

To Julia

Social Theory in the Twentieth Century

Patrick Baert



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6 The Spread of Reason Habermas's Critical Theory

Jürgen Habermas (1929–) studied philosophy, history, psychology and German literature at the universities of Göttingen, Zurich and Bonn. After completing his doctorate on Friedrich Schelling in 1954, he became a journalist, before taking up a position as Theodor Adorno's assistant at the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt, in 1956. He subsequently taught at Heidelberg for a couple of years and then became Professor of philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt. He became co-director of the Max Planck Institute in 1971, and returned to the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt eleven years later to take up the chair in sociology and philosophy. Since the early 1970s, Habermas has become a leading figure in philosophy and social theory, writing widely on core themes within the field. In spite of his dense style of writing, the high level of abstraction, and occasionally the vast knowledge which he presupposes of the reader, his influence at the end of the twentieth century vastly transcends the German-speaking world. Habermas is known especially as one of the most prominent twentieth-century exponents of 'critical theory'. Critical theorists, such as Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Habermas, do not simply wish to account for or explain the social world. They intend instead to evaluate both the potential and the problems of modern society, and their ultimate aim is to contribute to people's self-emancipation.

Like Karl Popper, Habermas is convinced that knowledge progresses through open discussion and criticism (see chapter 8). In this respect, Habermas also practices what he preaches. He has indeed been embroiled in several political and academic debates, some of which arose out of his writings, and most of which have led him to reassess and redefine his previous ideas and concepts. Amongst the most memorable debates are his encounters with positivist and falsificationist philosophers of science, supporters of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the system theorist Niklas Luhmann, the student movement in Germany and the post-structuralist or post-modernist movement in France.¹

There are very few philosophers or theorists who have shown such a persistent interest in differing views. There are even fewer who have been so willing, as Habermas has been, to take counter-arguments on board. As a result, Habermas's philosophy is far from static; it is constantly evolving.

Habermas's *Habilitationsschrift* was published as *Structural Transformation in the Public Sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit)* in 1962.² It depicts the emergence and spread of a 'public sphere' of open debate in the eighteenth century, and it also deals with the gradual decline of that cultural pattern in advanced capitalist society. Contrary to Habermas's later works, this book is remarkably easy to read. It is, however, truly Habermasian in that it already reveals his fascination with the communicative dimensions of a liberal democracy. For Habermas, the 'public sphere' expresses a 'discursive will-formation' or free uncoerced debate amongst equals, and the latter was to become central to his notion of a critical theory. His interest in open, unconstrained debate led eventually to his notion of communicative rationality based on an in-depth reading of American pragmatic philosophy (which Habermas referred to as 'radical democratic Hegelianism').

Shortly after the publication of his dissertation, a number of articles and essays were translated and published under the title *Towards a Rational Society; Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (originally two books: *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform* and *Technik und Wissenschaft*). This book comments on, amongst other things, the student movement in Germany and the increase and dispersion of instrumental rationality in various aspects of life.³ Underlying his earlier work is the notion that, in the political arena, what Mannheim called 'substantial rationality' has been substituted by 'functional rationality'. This means that ultimate values have become less of a guiding force for political practices than they were before. Instead, politics is increasingly geared towards avoiding technical problems which threaten the equilibrium or the adequate functioning of the social and economic system. The ideas in the two earlier books are obviously not far removed from his mentors, Adorno and Horkheimer.

Habermas's originality shows itself first at the level of methodology and philosophy of the social sciences. In *Theory and Practice (Theorie und Praxis)*, *Knowledge and Human Interests (Erkenntnis und Interesse)* and *On the Logic of the Social Sciences (Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften)* attention is focused on the epistemological foundations of critical theory.⁴ Habermas advances a critical account of both functionalism and system theory, attempts to situate critical theory in relation to hermeneutics and positivist epistemology and distances himself from some positivist tendencies in the Marxist theory of society (see chapter 8). There is an obvious link with his earlier work: technical rationality goes hand in hand with those types of analysis that are indebted to a positivist or functionalist framework. But Habermas does not entirely reject the views of his opponents. Some

insights of system theory are incorporated into his general social theory, and however suspicious he might be of 'empirical-analytical' modes of knowledge, they do remain an essential ingredient in his reconstruction of critical theory.

During the first half of the 1970s Habermas paid attention to a number of substantive issues. In *Legitimation Crisis (Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus)* he directs his attention towards societal problems related to the advent of modernity. He deals in particular with different types of crisis under advanced capitalism, in particular crises of motivational commitment and normative integration. Then followed *Communication and the Evolution of Society (Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus)*, an attempt to provide a contemporary reassessment of Marx's theory of history, and to deal with the homology or structural identity between personality development and changes at a social level.⁵ Gradually, however, Habermas's interest turned towards the accomplishments of the linguistic turn in philosophy, and by the mid-1970s he had worked out the cornerstones of his theory of universal pragmatics – the prelude to his theory of communicative action.

In 1981 Habermas published his *magnum opus*: two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns)*. This is a *tour de force* in grand social theory, in which, amongst other things, he reworks the concept of rationality whilst overcoming some of the shortcomings of an originally Cartesian philosophy of consciousness (*Bewusstseinsphilosophie*) and its attendant subject-object conception of cognition.⁶ Habermas's notion of communicative rationality and his criticisms of Marx are not unrelated. Marx paid exclusive interest to the concept of 'labour', and Habermas insists that linguistically mediated interaction is as vital to social reproduction and evolution as is labour. So, the concept of labour needs to be supplemented with the notion of 'interaction'. Whereas labour ties in with instrumental reason, interaction refers to communication geared towards mutual understanding.⁷ Likewise, Habermas's concept of communicative rationality (central to his attempt to develop a critical theory) is embedded in linguistically mediated interaction.

Having been exposed to various criticisms, Habermas has retreated from some of the more extreme positions in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Despite this, it is fair to say that he is still committed to the broad outline of the theory. Indeed, his more recent contributions share roughly the same assumptions. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne)*, for instance, consists of a staunch defence of the project of the Enlightenment against anti-modernist, post-modernist and post-structuralist authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard (see chapter 5).⁸ For Habermas, these critiques of the Enlightenment have basically failed to recognize its emancipatory potential.

Enlightenment thinkers stood for open debate and criticism, and thus for communicative rationality. Most recently, *Justification and Application (Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik)* is Habermas's contribution to ethics and legal theory. This work is again very much in line with the theoretical outline of his theory of communicative action.⁹

Influences and early writings

The early Frankfurt School, of which Adorno and Horkheimer were the most eminent members, was founded in the early 1920s, and dissolved approximately ten years later because of the radically changing political scene in Germany at the time. Adorno et al. embarked upon an ambitious project aimed at reconstructing Marxist social theory whilst taking on board some Weberian and Nietzschean insights. They considered Marx too much enmeshed in, and thus not critical enough towards, the project of the Enlightenment. The members of the Frankfurt School left their home country in the mid-1930s for safer regions (in particular the United States), but a number of them, including Adorno, returned after the Second World War. Habermas, originally a student of Adorno and later his assistant, is considered to be the main successor of that generation – a leading intellectual, whose work, although from varied sources, is still in some respects faithful to the spirit of the early Frankfurt School.

There are a number of continuities running from the Frankfurt School to Habermas's work. Some commentators argue that, because of its interdisciplinary nature, Habermas's *oeuvre* comes particularly close to the research conducted in the early years of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research.¹⁰ More substantively, Habermas shares with Adorno and Horkheimer a concern with the extent to which the *Aufklärung*, in spite of its liberating potential, has led to the spread and dispersion of means-end rationality in the West.¹¹ Furthermore, the early Frankfurt School and Habermas are highly critical of the epistemological assumptions of positivist sociology. They emphatically deplore the technical nature of positivist knowledge (see chapter 8).¹² Habermas obtains from Adorno et al. a conception of critical theory as geared towards the self-emancipation of human beings. In this view, social scientific knowledge ought to help lift up past social and psychological restrictions.

Amongst the differences with, for instance, Adorno is that Habermas's penchant for developing a 'grand social theory' in a traditional mould is at odds with the former's criticisms of identity thinking. Adorno coined the term 'identity thinking' to designate any attempt to impose a unitary system of concepts and general definitions onto the particularity and idiosyncrasy of objects.¹³ This ties in with yet another difference: whereas Adorno's view of rationality is still deeply embedded in the philosophy of consciousness,

Habermas prefers to ground reason in the intersubjective context of daily linguistic usage. Whereas for Adorno the only safe haven for reason against the spread of instrumental rationality resides in the aesthetic realm, Habermas opts for a dialogical notion of reason. Also, whereas the Frankfurt School, following Weber, portrays a single and irreversible direction towards increasing instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) in the West, Habermas points out the twofold and selective nature of that rationalization process. For Habermas, one aspect of this process is indeed the alleged means-end rationality; another is the extension of judicial liberties and communicative rationality. The latter is worth defending.¹⁴ Finally, whereas the early critical theorists seem to reject bourgeois society *in toto*, Habermas argues that there are some formal features of bourgeois political institutions which are worth preserving. By contrast with Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas indeed demonstrates how his notion of communicative rationality is already presupposed in the main institutions of our liberal democracy, and *mutatis mutandis* how an immanent critique of contemporary society becomes feasible.¹⁵

Habermas is also widely acquainted with the broader German philosophical tradition. During his university training, he became familiar with Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Marx and Georg Lukács. Amongst sociological influences are Marx's historical materialism, Durkheim's theory about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, Weber's theory of rationalization, Parsons's notion of social differentiation and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. Further influences include the American pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey and Mead, Gadamer's hermeneutics, post-Wittgensteinian 'ordinary language philosophy' of Oxford's J. L. Austin, John Searle and Peter Strawson, and Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory. Given the wide variety of Habermas's sources, it is remarkable that his own project is nevertheless unified thematically. Whether he is discussing Weber's concept of rationality or Mead's notion of a symbolically constituted social world, whether he is arguing against the excesses of logical-positivism or against the relativist inclinations of the French post-modernist wave, underlying his *oeuvre* one always finds a fierce belief in the project of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and in the principles of political liberalism. Most of his writings are centred around this deeply held conviction.

It should already be clear that, in some aspects, Habermas's project is not dissimilar to that of Giddens (see chapter 4). Indeed, they both attempt to integrate a wide variety of intellectual traditions in order to develop a post-empiricist, though explicitly non-relativist, contribution to social theory. Furthermore, both warn against the dangers of adopting a one-sided argument, whether it is so-called structure-related or actor-orientated. Each aims instead at linking different levels of social analysis and at overcoming previously held dualisms. Like Giddens, Habermas wants to transcend the opposition

between the functioning at the system level on the one hand, and the workings at the symbolic, intersubjective realm on the other. In this respect, Habermas introduces two central concepts: the 'social system' and the 'life-world' (Schutz's *Lebenswelt*). The life-world refers to the shared meanings and taken-for-granted nature of our daily activities. Habermas states that the life-world is central to social reproduction; by that he means that society is constantly made and remade through these routine practices. The life-world has, in particular, received close attention from 'internalist' viewpoints such as phenomenology and ethnomethodology (see chapter 3). The social system refers to the way in which social structures and functional imperatives constrain people's actions through the media of money and power. It has been the object of study from externalist perspectives such as structural-functionalism or system theory (see chapters 1 and 2). Whereas the life-world raises issues of communication, the social system relates to the forces and relations of production. Habermas's work pays attention both to the social system and to the life-world and aims to demonstrate their interplay. The life-world is dependent on the adequate functioning of the social system, especially the efficient use of resources and state-governed organization and co-ordination of activities. The social system needs properly socialized individuals and a certain degree of permanence at a cultural level. This is provided by the life-world.¹⁶

For Habermas, critical theory should be seen as residing at the intersection between philosophy and science. Critical theory intends to uncover the structural conditions of people's actions, and it is ultimately directed towards transcending these conditions. Habermas goes to some lengths to define critical theory and to specify how it relates to other forms of knowledge. Relying partly upon Peirce's pragmatic philosophy and its attendant link between science and action, Habermas distinguishes in his earlier work three distinct forms of knowledge: empirical-analytical knowledge, hermeneutics and critical theory. These types of knowledge are related to three anthropologically distinct forms of *a priori* interests. Interests are understood as 'basic orientations' embedded in 'fundamental conditions' of reproduction and self-constitution of the human species.¹⁷ Whereas the empirical-analytical or positivist approach ties in with technical control and prediction through nomological knowledge, hermeneutics seeks understanding within a context of intersubjective meaning. Finally, critical theory, as a combination of hermeneutics and empirical-analytical types of knowledge, is aimed at emancipation. It endeavours to question assumptions that previously have been taken for granted, and to remove psychological or social constraints and dependencies. Note that each of these interests is related to different means of social organization and media. Empirical-analytical types of knowledge have an affinity with 'instrumental action' or 'work', hermeneutics is relevant to 'language' or 'interaction', and critical theory deals with 'asymmetrical relations' or 'power'.¹⁸

I will deal with each type of knowledge in turn. What Habermas calls empirical-analytical knowledge is basically a positivist notion of knowledge. Positivism is a broad term, and includes, for instance, Comte's holistic thinking and his unilinear evolutionism on the one hand, and Mill's methodological individualism and his ahistorical approach on the other. Positivism is exemplified more recently in Hempel's or Nagel's deductive-nomological model. Originally an ambitious attempt to ban all metaphysics and religion, positivism now covers a large number of different assertions or themes. Amongst the latter are the assumptions that there is a unity of method between the social and the natural sciences; the notion that the social sciences ought to search for eternal law-like generalizations; the belief that the same format which allows phenomena to be explained also allows the prediction of the very same phenomena, and vice versa; a rejection of explanations which refer to subjective states of individuals such as motives or purposes; a predilection towards quantification; and a view of the social sciences as exclusively aimed at solving technical problems of society (see chapter 8). Habermas rejects the positivist claim that it is the only form of valid knowledge, and he also repudiates the positivist tendency to ignore the intersubjective and social dimension of scientific knowledge.¹⁹ In his view, there is a residual positivism in Marxism in so far as it reduces social interaction to mainly (if not exclusively) a mechanical outcome of the productive forces.²⁰ Like Giddens and Bourdieu, Habermas recognizes that some hermeneutic insights are indeed relevant to the workings of the social world: people attribute meaning to their surroundings, and act accordingly (see chapters 1 and 4).

This brings me to the second type of knowledge. Hermeneutics, or the method of *Sinnverstehen*, postulates a qualitative difference between the methods of the social and the natural sciences. This argument goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey's appeal for a distinctive method of interpretative understanding (*Verstehen*) for the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey clearly articulated the hermeneutic position in the so-called *Methodenstreit* at the end of the nineteenth century. According to him, whereas the natural sciences deal with questions like 'why' and 'how', the social sciences and history try to answer 'what' questions. Although Dilthey initially presented an individualistic version of the method of *Verstehen*, in which re-enactment takes a prominent position, he later came to recognize the public-collective and linguistic features of this re-enactment process. Habermas argues that, due to its emphasis on descriptive analysis, Dilthey's hermeneutics is incapable of critically assessing the validity of statements. Furthermore, against Dilthey's assumption of a neutral or virginal re-enactment of the past and in line with Gadamer's notion of prejudice (*Vorurteilsstruktur*), Habermas argues that interpretations are only possible through the medium of implicit preconceptions. For him, the more recent developments within hermeneutics (for example, Schutz's sociological interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology,

Peter Winch's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, or Garfinkel's ethnomethodology) do not entirely overcome some of the shortcomings of Dilthey's work. Habermas finds more inspiration in the work of Gadamer, in particular his *Truth and Method*. Gadamer argues against the Enlightenment notion of value-free and theory-independent knowledge. According to him, tradition and prejudice should not be seen as obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge, but rather as the precondition for the possibility of that knowledge. As the historicity of traditions is intrinsic to knowledge formation, knowledge is temporal and open to future reassessments. Understanding the world is not merely a one-way process – our very preconceptions are reconstructed in the encounter with the world. Most of these conceptual insights are taken over by Habermas, whilst he criticizes Gadamer for his alleged lack of a critical dimension. People's knowledge or interpretation, he argues, necessarily rely upon a number of implicit assumptions which are embedded in history and tradition, but it does not follow that different sets of assumptions are equally valid. What sociology needs in addition, Habermas continues, is a 'depth hermeneutics' which provides a yardstick enabling us to evaluate different traditions critically and to identify ideological distortions and their relationship with power relations.²¹

Habermas's depth hermeneutics falls under the third type of knowledge: critical theory. Critical theory rests upon a combination of causal explanation and *Sinnverstehen* and is ultimately aimed at self-emancipation. Self-emancipation takes place whenever people are able to challenge past restrictions which are a result of distorted communication.²² Although Freud defined his theory in close association with the natural sciences, Habermas conceives of psychoanalysis as the example *par excellence* of critical theory. The hermeneutic dimension enters a psychoanalytic encounter whenever the psychoanalyst helps the patient to re-enact previously repressed memories and experiences. Habermas talks about 'depth hermeneutics' here, since the psychoanalyst attempts to move behind the surface meaning and to delve further at the level of repressed needs and wishes. One of the aims of this interaction is, of course, to reveal to the patient the previously hidden causal mechanisms which have hitherto influenced behavioural patterns; this then is the empirical-analytical dimension. However, the ultimate goal of the psychoanalytic encounter is the removal of these restrictions of the past, which Habermas calls the emancipatory dimension of psychoanalysis.²³ Another example of critical theory, but at a societal level rather than at a psychological one, is historical materialism. Like psychoanalysis, historical materialism is directed towards reflection and critical awareness.

Habermas's earlier writings, and in particular *Knowledge and Human Interests*, suffer from a number of weaknesses. First, as he later acknowledges himself, his earlier thought is still embedded in what he calls a Cartesian 'philosophy of consciousness' (or philosophy of the subject) in that it overlooks

the social nature of communicative practices. Second, although Habermas demonstrates persuasively that psychoanalysis can be self-emancipatory for the *individual*, this does not imply, as he seems to assume, that psychoanalysis is a stepping-stone for a critical theory of *society*. Many doubts have since emerged regarding such potential for psychoanalysis.²⁴ Third, the early Habermas regularly conflates reflection upon socially induced constraints on the one hand, and liberation from these constraints on the other. When later pressed on this issue, he recognizes that self-reflection is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for negating past restrictions. But in his early writings the two notions are not always properly distinguished. Fourth, Habermas uses the term 'reflection' with at least two different meanings. One refers to the Kantian concept of 'critique' as reflection upon the conditions of possibilities of knowing or acting. Another refers to the Hegelian emancipatory notion of *Bildung* as reflection upon hitherto unconscious or hypostatized constraints.²⁵ Habermas later recognizes this ambiguity in these writings, calling the latter self-criticism and the former rational reconstruction. He has devoted an important part of his work in the 1990s, including *The Theory of Communicative Action*, to the phenomenon of rational reconstruction. In this context, he relies upon what he calls 'reconstructive sciences', referring to Chomsky's generative grammar, Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. These reconstructive sciences reveal the underlying rules of our pre-theoretical 'knowing how'. Habermas's theory of communicative action or universal pragmatics is itself such a reconstructive science. This theory allows him to follow Kant in his notion of reason, reflecting upon the universal conditions of its own functioning, whilst avoiding the *a priori* nature of Kant's enterprise.²⁶

The theory of communicative action

This brings me to his seminal work on rationality. For Habermas, an action or a statement is rational if it can, in principle, be justified on the basis of an open debate with equal participation for each individual. This working definition can be used to address three aspects of the concept of rationality. One component is epistemological. Its leading question is whether or not each culture incorporates its own rationality. Habermas's conceptualization of rationality as procedural leads him to reject relativist notions such as those of Winch, who relies upon Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. A second component of rationality operates at the level of social theory. It deals with the rationality claims which are made in one's explanations of social conduct (see chapter 7). The third component, to which Habermas pays most attention, refers to the sociology of culture and particularly the cultural process of transition which the West has undergone since roughly the sixteenth century.

By focusing on this third component, Habermas reacts partly against Weber's notion of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) and Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of instrumental reason. According to these authors, modern civilization is characterized by an increase in the logic of means-end rationality. As such, they are highly critical of the project of modernity. For Habermas, however, rationalization is not a single, but a twofold process. On the one hand, it indeed involves instrumental rationality, as it has been conceptualized by Weber and the Frankfurt School. Like them, Habermas is highly critical of excessive means-end rationality. On the other hand, there is undoubtedly a more positive component to the rationalization process in the West. Habermas decides to call this positive aspect of the Enlightenment 'communicative rationality'. Communicative rationality refers to the institutionalization of mechanisms of open criticism and defence. Whereas instrumental rationality links in with the imperative of the social system, communicative rationality refers to the level of the life-world. Communicative rationality becomes the corner stone of Habermas's contribution to critical theory.²⁷

Central to Habermas's 'universal pragmatics' is the notion of competence. He argues that people possess specific practical skills which allow them to draw particular distinctions. One of these distinctions is between three types of action: 'instrumental', 'strategic' and 'communicative action'. Instrumental and strategic action are both orientated towards success, but whilst the former refers to a relationship with external nature, the latter deals with strategic situations between people. Strategic and communicative action are both social, but the latter is social action orientated towards reaching 'understanding' (*Verständigung*) with respect to all 'validity claims' (*Geltungsansprüche*).²⁸ Obviously influenced by Popper (see chapter 8), Habermas argues that people are able, in principle, to make an additional distinction between three different worlds: external nature, society and internal nature. Whereas the world of external nature refers to issues of a correct representation of facts, society refers to issues of moral rightness of social rules, and internal nature deals with issues of sincerity.²⁹ As will be obvious from what follows, the ability of people to make these various distinctions is central to Habermas's notion of communicative action.

One of Habermas's central claims is that the notion of rationality presupposes communication. To elaborate this argument, Habermas relies on speech act theory. He draws heavily upon Austin's distinction between illocutionary and locutionary speech acts. Austin introduces these terms to draw a distinction between saying something on the one hand, and doing something by saying something on the other. Following Austin, Habermas claims that every speech act can be divided up into a propositional level and an illocutionary level. Habermas combines this with his tripartite frame of worlds according to which there are three uses of language: cognitive, interactive and expressive.

The cognitive use of language points to something in the objective world and draws upon constatives as a type of speech action. The interactive use refers to the social world, aims at establishing legitimate interpersonal relations and draws upon regulatives (like commands or promises). Finally, the expressive use refers to the subjective world, the intention or self-representation of the speaker, whilst drawing upon avowals. As will become clear in the following, these three uses of language tie in with three 'validity claims'.³⁰

I am now in a position to elaborate on the core of Habermas's theory of communicative action. One of his pivotal assertions is that whenever people are involved in a conversation with one another four culturally invariant 'validity claims' are implicitly presupposed. These are 'intelligibility', 'truth', 'moral rightness' and 'sincerity'. Intelligibility (*Verständlichkeit*) refers to the presupposition that whenever one speaks, what one says has meaning and is not gibberish. As intelligibility is fulfilled within language use itself, it is not part of the subject-matter covered within Habermas's universal pragmatics. Truth (*Wahrheit*), the second validity claim, refers to the fact that, by saying something, there is the implicit idea that the 'factual content' of what is said is true. Moral rightness (*Richtigkeit*) refers to the implicit claim that, by saying something, one has the right to say it at a given moment within a given context. Finally, sincerity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) is the implicit claim that, by saying what one says, one is not intending to deceive the other participants in the interaction.

The ability of people to differentiate between the three worlds ties in with the latter three validity claims. Truth belongs to the world of external nature; Habermas calls it the 'cognitive-instrumental sphere'. Moral rightness links in with the world of society; in Habermasian parlance, this is the 'moral-practical sphere'. Sincerity concerns the world of internal nature; Habermas calls it the 'evaluative or expressive sphere'. Although the validity claims are implicitly presupposed in communication, all are also potentially open to argumentation. Each validity claim is associated with a different form of argumentation. Theoretical discourse refers to the truth-validity of propositions or efficacy of actions; Habermas calls this form of discourse the 'cognitive use of language'. Practical discourse refers to the rightness of norms; Habermas coins it 'interactive use of language'. Aesthetic criticism and therapeutic critique refer to adequacy of value standards and truthfulness and sincerity of expressions; this is the 'expressive use of language'.³¹

'Undistorted communication' differs from 'distorted communication' in that the people involved can openly defend and criticize all validity claims. This is especially the case in an 'ideal speech situation', which is an uncoerced debate between free and equal individuals, and as such it is entirely dominated by one principle: the 'force of the better argument'. Furthermore, all individuals involved have equal right to enter the discussion, and there is no repressed motive or self-deceit which might affect the outcome. The ideal

speech situation is an ideal type in the Weberian use of the word, and one of Habermas's bold claims is that it is inherent in the nature of language. He refers to it as a 'counterfactual' ideal which can operate as a yardstick for critically evaluating and comparing real-life situations and as a critique of distorted communication.³² Of the four validity claims, only truth and moral rightness can be redeemed in discourses which approximate an ideal speech situation. The intelligibility of a statement tends to be demonstrated by putting it differently, and sincerity can only be shown by subsequent actions. But truth and moral rightness can be redeemed in discourse. It follows that Habermas's notion of rationality and truth is a *procedural* one: his notion of rationality does not adhere to absolute foundations of knowledge, but to *procedures* of reaching knowledge.³³ One of the upshots of this is that, analogous to Popper's rejection of a 'first philosophy', our knowledge is temporal – to be held until a better argument compels us to think otherwise (see chapter 8). Contrary to, for example, Tarski's notion of a correspondence theory of truth, Habermas's consensus theory of truth refers to agreements reached on the basis of an open unrestrained debate amongst equals.

Hitherto, I have mainly dealt with the Habermasian notion of a rational 'conduct of life' (*Lebensführung*); but what about the differences between societies as to whether their 'form of life' (*Lebensform*) allows for such rational conduct? For Habermas, some societies are more predisposed to *Lebensführung* than others. In particular, the *Lebensform* of earlier civilizations seems less conducive to rationality. In this context, Habermas develops a theory of homology or structural identity between individual and societal development. For this he relies, in part, upon Piaget's work on the cognitive and moral development of children, distinguishing, as does Piaget, four stages of the child's development: the symbiotic, the egocentric, the sociocentric and the universalistic. Each phase leads to a 'decentring' of an egocentrically distorted view of the world. The child gradually learns to distinguish the objective, the social and the subjective realm. Before children enter the egocentric stage, they are unable to differentiate themselves from the environment, and it is only during the sociocentric stage that children gradually learn to distinguish physical and social reality. Finally, during the universalistic stage they learn to reflect critically upon their actions or values from the perspective of alternative arguments. This unilinear perspective ties in with Kohlberg's three stages of consciousness in ontogenesis: the pre-conventional, the conventional and the post-conventional.³⁴

Consistent with his interpretation of, amongst others, Lévi-Strauss, Piaget and Kohlberg, Habermas argues that societal development goes through analogous stages to personal development. As opposed to modern world-views, mythical world-views do not allow people to distinguish between the external world, the social world and internal nature – they tend to conflate nature and culture, or language and the world. Analogous to individual development,

there is a trend towards increasingly discursive rationality in the transition from mythopoietic, cosmological and religious cultures, to metaphysical and modern societies. Habermas adheres to a unilinear evolutionism in that he sees this trend towards increasing rationality as the inevitable and irreversible outcome of a collective learning process.³⁵ Rationality becomes a possibility once a differentiation of the system and life-world takes place, plus a differentiation of the cognitive-instrumental sphere, the moral-practical sphere, the evaluative and the expressive sphere.

However, with the differentiation of the system and life-world, two problems occur. First, the maintenance of the economic and political dimensions of the social system might become eroded. This ties in with a 'motivation crisis' in the work sphere and a 'legitimation crisis' at the political level. Broadly speaking, Habermas's argument is that in advanced capitalism, politics is reduced to its pragmatic dimension; it is mainly in charge of macro-economic issues. However, if it fails to pursue its economic functions, it cannot rely upon legitimate authority, loyalty or commitment on the part of the citizens. Once politics is largely reduced to the solving of economic problems, recurrent economic crises are sufficient to erode its legitimacy.³⁶ Second, the system imperatives tend to instrumentalize the life-world, and this 'colonization of the life-world' leads to what Durkheim diagnosed as 'anomie' and Weber as a general loss of meaning. The subordination of the life-world to system imperatives is exemplified in Marx's theory of labour where the commodification of labour leads to the erosion of its life-world dimension. It is worth mentioning, however, that Habermas's theory of colonization differs significantly from the view of classical social theorists and their followers. He differs from Weber in that he does not conceive of the colonization of the life-world as part of an internal logic of modernization. In Habermas's view, the colonization of the life-world is not inevitable. This differs from a Marxist view in that Habermas's hope rests with the new social movements, and the latter do not operate within a traditional Marxist agenda. The new social movements are concerned with issues relating to quality of life and self-realization. Although these values are not incompatible with Marx's earlier writings, contemporary Marxists are reluctant to attribute such priority to these goals.³⁷

Evaluation

There is no doubt that Habermas's enterprise is a courageous one. At a time when the project of the Frankfurt School has been widely abandoned, Habermas aims at finding new philosophical grounds for critical theory. Whilst post-modernism has been so much in the ascendant in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Habermas attempts to redefine and defend precisely

the project of modernity. Furthermore, he also sets out to argue against all those who, whether influenced by Nietzsche, Wittgenstein or Kuhn, court the doctrine of relativism. Despite the controversial nature of Habermas's work, its sheer breadth and depth are achievements in themselves. The latter accomplishments are probably unrivalled in the twentieth century. Habermas incorporates an impressive range of philosophies and sociological theories. He deals with a wide spectrum of issues, from traditional philosophical topics to the intricacies of contemporary politics.

Given the enormous scope of his work and given the difficult tasks he sets out to achieve, it would be inconceivable for his project to be without any significant lacuna. I will not even attempt to provide here an exhaustive list of all the criticisms which have been levelled against his writings. It is simply too long, and Habermas has incorporated some of these arguments in his work anyway. I will instead mention what I personally see as major weaknesses in his project. I deal especially with his central writings on communicative rationality because they have been the most influential so far. I think the deficiencies listed seriously compromise the validity of Habermas's argument as a fruitful contribution to critical theory.

First, there is the rather tedious, though not insignificant, point that some aspects of his work lack a solid empirical grounding. Habermas's contribution to critical theory relies on a number of 'reconstructive sciences'. The latter have been regularly subjected to criticism on empirical grounds, and rightly so. For example, the empirical basis of Piaget's or Kohlberg's work does not remain uncontested, neither does Lévi-Strauss's *oeuvre* (see chapter 1). The lack of empirical support for these theories may jeopardize the core of his theory of communicative action, which in its procedure of rational reconstruction draws heavily upon them. A similar criticism applies to Habermas's theory of societal evolution, which he backs by his personal and selective reading of the work of other theoreticians of evolution (Weber, Marx and Durkheim, to name only a few), who in their turn often rely upon secondary sources. Habermas's reconstruction of others' accounts of evolution clarifies and illustrates his position very well indeed, but, as a defence of that very same position, it is inevitably unconvincing. This is certainly not to say that Habermas's theoretical frame of reference cannot be sustained by empirical evidence, but more research is needed to pass a judgement on this issue.

Second, there are problems with Habermas's statement that communicative action is orientated towards reaching understanding or agreement. It is, in Habermas's own terms, *verständigungsorientiertes Handeln*. However, the German word '*Verständigung*' is confusing since it incorporates both understanding and agreement. Of course, it could be argued that agreement presupposes at least a minimal form of understanding. If two people agree upon something, then they necessarily must have some understanding upon

what they agree. Understanding, however, does not presuppose agreement; if two people understand each other, it does not follow that they agree upon what has been understood.³⁸ This weakens Habermas's argument that communication presupposes the possibility of *Verständigung*. He might have compelling reasons for arguing that communication indeed requires as a condition the possibility of understanding, but this does not imply that there is such a tight link between the two as he thinks there is. This problem comes to the surface especially when communication takes place between individuals belonging to different cultures. This brings me to the next point.

Third, deeper criticism applies to the concepts of communicative rationality and of the ideal speech situation, as conceived and conceptualized by Habermas. Even if, hypothetically, one can imagine an ideal speech situation to exist, it is rather difficult to grasp how people would reach an understanding, let alone consensus, when radically different forms of life (and thus different underlying assumptions) are at stake. Under these conditions even Habermas's notion of 'the force of the better argument', however innocuous at first sight, appears problematic. The rules of valid argumentation themselves are indeed part of a cultural heritage and tradition, and therefore, in Habermas's own terms, open to debate and criticism. One enters a vicious circle here, since deciding upon the better argument is dependent on Habermas's 'force of the better argument', and this in turn will be decided upon by the force of the better argument, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Leaving these analytical problems aside, it is sufficient to notice that the ideal speech situation fails to serve its practical purposes in the confrontation between different cultural settings – especially obvious in the case of competing theoretical systems or paradigms in science.³⁹

Fourth, it has often been argued against Habermas that his notion of an ideal speech situation is shockingly unreal. Critics are indeed sceptical about the value of grounding critical theory on utopian grounds. This criticism needs further qualification though. It is, of course, true that the ideal speech situation is an ideal type, and as such it cannot be found in reality. But from this observation alone, it does not follow that the counterfactual notion of unconstrained communication is useless as a foundation for critical theory. Habermas would be correct to counter-argue that it can still be employed as a yardstick to compare and judge between real settings. What is an unsurmountable problem for Habermas, however, is that the ideal speech situation rests upon an extremely impoverished notion of self and personhood. Note that Habermas insists that, apart from external constraints, any psychological barrier to open criticism and defence ought to be lifted as well. However, it is difficult to see how any being, referred to in the counterfactual, can be described as an individual at all. The notions of self and personhood are so intertwined with the very same psychological features (for example, deference to authority or self-doubt) of which Habermas is

willing to dispose. Several features, normally associated with the notion of personal being, cannot legitimately be attributed to the 'individuals' depicted in Habermas's unconstrained communication. To put it bluntly, the problem with his utopia is not that it promotes an unreal setting, but that it is devoid of people. Even leaving this argument aside (and assuming that Habermas's counterfactual is not a deserted place after all), any individual would still have a very different psychological make-up from his or her counterpart in the counterfactual. There are strong arguments to say that, rather than being the same individuals with different features, they are simply different individuals. This again seems to jeopardize the usefulness of the counterfactual.⁴⁰

Fifth, there is a remarkable lack of sociological awareness in Habermas's notion of communicative rationality. Remember that equality is one of his central concerns. After all, the ideal speech situation rests not only upon open unconstrained debate, but also upon equal opportunity for all to participate. But problematic for Habermas's notion of equality is the pedestrian observation that not all people are equally well equipped to participate successfully in these open communicative practices. Habermas indeed fails to recognize the extent to which communicative rational practices rest upon a vast amount of cultural and educational resources, which are unevenly distributed across the globe and across various sections of the same society. One does not need much exposure to the intricacies of the sociology of education to realize that educational and cultural capital are very much monopolized by the educated, upper-middle class. It is not terribly convincing to found critical theory, as Habermas does, upon an ideal type in which these people (or any section of society for that matter) hold such a privileged position. This does not imply that a viable critical theory cannot be based on the theory of universal pragmatics. But it does mean that the latter theory needs to be supplemented by a reflection upon the structural conditions which would secure more equal allotment of the communicative skills concerned.

Sixth, Habermas's 'consensual' theory of truth is problematic as well. He differs from Popper or Bhaskar in rejecting a realist account of science (see chapter 8), but he desperately attempts to avoid the more radical implications of that position. Distancing himself from both a correspondence theory of truth and a redundancy theory of truth, Habermas links the cognitive validity of a statement to its warrantability within procedures of a 'court of appeal' in which only 'the force of the better argument' prevails.⁴¹ However he remains suspiciously vague about what counts as evidence or what counts as the better argument within an open debate.⁴² More importantly, it seems obvious that, however much the actual debate approximates Habermas's ideal speech situation (and for the sake of the argument, let us assume that it is an ideal speech situation in the Habermasian sense), people's agreement upon the truth or falsehood of a statement can still potentially be mistaken. Hence, as a prescriptive contribution to the philosophy of science Habermas's procedural

concept of rationality compares unfavourably with, for instance, Popper's. However problematic Popper's notions of falsification and verisimilitude might be, they do provide us with tools for establishing which claims are more desirable than others (see chapter 8).

Further reading

Those who wish for a historical introduction to the Frankfurt School can consult Held's *Introduction to Critical Theory*. For a fine analytical approach to the project of critical theory, I would suggest Geuss's excellent *The Idea of a Critical Theory*. For a brief, but comprehensible introduction to Habermas's work in general, Bernstein's introduction to his edited volume *Habermas and Modernity* and Giddens's contribution to the same volume (entitled 'Reason without Revolution') are both a good start. Also recommendable, though more difficult, is Dews's *Autonomy and Solidarity*, an edited collection of interviews with Habermas. Part III of Held's *Introduction to Critical Theory* discusses Habermas's work within the context of critical theory in general. McCarthy's *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* is an excellent introduction to his earlier work, but does not fully incorporate Habermas's theory of communicative action. The latter is summarized very well in Ingram's *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*. Habermas's universal pragmatics is critically evaluated in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, edited by Thompson and Held. Outhwaite's *Jürgen Habermas* is a solid, well-balanced overview of Habermas's work and includes not only his writings on communicative rationality, but also his latest work on legal theory. *Habermas and Modernity*, edited by Bernstein, is an excellent series of articles dealing with Habermas's defence of the project of the Enlightenment. Habermas's own writings are difficult to read, and this, unfortunately, does not improve with time: his earlier works are more accessible (*Towards a Rational Society*, for instance), whilst his most influential contributions so far (*Knowledge and Human Interests* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*) are pitched at an extremely high level of abstraction. It is ironic that for someone who grounds critical theory primarily in communicative practices aimed at *understanding*, Habermas has been remarkably unsuccessful in addressing his audience in an intelligible, let alone accessible manner.

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7 The Invasion of Economic Man Rational Choice Theory

Individualistic and economic approaches to social life were amongst the *bêtes noires* of Durkheim's sociological project. Part of the constitution of the new discipline of sociology was to distinguish it clearly from psychology and economics, not only in terms of subject-matter, but also in terms of theoretical approach. In opposition to individualistic approaches, society was considered to be an entity *sui generis* – not a mere aggregate of its component parts. Furthermore, rational calculative attitudes were seen as limited to particular spheres of social life, and, even in cases where these attitudes were prevalent, a precondition for their existence was identified in shared norms and values.

Sociology has long been dominated by this Durkheimian perspective. In its weak version, sociological reasoning is seen as alien to the picture of actors rationally pursuing their individual interests. A stronger version presumes that reason is, in John Wilnot's terms, 'an *ignis fatuus* of the human mind': that behind the surface level of rational action lies a deeper more fundamental level of unacknowledged social structures. That Durkheimian perspective, advocated in either of its versions, has permeated twentieth-century sociology: there is indeed a consensus amongst otherwise very different theorists such as Parsons, Dahrendorf, Garfinkel, Bourdieu and Giddens on the irreducibility of social life to economic logic (see chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4). Even Weberian action theorists, who have traditionally been hostile to holistic types of explanation, are keen to distance themselves from any form of economic reductionism. The emergence of rational choice theory in social and political science in the course of the 1980s has therefore been all the more surprising and revolutionary. Rational choice theory in the study of politics and sociology is nothing short of the invasion of economic man. It is the ultimate imperialist assault of economics on sociology – the subordination of *homo sociologicus* to *homo economicus*. *should be socialist*

Of course, it could be argued that economic man has been expansionist in the past. After all, Hobbes's political theory relied heavily upon the view that the world is inhabited by rational, self-interested agents, and Adam Smith