LIMITS TO HABERMAS’ THEORY OF THE IRRATIONAL

The introductory chapter to this dissertation set out three requirements of the theory of modernity. In chapter three, I reconstructed three fundamental ideas of critique from Habermas’ early work. These ideas of critique are the methodological means for satisfying the requirements of the modern project. Finally, chapter four explicated Habermas’ application of these ideas of critique in his mature work. Throughout, I have emphasized the presence of an ambivalence or tension within his understanding of modernity. In chapter two, I explained the meaning of this ambivalence at the level of his theory of the rational, as a tension between the concerns of reason and happiness. In the previous two chapters, I have sought to establish the initial steps of the argument that this ambivalence is more significant and pronounced at the level of Habermas’ theory of the irrational. This chapter pursues this claim in more depth.

The chapter has three central aims. The first is to situate my criticisms of Habermas’ work within the broad range of criticisms in the secondary literature. A general classification of the predominant objections to his views is needed to do this. I use the framework of ‘theoretical requirements of modernity’ in making this classification. I identify six distinct streams of intellectual and political disquiet with Habermas’ writings (Table 5.1). This classification will assist in understanding the significance of my criticisms for his theory as a whole.

In the first part of the chapter, I consider briefly the substance of the first three streams of criticism, ‘Criticism 1a’, ‘Criticism 1b’ and ‘Criticism 2a’ (see table 5.1). Each of these criticisms touches upon details of Habermas’ theory of the rational. A rebuttal of these criticisms is essential to the viability of his attempt to sustain the project of modernity. From the point of view of the primary arguments of the dissertation, however, the issues involved are not central. Only the main points will be touched upon. The remaining sets of contention – ‘Criticism 2b’, ‘Criticism 3a’ and ‘Criticism 3b’ – will be the focus of concern in this chapter.
Table 5.1 Classifying criticisms\(^1\) of Habermas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Criticism</th>
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| Theory of the rational | 1. Universal human characteristics  
|                    | a. there are no such characteristics                                      |
|                    | b. the relevant characteristics are not captured by an action coordinating | concept of language                                                       |
|                    | a. there is no such meaning                                                |
|                    | b. the relevant meaning involves a struggle for happiness rather than the evolution of reason |
| 2. Meaning in history | a. there is a failure to link emancipatory conceptions of change with the necessity for strategic action |
|                    | b. the adoption of systems theory falsely characterizes the irrational as something rational |
| Theory of the irrational | 3. Practical realization                                                  |
|                    | a. there is a failure to link emancipatory conceptions of change with the necessity for strategic action |

The second aim of the chapter is pursued in part two, as an examination of ‘Criticism 2b’. I have already introduced the general thrust of this criticism in chapter two. The contention, here, is that the ambivalence within Habermas’ work manifests itself as an emphasis upon rationality and its defence to the relative exclusion of concerns for happiness and meaning. I defend Habermas against this particular objection to his work. I rely heavily upon the distinction between ‘identity’ and ‘validity’ claims explicated in chapter four. I argue that many of Habermas’ critics base their objections upon a failure to acknowledge this distinction. I claim that Habermas’ theory of the rational is robust enough to withstand their reproach.

The conclusion I draw from this discussion is that the relevant arguments, about an ambivalence within Habermas’ oeuvre, are not properly located at the level of the theory of the rational. I maintain that they gain greater force and weight when reformulated in such a way as to apply to his theory of the irrational. The elaboration of these criticisms, ‘Criticism 3a’ and ‘Criticism 3b’, constitutes the third and final aim of the chapter. I deal

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the term ‘criticism’ to refer to objections to Habermas’ work and avoid confusion with ‘critique’ as it has been used in the dissertation as a whole.
with ‘Criticism 3b’ to begin with. This continues a concern with the ambiguities within Habermas’ crisis theory discussed in chapter four. It involves his application of systems theory. I argue that Habermas tends to use systems theory to expand the theory of the rational, to reinterpret irrational phenomena as rational features of modernity. This blunts the radical social democratic critique of the economy and the state in particular, as institutions which need to be radically democratized. I reconstruct an alternative approach to understanding these institutions present within Habermas’ work. It is argued that the rudiments of a theory of the irrational are evident within his writings but are obfuscated and blocked by the application of systems theory. Habermas’ limited use of the concept of the ‘causality of fate’, it is put forward, can be expanded so as to elaborate this theory of the irrational in a more systematic way.

A similar problem of reinterpreting the irrational as the rational is the concern of ‘Criticism 3a’. ‘Criticism 3b’ focuses upon Habermas’ employment of systems theory. ‘Criticism 3a’, on the other hand, deals with his construction of action theory. I maintain that Habermas introduces a dichotomy between communicative and strategic action which mitigates against a category of action essential to any radical social democratic reformism, ‘strategic action with an emancipatory purpose’. This type of action was introduced in chapter three as an important element of critique as crisis theory. It enables short-term, reformist political strategies to be linked with long-term, revolutionary approaches to social change. Habermas’ separation of the communicative and strategic prevents such a linking of the short-term with the long-term. In the final part of the chapter, I point out the ways in which strategic and communicative action are linked to one another. I argue that Habermas needs to revise his approach to acknowledge these links and use them as a basis for examining questions of political strategy. The claim is put forward, once again, that this requires an elaboration of Habermas’ implicit theory of the irrational.

I THREE CRITICISMS OF HABERMAS

In this part of the chapter, I will briefly summarize the nature of ‘Criticism 1a’, ‘Criticism 1b’ and ‘Criticism 2a’. I have sought to provide an exhaustive and detailed account of neither the objections themselves nor Habermas’ line of defence. The purpose of this
section is merely to clarify the nature of these criticisms in order to situate my own concerns, pursued in later parts of the chapter, within the context of Habermas’ theory as a whole.

**Criticism 1a There are no universal human characteristics**

Habermas’ work is criticized, here, for its attempt to delineate, irrespective of time and place, the basic characteristics of human existence. Habermas sets out this requirement of the theory of modernity as follows: ‘Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself’ (PDM, 7). Habermas’ aim, in attempting to satisfy this requirement, is to overcome moral and political relativism, the belief that the normative standards of different social formations cannot be categorized according to a universal standard of rationality.

Critics have disputed Habermas’ arguments for two broad kinds of reasons. I am relying, in this respect, upon a distinction stressed by Richard Bernstein (1983, 184). This distinction defines two different ways of justifying a theory. On the one hand, ‘strict dialectics’ is a mode of argumentation which seeks to validate undeniably a certain approach. Habermas’ lengthy analyses of the history of social theory is an example of this. These analyses seek to demonstrate that his position represents the necessary and unavoidable outcome of a scholarly learning process. Thinkers such as Culler (1985), Thompson (1982) and Wood (1985), among others, have questioned Habermas’ approach insofar as it adopts this strict mode of justification. They dispute the internal consistency and assumptions of his detailed arguments.

A second mode of justification, in Bernstein’s view, is ‘interpretative or hermeneutical dialectics’. This approach endeavours to convince a reader with the ‘overall plausibility’ of the reasons brought forward. In this case, a variety of considerations come into play in evaluating a theoretical position. While the strength of logic is relevant, more at issue is the persuasiveness of the political vision or moral values which are being advanced. Lyotard’s (1984) critique is an example, in which it is contended that Habermas’ focus on consensus has conservative and even violent consequences because it supposedly ignores the values
of difference and dissension. From a different point of view, Habermas’ debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer (Habermas 1977a; TCA, 1, 102-36) and his intervention into anthropological debates sparked off by Peter Winch (TCA, 1, 53-66) have raised similar issues. In these instances, conservative reservations are brought against his defence of modernity, against an understanding of freedom and emancipation which apparently ignores the intrinsic value of traditions, traditions which cannot be compared with one another and must be preserved for their own sake.

The need to defend moral universalism has had an important impact upon the trajectory of Habermas’ intellectual career. This is because he has taken up the tradition of critical theory after some of his predecessors had cast doubt upon the possibility of establishing universal normative foundations. It is also because he has had to continually confront, from other quarters, substantial objections to universalism. Thomas McCarthy (1982, 57-8) argues that it was in response to the hermeneutic objections to moral universalism that Habermas altered his program around 1970 from a practically-oriented enterprise to a more emphatically theoretical project of justification. A theoretical element is required, in Habermas’ view, to transcend the mere agreement which hermeneutics seeks to maintain and establish the possibility and grounds of universal consensus. The practical implications of this ‘theoreticization’ of the project of modernity will be an important theme of later parts of this chapter. It involves the claim that Habermas’ preoccupation with the defence of the project of modernity, with a theory of the rational, has had detrimental effects upon his theory of the irrational.

**Criticism 1b  Habermas’ theory misidentifies the universal characteristics of humanity**

This criticism of Habermas’ work is directed against his specific argument about human universals rather than against his defence of universality as such. Many of his critics, in this regard, are as committed as Habermas to the Enlightenment project. They deny, nevertheless, that his particular interpretation of the presuppositions of language use is the appropriate way of conceptualizing the invariant characteristics of human life.

Habermas’ universalism focuses upon those pragmatic features of communication which are essential for the rational coordination of action. He argues that if subjects are to
subordinate their own plans of action on the basis of an agreement, there must be a redemption of both identity and validity claims. This emphasis upon identity and validity claims, it should be noted, does not mean that Habermas thinks action coordination is the sole function of language. He recognizes that there are other important uses, but he maintains that the consensual linking of intentions is, in a sense, fundamental. Habermas emphasizes that the human form of life requires, as an indispensable necessity, the communicative use of language. He argues, in a similar way to Durkheim (1964), that a certain degree of consensus is essential to the very existence of ‘society’. He wishes to show that social interaction cannot be reduced to the pursuit of interest alone (see TCA, I, 274; McCarthy 1984, 282; White 1988, 32-34).

Despite Habermas’ clarification of his intentions in this way, critics have still disputed the focus on formal presuppositions of communicative action. They advance an understanding of language as primarily ‘world-disclosing’ (Bernstein 1995; Taylor 1991). They shift the emphasis of analysis away from the action-coordinating function of language, to individuals and groups who need to give meaning to their lives through interpretations of the world as a whole. They recognize that many of modernity’s problems result from a failure of subjects to follow rational procedures, but they argue the justification of these procedures alone ignores what is required. These theorists insist that if we are to understand properly the presuppositions of consensus formation, it is necessary to examine a conception of the good life within which procedural rules can be rendered meaningful and can provide subjects with motivation for following them.

Habermas’ consistent response has been that these arguments rely upon the framework of the philosophy of the subject (see, for example, PDM, 75-82; ‘R’, 215-22). He argues against the primacy of the world-disclosing function of language. He insists that we cannot raise to the level of the universal, substantive understandings of the world as a whole. Habermas maintains, as we have seen in the distinction between the pragmatic, moral and ethical aspects of discourse, that only in the ethical, as one aspect of communication oriented toward solving problems of action coordination, is a ‘totality’ at stake. The philosophy of the subject, on the other hand, designates a totality which subsumes all other linguistic functions within the requirements of its own reproduction. In Habermas’ terms, it
tries to raise the ethical above the moral and pragmatic, and above the formal concept of language as such. He responds that

grammatically regulated world views and forms of life appear only in the plural … they constitute totalities which are not in turn overshadowed by a supertotality, but rather correspond to one another in terms of their formal and most general structures. Because all lifeworlds have to reproduce themselves through the agency of action oriented towards reaching understanding, so the general character of communicative rationality stands out within the multiplicity of concrete forms of life (‘R’, 220).

Habermas’ privileging of the ‘just’ over the ‘good’ will also be discussed in the next part of the chapter.

**Criticism 2a There is no intrinsic meaning to history**

Here, criticism of Habermas’ work concerns its claim to establish a universal direction within the historical process. Habermas makes it clear that this basic idea of an intrinsic meaning to history cannot be sustained as it was in early formulations of the philosophy of history and evolutionism (*TCA*, 2, 145-55). Progress, insofar as it can be identified, is not linear. It is also not automatic. Habermas’ distinction between the logic and dynamics of development is designed to make this clear. Nonetheless, in opposition to naïve views of history as progress, Habermas insists that history is not merely a whirlwind of events which have no intrinsic significance. He charts a middle way between two extremes:

The relation of history to reason remains constitutive for the discourse of modernity – for better or worse. Whoever participates in this discourse (and nothing about this has changed up to our own day) makes a distinct use of the expressions ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’. They are used neither in accord with the game rules of ontology to characterize God or being as a whole; nor in accord with the game rules of empiricists to characterize individual subjects capable of knowledge and action. Reason is valid neither as something ready-made, as an objective teleology that is manifested in nature or history, nor as a mere subjective faculty. Instead, the patterns
looked for in historical events yield encoded indications of unfinished, interrupted, and misguided processes of self-formation that *transcend the subjective consciousness of the individual* (PDM, 392, n4, emphasis added).²

For Habermas, theorists such as Foucault, who reject the idea that history can be understood as a learning process, ‘cannot help but extinguish the last spark of utopia and destroy the last traces of Western culture’s self-confidence’ (NC, 52).

A necessary element of the project of modernity, then, is to establish that existing institutions and practices are the product of lessons from the past which must not be forgotten. Habermas is interested in defending the ‘kernel of truth’ of the present against those who fail to recognize that what we have contains crucial advantages over other known alternatives. In the poststructuralist critique of reason, for example, he finds that the ‘high price’ exacted in pre-modern social formations ‘from the mass of the population (in the dimensions of bodily labour, material conditions, possibilities of individual choice, security of law and punishment, political participation, and schooling) is barely even noticed’ (PDM, 338).

**II CRITICISM AT THE LEVEL OF THE NORMATIVE AND THE RATIONAL**

The above criticisms, and Habermas’ response to them, relate to the theory of the rational. My intention has only been to introduce the kinds of issues involved rather than pursue these criticisms in great depth. This assists, nonetheless, in clarifying the nature and significance of the remaining three criticisms summarized in table 5.1, criticisms which will be dealt with in more detail in this chapter.

This part is concerned with ‘Criticism 2b’, the claim that Habermas’ theory of history contains a rationalistic bias. This set of criticisms also embraces the theory of the rational and it parallels the objections already covered in ‘Criticism 1b’. The critics maintain, here,

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² See also Habermas’ critique of Castoriadis which involves an attempt to justify the concept of ‘learning processes’ against ‘merely different’ world imaginaries (PDM, 327-35). McCarthy (1985) has argued that
that history is a terrain upon which there is a continual struggle for happiness and fulfilment and it is only as a by-product of these struggles that rational structures materialize. In their view, Habermas portrays an autonomous and independent evolution of reason that goes on over and above the heads of the participants themselves. He is charged with misunderstanding how history is constituted as intrinsically meaningful. I will defend Habermas’ work against these claims. I maintain that Habermas’ theory of the rational is robust enough to withstand this particular criticism, especially when the distinction between ‘identity’ and ‘validity’ claims is recognized. I argue that while not privileging issues of happiness and meaning, his approach incorporates them in a satisfactory way. It is on this basis that I argue, in the final part of the chapter, that the alleged rationalistic bias in Habermas’ work is more properly directed at his theory of the irrational. This will involve an exploration of ‘Criticism 3a’ and ‘Criticism 3b’.

In the first section, I will examine the various claims which constitute ‘Criticism 2b’. These claims have been raised against many aspects of Habermas’ theory. I will consider them, initially, insofar as they have been directed against his concept of democracy. Critics have argued that the discursive concept of democracy is too rationalistic and fails to acknowledge the difficulties of reaching agreement and consensus in modern societies. They insist that democracy must be based in different epistemic foundations if it is to be adequate and workable. In the second section, I then examine these claims in a more general way. They can be traced back to the fundamental structure of Habermas’ theory. I argue that his critics, while identifying a certain rationalistic bias in his approach, have overstated their case. I will rely, in making this argument, upon the distinction between identity and validity claims, a distinction which is not prominent in either Habermas’ own writings or in commentaries upon those writings.

**Criticism of Habermas’ concept of democracy**

We have seen, in the previous chapter, Habermas’ concept of democracy is philosophically grounded in the theory of communicative action. In Habermas’ view, democracy arises from an insistent need by citizens to pursue collective goals and regulate their conflicts with one another *consensually*. If democracy did not have its roots in deep-seated identity

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Habermas’ understanding of ‘learning processes’ tends to be Eurocentric.
and validity claims, it would not be distinguishable from violent or strategic approaches to dealing with problems. This method of justification has brought forth the criticism that Habermas prescribes overly demanding requirements for democracy, requirements which actually jeopardize its capacity to provide an alternative to violence (McCarthy 1992, 1994; Rehg and Bohman 1996).

It may seem that Habermas’ procedural and discursive concept of democracy is not overly exacting for citizens since it relies on no prior substantive consensus. It depends only on commitment to the principle of impartiality or ‘D’. The question arises, nonetheless, does this formal principle of discourse demands too much? In the context of modern pluralism and multiculturalism, citizens may not be able to agree on what impartiality involves. Each group may see the other’s definition of impartiality as inimical to their interests. Habermas’ claim that impartiality is a shared, universal principle is designed to rise above these sectarian points of view. Thomas McCarthy (1992, 62) argues, to the contrary, that ‘[t]he separation of formal procedure from substantive content is never absolute: we cannot agree on what is just without achieving some measure of agreement on what is good’. From this point of view, formal principles have no definite meaning in and of themselves but are interpreted in light of broader conceptions of life as a whole. Social life is characterized as a struggle for meaning within which divergent conceptions of justice first find their place.

The concepts of consensus and impartiality are critical in Habermas’ account. Citizens need to distinguish impartially between the moral, ethical and pragmatic aspects of political problems in order to embark upon the requisite types of discourse and bargaining. If they cannot overcome reasonable disagreements at this preliminary stage, then discursive democracy must fail in practical terms. Instead of ‘spurring on’ (Habermas 1996d, 462) democratic processes, critics suggest that the motivation for consensus may well produce disappointment and disaffection. The apparently interminable nature of contemporary moral and ethical debates, discussed at the very beginning of the dissertation, testifies to this predicament (MacIntyre 1981). It may be argued that the legitimacy of democracy derives from its superior ability to resolve problems that do not admit of consensus. Habermas’ identification of the willingness of citizens to resolve conflicts non-violently with the motivation for consensus would then be misplaced. It would amount to a strenuous insistence on rationality to the detriment of practicality, even of reasonableness. It would be
a strange thing indeed for ‘rationality’ and ‘reasonableness’ to diverge in Habermas’ account (Seel 1991; Wellmer 1991, 230).

Critics argue that the stark contrast between consensus- and strategically-oriented action needs to be given way if Habermas is to accommodate these points, an issue which recurs below. Then, even on explicitly moral and ethical questions, discourse would have to make room for elements of bargaining and fair compromise if democracy is to be workable. In general, the ‘normative account of legitimacy’ would need to be broadened ‘to recognize forms of compromise that are not simply based on strategic calculations’ (Rehg and Bohman 1996, 94).³

The question of whether such concessions to strategic action would necessarily amount to a downgrading of the normative content of democracy would then depend on the quality of the political culture. It has been noted that Habermas does not underestimate the general function of culture and institutional practices. He insists that ‘any universalistic morality is dependent upon a form of life that meets it halfway. There has to be a modicum of congruence between morality and the practices of socialization and education . . . . Moral universals is a historical result’ (MCCA, 207-8). Critics suggest that this does not remedy the problem since Habermas’ reconstruction of culture is itself too rationalistic. McCarthy (1992, 65-69) points out a different way of relying upon a ‘form of life’. He argues that it is possible to imagine situations in which participants may still be motivated to engage in debate through the idea of consensus, rather than merely seek a compromise of interests, even though they may regard the actual achievement of consensus to be unrealistic. This would not mean, as it does for Habermas, that the very grammar of our existence would break down, that the idea of truth would lose all credibility and orienting force. Rather, there could be a type of community which cultivated ‘good-willed members’ (McCarthy 1992, 66) to keep on searching for the common interest.

In this alternative scenario, a conception of the good life is privileged over a pointless search for rational consensus, without fundamentally compromising standards of rationality. Other critics have argued that Habermas’ focus on rationality as a threshold

³ These authors reconstruct a weaker set of epistemic conditions for democratic deliberation (Rehg and Bohman 1996, 94-99).
jeopardizes the search for happiness and, therefore, an important motivation to be rational. Benhabib (1986; 1992, 182-7) insists that only if subjects are motivated by a utopian vision of the future are they likely to act in a way conducive to rationality. Rationality on its own, by contrast, because it has no independent weight, will necessarily degenerate into a mere slogan with which competing forms of life combat others. By pitching the minimum requirements of democracy at too high a level, it is implied, Habermas risks reintroducing the destructive elements of modernity he is trying to avoid (Bernstein 1995).

I would like to argue, in the following section, that these criticisms of Habermas’ position are misplaced. I draw attention to his consideration of identity claims and their changing relationship with validity claims in history. The contention is put forward that Habermas’ theoretical framework is able to balance a concern with reason with that of happiness and the good life. The critics are charged with attacking only a partial understanding of his theory. If the defence of Habermas against this particular line of criticism is successful, then the weight of problems shifts over to the third dimension of critique. I will present this argument in the final part of the chapter.

**Balancing validity with identity**

I provide a defence of Habermas as follows. Firstly, I review the earlier discussion of identity and validity claims and how their relationship changes in the course of history. This establishes a framework for refining Habermas’ arguments. Secondly, this clarification is contrasted with the arguments of his critics who wish to give philosophy jurisdiction over questions of the good life and happiness. I attempt to show that these interlocutors confuse the levels of identity and validity. I explain why Habermas’ earlier formulations of his mature work also displayed a similar confusion. The revisions in the latest work strengthen his position. The conclusion reached is that Habermas’ theory of the rational is robust enough to withstand the objections of its critics.

To begin, I will retrace Habermas’ theses about identity and validity claims. Habermas wishes to establish that language communication is made up, firstly, of a structure which puts pressure upon subjects to recognize one another. By ‘recognize’ is meant that a subject sees another subject as a responsible person, one who possesses reasons for their actions
and expressions. With recognition, a subject restrains itself from viewing the other as merely an object to be manipulated. In attributing to the other the status of personhood, the subject relativizes its view of the world. It must expand its range of perception to include the wishes and rights of others as well as it own. This pressure is not one-sided. It pushes all subjects to recognize one another. For Habermas, this structure of ‘reciprocal recognition’ is fundamental. The important implication is that for the identity of human beings to be stable, they must maintain a specific form of interaction, one in which reciprocity is secured. Identity is necessarily injured and damaged for both parties in relationships of exploitation. Individuals cannot ‘have’ their identity as a possession. Identity or individuality contains an ‘intersubjective core’. It is an attribute that can only be formed and maintained by remaining in a community that complies with this fundamental structure of language. There is a kind of centripetal force placed upon human beings out of which they cannot escape while they are alive.

Importantly, structures of reciprocal recognition are not only universal but also formal in character. In recognizing another’s quality of responsibility, difference is necessarily accepted: I recognize another’s accountability for who they are, whatever the ‘they are’ is. Identity and difference are not necessarily in competition with one another. Once again, the import of this can only be seen in the context of the symmetry involved: I can only receive recognition for my claim to identity from another person, which means that I must have already recognized them as a person. Irrespective of our differences, the formal structure of recognition holds us together. The maintenance of one’s substantive identity, what one has made oneself into, depends upon formal, intersubjective structures. Habermas stresses that we must take care to distinguish these claims to identity from those to validity. When a subject’s identity is secured, their capacity for responsibility is being recognized. This does not mean that the actual content of their expressions and actions, which is the basis of their claim to be a particular kind of person, is being agreed to. This content must be understood, rather, in terms of validity claims. I may recognize another and still contest the reasons they put forward for being the person they have made themselves into. I may argue that it is morally wrong to be that kind of individual or that they deceive themselves about who they really are.
Validity claims also accompany the basic structure of intersubjective communication. They refer to the ‘something’ about which communication is concerned. Habermas differentiates this ‘something’ into three worlds (the objective, the social and the subjective). Each of these worlds carries with it an abstract claim to validity (truth, rightness and truthfulness). In communication, subjects test one another’s claims to truth about the objective world, rightness in relation to their shared social world and sincerity in relation to their own inner worlds of experience. For Habermas, when an individual or group can be systematically expected to know, give and justify the reasons for their actions and expressions, the threshold has been passed to a rational way of life.

Processes of criticism and contestation need not harm the identity of the participants involved. Indeed, and this is the important point, the quality of the discourse depends crucially upon how well identity has already been secured (Warren 1995). When identity claims are stable, individuals can engage in a more or less selfless process of testing their knowledge of the world. Feeling secure in their own understanding of themselves, they can leave self-preoccupations behind and discuss issues that are of public concern. When identity is fragile, on the other hand, claims to recognition may be confused with claims to validity. Already feeling threatened and insecure about themselves, subjects have difficulty disassociating discussions about issues from discussions about themselves. Their understanding of the world takes on a narcissistic quality in which encounters with others become a test of their self-worth (Livesay 1985; Sennett 1977). Discourse is then personalized so that what is really a rejected validity claim is perceived to be a denial of one’s status as a responsible person.

Insofar as history is also progress, argues Habermas, it can be understood as an extrication of validity from identity. The two tend to be intertwined in a specific way in less rational ways of life: one’s identity is dependent upon subscription to particular views. There is little sense of one’s own self in distinction from fixed understandings of the world. When this fusion of validity and identity is overcome, the structural potentialities of language are released. It becomes possible for individuals to develop an abstract sense of identity or responsibility through the very process of testing the various validity claims attached to their knowledge. Indeed, identity can be detached from validity only once the domain of validity itself has been internally differentiated. Only with this internal differentiation do
worldviews become susceptible to criticism (TCA, 1, 43-74). This is the historical context, then, of the Habermasian concept of democracy. As our shared understandings of the world are eroded, we come to rely more and more upon abstract identity structures or structures of reciprocal recognition. Autonomy (identity) and rationality (validity) are related to one another in a distinctive way. At the modern stage of evolution the stabilization of identity depends more and more upon rational processes of conflict resolution and action coordination.

Habermas recognizes the danger in this process of historical evolution, a danger which the critics argue is not acknowledged adequately in his theoretical approach: ‘The revenge of a culture exploited over millennia for the legitimation of domination [might] take this form: Right at the moment of overcoming age-old repressions, it would harbour no violence but it would have no content either’ (PPP, 158). Habermas concedes that a cultural tradition whose prejudices have been so thoroughly criticized may leave only abstract identity structures behind. Yet, it was only cultural interpretations of the world which gave human life its meaning. There is the possibility that abstract structures of identity may become operative only to support a process of criticism which has lost its object. The relentless erosion of substantive worldviews places increased pressure on structures of reciprocal recognition to take the load of keeping society together. But even if this succeeds, life might thereby become meaningless: there is nothing left to talk about, to fight for.

In practice, of course, this does not mean that some kind of rationalistic dystopia arises. The siphoning off of validity has resulted in desperate struggles to retain meaning in a meaningless world (Elliott 1992). There are risks for democracy in these struggles. Since ‘every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not’, as Benhabib (1996, 3) notes, ‘identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference’. These struggles tend to suppress the democratic threshold of modernity and assert claims to validity with which dogmatic identities are fused. It is precisely for this reason, in fact, that Habermas refuses to lower the normative requirements of democracy by weakening the epistemic justification of discourse. He insists that we must recognize that abstract identity structures represent a democratic threshold. They should not

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4 This particular paradox of rationalization involves a ‘loss of meaning’ which complements the other paradox of a ‘loss of freedom’ associated with the systemic colonization of the lifeworld.
be given secondary importance for the sake of meaning. If they are, then a rational maintenance of meaning is itself jeopardized. When validity and identity are not clearly distinguished, disputing the claims of others becomes part and parcel of disputing their responsibility as such. One of the features of modern society is that its cultural pluralism often results in incursions into the deepest layer of identity: difference expands into irreconcilable conflict. When validity claims suck identity into their vortex, a particular worldview becomes one-dimensional. Habermas rejects weakening the strong epistemic justification of legitimacy since any concession on this point would mean that we would lose the ‘fixed point of reference’ of identity structures (Habermas 1994b, 134). He argues that it is only ‘on this unavoidable fiction’ of accountability that ‘the humanity of intercourse among men who are still men’ (cited in McCarthy 1984, 291) is possible. The supposition of accountability is not, however, a mere fiction. Structures of reciprocal recognition have become factually important with their institutionalization in the form of constitutional rights and principles. Habermas suggests that the critics who wish to ground democracy on less substantial epistemic foundations compromise the very position from which they wish to make their concessions. The critics neglect the historical basis upon which they are standing. If the principles of identity are substituted for a modified view, our initial orientation and commitment would be lost. Habermas maintains that we have ‘no choice’, we are ‘forced’ to deal with political problems according to the concept of impartiality (1996d, 455; 1994b, 122). While this may be ‘dogmatism’, in his view it is ‘harmless’ (BFN, 446-7).5

Adhering to this point of view means that Habermas does not diagnose a destructive pluralism leading from the discursive concept of democracy. The existing multitude of forms of life has become stark, to the contrary, only because ‘principles of equality’ have already gained ‘a foothold in social practice’ (JA, 90). The historical achievement of institutionalizing legal, formal principles of equality means that de facto unequal treatment becomes ‘all the more obvious’ (Habermas 1994b, 114). This underlying commitment to autonomous processes of problem solving should not be forgotten amidst the growing

5 Habermas’ focus on unavoidable orientations seems to accommodate McCarthy’s persistent criticism that it would be better to focus on ‘good-willed members’ of a community rather than the possibility of achieving consensual results (see also Cooke 1994, 165-6). In his institutional analysis, for example, Habermas suggests that while the formal political system must constantly make decisions, decisions that may not be agreed to by all who are affected, the crucial point is that only the motivation for consensus exerts a stubbornly democratizing influence.
clamour for recognition. Is it possible to imagine at all, suggests Habermas, contemporary differences without reference to an implicitly widespread pledge to common rules and procedures?

Only if it could be shown in principle that moral discourses must prove unfruitful despite the growing consensus concerning human rights and democracy – for example, because common interests can no longer even be identified in incommensurable languages – would the deontological endeavour to uncouple questions of justice from context-dependent questions of the good life have failed (JA, 91).

From these comments it becomes clear that Habermas’ strong defence of democracy lies at the level of identity rather than validity.6 The analytic distinction between the two is not always clear in empirical circumstances. This is so since ‘every legal community and every democratic process for actualizing basic rights is inevitably permeated by ethics’ (Habermas 1994b, 126).

[T]he integrity of the individual legal person cannot be guaranteed without protecting the intersubjectively shared experiences and life contexts in which the person has been socialized and has formed his or her identity. The identity of the individual is interwoven with collective identities and can be stabilized only in a cultural network (Habermas 1994b, 129).

I argue that this empirical admixture of identity and validity may be the reason why some of Habermas’ critics neglect the analytic distinction between the two. They tend to focus only upon his theory of validity claims and the associated conceptualization of reason and morality. It then becomes difficult to understand how universalistic claims can be rendered compatible with particular ones.

Habermas promoted this confusion in his earlier formulations of democracy which were couched too exclusively in the terms of moral universalism. During Between Facts and Norms, he states that ‘[i]n my previous publications on discourse ethics, I have not

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6 Maeve Cooke (1994, 48-50, 158-62) has also hinted at this.
sufficiently distinguished between the discourse principle and the moral principle’ (BFN, 108; see also Ingram 1993 and Wellmer 1991). In the terminology emphasized here, this amounts to a failure to distinguish between the levels of identity and validity. The presuppositions of identity – structures of reciprocal recognition – support discourses in which validity claims are contested. It is structures of identity (as opposed to validity) which prescribe the principle of impartiality. Within political discussions, moral questions must be arbitrated according to the standard of universal consensus (MCCA, 43-115) but they form only one of three discursive elements. Democratic legitimacy must be measured in relation to the combination of different kinds of discourse as well as processes of bargaining. ‘Political questions differ from moral ones’ (BFN, 151). The requirement of consensus which applies to moral questions is therefore softened in Habermas’ most recent account of legitimacy. Here, ‘rationally motivated agreement’ rather than ‘rationally motivated consensus’ (BFN, 156-7) applies. The former relates to substantive obligations we voluntarily impose upon ourselves through the medium of discussion in a particular political community. The latter refers to moral rights and duties which no living person can neglect. The difference between identity and validity is summarized in table 5.2. Habermas’ approach encompasses all dimensions whereas he tended to reduce his understanding of democracy to the shaded era in earlier formulations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The level of identity</strong> (autonomy)</th>
<th>Structures of reciprocal recognition: discursive redeemability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The level of validity</strong> (rationality)</td>
<td>Truth</td>
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In Habermas’ view, conflict and disagreement at the level of validity should not be confused with an underlying and implicit commitment to principles (that guide these conflicts) at the level of identity. He argues that autonomy (identity) can only be acquired and preserved by maintaining a degree of scepticism at the level of rationality (validity). This does not mean that conceptions of the good life must submit to the kind of rigorous testing of hypotheses in the sciences. There is merely the requirement that they leave ‘room for reflection on their relationship with the other worldviews with which they share the
same universe of discourse and against whose competing validity claims they can advance their positions only on the basis of reasons’ (Habermas 1994b, 133). For the critics, it is still necessary for philosophy to go beyond this and provide both rationality and morality a more substantive content. They argue that procedural justifications ignore necessary sources of motivation. By focusing upon procedures rather than the meaning of being rational or moral within a conception of life as a whole, these theorists argue that Habermas conceals a tie to unacknowledged debts. They question whether Habermas can answer the question of why one should be rational or moral at all.

Habermas admits that he cannot answer the question, ‘Why be moral?’, for people themselves. Philosophers, in his view, can provide only theoretical arguments for why morality and rationality are crucial for human coexistence in modern societies. For secular intellectuals this may, itself, be some kind of motivation. Even for them, nonetheless, it is a weak source. Moral despair or moral indifference cannot be overcome with theories. They require ‘an answer to the fundamental ethical question of the meaning of life as such, of personal or collective identity’. Philosophy is unsuited to this ‘propaedeutic task’ in Habermas’ view. It

is not in a privileged position when it competes with the rhetorically moving, exemplary representations of the novelist or the quietly insistent intuitions of common sense. We learn what moral, and in particular immoral, action involves prior to all philosophizing … . The inarticulate, socially integrating experiences of considerateness, solidarity, and fairness shape our intuitions and provide us with better instruction about morality than arguments ever could (JA, 75-6).

In making this claim, Habermas shifts the burden of proof over to his critics to show that a conception of the good can be rendered compatible with universalistic pretensions.

Even while Habermas privileges the just over the good, this does not entail that his account is insensitive to issues of meaning. While he restricts his own, philosophical account to formal considerations, he is referring to a process in which substantive values always come into play in practice. The critics suggest, nevertheless, that Habermas’ account is too ‘Kantian’. I conclude this part of the chapter with a final defence of this objection, an
objection which is, once again, based on a false restriction of Habermas’ position to moral universalism (the shaded area in table 5.2).

In Habermas’ view, Kant made the mistake of abstracting the concept of the autonomous individual from its place within the communication community. In Kant’s *monological* procedure of testing the universality of norms, there is presupposed a harmonious order of interaction. In solitary self-reflection, Kant’s subject tests the universality of its maxims and attributes those which pass the inspection to every other subject. ‘The moral laws are abstractly universal in the sense that, as they are valid as universal for me, *eo ipso* they must also be considered as valid for all rational beings’ (*TP*, 150-1; see also *MCCA*, 203). Habermas argues that Kant’s approach effectively means that moral action is expelled ‘from the very domain of morality itself’ (*TP*, 150). Morality deals with questions of interpersonal relations. By devising a monological procedure with substantive assumptions about social order, Kant effectively smuggles in a political theory about how society *should* be structured. He excludes a more radical questioning of norms so that subjects might regulate their life together in a completely autonomous fashion. Habermas argues that Kant’s understanding of morality is actually ‘a special case of what we today call strategic action’ (*TP*, 151). As we have seen, strategic action is an abstraction from communicative relationships. It foregoes the requirement of reaching understanding and involves a subject relating to itself and its preferences. The subject does not make its actions depend upon the agreement or understanding of others but bypasses such processes.

The critics argue that Habermas has made a similar mistake. Benhabib (1986) contends that Habermas’ tendency to restrict moral discourse to the normative claim to validity means that Kantian limitations are reintroduced. It restricts discussion within the confines of the hegemonic culture. Interests and needs have already been interpreted by this culture and assume an ideological form in the sense that they are erroneously accepted as natural and given. Benhabib maintains that part of the discursive process must involve efforts to reinterpret interests and seek to uncover instances of self-deception. Unless these ‘aesthetic’ and ‘therapeutic’ discourses accompany normative argumentation, discourse will legitimate domination.
This issue is particularly important in relation to discrepancies between moral consciousness and moral action. It involves cases where a certain stage of moral competence is not matched by an emotional and affective capacity to employ this competence in the stress of open conflict. The motivational problems encountered in acting morally are not simply a question of morality but an issue of damaged self-formative processes. The goal of such processes is not only a morally upright person but one who has become free to express themselves. The individual invariably grows up, nevertheless, with interaction partners who do not always respect implicit structures of reciprocal recognition. The relationship with one’s inner nature is to be protected by morality. When identity is damaged, however, it is not a question of restoring morality. Morality can only be restored as a result of first reconstituting one’s identity, one’s relationship with inner nature.

I maintain that Habermas clearly recognizes these issues. He provides a way of understanding how damaged self-formative processes are to be continued in his description of the way moral discourses can be linked with those of an aesthetic and therapeutic kind. With such linkages,

Internal nature is … moved into a utopian perspective … . [It] is rendered communicatively fluid and transparent to the extent that needs can, through aesthetic forms of expression, be kept articulable or be released from their palaeosymbolic prelinguisticality. But that means that internal nature is not subjected, in the cultural preformation met with at any given time, to the demands of ego autonomy; rather, through a dependent ego it obtains free access to the interpretive possibilities of the cultural tradition. In the medium of value-forming and norm-forming communications into which aesthetic experiences enter, traditional cultural contents are no longer simply the stencils according to which needs are shaped; on the contrary, in this medium needs can seek and find adequate interpretations (CES, 93; see also ‘Qcq’, 202-3).7

Habermas views individual identity as the result of interaction with others in the medium of communicative relationships. He recognizes that Kant’s suppression of these relationships
from philosophical consideration fixes individual identity within existing conventions (Warren 1995, 176-81). The approach of discourse ethics, on the other hand, contains an emphasis upon the need to link the three validity claims with one another in the discussion of any particular issue (TCA, 1, 13-4; TCA, 2, 398). This enables the medium in which identity is formed to emerge as a topic. This does not ignore the priority of the just which subsists at the level of identity. Rather, the ‘unavoidable fiction’ of accountability is the solid foundation upon which participants can question their particular identities. This overcomes the battle between (social) duty and (private) inclination characteristic of Kant. I

\[7\] Critics have evaluated Habermas’ conceptualization of the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of his theory in different ways. Ingram (1987, 1990) has consistently argued that it makes Habermas’ theory of rationality stronger and more complex than others, such as Elliott (1992, 110-9), Jay (1985) and Whitebook (1985), have suggested.
maintain, then, that the ‘Kantianism’ with which Habermas is charged applies at the level of his theory of identity rather than of validity.  

III A REVITALIZED THEORY OF THE IRRATIONAL

Habermas remarks that in light of the enormous problems facing the world today, ‘my modest opinion about what philosophy can and cannot accomplish may come as a disappointment’ (MCCA, 211). With this modest opinion, however, he insists on the Marxist claim that theoretical and moral questions can only be resolved in practice. He has consistently declared that

\[ \text{one should not place excessive demands on moral theory, but leave something over for social theory, and the major part for the participants themselves … . [W]hoever takes a risk upon him or herself, must be allowed to make his or her own decision} \]

\[(AS, 167-8).\]

Philosophy is confined to clarifying the moral point of view. Habermas suggests that many of his critics fail to keep this important point in mind. As a result, they proceed on the basis of false assumptions. With the added defence of his position put forward above, I argue that the objections raised are not appropriately made at the level of the theory of the rational. Instead, they become more relevant in the construction of a theory of the irrational, an essential element of a comprehensive critical theory. This part of the chapter deals with the relevant considerations (‘Criticism 3a’ and ‘Criticism 3b’).

The central question guiding my investigation is whether and how theoretically guided practice is still possible today. As established earlier in the dissertation, critique as crisis theory is the appropriate framework for addressing this question. I argue that Habermas develops this dimension of critique in a fragmentary and ambivalent way. His theory therefore fails to address properly the third requirement of the theory of modernity, that of ‘practical realization’. I begin my argumentation by referring to the focus upon the

\[8\] Of course, Habermas is ‘Kantian’ to the extent that he emphasizes a differentiation of the various validity claims. I argue, however, that he recognizes the need for mediation between them.
normative level in debates over his work. I reiterate the claim that the most important problems in his theory do not exist at this level. The remaining sections explicate various criticisms of Habermas’ theory of the irrational.

In chapter three, the theory of the irrational was held to be made up of two general features. Firstly, the material preconditions of social and political change are to be identified in terms of systematic tendencies toward crisis. Secondly, there must be an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of different political strategies designed to capitalize on the opportunities presented by crises. This is the issue of prudence. The first set of objections examine Habermas’ theory of crisis (‘Criticism 3b’). They detail further problems in his application of systems theory, apart from those presented in chapter four. The primary issue concerns the place of ‘objective meaning’ in the theory of modernity and how it is to be explained. I maintain that Habermas applies systems theory to comprehend objective meaning in terms of the rational. I argue to the contrary, that it is necessary to understand meaning that transcends the intentions of subjects in terms of the irrational. In the third section, I explore an alternative approach present within Habermas’ *oeuvre* which provides a framework for such an understanding. This framework, scattered throughout Habermas’ writings, represents the rudiments of a stronger theory of the irrational. In the fourth and final section, I extrapolate the implications of this alternative approach for rethinking the question of prudent political strategy (‘Criticism 3a’). I argue that an elaboration of Habermas’ theory of the irrational also has implications for his action theory. I am concerned that his construction of action theory prevents linking the communicative and strategic dimensions of political strategy in a prudent way.

**The focus on the normative and the rational**

In their studies of the tradition of critical theory, Seyla Benhabib (1986) and Axel Honneth (1991) argue that Habermas, as well as Michel Foucault, have been pivotal figures in reopening the social dimension of inquiry. Empirical analysis tended to be submerged, particularly in the writings of Adorno, in favour of philosophical speculation alone. The ‘social’ was suppressed as a category of analysis since history was viewed as an immutable expansion of human domination over nature, both external and internal. Such an abstract philosophical perspective diminishes the importance of social actions and institutions. It
excludes the possibility that ‘social groups actively participate in the integration of society’ (Honneth 1991, 100). Nancy Fraser (1981, 1985) has pointed out, in the case of Foucault, that this new direction for critical theory has certainly led to ‘empirical insights’ but has also been accompanied by ‘normative confusions’. Foucault’s analysis of discipline and resistance yields many fruitful hypotheses but systematically fails to explain the normative basis of political struggle. For Fraser, there is a conflation of conceptual, strategic and normative dimensions of argument. Habermas develops a similar case in his analysis of Foucault (PDM, 238-93; NC, 173-9). It is as though Foucault has gone in the opposite direction, abandoning philosophy for social research that supposedly has no standards.

Much of the Foucault-Habermas debate has focused on these normative issues (Kelly 1994; Larrain 1994; Matustik 1989). It has examined questions such as whether a normative standard is or is not required, whether Foucault uses such a standard even though he denies it, as well as whether Habermas’ normative framework can incorporate Foucault’s insights. Habermas thinks that the fundamental issue is a difference between Foucault’s theoretical practice and his self-understanding. He seeks to convince Foucault, as he tries to do with other thinkers (either as virtual or real interlocutors), that he understands Foucault better than Foucault understands himself. In this reading, Foucault is a good representative of ‘that almost 200-year-old counterdiscourse inherent in modernity itself’ (PDM, 302).

There is no attempt, here, to pass judgement on this particular debate. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the focus on normative themes. This is similar to the controversy discussed above. In both discussions little attention has been paid to the question of the material, compared to normative, preconditions of practical change. I have argued that the tendency on the part of some theorists to criticize Habermas at the normative level alone means that they falsely inflate what can be expected of philosophy. Habermas himself insists that we must look more to the dimension of social theory, to understand whether structural tendencies in society are acting as catalysts for progressive change. He emphasized this, for example, in Legitimation Crisis, where he argued that a widespread adolescent crisis was of particular importance for the future of modern society. It created an opportunity for a significant proportion of the population in modern nations to transcend a conventional level of moral consciousness and adopt a universalistic point of view. Without

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9 Sheldon Wolin (1988, 197) has pointed to the absence of a theory of crisis of systems of power in Foucault.
such a deep-seated structural potential, Habermas implied that the push forward to higher stages of moral consciousness must necessarily remain limited and episodic. As White (1988, 80) notes, the ‘concern for collective identity is intertwined with the problem of motivation’ (see also Jay 1984, 462-3).

This does not mean that Habermas’ philosophical position is without problems in itself. The point is that different kinds of politics and political implications flow from different dimensions of critique. I claim that Habermas’ critics are looking for a politics in the wrong place. The synchronic and diachronic dimensions of critique are tied up with the need for a general self-understanding on the part of political actors. The results of applying these two critical notions do not consist in concrete recommendations for practice. They provide a framework within which processes of modernization, at various levels, can also be understood as rationalization. In light of this, social and political actors can place themselves within a comprehension of the larger historical context. The real points of dispute between Habermas and many of his critics, I argue, lie in another dimension. Critique as crisis theory seeks to provide more than a self-understanding. It probes the limits of theoretically comprehending how social and political movements can capitalize on existing potentials and practically realize them. The next three sections deal with the issues involved in this.

**Criticism of systems theory**

As seen in chapter four, Habermas constructs an understanding of modern society in terms of a ‘paradox of rationalization’. The potential for enlightenment released from a rationalized lifeworld is systematically restricted by the conditions of enlightenment itself. Systemic mechanisms of coordination come into play because the autonomous development of lifeworld structures requires a setting free from material constraints. These mechanisms are fundamentally opposed to action based on a cooperative formation of will and a consensual resolution of conflicts. It is in this way that Habermas brings together Marx and Weber in his interpretation of capitalism. There is no doubt that the Marxist anticipation of the growth in productive forces automatically leading to emancipatory consequences is false. It was for this reason that the attention of earlier critical theorists
shifted to an analysis of culture and personality, in the attempt to explain why the revolution did not occur. In doing so, of course, they still held onto the assumption that the Marxist philosophy of history was accurate. It was perhaps as a reaction against these overblown expectations that Adorno and Horkheimer (1952) opted for a fundamentally different understanding of history. In this approach, history represents a continual and constant expansion of instrumental reason.10

Habermas uses systems theory to reformulate the claims of Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno about the empirical tendency to suppress the communicative elements of reason in modernity. In doing so, he emphasizes that systemic media are important and necessary aspects of complex, modern societies. I dispute Habermas’ application of systems theory in making this claim about necessary levels of complexity. I advance a further set of criticisms of his use of systems theory, apart from those dealt with at the end of chapter four. The purpose is to find out whether he could have made a similar case about the ambivalent potential of modernity, about the trends toward both democracy and complexity, in a different way. I argue that Habermas suppresses the Marxist elements of his theory. To first understand Habermas’ position, then, we will need to go a little further into his discussion of Marx. Secondly, I provide a set of arguments against Habermas’ incorporation of systems theory. I contend that he privileges the functional capacity of systems to the detriment of understanding systems in terms of crisis theory.

**Habermas’ approach to Marx**

Habermas argues that an analysis of present day society requires a distinction between system and lifeworld perspectives. He maintains, therefore, that Marx’s conceptual apparatus, which did not incorporate this distinction, is no longer valid. Marx’s inheritance of Hegelian logic meant that he saw ‘the development of the system and the structural transformation of the lifeworld’ (*TCA*, 2, 339) as two moments of the same process. For this reason, Marx interpreted the difference between statements about system and lifeworld in merely semantic, rather than substantive, terms. In Habermas’ view, Marx sees conflicts in interaction and economic dynamics as one and the same thing. For Marx, the capitalist

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10 McCarthy (1991, 119) notes that by ‘the 1940s Horkheimer and Adorno had in effect abandoned Marx for Weber on the question of the emancipatory potential of modern rationality’. 
system is nothing more than an obscure form of class conflict which acquires the semblance of a self-regulating system (*TCA*, 2, 339). There is, in reality, no system as such, independent of the lifeworld.

Habermas argues that an adequate theory of rationalization makes clear why this approach is fundamentally mistaken. Such a theory begins to take shape when the premises of the philosophy of the subject are abandoned. That philosophy brings with it the idea of an ethical totality or macro-level subject which evolves, in history, by dividing itself against itself (capitalism) only to then reabsorb the fragmented elements within a higher-level totality or synthesis (socialism). In Habermas’ view, this conception of diremption followed by dialectical integration cannot be sustained: ‘systems theory and action theory can be viewed as the *disjecta membra* of th[e] Hegelian-Marxist heritage’ (*TCA*, 2, 202).

He argues that once we replace the conception of a species-subject with the identity and validity structures inherent within linguistic communication, we encounter a theory of rationalization which can posit no ethical totality standing behind historical processes as a guarantee. It can refer only to the gradual realization of the *formal conditions* of communicative autonomy. In order to develop, these formal conditions need to be released from the burdens of material reproduction.

This [Marx’s] interpretation excludes from the start the question of whether the systemic interconnection of the capitalist economy and the modern state administration do not also represent a higher and evolutionarily advantageous level of integration by comparison to traditional societies. Marx conceives of capitalist society so strongly as a totality that he fails to recognize the *intrinsic* evolutionary value that media-steered subsystems possess. He does not see that the differentiation of the state apparatus and the economy also represents a higher level of system differentiation, which simultaneously opens up new steering possibilities and forces a reorganization of the old, feudal, class relationships. The significance of this level of integration goes beyond the institutionalization of a new class relationship (*TCA*, 2, 339).

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11 Earlier in his career, Habermas had maintained exactly the opposite (*TP*, 205).
Habermas wishes to distinguish a new level of ‘systemic differentiation’ from its class-specific effects. He argues that the institutional foundations of economy and state are not identical with private ownership of the means of production. On the contrary, as the relatively advanced economies of erstwhile socialist and communist regimes have demonstrated, high levels of systemic differentiation can coexist with a variety of different property relationships. Habermas maintains that ‘every modern society, whatever its class structure, has to exhibit a high degree of structural differentiation’ (TCA, 2, 340).

Habermas’ theses on Marx can be clarified if we approach these theoretical issues in explicitly political terms. For, as Arnason (1991, 194) argues, ‘Habermas’s simplifying reconstruction of modernity is based on a specific combination of conceptions from action and systems theory; the question thus arises as to which underlying assumptions and prior decisions have been encoded in these’. Firstly, he is arguing that a totalistic revolution is both unlikely and undesirable for modern societies. Interventions into systems cannot hope to substantially reduce their level of complexity without regression. In addition, the unintended consequences of this kind of interference are unforeseeable and should be approached with great caution. Habermas argues that this ‘must make the juste milieu appear more and more worth preserving, even in the eyes of those who have not given up the expectation of a long-term revolutionary transformation (‘Rmc’, 223).

Secondly, Habermas is trying to differentiate two versions of radical social democratic reformism on normative grounds. He is committed to a social democracy which fundamentally questions the game rules of capitalist society. He argues for a politics that is interested in the ‘grammar of forms of life’ rather than ‘distributional problems (TCA, 2, 392). This is in contrast to a social democracy which moves within a discourse of production and distribution and argues only for more material equality (TCA, 1, xliii; NC, 48-70). For Habermas, distributional issues have become less important and they are, in any case, only a basis upon which a rational society can grow. If we do not distinguish properly between system and lifeworld, these normative distinctions will not be grasped. Habermas argues that because Marx is tied to the utopian images of reconciliation drawn from the philosophy of the subject, he is unable to appreciate the value of modern lifeworlds.
At the stage of posttraditional forms of life, the pain that the separation of culture, society, and personality also causes those who grow into modern societies and form their identities within them counts as a process of individuation and not alienation. In an extensively rationalized lifeworld, reification can be measured only against the conditions of communicative sociation, and not against the nostalgically loaded, frequently romanticized past of premodern forms of life (TCA, 2, 341-2).

Thirdly, and finally, Habermas is attempting to further rid theory of traces of the philosophy of the subject insofar as it searches for an addressee that is supposed to play a world-historical role. He shifts political attention away from the question of political actors to questions of important political issues which may be engaged by a variety of groups. Habermas argues that the colonization of the lifeworld gives rise to a number of protest potentials, both for resistance and withdrawal (TCA, 2, 391-6). In Marx, however, there was a close connection between statements about systemic mechanisms and those concerning interaction between classes. This enabled the theorist to link issues and addressees together. Because, for Marx, systemic dynamics and interaction conflicts are one and the same process looked at from different points of view, the scientific diagnosis of economic crisis could lead, ‘with the aid of certain empirical hypotheses’ (TCA, 2, 337), to theorems about the trajectory of class struggle. For Habermas, as seen in chapter three, such a technical and dogmatic relation of theory to practice is invalid today, both for systematic and normative reasons.

In general, then, specific political concerns guide Habermas’ emphasis upon the functional and evolutionary significance of systems in contrast to their crisis-ridden aspects. He still recognizes that systems contain contradictions and crises. Nevertheless, this does not serve as a guide to the analysis as it seemed to do in Legitimation Crisis. A crisis-theoretical approach is, instead, ‘added on’ to an investigation formed from a very different point of view. Habermas emphasizes the progressiveness of essentially undemocratic market processes and administrative processes, by focusing upon the way in which steering media ease the burdens on communication and free it up for other purposes. He even argues that the functions of material reproduction can sometimes be ‘painless’ (TCA, 2, 375)
transferred over to systems media. He maintains that the systemic absorption of the lifeworld has

been successful in overriding the defensive reaction of those affected so long as it was primarily a question of transferring material reproduction of the lifeworld … . Along the front between system and lifeworld, the lifeworld evidently offers stubborn and possibly successful resistance only when functions of symbolic reproduction are in question (TCA, 2, 351).

We may ask, in this light, what all the conflicts regarding the creation of a capitalist labour market 200 years ago, and which continue on to this day, are all about? Karl Polanyi’s (1944) account of the ‘great transformation’ in modern life, for example, provides an interesting contrast to Habermas’ interpretation of history. In addition, the more recent resurfacing of distributional conflicts across the advanced capitalist world raises further questions for Habermas’ analysis (Thompson 1984, 301-2).12

I would like to explore the question as to which of two points of view should have priority, the ‘functional’ or the ‘crisis-ridden’? How fundamental must the internal contradictions of systems be if they are to be privileged over a functional, evolutionary perspective? Can they be understood within a more encompassing systems-theoretical approach? An interesting comment from *Theory and Practice* provides a guide to thinking about an answer. Habermas states that

a prior understanding originating in interested experience always infiltrates the fundamental concepts of the theoretical system … . [These] interests which direct knowledge must be brought under control, they must be legitimized as objective interests … . Whether the theory of social integration (arising out of the experience of the insecurity produced by social crises) seeks to understand the social system as a structure of a harmoniously equalized and enduring order, or whether the theory of social conflict (arising out of the experience of how deceptive the security of

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12 In general, I question Habermas’ apparent unwillingness to identify systemic regulation of material reproduction as a colonization of the lifeworld as well. Surely, it also affects symbolic reproduction, even of post-traditional lifeworlds, by fragmenting workers’ lives and suppressing the development of capacities for political (and cultural) participation.
compulsive political integration can be) seeks to understand that same system as an association of domination kept open and in flux by internal oppositions – no matter which approach is chosen, *an anticipatory interpretation of society as a whole* always enters into the selection of the fundamental categories. Significantly, this is a prior understanding of how the society is and, at the same time, of how it ought to be – for the interested experience of a situation in which one lives separates the ‘is’ from the ‘ought’ just as little as it dissects what it experiences into facts, on the one hand, and norms, on the other (*TP*, 210, emphasis added).

I would like to use this comment as a way of questioning Habermas’ application of systems theory. Why does he emphasize the importance of systems for societal integration? Are the reasons he puts forward convincing? I now turn to a discussion of these questions.

*Rationality and irrationality*

Habermas argues that systems theory is essential for understanding the conditions of social order. This has been explained in chapter four. It is necessary because action theory cannot take into account the whole range of factors relevant for the coordination of social action. In particular, Habermas contends that action theory fails to comprehend the systematic interconnection of the unintended consequences of actions. While action theory focuses upon the meaning of an action to an actor, systems theory examines the objective consequences of a system of activities which may or may not be obvious to the actors themselves. Many of Habermas’ critics acknowledge that a theoretical framework is required to understand meaning which transcends the conscious intentions of subjects. This is especially clear in modern societies where the significance of everyday action for the social system as a whole cannot be understood from the participant’s perspective. A point of view is required which is able to grasp the counterintuitive workings of society. These critics question, nonetheless, Habermas’ decision to use systems theory to provide a basis for understanding such objective meaning (Honneth 1991; Joas 1991, 105-6; McCarthy 1991, 130-7).

I argue that the main problem is Habermas’ inclination to identify the unintended consequences of action too immediately with the rational, evolutionary role of systems. He
interprets what goes on behind the backs of subjects as processes which perform a necessary and valuable function. The question then becomes, can Habermas attribute to systems an objective, problem-solving capacity? Habermas’ critique of systems theory in his earlier work implied that such an attribution is not possible. This critique maintained that unlike in the natural sciences, functionalist analysis encounters an insurmountable problem in the social sciences. The social theorist is provided with no clear and objective value around which systems functioning is oriented. Indeed, he or she has no unambiguous means for identifying the very structures and content of a social system. In the study of biological organisms, the relevant criteria are definite: biological systems can be identified precisely in terms of spatial parameters and their goal-values can be unequivocally described as the interest in self-preservation. Insofar as domains of social life seem to take on the characteristics of systems, there exist no similarly definite criteria. It is not only difficult to identify the ‘goal states’ of systems but their ‘boundaries’ and ‘internal structures’ are also blurred (OLSS 82-5; LC, 2-3). This places severe restrictions on the application of a systems approach in the social sciences. Habermas had argued that the postulation of an objective or functional need conceals the fact that any delimitation of social systems is an arbitrary stipulation.

Habermas concluded, in these earlier reflections, that the operations of systems cannot be separated from the interpretations of the participants within them. Systemic characteristics can only be defined by the theorist through a process of hermeneutic clarification. The functional significance of social processes cannot be measured against an objective scientific standard but only with respect to the norms through which they have been legitimized. Even then, as Habermas had also claimed, these guiding norms invariably contain ideological components. He emphasized that it is these ideological elements which take on an objective meaning. They transcend the motives of action and compensate for the fact that the exigencies of material reproduction prohibit the full realization of human autonomy. ‘[S]ocial action is the combined result of reactive compulsions and meaningful interactions’ (OLSS, 88). Ideologies perform a ‘rationalizing’ rather than ‘rational’ function. They protect the social order from criticism by offering legitimations of action which have not been communicatively agreed to. A critical theory of society cannot,

13 As will be seen further below, this approach reinforces Habermas’ tendency to overlook the role of ideological suppression.
therefore, rest content with social conventions as the normative foundation of analysis. The only ‘ultimate’ perspective is the idea of communicative autonomy: ‘the meaning in terms of which the functionality of social processes is measured is … linked to the idea of a communication free from domination’ (OLSS, 87). If Habermas’ tremendous work on the normative foundations of critical theory is to have any meaning, surely he must maintain that this is the primary point of view. He had emphasized this clearly in the account of individual, psychological development. It is not a question of the analyst imposing a definition of normality upon the patient and manipulating them so as to conform with this standard. Patients must understand the relevance of their current beliefs and dispositions in relation to the ideal of moral autonomy. After all, the practical presupposition of analysis is that the patient is blocked from furthering their own self-realization. Similarly, at the level of society, Habermas had earlier stressed that social scientific analysis only arises out of an interest in such emancipatory ideals (OLSS, 188).

Habermas abandons this point of view when he argues that systems perform a ‘rational’ rather than ‘rationalizing’ function. He expands the theory of the rational devised in terms of communication to include a theory of systems, a theory which posits that systems enhance the possibility of communication. If he were to retain the importance of a theory of the irrational at this level, on the contrary, it would be more consistent to interpret systems as forms of restricted communication which have been ideologically legitimized. The limitations placed upon communication create efficiency and productivity in the domain of cognitive-instrumental validity. Nonetheless, this does not point to the existence of an intrinsically teleological sphere of action. As Joas (1991, 106) points out, ‘integration effected by means of the results of action can mean not the interconnecting of the actors through all the results of action, but merely the definition of certain kinds of results that are recorded as legitimate’. In turn, this definition is determined by powerful social interests (Giddens 1976). The additional claim of ‘objective purposiveness’ is barred by all the criticisms that Habermas earlier laid out.14

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14 Theorists such as Block (1987, 1990) and Pixley (1993) argue that Habermas’ systems approach ends up playing into the hands of a conservative politics and the call to wind back the state’s role in economic processes. The idea that the economy is a ‘system’ resembles neo-classical and neo-liberal claims which mask the fact that political institutions guide and control economic processes. This leads to the thesis, evident in Habermas’ Legitimation Crisis, that there is a zero-sum game between ‘legitimation’ and ‘accumulation’. The conclusion drawn from this is that progressive politics should relinquish the discourse of ‘markets versus states’ and focus on the ‘symbolic’, rather than ‘material’, issues confronting the lifeworld (see also TCA, I, xliii).
It should be noted that, at stages in his argumentation, Habermas maintains that action theory is primary for the construction of social theory. Systems first need to be institutionalized in the lifeworld, they need to be rendered legitimate so as to take effect. He argues that ‘the lifeworld remains the subsystem that defines the pattern of the social system as a whole’ (TCA, 2, 154). At the same time, nonetheless, he then examines systems independently of the lifeworld. The central motive behind his assertion of the primacy of action theory is that a systems analysis cannot apply to the whole of society, as it does for thinkers such as Luhmann (Bausch 1997). But this does not deflect the criticism that systems cannot possess any objective meaning whatsoever. It merely confines objective meaning within certain parameters. If we interpret what Habermas designates as systems in terms of restricted patterns of communication, however, then the scope for the lifeworld and action theory would be considerably enlarged. We could encompass money and power within an explanation of how open communication is suppressed.

We may observe, here, a general tendency for Habermas to abandon the intersubjectivist foundations of his theory. As noted in chapter four, he insists that critical theory can only acquire knowledge from the point of view of a reflective participant in argumentation. In the course of his own discourse, Habermas slips over these supposedly immutable boundaries into an ‘observer perspective’. In the mature analysis, systems lose the quality of unconsciousness they had in the earlier work and assume an objectively rational function. They compensate, in the same way that the ‘invisible hand’ did for early liberal theorists, for the limited cognitive and moral capacities of human beings. I have discussed this theme of epistemic limitations in chapter two, in relation to the contemporary Left’s revisionism and its incorporation of ideas from the liberal tradition. This can be juxtaposed with the further clarification, just provided, of the political reasons for Habermas’ adoption of systems theory. His emphasis upon the functionalism of systemic media might be compared with the political pressure experienced by liberal democratic theorists, and identified by C. B. MacPherson, to defend an existing reality against alternatives. Habermas has in mind revolutionary approaches to the critique of society in his

15 The nub of Habermas’ critique of Parsons is to demonstrate that the latter failed to acknowledge the primacy of action theory, that systems concepts have a ‘methodologically derivative status’ (TCA, 2, 204-34).
16 This occurs even in relation to his understanding of the lifeworld as Joas (1991, 115-6) points out.
incorporation of systems theory. He thinks that existing institutions deserve more recognition than some critics are prepared to give.

Habermas’ political motivations may be justifiable in light of his personal and political experiences. These motivations mitigate against, nevertheless, his reconstructive approach to theory. In the domain of moral theory, he has consistently argued against theorists such as Rawls that philosophy can arbitrate upon anything more than the moral point of view (Habermas 1995). For Habermas, the chief function of philosophy is ‘to refute value scepticism. What it cannot do is make any kind of substantive contribution’ (MCCA, 211). The preconceptions of morality which one gains from living in a society must be identified and extricated in the reconstructive process. It must be left up to the participants themselves to decide questions of a more substantial kind. It was noted earlier that this restriction of the scope of philosophy is precisely Habermas’ strategy of making room for social theory. What is gained in this way, however, seems to be then lost through his elaboration of this social theory. Habermas makes room for the participants to decide for themselves only to close it again by focusing upon the evolutionary significance of systems. Habermas insists that, unlike Marx, we must not theoretically pre-judge the reificatory effects of systems. Whether or not processes of real abstraction damage lifeworld structures must be left to an empirical investigation (TCA, 2, 375). In this critique of Marx, Habermas hardly recognizes the dogmatism he himself is imposing from the other side, as it were. I would like to argue that his justification of systems theory betrays a similar kind of prejudice to the one he identifies in Rawls. Both preempt questions which can only be decided in practice. The next section considers a way in which Habermas could have avoided this problem.

An alternative approach

In this section, I explore an alternative approach to understanding the objective meaning of history. It is argued that this approach is present within Habermas’ work as the idea of the ‘causality of fate’ or ‘dialectic of the moral life’. I maintain that a consistent application of this notion would provide Habermas with a better way of carrying through the normative foundations of his work into the construction of social theory. That is, it would enable him to develop a stronger theory of the irrational which would complement his theory of the rational. The causality of fate conceptualizes the element of the irrational in historical
development compared to systems theory’s focus upon the rational. It will be argued that it represents a way of addressing the questions of crisis and prudence which are central to the dimension of critique as crisis theory.

As we have seen, Habermas argues that individuals are dependent on a fragile network of intersubjectivity for the maintenance of their sense of self. Identity is formed and reproduced through everyday interaction. The quality of interaction determines the stability of individual identity. When this supportive framework is disrupted in some way, individuals immediately feel the repercussions. Communicative structures represent a net within which all humans are linked together. The effects of isolated disturbances spread out radially in all directions along connecting pathways. Damaged communicative fabrics are inhabited by unstable individuals. For Habermas, these disturbances explain, at the level of individual psychology, neurotic symptoms and suffering in general. The palpable effects resulting from the production of irrationality call out for redemption in terms of a ‘passion for critique’ or ‘yearning’ to overcome them. At the societal level, structurally identical phenomena can be observed. Habermas describes the overarching conceptual framework in which they can be understood in terms of Hegel’s idea of the ‘causality of fate’ or ‘dialectic of the moral life’ (TP, 148; PDM, 28-9):

In his fragment on the spirit of Christianity, Hegel unfolds the dialectic of the moral life through the example of the punishment that befalls one who destroys a moral totality. The ‘criminal’ annuls the complementarity of unconstrained communication and the reciprocal gratification of needs by putting himself as an individual in place of the totality. In so doing he sets off a process of fate that turns upon him. The struggle ignited between the conflicting parties and the hostility against the other who has been injured and oppressed render perceptible the lost complementarity and past friendship. The criminal is confronted with the negating power of his past life. He experiences his guilt. The guilty one must suffer under the violence of the repressed and sundered life, which he has himself provoked, until he experiences in the repression of the other’s life the deficiency of his own, and, in his turning away from the other subject, his alienation from himself. This causality of fate is ruled by the power of the suppressed life. The latter
can only be reconciled if the experience of the negativity of the sundered life gives rise to yearning for what has been lost and compels the guilty one to identify with the existence of the other, against which he is struggling, as that which he is denying in his own. Then both parties recognize their rigidified position in relation to each other as the result of detachment and abstraction from their common life context. And in the latter, the dialogic relation of recognizing oneself in the other, they experience the common ground of their existence (KHI, 56).

This phenomenon can also be elaborated with the concept of ‘performative contradiction’ (Jay 1992). In arguments with poststructuralists as well as moral skeptics Habermas has used this idea to justify a universalistic rationality and cognitivist concept of morality. Performative contradiction refers to the relationship between the locutionary and illocutionary, or constative and performative levels of communication (MCCA, 80). Habermas insists that theorists such as Foucault put forward claims which are contradicted by the presuppositions logically entailed in making those claims. In particular, Foucault makes claims to validity at the same time as he rejects the idea that there are such things as validity claims. According to Habermas, Foucault asserts, on one level, that all claims to knowledge actually manifest a will to power. If all claims represent a will to power, however, Foucault necessarily destroys the value of his own assertions.

When restricted in this way, the concept of performative contradiction has primary value at an intellectual level. Its focus is upon validity claims and the presuppositions involved in making assertions and counterassertions in the practice of argumentation. Habermas contends that poststructuralists and moral skeptics are disregarding fundamental and unavoidable elements of the human way of life in mounting their case. They would apparently wish to remove themselves from the language game of humanity as such while still wishing to participate in a debate over whether this is possible at all. In these terms, this concept of contradiction moves within the universe of the first two dimensions of critique. Habermas is seeking to defend and elaborate the self-understanding of the project of modernity. In a more substantive sense, however, the concept of performative contradiction can be employed as a basis of the third model of critique. Here, we are concerned with identity rather than validity claims. By putting him or herself in the place of
the totality, the ‘criminal’ represses structures of reciprocal recognition. Because these structures are constitutive of the criminal’s own personhood, he or she brings into existence a problem for both him or herself and the community.

The assertion of one’s own self at the expense of mutual relationship generates an unconscious element into human existence. In refusing to recognize another, the ‘criminal’ unintentionally refuses to acknowledge him or herself. In Habermas’ words,

The dynamism of fate results … from the disruption of the conditions of symmetry and of the reciprocal dependencies of an intersubjectively constituted life-context, where one part isolates itself and hence also alienates all other parts from itself and their common life. This act of tearing loose from an intersubjectively shared lifeworld is what first generates a subject-object relationship (PDM, 29).

A subject-object relationship introduces an unconscious element because the interaction system is no longer explicitly regulated by norms. Communication between individuals is consensual, free and autonomous only when motives and intentions of individuals can be articulated and expressed consciously in the form of norms. It is at this point that Habermas’ stress on two different kinds of freedom, discussed in chapter four, is important. The deep scarring of communicative relationships in modern societies points to the predominance of subject-object relationships and a corresponding understanding of freedom. Alienated from a common life, subjects get the impression that freedom lies in the direction of expanding one’s strategic power over others. This understanding only reinforces the initial repression of the conditions of possibility of one’s own sense of identity. It serves to exclude reciprocal structures in which one could reconcile with others and with oneself. The problem is that what is required to restore conscious regulation and one’s identity now appears to be a sacrifice of one’s own interests. This is despite the fact that those interests are themselves distorted, the product of the lack of secure identity itself. If this can be overcome, one learns, again, how to see oneself through the eyes of the other and one thereby regains an intersubjective capacity for self-control and self-understanding. It is the deep-seated prejudice ingrained within consciousness by subject-object relationships which systematically obstructs this different path of development. It is on this
disrupted *identity* basis that there derives a focus, in modern consciousness, upon the cognitive instrumental claim to *validity* alone.

In Habermas’ mature work, the analysis of the irrational tends to be confined to the level of validity. He mobilizes ‘performative contradiction’ in arguments with other philosophers rather than in his social theory as well. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, by contrast, he considered in more detail the implications of crisis at the level of identity. Habermas’ concern was with a critique of Marx. Habermas’ criticism of Marx in that publication (as well as others) was the latter’s failure to recognize the categorical differences between instrumental and communicative action. This failure, according to Habermas, leads to the false conception that emancipation can be gained through a technical application of theory and thus the perpetuation of the scientistic prejudice just mentioned. Habermas argues that the dialectic of the moral life could have provided Marx with a systematic basis upon which to avoid this misunderstanding. This dialectic makes clear that historical progress occurs not only through the increasing productivity of labour but also in the medium of class conflict or a ‘struggle for recognition’ (*KHI*, 58). In this struggle, ideologies are overcome through reflection in contrast to limited technical capacities being transcended by an expansion in the forces of production. Ideologies are the result of systematically distorted communication. They fix the identity of subjects within a set of rigid behavioural patterns. It is necessary, as seen earlier, to open up need interpretations to discursive change in order to overcome this. Only a dissolution of these inflexible patterns of identity formation for both classes of society can enable an examination of problems, including economic ones, outside the frame of reference defined by the unconscious, by the banishment of certain need interpretations. The validity claims of discourse can then come into a freer interplay with one another. According to Habermas,

Marx could have employed this model and constructed the disproportional appropriation of the surplus product, which has class antagonism as its consequence, as a ‘crime’. The punitive causality of fate is executed upon the rulers as class struggle coming to a head in revolutions. Revolutionary violence reconciles the disunited parties by abolishing the alienation of class antagonism that set in with the repression of initial morality (*KHI*, 57).
Of course, it is possible to retain this interpretation without the revolutionary connotations or the fusion of the logic of development with its dynamics. The idea then arises that an initial repression of moral relationships continues to make its power felt until it is reversed, whether through revolution or otherwise. In the same way as the unconscious wreaks havoc at the individual level, the ‘capitalistic unconscious’ continues to subject material reproduction to laws outside consciousness until these laws are superseded by communicative steering mechanisms. There need be no suggestion that these laws will be superseded but only that they must continue to operate in the absence of communicative autonomy. The important point, in this approach, is that systems represent semi-permanent manifestations of disrupted relations of recognition. This approach was evident in Habermas’ earlier work in which he privileged social psychology over an abstract, theoretical sociology like systems theory:

A sociology that accepts meaning as a basic concept cannot abstract the social system from structures of personality; it is always also social psychology. The system of institutions must be grasped in terms of the imposed repression of needs and of the scope for possible individualization, just as personality structures must be grasped in determinations of the institutional framework and of role qualifications (cited in McCarthy 1984, 334).

In this approach, the structures of systems are not separated from structures of culture, society and personality. They represent an underdeveloped moral consciousness rather than an evolutionarily superior steering mechanism.

In this reading, the further extension of systems into core domains of the lifeworld can be seen as a gradual and persistent working out of the causality of fate. This renders unnecessary Habermas’ foray into an arbitrary evaluation of the point at which systemic complexity becomes a problem. The failure to redeem the initial violation of communicative relationships has a cumulative effect as subjects move further and further away from an intersubjectivist understanding of autonomy. Habermas unintentionally reinforces this alienation from communicative relationships. By emphasizing the objective purposefulness of systems, he fails to make clear the normative standard from which their
functionality should always be assessed: communication free from domination (see also Cooke 1994, 144-6). It is only with this that he is forced to engage in constructive theorizing, on behalf of the ‘sons and daughters of modernity’ (TCA, 2, 397), about how much systemic regulation we should accept. A consistent adoption of the causality of fate, however, would allow Habermas to adopt a strictly reconstructive approach.

**Theoretically guided political practice**

The argument of this chapter is that adopting the causality of fate, as a basis for elaborating Habermas’ underdeveloped theory of the irrational, does not only overcome the problems associated with his application of systems theory (‘Criticism 3b’). It also avoids what are held to be related complications with his action theory (‘Criticism 3a’). These complications are the concern of this section of the chapter. They represent the final set of issues in my examination of whether and how Habermas’ mature work can be expanded to acknowledge the importance of ‘theoretically guided practice’.

In his early work, Habermas put forward the idea of an emancipatory cognitive-interest which gives rise to a particular kind of (critical) theory, a theory that can only be confirmed by the practice leading from it. Its criterion of ‘success’ is the continuation of an interrupted self-formative process. Insofar as he has let go of the causality of fate as a guiding model, Habermas replaces this relation between theory and practice with a contrast between theory and empirical research. The ‘reconstructive sciences’ are the means for composing a flexible theoretical framework which can be used as a guide to test, empirically, individual hypotheses. Habermas is interested in elaborating and defending a theory against other theories. As he says in the preface to *The Theory of Communicative Action*, ‘I have written this book for those who have a professional interest in the foundations of social theory’ (TCA, 1, xlv).

In contrast to playing the role of ‘kick-starting’ a stalled process of self-development, Habermas’ mature concept of theory is directed toward an analysis of an apparently permanent reality, as in the natural sciences. The thesis of a significant difference between philosophy and science, which Habermas strenuously argued for in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, has since given way to a close resemblance (White 1988, 130-1, 174-5, fn 11).
Many authors have commented upon this shift in Habermas’ approach (see, for example, Beilharz 1995, 48, 52, 63-4; Giddens 1982, 159-60; Honneth 1991, xxx; Howard 1974; McCarthy 1982, 57-8; 1992, 139). They argue that the emphasis upon theory-research means that an overall problem with Habermas’ reconstruction of history is its lack of attention to the role of historical actors. In particular, the idea of historical progress occurring in reaction to ‘system problems’ obscures the role of social movements in social change (Honneth and Joas 1988, 166; Honneth 1995; Mouzelis 1992, 282-4). In contrast to understanding how subjective experiences of injustice are connected with political struggle, this conception suits the categories of an abstract, scientific theory. To be sure, Habermas acknowledges the role of social movements. For example, he argues that

the gradual embodiment of moral principles in concrete forms of life is not something that can safely be left to Hegel’s absolute spirit. Rather, it is chiefly a function of collective efforts and sacrifices made by sociopolitical movements. Philosophy would do well to avoid haughtily dismissing these movements and the larger historical dimension from which they spring (MCCA, 208).

In the final pages of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, too, Habermas refers to the practical foundations of his theory in lifeworld experiences of systemic colonization (*TCA*, 2, 401-3). These remarks hardly represent, nevertheless, systematic guides to theory construction. Habermas does not methodically incorporate the concept of social struggle. Because of this, Benhabib (1986, 330-1) argues that Habermas’ arch enemy – the philosophy of the subject – ends up reappearing in the account of historical development. Habermas’ reconstruction

does not remain merely an empirically fruitful research hypothesis, but assumes the role of a philosophical narrative of the formative history of the subject of history. Much like Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, reconstructions then begin to speak in the name of a fictional collective ‘we’ from whose standpoint the story of history is told.
Of course, we may ask what or whose perspective this ‘we’ constitutes.\(^{17}\)

In this section, I explore how Habermas could have retained a stronger connection between theory and practice by using the model of the causality of fate. The assumption is that theory and practice can be connected satisfactorily only within the framework of a theory of the irrational. The causality of fate, as seen above, provides such a framework. It is argued that elements of Habermas’ action theory mitigate against the application of this framework. Firstly, I comment upon the rationalistic bias in his account of the way in which the relation between theory and practice changes in history. Habermas’ action theory fails to acknowledge the strategic basis of communicative power. This means that the irrational foundations of a rational practice are not taken into account. Secondly, I consider the general problem of how the political decisions of social movements can be theoretically oriented. I argue that such guidance requires a theory of the irrational as a substantive basis. Only with this, it is suggested, can the category of ‘strategic action with an emancipatory purpose’, enunciated in Habermas’ earlier work, be validated.

*The strategic basis of communicative power*

There is a rationalistic bias in Habermas’ account of how the relationship between theory and practice changes in the course of history. Quentin Skinner (1982) has been one of the harsher critics. Skinner argues that Habermas’ emphasis upon discourse as a means to gain enlightenment obscures the way in which concrete struggles conducted in strategic fashion prepare the way for discourse in the first place. He goes so far as to compare Habermas with Martin Luther.

Reading Habermas is extraordinarily like reading Luther … . Both insist that our wills are enslaved by our unregenerate way of life. Both emphasize that in consequence we cannot see, except through a glass, darkly, the true character of our alienated condition. Both promise that a change of heart will release us from our present bondage and bring us to a state of perfect liberty. Above all, both … trust …

\(^{17}\) This relates to a general point about the fetishism of concepts in the analysis of social processes (see Misgeld 1985; Smith 1974).
the healing properties of the Word (or discourse, as Habermas prefers to call it) … .

[It] is disconcerting to see how far his assumptions and vocabulary merely recall a traditional story of deliverance in secular modern dress. We are surely entitled to something more rigorous from our social philosophers than a continuation of Protestantism by other means (Skinner 1982, 38).

Skinner’s complaint is overstated but does pinpoint a problem within Habermas’ theory. At the beginning of chapter four, we noted Habermas’ introduction of a distinction between action and discourse. In contrast to the early work, his later writings have been concerned with discourse rather than action. Habermas argues that with this distinction, ‘the normative question concerning the relation of theory and praxis can be given a surprisingly descriptive aspect’ (TP, 25). He is referring to the institutionalization of discourse in the course of history. The emergence of scientific, legal and artistic institutions as well as the public sphere mean that practice itself becomes theoreticized. Political action becomes less an affair of strategic calculation and is able to take on the characteristics of rational discussion.

It is not, however, simply a distinction between action and discourse which supports this conception of history. The introduction of a dichotomy between communicative and strategic action is also involved (TCA, 1, 286). In making this dichotomy, the issue of political struggle is not high on Habermas’ (1985b, 151) agenda. Rather, he has a traditional sociological interest in mind:

The question: ‘How is social action possible?’ is only the other side of the question: ‘How is a social order possible?’. A theory of action that is to answer these questions must be capable of stating the conditions in which alter can ‘link up’ his actions to those of ego.

A primary motivation guiding Habermas’ theory construction is to maintain, along with Durkheim, Weber and Parsons, that social orders cannot be stable if based upon the aggregation of interlocking interests alone. Normative commitments need to underlie strategic interaction (such as the employment contract) if order is to be possible at all. Habermas argues that the concepts of action theory must be tailored to explaining these
conditions of social order, as suggested in the above passage. For him, ‘[c]onsent and influence are – at least from the perspective of the actor – mutually exclusive mechanisms for coordinating actions’ (Habermas 1985b, 153).

The argument put forward here is that the dichotomy between communicative and strategic action suppresses the role of struggle and conflict in historical progress. I argue that the elements of this dichotomy are connected in two important ways. This section examines the first of these while the next section deals with the other.

One type of connection between communicative and strategic action can be observed when we acknowledge what I call the ‘strategic basis of communicative power’. This idea can be explored using a recent contribution by Claus Offe (1992). Offe has called for a ‘sociologization of the lifeworld’, which involves going beyond Habermas’ abstract formulations and setting out an analysis in terms of concrete institutions and practices. This kind of analysis is important if we are to understand properly Habermas’ claim that the lifeworld is to meet individuals ‘halfway’ in addressing social problems with the rational means of discourse. As we have seen, Habermas acknowledges that individuals cannot do this on their own but must have the support of cultural traditions, institutions and communities. Offe describes three variables that clarify how such a ‘meeting halfway’ might come about. Two refer to Habermas’ characteristic method of argument. Firstly, a rational approach may be promoted by increases in the complexity of the social system. This is the argument briefly described in chapter two with reference to the recent work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. In a ‘risk society’, it becomes a matter of necessity that groups and individuals be included in decision-making processes. There is a functional need for the exercise of moral discretion. Secondly, we can look at the rationalization process of society as a whole to see how it provides structural support to individuals with a post-conventional consciousness. This is the key to Habermas’ understanding in The Theory of Communicative Action. Culture, society and personality evolve in such a way that they assist, more than before, an actor to adopt a rational understanding of social problems and issues. In contrast to the stress on objective need in the functionalist approach, here there is an emphasis upon the internal, motivational perspective. Individuals are encouraged by historical trends to pursue a rational or moral approach as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end.
Offe’s examination of a third approach is of greatest interest in the present context. He argues that the above two conditions of rationality are both too abstract and too weak to understand how moral practice can be practically supported. Offe (1992, 64) refers to the additional requirement that

societal forms of association and structures of collective action … be such that they do not overburden individuals, in the sense of requiring them to take ‘unreasonably’ high risks of falling victim to deceit or exploitation by third parties when following their moral insights in practice.

Such associations and structures are to produce ‘stability and conditions of trust’ (Offe 1992, 83). The important point I wish to emphasize is that Offe makes the seemingly paradoxical claim that strategic influence is a necessary foundation for moral reasoning. If a particular social movement is weak in terms of monetary, legal and other resources, it will face a hostile environment in which its moral integrity will be used against it.

Offe cites an empirical example to support his case. It relates to trade unions and the representation of workers’ interests. He argues that instructive comparisons can be made between how the industrial relations systems of Sweden and the United Kingdom affect the conduct of actors. In the UK, structures of collective bargaining limit the range of issues with which unions can deal to primarily distributive ones. They also divide individual unions from one another and promote inter-union competition. This results in socially and temporally restricted political action. No one union is able to form long-term and broad-ranging commitments because of the inimical environment surrounding them. In Sweden, by contrast, the industrial relations system involves a solidaristic, strong and centralized union movement. This movement addresses a large range of issues, including income and industry policies as well as the welfare state. Offe (1992, 87) argues that this is a system of action ‘in which moral questions concerning the continued development of social conditions according to ambitious standards of solidarity, justice, and responsibility come under the scrutiny not only of labour but also of the public at large, as freely as they do necessarily’ (see also Higgins 1985).
Offe argues that we cannot conclude that other nations should immediately follow Sweden’s example. Getting from ‘here to there’ is far more complex than mere replication. ‘Institutional engineering’ is not a realistic option. What I would like to emphasize, nonetheless, is the general theoretical point that moral action is, paradoxically, dependent upon considerable strategic power. It is only on this condition that unions, for example, can safely exercise moral capacities without being in danger of exposing themselves to serious setbacks and defeats by more powerful opponents.

The dichotomy between communicative and strategic action in Habermas’ account tends to exclude such considerations. His arguments imply that progressive social movements must seek to change their society through communicative means alone, that they have to rely only on communication in the battle against non-communication. For Habermas, democracy and organization are mutually exclusive phenomena. In thinking about the characteristics of democratic public sphere, he states that

> Forms of self-organization strengthen the collective capacity for action. Grassroots organizations, however, may not cross the threshold to the formal organization of independent subsystems. Otherwise they will pay for the indisputable gain in complexity by having organizational goals detached from the orientations and attitudes of their members and dependent instead upon imperatives of maintaining and expanding organizational power (PDM, 364).

The argument presented here is that these hard and fast distinctions can only be maintained from a perspective which emphasizes the rational conditions of social order and action. From a practical point of view, however, important links between the strategic and the communicative come into view. It has been just shown that, on closer inspection, the lifeworld contains elements of both the rational and the irrational, elements which are not necessarily in absolute conflict with one another. Organizational power, in particular, can be a prerequisite for, rather than enemy of, democracy (see also Castles 1981).

Habermas’ emphasis upon the spontaneity and anarchy of the public sphere, then, fails to acknowledge that power structures can be useful rather than pernicious for democracy.
These structures may, in certain circumstances, be a necessary precondition for the exercise of moral reason by subordinate groups. Thus, contrary to Habermas’ account, democratic processes cannot be contrasted starkly with the supposedly undemocratic organizational features of economies and administrations. White (1988, 140-1) makes the point that

new social movements need the support, at least to some degree, of existing economic and political institutions. It is here that the guiding metaphor of an unending ‘border conflict’ [between system and lifeworld] ceases to be very helpful. Habermas’s view … that new social movements should shy away from large, formal organizations or parties makes it unclear how such movements could gain the sort of support they need from the economic and political systems for the institutional changes they want.

Even when this particular link between strategic and communicative action is recognized, a considerable gap between theory and practice still persists for social movements. In situations in which their strategic influence is limited, how are these movements to act such as to put themselves in a position so that dominant groups are forced to engage in discourse? In the next section, I examine a second type of link between communicative and strategic action with a view to discussing this question. My concern is with how the decisions of such movements, in response to this question, can be rendered prudent with the means of a theory of the irrational.

Strategic action with an emancipatory purpose

I argue that an understanding of the irrational provides social movements with a guide in the struggle with and against others, a guide which does not reduce their actions to technical ones. In chapter three, ‘critique as crisis theory’ was introduced as the way in which such an understanding can be generated. It gives rise to the category of ‘strategic action with an emancipatory purpose’. This category of action links the short- and long-term aspects of political struggle. The contention is that Habermas does not establish a sound basis upon which this linking can occur. The argument is set out as follows.
Habermas’ dichotomy between strategic and communicative action is guided by an interest in establishing the priority of the latter, of the practical over the technical. This is part of his attempt to move the foundations of critical theory from the philosophy of the subject into a theory of communication. It is argued that this leads him to reach questionable conclusions about the role of ideology in modern societies. For Habermas, the critique of ideology is only possible on the basis of a holistic conception of the good life. Such holistic conceptions are connected with the philosophy of the subject. Habermas maintains that only a formal conception of reason is permitted in modernity. It is not possible to define an understanding of the good life in universalistic terms. Habermas seems to conclude from these philosophical considerations that ideology is no longer empirically operative in modern societies. I argue that this conclusion is driven by the dynamics of his attempt to privilege the practical over the technical rather than by adequate empirical evaluation. The critique of ideology provides a basis for political action which Habermas thinks cannot be sustained. I argue that if we allow for the possibility that ideologies are still important, even if not at the grand level of earlier conceptions, their critique is relevant to decision-making processes in which social movements must choose the most prudent strategy. In making this case, I rely on what I think is an example of these kinds of considerations in a recent contribution by Nancy Fraser (1995).

Habermas’ understanding of ideology underwent changes in light of the modifications to the integrated framework of critique presented in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. These issues were discussed in chapter three, where his introduction of a distinction between ‘rational reconstruction’ and ‘critical self-reflection’ was noted. The purpose of this distinction is to make clear that critical-self reflection, or the critique of ideology, cannot be applied to the human species as a whole without subscribing to the untenable assumption of a ‘species-subject’. Habermas maintains that only groups and individuals succumb to ideological suppression since worldviews exist in the particular. Insofar as the species forms the object of analysis, there can only be a rational reconstruction of universal competences.

This does not exhaust the limitations Habermas imposes upon critical self-reflection. He has also argued consistently that it is inapplicable to the members of the group: ‘advanced capitalist societies’. Habermas supports his case with a theory of social evolution first
announced in *Toward a Rational Society*. I will retrace briefly the steps in his argument. In its primitive and traditional forms, Habermas contends, culture performs an ‘ideological’ function. It justifies unequal life chances. The unequal distribution of wealth must be legitimated if class societies are to be stable. In particular, forms of legitimation justify a scope for strategic action in which power is unevenly distributed: they vindicate one class’ power over another. The scope for legitimate strategic action is defined in relation to an other worldly context. Strategic action is regulated according to the dictates of a metaphysical order of things. The relevant worldviews

answer the central questions of men’s collective existence and of individual life history. Their *themes* are justice and freedom, violence and oppression, happiness and gratification, poverty, illness, and death. Their *categories* are victory and defeat, love and hate, salvation and damnation. Their *logic* accords with the grammar of systematically distorted communication and with the fateful causality of dissociated symbols and suppressed motives (*TRS*, 96, emphasis added).

Habermas argues, however, that ‘ideologies’, in the strict sense of the word, emerge only with modern societies. Their legitimating effect is similar to traditional approaches except that they are justified in the categories of science rather than with reference to a metaphysical order (*TRS* 99). Scientific explanations of society, in other words, are what now assume ideological form.

The further evolution of modern societies, in Habermas’ view, surpasses this ‘scientific’ form of ideology. This argument is an element in the idea of the ‘spectre of technocracy’ introduced in chapter two. In late modern societies, for Habermas, the technical interest in instrumental control expands to such an extent that it is no longer a question of the suppression of one class’ interest in favour of another’s. Rather, ‘ethics’ is suppressed as such (*TRS*, 110-1). It is not a question of ideological *delusion* but a *prevention* of practical discourse.

Habermas makes a somewhat different argument, in his later work, which has the same effect, of invalidating the relevance of critical self-reflection to members of modern societies as a whole. He refers to rationalization processes in the dimension of the lifeworld
alone. For Habermas, the rationalization of the lifeworld means that the modern form of understanding ‘becomes so transparent that the communicative practice of everyday life no longer affords any niches for the structural violence of ideologies’ (TCA, 2, 354). Modern ideologies work by intertwining moral and aesthetic claims to validity with cognitive-instrumental ones. Habermas maintains that because the three have now become clearly differentiated from one another, ‘intertwining’ validity claims no longer has delusive effects. He thinks that modern subjects can see through this. In contrast to illusions of meaning, he argues that a functional equivalent for ideology emerges in the form of a lack of meaning. It comes about because differentiated validity claims are torn out of the lifeworld and institutionalized for expert treatment. Habermas retains the idea that the cognitive-instrumental (or technical) claim to validity is dominant because it is not linked up with the aesthetic and moral claims to validity. The targets in his early work were the supposedly widespread ‘ideologies’ of positivism and scientism, which justified the suppression of the practical. The explanation in the later work is that a ‘fragmentation of consciousness’ allows the systemic colonization of the lifeworld to proceed without substantial resistance (TCA, 2, 355-6).

This provides Habermas with yet more reasons for rejecting the orthodox Marxist approach of relating theory to practice, based in the philosophy of the subject. The orthodox approach, in his view, assumed that bourgeois ideals were still effective in guiding institutional and everyday practices. These ideals had manifested themselves, however partly, in a way of life. They ‘entered into the self-understanding and the private life-styles of the bourgeoisie and of an increasingly bourgeois nobility, as well as into the principles of public order’ (TCA, 2, 352). Because these ideals were in contradiction to the reality they supported, critique and a ‘critically transforming practice’ could rely on an unproblematic normative foundation. It was simply a question of confronting actors and institutions with the contrast between their ideals and their practice. This tension between ideal and reality was supposed to guide the dynamic as well as the logic of development. The infusion of ideals within institutions functioned as a ‘utopian potential’ that transcended and negated the existing reality. Habermas argues that it was on this basis that a ‘second generation of ideologies’ (TCA, 2, 353) grew up in modernity, such as anarchism, communism, socialism and fascism. They represented a critique of bourgeois ideology and also had ‘the form of
totalizing conceptions of order’, conceptions which were ‘addressed to the political consciousness of comrades and partners in struggle’ (TCA, 2, 354).

For Habermas, such an approach falsely raises standards, which actually belong to a particular epoch, to the level of universality. The distinction between rational reconstruction and self-reflection is an attempt to make clear that such standards are inappropriate for interpreting earlier phases of history. At the level of the universal, only species-wide competencies of speech and action can be reconstructed. Ideological delusions, by contrast, exist in the particular. But this means the foothold of critical theory is lost, a foothold which Habermas (1989a) had himself relied upon in one of his earliest studies, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

When these bourgeois ideals are cashed in, when the consciousness turns cynical, the commitment to those norms and value orientations that the critique of ideology must presuppose for its appeal to find a hearing becomes defunct. I suggested, therefore, that the normative foundations of the critical theory of society be laid at a deeper level. The theory of communicative action intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices…. Such a tack no longer restricts the search for normative potentials to a formation of the public sphere that was specific to a single epoch (Habermas 1992c, 442; see also ‘Rmc’, 229-32).

For Habermas, this means that the relationship of theory to practice is rendered tenuous. The earlier critique of ideology was part of a search by the philosophy of the subject for an addressee which would realize concrete ideals intrinsic within the historical process. The philosophy of the subject seeks to demonstrate connections between the evolution of social structures and the identities of groups. This is supposed, as in orthodox Marxist analysis, to identify the agent which will precipitate emerging potentialities of historical progress. The philosophy of the subject is defined by a search for the subject which will realize the already identified meaning within history.

Habermas’ communications approach, in which the ideals immanent within history are both formal and abstract, seeks to avoid the ‘destructive’ connotations of such an approach. For Habermas, since theory can no longer rely on holistic interpretations, it is unable to
oppose the ‘true’ to the ‘false’. It cannot identify a solid reference point shared by everyone, in which there is expressed an ideological anticipation of the rational order of things. Instead, theory can merely identify the ways in which the formal requirements of communicative action are suppressed. It must clarify how the only way substantive beliefs can be regarded as valid at all – through processes of argumentation – is blocked. Habermas uses the metaphor of a ‘tangled mobile’ to describe how the interplay of different reasons in everyday communication comes to a standstill in modernity (MCCA, 19). Philosophy’s task is to help set this interplay into motion again by acting as ‘interpreter’ on behalf of the lifeworld. It must make clear that a rational treatment of social issues and problems relies upon moral and aesthetic forms of reasoning, not only cognitive-instrumental kinds. This link with totality is different from the one deriving from the philosophy of the subject in which there is a ‘world picture’. The totality, in Habermas’ communications approach, is the tripartite validity basis of reason which is linked together by the process of redeeming claims through argumentation.

Some distinctions and definitions that Mark Warren (1989) has put forward may help us to understand what Habermas is getting at. Warren distinguishes between three different forms of ideology, only two of which are important here. He describes them as ‘dissimulation’ and ‘reification’. Reification or naturalization involves the misidentification of ‘the causal origins of social phenomena in such a way that they are removed from the realm of possible political action’ (1989, 514). This refers to the traditional function of culture and ideology. Worldviews legitimate inequalities in life chances by suggesting that things simply cannot be otherwise. Warren contrasts this with the mechanism of dissimulation or masking. Here, ideology works by ‘hiding’ unequal relations of power by emphasizing more equal or desirable relations. In this case, certain aspects of reality are highlighted at the expense of others so that a part is conflated with the whole. Ideologies, in this sense, ‘are plausible and effective because they selectively articulate real needs, relations, and potentials’ (Warren 1989, 526). The primary example is a certain use of the abstract and formal legal protections of constitutional democracy. An emphasis upon these protections does not represent a naked lie for they express the need for the security of personal space as a condition of political citizenship. These principles were not valued in pre-democratic, feudal societies. As far as liberal theorists ‘fail to go beyond the images of founding’ (Warren 1989, 528), however, they fail to recognize the various other conditions
of effective citizenship. In particular, the focus on politically guaranteeing negative freedoms does not indicate the more concrete social and economic conditions of freedom. Dissimulating ideologies consist of a myopic vision which suppresses the range of conditions for the realization of ideals.

It is in this sense of dissimulation that Habermas appears to present the idea of a fragmentation of consciousness. Validity claims are torn apart from one another and only the validity of cognitive-instrumental rationality seems capable of redemption. Technical capacities are, of course, important but they are used to exclude the moral and aesthetic dimensions of freedom and autonomy. It is important to note, as Warren (1989, 515) argues, that dissimulations rest upon reification. The former cannot work without the simultaneous operation of the latter. Dissimulation is effective only once need interpretations have already been reified. Once again, the distinction between identity and validity becomes important in evaluating Habermas’ account. To understand why the cognitive-instrumental claim to validity is systematically privileged in modernity, we must refer back to processes of identity formation. Distortion in the structures of reciprocal recognition results in unstable identities. This is what first leads subjects to believe that their interests can be satisfied by the exercise of strategic action. We are back, then, to the operation of the causality of fate.

I have tried to make clear, in an earlier part of the chapter, that Habermas recognizes these links between identity and validity at the level of the theory of the rational. This shields him against those critics who claim that a stronger role for philosophy is required at this level. The argument presented here is that Habermas’ conclusions about the role of ideology in modern society lead to a false evaluation, that the critique of ideology is not important as a guide to political struggle. Habermas seems to think that everything is in front of actors rather than behind their backs. Politics then becomes a matter of more discourse rather than understanding how ideologies continue to deceive people, and how their critique should be conducted in an effort to overcome such deception (Bohman 1986, 1990). It is doubtful, as many critics have argued, whether Habermas’ stress on the fragmentation of consciousness justifiably ignores the continuing role of ideology (Held and Simon 1976, 143; Johnson 1992, 1995; Larrain 1989, 110-11; Thompson 1984, 299-301). On this particular issue, it seems as though Habermas fails to acknowledge his own distinction between the logic and
dynamics of development. Simply because rationalization processes point toward the undermining of ideology does not mean that this has actually happened.

How and to what extent, then, is the critique of ideology important, in a general way, for the guidance of political struggles in contemporary modern societies? As argued in chapter three, this critique is not simply a question of using ‘rational’ standards to identify the ‘irrational’. There is also the task of understanding how the irrational itself works and operates, of seeing how it presents both opportunities for change and difficulties to making such change. I have argued that Habermas’ account of the ‘causality of fate’ provides a theoretical framework for understanding the operation of the irrational in modern society. A deficit in autonomy and rationality leads subjects to acquire distorted understandings of these ideals. They strive for autonomy and rationality in ways which are contradictory. I maintain that an important task confronting a theory which is to guide practice is the clarification of these issues and dilemmas. It is in this sense that I interpret Nancy Fraser’s (1995) recent analysis of contemporary political struggles against injustice. She reflects upon different critiques of injustice (ideology, the irrational) and the associated advantages and disadvantages for the conduct of such struggles. I will now summarize briefly her account in an attempt to further establish the contours of a Habermasian theory of the irrational.

Fraser (1995) erects an analytical framework for understanding general kinds of problems encountered in contemporary political struggles against injustice. This framework comprises two sets of distinctions. The first set refers to two broad categories of injustice. There are, on the one hand, struggles for remedying ‘distributive injustice’ and, on the other hand, those which focus upon ‘cultural injustice’. In the first, Fraser argues that the relevant discourses of struggle revolve around terms such as ‘interest’ and ‘exploitation’. In the second, the concern is with issues like ‘identity’, ‘difference’ and ‘recognition’. The politics of recognition seeks to alter the self-understanding of groups which have been defined in negative ways by the dominant culture. The politics of distribution, meanwhile, attempts to equalize economic opportunities. Fraser is not interested in privileging one type of struggle over the other but is concerned with how the political strategies flowing from them can be contradictory. She wishes to clarify how the two can be combined in such a way that they ‘synergize’ rather than create ‘mutual interference’.
Fraser argues that compatibility between different forms of struggle is important because the two forms of injustice are empirically intertwined in insidious ways. Economic injustices are supported and reinforced by devalued cultural identities of the associated groups. Political strategies which seek to redress this twin dynamic, however, face a dilemma. There is a tension between claims for cultural recognition which aim for specificity and strategies of redistribution which seek group dedifferentiation. Attempts to eradicate economic injustice, for example, often involve undermining group identity, such as the sexual division of labour. Efforts to gain recognition, on the other hand, imply that group identity be reinforced and sustained. Problems result particularly for those groups to which the two forms of injustice apply together. These groups are faced with the paradoxical requirement that they simultaneously claim and deny their specificity. The question is, how can this problem be minimized or, perhaps, be overcome?

Fraser introduces another distinction in her attempt to resolve this question, a distinction which contrasts two general approaches to the critique of injustice. She compares struggles which aim for ‘affirmation’ with those that strive for ‘transformation’. Affirmative strategies seek to correct existing forms of injustice without attacking the underlying structures which produce them. Transformative strategies, on the other hand, aim precisely at the ‘underlying generative framework’. Fraser (1995, 82) emphasizes that the difference between the two represents a contrast between ‘end-state outcomes versus the processes that produce them’ rather than between ‘gradual’ and ‘apocalyptic’ change. The correlation of alternative approaches with the two types of injustice reveal four different political strategies (Table 5.3).

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<th>Affirmation</th>
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<td><strong>Redistribution</strong></td>
<td>the liberal welfare state</td>
<td>socialism</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recognition</strong></td>
<td>mainstream multiculturalism</td>
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Strategies of ‘redistribution’ which are ‘affirmative’ involve the surface reallocation of existing goods to existing groups. They are summed up in what Fraser calls the project of
the ‘liberal welfare state’. These strategies typically involve a ‘socialization of consumption’ rather than a ‘socialization of production’. Similar strategies are evident in the sphere of recognition. For Fraser, they comprise the revaluation of presently devalued identities and can be placed under the category, ‘mainstream multiculturalism’. These strategies accept the binary codes constitutive of identity and seek to revalue that element of the code which has been degraded. ‘Transformative’ strategies, in the case of ‘redistribution’, are placed by Fraser under the category of ‘socialism’. They involve an attempt to undermine the existing relations of production responsible for producing economic outcomes. In the sphere of ‘recognition’, transformation means, for Fraser, ‘deconstruction’. Deconstruction seeks to fundamentally blur the binary structures which produce subsisting identities. As opposed to affirmative strategies, in which there is a revaluation of one part of a binary code, a transformative approach questions the code itself, as to its supposed naturalness and inevitability. The identities of all members of society are, as a result, placed into question.

Fraser argues that a central problem of strategies of affirmation, in both dimensions of injustice, is that they lead to contradictory tendencies in the long-run. With respect to the welfare state, for example, the making of surface reallocations without altering the underlying logic of injustice means that welfare recipients can be marked out ‘as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time, such a class can even come to appear privileged, the recipient of special treatment and undeserved largesse’ (Fraser 1995, 85). They may become the target of discrimination and a backlash by the majority.18 Transformative remedies of redistribution, on the other hand, tend to undermine the structures producing both economic injustice and the associated group differentiation. They may not only equalize economic opportunities but also destroy the division of labour which marks out certain groups from others.

Similar phenomena, argues Fraser, can be observed at the level of recognition. Here, drawing attention to devalued cultural groups can have the effect of ‘pouring oil onto the flames of resentment’ (Fraser 1995, 89). Strategies such as affirmative action can aggravate the initial problem. On the other hand, transformative strategies tend to be more ‘self-

18 On this, Gösta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) study of the stratifying effects of different types of welfare capitalism is also illuminating.
consistent’. By questioning the way in which identity is produced as such, they stress the importance of formal structures of recognition underlying all identity formation. They serve to highlight one of Habermas’ main points, that dominant groups depend upon their subservients as well. Transformative approaches have the additional advantage that they better promote coalition building between disadvantaged groups. By ignoring the ‘superstructural’ manifestations of injustice, a level at which different groups appear to be in conflict, they are able to focus on the fundamental generative mechanisms, in relation to which the disadvantaged can identify a common enemy.

Fraser prefers a strategy, then, in which ‘socialist’ attempts to remedy economic injustice are accompanied by a ‘deconstructive’ approach in the realm of culture. This combination avoids reinforcing the very group differentiations at the basis of injustice. There is, nonetheless, another dilemma she refers to which makes her preferred option difficult to put into practice. This involves the distinction between the short- and long-term of political strategy. In this respect, strategies of affirmation are useful because they can mobilize currently disaffected groups for political action. By drawing attention to an economic class, a sexual group or a racial minority, this politics identifies the addressees it is trying to agitate. The emotional and affective potential attached to experiences of injustice offers an energy basis for action. Transformative strategies, on the other hand, appeal to a more detached approach. They tend not to have a short-term appeal but depend upon the addressees realizing that the short-term benefits associated with affirming their identities are not linked with a more fruitful long-term strategy. Deconstructive and socialist politics is ‘far removed from the immediate interests and identities’ of most of those concerned. If this strategy is to be ‘psychologically and politically feasible’, people will need to be ‘weaned from their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities’ (Fraser 1995, 91).

In conclusion, Fraser’s analysis illustrates both the viability and relevance of a theory of the irrational for political struggle in contemporary modern societies. A theory of the irrational is not simply a question of identifying the irrational with standards of rationality. It also involves understanding how the irrational itself works. This understanding clarifies the issues facing progressive struggles. We might draw parallels, in this respect, between Fraser’s warnings about the politics of affirmation with Freud’s reservations about
accepting the answers of a patient to the constructions of the analyst. For Freud, either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ can be misleading and jeopardize a fundamental recovery in the mental health of the patient. In the ‘battle’ between the rational and irrational, Freud noted that the irrational (resistance, the unconscious) will ‘make use of’ the analyst’s constructions themselves in order to ‘conceal the truth’ (see Freud cited in KHI, 268-9). In an analogous fashion, Fraser has reservations about the politics of affirmation which can be used as a way of further discriminating against subordinate groups. This stress on the need to recognize the long-term problems associated with fruitful short-term strategies does not necessarily make linking the two any easier. It does, however, establish a comprehension of the issues involved.

Habermas’ approach does not extend this far for the reasons advanced above. He assumes that the critique of ideology and injustice must assume an implicit counter-worldview in which a rational and normative order is projected. In her analysis, however, Fraser (1995, 85) points out that both affirmative and transformative strategies rely upon formal and universalistic assumptions. It is not the assumptions which are of importance in her reflections, but the means for achieving them which may produce contradictory results. That is, the issue is what kind of strategic action is most suitable and prudent for achieving emancipatory ideals. This contrasts with Habermas’ resignation that theory, insofar as it deals with general issues and themes, must rest content with being an ‘interpreter’ on behalf of the lifeworld.

**IV Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate that Habermas fails to elaborate an adequate theory of the irrational. It has been shown that the fragments of such a theory are present within his writings but are never developed into a significant element of his understanding of the project of modernity. The consequence of this is that his theory of the rational addresses questions which can only be resolved using a comprehension of the

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19 This does not mean to say that subordinate groups represent the ‘rational’ and dominant groups, who use affirmation against subordinates, are the ‘irrational’. The drawing of analogies between the two situations is only meant to illustrate similarity rather than congruence. At the social and political level, the ‘irrational’ is a structure of misrecognition of which both subordinate and dominant groups are constituent elements.
irrational. I have also sought to indicate how Habermas’ ideas about the ‘causality of fate’ can be used to overcome these problems. In other words, it has been argued that there are resources within Habermas’ own *oeuvre* which make possible a more satisfactory fulfilment of the requirements of the theory of modernity.

Critique as crisis theory is the means for explicating a theory of the irrational. Its purpose is to provide a guide to political practice, to link the short-term and long-term aspects of struggle. There are two steps to completing such a task. First, there needs to be an identification of crisis. Systematic crisis tendencies establish the material preconditions for social and political change. Crises provide opportunities for social movements to intervene in the existing state of affairs. They demonstrate that such movements are not locked out of an air-tight, hegemonic system of things. Second, there needs to be an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages associated with various strategies designed to capitalize on opportunities presented by crises. This involves evaluating different approaches to the critique of ideology or of injustice. Together, these two elements of critique as crisis theory – of crisis and of strategy – form a basis upon which political struggle can be guided.

In the course of the chapter, I have discussed these two elements separately. In both areas I have identified components of Habermas’ work which prevent a satisfactory development of critique as crisis theory. In the case of establishing crisis tendencies, his allegiance to systems theory is problematic. In the case of evaluating strategies, his conclusions about the role of ideology in contemporary circumstances is problematic. I have argued that the causality of fate provides a framework for solving both problems. It establishes, firstly, that modern human life is pervaded by crisis tendencies which manifest themselves in economic, political and cultural terms. Their single origin is in the violation of reciprocal structures of recognition. The causality of fate establishes, secondly, that ideologies emerge from this predicament of crisis. On the one hand, certain ideologies seek to justify the present order of things by articulating the existing and distorted conception of human needs and interests as natural and desirable. On the other hand, various critiques of these ideologies arise which rely upon communicative standards of autonomy and rationality. It is in the realm of these critiques of ideology that questions about prudent political strategy arise.
It should be emphasized that my criticisms of Habermas’ work are directed at a particular aspect of his theory. I have sought to clarify the direction of this criticism using the framework of different requirements of the theory of modernity and associated conceptions of critique. It is in this way, I think, that the longstanding complaint against Habermas’ work – that his writings are not oriented toward the needs and objectives of political struggle – can be sustained at the same time as recognizing the value of the theory in different respects. That is, Habermas’ various distinctions and dichotomies can be understood, from the point of view of the theory of the rational, as important elements in the self-understanding of the project of modernity. These distinctions are important and necessary insofar as this self-understanding is concerned. The same distinctions may be legitimately softened, however, from the point of view of the practical realization of this project. The theories of the rational and the irrational have different political aims and objectives. Thus, the adequacy of one may be accepted without entailing endorsement of the other.