It should be noted that fragments of chapters two, four and five have been partly developed in Leet (1998).
Habermas adopts a more radical outlook and focuses on a critique of liberal democracy, on defects and problems of existing institutional practices.

In this chapter, I also set out the meaning of the concept of ‘critique’. I argue that critique is the general means with which theorists such as Habermas seek to resolve the ambivalence present within the project of modernity. A commitment to critique, I argue, implies that the difference between a defensive and radical approach is artificial and must be overcome: if the claims of either are to be redeemed then both must be realized together. Chapter two, therefore, sets up the basic problems facing Habermas’ project of modernity and the means for resolving them.

The purpose of chapter three is to examine these means in further depth. Specifically, it clarifies three different dimensions of the idea of ‘critique’. I reconstruct these critical methodological resources from Habermas’ examination of Kant, Hegel and Marx respectively. I argue that these resources enable the three requirements of the project of modernity to be satisfied in a way which transcends the ambivalent perspective discussed in chapter two.

Chapter three confines itself, predominately, to Habermas’ ‘early work’ in its explication of critique. At this point, a general remark on the periodization of Habermas’ oeuvre is necessary. Habermas’ work is usually divided into two periods. There is a distinction between the ‘early writings’ from 1957 to around 1970 and the ‘later writings’ which have transpired since 1970 (Bernstein 1985, 8-12; White 1995, 6-7). Habermas’ intentions of erecting a critical social theory remained the same during his early writings. He was convinced, as he later remarked in 1982, ‘that the project of a critical social theory had to prove itself, in the first instance, from a methodological and epistemological standpoint’ (OLSS, xiv). In The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas clarified the different approach which he had been pursuing since 1970:

The theory of communicative action is not a metatheory but the beginning of a social theory concerned to validate its own critical standards. I do not conceive of my analysis of the general structures of action oriented to reaching understanding as a
continuation of the theory of knowledge with other means (TCA, 1, xli; see also JA, 149).

In the later work, Habermas’ focus is upon developing the substantive content of a critical theory of society while, in the early work, he was interested primarily in elucidating the epistemological and methodological foundations of such a theory. Habermas’ later work, it is true, also deals with these methodological issues. The early work is more suited to reconstructing concepts of critique, nonetheless, because its concern is with the basic ‘idea’ of these concepts and their function within the project of modernity. An examination of Habermas’ early work establishes the essential criteria and standards with respect to which his later, substantive theoretical corpus can be evaluated.5

This does not mean that methodological and substantive concerns can be separated completely. An important aim of chapter three is to introduce the significance of substantive issues for the methodology of critique itself. I argue that Habermas’ early work represented, in itself, a way of resolving the ambivalence discussed in chapter two. In chapter three, I examine why, in Habermas’ own view, this attempt to reconcile the tension within his writings had to fail. This discussion is designed to set the stage for chapter four, in which Habermas’ response to these problems is discussed in terms of his mature, substantive theory.

I argue, then, that Habermas’ mature theory must be understood in relation to the problems he encountered in his earlier approach. I will not go into the details of these problems at this stage. They are better introduced in the course of the argumentation. My primary contention, however, is that these problems bring out an implicit set of preferences regarding Habermas’ more mature understanding of the project of modernity. I argue that in light of his early, failed attempt to resolve the ambivalence within his perspective, he tends to adopt a defensive posture. The explication of his later work, in chapter four, brings this posture to the foreground.

5 There is some difficulty in correlating the distinction between Habermas’ ‘early’ and ‘later’ work with the contrast between a ‘methodological’ and ‘substantive’ focus. His first major publication, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Habermas 1989a), dealt with substantive concerns which have preoccupied him throughout and inspired his most recent book, Between Facts and Norms (Habermas 1996a).
Chapter five builds upon the explication provided in chapter four and further advances the argument that Habermas’ work is oriented primarily around providing a theory of the rational. I maintain that this results in a devaluation of the theory of the irrational and, therefore, the third requirement of the theory of modernity, ‘practical realization’. I argue that a series of theoretical decisions leads to this result, decisions which are unnecessary. I reconstruct an alternative, substantive approach within Habermas’ work which enables a more systematic application of ‘critique as crisis theory’, a dimension of critique whose purpose is to establish a theory of the irrational. On this basis, it is argued, the bias within Habermas’ later work towards the theory of the rational can be overcome. These revisions are necessary if Habermas is to connect theory and practice in a satisfactory way. In particular, this linking of theory to practice is vital to the coherence of a radical social democratic politics.

Finally, chapter six reiterates the basic arguments of the dissertation and their significance for Habermas’ project.