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LIFE-WORLD AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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Abstract

The paper offers a critical review of Habermas's two-volume study entitled Theory of Communicative Action (whose first volume was recently translated into English) with a focus on the two key concepts or themes of "communicative action" and "life-world". After recapitulating in detail Habermas's own presentation of the two themes, the paper turns to a discussion of various quandaries or unresolved issues besetting these concepts both singly and in their mutual relation. Foremost among these quandries are the following: the ambivalent status of communication and language in Habermas's approach; the relation between "communicative" and "teleological" action; the tension between communication (or communicative consensus) and purposive action and its aggravation in the process of modernization and rationalization; the opaque character of the "life-world" (between pehenomenology and ontology); the possibility of sociological "objectification" of the life-world; and the unclear connection between life-world and formal-rational "world concepts". A concluding section explores the implications of these quandaries for Habermas's larger theoretical framework, concentrating particularly on the role of rationality and rationalization, the progressive "colonization" of the life-world, the issue of intersubjectivity, and the eclipse of political praxis.

Resumen

Este trabajo ofrece una revisión crítica del estudio de Habermas Teoría de la Acción Communicativa (2 volúmenes en el original alemán, el primero recientemente traducido al inglés), focalizando en los dos conceptos claves de "acción comunicativa" y "mundo de la vida". Después de recapitular en detalle la propia presentación de Habermas de los dos temas, el paper discute las varias perplejidades o cuestiones no resueltas tratando aquellos conceptos aisladamente y en su relación mutua. Entre las perplejidades mas relevantes están las siguientes: el estatuto ambivalente de comunicación y lenguaje en el enfoque habermasiano; la relación entre acción comunicativa y teleológica; la tensión entre comunicación (o consenso comunicativo) y acción proposital y su agravimiento en el proceso de modernización y racionalización; el carácter opaco del "mundo de la vida" (entre fenomenología y ontología); la posibilidad de "objectivación" sociológica de "mundo de la vida"; y la oscura conexión entre el "mundo de la vida" y los racional-formales "conceptos sobre el mundo". Una sección conclusiva explora las implicaciones de aquellas perplejidades para el marco teórico mayor de Habermas, concentrándose particularmente en el rol de la racionalidad y la racionalización, la progresiva "colonización" del "mundo de la vida", la cuestión de la intersubjectividad y el eclipse de la praxis política.

LIFE-WORLD AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

As in the case of literature and philosophy, "classical" texts in social theory are usually a matter of the past; only rarely does one witness the emergence of such a text as a contemporary. Habermas' Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns is one of the few exceptions to this rule: both in terms of its range of coverage and its trenchant mode of analysis the sprawling, two-volume study carries all the earmarks of a sociological "classic."[1] Apart from its intrinsic merits, the classical quality attaches to the work also through a kind of osmosis: over long stretches the study offers a detailed discussion of the classical founders of modern sociology, notably Weber, Durkheim, Mead, and Parsons--a discussion which, in my view, has no equal in recent literature. To be sure, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns differs from its classical forebears by a number of innovative features: both by the incorporation of recent, sophisticated methods of inquiry (like "reconstruction") and, more importantly, by its attunement to pervasive intellectual changes characterizing our age. On the latter plane, the most significant innovation is Habermas' departure from the traditional "philosophy of consciousness" (or subjectivity) dating back to Descartes and Kant, and his resolute turn toward language and intersubjective communication. Moving beyond initial steps made in this direction by Mead and Durkheim, the study elevates speech and communication to primary categories of sociological theory. Given its central status, a chief question raised by the study is whether, as formulated in its pages, the "linguistic turn" constitutes an adequate response or remedy to the dilemmas bequeathed by the philosophy of consciousness.

The wealth and complexity of issues covered in Theory of Communicative Action (to use the English title) militates against a comprehensive review in the confines of a short essay. For present purposes I intend to focus on two major topics or conceptual themes, those of "communicative action" and of the so-called "life-world"--although I shall also attempt to indicate the significance of these themes in Habermas' broader theoretical frame of reference. The choice of the two topics, I believe, is not the result of idiosyncratic preference. The importance of "communicative action" is already amply attested by the overall title of the work. In addition, Habermas underscores the weight of the themes by devoting to them two "theoretical interludes" (Zwischenbetrachtungen) which punctuate the argument of the two volumes: the first deals with social action and "communication," and the second with the relation between "system and life-world."[2] In the following I shall, first of all, recapitulate in some detail Habermas' own presentation of the two concepts in his study. Next, I shall point to some quandaries or unresolved issues besetting these concepts both singly and in their mutual relation. Finally, by way of conclusion, I endeavor to project these quandaries against the larger tapestry of the work--using them as a sort of fulcrum to detect more deep-seated fissures or antimonies--while simultaneously suggesting alternative pathways of thought conducive to a lessening of such tensions.

I

Communicative action, as any attentive reader will recognize, is not a novel feature in the Habermasian opus. One of his earliest publications, entitled Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, deplored the progressive dismantling of public debate and communication in favor of technical-functional imperatives. His main epistemological work, Knowledge and Human Interests (1968),

focused more directly on the notion, attributing to it a quasi-transcendental cognitive status. In discussing Peirce's theory of science the study observed: "The community of investigators, however, requires a use of language not confined to the limits of technical control over objectified natural processes--a use which arises from symbolically mediated interactions between social subjects who know and recognize each other as unique individuals. Such communicative action forms a system of reference that cannot be reduced to the framework of instrumental action."[3] The "postscript" to the same study (written some five years later) differentiated more carefully between experiential "interests" and knowledge claims or between the domains of "life-praxis" and "praxis of inquiry"--but without abandoning the distinction between empirical-instrumental and communicative endeavors. Communicative action or interaction was now assumed to occur both on the level of everyday experience and on that of reflectively refined, "discursive" inquiries. As Habermas elaborated, the "linkage between knowledge and interests had been developed in the study without sufficient attention to the critical threshold separating communications embedded in experiential and action contexts from 'discourses' permitting rationally grounded and thus properly cognitive knowledge."[4]

Following Knowledge and Human Interests the theme of communicative action surfaced repeatedly in Habermas' publications, including his writings on linguistic competence, universal pragmatics, and cognitive and moral development; for the sake of brevity, however, I shall omit citation of relevant passages.[5] In Theory of Communicative Action the theme is first introduced in an epistemological context, namely, during a discussion of modes of rationality and rationalization. Critiquing the Baconian focus on science as technical control--a focus strongly reverberating in Max Weber's perspective--the study comments: "By concentrating on the non-communicative use of propositional

knowledge in purposive action we make a prior choice in favor of cognitive-instrumental rationality, a concept which, via empiricism, has strongly shaped the outlook of modernity and which carries the connotation of successful self-preservation, rendered possible through informed control over, and intelligent adaptation to, the conditions of a contingent environment." By contrast, "when starting from the communicative use of propositional knowledge in speech acts, we opt in favor of a broader meaning of rationality linked with older notions of 'logos'. This latter concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations which ultimately derive from the central experience of the quietly unifying, consensus-producing function of argumentative speech where participants overcome their initial subjective views and, through the bond of rationally grounded convictions, assure themselves both of the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life context." The differential use of knowledge, according to the study, determines in the end the basic direction or objective of reason: "In the one case the intrinsic telos of rationality is instrumental control, in the other communicative consensus or agreement."[6]

Communication and communicative rationality, in the new work, are by no means limited to "propositional" knowledge or propositions about empirical phenomena (in the external or "objective world"). In line with arguments familiar from his "universal pragmatics," Habermas extends the range of rational speech from factual assertions to intersubjective norms and modes of self-reflection and self-expression (in his terms, to the dimensions of the "social" and the "subjective world"). "Norm-regulated actions, expressive self-presentations and evaluative utterances," he writes, "complement and round out constative-factual speech acts to form a broad communicative praxis. Against the backdrop of a 'life-world' this praxis aims at the

attainment, preservation and renewal of consensus--more specifically of a consensus resting on the intersubjective recognition of arguable validity claims. The rationality inherent in this praxis manifests itself in the fact that a communicatively reached consensus must ultimately be grounded on reasons." Regarding the rational validation of cognitive claims, some types of communication are said to be amenable to "discursive" scrutiny (especially the domains of factual propositions and intersubjective norms), while other types permit only more limited versions of "critique" (such as the critical analyses operative in individual therapy and aesthetics). "We can summarize our views by saying," Habermas affirms, "that rationality is a disposition of individual subjects capable of speech and action and manifesting itself in forms of behavior backed up by good reasons." Accordingly, "any explicit examination of controversial validity claims requires the demanding mode of a communication which fulfils the requisites of argumentation."[7]

So far, the presentation has concentrated chiefly on the rational-discursive aspect of communication, while relatively neglecting its "active" or practical connotations. The latter topic is broached in a subsequent section of the study dealing with "sociological concepts of action" and their linkage with modes of rationality. Habermas at this point differentiates communicative action from three competing action types prominent (in his view) in recent sociological literature: namely, "teleological (or purposive-rational) action," "norm-regulated action," and "dramaturgical action." As the study emphasizes, the first type has at least since Aristotle been the focus of theoretical attention. Acting teleologically, an actor seeks to implement his objective or "telos" by choosing the means appropriate to his aims, that is, by selecting a given course of action among available alternatives. Individual teleological choice is transformed and amplified into "strategic

action" whenever the decision of one actor is influenced by, or a response to, decisions by another agent (or agents). In its strategic guise, the teleological model forms the bedrock of the theory of "economic choice," as developed by the founders of classical economics, and also of more recent formulations of "games of strategy." In terms of its linkage with rationality the model, according to Habermas, is basically guided by the standard of rational "efficiency"--although this standard cannot be entirely divorced from valid propositional knowledge. As he points out, teleological action necessarily involves a relation between an actor and the external or "objective world," where "objective world" means the "totality of states of affairs which either exist or can be made to exist through purposive intervention." While, in principle, such a relation can support a purely cognitive or contemplative stance, action becomes teleological (or strategic) through the accent on intervention and efficiency.[8]

As portrayed in the study, other action types or models can be understood in terms of the progressive differentiation of actor-world relations. In contrast to the individualistic and "one-world" mentality operative in teleological endeavors, "norm-regulated action" refers to consensual activity among members of a social goup, that is, to activity in accordance with accepted cultural norms and values where the latter express "a prevailing consensus among group members." In Habermas' account, this action type was first introduced by Durkheim and subsequently fleshed out by Parsons and other spokesmen of sociological "role theory"; action from this vantage point always means compliance with socially prescribed behavior expectations. Regarding its rationality potential, the type is said to involve basically a "two-world" orientation, namely, orientation both to the objective and the "social world"--where "social world" means a given "normative context" specifying the

"totality of legitimate interpersonal interactions" and where legitimacy is judged by the standard of (normative) "rightness." While role theory points to the normative-social dimensions of behavior, "dramaturgical action" uncovers the domain of subjectivity by concentrating on the self-disclosure of agents in front of each other or in front of an audience. In this case, Habermas writes, the actor "evokes in his audience a particular image or impression by means of a more or less deliberate revelation of his subjectivity." With this action type, he adds, a new "world" or dimension of behavior comes into view: namely, the agent's "subjective world" defined as the "totality of subjective experiences to which the actor has privileged access" and governed by such (potentially rational) standards of truthfulness and authenticity. Despite its discovery of this new terrain, Habermas finds dramaturgical action still restricted to a "two-world" outlook: the correlation of inner and outer, subjective and objective worlds.[9]

In Habermas' presentation, communicative action is distinguished from the mentioned action types both by its range of coverage and its uniquely reflective-rational capacity: that is, both by its ability to encompass the "three worlds" simultaneously and by its rootedness in language seen as a reflective "medium" of interaction. In his words, the concept refers to the interactive "negotiation of definitions of situations amenable to consensus"; with this action type "the further premise of a linguistic medium comes to the fore in which the world-relations of actors are mirrored as such." First initiated by Mead, the category was subsequently developed--though insufficiently and sketchily--by interactionism, speech act theory, and sociological hermeneutics. According to the study, the chief advantage of communicative action resides in its capability to correct the one-sidedness of alternative approaches, mainly through its reliance on language. While, in the

teleological type, language serves merely as a subordinate means for utilitarian calculations, and while normative and dramaturgical actions thematize language only as a reservoir of cultural values or an instrument of self-display, the communicative model alone "presupposes language as a medium of unrestricted consensual interaction in which speakers and hearers make simultaneous reference to aspects of the objective, social, and subjective worlds, against the backdrop of their pre-interpreted life-world." As Habermas adds, this multi-dimensional use of language can be explicated more fully in a theory of "formal" or "universal pragmatics"--a theory which transcends narrow linguistic concerns with syntax. While conducive to mutual comprehensibility, adherence to syntactical rules alone does not yield access to the "pragmatic" dimensions of speech, that is, its embeddedness in world-contexts or "world-relations" which, in turn, can be reflectively scrutinized: "In the communicative model language is relevant only from the pragmatic angle that speakers, by uttering statements in a communicative fashion, enter into distinct world-relations" and that they do so "in a reflexive manner." Against this background, communication functions "as a mechanism of coordination" in the sense that participants "reach agreement on the claimed validity of their utterances, and thus grant intersubjective recognition to reciprocally raised validity claims."[10]

In Theory of Communicative Action, the formal or "universal-pragmatic" underpinnings of communicative exchanges are elaborated in greater detail in the first "theoretical interlude" dealing with action theory and communication. Following a critical review of Weber's typology of actions, Habermas at this point introduces a broad distinction between "success-oriented" and "consensus-oriented" actions, where "success-orientation" is basically a new description of the teleological model (comprising both instrumental and

strategic behavior), while "consensus-orientation" serves as trademark of communicative action or interaction: "I call communicative those actions in which the behavioral goals or plans of actors are coordinated not via egocentric calculations of success but through consensual exchanges." In Habermas' portrayal, consensus or consensual interaction (Verständigung) does not merely denote a psychological convergence of feelings or dispositions nor a purely factual-prudential accord, but rather points to a rationally achieved and grounded agreement. Communicative processes, he writes, "aim at a consensus which satisfies the conditions of a rationally motivated consent to the content of an utterance"; thus, consensus rests on "common convictions" supported by "potential reasons." To buttress the mentioned dichotomy, the interlude takes recourse to contemporary linguistic analysis and speech-act theory, and especially to Austin's differentiation between "locutionary," "illocutionary," and "perlocutionary" speech acts (or rather components of speech acts). While locutionary utterances report on given states of affairs and while illocutionary acts signal the "pragmatic" sense of speech, perlocution in essence has to do with the impact of speech on listeners. Transplanting Austin's differentiation onto the plane of action theory, the study associates communicative action chiefly with locutionary and illocutionary utterances, while finding the central trait of success-orientation in its emphasis on perlocution. "The self-sufficiency of an illocutionary act," we read, "is to be understood in the sense that both the communicative intent of the speaker and his pursued illocutionary goal result from the manifest meaning of the utterance." By contrast, teleological behavior is guided by extrinsic and instrumental objectives: "Just as for illocutionary acts the meaning of the utterance is constitutive, so for teleological behavior it is the intention of the actor"--an intention directed at exerting influence or at the "performance of a

perlocutionary act." As Habermas adds: "I thus label 'communicative' those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue with their utterances exclusively illocutionary aims; on the other hand, interactions in which at least one participant seeks to produce perlocutionary effects I regard as linguistically mediated strategic action."[11]

Having stressed the illocutionary character of communication, the study proceeds to delineate the pragmatic ingredients of consensus, that is, the conditions required for the consensual coordination of behavior. In a nutshell these conditions include: first of all, comprehension of the semantic meaning of an utterance; secondly, understanding and acceptance of the pragmatic motivations and implications of the utterance ("acceptability conditions"); and lastly, implementation of the obligations deriving from the utterance. Differently phrased, a hearer must be able to grasp the meaning of a statement as well to take a stand toward it (by responding with "yes" or "no") and orient his actions accordingly. In Habermas' view, semantic meaning cannot be rigidly divorced from pragmatic connotations, since (to use an example) understanding a command implies knowing how and why to comply with the command. In the case of communicative interaction, understanding a statement typically implies knowing the conditions which would validate, justify, or argumentatively corroborate it. Habermas at this point returns to the theme of validation and validity claims familiar from his earlier writings. Narrowly construed, communicative interaction is said to include "only such speech acts in which the speaker advances validity claims amenable to critical scrutiny." As in previous publications, these claims assume mainly three forms, and include claims regarding the "truth" of propositions, the "rightness" of normative obligations, and the "truthfulness" of self-disclosure--a tripartition which again is linked with the actor's (or speaker's)

"world-relations": his relation to the "objective," "social," and "subjective" worlds. "A communicatively achieved consensus," we read, "depends on precisely three reviewable validity claims because--in deliberating about something and articulating their views--actors cannot help but embed their speech acts in exactly three world-relations and claim validity for them in each of these dimensions." Habermas proceeds to define three types of speech acts ("constative," "regulative," and "expressive") corresponding to the three validity claims and all sharply distinguished from perlocutionary or strategic behavior.[12]

In its concluding paragraphs the interlude draws attention to the second major topic I wish to explore in this context: the concept of the "life-world." As Habermas notes, the focus on rationality or rational validation shortchanges the domain of everyday experience against which processes of rationalization are silhouetted. The concept of the "life-world"--defined as the arena of "implicit knowledge"--serves at this point as supplement or corrective designed to remedy this defect and to provide rationality with concrete social or sociological moorings. In Habermas' words, the concept refers to the "background of implicit knowledge which enters into cooperative efforts of interpretation a tergo; communicative action always occurs within a life-world which remains in the back of communicative participants." In the same context the concept is also circumscribed as an "implicit knowledge not representable in a finite number of propositions"; as a "holistically structured knowledge"; and as a kind of knowledge "which is insofar not at our disposal as we are unable to render is conscious or subject it to doubt at our discretion."[13] Although elaborated at length for the first time in Theory of Communicative Action, the topic is not an entirely new ingredient in Habermas' vocabulary. As previously indicated, his earlier works on cognitive interests

already made reference to a diffuse "life-praxis" seen as a foil or backdrop to the "praxis of inquiry" in which validity claims are scrutinized. In Legitimation Crisis the notion of the "life-world" was specifically introduced to counterbalance the category of "systemic" imperatives, that is, imperatives geared to the instrumental-rational efficiency of social systems. We speak of "life-world," the study noted, when focusing on patterns of institutions "in which speaking and acting subjects are socially integrated" or which are "symbolically structured." While, from the systemic angle, "we thematize a society's steering mechanisms and the extension of the scope of contingency," the life-world perspective accentuates "the normative structures (values and institutions) of a society."[14]

Only loosely sketched in such earlier passages, the life-world is a persistent theme running through the two volumes of Theory of Communicative Action and culminating finally in the second "theoretical interlude"; here only a few glimpses of this recurrent treatment must suffice. In the opening chapter, the notion surfaces first during a discussion of modes of rationality and particularly of Alfred Schutz's concept of "mundane reasoning." Appealing to the insights of phenomenological sociology, Habermas defines the life-world as an "intersubjectively shared" or "collective life-context" comprising the "totality of interpretations which are presupposed as background knowledge by members of society." The topic reemerges again in a section devoted to the differentiation between primitive-mythical and modern-rational "world-views." In every instance, the life-world is said to be a reservoir of implicit knowledge, that is, a collection of "diffuse, unproblematical background convictions" providing a "source of situational definitions." The difference between world-views, however, resides in the potential for rationalization. In Habermas' portrayal, primitive-mythical world-views exhibit relatively

closed and unquestioned patterns of belief and behavior: "To the extent that the life-world of a social group is governed by a mythical world-view, individual members are relieved of the burden of interpretation and also of the chance to bring about a critically reviewable consensus. As long as it remains 'sociocentric' (in Piaget's sense) the world-view prevents the differentiation between the 'worlds' of existing states of affairs, of valid norms and of subjective experiences amenable to expressive display." Modernization or rationalization from this angle signifies chiefly the progressive differentiation between dimensions of the taken-for-granted life-praxis, and particularly the segregation of reviewable "worlds" from the matrix of the traditional "life-world"--what Habermas describes as the "decentering of world-views." "Only to the extent," he writes, "that the formal system of coordinates of the three worlds is differentiated, is it possible to formulate a reflexive concept of 'world' and to gain access to this world through the medium of common efforts of interpretation understood as cooperative negotiation of situational definitions. . . . In performing their interpretation members of a (modern) communicative group delimit the objective world as well as the intersubjectively shared world against the subjective worlds of individuals and (other) collectives."[15]

The most elaborate treatment of the concept occurs in the second "theoretical interlude" (which forms the centerpiece of the second volume). Drawing on arguments borrowed from Mead and Durkheim, the interlude initially contrasts the concept as a purposive category to purely instrumental or functional criteria. On Mead's interactive premises, we read, "society is construed from the participant perspective of acting subjects as <u>life-world of a social group</u>." On the other hand, "from the observer perspective of an outsider society appears simply as a <u>system of behavior</u> where behavior is more or

less functionally related to system maintenance." Pursuing the insider's approach, Habermas in the following appeals again to the precedent of phenomenological sociology. Invoking Schutz's distinction between "situation" and "horizon" (or context) he writes: "A situation is a thematically focused, action-pertinent segment of patterns of relevance in the life-world which are concentrically ordered and whose anonymity and diffuseness increases with growing social and spatio-temporal distance." Situations, in this terminology, are always embedded in broader "horizons" which in turn are grounded in the life-world. For participants, we are told, the concrete situation is "always the center of their life-world; but it has a moving horizon because it points to the complexity of the life-world"--a life-world which is constantly "present" but only as "background of actual events." Noting certain subjectivist limitations of Schutzian phenomenology (deriving from the Cartesian legacy), Habermas seeks to correct this defect through recourse to hermeneutics and ordinary language theory. From a linguistic angle, he observes, "communicative actors always move within the horizon of their life-world"--a life-world which now can be defined as "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized reservoir of meaning patterns." The fabric and structures of the life-world, from this perspective, can be said to "determine the forms of possible intersubjective communication and consensus."[16]

Despite this invocation of phenomenology and hermeneutics Habermas does not limit his discussion to the level of taken-for-granted convictions and implicit meanings. Reacting against a narrowly "culturalist" construal of the life-world--and also against a pre-cognitive focus inhibiting sociological analysis--the interlude translates background convictions into the concept of "everyday practice" (Alltagspraxis) by means of which distinct life-world spheres and their modes of reproduction can be scrutinized. The reformulation

yields three "structural components," labeled respectively "culture," "society," and "personality"--where culture denotes a reservoir of shared knowledge and pre-interpretations, society a fabric of normative rules, and personality a set of faculties or "competences" enabling individuals to speak and to act. In terms of generative potential, the three components are said to undergird processes of cultural reproduction, of group and solidarity formation, and of individual socialization. "Under the functional aspect of consensual agreement," we read, "communicative interaction serves tradition and the renewal of cultural knowledge; under the aspect of action coordination it promotes social integration and the establishment of solidarity; under the aspect of socialization, finally, it supports the achievement of personal identity." In light of previous descriptions of communicative action, the three components can readily be grasped as life-world underpinnings of the "three worlds" characterizing rational argumentation (with culture being related at least in part to "objective" cognition, society to the "social" and personality to the "subjective world"). Underscoring the internal connection Habermas proceeds to depict modernization as the gradual replacement of implicit by explicit meaning patterns--a change involving the progressive "differentiation" of life-world components and the move from everyday exchanges to rational communication thematizing reviewable validity claims. In his words: "A directional transformation of life-world structures prevails to the extent that evolutionary changes can be analyzed in terms of a structural differentiation between culture, society, and personality. Distinct learning processes can be postulated for this structural differentiation if it can be shown that such differentiation signifies a growth in rationality."[17]

Modernization (one needs to add) does not entirely coincide, however, with the differentiation of communicative structures or components--an

emphasis which would shortchange processes of material reproduction. Habermas at this point returns to the distinction between instrumental (or functional) and communicative rationality and also to the dichotomy between "system" and "life-world" familiar from Legitimation Crisis. As he affirms, long-range social development involves not only the internal diversification of life-world components but also the growing segregation of symbolic-communicative patterns from reproductive endeavors governed by standards of technical efficiency--a process which can be described as the "uncoupling" of system and life-world. "If we view the cohesion of society exclusively as 'social integration'," he writes, "we opt for a conceptual approach concentrating on communicative action and construing society as human life-world." If, on the other hand, we grasp the same phenomenon "from the angle of 'system integration', we adopt an approach which conceives society after the model of a self-regulating system." Seen jointly from the two angles, society as a whole emerges as "an entity which in the course of evolution is increasingly differentiated both as system and as life-world. Systemic evolution is measured by the growth of a society's steering capacity, while the segregation of culture, society, and personality indicates the evolutionary stage of a symbolically structured life-world." According to Habermas, the main social domains dedicated to the enhancement of "steering capacity" are the economy and the state; with the disintegration of mythical and traditional world-views, the two domains are said to be steadily transformed into "subsystems" ruled by efficiency criteria and "uncoupled" from symbolic interaction: The "steering mechanisms of money and power" sanction an "instrumental concern with calculable quantities and thus permit a generalized strategic manipulation of the decisions of other agents bypassing modes of linguistic communication." Once instrumental subsystems are no longer merely coordinated with communicative

patterns but begin to invade and subdue the latter, the uncoupling of system and life-world is converted into a direct "colonization of the life-world," that is, its subjugation to alien standards of technical control.[18]

II

Before entering into a critical review of Habermas' arguments, I want to stress again some of the obvious merits of Theory of Communicative Action. As suggested previously, these merits include the departure from narrowly individualistic premises and the turn to "language" and "intersubjectivity" (although the meaning of these terms is at this point still opaque). Another obvious achievement is the sheer size of the study and the vast range of coverage: a coverage extending from the exegesis of sociological "classics" over discussions of social development to the analysis of modes of rationality and rational argumentation. The very size of the study, however, may also be one source (although not the only source) of pervasive ambiguities and theoretical quandaries besetting Habermas' presentation: Looking over the two volumes the reader occasionally has the impression that the study is the work not so much of a single author but a collective of authors whose views are not always synchronized. Accents set in one section or chapter are sometimes strongly revised if not entirely revoked in another portion of the study; occasionally this imbalance occurs even in the same section or on the same page (as I intend to show). Because of their central role in the study's overall framework I want to concentrate at this point on the key concepts of "communicative action" and "life-world" in an effort to disentangle their meaning and mutual relationship.

Given the crucial weight placed on "communicative action" one might assume that its meaning is relatively clear and unproblematical; this,

however, is not the case. One quandary concerns the status of communication (and implicitly of language). Despite recurrent references and attempts at clarification, the study oscillates precariously between a mode of action predicated on a prior, pre-subjective consensus and another view treating consensus as outcome of divergent individual designs. The oscillation can be restated as the query whether communication signifies a matrix underlying social interaction, or else a relatively extrinsic mechanism of social coordination. The quandary seems endemic to Habermas' entire opus. In his earlier publications, "communicative action" tended to denote usually (if not preponderantly) an action orientation proceeding on the basis of conventional or consensually accepted norms and meaning patterns. Thus, in the words of Knowledge and Human Interests: "In everyday life-contexts, ordinary-language communication is never isolated from habitual interactions and attendant or intermittent experiential expressions." The view was more poignantly stated in another essay of the same time. "By 'interaction'," Habermas affirmed there, "I understand communicative action, symbolic interaction. It is governed by binding consensual norms which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects. Social norms in this case are enforced through sanctions and their meaning is anchored in ordinary-language communication." These comments did not prevent him from portraying communicative action in another passage (cited before) as a "system of reference" coordinating "interactions between social subjects who know and recognize each other as unique individuals."[19]

The quandary is not entirely resolved in Theory of Communicative Action--although the overall tendency is toward the latter meaning. Thus, a passage in the introductory chapter defines communicative action as the kind of "praxis" in which agents rely on "their common life-context, the

intersubjectively shared life-world." Similarly, a later section describes communicative action as a consensual mode of interaction, a mode in which "participants pursue their plans consensually on the basis of a common situational definition." Noting the limitation of this formulation, however, Habermas adds in the same paragraph: "If a common situational definition must first be negotiated, or if consensual efforts fail in the context of a common definition, then consensus--which normally is the condition for the pursuit of goals--is itself transformed into a goal or objective." In view of study's pervasive stress on rationality and rationalization, it seems fair to construe consensual interaction more as an achievement than a premise. This construal is buttressed by Habermas' own distinction between "communicative" and "norm-regulated" action--where the first type denotes a particularly reflexive or rational-discursive form of interaction while the second type involves behavior in accordance with conventional rules (akin to Weber's notion of "traditional" action). The construal is further underscored by Habermas' comments on consensus or consensual interaction (Verständigung). As indicated, consensus in his view does not merely mean a merger of feelings or dispositions nor even a factual convergence of opinions, but rather a rationally grounded accord: Communicative processes "aim at a consensus which satisfies the conditions of a rationally motivated consent to the content of an utterance." The same focus on achievement is also evident in the category of "communicative rationality" which serves as a leitmotiv throughout the entire study. "The concept of communicative rationality," we read (in a passage mentioned earlier), "carries with it connotations which ultimately derive from the central experience of the quietly unifying, consensus-producing function of argumentative speech where participants overcome their initial subjective views and, through the bond of rationally grounded convictions, assure themselves

both of the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life-context."[20]

The ambiguities surrounding communication have a direct bearing on the status of language in Habermas' framework or on the significance of his "linguistic turn." Appealing to the Humboldtian legacy in ordinary language philosophy, Habermas at various points portrays language as a concrete presupposition of human interaction which is never fully at the disposal of participants. "Language and culture," he affirms, "are neither identical with the formal world-concepts by means of which participants jointly define their situation, nor are they generally something mundane or 'inner-worldly'; rather, they are constitutive for the life-world itself. They neither coincide with one of the formal worlds to which participants ascribe components of their situation, nor are they part of the objective, social or subjective worlds." In a formulation reminiscent of Gadamer's hermeneutics (which in turn is inspired by Heidegger) the study notes that ordinary language always remains "in the back" of participants: "Communicative agents always move within the horizon of their life-world which they cannot surpass or transcend." Statements of this kind, however, do not prevent Habermas on other occasions--and sometimes in the same context--from depicting language as a usable instrument, that is, as a "means" of communication or a "mechanism" of action coordination. The same passage pointing to the "vis a tergo" character also speaks of language as a "medium" of consensual interaction. The discussion of action theory differentiates communicative action from other types by its reliance on the "linguistic medium in which the world-relations of actors as such are mirrored." Linguistic communication, Habermas adds, is "simply the mechanism of coordination through which the action plans and purposive goals of participants are interactively correlated." The same view is

restated in the first theoretical interlude. "For a theory of communicative action," we read there, "linguistic communication seen as mechanism of action coordination becomes the focal point of interest." The stress on coordinating functions--intimately associated with rationalization processes--is bound to cast doubt on Habermas' linguistic turn, by revealing language either as a usable means or else as a property or "competence" of individual speakers (a construal not radically at odds with the traditional philosophy of consciousness).[21]

Another quandary--not unrelated to the status of communication--concerns the distinction between action types, especially between "teleological" and "communicative" action or between "success-orientation" and "consensus-orientation." The quandary seems again endemic to Habermas' approach. Regarding the dichotomy between "labor" and "interaction" (as used in his earlier works), the difficulty of effecting a neat separation has been noted by numerous critics, including Anthony Giddens who wrote: "All concrete processes of labor, as Habermas emphasizes in his discussion of Marx, and as Marx emphasized so forcibly himself, are social: or in Habermas' terms, involve interaction."[22] Rather than recapitulating Giddens' able critique I want to concentrate here on the special or intrinsic dilemmas of the new study. As it seems to me, not only is instrumental or teleological action regularly social or interactive in character, but communicative action (to the extent that is a mode of "action") is invariably animated by a "telos" and thus teleological; I shall emphasize the second aspect. Theory of Communicative Action repeatedly chides "intentionalist semantics" for reducing communication or semantic understanding to speaker's intentions. This type of semantics, we read at one point, "does not come to grips with the coordination mechanism of linguistically mediated interactions because it construes communication after the

model of teleological action." At the same time, however, Habermas is unable to isolate the communicative category from purposive intent. This is evident already in the adopted terminology: for example, in the opposition between "success-orientation" and "consensus-orientation"--where orientation seems readily interchangeable with intention (or at least closely allied with it). Similarly, the study persistently speaks of the "goal" or purpose of both illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (and occasionally of the illocutionary "success" of communication). While the "illocutionary goal" of a speaker is said to result from the meaning of the utterance itself, the "perlocutionary goal" is manifest only in effects or consequences of speech. To recall a passage cited earlier: "I label 'communicative' those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue with their utterances exclusively illocutionary aims."[23]

The goal-aspect, moreover, is not only incidental to communicative action but a central ingredient whose status is steadily enhanced in the course of rationalization, that is, with the transition from ordinary exchanges to rational-discursive communication. As Habermas himself admits (and I again repeat his statement): "If a common situational definition must first be negotiated, or if consensual efforts fail in the context of a common definition, then consensus--which normally is the condition for the pursuit of goals--is itself transformed into a goal or objective." In another context, the study is even more forthright by acknowledging the necessary teleological structure of action, including its communicative mode. In an effort to differentiate communicative "action" from communication or rational consensus per se, Habermas observes: "Language is (simply) a means of communication which serves the task of consensus whereas agents--in interacting with each other and seeking to coordinate their actions--pursue their own distinctive goals.

To this extent, the teleological structure is constitutive for all types of action"--although these types differ in their specification of contextual conditions. Differently phrased: reciprocal understanding and communicative consensus represent merely a "mechanism of action-coordination"--which does not fully absorb or exhaust the active component of the communicative mode. Regardless of different accents and contextual conditions, action types are said to converge at least on this level: "In all cases the teleological structure of action is presupposed in the sense that actors are presumed to be endowed with the capability of goal-orientation and purposive action, and also with the interest in implementing their action plans."[24]

The prominence of teleology, one might add, casts doubt on the internal coherence of "communicative action" (at least in its rational-reflective mode), that is, on the compatibility between action and communication or between "telos" and consensus. Again, there is a history to this dilemma in Habermas' thought. His early publications, notably Knowledge and Human Interests, insisted on the close amalgamation of action and communication, presenting both as symbiotic elements of everyday experience. "In everyday life-contexts," he wrote at that time, "ordinary-language communication is never isolated from habitual interactions and attendant or intermittent experiential expressions. . . . Language and action in this case interpret each other reciprocally: this is spelled out in Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games'." As he added, further underscoring this view: "The 'grammar' of ordinary language determines not only internal linguistic relations, but regulates the communicative nexus of sentences, actions, and expressions as a whole, that is, a habitual social life-praxis." The "postscript" to the same study (mentioned earlier) introduced a sharp conceptual distinction between everyday exchanges and rational-discursive communication,

a distinction centering on the respective role of action. The claim to "objectivity" associated with science, the essay stated, is based on the consistent "virtualization of the pressure of action and decision which renders possible the discursive testing of hypothetical validity claims and the accumulation of valid knowledge." Rephrasing the distinction in terms of the dichotomy between "discourses" (or "praxis of inquiry") and "life-praxis," the postscript elaborated: "In everyday life-praxis, we gain and exchange action-related experiences; statements made for the purpose of communicating experiences are themselves actions." By contrast, "given their communicative structure discourses are divorced from the constraints of action; nor do they provide room for processes of generating informations. Rather, discourses are immune from action and free from experience."[25]

The segregation of discourses from ordinary life-praxis has never been revoked in Habermas' subsequent writings. Given the stress on rationality in his recent work, the notion of "communicative action" thus appears fraught with profound tensions if not entirely paradoxical: in the course of social rationalization communication is bound to be progressively purged of its active components or concrete action contexts; in any event, the distance between consensus and active "telos" is liable to widen. In Theory of Communicative Action Habermas seeks to circumvent or at least to mollify this conclusion through recourse to speech-act theory and especially through reliance on the concept of a "formal" or "universal pragmatics" of speech. As indicated, the first interlude associates rational communication or consensus not only with a purely semantic understanding of utterances, but also with the pragmatic acceptance of validity claims and the practical implementation of the consequences of speech; in this manner, despite recognition of the gulf between communication and communicative "action," the interlude seeks to

effect a reconciliation or partial reunion of reason and life-praxis. A closer inspection of the argument, however, cannot fail to reveal the imbalance of the merger: that is, the relative accentuation of cognitive understanding over practical implementation (or of theory over practice). The distinctive mark of a "formal-pragmatic" approach, Habermas asserts, resides in its focus on the question "what it means to understand a communicatively employed sentence or utterance." In addition to a narrowly semantic grasp of terms, such understanding in his view includes various other types of "knowledge": "We understand a speech-act if we know what renders it acceptable. . . . A hearer understands the meaning of an utterance if--apart from its grammatical correctness and contextual premises--he knows the essential conditions through which he can be motivated by a speaker to take an affirmative stance." Yet, knowing clearly is not the same as doing; nor is cognitive understanding synonymous with will-formation or social action. As Agnes Heller observed pointedly (and correctly) in one context: "The assumption that consensus can be achieved in a process of enlightenment is in fact no answer: the will to achieve consensus is the problem in question." From Habermas' own perspective communicative rationality, she added, seems to involve "a choice, a value-choice." While, seen as a cognitive endowment or competence, reason is simply a "rationality in-itself," "to transform it into a rationality for-itself we have to choose communicative rationality as a value."[26]

The quandaries besetting communicative action are matched if not exceeded by those surrounding the "life-world" concept. I shall bypass or downplay difficulties of a terminological kind--some of which have surfaced already in previous discussions. Thus, it is at least awkward or confusing to encounter "culture" as a synonym for language and background assumptions in general, and

subsequently as label for one of the sub-components of the life-world. The same might be said about the term "society" which in some instances designates the fabric of social interactions as a whole, and in others a particular subdivision dealing with normative integration. More important are ambiguities affecting the status of the life-world itself. On repeated occasions the life-world is depicted as an arena of purposive meanings and symbols animating individual agents or speakers. As mentioned, Legitimation Crisis contrasted systemic steering mechanisms to the life-world seen as institutional matrix "in which speaking and acting subjects are socially integrated." The formulation is picked up in the second interlude where the "life-world of a social group" is identified with society as "construed from the participant perspective of acting subjects." The same view also underlies the appeal to Schutzian phenomenology--especially the portrayal of "situations" as experiential patterns "concentrically ordered" around individual agents for whom a given circumstance is "always the center of their life-world." With a slight change of accent (but again with reference to Schutz), the study at another point associates the category with a "subject-writ-large," claiming that "members of a collectivity" typically rely on it "in the first person plural." Statements of this kind are clearly at odds with passages stressing preconscious and pre-subjective background conditions--unless subjective meanings are supposed to operate as "vis a tergo" behind social subjects (which is barely intelligible). The two opposing approaches can be termed respectively the "weak" and the "strong view" of the life-world--with the first drawing its inspiration chiefly from Schutzian (and Husserlian) phenomenology and the second tracing its roots to Gadamer (and Heidegger); while in the former the life-world appears as a network of potential or embryonic subjects, the latter breaks more resolutely with traditional subject-object (and ego-alter)

polarities. By combining the two approaches, the study seeks to incorporate advantages intrinsic to both--but at the price of diminished coherence. The need to separate the two views has been recognized by numerous observers, including a philosopher as congenial to Habermas as Karl-Otto Apel. Assessing recent trends in philosophy, Apel in one instance differentiated "Heidegger's more radical 'analysis of Dasein'" from Husserl's "phenomenology of the life-world," noting the comparatively greater proximity of phenomenology to traditional problems of "transcendental constitution."[27]

In Theory of Communicative Action, the incoherence of the mixed perspective surfaces in numerous forms and contexts; one has to do with the availability of the life-world for sociological analysis. On repeated occasions the study insists on its strictly non-available or non-objectifiable character. Elaborating on the notion of background assumptions Habermas states that communicative agents cannot objectify or face frontally "the horizon of their own life-world": "As interpreters they are with their speech acts part of the life-world, but they cannot refer to 'something in the life-world' in the same manner in which we refer to facts, norms or experiences. . . . Differently put: participants cannot distantiate language and culture in a way akin to their treatment of the totality of facts, norms or experiences about which communication is possible." The concluding section of the study reiterates this ("strong") view of the life-world by presenting the latter as a kind of background pre-understanding "which is at no one's arbitrary disposal." Given these and several other statements to the same effect, the reader is bound to be surprised by the study's tendency toward progressive objectification, that is, the transformation of the life-world into a pliant target of sociological inquiry. This transformation occurs in several stages. The initial, relatively subtle shift involves the bracketing of the life-world concept in favor

of the notion of everyday interaction or "everyday practice", a notion amenable to narrative description and especially to the portrayal of processes of social reproduction. In quick succession, this shift is then found to yield a whole host of sociological categories and distinctions no longer recalcitrant to empirical research: first, the differentiation between three "structural components" of the life-world (culture, society, and personality), and subsequently the segregation between symbolic and material modes of reproduction or between "system" and "life-world." Clearly, the introduction of these categories would serve little purpose if it were not possible to pinpoint their substantive content and respective boundaries. In the case of the three structural components, Habermas indicates their close affinity to existing sociological subdisciplines: namely, sociology of knowledge, institutional analysis, and social psychology. The second and more basic distinction is presented as the opposition between "inner" and "outer" dimensions, or else as the contrast between divergent "subsystems"--in the sense that, in the course of modernization, the life-world is "steadily reduced to one subsystem among others." At one point, the study even speaks of the "everyday praxis of the life-world" as a "clearly demarcated object domain."[28]

The sketched transformation of the life-world is problematical not only because of its objectivist bent, but also in terms of its claimed sociological results. As previously mentioned, the "components" of the life-world in Habermas' account correspond to the three formal "world" concepts of rational discourse--concepts which in turn can be correlated with "subject-object" and "ego-alter" distinctions; treated as "inner" and "outer" domains even the system--life-world bifurcation can be traced back to the same set of categories. To the extent that this is the case, however, the life-world ceases to function as polar counterpoint to the formal "worlds," being reduced

instead to their simple anticipation. As can readily be seen, the contrast between "weak" and "strong" views surfaces here again, with wide-ranging effects on the study's arguments. Basically, Habermas in this instance exploits the advantages implicit in the weak conception of the life-world--but at the cost of tautology or definitional circularity: culture, society, and personality can be presented as "structural components" because the life-world has been defined from the beginning as a matrix composed of embryonic subjects (and objects). The quandaries besetting this approach are not only definitional, however, but carry over into other topical areas, including the theory of social development. Portrayed as "structural components," subject-object and ego-alter relations are treated as invariant features of social life--a perspective compressing social "change" into the teleological unfolding of a timeless potential.[29] More important at this point are the developmental implications for the life-world itself: Once modernization is seen as progressive rationalization of background assumptions through discursive thematization, the life-world is bound to be not only weakened but steadily eclipsed and finally absorbed by world-concepts. Consistently pursued, this process would render nugatory a central pillar of the entire study, thus depriving communicative action of its social moorings. As it happens, however, other arguments of the study tend to cast doubt both on this outcome and the invariance of structural components.

The ambivalent status of the life-world, from a developmental perspective, emerges chiefly in Habermas' discussion of primitive or "archaic" societies. The case is instructive because of the exemplary character ascribed to these societies--the fact that (as the study says) they are "virtually synonymous with the life-world matrix." Given the theoretical prominence of structural distinctions one would expect them to operate at least

incipiently in pre-civilized or "tribal" settings; this, however, is not the case. Pointing to the centrality of lineage and family relations and the prevalence of "mythical world-views," Habermas notes the amorphous blending of culture, personality, and social integration and the virtual absence of rational world-concepts: mythical orientations, he states, "obliterate the categorial distinctions between objective, social and subjective worlds." The same situation obtains regarding the opposition between symbolic and material reproduction. As Habermas observes, primitive world-views do not yet differentiate between society and its "natural environment"; nor do they support a strict dichotomy between instrumental-teleological and communicative action or between systemic imperatives and consensual agreement: "Systemic mechanisms are not yet divorced from institutions promoting social integration"--to the point that "social and systemic integration actually converge." If this is correct, however, how can the study subsequently segregate "system" from "life-world," reducing the latter to a mode of symbolic reproduction--given the absence of this distinction in archaic societies whose life-world is nonetheless presented as prototypical (and as "closest to furnishing an empirical warrant for the life-world concept as such")? Differently phrased: how can the life-world be depicted as an "inner" domain made up of symbolic subcomponents--given the relatively modern character of the inner-outer division and of the subcomponents themselves?[30] At a minimum, Habermas' account at this point conveys a sense of anachronism: the impression that, projected onto an amorphous canvas, recent sociological categories are surreptiously endowed with structural invariance.

III

Having scrutinized the two key concepts of Habermas' study I want to allude briefly to some broader (and perhaps more worrisome) implications or

corollaries. First, to stay with the life-world theme, it seems fair to underscore its generally precarious status in the confines of Theory of Communicative Action. In the concluding passages of the study, Habermas reiterates its cognitive unavailability--the fact life-world patterns are "at no one's disposal." The "horizon knowledge" underlying everyday praxis, he observes, has the character of taken-for-granted assumptions; "but it does not satisfy the criterion of a knowledge which is intrinsically related to validity claims and thus can be critically assessed." Although not an isolated instance, this comment seems odd or out of place in a study whose centerpiece is discursive rationality and a theory of communication anchored in reviewable validity claims. In the same context, reflecting on general philosophical underpinnings, Habermas is content to claim for his overall approach at best a "felicitous coherence of different theoretical fragments" and even to regard coherence as "the only criterion of judgment" on this level--a view which is hardly congruent with the strong doctrine of discursive truth (and rightness) championed elsewhere in the study. At another point, Habermas exempts the "totality of a life-form" or life-world from the application of specific rationality standards, stating: "Life-forms and life stories are judged implicitly by criteria of normalcy which do not permit approximation to ideal yardsticks; perhaps we should speak instead only of a balance between mutually complementary life-elements." This assertion--one should note, however--occurs at the end (as a kind of afterthought) in a section devoted to the differentiation between mythical and modern world-views where modernity is singled out precisely for its superior rationality. As it seems to me, life-world arguments cannot simply be juxtaposed to, or amalgamated with, the defense of rationalization--without incurring the risk of incoherence (which is not the same as fragmentary coherence). Differently put: rationality

criteria cannot simultaneously be bracketed in favor of "normalcy," and extolled as pacemakers of processes in which earlier life-forms are "categorially devalued."[31] Far from effecting a judicious "balance," one might say, rationality in Habermas' overall presentation tends to jeopardize or erode the life-world (and vice versa).

The same presentation--and this may be more crucial still--places in jeopardy also the role of communicative action and thus the "normative foundations" of critical social theory. Habermas' vindication of rationalization and of modern rationality is predicated basically on the saving virtues of communicative consensus--virtues he seeks to guard jealously against the encroachment of systemic imperatives. At a closer look, however, this vindication is deeply problematical because, in Habermas' own account, rationalization and consensus are by no means readily compatible. In a previous context I pointed to the tension between the active and consensual components within the concept of "communicative action," indicating how, with growing rational reflexivity, the former are increasingly ejected or purged from the consensual ideal. Looking at things from the other side of the coin, a similar purge can be shown to affect consensus itself. According to Theory of Communicative Action, modernization involves the steady separation or "uncoupling" of system from life-world, that is, the growing autonomy of systemic social domains (chiefly the economy and the state) governed by success-orientation and standards of rational efficiency. Simultaneously, modernization is said to denote the increasing differentiation of the symbolic life-world itself, that is, the progressive division between its "structural components" and between the three dimensions of the objective, social, and subjective worlds. Translated into "subject-object" and "ego-alter" categories, social development in this sense signifies the growing segregation of the subject from the object world--and

actually the relentless subjugation of "nature" by man--and also the segregation of ego from alter or of personal "identity" from social "solidarity." Against this background it is entirely unclear how and why ego (or individual agents) should seek consensus rather than success in any and all areas of behavior, or try to curb teleological-strategic impulses. Contrary to Habermas' claims, the "colonization of the life-world" is not simply a deplorable but avoidable hazard, but a necessary consequence of his own premises and conception of rationalization.

Repeatedly Theory of Communicative Action sounds a somber note on the prospects of communicative consensus. Thus, at one point the study speaks of the "irresistible momentum" of instrumental-functional subsystems which is "simultaneously the cause of the colonization of the life-world and of the segmentation between science, ethics, and art." As in the discussion of the life-world, however, these and similar comments do not affect the general thrust of the argument; in fact, the same passage ascribes possible "pathological" consequences "neither to the secularization of world-views nor to the structural differentiation of society per se." Pressed on the immunity of the life-world from (irresistible) strategic imperatives, Habermas occasionally retreats to an "innatist" position: the thesis that symbolic domains of the life-world are somehow "by nature" (von Haus aus) consensually constituted or pregnant with communicative "order." Despite its time-honored status, however, the thesis seems anomalous in a study which otherwise strongly opposes "foundational" or ontological presuppositions. Once instrumentalism is given free rein against nature (as it is in these volumes), what "natural" barriers could plausibly safeguard the integrity of human or social bonds? Actually, faced with the progressive "anomie" in modern societies, Habermas seems in principle reduced to the same kind of counterfactual plea he ascribes at one

point to Durkheim: namely, that there simply ought to be some "oughts." Moreover, even assuming the presence of "oughts" in rationalized settings, Habermas persistently emphasizes the purely "formal" or procedural character of modern norms--a character compatible with any kind of substantive content including success-orientation (or the manipulation of procedures for strategic ends). Occasionally, it is true, the instrumental implications of pure formalism and legalism are acknowledged in the study--for instance, in the query how social identity is supposed to be preserved once social bonds have "evaporated into a merely procedural consensus on the basis of communicative ethics"--but again without noticeable effect on the rationalization model.[32]

The elusiveness of consensus can be traced at least in part (I believe) to a curious gap in Habermas' presentation: his nonchalance regarding intersubjectivity or its treatment as a non-issue. Given the sketched processes of rationalization and modernization, however, intersubjectivity or social "solidarity" can by no means be taken for granted. Due precisely to the growing differentiation of life-world components and formal world-concepts, the status of the "social world" (so-called) is bound to be deeply problematical. Once ego, as Habermas postulates, is increasingly segregated from objects--to the point of even acquiring, through reflexivity, an "extramundane" position toward phenomena--how can one subject maintain a straightforward relation to another (extramundane) subject, without reducing the latter somehow to a mundane occurrence? Differently put: how can ego's steady internalization fail to produce the distantiation of alter? As is well known, the issue has been discussed at length in phenomenological literature--from Husserl's Cartesian Meditations to Sartre's analysis of "the Look" in Being and Nothingness. Without necessarily endorsing the cogency of the phenomenologists' arguments, one certainly cannot deny the seriousness of their endeavor to come

to terms with the problem. Given the centrality of interaction in Habermas' framework, one would expect to find an equally serious treatment--which, however, is missing. At one point the study chides Husserl for not "resolving" the intersubjectivity issue, and Schutz for bypassing its significance--but without offering an alternative approach. Basically, Habermas seems to regard the issue as settled due to his turn to language; yet, in view of the dilemmas besetting this "turn"--the portrayal of language as a "mechanism" of action projects--the remedy is hardly adequate or persuasive. Lacking intersubjective moorings, communicative consensus is liable to remain a hortative ideal.[33]

As it seems to me, the mentioned quandaries or weaknesses are ultimately linked with an important feature of Habermas' opus, a feature striking because of his guiding ambition: the persistent influence of the "philosophy of consciousness" (or subjectivity), and more generally of the legacy of metaphysics. The influence is evident in the pervasive emphasis on "basic dispositions" or attitudes (Grundeinstellungen)--which can only be dispositions of consciousness. Thus, the differentiation between formal world-concepts is associated by Habermas with a corresponding distinction between "dispositions towards worlds"--chiefly: the "objectifying" disposition toward facts, the ethical disposition toward social norms, and the reflective disposition toward self (and language)--all of which are said to depend on "changes in perspective or attitudes which we perform." The same emphasis recurs in the discussion of action types and of speech-act theory. While the contrast between success- and consensus-orientation is traced to the respective "disposition assumed by actors," the classification of speech acts is founded on the "basic dispositions" of individual speakers--with constative, regulative, and expressive speech acts being matched by objectifying, normative, and expressive

dispositions. Further repercussions of traditional philosophy surface in "inner-outer" dichotomies and in the crucial role assigned to "world-views." On various occasions, the "objective" and "social" domains are jointly juxtaposed to the "subjective" sphere under the labels of "outer" and "inner" worlds (or perspectives), while "world-views" are singled out for their contribution to "identity-formation" and their ability to "furnish individuals with a core of basic concepts and assumptions."[34] As it happens, of course, most of these notions or categories have come under serious attack in recent decades. Thus, speech-act theory has been denounced for its subjectivist leanings, just as "world-views" for their ideological overtones. On a broader scale, traditional subject-object (and ego-alter) polarities have been challenged by a host of phenomenological, structuralist, and "post-structuralist" writings—writings stressing the porousness of consciousness and the necessary interpenetration of subject and world. Habermas may not personally wish to venture in these directions, preferring instead the terra firma of time-honored maxims. But why should "critical theory" (of all outlooks) be hardened into a doctrinaire barrier against innovation and against a critical rethinking of the metaphysical tradition?[35]

There is a corollary to traditional categories (bound to be noticed by students of political theory): the disappearance of politics or political praxis in Habermas' recent work. His early publications, as is well known, were still strongly preoccupied with political praxis and its progressive disintegration under the impact of social-empirical and instrumental-technical imperatives. In an intriguing and challenging passage, Theory and Practice bemoaned the medieval substitution of the "social" domain for the Greek "polis" and the redefinition of man as "social" rather than "political animal"--changes which were viewed as harbingers of an impending erosion and

decay. Theory of Communicative Action bears few if any traces of this original concern. Taking his bearings from Durkheim, Mead and other sociological "classics," Habermas in the study reveals himself squarely as a "sociologist" (cum moralist) or a theorist of the social domain--while relegating politics to the status of a specialized subdiscipline or subsystem.[36] As indicated, in the course of modernization both the economy and the "polity" (or state) are claimed to be progressively transformed into functional-systemic structures governed by success-orientation and standards of technical efficiency, a trend submerging politics inexorably in bureaucrating controls. At the same time, politics has no clear place within the communicative life-world--an arena devoted to symbolic reproduction and differentiated into the subcomponents of culture, society (or social solidarity), and personality (or socialization). At this point the Habermasian dualism of "labor" and "interaction" (or of system and life-world) exacts its price: by exorcising political praxis seen as an activity which is neither external nor internal, neither purely instrumental-technical nor communicative-consensual in character. Wedged between the alternatives of material and symbolic processes or between "outer" and "inner" worlds, politics as a concrete-transformative enterprise thus appears doomed to insignificance if not extinction.

Politics, moreover, is not the only casualty of Habermasian categories and dichotomies. Coupled with the "inner-outer" distinction, the process of rationalization is liable to tarnish the emancipatory aspiration (that is, the core) of critical theory. In portraying the image of an "idealized" or fully rationalized life-world, Habermas projects a condition of life in which all "natural" limitations as well as limitations of "otherness" are finally extirpated. "Universal discourse," we read, "points to an idealized life-world" reproduced entirely through rational "mechanisms of consensus"; in this

setting the "natural growth" (Naturwüchsigkeit) of social traditions is dissolved by reason in the same way as are religious traditions by "modern natural science, formalized jurisprudence, and autonomous art."[37] Joined with the study's endorsement of science and technology, this attack on nature reveals ultimately (as Adorno and Horkheimer insisted) an impulse of control and domination--an impulse starkly at odds with the proclaimed goal of freedom from domination. Simultaneously, in the domains of social integration and personality, modernization yields an increasing formalism and abstractness of social bonds and identity structures, a formalism purged entirely of historical or substantive content. Yet, removal of content also means the elimination of all forms of "otherness" and concrete human "difference." Against this background, "universal discourse" signifies basically a retreat to a formal level of identity on which all non-identical properties are erased and "others" can no longer really happen to ego. Differently put: communicative interaction in an idealized setting bears no longer any trace of a real human encounter involving love and hate, joy and pain. Contrary to the professed "decentering" of the cogito, Theory of Communicative Action thus conjures up the specter of solipsism.

In contradistinction to formalized discourses, the contours of a communicative-political praxis akin to human encounter have been outlined by several writers, including Agnes Heller. Adopting a narrowly rationalist approach, she observes, Habermas is led to conclude that "reflexive theory cannot be applied to strategic activities, that force and discourse cannot be conceived together." Actually, however, social or political struggle "cannot be described--at least not in all its forms--as merely strategic activity and . . . the models of force and of discourse could be interconnected." As Heller continues: "Human beings do not accept social theories (philosophies)

from the standpoint of their group-interests, but from the standpoint of their lives as a whole, from their systems of needs. 'Readiness' for rational argumentation about values and theories presupposes the involvement of the human being as a whole, as a needing, wanting, feeling being." Moreover, "if we accept the plurality of ways of life, we have to accept the plurality of theories as well."[38] In a more philosophical vein, the ontological dimensions of communication or communicative praxis have been highlighted by Heidegger. Commenting on one of Hölderlin's later poems, Heidegger distinguishes communication (Gespräch) sharply from "language use" or the mere exchange of "performative utterances." Participants in communicative interaction, he notes, do not properly initiate, conduct, or perform the communicative process; instead, they become partners in a reciprocal endeavor only by virtue of language and its recollective and disclosing potency. What genuine communication yields, Heidegger adds, is not simply a uniform rational consensus, but rather a substantive mode of mutual recognition--including recognition of "difference" (which is not synonymous with non-rational particularity): Communicative differentiation is "not separation, but a form of emancipation which creates between speakers that open space in which uniqueness can occur" as well as the "harmony" of differences.[39]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jürgen Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 2 vols. (Frankfurt-Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); hereafter cited as Theorie. In the meantime the English translation of the first volume has appeared under the title The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), hereafter cited as TCA.

[2]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 367-452, vol. 2, pp. 171-293. In his translation McCarthy renders Zwischenbetrachtungen as "intermediate reflections"; see TCA, p. 273.

[3]Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 137 (translation slightly altered).

[4]Habermas, "Nachwort (1973)" to Erkenntnis und Interesse (Frankfurt-Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 397; for an English version see "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests," Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol. 3 (1975), p. 181. Compare also the sections on "knowledge and interest" and "action and discourse" in the "Introduction" (1971) to Theory and Practice, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), pp. 7-10, 16-19. The distinction between life-praxis and discourses (or between the "apriori of experience" and the "apriori of argumentation") was further fleshed out in Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," in Helmut Fahrenbach, ed., Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Walter Schulz zum 60.Geburtstag (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), pp. 211-265.

[5]Compare, e.g., Habermas, "Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence," Inquiry, vol. 13 (1970), pp. 360-375; also the essays "What is Universal Pragmatics?" and "Moral Development and Ego Identity," in Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 1-68, 69-94.

[6]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 28, 30.

[7]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 37, 44. As a fourth arena of communication amenable to discursive validation (by means of "explicative discourse") the study mentions linguistic "comprehensibility" or the correctness of symbolic expressions. Reformulating the same basic perspective a later passage states (p. 114): "The concept of communicative rationality refers, on the one hand, to different forms of the discursive redemption of validity claims (in this sense Wellmer speaks of 'discursive rationality'); on the other hand, it points to different 'world' relations into which communicative agents enter by raising validity claims for their utterances."

[8]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 126-127, 129-130.

[9]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 127-128, 132, 137, 140. The "dramaturgical" approach has been articulated chiefly by Goffman and some spokesmen of phenomenological interactionism.

[10]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 128, 141-143, 147-148.

[11]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 385-387, 389-390, 396. The distinction is further elaborated in these terms (p. 394): "Perlocutionary effects, just as the success of teleological actions in general, can be described as mundane conditions produced by intervention in the world. By contrast, illocutionary effects are reached on the level of interpersonal relations in which participants achieve a consensus about something in the world; these effects are thus not 'innerworldly' but extra-mundane."

[12]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 398-401, 406, 410, 412-414. Habermas rounds out his scheme of speech acts (p. 436) by adding "communicative acts" (dealing with the organization of discourse) and "operative acts" (reflecting the internal logic or syntax of speech). Introducing the new category of "conversation" he also links speech acts with corresponding action types (pp. 437-439):

namely, constatives with conversation, regulatives with norm-regulated action, expressives with dramaturgical action, and perlocutionary acts with teleological-strategic action.

[13]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 449, 451. Habermas also depicts the life-world (p. 452) as "a continent which remains hidden as long as the theorist analyses a speech act from the perspective of the speaker who, in his utterance, places himself in relation to something in the objective, social and subjective worlds."

[14]Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), pp. 4-5.

[15]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 32, 106-108. For the distinction between "world" and "life-world" compare also pp. 123-124 where Habermas places the accent on the different attitude--non-reflective vs. reflective--which members assume toward the cultural tradition: "In the one case the shared cultural tradition of a community is constitutive for the life-world which members encounter as a pre-interpreted context; the shared life-world forms here the background for communicative action. . . . In the other case particular ingredients of the cultural tradition are specifically thematized; new members must adopt a reflective attitude toward cultural meaning patterns which otherwise render possible their efforts of interpretation."

[16]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 179, 187-189, 192.

[17]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 208-209, 218. In this context (pp. 210-212) Habermas chides Schutz, Durkheim, and Mead for a one-sided focus on one component of the life-world: Schutz on culture, Durkheim on society, and Mead on socialization.

[18]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 226-228, 273, 293.

[19]Knowledge and Human Interests, pp. 137, 167; "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'," in Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 91.

[20]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 28, 32, 386-387; vol. 2, pp. 193-194. Compare also the comment (vol. 1, p. 410): "As communicative action we describe all those interactions in which participants coordinate their individual action plans without reservations on the basis of a communicatively achieved consensus. . . . Communicative action embraces only those speech acts with which a speaker raises reviewable validity claims." What these and similar statements leave open is whether achieved consensus yields a common or joint action plan or only the pursuit of divergent goals on the basis of a reciprocal acknowledgment of differences.

[21]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 141, 143, 148, 370; vol. 2, pp. 190-192. Even when presenting language as precondition of interaction Habermas oscillates between an "ontological and a "transcendental" construal (where the latter specifies a foundational or a priori "condition of possibility"). Thus, after noting the "non-surpassable" character of language and the life-world, he adds (vol. 2, p. 192): "The structures of the life-world determine the forms of possible intersubjective consensus. . . . The life-world is, so to speak, the transcendental plane on which speaker and hearer encounter each other."

[22]Anthony Giddens, "Labour and Interaction," in his Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 108.

[23]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 371, 390, 394, 396.

[24]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 150-151; vol. 2, pp. 193-194.

[25]Knowledge and Human Interests, pp. 167-168, 172; "Nachwort (1973)" to Erkenntnis und Interesse, pp. 386, 397. Habermas acknowledged only an indirect linkage between discourses and life-praxis: argumentation or the

praxis of inquiry could proceed only within the boundaries of a given experiential domain. Compare also Theory and Practice, p. 18.

[26]Agnes Heller, "Habermas and Marxism," in John B. Thompson and David Held, eds., Habermas: Critical Debates (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 25, 29; Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 400-401. For an argument that Habermas' general framework tends to resolve the theory-practice issue in favor of theory see my "Between Theory and Practice," Human Studies, vol. 3 (1980), pp. 175-184.

[27]Karl-Otto Apel, Transformation der Philosophie (Frankfurt-Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 38-39; Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, pp. 4-5; Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 179, 187-188, 200. In a more critical fashion Alexandre Métraux pointed to a certain half-heartedness in the phenomenological approach: "Although taking as its point of departure quite correctly the 'world of the natural attitude', Husserl's account continues to be permeated by a dualist conception of the relationship between subject and world which finds no warrant in everyday experience." See his preface to Aron Gurwitsch, Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977), p. xx. For a defense of the "strong view" of the life-world, against Habermas' own half-heartedness, see Ulf Matthiesen, Das Dickicht der Lebenswelt und die Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns (Munich: Fink, 1983); also Dieter Misgeld, "Communication and Societal Rationalization: A Review Essay of Jürgen Habermas's Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns," Canadian Journal of Sociology, vol. 8 (1983), pp. 433-453, esp. pp. 438-439.

[28]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 192, 210-212, 223, 229, 561, 589.

[29]For a general critique of Habermas' view of social development see my Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions to a Post-Individualist Theory of Politics (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp. 179-207;

also Michael Schmid, "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution," in Habermas: Critical Debates, pp. 162-180.

[30]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 233-234, 237-238, 244. The dilemma carries over into sociological and anthropological methodology. Though admitting the problem Habermas fails to draw broader theoretical conclusions from it. Due to the coincidence of archaic society with the "socio-cultural life-world," he claims (pp. 245-246), anthropology has tended to be a "hermeneutical science par excellence." Simultaneously he recognizes, however, that the overlapping of systemic and social integration renders social processes at that stage "not only transparent but also in many ways opaque." The latter aspect, in his view, accounts for the incursion of depth psychology and linguistic structuralism into anthropology.

[31]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 104, 112; vol. 2, pp. 588-589. Habermas' oscillation in these matters recurs also in his discussion of "world-views" and of the meaning-context issue. "Through their holistic character," he writes (vol. 1, pp. 92-93), "world-views, it is true, are removed from the domain in which truth criteria can meaningfully be applied; even the choice of criteria determining the truth status of utterances may depend on the fundamental context of a world-view. This does not mean, however, that the idea of truth itself should be construed in a particularist sense: whichever language system we choose, we always rely intuitively on the premise that truth is a universal validity claim." Appealing to Searle's speech-act theory, Habermas notes at another point (vol. 1, p. 450): "Once we begin to alter relatively deep-seated and trivial background conditions, we notice that apparently context-invariant validity conditions change their meaning and thus are by no means absolute." To which he adds: Actually, the knowledge of the validity conditions of a speech act must not depend completely on contingent background

assumptions--for otherwise formal pragmatics would lose its subject matter." To use Giddens' phrase, these instances are good examples of "wanting to have one's cake and eat it too." See Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, p. 108.

[32]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 165, 178-179, 488, 536, 541. As in the case of other key issues, Habermas is profoundly ambivalent regarding the formalization and legalization of ethics. In modern societies, he notes (vol. 2, p. 166), traditional life-forms "have lost their totalizing and exclusive sway, having been subordinated to the universalism of law and ethics; but as concrete life-forms they obey a standard other than universalization." Concerning legalization the study (vol. 2, pp. 541-542) finds the central ailment of contemporary welfare society in the use of the law as a functional "medium" rather than an "institution" adapted to life-world processes (a diagnosis of disarming simplicity).

[33]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 106-107; vol. 2, pp. 192, 197-198. As Habermas states blandly at one point (vol. 2, p. 279): "After the paradigm change brought about by the theory of communication, the formal properties of possible intersubjective consensus can take the place of the (Kantian) conditions of possibility of objective experience." For a detailed discussion of intersubjectivity, especially in the context of phenomenological literature, see my Twilight of Subjectivity, pp. 38-115.

[34]Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 75, 80-81, 83, 100, 376, 386, 415. Indebtedness to the "philosophy of consciousness" is equally clear in the portrayal of art as subjective "expression"--a portrayal which ignores both Heidegger's and Gadamer's arguments to the contrary; see Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), and Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of

Art," in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 17-87.

[35]A pioneering venture, of course, was Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world" as developed in Being and Time (of 1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962). Compare also Heidegger, "The Age of the World View," trans. Marjorie Grene, in W. V. Spanos, ed., Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 1-15; and Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," Glyph, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 182-197. Theory of Communicative Action repeatedly singles out Heidegger and post-structuralist writers as "bêtes noirs" for their critique of rationalization; e.g., vol. 2, pp. 165, 222.

[36]As Habermas asserts in the opening section (Theorie, vol. 1, pp. 18, 20): Among the social sciences, and especially in contrast to political science and political economy, "it is sociology which in its conceptual structure is closest to the problematic of rationality. . . . Alone among social-scientific disciplines sociology has maintained attention to the questions of society as a whole." Compare also Theory and Practice, pp. 47-48.

[37]Theorie, vol. 2, pp. 219, 221. In this and other passages Habermas uncritically accepts the positivist thesis of enlightenment leading from theology over metaphysics to positive science--an endorsement warranting the charge of the incipient positivism of his framework. See, e.g., Giddens, Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, p. 97.

[38]Heller, "Habermas and Marxism," in Habermas: Critical Debates, pp. 27, 31. Compare also her comments (pp. 23, 36): "Marx's theory had one advantage, as well as a certain grandeur which disappears in Habermas's interpretation: Marx grasped human progress as suffering. He conceives of the fate of

the invididual human being together with the development of production and of institutions. . . . Even in a world of organized discourse, our main needs will be those we once attributed to God: creation and love."

[39]Martin Heidegger, Hölderlins Hymne "Andenken" (Gesamtausgabe, vol. 52), ed. Curd Ochwadt (Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 1982), pp. 157, 161, 165. For a detailed elaboration of the concept "world" in its various meanings see Heidegger, Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit (Gesamtausgabe, vol. 29/30), ed. F.-W. von Herrmann (Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 1983).