This chapter aims to articulate Habermas’ response to the ‘ambiguity of critique’ identified previously. The focus is his later or mature work and his substantive application of three fundamental ideas of critique. The intention is to establish the foundations of the arguments put forward in chapter five. The general contention made is as follows. The decisions Habermas makes in order to solve the problems within his early work build in a systematic bias within his theory. This bias is made up of an emphasis on the defence of the project of modernity and, therefore, a relatively one-sided stress upon the theory of the rational. The consequence is, I maintain, that the theory of the irrational, while partly developed, is inadequate for the purpose it is supposed to achieve. This purpose is to provide theoretical guidance to those social and political movements with an interest in concretely realizing the rational potential of modernity. In chapter five, I will reconstruct an alternative basis for this theory, a basis present within some sections of Habermas’ work, which, it is contended, can resolve the problems involved.

The first two parts of the chapter examine Habermas’ response to the problem of the ‘philosophy of the subject’. This is one aspect to the issue of the ‘ambiguity of critique’. The presence of the philosophy of the subject in Habermas’ early work formed a barrier to his efforts to establish the significance of the ‘practical’ dimension of reason for human existence in contrast to the ‘technical’. Habermas seeks to replace this philosophy with a conception of ‘communications theory’. First, in the part entitled ‘the fundamental priority of language’, there is a discussion of what revisions he thinks need to the methodology of theory construction. This involves changes to the understanding of the first two dimensions of critique, the Kantian and the Hegelian. The changes do not affect the ‘fundamental ideas’ of these critical models but seek to preserve these ideas in a way consonant with Habermas’ substantive intentions and in altered intellectual circumstances.

The second part of the chapter examines Habermas’ application of these revised conceptions of critique. It discusses, in other words, the substantive conception of the universal, rational potential of the human race and how he thinks this potential is realized
through history. My explication takes place at both an abstract, philosophical level and at a more concrete, institutional plane. At the abstract level, Habermas is interested in identifying the essential characteristics of human communication. At the concrete level, he wishes to understand how these characteristics are institutionalized in modern societies, particularly in terms of the principle of ‘democracy’. In my presentation, I also emphasize a distinction in Habermas’ work between ‘identity claims’ and ‘validity claims’. It is in terms of this distinction, I argue, that his conception of the fundamental characteristics of communication can be most clearly understood. This distinction has not been an explicit feature of Habermas’ own work or of the secondary literature. In chapter five, I will attempt to demonstrate its importance for understanding Habermas’ theory of rationality. I contend, there, that the claim that he does not reconcile the concerns of reason and happiness relies upon a failure to acknowledge the important difference between ‘identity’ and ‘validity’ claims.

The third part of the chapter, ‘critique and crisis’, examines Habermas’ substantive elaboration of the idea of critique as crisis theory. I argue that his mature work displays an ambivalent application of this idea of critique. This is the most important step leading up to the arguments presented in chapter five. I distinguish between two conceptions of crisis in Habermas’ writings, ‘crisis as spur’ and ‘crisis as threat’. The first is suited to the third conception of critique introduced in chapter three. It is useful, I argue, for the construction of a theory of the irrational which can orient the struggle of social movements interested in emancipatory political change. The alternative approach, on the other hand, ‘crisis as threat’, is held to entail an overextension, on Habermas’ part, of the theory of the rational. In this respect, I argue that his application of systems theory tends to reinterpret as characteristics of the rational what are actually irrational features of modernity and obstacles in the path of the realization of reason. In chapter five I will submit that this means Habermas’ later work is an inadequate basis for forging a theoretical guide to radical social democratic political practice. In the final section of the chapter, however, I defend Habermas against a particular criticism of his use of systems theory. Defending Habermas in this way helps define the nature of what I argue is a stronger critique of his approach in this regard, a critique that will be pursued in the next chapter.
I THE FUNDAMENTAL PRIORITY OF LANGUAGE

The practical dimension of reason has been suppressed in many conceptualizations of the project of modernity. The general move to a ‘reflective modernity’, as shown in chapter two, has sought to correct this mistake. Habermas has always made a clear distinction between the practical and technical the cornerstone of his work in an effort to do the same. The ‘quasi-transcendental’ approach he adopted in his early work, however, incorporated assumptions of the philosophy of the subject which compromised this distinction. The means used for expressing his claims, in other words, tended to jeopardise those very claims. In the first section, I discuss this issue and Habermas’ response to it. In the second section, I consider the methodological implications of this response, which involve the concept of ‘rational reconstruction’, a concept which is a primary feature of his mature work.

The intrinsic limits to epistemology

The ideal of immanence, discussed in chapter two, is an important tool of reflective modernity. It is designed to avoid the destructive consequences of a conception of critique which opposes an existing reality with its own ideals of what should be. A three phase process of deepening this commitment to immanence has been presented in the previous chapter in terms of successive forms of critique. These methodological tools alone have proved insufficient in Habermas’ effort to establish the priority of the practical over the technical. A set of substantive assumptions remained present within his approach which mitigated against the immanence of his critique. These assumptions are what Habermas has referred to as the ‘philosophy of the subject’ (PDM). The role of this philosophy in his early approach can be understood as follows.

Habermas’ adoption of Kant’s epistemological idea of critique is defined by a division between a subject and an object. This approach presents no difficulties in accounting for the conditions of possibility of the natural sciences. There, a transcendental frame of reference determines in a one directional fashion the possibility of experience and knowledge of the world. The epistemological approach does not as easily explain the conditions of historical knowledge. In this case, the object of knowledge is the history of
the subject of knowledge. The conditions which determine historical knowledge are also the object of historical knowledge. They are not fixed, as they are in the natural sciences, but constituted empirically in the course of history. Albrecht Wellmer (1976, 249) points out that this paradox, from the point of view of a transcendental critique of knowledge, is ‘not a decisive counter-argument: it merely shows the limits of transcendental philosophy’.

Habermas always recognized the differences between the natural and cultural sciences, as explained in chapter three. He did not, nevertheless, think through the implications of this for an argument constructed in terms of the theory of knowledge. The problem and the solution can be thought through as follows. The subject itself cannot be the foundation of historical knowledge as epistemology implies. This is what motivates the current ‘critique of the subject’ in general: the subject cannot claim to be the master of its knowledge and action since its contingently formed identity is itself the only point of view it has over the present (Wellmer 1991, 57-91). The only ‘transcendental’ fact is that the subject has always already fallen prey to outside forces. This observation can lead the application of critique in two ‘extreme’ directions.

On the one hand, metaphysicians employ critique from an apparently privileged perspective. Hegel, for example, looked upon the finite subjects of history from the point of view of an Absolute Subject. On the other hand, poststructuralists, such as Foucault, see the subject as a mere reflex of desires, the unconscious, the irrational. Habermas objects to both of these strands of thinking (‘Qcq’, 192-3; PDM, 300). An epistemological approach, nonetheless, does not point to a way out. The division between subject and object cannot establish any suprasubjective context other than the idea of a species-subject. Within the confines of this perspective, avoiding relativism necessarily means siding with absolutism. This compromises a dialogical and fallible understanding of the practical interest in mutual understanding. Richard Bernstein (1985, 14) notes that the epistemological approach

obscares and even blocks the way to grasping the intrinsic intersubjective and dialogical character of communicative action. Even the expression ‘intersubjectivity’ carries the burden of the philosophy of the subject, insofar as it suggests that the main problem is to understand how self-sufficient subjects can
be interrelated, rather than focusing attention on how subjects are constituted and formed in and through their social interactions.

The epistemological approach necessarily begins from the limited angle of view of the individual subject. This problem is magnified when the subject is conceived as a species. For this is likely to be a philosophical technique for elevating what is really a particular perspective to the level of the universal. The way out for Habermas is to begin from the point of view of speakers and hearers oriented to mutual understanding. When approaching the issues from this perspective, the fundamentally dialogical and cooperative nature of communicative action is revealed.

Habermas had already perceived the solution in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. There, he identified the relevant structure transcending the subject in terms of the ‘framework of ordinary language communication’. Habermas emphasized that while *action* is the transcendental framework for the natural sciences, the grammar of ordinary language plays the same role in the cultural sciences. The historical variability of the subject is contained within the fixed frame of reference of ordinary language. When this idea is thought through, the need for a conception of a species-subject disappears in favour of the structure of ordinary language as constitutive of the human way of life. What was before expressed in terms of the philosophy of the subject can now be comprehended as the formative influence of linguistic structures upon the human race. A specification of the ‘practical’ in terms of a quasi-transcendental interest, however, suggests that the species secures through the passive medium of its individual members the continuation and transmission of a normative consensus. When the properties of the transcendental are secured in the *formal* structures of ordinary language, to the contrary, the active properties are returned to individual subjects acting together. The interest in mutual understanding is then not reduced to the reproduction of a consensual content but restricted to a formal orientation that can only be redeemed by subjects themselves. This precludes a theoretical subjection of the practical by the technical.

These revisions have significant consequences for the first two conceptions of critique laid out in the early work. The following section clarifies the methodological implications involved.
Two dimensions of rational reconstruction

Habermas is now reluctant to use the term ‘transcendental’ to characterize the Kantian dimension of his theory. He seeks to retain the basic idea of Kant’s conception of critique. This basic idea consists of the need to clarify the ‘non-substitutable’ presuppositions and rules by which humans ‘always already’ orient their knowledge and action (MCCA, 2). The purpose is to elucidate presuppositions which have ‘no functional equivalent in our form of life’ (JA, 163). Habermas now argues, however, that it is not to be employed to understand the rules which condition a subject's experience of an object. In place of the emphasis on experience of the world of objects, Habermas puts the function of reaching understanding he claims is inherent in language use. He argues that ‘the experience we have in processes of communication is secondary to the goal of reaching understanding that these processes serve’. If the general aims of a transcendental investigation are maintained, they cannot be realized in ‘the epistemological model of the constitution of experience but perhaps the model of deep and surface structure’ (CES, 24; see also ‘Rmc’, 238-239). Habermas’ theoretical interest shifts from the level of action and experience to the level of communication and discourse (TP, 16-22; ‘PKH’, 166, 174).

Habermas places fundamental priority on language as the medium for reaching understanding. This indicates the kind of methodological approach suitable for filling out the Kantian conception of critique today. Being confined within the parameters of language means that ‘there is a sense in which we can never be neutral observers, simply because we are always already participants … . The critical vantage-point can never be better than that of a partner in the communication’ (Habermas 1970a, 206). The road leading outward to ‘objectivism’ is barred. Habermas’ ‘theory of communicative action’ seeks, instead, to extend the reflective role of a participant in communication. Habermas claims that this makes possible a reflective comprehension of the rules and structures in which we are always already enmeshed.

Even then, Habermas stresses, hypotheses must be put forward in a fallible way and made open to empirical testing. Arguments are to be presented as the framework for an empirical research program. Habermas suggests that this opens the door for a cooperative relationship
between philosophy and the empirical sciences. He argues that this relationship gives rise to the ‘reconstructive sciences’ (TCA, 1, 1-3; MCCA, 14-16). These sciences advance strong philosophical claims, claims which are of a universal kind. At the same time, the claims are formulated in such a way that they can be indirectly tested in an empirical way (MCCA, 117-19). Habermas refers to a longstanding tradition in which this methodology is more or less implicit. Thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Weber, Mead, Piaget and Chomsky ‘inserted a genuinely philosophical idea like a detonator into a particular context of research’ (MCCA, 15).

Habermas aims to explicate the reconstructive sciences in two different dimensions. McCarthy (1984, 278) refers to these as the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ while Bernstein (1985, 20) describes them as the ‘synchronic’ and the ‘diachronic’. The synchronic aspect, which represents the Kantian conception of critique, refers to the deep structural features of language use. It is the means for identifying universal human characteristics. The diachronic dimension, which represents the Hegelian conception of critique, examines the historical trends which make possible a fuller realization of these possibilities extant within language. Habermas argues that at both the individual and the collective levels there are ‘learning processes’ or ‘processes of embodying rationality structures’ (TCA, 1, 3) which can be rationally reconstructed. He emphasizes, in addition, that there can only be a strictly logical account of development divorced from the actual dynamics of development (TCA, 2, 110-1, 144-5).

With these clarifications of Habermas’ methodological approach to the first two ideas of critique, it is now possible to consider the actual object domain of his investigations. Habermas argues that the appropriate level of analysis is the study of ‘pragmatics’. Pragmatics is concerned with how speech situations are constructed. This goes beyond studies of semantics which focus only on questions of sentence construction. For Habermas, the latter systematically restrict our understanding of what communication involves. He argues that subjects must be competent in producing the social situations which form the context of transferring information, not only in the formation of sentences.

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1 Bernstein’s terminology is adopted here.
2 A classical definition comes from Charles Morris (1938, 30): ‘Since most, if not all, signs have as their interpreters living organisms, it is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the ... psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs’.
Habermas is interested in communicative, not simply linguistic, competence (1970b, 138). He argues that interpersonal relations do not form, as they do for theorists such as Noam Chomsky, external limiting conditions on the application of an innate linguistic competence. Rather, they are enabling conditions whose production subjects must learn to master if they are to communicate at all. Fortunately, various philosophers and philosophical traditions have already analyzed this pragmatic dimension (CES, 5-8).

Habermas singles out the ‘speech act theory’ of Austin and Searle as the most useful. A ‘speech act’ is the most elementary unit of communication: the employment of a ‘sentence’ in an ‘utterance’. Austin established that in ‘saying’ something there can also be a ‘doing’. Apart from the semantic meaning of a sentence, there is also an utterance in which it is located. The utterance serves to establish interpersonal relations between speaker and hearer. The effect of establishing such relations is described as the ‘illocutionary force’ of the utterance. Habermas’ main point is that this illocutionary force represents the rational potential of language use. It makes possible a coordination of action on the basis of reasons, one which does not rely on violence or power. This rational potential of illocutionary force can be understood, in particular, in terms of a distinctive class of expressions:

Such expressions do not retain any given pragmatic feature of contingent speech situations; they explain the meaning of certain idealized features of speech situations in general, which the speaker must master if his competence is to be adequate for participating in situations of potential speech. A theory of communicative competence can thus be developed in terms of universal pragmatics (1970b, 138-9).

Habermas terms this class of expressions, ‘dialogue constitutive universals’. Through them, a study of the universal conditions and competences underlying the establishment of communicative relations becomes possible.

In his early formulations, Habermas (1970b, 141-3) referred to four sets of dialogue constitutive universals. Only two of these are of crucial importance for the present discussion. They form the substantive basis upon which we can understand Habermas’ theory of society and history. They are the a) system of personal pronouns and the b) system of performative verbs. The meaning and implications of these two sets of dialogue
II MODERN SOCIETY IN A RECONSTRUCTIVE PERSPECTIVE

This part of the chapter attempts to provide an outline of the results of Habermas’ research along the lines sketched out above. There are two points of reference. On the one hand, there are ‘identity’ and ‘validity’ claims, which form the object domain of research, while on the other hand, the ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’ dimensions of the reconstructive research itself.

The first two sections explore Habermas’ central theses about identity and validity, primarily in the synchronic dimension. It is argued that ‘identity claims’ form the basis of Habermas’ concept of ‘autonomy’ while ‘validity claims’ are constitutive of his understanding of ‘rationality’. These distinctions will be important for the analysis in chapter five. The remaining two sections discuss the diachronic dimension, Habermas’ understanding of how autonomy and rationality expand in the medium of history. This occurs at two different levels, firstly an abstract understanding of the shift from action to discourse and, secondly, at the more concrete level of how discourse is institutionalized in modern societies. I contend that the concepts of autonomy and rationality come together in Habermas’ specification of ‘democracy’.

The system of personal pronouns: identity claims

For Habermas, the system of personal pronouns represents, in grammatical form, the conditions of possibility of the human person. They designate the symbolic space in which an ‘individual’ can first be born. Communicative competence, in this respect, means the ability to employ and switch between the ‘speaker perspectives’ of the first (I, we), second (you, they) and third (he, she, it) persons. The mastery of this competence is crucial to the acquirement of individual autonomy. To understand how Habermas justifies this, it is necessary to consider his reconstruction of George Herbert Mead’s social psychology.

Mead isolated the coordination of action through language as the evolutionary beginning point of the human species. He described this civilizing process in terms of three
developmentally specific stages (*TCA*, 2, 5-27). The details need not concern us here. The most important point involves the fundamental mechanism which is supposed to give rise to the human species and its evolution. Habermas provides some modification of Mead’s approach but the mechanism is essentially described as ‘taking the attitude of the other’. It explains the process of ‘internalization’ through which an ‘individual’ or ‘person’ first emerges. It enables the subject to see its own behaviour from the perspective of others. This is argued to be the origin of self-consciousness, something which is not given but emerges only in interaction. The precondition of self-consciousness is the letting go of an entirely egoistical perspective and seeing oneself in the context of one’s relations with others. It is only with such an expanded capacity for perception, from a centred to a decentred frame of reference, that one’s ‘self’ comes into view at all. When the reactions of an interaction partner are unexpected and disturb one’s habitual behaviour, it is necessary to reflect upon one’s own actions. One must question the assumptions which have failed to sustain interaction. This reflection or questioning becomes possible through a shift in perspective in which one’s own person first comes into being for oneself.

Habermas notes that Mead explains this process with a distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’. The ‘I’ is the source of spontaneous and unpredictable gestures and speech. The ‘me’, on the other hand, is the social perspective of the ‘I’ that the subject forms through communication with others. It represents a ‘relation-to-self’ that one gains by putting oneself in the position of the other: one appears to oneself from the same perspective as the partner to interaction. The ‘I’ cannot be directly accessed through observation. Awareness of its very existence comes into being through confrontation with the reactions of others to oneself. One begins to ‘recognize oneself-in-the-other’ (*PT*, 175). This means that one’s very individuality necessarily has an ‘intersubjective core’. A ‘self’ only comes into existence in relation to an ‘other’. Self-consciousness ‘forms itself on the path from without to within, through the symbolically mediated relationship to a partner in interaction’ (*PT*, 177).

The subject gains control of itself and is able to organize its life using this social perspective of the ‘me’. The ‘me’ is made up of the expectations others make of the subject. In this way, the normative expectations of the society ‘migrate’ into the person. A “‘me’ … places limits, from the intersubjective perspective of a social “we”, on the
impulsiveness and the creativity of a resistant and productive “I” (PT, 180). At first, the child’s limited range of interaction partners means that the self is formed primarily through copying and the replication of behaviour. In the course of development, however, there is a ‘generalization’ of the ‘me’ due to the expansion in communicative partners. Because of this generalization, the normative expectations placed upon the self become more abstract and can transcend the conflict between what is now a multitude of concrete demands. One learns to see oneself from the point of view of a larger community, a nation-state or, at the highest level, the universe of human beings, past, present and future. I do not wish to go further into these diachronic considerations here. For now, we can anticipate Habermas’ conclusions by seeing in the abstract structure of personal pronouns what lays ahead for the subject if it can reach independence. In seeing through all concrete determinations of identity and understanding how it belongs to an unlimited communication community, the subject takes on, simultaneously, the characteristics of a universal and unique being. This corresponds, grammatically, with the ‘deictic’ nature of personal pronouns.

A crucial point in Habermas’ appropriation of Mead is that the ‘me’ provides a basis for the subject to relate to itself in a non-objectifying manner. This argument equips Habermas with the means for reconstructing fundamental philosophical concepts which he argues have been hitherto defined by the philosophy of the subject. Within the framework of the latter ‘the knowing subject relates to itself as an object’ (PT, 170). The individual treats itself and others only in a manipulative way. It sees its freedom as necessarily restricted not only by others but also by its own ‘inner nature’. The claims made by these ‘others’ are perceived as demands over which one may have more or less control. The individuality of subjects ‘does not reach beyond the objectivistic determinations of the strategic freedom of choice whose paradigm is the arbitrary will of privately autonomous legal subjects’ (PT, 160-1). This places freedom and community, the subject and its other, immediately into conflict. In refining Mead’s insights, Habermas rejects this approach and makes clear that we are dependent in specific ways upon others and ourselves for freedom.

In the philosophy of the subject, ascriptive characteristics are used to identify individual identity. In sociological discourse, in particular, there has been an attempt by theorists of modernity to understand the growth of individualism in terms of more and more deviations from the general type. Durkheim, for example, pointed to the expansion of different social
roles as a sign of how modernity opens up a space for individuals to emerge from the tight cohesiveness of traditional social groups. Habermas (PT, 150) points out, to the contrary, that a *quantitative* growth in the number of social roles does not necessarily signal a potential for individualism. A form of life that is more pluralistic in comparison with its traditional counterpart still determines social roles in the same way. The individual is subordinated to a pluralist way of life just as he or she was subordinated to a more collective mode of living. The ‘space’ Durkheim describes is of essentially the same character, whether in traditional or modern societies. It is this observation that has opened the door for critics of modernity, such as Foucault, who argue that individual freedom is an illusion. The very idea of the individual, argues Foucault (1981), gives society a hitherto unprecedented form of power over the subject. Rather than repressing the individual from the outside, as it were, society now constrains through the very production of identity, by making people live up to ‘being themselves’.

From the point of view of communications theory, on the other hand, language contains ‘a synthetic force … that generates unity within plurality in a *different* manner than by way of subsuming what is manifold under a general rule’ (PT, 162). The ‘space’ for individuality designated by this approach is below the level of concrete roles, attributes and ascriptive characteristics. It refers to the *responsibility* of the person in contrast to sociological or role theory which tends to grab at the superficial manifestations of the exercise of this responsibility. Moreover, the contrast between deep structure and surface appearance is complemented by an emphasis upon the intersubjective origins of the abstract capacity for responsibility. This makes clear, once again, the link between individuality and dependency. In Habermas’ communications approach, it is as though humans are the nodal points of an intricate spider’s web of language. The fragile links between these nodal points can only be maintained by forms of reciprocity. It becomes clear when we reflect upon the interaction system as a whole that if any one person cannot maintain their identity in isolation, then each is dependent on all. The system of personal pronouns represents precisely the symmetry implied by a reciprocal conferral of responsibility. ‘Individuality’ means ‘the self-understanding of a subject who is capable of speech and action, one who in the face of other dialogue participants presents and, if necessary, justifies himself as an irreplaceable and distinctive person’ (PT, 168). In light of this, Habermas argues that non-reciprocal forms of action are parasitic on the human way of life. They are derivative and
secondary. He maintains that if we accept that the self is necessarily ‘socially constituted through and through’, then independence cannot be arrived at by detaching [one]self from particular life contexts, to step outside of society altogether and settle down in a space of abstract isolation and freedom. Rather, the abstraction that is expected of it lies in the same direction in which the civilization process is already pointed (PT, 183).

Since identity can only be constituted and maintained through relations of reciprocal recognition, we can see the anthropological roots of moral systems. The fundamental intuitions that moral theory articulates are recommendations on how best to behave in situations where it is in our power to counteract the extreme vulnerability of others by being thoughtful and considerate. In anthropological terms, morality is a safety device compensating for a vulnerability built into the sociocultural form of life (MCCA, 199).

The features of language use mean that individuals, to form an inward sense of identity and security, must enter upon the unstable terrain of interpersonal relations. It is through this risky process of relating to others, and through this process alone, that one can gain a personality oneself. In doing so, the subject necessarily exposes itself to the reliability and sense of concern of its interaction partners. Without the safeguard of morality, such a process would become suicidal. ‘This explains the almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity – an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb’ (MCCA, 199). Morality is able to keep the fragility of human life within a set of parameters. It is no accident, then, that in their core ideas about human life, the world religions converge in their moral intuitions (Habermas 1994a, 20). For Habermas, the ‘universal presuppositions of communicative action constitute semantic resources from which historical societies create and articulate, each in its own way, representations of mind and soul, concepts of the person and of action, consciousness of morality, and so on’ (PT, 191). With the privilege of entering into a sociocultural form of life, human beings necessarily take on a certain kind of responsibility, a responsibility that
exists irrespective of conscious intentions and which, in a sense, stretches outward through
time and space:

No one can maintain his identity by himself. Consider suicide, for example. Notwithstanding the Stoic view that held that this final, desperate act reflects the imperious self-determination of the lone individual, the responsibility for suicide can never be attributed to the individual alone. This seemingly loneliest of deeds actually enacts a fate for which others collectively must take some of the blame, the fate of ostracism from an intersubjectively shared lifeworld (MCCA, 200; see also PDM, 316).

This intersubjective form of responsibility, which spreads out through time and space, has important political implications. In general, it means that there are unavoidable limitations on action for human beings if they are to retain their identity as such a species. The system of personal pronouns identifies a framework of life so fundamental that we cannot realistically imagine its overhaul. For this reason, Habermas is especially sensitive to those political positions and policies which ignore the limitations involved.

**The system of performative verbs: validity claims**

The structures of symmetry and reciprocity posited by the system of personal pronouns enable a process of ‘individuation through socialization’. It needs to be made clear, nonetheless, that in presenting itself before others, the subject does not depend on their agreement for its sense of identity. We may describe the issues of reciprocity as ‘identity claims’. What is at issue is not the content of what the subject is expressing but his or her status as a responsible person, one who is accountable for these expressions. The securing of identity is an obvious prerequisite for entering into processes of reaching understanding about something. For it is only a person, an ‘I’ or a ‘you’, that can embark on such processes in the first place. Habermas states that

identity claims aiming at intersubjective recognition must not be confused with the validity claims that the actor raises with his speech acts. For the ‘no’ with which the addressee rejects a speech-act offer concerns the
validity of a particular utterance, not the identity of the speaker. The speaker certainly could not count on the acceptance of his speech acts if he did not already presuppose that the addressee took him seriously as someone who could orient his action with validity claims. The one must have recognized the other as an accountable actor whenever he expects him to take a position with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to his speech-act offers (PT, 190).

It is at this point that we come across the concept of ‘validity claims’ and its connection with Habermas’ understanding of ‘rationality’. He argues that here, too, we can identify universals that can be reconstructed. This involves the system of ‘performative verbs’.

Habermas submits that these verbs can be classified into three universal classes, which form a series of basic distinctions fundamental to any speech situation. They provide, beyond the system of speaker and hearer perspectives, a further coordinate system for participants about how the world is structured. If ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘it’ (and their correlates) are the basis of communication, then validity claims specify ‘relations to reality’ which participants take up in their attempts to reach understanding in communication. For Habermas, the ‘something’ about which we communicate can be divided into three abstract categories. We may talk about something in terms of (a) its truth, (b) its normative rightness, or (c) its sincerity or authenticity. Corresponding to these three classes, it is possible to identify a cluster of verbs which describe the act of asserting a claim to validity, such as (a) ‘assure’, ‘confirm’, ‘deny’, (b) ‘order’, ‘obey’, ‘allow’, and (c) ‘expose’, ‘present’, ‘allude’. These performative verbs come under the headings of ‘constatives’, ‘regulatives’ and ‘expressives’ (Habermas 1970b, 142-3).

We can understand the relation of validity claims to the concept of rationality by examining their function for human life. Human cognition, speech and action always involve an attempt to realize something. The pursuit of these various purposes in life entails the use and application of knowledge. Habermas argues that the concept of ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ is connected with the quality of our knowledge, its capacity to enable us to realize our purposes. Reason should not, nevertheless, be identified with the content of knowledge. What is important, he insists, is that we necessarily claim that our acquisition and use of knowledge is appropriate and adequate. Our actions and
expressions are connected with claims to their validity. These claims are the criteria to which we refer in evaluating our attempts to realize our purposes. Expressions and actions satisfy the precondition for rationality when they are susceptible to being criticized and argued for. Reason, itself, becomes operative when it is possible to engage in a communicative process of testing, revising and affirming validity claims (TCA, 1, 8-10).

Habermas characterizes four different types of human action which can be elucidated with the notion of validity claims. He links validity claims with action using the conception of a system of ‘worlds’ (TCA, 1, 16-7, 19-22, 41-2, 87-94). For Habermas, the validity claims implicit in actions relate to specific object domains or ‘worlds’. The concept of world is meant to show that an agent exercises rationality in relation to a demarcated region of reality. This can be explained through a more specific characterization of Habermas’ four fundamental types of action. Firstly, teleological action involves a subject forming relations with a world of ‘states of affairs’. This world includes all those entities or objects which already exist or could be brought into existence through successful intervention into this world. In relation to it, a subject raises validity claims of truth and efficacy. Included here is a specific ‘cognitive-volitional’ complex whereby the actor approaches this world with an ‘objectivating attitude’. In normatively regulated action, another world is added to the subject’s repertoire. He or she must be able to distinguish between states of affairs, on the one hand, and ‘norms’ on the other. These norms make up a ‘social world’ which ‘lays down which interactions belong to the totality of legitimate interpersonal relations’ (TCA, 1, 88). In raising validity claims about this world, the actor also takes on a certain attitude. This attitude makes clear how these first two concepts of validity, world and action differ from one another. The actor is equipped with a ‘cognitive-motivational’ complex which makes a ‘conformative attitude’ to norms possible. Norms are not treated as mere facts to be observed but have a ‘binding force’ on those to whom they are applicable. In normatively regulated action, subjects raise claims which they expect will bind their interaction partners. This is explained by the fact that norms are perceived to be adequate standards for the interpretation of needs. The cognitive-motivational complex which makes norms binding follows from the transference of need interpretations into ‘need dispositions’.
A third concept of world emerges in *dramaturgical action* when the actor presupposes him or herself as a world. The actor relates to his or her own ‘subjective world’ when presenting it to a public. Here, ‘desires’ and ‘feelings’ are the constituents of the relevant world. In relation to them, the subject makes claims of sincerity or authenticity. Claims to sincerity are raised with respect to questions of truthfulness while claims to authenticity concern issues of expressive accuracy. Habermas notes that these two dimensions can sometimes be blurred: ‘Often we lack the words to say what we feel; and this in turn places the feelings themselves in a questionable light’ (*TCA*, 1, 93).

Dramaturgical action, like normatively regulated action, presupposes a distinction between two worlds. It assumes that the actor can discriminate between an external (objective and social) and internal world. Habermas argues that a more and more complex structure of world perspectives comes into play as we take additional action types into account. The most complex structure arises in what he is most concerned with: *communicative action*. The distinctive feature of this model of action is its concept of language. Habermas argues that in the other action-types, language is subordinated to the aims of the corresponding model. Communicative action, on the other hand, articulates an ‘interpretive concept of language’ as a ‘medium of uncurtailed communication whereby speakers and hearers … refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation’ (*TCA*, 1, 95). Here, language is a medium in which the three dimensions of rationality overcome their separateness and enter into an interplay with one another.

It is important to note that this is a model of *action* rather than a reference to mere conversation. In it, participants meet one another with already defined preferences and aims. ‘In this respect the teleological structure is fundamental to all concepts of action’ (*TCA*, 1, 101). Communicative action is distinctive because it coordinates these different goal-directed actions in a specific way. Coordination is based here, and here alone, on a *cooperative process of interpretation* of the situation. Communicative action introduces an advanced level of reflection into human life. Whereas, in the individual models of action, a relation to the world is taken up ‘straightaway’, these relations themselves are reflected in the linguistic medium of communicative action. Subjects must ‘relativize’ their relations to the world in order to enter a process of communication in which their validity claims may
be contested and need to be defended. Language extends beyond the merely instrumental and semantic function it exercises in the other models of action. It now takes on the **pragmatic** function of coordinating action via criticizable validity claims. ‘Speakers integrate the three formal world-concepts, which appear in the other models of action either singly or in pairs, into a system and presuppose this system in common as a framework of interpretation within which they can reach understanding’ (*TCA*, 1, 98). In communicative action, the rationality implicitly present in expressions is mobilized ‘expressly for the cooperatively pursued goal of reaching understanding’ (*TCA*, 1, 99).

**The expansion of autonomy and rationality**

This section of the chapter considers the above theses in terms of the diachronic dimension of rational reconstruction. Habermas is interested in how human identity matures into autonomous forms as well as how questions of the validity of knowledge are subject to more rational treatment over time. In both this and the next section, the presentation of Habermas’ theory is nonsymmetrical in its attention, focusing primarily on the dimension of validity. This does, in fact, replicate a certain bias within his own work. This bias will be considered in chapter five while further attention to questions of identity formation is provided in the next part of the chapter.

Habermas maintains that the form of social reproduction, at any particular time and place, is **in principle** tied to a rational process of criticism and revision. The knowledge contained in methods of reproducing life, connected to validity claims, is open to contestation. It is this hypothetical quality of openness which makes learning possible. ‘In virtue of their criticizability’, he writes (*TCA*, 1, 18), ‘rational expressions also admit of improvement; we can correct failed attempts if we can successfully identify our mistakes’. Habermas argues that this potential for learning was relatively restricted in pre-modern communities. Methods for satisfying the requirements of human life were sanctified within the boundaries of an unproblematic consensus. Fixed religious and metaphysical worldviews justified everyday practices as natural and immutable. The taboos of this ‘authority of the sacred’ prohibited the criticism of knowledge. Recognition of the sacred produces a feeling of **moral obligation** in the individual. ‘[I]t is surrounded with an aura that simultaneously frightens and attracts, terrorizes and
enchants’ (TCA, 2, 49; see also CES, 137). This authority of sacred knowledge was gradually displaced with the onset of modern societies. The possibility arose of fashioning new methods of creating and maintaining social order. These developments, which are still manifesting themselves in Habermas’ view, make possible human cooperation on the basis of knowledge susceptible to criticism. Diachronic rational reconstruction articulates the general logic involved. Of chief importance in this historical understanding is the concept of the ‘lifeworld’.

The idea of the lifeworld expresses the insight that a kind of sacredness never completely disappears from modern social life. The sacred, proper, denotes values, beliefs and practices that, having ‘passed through’ linguistic formulations, solidify and become fixed. They confront individuals ‘from the outside’. Issues are susceptible to rational treatment when these beliefs and norms become less compelling and need not be accepted without argument. Discursive examination is, nonetheless, never entirely free of unquestioned norms. There is another set of preconceptions, which lie ‘behind’ our explicit discussions. Habermas says that without a ‘sprawling, deeply set, and unshakable rock of background assumptions, loyalties, and skills’ (BFN, 22), even the most simplistic of our utterances would lack meaning (TCA, 1, 336). We would also lack motivation to act and possess no ‘natural’ orientation to things, others or ourselves. The concept of the lifeworld, although complex, is simply meant to indicate that humans cannot exist in a cultural, social or personality vacuum. A complete destruction of this type of ‘sacredness’, of our preconceptions and know-how, would amount to an undermining of linguistic communication and therefore the human way of life as such.

Habermas refers to the declining power of the sacred under the catchphrases, ‘differentiation of world from lifeworld’ (TCA, 1, 82-3) and ‘linguistification of the sacred’ (TCA, 2, 77-111). He means, simply, that a sphere of things which we can come to an agreement about separates off from a sphere in which agreement is presupposed in an unconscious way.

To the extent to which participants in communication can conceive of what they reach agreement on as something in a world, something detached from the lifeworld background from which it emerged, what is
explicitly known comes to be distinguished from what is implicitly certain (MCCA, 138).

The scope for communicative action grows tremendously with complex and pluralistic societies. In more traditional societies, as far as disagreements did occur, they could be easily resolved in relation to a solid, overarching agreement on the way life should be lived. Once societies are less and less held together by the ‘spellbinding power’ of the sacred, they must rely more and more upon processes of communicative action for producing explicit agreements. In addition, as ways of life multiply for various reasons, there is no longer a singular lifeworld encompassing the whole of society. Modernity denotes a time and space in which ‘[i]ndividuals, groups, and nations have drifted far apart in their backgrounds of biographical and social-cultural experience’ (‘Qcq’, 192).

Disagreement and lack of orientation become a routine part of everyday practice. A heightened responsibility is placed on individuals to cooperate and explicitly produce shared certainties. The ‘rationality potential’ (TCA, 2, 77) ingrained in communicative action makes possible a constructive response to this predicament. It means, at the same time, that freedom is gained only with a corresponding increase in the burdens individuals must shoulder. In fact, at a certain stage, lifeworlds can cease to sufficiently overlap one another, or even individually provide coherence, such that even communicative action loses its effectiveness. The ways of life of individuals and groups become so different that the minimum level of shared understanding required cannot be reached. Habermas (1996b, 352) describes a predicament in which we ‘still argue about moral judgements and beliefs with reasons [but] an encompassing value-consensus on basic moral norms has been shattered’.

In this situation, the rationality of communicative action can still assert itself by pointing to ‘the practice of argumentation as a court of appeal’ (TCA, 1, 18). Once participants no longer agree on basic moral norms, the only thing they share is a belonging to ‘some communicative form of life’. As human beings, they all reproduce their lives through language. Since these life forms ‘have certain structural aspects in common’ the participants can rely only on the ‘normative contents’ of these common aspects as a basis for ‘shared orientations’ (Habermas 1996b, 352-3). These normative
contents are the structures of ‘reciprocal recognition’ built into ordinary language communication. With the erosion of consensus over specific and particular claims to validity, philosophy’s task is to point out the more solid foundations of identity structures on which subjects can rest. The only thing that can rationally motivate every participant to keep trying to resolve his or her conflicts consensually is if they can be assured that their needs and interests will be recognized, that issues will be resolved impartially. The principle of discourse or argumentation can be described as follows: ‘Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses’ (BFN, 107; MCCA, 197). It is in this way that the synchronic analysis of implicitly raised identity and validity claims is complemented with a diachronic analysis of how what is at first implicit becomes explicit for the actors themselves in the process of history. ‘In modern societies there is such an expansion of the scope of contingency for interaction loosed from normative contexts that the inner logic of communicative action “becomes practically true”’ (TCA, 2, 403).

A question arises, however, whether these developments point to a solution to the problems involved: can impartiality really solve persistent moral disagreements? Can we expect ‘all those possibly affected’ to agree on something when they have only resorted to argumentation because of disagreement on everything else? It is this very difficulty that Habermas exploits in his philosophical specification of human autonomy and rationality. If argumentation cannot be expected to routinely produce outcomes in the form of agreements, participants can rely on nothing other than the norms embodied within the process of argumentation itself. If they still insist on regulating their life in a consensual fashion, they must accord one another the rights and duties necessary for the practice of argumentation to continue.

It is with this dynamic understanding that Habermas hopes to preserve the fundamental idealism of the Enlightenment. While the factual reproduction of social life takes place haphazardly under constraints and necessities, it nevertheless contains the ideal of a ‘conscious conduct of life’ as a modifying force. The structures of reciprocal

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3 In Habermas’ view, this principle of discourse, when applied in the context of modern law, is equal to the principle of democracy. This thesis will be discussed in the next section.

4 These basic rights and duties are explored further below in connection with Habermas’ concept of democracy.
recognition and of validity claims mean that we can deal with substantive issues and conflicts under autonomous conditions and universal points of view. We persist in the search for truth, rightness and sincerity despite the conservative weight of existing conditions. Amidst the plurality, conflict and change of modern life is a communicative drive towards resolution. Without this drive, says Habermas (1990c, 127), we would have no rational alternative to violence and coercion as methods of collective will formation and conflict resolution. Of course, ‘with this comes the problem of having to explain how the reproduction of society can possibly proceed on such fragile ground as that of context-transcending validity claims’ (BFN, 8). It is at this point in the argument that Habermas’ institutional analyses come into play.

Before exploring these concrete and institutionally oriented investigations, it is important to take away the rationalistic bias of the above account. The dimension of rational reconstruction, which is concerned with the logic of development alone, does not encompass the actual course of historical evolution. Habermas is well aware that significant obstacles confront a rational and autonomous response to the disintegration of traditional ways of life. The violent class, ethnic and religious conflicts that have recurred in modern societies are examples of a different approach. They are instances of what Habermas calls ‘strategic action’. Strategic action is an alternative to communicative action in situations of disagreement. It involves an actor viewing others only in terms of their degree of usefulness for achieving a preconceived end (TCA, 1, 285-6). One reason why human beings may prefer strategic action over communicative action arises from internal inadequacies in lifeworld structures. They may lack the appropriate resources and motivations (cultural, social and personality) allowing them to transcend their own point of view and recognize another. More important than this, argues Habermas, are those factors which externally prevent modern lifeworlds using

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5 In light of this understanding of democracy, it is somewhat surprising that some critics have considered Habermas anxious or insecure in feeling the need to provide philosophical foundations (Rorty 1987). For Habermas has no reservations in releasing us from the security of a tradition-bound way of life into the uncertainties of a potentially unlimited democratic process. He argues that the ‘permanent risk of dissensus’ can be turned to advantage, it can be used to ‘spur on’ democratic processes (Habermas 1996d, 462). What the philosophical justification does provide is an understanding of the core dynamic of these processes.

6 For criticisms of Habermas’ neglect of internal deficiencies to the lifeworld see Alexander (1991, 62), Livesay (1985) and Fraser (1987, 51ff).
their communicative potential. Here, he says, the ‘systems’ of contemporary societies tend to undermine autonomy and rationality.

The notion of ‘system’ refers to entire domains of social life in which action is ‘freed’ from the burdens of communicative coordination. This does not mean anarchy because systems provide an alternative mechanism of alignment. Habermas argues that the two central systems of modern society are the economy and state, whose coordinating mechanisms are ‘money’ and ‘power’ respectively. Money and power, as ‘steering media’, regulate action by providing a reference point for all participants involved. They are the common currency used to negotiate claims and conflicts within systemic contexts. Problems arise, according to Habermas, when these media break out of their legal domains and literally invade the lifeworld (TCA, 2, 301-73). Individuals and groups are prevented from autonomously regulating their collective existence with these processes of ‘colonization’. Money and power define issues and problems in their own terms and lock out communicatively generated interpretations. From the sphere of industrial life to that of the environment, decisions are made according to predetermined criteria rather than via the impartial standards of democratic discussion. Importantly, this phenomenon not only prevents the consensual formation of agreement. It also damages lifeworld structures of reciprocal recognition.

One more significant trend in modernity compounds the difficulties for autonomy and rationality. The consensual working out of interpretations becomes more arduous with the separate institutionalization of validity claims. Habermas argues that rationalization consists of a progressively clearer distinction between such claims as well as their individual treatment via processes of permanent criticism. The scientific enterprise, the legal system and institutions of art criticism make questions of truth, rightness, authenticity and sincerity a matter for experts. Validity claims are not only cut off from one another but also from everyday orientations. Citizens must confront a bewildering complex of expertise which challenges their understanding of reality. Not only may they

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7 Habermas notes that systems require legal institutionalization (TCA, 2, 172-9). The significance of this is considered further below.

8 There are significant differences between the two media. The notion of ‘power’ cannot be entirely reduced to a ‘steering medium’ in Parson’s sense (see TCA, 2, 267-72). The significance of these differences will be discussed further below.

9 This will be covered in more detail in the next part of the chapter.
disagree among themselves over what is true, right and sincere, specialists devoting their lives to these questions also have their interpretations.

These two trends, the expansion of systems and the growth of expertise separated from the lifeworld, point to endemic problems in modernity. They signify a persistent course towards the ‘loss of freedom’ and the ‘loss of meaning’ respectively. In the context of all this, we may ask whether Habermas’ defence of modernity is practical. Significant criticisms have been raised regarding his application of systems theory. Political parties, trade unions and other formal organizations have been the traditional basis of progressive movements. For citizens, this one set of potentially democratic footholds into systems is lost in Habermas’ view. He subsumes them under a systemic logic of action incapable of radical democratization. Critics have argued that the analysis of the conflict between system and lifeworld offered in The Theory of Communicative Action has failed to provide a practically enlightening theory.\(^\text{10}\) Habermas acknowledges that he no longer offers a ‘socialist’ concept of democracy in contrast to earlier formulations (see Habermas 1989). He places out of the question a radical democratic regulation of economy and state. Instead, the task for radical democracy now is to ‘erect a democratic dam against the colonializing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld’ (Habermas 1994, 444). The task is a defensive one, to protect structures of reciprocal recognition. The responsibility for this supposedly lies in informal public spheres and civil associations within the lifeworld.\(^\text{11}\)

With this approach, Habermas presents a modified version of Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1952) thesis of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’. He argues that there is an ‘irresistible irony’ to the ‘world-historical process of enlightenment’ (TCA, 2, 155). The rationalization of the lifeworld places great burdens on communication for the coordination of action. The demands become so immense that communicative action must be replaced by ‘delinguistified’ media. Habermas argues that ‘lifeworlds can afford only a restricted outlay for coordination and understanding’ so that ‘at a certain

\(^{10}\) See, for example, Berger (1991), Fraser (1987), Giddens (1985), Johnson (1992), McCarthy (1992) and Misgeld (1985).

\(^{11}\) In the defence of his use of systems theory, Habermas has claimed that he would ‘not have found the energy to write such an intricate book’ if it meant ‘a rejection … of normative conceptions of the socialist or even only radical democratic tradition’ (‘R’, 260). But clearly, on his own admission, he has rejected
level of complexity ordinary language has to be disencumbered’ (PDM, 350). We can view this from two different points of view. From the perspective of communicative freedom and autonomy, the formation of systems is necessary so that culture can be emancipated from the restrictions of material reproduction. Time and space become available in which the lifeworld can spontaneously develop its potential, a potential hitherto strangled by the ‘Biblical curse of necessary labour’ (KHI, 58). ‘The lifeworld, more or less relieved of tasks of material reproduction, can in turn become more differentiated in its symbolic structures and can set free the inner logic of development of cultural modernity’ (TCA, 2, 385). From the point of view of societal complexity, the technological, administrative and economic comforts of modern countries would not be possible without the substantial use of steering media. These media neutralize laborious and inefficient processes of consensus formation so that power over nature can be increased. The problem, for Habermas, is that the second, systemic perspective, made possible itself by the rationalization of the lifeworld, tends to become an end in itself. The growth of complexity ceases to be modified and regulated by an encompassing institutional order and instrumentalizes the lifeworld for its own purposes: the technical overpowers the practical.12 For Habermas, this represents the conflict between the ‘philosophy of the subject’ and ‘communications theory’, a competition between contrasting visions of freedom and autonomy.

Is Habermas’ diagnosis adequate for a conception of radical social democratic politics? Apart from queries about his acceptance of key tenets of systems theory, we may simply dispute whether the informal associations of citizens can be expected to take up even a more limited radical democratic project. If powerful systems have to play such a large role in social life in comparison to the weaker steering capacities of the lifeworld, then is the ‘irresistible irony’ of history simply a euphemism for a failed project of enlightenment? Habermas’ analysis in The Theory of Communicative left few clear answers to the possible efficacy of ‘fragile validity claims’. In the more recent work, Between Facts and Norms, he offers some possible solutions. Here, there is a clearer, institutional account of the circulation of power in modern society and of the possibility

understandings of the socialist project as a thoroughgoing democratization of the state and the economy. See further contradictory statements in ‘R’, 261.

12 These issues of systems theory are introduced here to fill in Habermas’ reconstruction of history. The finer details of his account are dealt with in the next section.
that democracy can play a significant role within it. These issues are the subject of the following section.

**The institutional manifestations of democracy**

There are two, interrelated keys to Habermas’ argument about how validity claims can overcome their ‘fragile character’. The first concerns a revision in his earlier understanding of modern law, while the second involves an elaboration of the concept of ‘power’. The starting point is the fact that systems need to be legally justified. This requirement of legality opens up a channel between system and lifeworld through which either one can influence the other (TCA, 2, 185). While Habermas’ attention in *The Theory of Communicative Action* was directed at the influence of systems on the lifeworld, he has reversed his focus in *Between Facts and Norms*. Here, I will be concerned only with Habermas’ arguments regarding law.

The first stage in Habermas’ approach to modern law consists of the thesis that it embodies the core dynamic of democracy. He argues that ‘[f]rom the standpoint of legal theory, the modern legal order can draw its legitimacy only from the idea of self-determination: citizens should always be able to understand themselves also as authors of the law to which they are subject as addressees’ (Habermas 1996d, 449). Habermas insists that only the discursive concept of democracy can convincingly articulate this idea. We saw above that this concept involves subjects mutually according one another the basic rights and duties required for rational discourse. Habermas argues that when this process takes place within the medium of modern positive law, the result is a ‘basic system of rights’. This system is the *threshold* of constitutional rights required to make possible the idea of self-determination (Table 4.1).

The first three rights refer to the ‘addresses’ of law, and ‘guarantee what we now call the *private* autonomy of legal subjects’ (*BFN*, 123). They can only be described formally because their actual content must be the result of a democratic practice of will formation by citizens as ‘authors’. The fourth basic right follows from this requirement. Democracy is defined as the heart of this system of basic rights (*BFN*, 121) as well as the project of realizing these rights in the specific circumstances of modern societies (*BFN*, 125-9). The system of rights *legalizes* the core dynamic of democracy. Habermas
suggests that the ‘first act of a constitution-making practice already drives the wedge of an expansive idea into societal complexity’ (Habermas 1996d, 462).

Table 4.1 The system of basic civil rights (BFN, 122-3)

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<thead>
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<th>Basic rights that result from the politically autonomous elaboration of the right to the greatest possible measure of equal individual liberties.</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Basic rights that result from the politically autonomous elaboration of the status of a member in a voluntary association of consociates under law.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Basic rights that result immediately from the actionability of rights and from the politically autonomous elaboration of individual legal protection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Basic rights to equal opportunities to participate in processes of opinion- and will-formation in which citizens exercise their political autonomy and through which they generate legitimate law.</td>
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It should be noted that Habermas’ discursive concept of democracy, while involving a reciprocal conferral of rights, does not enforce the strong duties of discourse. Citizens have a right not to take on such obligations. They are free to remain private individuals in strategic domains (BFN, 119-20). For this reason, Habermas argues that constitutional democracy ultimately depends on the internal motivations of its citizens. At the same time, once activated, these motivations can have far reaching effects. To substantiate this claim, we must look at the second stage of Habermas’ approach to law.

Habermas argues that because law plays a crucial role in tasks of social integration, the dynamic of democracy can extend to the whole of society. Habermas draws on the accounts provided by Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons in particular, of the way law replaces the sacred as a centripetal force in modern societies (TCA, 2, 77-87; BFN, 73-6). As already seen, the dissolution of the sacred makes communicative action responsible for producing shared orientations. In turn, this power of communicative action is limited in the context of complex societies. Habermas argues that law compensates for this by acting as a sociological ‘transformer’ (BFN, 81) of agreements reached in the lifeworld. The key sociological feature of law is that it ‘stabilizes
behavioural expectations’. It lets ‘members of a social collectivity know what behaviour they may demand of one another when and in which situations’ (BFN, 177). Because law has this large scale regulatory influence and because law is tied to discursive review, it also effectively extends in time and space the abstract features of communicative action: validity claims overcome their fragile character. Habermas holds out the prospect of a democratic circulation of power in modern societies.

With this understanding of law, Habermas has had to revise an earlier distinction made between law as institution and law as medium (TCA, 2, 362-5). That distinction largely excluded law’s democratic potential from systemic contexts in which it functioned without need of substantive interrogation. The result was a tripartite account of how law operated. First, as medium, it helped internally regulate systemic contexts of action. Second, as medium, it legitimiz ed the colonization of the lifeworld by legalizing the expansion of systemic media. Third, as institution, it protected the structures of modern lifeworlds. Habermas dispenses with this approach in his latest formulation and insists that law is always an institution. Whatever it regulates, it remains tied to communicative processes (Habermas 1990c, 130). He still recognizes that law can be instrumentalized for non-democratic purposes. This is, however, an empirical question rather than a matter of conceptualizing two different types of law. The crucial implication is that more conceptual room is made for democratic regulation of the systems of state and economy.

The revised and expanded concept of law allows Habermas to draw out several political recommendations. For example, he argues that ‘procedural law must be enlisted’ to democratize the administration by means of a ‘legitimation filter’ (BFN, 440-1). He suggests that the state can play a more democratic role in neo-corporatist arrangements by protecting the public interest from secretive deals among large organizations (BFN, 350-1, 441). The same goes for democratic party leaders in relation to holders of administrative power (BFN, 443). The judiciary’s expertise over questions of rightness needs to remain linked with ‘enlarged critical forums’ (BFN, 439-40). Discursive democracy has the potential, also, to affect the existing regulation of the workplace (BFN, 413-4). These opportunities arise because the institution of law erects procedures of legitimate law-making which, largely irrespective of the context or the competencies of actors, assert a democratizing influence. Individuals and groups are ‘forced’ through
Habermas characterizes these processes as a ‘higher-level intersubjectivity’ \((BFN, 299)\) that screen subjective inputs.

These revisions in the concepts of law mean that the formal political system is not democratically legitimate unless it has considerably opened up its internal workings to broader processes of opinion and will formation. In Habermas’ approach, the ‘strong publics’ of the formally organized political system make decisions and serve as a ‘context of justification’, while the ‘weak publics’ of the lifeworld are effective as a ‘context of discovery’ \((BFN, 307)\).\(^{13}\) In the final instance, democracy begins and ends in the much larger and more diffuse communicative practices of the lifeworld. Habermas argues that these practices are based in ‘civil society’, whose ‘institutional core comprises ... nongovernmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations’ \((BFN, 366)\). While the public space for this informal democracy is constitutionally guaranteed, it cannot be organized or institutionalized. The public sphere is a ‘wild’, ‘anarchic’ structure which ‘resists organization as a whole’ \((BFN, 307)\). Compared to the political system, the associations of civil society are more sensitive to social issues and are best suited to developing appropriate interpretations and problem-solutions. Habermas insists that a ‘constitutionally regulated circulation of power’ is maintained only on condition that the ‘core’ political system remains responsive to the ‘periphery’ of the public sphere \((BFN, 354-6)\).

With this reconstruction of modern society, Habermas delineates philosophical and institutional preconditions for a more or less autonomous regulation of public and private life by citizens themselves. Importantly, he shifts the focus of radical democracy away from the substantive realization of a goal, as in the case of destructive modernity. The emphasis moves, instead, to a procedural framework for responding to social problems which raise the question, ‘What should we do?’. The need to express a common good is then subsumed as only one element in a comprehensive approach to problem solving in which the analytically distinct aspects of problems need to be dealt with separately \((BFN, 151-68)\). There are, firstly, those aspects of a problem which admit of consensus and must be resolved through discourse. Pragmatic discourse deals with finding the

\(^{13}\) Habermas adopts these terms from Nancy Fraser (1992).
most suitable means for achieving ends that are already given. Ethical discourse refers to the classical task of radical democracy, of clarifying and rationally shaping a shared way of life. Moral discourse involves determining what is in the equal interests of all human beings. It specifies the values which act as parameters and limiting conditions for the other two types of discourse. It is in this way that Habermas conceives the results of the transition from action to discourse (Table 4.2). Discursive democracy also caters for those aspects to problems which cannot be consensually resolved. This requires processes of bargaining which seek a fair compromise of interests. Discourse has an indirect connection with bargaining, nevertheless, because it must specify the conditions under which a fair compromise can be reached.

In this way, Habermas refines his conception of radical democracy from another angle, in addition to the limitations imposed upon it by the acceptance of elements of systems theory. It is a project which no longer amounts to an attempt by the citizenry, acting as a ‘macrosocial subject’ (BFN, 299), to determine its collective destiny. A radical, deliberative14 democracy depends, rather, on an interplay between formally institutionalized discourses and bargaining procedures, and informal processes of public communication. This network of ‘subjectless communications’ (BFN, 299) does not project a utopia into the future. By asking, ‘What should we do?’, a public debate is set in motion that needs to proceed along the institutional pathways sketched above. At first, there is an attempt to resolve matters consensually by considering, in discourse, their moral, ethical and pragmatic aspects. Bargaining ensues on issues that do not admit of consensus and finally, policies are still subject to judicial review to ensure ‘their fit with the existing legal system’ (BFN, 162-8).

Table 4.2 The system of validity claims and its correlates

14 The term ‘deliberative’ has been introduced into debates about democracy, primarily in an American context, in the effort to transcend a narrowly liberal conception in which citizens merely aggregate privately formed preferences rather than also engaging in processes of deliberation in which those preferences are opened up to reasoned consideration.
At this point, it may be important to reemphasize the significance of Habermas’ *reconstructive* approach to philosophy for his attempt to link theory and practice. This approach puts strict limits on what Habermas can say, as a philosopher, about the substantive problems facing modern societies. Reconstruction serves only to identify (in a fallible way) the necessary conditions and presuppositions underlying the everyday practices in which we engage. At most, reconstruction can make us more aware of why we are acting but it cannot tell us how to act. In Habermas’ theory of modernity, there is only a reconstruction of the *conditions that make possible* the autonomous and rational regulation by citizens of their existence together. Substantive questions cannot be addressed other than by the democratic process itself. It is at this point, nonetheless, that questions about a theoretically guided practice, on the part of social movements...
interested in emancipation, emerge. When the conditions of democracy themselves are insufficiently institutionalized, ‘What should we do?’. Here, we must consider the possibility of applying ‘critique as crisis theory’.

III CRITIQUE AND CRISIS

As discussed in the previous chapter, a reconstruction of universal characteristics of the human race as well as of a meaning in history do not satisfy the requirements of a completely immanent critique. In the transition from idealism to materialism, another critical task arises. It involves understanding how human beings can act in a way which furthers the progressive tendencies of historical development.15 This final part of the chapter is concerned with Habermas’ understanding of these issues.

In the first section, a few observations are made regarding Habermas’ application of the Hegelian dimension of critique. The use of Hegel’s concept of ‘dialectical’ movement in Habermas’ later work was not considered in the previous parts of the chapter. For the purposes of the dissertation, it needs only to be briefly introduced. It provides, nonetheless, a necessary context if we are to understand Habermas’ conception of crisis. The second section examines two different approaches to historical development within Habermas’ work. I argue that the ambivalence characterizing his work, explored in chapter two, manifests itself in these different constructions of history.16 In turn, it is suggested that alternative constructions of crisis follow. These notions of crisis are the subject of the third section. I distinguish between ‘crisis as spur’ and ‘crisis as threat’. I maintain that the first notion articulates a theory of the irrational which can orient the action of social movements interested in progressive change. The second concept, on the other hand, is held to be a continuation of the theory of the rational. This relates to Habermas’ application of systems theory. In the final section of the chapter, I defend Habermas against a particular criticism

15 Of course, a reconstructive analysis does offer some guidelines. In the concluding pages to Between Facts and Norms, Habermas remarked that ‘I am certainly not offering anything original at the level of particular details. But this paradigm [of procedural democracy and law] can provide a certain coherence to the reform efforts that are either under discussion or already under way’ (BFN, 444).

16 The alternative conceptions of history described in this chapter are similar to those which were put forward in chapter two. The earlier concern, however, was with a tension between reason and happiness within Habermas’ theory of the rational. The present focus is upon Habermas’ conception of history in connection with his theory of the irrational.
of his use of systems theory. This clarifies the basis of what I believe is a stronger critique of his work in this regard, which will be the central concern of chapter five.

**Intrinsic meaning at different levels of history**

Habermas argues that the lifeworld can be divided into three components which correspond to the validity structure of speech acts. ‘Culture’, ‘society’ and ‘personality’ match up with the claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity respectively (*PDM*, 343). Habermas suggests that if we abstract from the dynamic contingencies of history, a logic, in Hegel’s dialectical sense, can be traced at each of these three levels. ‘World views’, ‘law and morality’, and ‘personal and collective identities’ each mature in a structurally identical fashion (Table 4.3). This is because ‘[s]ocial systems can be viewed as networks of communicative actions’ (*CES*, 98). For reasons of space, I cannot go into the details of Habermas’ arguments at any of these levels. We have already treated the issues in a general way for the dimension of ‘society’ in the previous part of the chapter. I would simply like to clarify what Habermas means by ‘logic’ and the three fundamental stages through which each process of lifeworld rationalization progresses.

By ‘logic’, Habermas means a certain kind of developmental sequence first articulated by Hegel’s concept of ‘phenomenology’. Its general features involve an identification of discrete stages of development which are irreversible. By this, Habermas means that every stage can be accessed only via the immediately preceding one. The stages form an hierarchical order because each one involves a comprehension of how and why the preceding one was inadequate (*CES*, 73-4). It is ‘dialectical’ in the sense that progress does not consist in the production of something wholly new but in a reconfiguration of the elements of consciousness, as we have seen in chapter three.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validity claim</th>
<th>Lifeworld dimension</th>
<th>Function</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>World views</td>
<td>develop in terms of a demarcation of different universal object domains which makes possible the differentiation of those validity claims that we implicitly tie to all speech actions.</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rightness</td>
<td>Law and morality</td>
<td>serve to regulate action conflicts consensually and thus to maintain an endangered intersubjectivity of understanding among speaking and acting subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerity and authenticity</td>
<td>Personal and collective identities</td>
<td>are the necessary presuppositions for taking on the general communicative roles, which are provided for in every speaking and acting situation and which find their expression in the employment of personal pronouns.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Habermas identifies three main stages, the ‘pre-conventional’, ‘conventional’ and ‘post-conventional’. I will consider them only insofar as they relate to the normative regulation of action conflicts. For the purposes of presentation, it will be easier to explain these stages of moral consciousness on the plane of ontogenesis (see CES, 79-81, 156; MCCA, 123-5). At the pre-conventional level, the child is concerned only with the consequences of action in cases of conflict with others. While he or she is aware of normative standards, these standards and rules are interpreted with respect to a mentality of punishment and reward. Moral prescriptions are followed as a means to an end. At the conventional level, conformity is the primary motivation for adhering to mores and values. The reference point is the family, group or nation. There is a sense of loyalty to these orders or communities such that morality is followed for its own sake. At the postconventional level, the system of norms to be adhered to as an end in itself transcends the reference point of a surrounding tribe or group. At this stage of moral consciousness, the individual is content only with those rules which can be justified from a universalistic point of view. The implicit reference point is the unlimited community of human beings, past, present and future.

Habermas argues that each of the three dimensions of the lifeworld follow a pattern of rationalization which progresses through these three stages. Of course, the lifeworld represents only one aspect of societal evolution as a whole. Apart from the practical or symbolic, there is also the technical or material dimensions of historical development. Incorporating this other aspect enables Habermas to chart the ‘logic’ of societal evolution
as a whole. I argue that it is at this point that the ambivalence discussed in chapter two enters into his theory construction.

**Alternative conceptions of societal evolution**

Habermas (CES, 121-2) identifies two central variables for understanding societal evolution. Firstly, in the domain of the lifeworld, he argues learning processes occur, initially, at the level of culture. The rationalization of world views makes available a capacity to resolve social problems. This capacity must be institutionalized within action systems to be rendered effective. New cultural possibilities can be tapped into by individuals who may acquire a stage of consciousness that transcends the average level of the society. When organized in social movements, these individuals can promote society-wide learning processes which translate the developmental level they have already attained into institutional conditions. Habermas argues that the lifeworld is primary for historical development. It is only on the condition that new structures of moral consciousness, or social relations in Marx’s sense, are institutionally secured can a new type of social formation come into existence. For this reason, he maintains that the maturation of normative structures is the ‘pacemaker’ of social evolution (CES, 120).

The other crucial ingredient of social change is made up of ‘system problems’. These arise in what Habermas calls the ‘basic domain’ of society (CES, 147). The basic domain alters with historical evolution. In primitive societies, it is the kinship system; in civilizations, the political apparatus; in early capitalist civilization, the economic system; and in late capitalist societies, a complementary state-economy matrix. In a post-capitalist society, according to Habermas’ scheme, it would pass to the democratic institutions of the lifeworld. The social structure (or ‘social relations’) of the basic domain regulate access to the means of production in terms of normative standards (CES, 144). System problems arise when methods of economic production and reproduction conflict with this normative basis of social integration.

Habermas stresses that system problems merely ‘trigger’ an ‘evolutionary challenge’ to social formations. Whether or not the society actually takes up this challenge and is
transformed depends upon contingent factors. It can only happen, nonetheless, when a new stage of moral consciousness has already arisen. It is with this condition alone that new social relations can be institutionalized (TCA, 2, 155). While normative structures have the ‘last say’, so to speak, they grow only in reaction to systems problems. ‘[C]ulture remains a superstructural phenomenon, even if it does seem to play a more prominent role in the transition to new developmental levels than many Marxists have heretofore supposed’ (CES, 98). If these structural factors are conducive to change, then the weight of responsibility falls upon social movements for success. They represent ‘learning processes through which latently available structures of rationality are transposed into social practice’ (CES, 125).

Unlike Marx, Habermas argues that system problems do not always result from a growth of productive forces. They are defined as an overloading of the ‘adaptive capacity’ of the basic domain. With this idea of adaptive capacity, Habermas reveals his indebtedness to systems theory in the reconstruction of the history of social formations. Societies can be described as systems to the extent that, like biological organisms, they devise internal structures which relate to one another so as to reproduce the whole of which they are parts. These interactions between structures transcend the grasp of subjects and possess an objective meaning of their own. This systems-theoretical concept allows Habermas to retain the idea of objective meaning in history without relying upon the philosophy of the subject (McCarthy 1984, 214). Habermas explains as follows:

Since the collective subject of a meaning-constituted life world, which is borrowed from transcendental philosophy, proves to be misleading at least in sociology, the concept of system recommends itself to us. Social systems are units that can solve objectively posed problems by means of suprasubjective learning processes (cited in Honneth and Joas 1988, 159).

Habermas maintains that the use of systems theory is indispensable. In the remaining parts of this section, I would like to delineate two general ways in which he uses it within his work which result in different interpretations of the historical process. I contend that these
contrasting views can be separated out from what Habermas presents as an unified approach.

Throughout his work, Habermas maintains that an exclusively systemic analysis of society is untenable. In particular, the significance of social crises and their role in historical transformation cannot be understood within such a framework. For systems theorists, crises arise only when the ‘environment’ of a system obstructs the latter’s routine reproduction. The example of a biological system can be used to understand this thesis. A river (environment) may reach such a level of pollution that it makes it impossible for a certain sea animal (system) to alter itself in an adaptable way. For two reasons, argues Habermas, this model of system crisis cannot be easily applied to societies. Firstly, societies do not generally possess the relative harmony of biological entities to begin with. Their capacity for reproduction may be threatened not simply from an altered environment but from systematic causes within. This consideration leads directly to the second. How are we able to identify and define a social system like a clearly isolated organism, both spatially and temporally? It is only with respect to a clear, initial definition that we can evaluate changes as either processes of learning or decomposition.

In the case of social systems, Habermas contends, subjects themselves are involved in interpreting their society. Individuals can be reduced neither to an environment of the system nor completely absorbed within it as constituent elements. Before the social scientist enters the scene, individuals have already played a part in structuring the object domain of analysis. If this is consistently taken into account, a systems approach on its own must fail. In this situation, a ‘dramaturgical’ concept of crisis is appropriate:

Systems are not presented as subjects; but, according to the pre-technical usage, only subjects can be involved in crises. Thus, only when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crises. Disturbances of system integration endanger continued existence only to the extent that social integration is at stake, that is, when the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the
society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social institutions (LC, 3).

For Habermas, system problems become crises only when the hermeneutic problem of mutual understanding is at stake.

Similar difficulties arise at the ‘other end’ of the theoretical continuum, when an overly ‘idealist’ concept of crisis is developed. A purely hermeneutic approach conceives the breakdown of social systems as the result of consensual values losing their socially integrative power. When subjects reject a particular interpretation as forming their group identity a crisis is supposed to result. Habermas insists that if such conceptions are not anchored and systematically related to structural disturbances, they prove to be ineffective or misleading (LC, 4). The question arises, then, how do we distinguish crisis ideologies from valid experiences of crisis? Habermas argues that only a demonstration of the interconnection of the system and lifeworld paradigms can answer this question. ‘A social-scientifically appropriate crisis concept’ (LC, 4) must understand how systemic problems are connected with manifestations of disorder in society’s normative self-understanding.

This approach to historical development adheres to the general Marxist understanding of crises promoting progressive change. We have already discussed Habermas’ conception of history in this regard in chapter three, where additional hypotheses from Freud were incorporated. An alternative conception of history is also present within Habermas’ work, particularly in The Theory of Communicative Action. In this conception, Habermas is influenced by other classical theorists, including Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno. The tradition of earlier critical theory, with Weber in mind, had more or less reversed Marx’s judgement that capitalism creates the seeds for its own destruction. It viewed the attempts by capitalism to remedy itself not as hopeless gropings in the dark but as a further penetration of instrumental logic into other spheres of life. The contradictions of capitalism, rather than promoting self-destruction, elevate the subjugation of the whole society to instrumental reason. If capitalism is to be overcome, in this view, there will need to be a movement against its fundamental logic rather than with the help of it (TCA, I, 144; Wellmer 1976, 243-4; 1985, 44-5).
Much of the argumentation of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is focused on assessing the weight of this more pessimistic view. As might be expected from what has been said so far, Habermas rejects the one-dimensionalism present within the views of Weber, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno. In stressing the difference between the technical and the practical, the instrumental and the communicative, he argues that society is subject to rationalization processes in both dimensions. These theorists failed to see the potential of communicative rationalization due to the blindspots of their categorical frameworks. Heavily influenced by the philosophy of the subject, each failed to adequately grasp ‘an encompassing societal rationality’, even though all had some ‘vague notion’ of it (*TCA*, I, 144). None was able to explicate this more encompassing conception in such a way as to show that it was just as susceptible to rationalization processes as instrumental reason. Habermas argues that their theories of action were insufficiently complex (*TCA*, I, 145).

A primary purpose of Habermas’ work has been to overcome this failure to identify progressive tendencies within modern society. In this encounter with the theorists of technocracy, however, it is not at all certain who comes off second best. Jeffrey Alexander (1991, 59) points to an interesting paradox of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In view of the attention Habermas devotes to the potential of communicative rationality,

... it may come as a surprise to the reader to learn that there is not much communicative rationality in the modern world after all! Beginning with the fourth section ... Habermas seems to bring his theoretical enterprise of the first 270 pages to a screeching halt and laboriously to change direction. He now suggests that communicative rationality is actually limited to a very small section of contemporary society called the ‘lifeworld’ ... . Whereas it had seemed to be his intention in the first two-thirds of his work to suggest that such ‘lifeworld’ practices as ordinary language are the basis for institutional behaviour, he is now intent on isolating these practices. He portrays them as vulnerable islands of feeling and thought surrounded by hostile oceans of rationalized ‘systems’.
There has been considerable controversy, as alluded to earlier, about the role of systems theory in Habermas’ account of modern societies. Systems theory provides him with a different way of understanding the theses of Weber and others about a suppression of the practical by the technical in the modern age. His critique of their work at the level of action theory indicates that they ignored the systematic potential ingrained in communicative rationality. Habermas’ revision of their arguments with the tools of systems theory, on the other hand, explains, in a different way, why this potential is paradoxically and systematically limited.

The question arises, how do these two conceptions of history relate with one another in Habermas’ work as a whole? Are they irreconcilable? Can one be privileged over the other? Or is it possible to integrate them in an harmonious way? I will argue, in chapter five, that Habermas can retain the general points he wishes to make with both conceptions of history but, to do so, he must firmly privilege one over the other. This may sound somewhat contradictory but will be clarified in the course of the next chapter.¹⁷ For the present time, I wish to extrapolate the implications of these alternative conceptions of history for the notion of crisis. This will be a final step in laying the groundwork for the arguments presented in chapter five.

### Alternative conceptions of crisis

In the first part of this section, ‘crisis as spur’ treats those texts, *Legitimation Crisis* and *Between Facts and Norms*, in which Habermas conceives crisis as a catalyst of progressive change. This represents, I argue, a theory of how the irrational is unstable and contradictory and continually presents opportunities for a further realization of the rational. In the framework of developmental logical accounts, ‘crisis’ refers to problems which act as a stimulus or motivation for subjects to move from one stage of development to the next, in the effort to overcome these problems (Kitchener 1980, 274). The second part, ‘crisis as threat’, deals with the analyses contained in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas also uses the terminology of ‘pathology’ to describe crisis tendencies which are

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¹⁷ Tom Rockmore’s (1989) claim that Habermas ‘rejects’ historical materialism seems misplaced. I argue here that there are certainly ambiguities in Habermas’ approach, especially when one compares *Communication and the Evolution of Society* with *The Theory of Communicative Action*. It appears,
conceived in more straightforwardly destructive terms. I suggest that this perspective derives from an overextension of his theory of the rational.

*Crisis as spur*

In the analysis contained in *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas puts forward a number of hypotheses about crisis tendencies in contemporary capitalist society. He constructs his approach in terms of a modification of Marx’s analysis of early capitalist formations. For this reason, it will be necessary to briefly indicate how he situates himself in relation to Marx.

For Habermas, the structural tendency toward crisis of the capitalist form of society is the opposition between economic classes. There is a contradiction between the social production of wealth, on the one hand, and the private appropriation of that wealth, on the other. He argues that in the final analysis, the dynamics of the contemporary social formation can be traced back to the class structure (*LC*, 73; *TCA*, 2, 332). This is so even though class no longer stratifies the society in an unambiguous way. There is a disjunction between cause and effect. The concrete level of effects is important, according to Habermas, because it indicates how the basic, structural crisis tendency is embodied, worked out and resisted by social groups. This is a first problem in appropriating Marx for contemporary analysis. Habermas seeks to clarify it on the basis of the analytic distinction between system and lifeworld.

Habermas argues that the specific historical configuration of liberal capitalism allowed Marx to ignore this distinction. For this reason, Habermas generally concurs with Marx’s analysis of this period (*LC*, 24-31; *TCA*, 2, 334-8). The basic point is that the historical conditions of capitalism enabled Marx to analyze the crisis of society in terms of the crisis of the economy. The capitalist economy was the first sociological entry point for universalistic worldviews. Bourgeois social movements transferred learning processes at the level of culture to the level of action. The ‘exchange of equivalents’ represented the earliest social manifestation of a post-conventional level of

nonetheless, that Habermas is still committed to a reconstruction rather than rejection of historical materialism.
consciousness such that the economy took over functions of social integration as well as those of systemic integration.

With the analysis of the ‘double character’ (TCA, 2, 334) of labour power, Marx was able to demonstrate that the universalistic morality of the exchange of equivalents is actually a process of domination. Class conflict assumes a peculiar form in capitalist society:

Whereas the dynamics of class in politically constituted, stratified societies were manifested directly on the level of conflicts of interest between social groups, in bourgeois society they are objectivistically concealed and objectivated through the medium of exchange value. The mechanism of the labour market, institutionalized in private law, takes over functions that had previously been performed by politically institutionalized relations of social force and economic exploitation. The monetarization of labour power becomes the basis of class relations (TCA, 2, 334-5).

Habermas interprets Marx’s detection of a contradiction in this process as follows. The real abstraction of labour power has an empirical limit. While from the perspective of the system, labour power is an ‘abstract performance’ which enters into the calculations for processes of valorization, it is a ‘concrete action’ from the point of view of the lifeworld. These perspectives or points of view are real tendencies in operation in social reality: labour power ‘is the site of an encounter between the imperatives of system integration and those of social integration’ (TCA, 2, 335). But the lifeworld, for Marx, is an indestructible limit to the system. Labour power cannot be a pure commodity, since it is tied to a human being, it has an ‘inextirpable subject-rootedness’ (Claus Offe cited in TCA, 2, 335). There is a limit to the process Marx calls ‘real abstraction’, of making things indifferent to their lifeworldly context.

Habermas argues that this analysis is accurate for the time period in which Marx was writing. Since then, however, the theoretical problem of connecting system and lifeworld has emerged. Substantial state intervention into the economy has rendered
Marx’s analysis invalid. The economy no longer envelops social relations completely. The critique of political economy was premised on a base-superstructure model in which the economy could be understood as an autonomous, self-regulating system. With state intervention, the logic of crisis cannot be extrapolated beyond the status of mere tendencies into predictions about the actual trajectory of social development. Habermas argues, instead, that we can only hold to the idea of recurrent tendencies toward crisis whose actual course must be the object of empirical investigation. In addition, the intervention of the state creates a normative gap in Marx’s analysis. In Habermas’ view, Marx did not appreciate the democratic potential of bourgeois political institutions. This potential takes on particular significance in the twentieth century now that the relations of production have been ‘repoliticized’. The aspects of universalistic culture institutionalized in constitutions takes on greater significance. It points to additional crisis tendencies.

Habermas’ diagnosis of a ‘legitimation crisis’ in modern society can now be sketched as follows. In traditional societies, political structures were the central integrative mechanism. Economic relations needed to conform with normative orders so as to be legitimate. The political system, in turn, was justified with reference to cultural traditions and worldviews. The emergence of liberal capitalism reverses the mode of legitimation. The political system now gains its legitimacy to the extent that it maintains the minimum conditions of the capitalist economy. This self-sufficient legitimation necessarily breaks up with state intervention. With this, argues Habermas, we are taken back to the situation of traditional societies in terms of the general structure of legitimation. The political system, once again, requires legitimation since it has assumed the role of the coordinator of society. One important factor is new. The justification of unequal life chances can no longer be made with respect to cultural tradition which has been ‘worn out’ (LC, 36). The only cultural support for the state’s intervention consists in the universalistic and formal procedures of democratic discourse (LC, 87). There is a basic tendency towards legitimation crisis because this form of justification cannot support a state which acts primarily to reproduce the capitalist class system. Habermas sketches a range of crisis tendencies. Basic economic crisis tendencies are not dissolved but displaced.
Habermas argues, firstly, that economic crises are displaced into the state apparatus where they take the form of ‘rationality crises’. These result when ‘the administrative system does not succeed in reconciling and fulfilling the imperatives received from the economic system’ (LC, 46). Rationality crises are due to failures of the administration to form an independent and objective view of the problems. There is a general lack of coordination between its departments and there is the push and pull of different sectors of capital. ‘Rationality deficits are the unavoidable result of a snare of relations into which the advanced-capitalist state fumbles and in which its contradictory activities must become more and more muddled’ (LC, 63). There is an exponential rise in the need for planning on the part of the state in relation to which its organizational capacity falls short.

As was stressed earlier, these objective problems will not result in crisis unless there is also promoted a subjective perception of normative disorder. We have examined a fragmented state apparatus that is attempting to integrate both itself and the economy. The question is, will the population at large consider this process to be fundamentally at odds with what is morally right and rationally appropriate? Will the actions of the state, justified with respect to universal norms and values, be seen through as attempts to maintain a system of social inequality? It is at this point that the general idea of crisis displacement guiding Habermas’ analysis becomes all important. He argues that the political actions designed to ward off economic crisis themselves provoke additional crisis tendencies which place further burdens of legitimation.

Habermas classifies two further crisis tendencies under the headings of ‘legitimation’ and ‘motivation’. Legitimation crisis tendencies refer to the ‘other side’ of rationality crises. While rationality problems involve a lack of output on the part of the state in terms of decisions, legitimation problems refer to a lack of input in terms of support from the democratic public for these decisions. ‘Mass loyalty’ is not forthcoming. Habermas emphasizes that the administrative system cannot merely produce mass loyalty at will. This resource, which is necessary for its effective functioning, is not at its disposal. Under modern conditions, it can be produced only according to the logic of unconstrained consensus formation. Moreover, the increasing politicization of social relations by the state means that more and more areas of human life are exposed to
conscious regulation. What was previously fixed and justified as natural and inevitable by cultural tradition is now open to choice. Meaning and normative orientation, which could once be relied upon without effort, are unintentionally undermined by the state’s groping efforts to regulate the economic system. As the state fixes (or attempts to fix) problems on one side, additional problems which it simply cannot fix grow upon the other. Once the unquestionable character of traditions is destroyed, ‘the stabilization of validity claims can succeed only through discourse’ (LC, 72). Habermas summarizes as follows:

Because the economic crisis has been intercepted and transformed into a systematic overloading of the public budget, it has put off the mantle of a natural fate of society. If governmental crisis management fails, it lags behind programmatic demands that it has placed on itself. The penalty for this failure is withdrawal of legitimation. Thus, the scope for action contracts precisely at those moments in which it needs to be drastically expanded (LC, 69).

Habermas notes that the pressure for legitimation can be eased through a separation of administrative and legitimatory functions. Legitimation is procured through ‘expressive symbols that release an unspecified readiness to follow’, such as in ‘the personalization of substantive issues, the symbolic use of hearings, expert judgements, juridical incantations, and also … advertising techniques’ (LC, 70). This provides room for the administration to proceed anonymously. In Habermas’ view, this manipulation of culture has a definite limit. Once made the object of political campaigning, culture loses precisely the quality which makes it effective, its intuitive, taken-for-granted status. These strategies of averting legitimation crisis will prove ineffective, according to Habermas, in the long run. Even so, in sponsoring activities that are supposed to ease the clamour for legitimation, the state ends up cultivating a foreign body within the system. By responding with monetary means to new universalistic demands, the state is forced to recognize and protect its own ‘enemies’.

An important part of Habermas’ argument is that these pressures for legitimation will continue to grow even if systemic crises are kept within limits. He supports this contention with the idea of ‘motivation crisis’. This involves the idea that ‘only a rigid
socio-cultural system, incapable of being randomly functionalized for the needs of the administrative system, could explain a sharpening of legitimation difficulties into a legitimation crisis’ \textit{(LC, 74)}. Only if the pressure for legitimation derives from deep-seated structural tendencies can its unavoidability be put forward. Habermas argued that the independent directions of the system and the lifeworld are heading toward a sharpened conflict. Syndromes of ‘civil privatism’ and ‘familial-occupational privatism’ continue to maintain the integrity of the state. They correspond to lack of political participation in the political public sphere and a sublimation of energy into private, competitive pursuits respectively \textit{(LC, 75)}. They sustain an achievement ideology within the educational and occupational systems. Habermas wants to show that these attitudes are disappearing through the erosion of cultural traditions. In addition, the independent logic of normative structures precludes replacing them with functional equivalents. Only these motivational considerations, he argues, can sustain the idea of legitimation crisis.

Habermas collects evidence for each of these propositions \textit{(LC, 79-92)}. Achievement ideology is withering, as the medium through which it has previously been expressed, the level playing field of the free market, has been destroyed by large organizations. Possessive individualism is also being undermined because of the increasing socialization of production and the dominance of large organizations. Finally, orientation to exchange value is eroding. One reason involves the increasing proportion of the population not dependent on the market for a source of income, such as students and welfare recipients. Needs are also arising which are not necessarily solved through monetary means. The other elements of bourgeois culture which then become predominant, such as post-conventional morality, exclude functionalist orientations. For Habermas, the remaining sources of motivation must inevitably cause a growing conflict between the socio-cultural and political systems.

The crucial step in Habermas’ argument concerns the ‘carriers’ of universalistic orientations. He pins his hopes on the outcome to increasingly widespread adolescent crises. Habermas argues that society is now configured in such a way as to promote an unconventional, that is postconventional, solution to this crisis. He refers to a number of indicators \textit{(LC, 91)}. Without going into these in detail, they essentially involve a
lengthening of the adolescent phase (through the extension of educational training) in which identity problems are thrust more and more upon individuals themselves. This increased pressure contrasts with an immediate identification with the existing conventional morality and creates the possibility for an autonomous resolution of the identity crisis. This potential is, of course, ambiguous: either the personality system is overloaded and individuals withdraw and retreat, or an autonomous ego organization leads to a radical attitude of protest against the existing state of affairs.

It is at this point that the scenario painted in *Legitimation Crisis* comes to an end. There are a number of objections to Habermas’ theses which I will discuss later. For the time being, I would like to continue with his further theoretical development of ‘crisis as spur’. This covers the analysis presented in *Between Facts and Norms*.

In an earlier part of the chapter, we analyzed Habermas’ specification of how power can be circulated in a constitutionally valid way in modern societies. Habermas admits that the ‘normal business of politics’ does not satisfy the strong conditions of his ‘two-track’ model. There is usually a lack of congruence between, on the one hand, the logic of the democratic generation of law and, on the other, the empirical dynamics of power. Crisis plays an important role in Habermas’ understanding of how this state of affairs can be overcome. He argues that the public sphere must be able to detect social problems, sharpen them into ‘a consciousness of crisis’ and thereby introduce them into the parliamentary context ‘in a way that disrupts the latter’s routines’ (*BFN*, 356-9). He describes two different ‘modes of operation’ of political discussion, the ‘normal’ and the ‘extraordinary’. The former involve routines of the core political system: courts deliver judgements, bureaucracies prepare laws and process applications, parliaments pass laws and budgets, and so on (*BFN*, 357). These sedimented patterns are invariably influenced by power constellations which subvert a strict adherence to democratic procedures. An alternative mode of operation comes into play in cases of conflict, in which ‘renovative impulses from the periphery’ intervene. In these cases, ‘the attention span of the citizenry enlarges … in such a way that controversies in the broader public sphere primarily ignite around the normative aspects of the problems most at issue’ (*BFN*, 357). The strictly constitutional understanding of how issues are to be addressed,
which usually lays dormant, comes explicitly into play to ensure that the non-
democratic exercise of power is highlighted and problematized.

Habermas wishes to argue that, contrary to the normal business of politics and the
theoretical models which depict it, the periphery can assume ‘a surprisingly active and
momentous role’ (BFN, 380) in situations of crisis. He argues that the ‘great issues of
the last decades’ (BFN, 381) are evidence of the contention that the periphery can and
does exercise this power. Owing to its ‘greater sensitivity in detecting and identifying
new problem situations’ (BFN, 381), the public sphere has effectively thematized and
dramatized issues that might never have been introduced by the more distant political
centre. Moreover, in coming from the outside rather than from the middle, these issues
have not been as easily manipulated and controlled in line with vested interests:

[...] In general, one can say that even in more or less power-ridden public spheres,
the power relations shift as soon as the perception of relevant social problems
evokes a crisis consciousness at the periphery. If actors from civil society then
join together, formulate the relevant issue, and promote it in the public sphere,
their efforts can be successful, because the endogenous mobilization of the public
sphere activates an otherwise latent dependency built into the internal structure of
every public sphere, a dependency also present in the normative self-
understanding of the mass media: the players in the arena owe their influence to
the approval of those in the gallery (BFN, 382).

When political issues become the focus of conflict in this way, civil disobedience is a
‘last means’ (BFN, 382) for the periphery to develop further pressure for legitimation.

To be effective, Habermas argues that the public sphere must possess (a) a specific set
of capabilities and (b) sufficient occasion to exercise them (BFN, 358). He maintains
that the second condition is relatively unproblematic. This is so because modern
societies, with strong centrifugal tendencies, face a growing need for social integration.
Crises are rendered permanent because of the exponential growth in issues that require
discussion and resolution. Circumstances routinely arise in which the engagement of the
public sphere is stimulated. More problematic is the first requirement. Unlike solutions
to economic and administrative problems, the structures of the lifeworld which make for ‘more or less spontaneous process of opinion-formation’ \((BFN, 358)\) are unsusceptible to conscious control. ‘What ultimately enables a legal community’s discursive mode of sociation is not simply at the disposition of the members’ will’ \((BFN, 359)\). No single organization or association can produce and make them effective. The conditions for potency, rather, lie in patterns of communication embedded in public spheres, civil society and a liberal political culture whose strength and vibrancy depends on a continuous practice of democracy \((BFN, 382)\).

In *Between Facts and Norms* there is a theme which dates back to *Legitimation Crisis*. The lifeworld or periphery denote spheres of life which have vulnerable conditions of reproduction. For this reason, they are easily susceptible to damage by the intrusive and alien mechanisms of systemic integration. This vulnerability is, nevertheless, reciprocal. Habermas argues that, with communicative power, the political system ‘experiences its internal dependence on enabling conditions. This is because the conditions that make the production of legitimate law possible are ultimately not at the disposition of politics’ \((BFN, 385)\). Habermas refers to the distinction between ‘power’ \((Macht)\) and ‘violence’ \((Gewalt)\) stressed by Hannah Arendt. The state is ‘violent’ to the extent that it treats citizens as docile subjects and both defines and satisfies their needs, usually in terms of cash payments. ‘Power’, on the other hand, is defined as the common will formed through communication aimed at agreement. Habermas argues that this ‘communicative power of shared convictions issues only from structures of undamaged intersubjectivity’ \((BFN, 151)\). It is an ‘authorizing’ force which lies at the origin and maintenance of legitimate law, political power and institutions. ‘It manifests itself in orders that protect political liberty; in resistance against the forms of repression that threaten political liberty internally or externally; and above all in the freedom-founding acts that bring new institutions and laws “into existence”’ \((BFN, 148)\). It is only on communicative power that constitutions can sustain themselves. Since this power can only be produced through the free action of citizens, political institutions always remain vulnerable. Institutions cannot be instrumentalized at will by political elites without damaging their underlying legitimacy.

There are, then, both methodological and substantive parallels between the analyses in *Legitimation Crisis* and *Between Facts and Norms*. Both publications emphasize the
contradictions the state and economic spheres succumb to in attempts to resolve their problems. Both indicate the resulting opportunities for social movements to intervene in the ‘normal business of politics’ and promote radical transformation. This conception of crisis, I argue, follows on from Habermas’ understanding of history in which objective system problems tend to promote a subjective consciousness of dissatisfaction with the existing order which stimulates progressive change. A different understanding of crisis, I argue, derives from the alternative approach to history discussed earlier. I now turn to an analysis of what I have termed Habermas’ conception of ‘crisis as threat’.

*Crisis as threat*

Habermas’ comments regarding the potential of the student movement in *Toward a Rational Society* were buttressed, in *Legitimation Crisis*, with the idea of a structurally induced adolescent crisis that is unlikely to be resolved in a conventional manner. At that time, his work belonged to a wider theoretical context in which there was anticipated a radical change in advanced capitalist societies (Lawrence 1989, 133). It was perceived that a conflict between democracy and capitalism was coming to a head, from which democracy might emerge victorious. The 1980s and 1990s have clearly demonstrated which principle has won. *Between Facts and Norms* was written by an author unprepared to join the ‘melancholic mood’ of other theorists. Moods, Habermas argues, ‘do not justify the defeatist surrender of the radical content of democratic ideals’. While he maintains that he has ‘no illusions about the problems that our situation poses’, he insists that genuine democracy is not ruled out by complex societies. ‘If defeatism were justified, I would have had to choose a different literary genre, for example, the diary of a Hellenistic writer who merely documents, for subsequent generations, the unfulfilled promises of his waning culture’ (*BFN*, xliii). The suggestion is that crises might still act as catalysts for fundamentally reorienting the workings of constitutional democracies.

The altered circumstances of modern societies have, nonetheless, had some effect on Habermas’ writings. The ‘spectre of technocracy’ that was diagnosed in his early work seems to manifest itself more explicitly in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas assumed that a crisis was likely to eventuate despite, and
partly because of, continued economic growth and a successful welfare-state compromise. Since then, the terms of that compromise have been broken and class conflict, which was held to be largely pacified, has resurfaced. I would like to argue that the analyses presented in *The Theory of Communicative Action* can be partly read as a response to this changed situation. Habermas appears more interested in why a substantial legitimation crisis might not, and perhaps will not, eventuate. He reflects upon why crisis tendencies represent simply a problem rather than also a political opportunity.

Habermas had already conceded in *Legitimation Crisis* that there was an important caveat to his arguments about the precipitation of crisis. He noted that

> motivation crises could still be avoided by uncoupling the cultural system. By ‘uncoupling’ I mean a situation in which culture remains an object of private enjoyment or of professional interest, and is even administratively placed under conservation as a kind of free preserve, but is separated from socialization processes (*LC*, 90).

A central presupposition of Habermas’ analysis had been that the universalistic content of bourgeois cultural traditions were becoming more and more important for the development of individual personalities in modern societies. Socialization processes, in this view, were being forced through the filter of post-conventional moral criteria. One way in which a legitimation crisis might be avoided, then, is if culture became divorced from the formation of personalities. It was at this point in the argument that Habermas summoned the power of his theory about the fundamental priority of language for human life. He maintained that an uncoupling of the cultural system would require a systematic suppression of the pragmatic functions of language. The socialization of persons would need to be separated ‘from norms that need justification’ (*LC*, 94). If this were to happen, then not only crisis, but the human mode of life as such, would disappear.

In response to criticism of the methodology of *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas has since understood why a major crisis might not eventuate in less dramatic terms. This relates to an initial overestimation of the role of culture in the integration of modern societies
Habermas had explicitly clarified this assumption as follows:

I start with the oversimplified assumption that attitudinal syndromes typical of a society must somehow be represented at the level of socially effective cultural value systems. I also rely on a correspondence of meaning structures at the levels of interpreted needs and cultural tradition. In doing so, I neglect not only subcultural differences, but also the important sociological question, whether – and if so how – cultural patterns are reflected in personality structures through agencies of socialization and practices of childrearing (*LC*, 75-6).

It was on the basis of the idea of a correspondence of culture and personality that Habermas’ arguments gained real explanatory weight. It was on this point that many of his critics focused their objections. Habermas subsequently revised his approach to incorporate these criticisms. This laid the basis, as we shall see, for the understanding of crisis presented in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

Habermas argues that, in *Legitimation Crisis*, he had failed to make a crucial distinction between ‘crises’, on the one hand, which refer to the reproductive requirements of systems, and ‘pathologies’, on the other hand, which refer to the reproductive requirements of the lifeworld (‘Rmc’, 278-81; *TCA*, 2, 385-6). This distinction reorganizes the matrix of crisis tendencies he had earlier composed. The conception of economic and rationality crises remains essentially the same. They refer to endogenously produced problems within systemic contexts (‘Rmc’, 279). *Legitimation Crisis* extended the traditional or orthodox Marxist understanding of the sources of systemic crisis by showing that systems are also dependent on external accomplishments, on individual skills and motivations and on mass loyalty (‘Rmc’, 280). This dependency on the lifeworld can result in systemic crises when the required symbolic material is not forthcoming. Habermas now insists that these deficiencies within the lifeworld are only systemic crises if one looks at society from the point of view of the system. From the perspective of the lifeworld, on the other hand, they are problems *in themselves*. This is the point at which a distinction between ‘crises’ and
‘pathologies’ becomes necessary. The former are ‘for the system’ while the latter are ‘for the lifeworld’. Habermas suggests that we are referring to the same phenomena, but argues

it makes sense to separate analytically the withdrawal of motivation affecting the occupational system and the withdrawal of legitimation affecting the system of domination, on the one side, from the colonialization of the life-world that is manifested primarily in phenomena of loss of meaning, anomie and personality disorders, on the other side … . Now I would … conceive of motivation crisis as a parallel case to legitimation crisis; and I would want to distinguish from both of these the pathological manifestations of a colonialized life-world (‘Rmc’, 280-1).

The category of ‘lifeworld pathologies’, for Habermas, explains why a crisis may not arise. As we have seen, a subjective consciousness is indispensable, in his view, to the phenomenon of crisis. Pathologies of the lifeworld can undermine the conditions which allow such a consciousness to arise so that objective system problems can continue to exist without provoking a crisis situation. This, in Habermas’ revised view, is what we must take into account in explaining whether culture will remain effective or not as a source of political resistance (‘Rmc’, 281).

The modified logic of crisis and pathology development charted in The Theory of Communicative Action paints a less radical picture than that presented in Legitimation Crisis. Habermas argues, firstly, that attempts to resolve ‘crises’ are confined within systemic domains. The state and economy regulate one another: ‘Developed capitalism swings between the contrary policies of “the market’s self-healing powers” and state interventionism’ (TCA, 2, 385). Still in line with his objective-subjective concept of crisis, he maintains that these ‘disequilibria’ become crises only when they affect the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. To begin with, then, ‘crisis as spur’ still comes into play. Beyond the effects on symbolic structures which cause problems for the system (withdrawal of motivation or legitimation), nevertheless, more insidious processes come into play. The crisis logic passes a certain threshold such that an opportunity for
intervention into the system is turned into a defensive struggle against systems. It is at this point that pathologies arise. Here, reference to tabular formulations will be of assistance in what is a rather complex explanation (Tables 4.4 and 4.5).

**Table 4.4 Contributions of reproduction processes to maintaining the structural components of the lifeworld (TCA, 2, 142)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural components</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reproduction processes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural reproduction</td>
<td>Interpretive schemes fit for consensus ('valid knowledge')</td>
<td>Legitimations</td>
<td>Socialization patterns Educational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td>Obligations</td>
<td>Legitimately ordered interpersonal relations</td>
<td>Social memberships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Interpretive accomplishments</td>
<td>Motivations for action that conform to norms</td>
<td>Interactive capabilities ('personal identities')</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To take care of problems of legitimation and motivation, systems penetrate further into the lifeworld. They must do so, however, in such a way that the resources of ‘solidarity’ are not used up so as to cause anomie. Solidarity is another important symbolic foundation upon which systems depend:

For the continued existence of the economy and the state, it is the resources in the middle column [of table 4.4] as contributing to the maintenance of society that are relevant, for it is here, in the institutional orders of the lifeworld, that subsystems are anchored *(TCA, 2, 385-6).*
Table 4.5  Manifestations of crisis when reproduction processes are disturbed (pathologies) (*TCA*, 2, 143)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural components</th>
<th>Disturbances in the domain of</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Dimension of evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural reproduction</td>
<td>Loss of meaning</td>
<td>Withdrawal of legitimation</td>
<td>Crisis in orientation and education</td>
<td>Rationality of knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td>Unsettling of collective identity</td>
<td>Anomie</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>Solidarity of members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Rupture of tradition</td>
<td>Withdrawal of motivation</td>
<td>Psychopathologies</td>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Systems must try and avoid causing anomie when they penetrate into the lifeworld to prevent what are at first only problems of legitimation and motivation (table 4.5). For Habermas, these three symbolic resources (of the middle column) ‘are secured, at the expense of, and through the ruthless exploitation of, other resources’ (*TCA*, 2, 386). These ‘other resources’ involve the domains of culture and personality. Their exploitation results in phenomena of ‘alienation’ and ‘the unsettling of collective identity’.

Habermas erects a model of four-way influence between system and lifeworld to help further understand this process of lifeworld colonization. It rests on basic roles human beings assume in modern societies. Between economy and lifeworld, there are the roles of consumer and occupational position, while between state and lifeworld, there are the roles of client and citizen. Colonization occurs when, in each domain, one role gets expanded to compensate for the downgraded status of the other. More specifically, ‘the client role is a companion piece that makes political participation that has been evaporated into an abstraction and robbed of its effectiveness acceptable’, while ‘the
burdens of normalizing alienated labour are passed off onto the consumer role’ \((TCA, 2, 350)\).

Systems undermine the autonomy and rationality of the lifeworld and compensate for this with a ‘foreign language’, namely money. In particular, the welfare state, while a source of potential democratization, tends to both guarantee freedom and take it away \((NC, 48-70)\). This is because ‘the very means of guaranteeing freedom … endangers the freedom of the beneficiaries’ \((TCA, 2, 362)\). Media of money and power cannot, by definition, foster, sustain or restore damaged relations of intersubjectivity. Only the more fragile means of reaching understanding through ordinary language can generate, over time, cultural milieus and solidarity. Habermas is interested in ‘a new type of reification effect’ \((TCA, 2, 349)\). In the attempt to manage capitalism, systems end up interfering in the reproduction of human life as such.

In his theory of value Marx concentrated solely on the exchange of labour power for wages and found the symptoms of reification in the sphere of social labour … . \([B]ut\ this\] does not discriminate between impoverishment, which concerns the material reproduction of the lifeworld, and disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld – in Weber’s terms, between problems of outer and of inner need. But this type of alienation recedes further and further into the background as the welfare state becomes established \((TCA, 2, 349)\).

The political implications following from this analysis are guided by the observation that ‘new conflict potentials’ are crystallizing in response to this interference from the system. Habermas argues that the ‘violent abstraction’ involved in dealing with a concrete form of life embedded in the context of a life history ‘suits the needs of a centralized and computerized handling of social exigencies by large, distant organizations’ \((TCA, 2, 363)\). The destruction of solidarity and meaning provokes reactions, however, which do not follow a traditional political logic. They are attuned more to the ‘grammar of forms of life’ rather than ‘distributional problems. Habermas argues that the ‘new problems have to do with quality of life, equal rights, individual self-realization, participation, and human rights’ \((TCA, 2, 392)\).
In general these new struggles are of a defensive nature. This contrasts with the more ambitious and offensive movements anticipated in *Legitimation Crisis*. It is at this point that I would like to end the analysis of Habermas’ ambivalent concept of crisis. In the following chapter, I will reexamine the alternative understandings of history and crisis with a view to resolving this ambivalence. This relates to his application of systems theory. In the remaining section, I deal with one predominant criticism of this application. The objections involved have been used to question the defensive political implications just discussed. I argue that these criticisms are unjustified. This enables me, in chapter five, to clarify a different set of criticisms. On the basis of these other criticisms, I argue that systems theory as a whole is unnecessary for Habermas to sustain his principal hypotheses. This, in turn, will be shown to have important political implications.

**Habermas’ application of systems theory**

With the concepts of system and lifeworld, Habermas identifies two basic structures within which individuals interact. On the one hand, there are intersubjective structures. These are divided into the dimensions of culture, society and personality in which there is contained implicit knowledge supportive of processes of communicative action. On the other hand, there are structures of money and power. Media, in the domains of the economy and the state, neutralize lifeworld contexts and guide action along narrow, circumscribed pathways. In the course of his intellectual career, Habermas has been ambiguous with regards to the role and implications of systemic background structures (‘R’, 254; Honneth 1991). In *Toward a Rational Society*, he equated systemic domains with the predominance of types of action. State and economy were defined as ‘systems of purposive-rational action’ (*TRS*, 56, 110-1). In sections of *The Theory of Communicative Action* he evokes a similar interpretation. Media are understood to completely ‘bypass’ ordinary language communication.

Inasmuch as they do not merely simplify linguistic communication, but *replace* it with a symbolic generalization of rewards and punishments, the lifeworld contexts in which processes of reaching understanding are always embedded are devalued
in favour of media-steered interactions; the lifeworld is no longer needed for the coordination of action (*TCA*, 2, 183).

In relation to this, we might be reminded of Habermas’ critique of Freud’s understanding of the unconscious. Habermas insisted that Freud should conceive the unconscious in linguistic terms, as a suppression of need interpretations rather than of language as such. If we apply the same critique to Habermas’ concept of system, then we must opt for understanding systems in terms of a methodical restriction of the ability to express need interpretations in systemic environments. This would manifest itself in terms of systematic distortions to communication rather than a repression of language as such. Which approach does Habermas really adopt?

Despite many of the rhetorical flourishes in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, it is clear that, from a systematic perspective, Habermas does not wish to equate systems with action types. On the contrary, his reconstruction of critical theory consists in the attempt to transcend the heavy reliance upon the perspective of action theory alone in that tradition. He seeks to do so by introducing a qualitatively different analytic understanding (*TCA*, 1, 144-5, 270-1, 343; *TCA*, 2, 113ff, 303-6). The main point is that, in modern contexts, societal integration cannot be understood using a distinction between categories of action alone. An appropriate theory must rely, in Habermas’ view, on ‘functionalist’ concepts of ‘order’ which branch out in two directions. These alternative forms of order are captured under the headings of ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system’.

In the case of the lifeworld, ‘participants remain intuitively aware of orders established by social integration even if this takes the form of a prereflexive, by no means readily available or recallable background knowledge’. In the case of systems, on the other hand, order is

as a rule counterintuitive in nature. Both aspects of the social order are in a respectively different sense ‘far from consciousness’, i.e. distant from the immediate experience of the participants in interaction … . [I]f one hunts for the

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18 Habermas notes, for example, that the expression ‘norm-free sociality’ led to much misunderstanding (‘R’, 257).
dimensions in which the respective degrees of societal integration achieved can be measured, one inevitably comes up against the two underlying conceptual models (‘R’, 252).

The two concepts are concerned with delineating the ‘unconscious’ prerequisites for social stability. They identify structures which support action coordination in different ways. In terms of the lifeworld or social integration, action is coordinated on the basis of an interlocking of intentions, backed up by a reservoir of common knowledge. Systemic integration, by contrast, is achieved irrespective of conscious intentions. By linking up the results of action, systems support an order which is ‘counterintuitive’. Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’, for example, can be seen as an expression of this insight. Only a theoretical perspective can make sense of what at first seems to be a strange congruence between actions of a more or less strategic type.

Media are like ordinary language in that they form a structure in which integration between actors takes place. Actions of various types occur within both system and lifeworld but are subject to the constraints of an overarching framework. While ordinary language exerts a rationalizing effect in the direction of emancipation, media exert a dehumanizing effect. ‘They are tailored to meet standard situations and, on the basis of a built-in structure of preferences, condition action decisions without resort having to be made to the resources of the lifeworld’ (‘R’, 258). Habermas is stressing the relevance of systems for integration rather than as a way of completely describing the types of action within them. In systems, for example, ‘[s]trategic actions do not only occur here; and it is not only strategic actions that occur here’ (‘R’, 258). Both system and lifeworld are abstract concepts at a distance from those categories which are suitable for dissecting action types. They refer to entire sequences of action. Habermas maintains that his thesis amounts to the assertion that these sequences, despite their internal variety, are integrated, ‘in the final instance’ (‘R’, 257), in one of two different ways. The conflict between system and lifeworld, therefore, is not a conflict between action types but between ‘principles of sociation’ (‘R’, 260; TCA, 1, 342).
It should be noted, as well, that system and lifeworld are ultimately theoretical perspectives. Habermas’ point is that they develop an affinity with different aspects of the object domain with the progression of history. He remarks that it

is always possible to approach from its own perspective the manner in which a lifeworld reproduces the material conditions for its existence; yet whether these processes have become so opaque and complex as to be inadmissibly foreshortened by being examined from this perspective and can thus be better explained under the aspect of system depends on the degree of differentiation within a society (‘R’, 253; see also ‘R’, 257). 19

In contrast to Legitimation Crisis, which critics argued relied too heavily on culture and norms, The Theory of Communicative Action has provoked the rebuke that there is not enough culture! (see Antonio 1989, 735-6; Berger 1991; Fraser 1985; Misgeld 1985; Mouzelis 1992, 1997, 114-6). Critics thought that Habermas had thoroughly excluded communication and interpretation from systemic contexts. In light of the clarifications just noted – which Habermas used as an opportunity to show that ‘the theory of communicative action is not a completely unpolitical project’ (‘R’, 251) – it is clear that the criticism that he underestimates the role of values and meaning in systems is misplaced. Habermas emphasizes that system and lifeworld are not to be interpreted concretely but as appropriate ways for understanding how modern societies are held together.

In defending Habermas against this charge, I would like to place the weight of criticism of his use of systems theory in a different way. This will be a principal concern of the next chapter. While we may agree with Habermas that a counterintuitive analysis is required to understand the complexity of modern society, we may still question whether systems theory is an appropriate candidate for such an analysis.

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19 Who can decide, and by what criteria, whether a systems approach is ‘better’ for analyzing issues of material reproduction will be a central question of chapter five.
IV CONCLUSION

The central purpose of this chapter has been to explicate Habermas’ application of three fundamental ideas of critique. In Table 4.6, there is a summary of the classifications reached thus far in the dissertation.

Table 4.6 Critique and the project of modernity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical requirement</th>
<th>Classical critical concept</th>
<th>Habermas’ critical concept</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universal human characteristics</td>
<td>Kant’s transcendental critique</td>
<td>Synchronic rational reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning in history</td>
<td>Hegel’s phenomenological self-reflection</td>
<td>Diachronic rational reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical realization</td>
<td>Marx’s critique of political economy</td>
<td>Critique as crisis theory</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Firstly, there is the question of a comprehensive theory of modernity, whose construction must take place in three dimensions. The (a) human potential for reason must be shown to (b) gradually manifest itself in human history so that, in modern societies, it is at a stage of fruition that allows it to be (c) more fully realized by social movements committed to this task. Three concepts of critique represent the methodological frameworks through which these theoretical aims can be realized. These concepts of critique go back to Kant, Hegel and Marx and have been retained, in modified form, by Habermas, a theorist committed to this tradition of thought.

It was stressed, at the beginning of the chapter, that Habermas’ application of critique must be understood within the context of problems in his early work. These problems were discussed, in chapter three, under the heading, ‘the ambiguity of critique’. Two ambiguities were identified, one concerning the ‘philosophy of the subject’, the other involving the contrast between idealism and materialism.
Habermas’ attempt to abandon the presuppositions of the philosophy of the subject involves establishing the fundamental priority of language communication for human life. There are two primary implications. Firstly, Habermas seeks to overcome the conception of ‘subjective reason’ contained within the philosophy of the subject. This conception emphasizes the relationship between a subject and an object. It privileges cognition, in which the subject represents the object in thought, and teleological action, in which the subject works on and manipulates an object. As we have seen, this ‘epistemological’ approach compromises any attempt to establish the priority for social life of interaction and communication between subjects. Habermas’ theory of language, in which the structures of ‘identity’ and ‘validity’ claims are central, seeks to overcome the dominance in modernity of the technical or instrumental conception of subjective reason. With the concepts of identity and validity, he sketches different understandings of individuality, freedom and autonomy. Habermas uses this as a basis for interpreting the manifestation of reason in history. He maintains that modern democratic institutions, in which there is a ‘pressure’ to resolve issues and problems through the medium of discourse, are representative of the intrinsic human capacity for rationality.

Secondly, Habermas’ theory of language seeks to overcome the conception of ‘objective reason’ contained within the philosophy of the subject. This conception presupposes that a ‘species-subject’ underlies historical processes and represents a substantive, holistic order with respect to which the rationality of the present can be evaluated. Habermas insists that no such conception of a ‘higher-level subjectivity’ can be sustained. If we are to explain the objective reason of history, then we must rely on systems theory. Systems theory demonstrates, for Habermas, how entire social formations can ‘learn’ without the active, conscious participation of individuals and groups. He argues that the mechanisms of material reproduction are susceptible to this kind of analysis. ‘Systems’ represent a form of order which integrate the decisions made by individuals in such a way that the material reproduction of society as a whole is more or less guaranteed.

There are, then, two fundamental constituents of Habermas’ mature conception of history. On the one side, there are formal structures of identity and validity which become realized over time. On the other side, there are social systems which increase in
complexity such that the requirements of a progressively higher level of material reproduction can be sustained. I have argued that this conception of history is ambivalent and results, in particular, in two different conceptions of crisis. In some parts of his writings, Habermas emphasizes the contradictory nature of systems and how this opens up opportunities for communicative rationality. In other respects, he stresses the way in which systems expand and pose as a threat to human freedom and autonomy. ‘Crisis as threat’ represents a reformulation, in functionalist terms, of the argument that the practical is suppressed by the technical in modernity.

This ambivalence within Habermas’ understanding of crisis is indicative of an actual, empirical tendency of modernity. I have suggested, however, that the way in which it is theoretically formulated creates problems for the attempt to resolve the second ‘ambiguity of critique’, the tension between idealism and materialism. It has been contended that the adoption of systems theory results in an extension of the theory of the rational at the expense of a theory of the irrational. The next chapter elaborates this argument, that inadequacies in Habermas’ theory of the irrational prevent him from linking theory and practice. It also claims that alternative theoretical resources within Habermas’ own corpus of writings serve as a basis for overcoming these problems.