MODERNITY: OUR DEFINING SITUATION

This chapter has three main aims. The first is to establish the broad historical and intellectual context for thinking about the project of modernity today. This context explains the recent scepticism about this project, which has arisen because of the consequences of previous attempts to realize it. It is argued that a shared learning process has taken place, among theorists both still committed to the project as well as those who have endorsed its abandonment. This process points to a general revision in modern ideals and objectives and, more importantly, the means which are considered legitimate for achieving them. It involves a shift from an ambitious and naïve approach to a more cautious and fallible understanding of modernity. The latter articulates, it is contended, a revised awareness of our ‘defining situation’. The significant implications this has for the tradition of radical social democracy are also examined.

The second aim of the chapter is to set out a similar kind of contextualization for Habermas himself. It is argued that important personal and historical experiences have shaped his intellectual and political views. In particular, these experiences have affected his understanding of what the project of modernity can mean in current circumstances. Habermas has lived during a period in German history when the perception that modernity is able to provide for both freedom and domination has been particularly acute. He has been a pivotal figure in the revision to the project of modernity mentioned above while still remaining firmly committed to its viability.

Finally, the chapter aims to present briefly the way in which Habermas has articulated this ambivalent potential of modernity in his theoretical work. The examination of his views, in this regard, represents a first opportunity to introduce the central argument of the dissertation. This is that he has interpreted the move from certainty to fallibility in a way which leads to false limitations about what can and should be done in the effort to realize modern ideals. It is suggested that Habermas tends to resolve the ambivalence of modernity by giving weight to only one set of priorities. That is, he focuses on defending the benefits of existing institutions rather than on a more radical critique of liberal democratic forms of governance.
The intention of the remaining chapters is to elaborate the further steps in this argument. First it will be shown that Habermas’ privileging of certain priorities over others is unnecessary and, second, that this tendency within his work can be overcome with theoretical resources he has himself constructed. In this regard, the present chapter also considers the general means with which this ‘overcoming’ can take place. The concept of ‘critique’, it is argued, is a methodological tool of critical theorists which allows them to identify and resolve false dichotomies. The argument is, then, that Habermas has not applied critique in a completely adequate way.

I THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF MODERNITY

The three requirements of an satisfactory theory of modernity were stated in the introductory chapter. The theoretical attempts made to satisfy these requirements, and the political practice leading from these theories, have provoked a great deal of scepticism. This scepticism applies to thinkers both within and without the tradition of critical theory. It is due to the fact that modern political practice has often led to domination and barbarism in contrast to the promised emancipation and freedom. A resulting debate has ensued about how, if at all, the project of modernity can be continued. This part of the chapter traces the way in which the general philosophical framework for constructing the theory of modernity has shifted.

The task of describing these changes is carried out in the first two sections in terms of a move from what I call a ‘destructive’ to a ‘reflective’ form of modernity. I have introduced by own terminology here in an effort to avoid confusion with the various issues raised in the continuing ‘modernity-postmodernity’ controversy. It should also be stressed that the terms ‘destructive’ and ‘reflective’ are meant to capture two different analytical tendencies within the thinking of modern theorists. The range of variations in the contemplation of modernity obviously cannot be comprehended by a binary distinction. This dualistic approach, nonetheless, suits my purposes in the present context. I have relied more heavily on those thinkers who have articulated the issues in a clear and representative way.

1 Alexander’s (1995) analysis is an example of a more differentiated and subtle explication.
The final section of this part of the chapter investigates the issues involved at a lower level of abstraction. It looks more closely at the political differences which continue to break out within the generally shared context of theorizing today. It is argued that ‘reflective’ modernity tends to place greater importance on the values embodied in the liberal tradition. It thematizes, in particular, the epistemic limitations to human attempts at changing the world. The section examines the implications of a renewed emphasis upon the liberal tradition for radical social democratic thinkers. The main question concerns what shape a socialist critique of liberal democracy can and should take today.

**Destructive modernity**

According to Charles Taylor (1975), a specific notion of human subjectivity distinguishes and defines modernity in relation to other epochs. He argues that during the seventeenth century, this notion began to exert an influence and came into conflict with earlier, pre-modern ideas. ‘The essential difference’, Taylor (1975, 6) says, ‘can perhaps be put in this way: the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order’. Taylor argues that the primary philosophical theme of modernity concerns the implications, potentials and problems of the conception of a self-defining subject. The meaning of this conception can first be clarified by referring to a series of general oppositions, put forward by Taylor, between the ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ approaches.

In Taylor’s view, classical philosophy sought to articulate humanity’s relationship with an understanding of the order of the universe. Its starting point was the idea of an intrinsic meaningfulness to the world as a whole. Emphasis was placed upon an underlying balance, order, harmony and equilibrium. Humanity achieved its potential, in this approach, when it realized the divine purposes and goals implicit within this overarching matrix. Human beings gained emancipation to the degree that they adjusted themselves to what was pre-ordained as right and just. In this way, philosophers could pronounce on the ‘good life’. The modern philosophical approach begins from a series of diametrically opposed assumptions. It dismisses the world as intrinsically meaningless. It holds that the human subject is separate and stands apart from a cosmos which is inert, passive and dull. This
modern conception criticizes the traditional approach as illusion. Because it contends that meaning only inheres in the human capacity to project meaning, emancipation is conceived as a release from the divine. While, in the classical approach, the present is dominated by a search for the sacred and lost past, in the modern approach, the present is preoccupied with an unknown and yet-to-be-conquered future. This modern break with tradition, says Taylor (1975, 9),

was accompanied by a sense of exhilaration and power, that the subject need no longer define his perfection or vice, his equilibrium or disharmony, in relation to an external order. With the forging of this modern subjectivity there comes a new notion of freedom, and a newly central role attributed to freedom, which seems to have proved itself definitive and irreversible.

These are, of course, polar oppositions which abstract from the considerable variation of both the classical and modern contexts of philosophy. Taylor’s point is that a ‘paradigmatic’ difference exists between the two which centres around these contrasting understandings of self. For example, in ancient traditions there were currents which defined the self in abstraction from cosmic order. The intention was not, however, to provide a theoretical basis for humanity to conquer an inert nature ruled by ‘contingent, de facto correlations’ (1975, 8). An attitude of resignation governed this approach in contrast to the modern desire for control and manipulation. Likewise, many philosophical systems of the modern age seek to resurrect a conception of intrinsic meaningfulness. And yet they remain committed to the core idea of a self-defining subject.2

Is this modern conception of self a good or a bad thing? This kind of question has, as Taylor shows, accompanied modern discourse from the beginning. In the last few decades, it has received considerably more attention, often under the rubric of ‘postmodernity’ as well as in debates between liberalism and communitarianism. The significance of this literature is that it has been able to gain some conceptual distance from the idea of the modern self-defining subject and its accompanying presuppositions. The remainder of the

2 Despite these acknowledged differences and variations, Richard Bernstein (1986, 164-5) has criticized Taylor’s account as being oversimplistic.
section considers two similar accounts, present within the literature, of these presuppositions and their implications.

Zygmunt Bauman (1987, 25-6) has argued that a distinctively ‘modern’ view of intellectual practice derives from a short, ‘unprecedented, and so far unrepeated’ period in eighteenth century France. He identifies six circumstances which were important in crystallizing this approach. Of these, only two need be systematically taken into account here. Firstly, a group of intellectuals known as the ‘les philosophes’ developed. The members of this group were intimately connected to one another in a series of societies and clubs. Their non-attachment to various social and political constraints enabled them to discuss freely and openly major issues of the day. The intellectual conventions they composed revolved around the ideal of free and unrestricted discourse. This ideal became a norm with which they evaluated other modes of social interaction. According to Bauman (1987, 26), the les philosophes cultivated a life practice in which there was the attempt to introduce ‘opinion, writing, speech and language in general as a social bond to do away with all social bonds’.

The second most important circumstance concerned the novel and extraordinary need for knowledge which arose at the time. There was a heightened sense of social insecurity and uncertainty. Others have noted the unique circumstances out of which French intellectual approaches, sociology in particular, arose as a thrust for order in the context of perceived chaos and anomie (Hawthorne 1976, chapter 6). Bauman (1987, 26) understands the coincidence in terms of the establishment of la republique des lettres in ‘a century when habits became the object of legislation, and a way of life was problematized as culture’.

Bauman argues that the idea of an intellectual ‘legislator’ arises from this conjunction of intellectual and social circumstances. A legislator was deemed required because it was clear that pre-modern unities and securities were fragmenting and breaking down. The earlier methods of producing solidarity and ‘community’ (Gemeinschaft) became defunct with the onset of ‘society’ (Gesellschaft). The pervasive feeling or ‘strongest fear’ of les philosophes, according to Bauman (1987, 38), was ‘the horror of a new and ever growing uncertainty’. Traditional mechanisms of social control and regulation were being rendered obsolete. Change moved from being a peripheral aspect of community life to the central
principle of social development. Bauman argues that ‘modernity’ is an intellectual and political project designed to restore order to a chaotic world.

In particular, Bauman suggests that a distinctively modern notion of ‘culture’ arose which implied that social order required explicit human design. In earlier societies, he argues, there was no distinctive dimension of life labelled culture. Rather, order was conceived in more or less naturalistic terms in which things and people had their proper place. Once order became problematic the category of nature in social affairs was destabilized and eventually replaced by the idea that the structure of society could be the product of will and reason. Bauman (1987, 51-67) employs the metaphors of ‘gardener’ and ‘gamekeeper’ to compare the modern and pre-modern intellectual approaches respectively. In the latter, change was only required to restore a natural order, while in the former it is considered necessary to go to the root of things and reconstruct humanity on a more rational basis. The modern approach consisted of both a ‘negative’ requirement of eradicating pre-modern obstacles to a new order and the more ‘positive’ and obtrusive task of reconstituting the human being through education and instruction. ‘Certainty was something to be achieved, and kept alive, by purposeful activity’ (1987, 95).

This project of civilizing populations was to be undertaken through knowledge, knowledge of what is true and good. This knowledge was to be obtained through free and equal discussion of an enlightened elite, divorced from the constraints and pressures of social and political life. Bauman (1987, 34) argues that this was an essentially anti-political project, because it called for the creation of a social order solely in accordance with a set of abstract, counterfactual tenets, without regard to practicalities or ‘the art of the possible’.

The meaning of the concept of ‘critique’, crucial to this dissertation, was fundamentally affected by the prerogatives of this modern project. Reinhart Koselleck (1988) has drawn out the implications involved. The key stumbling block of the legislative intellectual role is its assumption that a unitary conception of what must be done would emerge from the application of reason. This universalism was undermined in practice by the production of a series of different and conflicting answers. This was especially clear to Thomas Hobbes. Koselleck argues that Hobbes fashioned his ‘political method’ in response to the religious wars of the time. Hobbes concluded that these wars were interminable insofar as the parties
to the dispute framed their demands in moralistic terms. This was particularly the case for a
version of morality which arose from the period of the Reformation. It consisted of men
and women relying on their own conscience rather than conforming with an established
religious tradition. Hobbes traced the religious wars back to the mental posture of the
contending parties, each relying on their conscience and each claiming exclusiveness for
their knowledge of what was right and good. The moral mode of conflict exacerbated
differences and subverted a possible compromise solution. While all parties wanted peace
individually, their demands when set beside one another, could only lead to civil war.
Koselleck (1988, 28) explains:

A man cannot escape th[e] civil war even if he acknowledges his longing for peace as
a valid moral principle. For as the sole purveyor of a legal title to action, his
subjectively pure will to peace is precisely what leads to claims of more stringent
totality on the part of those who cite their conscience ... . The Reformation and
subsequent split in religious authority had thrown man back upon his conscience, and
a conscience lacking outside support degenerates into the idol of self-righteousness ...
. Mere conscience which, as Hobbes put it, presumes to mount the throne is not a
judge of good and evil; it is the source of evil itself.3

While the moralistic terms of good and evil were the catchwords of the parties to the
conflict, Hobbes ‘elaborated an extra-religious, supra-partisan position which in turn
enabled him to analyze all parties together, as parties to a common process’ (Koselleck
1988, 27). While those involved viewed the world in terms of ‘the moral alternative of
good and evil’, Hobbes considered the real issue to be ‘the political alternative of peace and
war’ (1988, 25). Transforming the moral conflict into a political problem provided Hobbes
with a more holistic frame of reference. He purported to transcend particular interests and
take into account the interests of the whole. From this perspective, he advocated the
absolutist state as a solution to the religious problem.

The paradox was that Hobbes’ absolutist state, in turn, led to a revival of the moralistic
thinking it was designed to suppress. Koselleck argues that with the rise of absolutist states,

3 Sheldon Wolin (1960, 331-42) has also discussed how the idea of conscience altered with the Reformation,
turning into a facade for individual interests.
a series of dichotomies emerged in human life. Sovereign was separated from subject, public policy from private morality. The consequence was a social structure in which the maturing class of the bourgeoisie was excluded from sharing political power. In compensation for this, a series of more or less secret societies and associations grew up. They kept strictly within the private domain, the Masonic lodges being a primary example. These societies successfully avoided the censorship of the absolutist state, becoming a breeding ground for artists and philosophers who wished to overcome the restrictions of the time with more ‘enlightened’ thinking. Koselleck’s key thesis is that the air of secrecy surrounding these attempts to resist the political power of the sovereign formed the basis of Enlightenment thinking and its categories. Because of their exclusion from political power, the orchestrators of a more enlightened world found it necessary to approach issues in a radically dualistic way. They developed dichotomous concepts and counter-concepts which reflected their real position of isolation. This ‘eighteenth-century intellectual structure’, Koselleck (1988, 99-100) argues, ‘turned the world into a stage of opposing forces ... reason and Revelation, freedom and despotism, nature and civilization, trade and war, morality and politics, decadence and progress, light and darkness’.

Such an approach, as also indicated in Bauman’s account, imagined that it was possible to escape the constraints of political life. Precisely because enlightenment thinkers were excluded from the tensions of politics, they could formulate their visions of political order in isolation, without considerations of compromise or concession in mind. Koselleck suggests that this form of Enlightenment constituted a regression, behind the level which Hobbes had attained. A conflict once again arose between moral and political thinking, placing the legitimacy of the political order in crisis. Koselleck goes so far as to say that the absolutism and exclusiveness associated with this moralistic structure of thought led not only to the Terror of the French Jacobins, but has subsequently generated many of the political catastrophes of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust and the Cold War.4

A constituent of this modern dynamic, says Koselleck, is a specific structure of ‘critique’. Critique adopted a ‘utopian’ function as it slowly broke out of the contexts which had regulated its use. From around 1600, it was primarily associated with the study of philology (Koselleck 1988, 105). Its application to literary and religious texts ‘consisted in a return to

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4 Many other thinkers, such as Talmon (1952) and Popper (1957), have made similar claims.
an original condition, and in a determination to reconstruct the authenticity of a source’ (Connerton 1980, 17). The aim of criticism was to overcome the corrupting process of history. In both religion and politics it was placed at the service of refining and continuing accepted traditions. Critique proved to be Janus faced, however, because it began to turn upon the boundaries set for it as additional objects of investigation. The catalyst for this was the role criticism played in religious disputes. At first, it was used to legitimate rival interpretations by Protestants and Catholics. After a certain period, criticism began to detach itself from its service to Church and Scripture and take on an independent status. At some point in the process, it successfully shifted ‘the criterion of truth from Revelation to the sphere of the clear and rational’ (Koselleck 1988, 106). Critique became an enemy of both religious camps. So too, in politics, it slowly broke down the barriers which had protected the state from its critical force. Koselleck, like Bauman, argues that the République des lettres was responsible for the extension of criticism to politics. The various writers and artists framed their arguments in moral terms, as though they were confining themselves to the private sphere. The dualism between morality and politics, nevertheless, operated to conceal the latent political implications of their criticism. In effect, those making criticism were freed from the responsibilities associated with political order, enabling them to make uncompromising and exclusivist attacks on the state. The key point for Koselleck (1988, 116) is that ‘[a]lthough criticism, all-encompassing, reached out into politics, it did not renounce its unpolitical, that is, its rational, natural, moral claim to assure the primacy of truth’. Koselleck (1988, 10) stresses that this concept of critique ignored the ‘indigenous side’ of religion and politics, that these institutions had been devised to deal with perennial human problems. Enlightenment criticism and reason constituted a relentless attack on these spheres but without offering any clear, concrete alternatives.

By contrasting a sphere of pure reason, freedom and morality with the rest of society, members of the Enlightenment purported to judge all institutions and traditions from this abstract point of view. Raymond Williams’ (1983, 86) etymological analysis confirms this tendency of criticism to abstract itself from

its real situation and circumstances: the elevation to ‘judgement’, and to an apparently general process, when what always needs to be understood is the
specificity of the response, which is not an abstract ‘judgement’ but ... a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context.

The destructive element of this conception of modernity emerged clearly once the state was successfully enlisted in the service of critique. Bauman argues that while modern intellectuals felt a need to be separated from political power to formulate distortion-free ideas, they had to be connected in some sense in order to be effective. The centralized state apparatus emerging from the absolutist era satisfied this need. It used intellectual knowledge in erecting systems of administration capable of remoulding social interactions. The legitimacy of this bureaucratic exercise of power, in turn, was based in its connection with the exercise of pure reason. The state was seen not to be a preserver and protector of difference and pluralism but an agent for the implementation of rationally defined plans.

**Reflective modernity**

With a matured awareness of the violence involved in this understanding of Enlightenment, there has developed a far more sensitive or ‘reflective’ modernity, especially since the 1970s. As Taylor (1975) insists, however, the ‘expressivists’ recognized from the beginning in the seventeenth century that ‘emancipation’ from the intrinsic meaningfulness of the pre-modern world had ambiguous consequences. A sense of loss as well as gain arises necessarily from a materialistic account of the world. The problem is that a conception of nature ruled by efficient causation rather than of mythical powers promotes both promotes and undermines the idea of human control. Since humans are also part of nature, they too have to take their place in this anonymous realm. What, then, is the essence of their supposed freedom? On the one hand, we have humans as subjects of knowledge and free to define themselves, while on the other, humans as objects of nature. As objects of nature, ‘the new science’ must necessarily breed ‘an understanding of man, mechanistic, atomistic, homogenizing and based on contingency’ (Taylor 1975, 10). The central problem of this new concept of self for the expressivists is that it seems to make freedom possible only by separating the individual from nature, from others and even from itself. To

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5 This is the term Taylor uses to designate those theorists and social movements which sought to combine self-defining subjectivity with the idea of intrinsic meaning.
be meaningful human action or life must realize some purpose or meaning that is, in some sense, larger than the self.

The consequences of the failure to restrain and regulate modern subjectivity in a meaningful way have been documented above. For Taylor, the view of freedom present within what I have termed ‘destructive modernity’ is ultimately unrealistic and cannot serve as a basis for forging a practical politics. He terms it a ‘situation-less freedom’ which is ‘sterile and empty’ because it does not give us any ‘reason to act in one way rather than another’. Moreover, it is ‘destructive, since in its emptiness it drives to tear down any … positive work as a hindrance to freedom’ (1975, 557). This conception of freedom can only define what freedom is not, which amounts to declaring war against the very facts of human existence, such as social conflict, hardship, complexity, discipline and organization. It can never reach a terminus or conclusion and so it can never define what freedom actually is or might look like concretely. There is no respect, in Koselleck’s words, for the ‘indigenous side’ of institutions. Leszek Kolakowski (1990, 13) formulates the general issue in terms of modernity’s tendency to destroy taboos. He argues that

Various traditional human bonds which make communal life possible, and without which our existence would be regulated only by greed or fear, are not likely to survive without a taboo system, and it is perhaps better to believe in the validity of even apparently silly taboos than to let them vanish … . [Civilization] is compelled, in order to survive, reluctantly to restore some of those irrational values and thus to deny its rationality, thereby proving that perfect rationality is a self-defeating goal.

Taylor offers a general solution. He argues that freedom must be ‘grounded in the acceptance of our defining situation’.

This means to recover a conception of free activity which sees it was a response called for by a situation which is ours in virtue of our condition as natural and social beings, or in virtue of some inescapable vocation or purpose … . The struggle to be free – against limitations, oppression, distortions of inner and outer origin – is powered by an affirmation of this defining situation as ours. This cannot be seen as a set of limits to be overcome, or a mere occasion to carry out some freely chosen
This section of the chapter indicates what contemporary philosophy has accepted as the ‘defining situation’ of our desire to be free. It is argued that there is a considerable degree of consensus about this in current philosophical debates despite continuing disagreements. This points to what I call a ‘reflective’ form of modernity.

Bauman articulates the issues in terms of a rejection of the ‘legislative’ intellectual role and the violence associated with it. The idea of the legislator or ‘design-drawing despot’ could only develop within a frame of reference which defined social disorder as a problem, ‘rather than a manifestation of the nature of things’ (Bauman 1987, 54). In the reflective approach uncertainty is considered an anthropological fact. Difference is seen as empirically inevitable and normatively desirable. The role of analysis is understood in terms of the negative requirement of identifying the various routes to domination rather showing the path to emancipation (Said 1994, Dubiel 1992). With the irreducible facts of plurality and uncertainty the principal philosophical task, for Bauman, becomes one of communication and interpretation. Unmasked as an illusion, the need for certainty is replaced by problems of interpretation, translation across different cultures and the necessity for mutual understanding rather than ignorance. In some sense, it is possible to perceive reflective modernity as taking hold of a ‘second chance’. It presents an opportunity to respond to the acknowledgment of uncertainty in a fashion different from the destructive reaction to the dissolution of pre-modern forms of life (Toulmin 1995, xv). By beginning our endeavours with this attitude of acceptance, we already avoid and bypass the mistakes caused by the refusal to accept.

There is a return, as Richard Bernstein (1971, 1976, 1983, 1986, 1991) has attempted to show in different ways and in many publications, to the point of departure of the American pragmatists. John Dewey (1960), in particular, stressed the need to abandon a search for absolutes and utopias and elaborate the kind of knowledge capable of dealing with the mundane problems and concerns confronted by communities. In contrast to a ‘quest for certainty’, it is better, he argued, to become accustomed to and accept the ineliminable uncertainty characterizing practical activity. From Dewey’s perspective, destructive
modernity can be seen more clearly as an abrogation of responsibility for action onto supposedly objective theories. There is a translation ‘into rational form the doctrine of escape from the vicissitudes of existence by means of measures which do not demand an active coping with conditions’ (Dewey 1960, 17).6

The objective context that has made such an approach necessary is brought out further by writers such as Anthony Giddens (1994a, 1994b) and Ulrich Beck (1992). For them, we live at a time when the basis of Enlightenment practice, the belief that increased knowledge of society and material reality will lead to collective control over humanity’s destiny, has mostly disappeared (see also Touraine 1989). This doubt is the result of an awareness of the extent to which various problems are now human made. In their view, it seems we will be a long time coping with the tremendous momentum bequeathed to us by destructive modernity. Many problems no longer lead from a lack of human power over inimical natural or social forces but from the byproducts of the exercise of this very power. Giddens characterizes this in terms of ‘manufactured uncertainty’. There is developing a heightened awareness of the paradoxes and unintended consequences of human intervention into the world. The difference between knowledge and social reality has become blurred as that reality itself is determined further and further by the application of knowledge.

For these writers, this means that contemporary problems are of a fundamentally different kind from those which characterized earlier periods of history. Dealing with these problems requires a ‘defensive’ approach which recognizes that institutions and organizations will not eliminate the problems permanently. In a ‘risk society’, problems no longer have definite solutions. Rather, they have responses which are partial and incomplete and have unintended side-effects as well. Manufactured problems never go away but need to be constantly addressed and partially resolved. ‘Damage control’ implies the ability to deal with only one aspect of a problem area at the same time as new problems and new dimensions to the same problem keep arising. Giddens (1994b, 22) explains:

Manufactured risk is a result of human intervention into nature and into the conditions of social life. The uncertainties (and opportunities) it creates are largely

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6 In the 1950s and 1960s, thinkers such as Wolin (1960, 352-434; 1969) and Jacobson (1958) expressed this critique in terms of an objection to the reduction of politics and political theory to the behavioural sciences.
new. They cannot be dealt with by age-old remedies; but neither do they respond to
the Enlightenment prescription: more knowledge, more control. Put more accurately,
the sorts of reaction we might make to them today are often as much about ‘damage
control’ and ‘repair’ as about an endless process of increasing mastery.

This new approach to problem solving has significant consequences for thinking about a
transformative politics. Giddens (1994a) argues that the ‘Left’ and the ‘Right’ seem to have
changed sides. In the past, he suggests, the former was associated with a call for historical
action and change while the latter sought to defend the existing state of affairs. It is now
liberal and neo-liberal doctrines and practitioners, however, which appear to be promoting
the dynamics of history in terms of the operation of freer markets. Thinking on the ‘Left’,
by contrast, has merged closer to more conservative traditions, with a general concern for
defending traditions and forms of life against economic and administrative rationality
(Gray 1995, Rogers and Streeck 1994, 141-2).

The shift to a reflective form of modernity means, then, that the political project of the
socialist Left has to be rethought. To the extent that this project has previously been based
in the destructive conception discussed earlier, its theory and practice must change
correspondingly. Jürgen Habermas reached a similar conclusion early in his intellectual
career. Before focusing on Habermas in particular, the next section will discuss the issues
involved for the socialist Left, or the project of radical social democracy, in general. The
purpose is to provide an initial guide to what is at stake in the recent and current
revisionism. I ask which particular ways the socialist project needs to be revised. I
investigate, more specifically, what this means for its relationship to liberalism and the
liberal tradition. For in the general move to ‘reflective’ modernity, there have arisen many
liberal themes about the epistemic and political limits to transformative strategies of social
change, in light of the mistakes of the past.

Political implications

An assumption of this dissertation is that the modifications in interpretive framework
articulated above are just that. They do not represent one aspect of a fundamentally
different social formation or period of history as some theorists of ‘postmodernity’ have
suggested. Rather, the undeniable and well documented social and economic changes (Lash and Urry 1987, Piore and Sabel 1984) represent, when looked at from the perspective of capitalism as a whole, a line of continuity. The underlying causal factor is held to be the capitalist accumulation process and its drive towards commodification (Callinicos 1989, Harvey 1990). These Marxist assumptions are shared by Habermas. He has argued that ‘intellectuals articulate shifts in mood, which they in no way invent, but which have instead palpable social and often economic causes…. Problems emerge in situations over which we are not in control’ (‘Qcq’, 198).

At the same time, Habermas thinks that the way we respond or react to problems is something over which there is the possibility of a measure of control. The explication of a more reflective and self-critical form of modernity may be understood as an attempt to refine these reactions. Rather than jumping in and providing ready-made answers, it cautions us to be more sensitive, examine the questions being asked and to be wary of unintended side-effects (Cooper 1988). In a way, reflective modernity as the intellectual framework (of certain groups of academics and political actors) for considering political strategy and social reform, now parallels a destructive modernity still in existence at the level of state and economy. State-sponsored capitalism continues to define problems and answers in its own language irrespective of those who will be affected. Perhaps the most important change has been that the socialist Left, in its cultural rather than organizational forms, has wanted less and less to do with it. Before discussing Habermas’ particular response to these circumstances in the remaining parts of the chapter, I would like to examine briefly the general issues raised in recent debates about what these circumstances mean for socialism or radical social democracy.

Beilharz (1994) makes use of the distinction between the ‘cultural’ and ‘organizational’ aspects of socialism in his analysis of the renewed hegemony of markets and the complicity of labour movements and parties in processes of neo-liberal economic rationalization and management. He argues that ‘[s]ocialism collapses as a political project because its bearers go elsewhere …. Socialism embraces liberalism anew, and becomes a cultural presence more than a specifically political force’ (1994, viii). At the same time that the ‘cultural Left’ has been rethinking its relationship to modernity, the New Right has been developing and administering a programme based on the worst and most destructive aspects of modern
rationalism. Meanwhile, the ‘organizational Left’ has been adapting itself to this new environment by making concession after concession. What are the implications for the Left, in intellectual terms, of this new constellation of circumstances? Any consideration of the literature that has resulted from trying to work through the issues which this question brings forth must be selective given its tremendous proliferation over the last decade. A central focus, however, can be provided around which opinions diverge. This concerns how radical social democrats should relate to the theory and practice of liberal democracy. For there has been a general commitment on the part of many radical theorists which accepts the parameters of liberal democracy as the appropriate framework of debate (Hindess 1993a, 1993b).

The acceptance of liberal democracy by socialists is, of course, not meant to act as an end to debate but precisely as a point of departure for critical analysis. Chantal Mouffe has described this in the following terms:

The recognition of the virtues of pluralism is indeed an important achievement, but it would be a serious setback in the fight for democracy if we were to accept ‘actually existing (capitalist, liberal) democracies’ as the ‘end of history’. There are still numerous social arenas and relationships where democratization is critically needed. The task for the left today is to describe how this can be achieved in a way that is compatible with the existence of a liberal democratic regime (Mouffe 1993, 81, emphasis added).

By accepting liberal democracy as an adequate political minimum, the Left enters a ‘deconstructive’ relationship with it. Anything that leads outside of the parameters of democracy in liberal form is likely to be ruled out of court, attention being directed instead to an expansion of existing spaces for contestation. Rather than focusing on ‘the conditions of right reason’, it concentrates on the exclusions different ‘economies of reason’ necessarily effect and the ways in which these limits can be tested and pushed back (Yeatman 1994, viii; see also Foucault 1984). For Yeatman (1994, ix), this designates a politics which ‘does not offer a utopian future, but works to shape contestatory political and public spaces, which open up in relation to existing systems of governance’.
This approach has important ramifications for the place of the ‘state’ in socialist discourse. Sheldon Wolin (1987) has set out the issues with regard to socialism’s relationship to the welfare state. Wolin argues that socialist ambitions surrounding the welfare state have been a direct continuation of Enlightenment hopes in administratively constructing a rational society. An ontology of modernity is assumed in which the economy and the state are the motor forces requiring cultivation and regulation. This makes for an authoritarian conception of politics, for Wolin, in which a more fundamental sense of democracy, involving the constitution and sharing of power by citizens rather than mere participation in already established political processes, is excluded. There is little recognition that ‘the evolution of the modern state is a story of an internal form of imperialism that we call centralization of power and of the steady destruction of local power and traditional authorities that we call modernization’ (Wolin 1987, 473). A key problem with socialist discourse is that it has focused on the state in order to fill in the missing theory of politics in Marx. By restricting politics to the state, however, the issues are circumscribed by how to deal with, and perhaps capture, this agent of capitalist control (1987, 469-70). Wolin (1987, 494-5) reserves special criticism for some Swedish social democrats who only offer a critique of capitalism with respect to its failure to perform. Socialist input is then proposed as a solution to crises in the performance of the state-economy matrix. For Wolin, this only intensifies the underlying logic of modernity and postpones a real conflict with democracy. It buys time for the existing state of affairs without offering a fundamental critique. In contrast, a democratic critique of the welfare state is made up of questions about the political implications ‘of classifying citizens as needy and of making them needful objects of state power’ (Wolin 1987, 470).

If we take the concept of ‘risk society’ into account, then a more radical conception of democracy becomes necessary as well as normatively desirable. There are problems without solutions, and as part of those factors generating the problems, the traditional organizational basis of Left politics, trade unions and parties, have become difficult to embrace by a reconstructed Left intelligentsia. The fundamental presuppositions ‘of the nation-state as a political community, the working class as a political movement, and the state as a political agency’ (Miliband 1994, 2-3) have been undermined. But the new approaches and perspectives have not only come from these negative experiences. They have also been encourage by another set of historical developments. The discourses of
social and political groups in struggles against authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have been influential. These have been connected with the rise of ‘new social movements’ in capitalist countries. Jeffrey Alexander (1993, 797) argues that these experiences have precipitated an emphasis on concepts such as ‘civil society’. Such notions are representative of the fact that ‘leading critical theorists in Europe have shifted their attention from demands for socialism and economic equality to reviving the public sphere, increasing organizational democracy, and expanding opportunities for individual expression’.

Claus Offe, a thinker close to Habermas, brings these various issues together and illuminates them in terms of a distinction between ‘substantive ethics’ and ‘procedural norms’. Offe argues that we must be content with working out the rules for dealing with problems rather than establishing the results we would like to achieve. This means concentrating on “the negative elimination of particularistic prejudices” rather than with “the positive discrimination of the ‘good’” (1992, 68).

The Left ... has been leaning in this direction ever since the experience of the movements of the 1960s, as well as after having run into various antinomies and dead ends in its own policies ... [W]e can say unhesitatingly that the concept of ‘socialism’ as a comprehensive structural formula for a truly emancipated social order is operationally empty – and has been for some time. Hence the political Left has replaced this global formula for structures and goals by an alternative project of guaranteeing minimums instead of realizing maximums and of using appropriate procedures and institutions to brake and shackle the destructive effects of the dynamics of technological, military, economic, bureaucratic, and ecological modernization by applying principles of responsible self-limitation. This is by no means a more modest but simply a more fitting interpretation of the ‘leftist’ project (1992, 69-70).7

This ‘critical acceptance’ of liberal democracy establishes a new point of departure for the Left. The question is, does the rethinking involved represent any advance beyond the general debate between liberalism and communitarianism that has accompanied modernity

7 Agnes Heller (1991) has also articulated these shifts in terms of the concept of ‘the political’.
from the beginning? If we take the broad perspective set out earlier, this was always the central issue. There is a danger that with the added pressure of the contemporary dominance of the Right, there will be too much conceded to liberal democracy in attempts to reconcile these tensions. As Hutton (1994, 161) has remarked in the context of a discussion about *Reinventing the Left* (Miliband 1994), the Left’s crisis is not that it belongs to the same tradition that brought us the gulag ... but that it has decided in the face of awesome financial power to temporise and accept the paradigm of the Right ... The Left can and should keep its nerve and protect the roots of the tradition from which it springs.

To find a point of orientation for gauging the Left’s current self-criticism, I will refer to C. B. MacPherson’s broaching of the issues of constructing a theory of post-liberalism. In particular, I point to two important essays in which the question of confronting liberal democracy is considered (MacPherson 1973, 1977).

A theory is liberal democratic in orientation, according to MacPherson (1973, 173), when its main problem is ‘to reconcile the claims of the free market economy with the claims of the whole mass of individuals to some kind of equality’. MacPherson contends that in intellectual history the liberalism of such theories has invariably won out against their democratic element. He maintains that there are three broad reasons why liberals could not fashion their democratic ideals in a fashion compatible with the various justifications of the market. Philosophically, theorists tended to retain a commitment to normative individualism. In this light, MacPherson narrates the early twentieth century history of liberalism as a process of becoming ‘pre-democratic’. By taking the philosophy of individualism as given, much liberal theory degenerated into marginal utility which suppressed any understanding of a conflict between democracy and market. Liberals made themselves incapable of understanding human needs and capacities outside a utility maximisation model.8

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8 It is on this basis, for example, that Mouffe (1993) rejects the formulations of John Rawls and Noberto Bobbio which attempt to delineate an ideal combination of individual rights and distributive justice.
The second reason subsumes empirical, sociological issues. MacPherson (1973, 170-79) contends that even liberals who managed to conceive human beings as having more capacities and needs than that of the accumulation of material goods failed to express this adequately. The key inhibiting factor in their approach was the acceptance of the market as indispensable to guaranteeing individual rights and freedoms. Their broad philosophy had no sociological outlet. Consequently, democracy and equality seemed a threat to individuality because they were a threat to the market. A set of restrictive economic assumptions thwarted an extension of democracy within the liberal tradition. The posing of questions and problems was confined within the parameters of market theory.

Thirdly, and finally, MacPherson argues that liberalism’s felt need to defend ‘actually existing democracies’ against authoritarian and totalitarian regimes led them to present the existing liberal democracies as having met the ‘essentials of democracy’ already: ‘[T]hey had to argue not merely that people were capable of the required degree of rational and moral self-development but that they had already reached it or nearly reached it … . They thus came up with a pluralist theory of society and of the democratic state’ (1977, 228). The pressure to justify the West against the East resulted, MacPherson suggests, in the notion of the democratic process as a competitive market.

In MacPherson’s narrative, these three difficulties effectively submerged the democratic moment of liberalism. The historical development of capitalist societies, however, has itself undermined the basis of liberalism’s anxieties about democracy. In MacPherson’s view, empirical transformations provide a basis for solving the long-standing conflict between democracy and market. The pre-requisite for theory to capitalize on this is that it must become decisively post-liberal. MacPherson sketches out the requirements in correspondence to the above three weaknesses. Firstly, a post-liberal theory needs to revitalise the philosophical heritage of an early liberalism which emphasized, along with Marxism, the many-sided maturing of the various individual creative capacities. Then, we should consider

whether we have been asking the wrong question all this time, in asking, as we have done, how to hold on to the liberty we have got – the liberty of possessive individualists – while moving a little towards more equality. Perhaps we should be
asking, instead, whether meaningful liberty can much longer be had without a much
greater measure of equality that we have hitherto thought liberty required (1973,
184).

Secondly, empirical changes in the relations between state and society allow such a
philosophical notion to be rendered realistic and achievable. MacPherson argues that it was
the belief of theorists like Mill and Green that only market society could provide substantial
material wealth which prevented them from maintaining a democratic temper. In his view,
the onset of a managed economy ‘has made nonsense of the justifying theory that
capitalism maximises social utility’ (1973, 182). We can now pose the question of
individual self-development outside the terrain of market theory because society itself has
rendered that theory inapplicable.

Finally, we may say that, in light of the recent decline of authoritarian regimes in eastern
Europe, the pressure is off to justify liberal democracies as ‘merely better’. More
conceptual room is opened for criticizing institutions with respect to their underlying ideals
to which they fail to live up. Critique is not defused by a constant reminder that political
alternatives might lead down the same track as totalitarianism.

I will return to these points of orientation for the critique of liberalism, provided by
MacPherson, in chapter five of the dissertation. They will be used as a standard with which
to measure aspects of Habermas’ contribution to a radical social democratic theory of
politics. At this point, I would like to move on to a detailed understanding of what
motivates Habermas’ contribution as a whole. We have reconstructed, in a general way, the
paradigmatic shifts in the understanding of modernity. We have also discussed the
associated political implications, implications which are ambiguous for the political project
of the Left. As someone who placed himself on the Left, Habermas has had to work
through these implications. Moreover, he has done so from a particular point of view, from
his own personal ‘defining situation’. In the next part of the chapter, I explore important
biographical experiences which have shaped Habermas’ theoretical and political
perspective. These considerations represent a crucial link in the explanation of his
understanding of the project of modernity.
II HABERMAS’ DIVIDED PERSPECTIVE

As Max Weber has made clear, for any particular person, the leading questions and issues of their age are filtered through the objective circumstances in which their life takes place. Weber (1981, 80-5) argued that social scientific research, along with human activity in general, is always motivated by particular points of view and belief. While research is subject to general standards, there are inevitably particular, non-scientific reasons for engaging in science. Humans, as cultural beings, study events only when they accord them significance. Indifference or objectivity as a psychological attitude is impossible in the selection of problems for study and cannot, therefore, possibly play a role in the human sciences. Guiding points of view are essential. They orient research and serve in the construction of theoretical concepts which then sift an infinite reality of relevant information. The particular values at the basis of any specific study vary according to the individual. To be sure, investigators are heavily influenced by the ‘evaluative ideas which dominate [their] age’ and the character of their culture. But there is a more or less accidental process by which various ideas enter individual consciousness. There exists ‘an infinite gradation of “significance” arranged into an order which differs for each of us’. The first task of the researcher, then, is to clarify the point of view he or she is approaching the subject matter from. The purpose of the research then reveals itself as an effort to highlight the significance and implications historical developments have for the values and beliefs selected.

The values and beliefs characteristic of Habermas’ approach to the world, it is argued, are marked by a specific division or ambivalence. This divided perspective was fostered by various experiences which he has mentioned himself, mainly in interviews. This part of the chapter sketches these experiences and Habermas’ reflections upon them. The understanding of his personal and historical situation, it is argued, is significant for trying to comprehend the logic and structure of his theoretical work. The basic points are as follows. On the one hand, Habermas’ attitudes toward politics were crystallized in terms of his early experience of democratic reforms after liberal institutions had been suppressed and destroyed during the period of National Socialism in Germany. This promoted an extreme sensitivity to the importance of basic constitutional rights and the minimal conditions
required for a workable form of liberal democracy. Confronted with the brute force and irrationality of the Nazi regime with which one can simply not engage or reason with, Habermas came into contact with what he came to see as a foundational layer of human existence. On the other hand, a central socializing experience was his readings of enlightenment idealism and critical theory as well as his contacts with radical movements. During the time of economic prosperity following the Nazi regime, Habermas was keenly aware of how the new conditions of abundance were not accompanied by a loosening of social and psychological taboos. Heavily influenced by a Marxian and Freudian view of history, Habermas was sympathetic to those currents which provided a stronger critique of the existing society in favour of a more emancipated one. Problems arose to the extent that these stronger critiques questioned the basic liberal freedoms that were supposed to be protecting humanity from regression into barbarism. The radicals suggested that accepting these liberal principles would, in the long run, promote the same authoritarian impulses which had been experienced before: private and public forms of power would be allowed to grow, shielded from regulation and intervention by the sham of liberal democracy.

**Democracy and fascism**

Habermas suggests that ‘[w]hat really determined my political views was the year 1945’ (AS, 77). In that year, at the age of sixteen, he was a member of the Hitler Youth and was sent to the western defences of Germany. He describes the end of the war as an experience of ‘liberation’ (AS, 77). There was a general culture of optimism among the youth, even though the political culture in Germany remained inhibited for some time, preventing an open confrontation with the past (AS, 77, 188). Reflecting upon these events Habermas has written: ‘We believed that a spiritual and moral renewal was indispensable and inevitable’ (AS, 43). Even though Habermas over-estimated these possibilities, he gained a tangible sense of what democracy meant. There was, for example, ‘the deep, everyday experience we lived through after 1945: things got better with the reintroduction of democracy’ (AS, 189). He felt, existentially, the meaning of democracy and its significance as an historical achievement. This translates, at the philosophical level, into a commitment to defend the benefits of modernity against those who focus either exclusively on the losses, or on a still-to-be-conquered future.
Habermas writes, ‘the fact that one only becomes aware of these acquisitions when they are threatened is a circumstance which merits philosophical attention’ (*AS*, 138-9).

Habermas’ commitment to democracy can also be traced back to his post-war German ‘re-education’. It kindled an enthusiasm for the prospects of the Federal Republic catching up with the stable, democratic political cultures of England, France and the United States (*AS*, 79). A keen sensitivity to ambivalence and ambiguity also ripened, however, as it soon became clear that democratic transformation was not occurring as rapidly as he had hoped. To begin with, there was an ‘essential continuity’ in both the universities and the political system, producing ‘the fear that a real break with the past had not been made’ (*AS*, 43-4, 47, 78-80). Habermas suggests that it was the student movement of the late 1960s which finally broke through stubborn authoritarian tendencies (*AS*, 229-36). It served to make obvious the ‘life fiction’ of the Adenauer period that ‘we are all democrats now’ (Habermas 1993, 63).

As early as 1977, Habermas was again disturbed by the vulnerability of German political culture. A pretext for abandoning democratic values came about with the return of economic crisis, the rise of terrorism and the exploitation of the situation by conservative elites to maintain ‘a feeling of anxiety and induce a sense of “realism”’ (*AS*, 48). More recently, he has spoken of a ‘second life-fiction’ (Habermas 1993). This is the politically influential idea that the German reunification process has relieved a once separated nation of the responsibilities of democracy. Habermas believes that a widespread belief prevails that the old Federal Republic had been crippled with liberal democracy in light of the Holocaust. Emerging from this is a second life-fiction, that a renewed Germany can now continue its former quest for a national identity separate from western Europe. In fact, talking in 1988, Habermas explained that after the ‘explosion’ of the student movement, there followed a ‘counter-revolution, fed by a hostility and resentment which has effectively lasted up to the present day…. It is as though the Right, discredited in the shadow of National Socialism, had only been waiting for a pretext to rise up again against the “Ideas of 1789”’ (*AS*, 230).
Overall, then, despite the liberalization of west Germany after the war, there was a general and noticeable inability of its citizens to come to terms with the Nazi past. In the postwar period, self-denial complemented the persistence of authoritarian factors. Halfmann (1985, 175) argues that the German people were ‘overwhelmed by “after-Auschwitz numbness”’. This indicates a phenomenon, for Habermas, which has its roots in the birth of the German nation as such. It concerns a specific ‘national self-consciousness’ on the part of the German people. He refers to a study which compares this with the French example. There, a self-understanding as a ‘nation of citizens’ developed compared to the ‘culturally and linguistically centred, ethnically differentiated self-understanding of the Germans’. In Germany, ‘national identity had to link itself up with the educated middle classes’ romantically inspired vision of a cultural nation’ (Habermas 1994a, 132). As a result, a certain particularism attached itself to nationhood whereas universalistic tendencies were more evident in the French self-understanding. These German peculiarities were further fostered by the strength of romanticism in that country which protested against the leveling and normalizing processes of modernization. It is no accident that the expressivist tendencies described earlier flowered strongly on German soil (Taylor 1975, 11-12). For Habermas, Auschwitz was the event which shattered this peculiarly German illusion of the idea of a Sonderweg or ‘special path’ ‘that set Germany apart and gave it special privilege in relation to the West’ (NC, 250).

Habermas has noted that a German tradition of intellectual participation in the public sphere began to take shape only after the second World War. Wellmer (cited in Halfmann 1985, 173) has argued that this has meant that the Left in particular, and ‘the forces of democratic renewal’ in general, have been ‘constantly pushed into what appears as a hopelessly defensive role’. The important point I wish to make is that Habermas belongs to the generation of Left intellectuals which have had to occupy this ‘defensive’ territory on the German political scene. At the same time, as will be shown in the next section, he has also developed and maintained strong links to a more radical approach.

Liberalism and socialism

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9 There is also the important issue of the ‘Historians’ Debate’ which is discussed in chapter four.
10 See ‘Heinrich Heine and the intellectual in Germany’ in NC.
Paradoxically, it was not so much the protection of basic rights but the radical motivations of the student movement which finally broke through the repressive silence of the post-war period and liberalized German culture and society. For Habermas,

this revolt was a decisive step for the political culture of the Bundesrepublik, only exceeded in its positive effects by our liberation from the Nazi regime by the Allies. What 1945 signified in terms of a transformation of our constitutional status, 1968 signified for the loosening up of our political culture, for a liberalization in forms of living and in relationships which is only making its full effects felt today [1988] … . Without the pressure of attitudes which emerged during that period, we would today have no Greens, no alternative scenes in the big cities, no awareness of the fact that subcultural and ethnic plurality enriches our streamlined culture – we would not have the degree of urbanity which is gradually being established, and it is likely that there would be less sensitivity on the part of the rulers towards the mood of the populace (AS, 236).

Despite this evaluation, Habermas has also argued that the students displayed a lack of historical awareness. They belonged to the ‘first generation whose memory was not determined by the Nazi period’ (TRS, 24). They did not, like Habermas and his generation, appreciate the significance of the introduction of democratic reforms and the implantation of a constitutional framework. Instead, they were acquainted with a form of life which could only be devalued in relation to what they thought was possible given the degree of economic prosperity. In Habermas’ reflections,

They are the first generation that no longer understands why, despite the high level of technological development, the life of the individual is still determined by the ethic of competition, the pressure of status-seeking, and the values of possessive individualism and socially dispensed substitute-gratifications. They do not understand why the institutionalized struggle for existence, the discipline of alienated labour, or the eradication of sensuality and aesthetic gratification should be perpetuated…. On the basis of a fundamental lack of sympathy with the senseless reproduction of now superfluous virtues and sacrifices, the rising generation has
developed a particular sensitivity to the untruth of prevailing legitimations (TRS, 24-5).

In short, because they stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before in the struggle for a democratic nation, the new generation of students are more sensitive to the unnecessary continuation of sacrifice. They took various democratic, economic and political freedoms for granted. They began their analysis from a starting point which itself had been historically constructed, but they tended to neglect this construction. While Habermas, in his early writings, was sanguine about the potential of the student movement for a further democratization of capitalist societies, he also detected a ‘neoanarchist’ tendency amongst them as a result of their generational situation. The reason was that, in their enthusiasm for the radical strands of Enlightenment as well as for what was happening in underdeveloped parts of the world, they were led into a false evaluation that a revolutionary situation was at hand (TRS, 25-6). A totalizing standpoint was also encouraged by the theories of late capitalism offered, at the time, by the likes of Marcuse and Adorno (AS, 232).

Habermas has observed, then, that the mentality of himself and his generation contrasts sharply with the enthusiasm of the students. This illustrates a general issue, the tendency for a person to become too accustomed to existing conditions and take on a conservative bent. Habermas says that he learnt this from Marcuse. After hearing a lecture by Marcuse on Freud and the possibility of a radical change of the present, Habermas identified what he thought was the main idea of ‘critical theory’:

[to show] the courage to release utopian energies again - with the uninhibitedness of the eighteenth century - in times like ours makes a peculiarly strong impression. If anything, he will have given rise to at least one reflection, even among the toughest of those in the audience: an awareness of the extent to which we all unconsciously share the conventional resignation that reinforces existing conditions in our thoughts, without testing the ‘conception’ lying behind those conditions, the objective possibility that they can undergo historical development (Habermas cited in Wiggershaus 1994, 545).
For Habermas, this approach competes with other considerations, considerations of which he became powerfully aware in the experience of National Socialism. There is the thought that the repression required by liberal democracy to preserve and maintain a definite set of parameters within which society should function is better than taking a risk that could lead to emancipation or regression. An older generation warns the younger ones of the mistakes made in the past, which are lost to the memory of the latter. There is an implicit wisdom that one should not abandon traditions without tremendous care and weighing up of the alternatives. The problem is that this can lead to a false conservatism. Apart from the weight of ‘existing conditions’, there is the added burden of the past. The result is a distortion in the communication between generations.

In another set of reflections on the stability of German political culture (although before the reunification process), Habermas (NC, 194-5) remarked that, in comparison to earlier times, he could ‘breathe a little more easily’. He could feel relatively more composed about the future in light of the liberalization and diversity that had been created and had to be taken notice of by governments of the day. At the same time, he said that ‘I don’t feel cozy and settled’. In trying to work out the proper balance in attitude to be taken, he tried to reconcile the division that is being articulated here.

A juste-milieu can have clay feet too. What would a nonoppressive normality be like? It would be a normality that managed not to be apathetic toward the unbearable. Sensitivity to what society has produced in the form of suffering and injustice that could be avoided would be normal. In my contact with my children, and with younger people in general, I notice how my own responses have become dulled. Perhaps, and I say this as a university teacher, contact with younger generations is the most reassuring thing there is in our country. If distrust of one generation for the other, and distrust within the same generation, ever becomes unnecessary, we will also be able to look into the future without getting worked up.

In other words, there is a need to become aware of the shoulders one is standing upon, of the benefits that basic rights provide, without becoming insensitive to continuing injustice, injustice that is sometimes hidden by certain groups which appeal to these same rights. It was the heightened sensitivity of the students to these remaining problems which provided
a thrust for further liberalization, a liberalization that was not going to come about by the mere defence of what was already there. When the past weighs too heavily, there seems to be the problem that one can settle too far into the rhythm of the status quo. There is the possibility that a defensive attitude could slowly precipitate precisely what one is trying to avoid.

With these considerations of an ambivalence within Habermas’ experiential perspective, we return to issues raised earlier in the chapter. They involve the way in which the socialist Left is now to articulate its relationship with liberal democracy. Habermas, as an important thinker of the Left, must necessarily approach these issues in light of his personal exposure to the concrete and tangible dynamics of modernity. My purpose in bringing these influences to light is not to reduce his theoretical efforts to a series of socio-psychological experiences. I am interested only in strengthening an argument, put forward in theoretical terms, about a tension within Habermas’ approach to the questions of modernity. The next part of the chapter examines the principal tool at his disposal which can be used to reconcile this ambivalence. This is the theoretical tool of ‘critique’. The central contention of the dissertation, advanced in later chapters, is that Habermas’ application of critique is imbalanced. It is because of this incomplete utilization of critique, I argue, that he does not completely succeed in resolving the tension.

III HABERMAS, MODERNITY, CRITIQUE

The issues raised earlier with regard to the contrast between ‘destructive’ and ‘reflective’ modernity are not new for Habermas. In fact, he had already accepted, in the early stages of his intellectual career, many of the theses which have been put forward in more recent times by theorists critical of modernity. Some commentators have failed to acknowledge this. The so-called debates over ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’, in which Habermas is situated on the former side, have often led more to obfuscation than clarification of his position. He has remarked that ‘I can scarcely recognize myself in the caricatured image of my theory that is sometimes drawn in this dispute’ (1990c, 127). This part of the chapter begins by explaining why the mode of thinking of destructive modernity has always been foreign to Habermas. As a theorist committed to the tradition of critical theory and its
concept of ‘critique’, he cannot endorse a naïve view of reason. The first section, then, explicates the meaning of ‘critique’ and its importance to a ‘reflective’ understanding of modernity. In the remaining sections, I trace Habermas’ divided experiential perspective into an ambivalence within his theory construction. Habermas’ theoretical approach, I argue, is torn between two different points of view. One involves a defence of reason and modernity’s institutionalization of reason. The other embraces a critique of existing forms of rationality and a more ambitious standard according to which this critique is to take place. My contention, elaborated in the following chapters, is that this tension can be resolved using the means of critique. I argue that to the extent that Habermas’ approach demonstrates evidence of a dichotomy between perspectives, it fails to adequately apply the resources of critique.

The immanence of critique

Connerton (1980, 26) has labelled the form of criticism examined earlier under the rubric of destructive modernity, ‘critique as oppositional thinking’. By this is meant a form of criticism which condemns the existing reality by contrasting that reality with its own ideals of how society should be. ‘Critique’, as it is to be understood here, takes a different approach to the evaluation of the present day. It does not seek to separate itself from the object of criticism as though the two move in completely different universes. Before playing any role in affecting current institutional practices, the first task of critique is to understand its own place within those practices. Since ‘theoretical activity [i]s a moment in the general life of society, for critical theorists, how, under which conditions, and to what ends theory enters social praxis is a question that they pose themselves’ (Benhabib 1986, 4; see also Horkheimer 1972). Properly understood, critique is a reflection of knowledge or reason upon itself rather than a juxtaposition of reason and society (see also Howard 1988, xvi). Critique attempts to remain immanent within the social process rather than proclaim that it has a neutral standpoint outside or beyond society.

In parts of the German philosophical tradition, this idea of immanence is expressed in terms of the concept of ‘reflection’. It needs to be emphasized that the philosophical meaning of the word is different from its ordinary, English language connotations. Jeremy Shapiro (in KHI, 319-20, n4) points out that
In English the word ‘reflect’ tends to mean, aside from ‘mirror,’ either ‘bend back’ or ‘recurve’ or the mental operation of reflecting on something (albeit the self) that is external to the act of reflection. In German usage, particularly developed by German Idealism and its dialectic of subject and object, the word ‘reflect’ expresses the idea that the act in which the subject reflects on something is one in which the object of reflection itself recures or bends back in a way that reveals its true nature. The process through which consciousness reflects back upon itself, insofar as it reveals the constitution of consciousness and its objects, also dissolves the naive or dogmatic view of objects; thus they themselves are re-flected through consciousness. Accordingly, ‘reflect’ can be used transitively in a cognitive context.

The difference between a destructive or oppositional, and a reflective or immanent, critique, as Kortian (1980, 38) explains, appears in Hegel’s work in terms of a distinction between the ‘positive’ and the ‘speculative’ proposition. A proposition is positive when it considers only the content of a thought, whereas it is speculative when the structure of the thinking itself is examined. When the emphasis is upon what is being thought, the associated reactions are approval and disapproval. The intention of understanding is manifested when the focus is upon the movement of and reasons for one’s thinking. The former is ‘dogmatic’ in the sense that there is an attachment to the object of thought. The latter is reflective and represents an advance in freedom since a broader perspective arises in which the process of thinking itself comes into view.

While these considerations may connote the image of different levels, it is important to note that philosophical thinking does not stand opposed to ordinary thinking as another layer of thought (Kortian 1980, 38). Rather, critique represents an understanding of the movement and genesis of ordinary thinking. It asks how does ordinary thinking work, how are its results produced, why do we produce the conclusions about the world that we do? In this view, philosophy should not simply oppose understandings of the world with its own, supposedly more educated perspectives. This would be to reproduce the dynamic of destructive critique it is trying to overcome. Instead, it should simply seek to comprehend the how, why, when and who of understandings of the world. Through this process itself, philosophy discovers a more comprehensive and more correct understanding of the world.
As we learn how we construct the world, we learn about ourselves, since the way we see the world is in fact a reflection of our true nature and self. On the other hand, mere criticism perpetuates and perhaps modifies everyday or common sense understandings of the world rather than transforming it into a reflective awareness. The reason is that the constructive role of the critic is ignored, the fact that understandings of the world always issue from a particular perspective.

Habermas acknowledges that a significant feature of modernity has been the tendency of critique to become destructive rather than remain within immanent parameters. He stresses, however, that this has been only one side or aspect of modernity. Inherent within modernity, from its beginnings, has also been a ‘counterdiscourse’ (PDM, 302). The intention of this counterdiscourse has been precisely to question critique and reason about their claims to knowledge. In Habermas’ interpretation, contemporary philosophical debates indicate that ‘the horizon of modernity is shifting’ (PT, 3). This shift does not mean that the modern project is being abandoned, but that its more self-critical elements are coming to the fore. What is often heralded as ‘postmodernity’ is merely a situation in which these self-critical features of modern discourse have moved to the centre of philosophizing (PT, 6-8). Thus, while Habermas endorses the revision of the project of modernity, he insists that it does not involve a ‘departure’ (PT, 4, 6) or ‘leavetaking’ (PDM, 336).

In the next chapter, I examine the concept of critique in a more detailed fashion. Specifically, I consider Habermas’ reconstruction of three different concepts of critique from the writings of Kant, Hegel and Marx. It is argued that each of these concepts identifies a lack of immanence in the previously dominant mode of criticism. The new concept, while not completely negating the former, introduces a new way of thinking which renders criticism more reflective than before. Each model institutes an advanced level of reflection. The two remaining sections of this part of the chapter deal with a problem in Habermas’ conception of history which, it is argued, tends to compromise the immanence of his own form of critique. This concerns an ambivalence within his construction of a theory of modernity which can be traced back to the divided experiential perspective articulated above. The reasons why this ambivalence is a difficulty for Habermas’ commitment to the immanence of critique will be set out towards the end of the chapter following the account of the tension within his theory.
The spectre of technocracy

The competition between a ‘destructive’ and ‘reflective’ form of modernity is a real tendency within history. In Habermas’ early work, this is expressed as an imbalanced institutionalization of the ‘technical’ and the ‘practical’ aspects of reason. Insofar as Habermas’ conception of history is motivated by a defence of modernity’s claim to reason, he is interested in how the practical can overcome the dominance of the technical. In this section, I will outline the key elements of his diagnosis.

In brief terms, by the ‘technical’ aspect of reason Habermas means questions of ‘expediency’. Reason, from the technical point of view, refers to the capacity for making and controlling objects. The ‘practical’ dimension of reason, on the other hand, relates to ‘symbolic interaction within a normative order, to ethics and politics’ (see the Translator’s Preface in TRS, vii). While the technical connotes the image of the individual fabricating objects for use and enjoyment, the practical is linked with the figure of individuals coming together and conversing with one another in order to forge a common will or an agreement about what should be done. In very broad strokes, Habermas (LC, 16) has reconstructed history in terms of the changing importance of these respective types of reason. He begins his sketch from the time at which mythical interpretations of the world were overcome and replaced by philosophies, when claims to knowledge had to be backed up with reasons rather than shrouded by references to mythical origins:

With the rise of philosophy, the elements of mythical traditions were for the first time freed for discursive consideration; but classical philosophy conceived and treated practically relevant interpretations as theoretical questions, while it devalued, as inaccessible to theory, technically utilizable knowledge. With the rise of modern science, on the other hand, precisely this sphere of empirical knowledge was drawn into reflexive learning processes. At the same time, in philosophy there prevailed a tendency, leading to positivism, to differentiate theoretical and practical questions according to their logical form; however, the aim was to exclude practical questions from discourse. They are no longer thought to be ‘susceptible of truth’. In contrast,
the institutionalization of general practical discourse would introduce a new stage of learning for society.

Here, we have a rough division of history into four epochs, using the technical-practical distinction as a standard. A summary is offered in Table 2.1 where stage four is an anticipated completion of the historical process. An elaboration is given as follows.

Habermas defines philosophy and mythology as systems of interpretation which claim to comprehend the cosmos as a whole (PPP, 9). The distinguishing feature between the two is that philosophy seeks to explain the ‘ordering of phenomena’ by searching for reasons rather than through ‘naïve’ stories’ about ‘quasi-persons equipped with superior powers’. Habermas notes the important consequences following the making of cosmic understanding a theoretical affair. In mythology, ritualistic action embodied and articulated the interpretation of the universe so that theory and practice did not exist as separate entities. With philosophy, this symbiotic connection was broken. After severing understanding from practice, philosophy had to find some way of reconnecting them, of mediating the poles. Habermas argues that mediation occurred ‘by means of initiation into a theoretical form of life’ (PPP, 10). Theory became inextricably connected with the cultivation of the individual and, in this way, retained its connection to practice. The intention of philosophy was to subject the individual to the discipline of theory. Philosophy was separated from the everyday life of the masses and became the affair of an elite. In this classical approach, emancipation is defined as freeing the individual from transient interests and passions and anchoring consciousness ‘in the unity of a stable cosmos and the identity of immutable Being’ (KHI, 307). Theory deals solely with practical questions while questions of expediency are excluded (TRS, 54).

<table>
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<th>Table 2.1 The changing relation of theory to practice in history</th>
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<td>Technical questions</td>
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Habermas argues that this situation undergoes a complete reversal with the onset and eventual triumph of modern empirical science. It begins with the systematic application of knowledge to systems of social labour, as a means to improve the production process (TRS, 56). In other words, theory leaves the polis and enters the profane dimension. Gradually, this model of theory and practice burst the boundaries of social labour and infiltrated the tradition of classical political philosophy. The result, says Habermas, was the rise of ‘modern social philosophy’ (TP, 41-81). In this modern approach to social life, knowledge is not concerned with directly cultivating citizens and instructing them in the ‘good and just life’. Instead, it is concerned, like in its engagement with nature, with technically establishing, ‘once and for all’ the correct institutional preconditions for a secure communal order. A very different mediation between theory and practice in practical affairs replaces that which centred on the individual:

With a knowledge of the general conditions for a correct order of the state and of society, practical prudent action of human beings toward each other is no longer required, but what is required instead is the correctly calculated generation of rules, relationships, and institutions ... The engineers of the correct order can disregard the categories of ethical social intercourse and confine themselves to the construction of conditions under which human beings, just like objects within nature, will necessarily
behave in a calculable manner … . The order of virtuous conduct is changed into the regulation of social intercourse (TP, 43).

The consequence of this development, for Habermas, was that the technical model of the relation of theory to practice came to dominate all areas of human life. Not only does it apply to the human attempt to control external nature but also to political tasks of ordering a good society. With this, the practical relation of theory to practice is suppressed: questions of moral or ethical ends are considered ‘not susceptible to truth’.

Habermas argues that the construction of various institutions in modernity create the possibility for a more balanced implementation of the technical and practical aspects of reason. These include the emergence of the democratic constitutional state and the political public sphere. These innovations are discussed further in later chapters of the dissertation. The important point is that Habermas sees the dominance of the technical persisting and growing despite these countermovements. In ‘the modern understanding of the world [there is a] stubborn tendency to narrow down to the cognitive-instrumental domain the domain of questions that can be decided on the basis of reasons’ (MCCA, 45). Habermas insists that there is an urgent need to eradicate the modern prejudice that only technical issues can be answered. There is a deterioration in society’s capacity to solve life problems in comparison to its success in solving technical problems. This does not mean that practical issues disappear:

For the scientific control of natural and social processes – in a word, technology – does not release men from action. Just as before, conflicts must be decided, interests realized, interpretations found – through both action and transaction structured by ordinary language (TRS, 56).
Insofar as Habermas diagnoses a conflict between the technical and the practical in which the latter is losing, his position is virtually identical to that of Max Weber’s.\footnote{As we shall see in chapter four, Habermas’ framework is less one-sided than Weber’s. Habermas sees the predominance of formal rationalization as a contingent, empirical matter rather than following necessarily and inexorably from the decline of religious and cosmological views of the world, as in Weber. Axel Honneth (1991, 248-68) has argued, nevertheless, that Habermas’ sensitivity to the problem of the suppression of the practical and its importance to modernity has been unduly influenced by his encounters with theorists of}

The ‘spectre of technocracy’ is the danger of humans reducing their perspective of the world to a technical one and of excluding humane relationships with themselves and others. Habermas’ conception of history, from this point of view, sees the basic conflict between the practical and the technical as constitutive. There is a tendency which, ever since the decline of classical political philosophy, points to the gradual dissolution of the practical by the technical. This imbalance is aggravated further and further until the twentieth century in which the very distinction between the two begins to disintegrate and be lost to consciousness.

From this perspective, the most urgent concern of critical theory, for Habermas, is to understand how the practical dimension of life can be restored. A major problem confronting this task is that the basic model of praxis, embodied in classical political philosophy, is now out of date. Habermas argues that science and its very significant role in constructing our natural and social environments mean that the practical cultivation of the individual is no longer adequate. This is so, firstly, because such an approach does not address the real causes of technical domination which are located at the social and political levels. Secondly, Habermas argues that even if it were possible to reverse modern developments and make the classical approach applicable, this would be unrealistic. Habermas argues both that we should not and cannot renounce our technical achievements since they are manifestations of our human potential for rationality. Thus, for Habermas, the task that confronts us is to \textit{direct, channel and regulate our existing technical capacity in a practical way}. The question remains, ‘how’?

Habermas’ response to this question takes the form of a ‘critique’ of technical reason. The details of this argument are presented in the next chapter. For now, I would like to provide a brief indication of his approach. Habermas stresses we must first make clear that
technical rationality cannot produce human freedom on its own. Theorists who suggest otherwise are misguided for two central reasons. To begin with, normative considerations prohibit such an approach. This recalls the earlier discussion about the implications of destructive modernity. Scientific control proceeds by way of formulating and testing hypotheses about universal relationships. This conception is most readily applied to the physical environment whose laws can be safely assumed to be constant and invariable. The same assumption in the domain of social life, on the contrary, clearly excludes the possibility of human freedom. A technical mastery of history, therefore, is morally forbidden. The logical conclusion of such an approach, argues Habermas, is ‘the splitting of human beings into two classes – the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions’ (TP, 282). Secondly, the technocratic ‘vision’ is false for logistical reasons. Scientific hypotheses cannot be applied to society as they are to nature. Because human will cannot be merely controlled but coopted, the application of knowledge requires consent and agreement. Strictly speaking, scientific method cannot take this factor into account. A different, non-scientific form of knowledge is required to solve this problem.

As established above, however, the non-scientific knowledge required cannot take the form of classical philosophy in the context of a scientific society. Habermas argues that the prescientific horizon of experience can offer only personal recommendations that are not applicable to questions of the organization of society as a whole. This organization itself must be understood partly in social scientific terms. Any practical approach must incorporate this scientific knowledge from the beginning.

Culture and education can ... no longer ... be restricted to the ethical dimension of personal attitude. Instead, in the political dimension at issue, the theoretical guidance of action must proceed from a scientifically explicated understanding of the world (TRS, 57).

In short, there must be some way of combining the classical and modern approaches, without compromising their separate claims to validity: our capacity for technical control must not be blindly directed at manipulation for its own sake, but at the behest of

‘technocracy’. Honneth maintains that, as a consequence, the theme has assumed a false importance in the Habermasian version of history.
practical reasoning, about what we really want. Habermas poses the problem in the following terms:

how can the promise of practical politics – namely, of providing practical orientation about what is right and just in a given situation – be redeemed without relinquishing, on the one hand, the rigour of scientific knowledge, which modern social philosophy demands in contrast to the practical philosophy of classicism? And on the other, how can the promise of social philosophy, to furnish an analysis of the interrelationships of social life, be redeemed without relinquishing the practical orientation of classical politics? (TP, 44).

Habermas argues that if the findings of experimental science, applied to the domain of society, are to have worthwhile effects, they need first to be accepted and agreed to by citizens themselves. Otherwise, citizens are defined as variables in an equation whose outcome is defined by scientific experts. Theory needs to enter practical life through the medium of convictions.

The limits of reason

In aspects of Habermas’ work, then, there is a conception of history constituted according to the distinction between the technical and the practical. Moreover, it is seen that the latter is threatened by the former further and further in the course of history. In other dimensions of his writings, however, we can find a different understanding. Here, history is conceived as a medium of progress insofar as it consists of solving problems and simultaneously creating new problems. As our technical and practical capacities increase, it is argued, new phenomena which were previously explained away as immutable and constant come under our control. Initially, we are unable to use properly our enhanced capacities to effect. What comes first is a consciousness that we can become more autonomous which creates a conflict with the existing reality in which we are dependent. ‘This suffering’, which consists of a contradiction between what we now know could be done and what merely can be done, ‘is … the negative of a new need’ (CES, 164-5). History never comes to a

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12 Habermas states that ‘[p]ublicly administered definitions extend to what we want for our lives, but not to how we would like to live if we could find out, with regard to attainable potentials, how we could live’ (TRS, 120).
standstill but constantly pushes humanity onward by creating ‘new dimensions of scarcity and thus new historical needs’ (CES, 165). This is a view informed by Marx’s dictum that ‘[m]ankind ... inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation’ (Marx 1975, 426). The important point I wish to make, in comparison to the conception of history covered in the previous section, is that ‘rationality’ forms only one of three broad types of historical need. A rough characterization of history in these terms is given in table 2.2.

**Table 2.2 Stages of exploitation and emancipation (CES, 164)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploitation</th>
<th>Corresponding hopes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bodily harm: hunger, exhaustion, illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personal injury: degradation, servitude, fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spiritual desperation: loneliness, emptiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Habermas has used this schema in different ways. He has sometimes applied it to human history as a whole (CES, 165-7). Here, however, I am concerned with how it relates to the modern epoch alone. The same movement of problems being solved and new ones arising has occurred in the last few hundred years.

Habermas thinks that this ‘dialectic of progress’ is of particular importance for reconstructing the Marxist tradition. He argues that poverty was closely identified with domination in Marx. Since that time, there has been a need to differentiate clearly hunger from oppression. Habermas remarks that the ‘more the possibility grows in developed societies of uniting repression with prosperity … the more the accent shifts from the elimination of hunger to emancipation’ (PPP 156). There is a further distinction which
Habermas elaborates in discussing the work of Walter Benjamin. Just as prosperity might coexist with repression, there is the possibility that emancipation might coexist with unhappiness and unfulfilment. Then, the very meaning of progress becomes questionable. When we take the perspective of happiness as a guide, it is possible to see that reforming and improving the conditions of human life could have no meaning. The difficult life of backward, traditional societies might even come off better in a comparison with the sophisticated and relatively comfortable living of the majority in modern societies. Despite the tremendous growth in instrumental rationality and the apparent claim to universality of modern culture, it is important for Habermas that we also take care to understand what ‘we have unlearned in the course of … learning’ (TCA, 2, 400).

For Habermas, the critical question is:

> Can we preclude the possibility of a meaningless emancipation? …. Is it possible that one day an emancipated human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good? (PPP, 158).

Is it possible that the very achievement of a capacity for freely and collectively controlling our destiny, without any trace of domination, could also mean that this very exercise could become meaningless?

As we will see further in chapter four, Habermas does regard meaning as a scarce resource in modern societies. In the context of this diagnosis, the primary task of critical theory is different from that articulated above. A critique of science and technology alone will not do since it is not merely a question of restoring the practical dimension of life. Rather, that life itself requires meaning.

Habermas argues that philosophers are of little help in this situation of meaninglessness. He has consistently restricted their role to ‘guardians of rationality’ (Habermas 1981; PPP, 1-20; MCCA, 1-20). They cannot lead people to happiness but only indicate the prerequisites for being rational. ‘Philosophers are not teachers of the nation. They can sometimes – if only rarely – be useful people’ (AS, 199). In fact, they can only be useful by abandoning their role as philosophers and a concern for the universal, and enter into the public sphere
as participants. Of course, they can do so with specialized knowledge but this gives them no higher status than the other participants who contribute to a discussion about what should be done. In short, happiness is a problem that seems to have no theoretical solutions.

As will be seen in chapter five, critics focus on Habermas’ doubt about whether there can be rationality at all without happiness or a conception of the good. It is possible to illustrate the general kinds of issues involved by thinking about ‘the motivation to be moral’. Habermas argues that a post-metaphysical philosophy can provide no reasons why one should act morally. Motivation cannot be induced by a theory. Instead, the ability to follow moral insights, especially when these insights conflict with one’s interests, is dependent upon ‘processes of socialization and the degree of success in identity formation. But an identity cannot be produced by arguments’ (*JA*, 128). Moral action is not even a question of individual choice. It is contingent upon how one has been brought up, the quality of interaction with others and so on. Philosophy can only indicate to the already morally motivated individual how they should go about resolving problems from a moral point of view. It can give advice only to those who are willing to follow it. As for those who do not wish to be moral or have difficulty in being motivated, only the course of their individual lives will determine whether the factors against will be defeated by the factors in favour of morality.

It is at this point in the argument that Habermas makes some remarks about the possible role of religion today. He argues that because philosophy cannot answer the question, ‘why be moral?’, it remains dependent on religious sources.

Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes (for the time being?) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses (*PT*, 51).

Here, we have the image of a philosopher resigning before an inquirer, saying that he or she cannot do or say anymore, and pointing instead to a priest! The inspiration one may need to be moral, to raise oneself above the to and fro of the everyday pursuit of self-
interest, can only come from an inspirational language. Habermas argues that it is an advance in rationality that such languages no longer take on the function of forming the worldview of the society as a whole. At an individual level, however, it seems that religion is still important, especially for those whose socialization processes have shunted them in an immoral direction.

Habermas is keen to restrict the function of philosophy to clarifying the conditions of rationality alone because he is worried that a more expansive role for theory might lead us back into the dangers of ‘destructive’ modernity. Incorporating issues of happiness, from this point of view, may compromise the immanence of critique by making assumptions about the good life which cannot apply to everyone. The question raised by critics is whether this fear ends up undermining the conditions of rationality itself. The suggestion is that critique can also fail to be immanent by not acknowledging that a motivation for happiness and meaning is essential to the exercise of reason. A practical example of the general issue involved is the case of Habermas’ relationship with the student movement. Habermas states that the ‘students who became active in 1968 were already so removed from the Nazi period that they could no longer accept as obvious what was obvious for Marx – that there could be no socialist emancipation without the realization of the freedoms enshrined in bourgeois principles’ (AS, 233). A question arises here, however, as to whether this is as ‘obvious’ as Habermas makes it sound? Why does rationality have to become before happiness or fulfilment? And, indeed, can it come before? Could we not pose the question in reverse and still be justified: is the effective and non-ideological working of rational principles at all possible without emancipation in a stronger sense of the term?

Elements of Habermas’ writings suggest a conception of history which acknowledges the importance and validity of these questions. It has been argued, however, that his work predominantly emphasizes an approach which prioritizes a different set of questions and issues. There is a highlighting of the importance of basic constitutional freedoms and minimums. In Habermas’ words, ‘first things first’ (PPP, 158)
There have been three central purposes of this chapter. The first two have involved introducing the context of Habermas’ contribution to the project of modernity. This context has been explicated at a number of different levels. At the most fundamental level, I have charted a broad shift in theoretical framework, manifested within contemporary debates, from a ‘destructive’ to a ‘reflective’ form of modernity. I have also sought to sketch the theoretical and political implications of this context. Since various attempts to realize the project of modernity have failed or led to undesirable consequences, serious questions have been raised as to how, if at all, this project can be continued. In this connection, there has been a discussion of efforts on the part of thinkers to redefine the project of the socialist Left. This relates to how a radical social democratic critique of liberal democracy is to be constructed today. Finally, at a more concrete level, I have examined Habermas’ historical experiences of growing up and becoming politically active in twentieth century Germany. This additional contextualization is important and necessary in any comprehension of his particular perspective on the range of issues involved in the shifting understanding of the modern and socialist projects.

The third purpose of the chapter entailed an analysis of how Habermas’ own experiences, which reflect the ambiguous potential of modernity, have led to an ambivalence or division within his theoretical framework. This was articulated as a tension between two conceptions of history, one emphasizing the dominance of the practical aspect of reason by its technical aspect, the other stressing the importance of happiness to social life and progress. In this discussion, the concept of ‘critique’ was also examined. I have argued that critique is an important methodological tool in the tradition of critical theory which is used to overcome the presence of false dichotomies in thought. The question raised by the following chapters is whether Habermas elaborates and applies critique so as to resolve the ambivalence contained within his work.

The following chapter examines Habermas’ understanding of critique in more detail. It explicates three different ideas or dimensions of critique. These three conceptions correspond to the three basic requirements of the theory of modernity. Habermas’ task, it is argued, is to construct a theory in which each of these dimensions of critique is applied in
such a way as to satisfy the three requirements. The resolution of the ambivalence within his work, discussed in this chapter, depends upon the completion of this task. Habermas’ attempt to do this in his ‘early work’ is the subject of the next chapter.

I should note, at this point, that the argument put together in this chapter, about an ambivalence within Habermas’ writings, will be modified in later chapters. I will hold to the general claim, throughout, that this ambivalence exists. I will argue, however, that it has a number of different manifestations within Habermas’ oeuvre. In this chapter, I have dealt with it insofar as it applies to his theory of the rational. The contention that reason tends to be privileged over happiness in Habermas’ account refers to his understanding of the universal elements of human existence and their relationship to historical progress. That is, it relates to the first two requirements of the theory of modernity (see table 1.1). In chapter five, I will defend Habermas’ approach in this regard. It will be argued that his account does give priority to reason but this is both justified and does not neglect issues of happiness in the way many critics have claimed. I will maintain that the main problem is not with Habermas’ theory of the rational but with his theory of the irrational. The introduction of the theme of ambivalence in terms of the theory of the rational has been necessary because the issues involved in constructing a theory of the irrational are not considered until the next chapter.