Jürgen Habermas and the Difficulties of Enlightenment

Schmidt, James

The New School

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3899

Boston University
Immanuel Kant, having posed the question of whether his was an enlightened age, went on to give the prudent answer. "No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment."¹ Kant could maintain his faith in enlightenment by turning his gaze from what the present had accomplished to what the future promised. But in an age when, as Theodor Adorno observed, it is a good deal easier to write a universal history leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb than it is to write one leading from savagery to humanitarianism,² proponents of enlightenment have had to be even more cautious than Kant. What has passed for enlightenment must be placed under suspicion. Thus Jürgen Habermas has suggested that a "dialectical theory of progress, such as historical materialism claims to be," had better keep its guard up:

... what presents itself as progress can soon show itself to be the perpetuation of what was presumably overcome. Thus more and more of the theorems of the counter-enlightenment have been incorporated into the dialectic of enlightenment, more and more elements of the critique of progress have been assimilated by the theory of progress: all in order to formulate an idea of progress that is subtle and resilient enough not to let itself be blinded by the mere illusion of emancipation.

There is, however, a limit on this dialectic, and there is one proposition that enlightenment cannot accept: "namely, the thesis that enlightenment itself mystifies."³

For something on the order of a quarter of a century, Jürgen Habermas has struggled to keep both his guard up and his faith intact. From his earliest writings he has sought to disabuse his contemporaries—Marxist and non-Marxist alike—of a naive faith in the beneficence of scientific and technical progress without falling prey to the temptation of viewing enlightenment itself as deception. That he has had few illusions about the difficulties involved in questioning what has passed for progress without denying that enlightenment has progressed is witnessed by the relentless self-criticism and constant reformulation to which his arguments have been subject. To write about him is to run the constant risk of criticizing as inadequate—or worse still, accepting without question—points which he has already abandoned. The safest course may be to focus less on the individual arguments and try instead to capture the general trajectory which his enlightened suspicion about enlightenment has traced.

_A Philosophy of History with a Practical Intent_

We can take, as our point of departure, his point of departure. In 1957, three years after receiving his doctorate for a dissertation on Schelling's philosophy of history, Habermas published an extensive survey in _Philosophische Rundschau_ of literature on "the philosophical discussion of Marx and Marxism." The review, which focused on the difficulties Marx's more recent commentators had had in coming to terms with the perspectives opened by the publication of Marx's early writings and the problems created by the political and ideological reality of Soviet Marxism, came to some rather

unorthodox conclusions. The philosophical reading of Marx had stumbled, Habermas argued, by assuming that Marx was in any conventional sense the author of a philosophy. Against the legions of Thomists, existentialists, fundamental ontologists, and philosophical anthropologists who felt that in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* one could find that philosophy which grounded the rest of Marx's writings, Habermas argued that Marx had to be understood first and foremost as a social theorist who had sought to "abolish philosophy" by "realizing" it. In understanding the uniqueness of Marx's project, Maurice Merleau-Ponty had come closest to the mark. Marx's abolition of philosophy created a philosophy of history which was "no longer philosophical" in that it no longer rested on metaphysical guarantees. Rather, Marx's reading of history was a "critical prologue to praxis." It was, in Habermas's formulation, "a philosophy of history with a practical intent."

There were, of course, others who had argued similar points before Habermas. In the 1920s Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács had probed the peculiar relationship between Marxism and philosophy, and the tension between philosophy and social theory had proved enormously provocative for the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. But against Lukács explicitly, and implicitly against the

---

first generation of critical theorists—who, as Habermas later recalled, had by the mid-'fifties settled into a routinized critique of a rigidly standardized corpus of philosophical and sociological texts—Habermas sounded a new theme. The articulation of this philosophy of history with practical intentions could no longer presume the validity of Marx's categories or analyses. It must admit that the contemporary world provided, if not a refutation of Marx's project, then at least some troubling “facts against Marx.” In place of Lukács's retreat to the level of “objective possibility”—a strategy which left Marx's conjectures intact as potential consequences of a crisis which for some reason never matured—Habermas called for a confrontation between the critical intentions of Marx's philosophy of history and the empirical analyses which contemporary social sciences offered.

Since that early review essay Habermas has forced critical social theory into a confrontation with contemporary philosophy and social science in hopes of revitalizing the practical intent of Marx's “dialectical theory of progress” without losing sight of the critique of the illusions of enlightenment which was the ultimate achievement of Horkheimer and Adorno. His four books—Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (1962), Erkenntnis und Interesse (1969), Legitimationsprobleme im Späkapitalismus (1973), and Theorie der kommunikativen Handelns (1981)—his numerous essays and essay collections, his de-

8 Jürgen Habermas, “Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism and Critique,” in Habermas, Theory and Practice, translated by J. Viertal (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 195–198. The first German edition carried the subtitle “Four Facts Against Marx” at the head of this section. It was dropped in subsequent German editions and in the English translation.
9 Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, p. 444.
11 Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962); Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, translated by J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971); Jürgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, translated by Thomas McCarthy
bates with practitioners of critical rationalism, systems theory, and hermeneutics have pursued two general complexes of problems, seeking (1) to clarify the nature of the early capitalist public sphere, to account for its transformation in advanced capitalist societies, and to outline the potential problems this transformation poses for the modern state and (2) to explore, through a recourse to philosophical traditions outside the normal locus of discussion in Marxism and critical theory, that peculiar relationship between social analysis and social criticism that defines critical theory. Habermas’s efforts have resulted in the growth of a literature by and about him that already threatens to defy cataloguing, let alone study, while Habermas’s own stature has grown to the point where he is in all probability the most influential German social theorist since Max Weber.

The task here, however, is not that of documenting his influence so much as it is that of explaining his importance. The major theme has already been introduced: Habermas’s claim on our attention rests with his peculiar coupling of a commitment to a vision of history as at least potentially a progress of enlightenment with a refusal to underestimate the degree to which recent history has made a mockery of the

---


12 The most important for this essay are: Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, partially translated as Theory and Practice: Jürgen Habermas, Kultur und Kritik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973); and Jürgen Habermas, Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), partially translated by Thomas McCarthy as Communication and the Evolution of Society (Boston: Beacon, 1979).


Enlightenment's hopes. This tension can best be grasped if we examine in turn (1) Habermas's efforts to clarify the intentions which define critical social theory, (2) his attempts to articulate the distinctive features of the interpretation of history central to this program, and (3) his recourse to the unique relationship between language and action as a means of grounding his hopes for enlightenment.

Practical Intentions

In the tradition of "practical philosophy" which Habermas sees stretching from Aristotle to the rise of historicism in the early nineteenth century, politics was viewed as a continuation of ethics, concerned with the cultivation and formation of a habit of virtue, and striving for a type of knowledge which was categorically different from that of theoretical sciences. While these latter disciplines sought certain knowledge (episteme) through the contemplation of objects which did not change, practical philosophy faced a domain of objects which could always be different than they were. Its goal, accordingly, was phronesis—a term which Habermas glosses as "a prudent understanding of the situation." 15

Habermas refuses to view the breakup of practical philosophy and the consequent emergence of separate disciplines of politics, economics, ethics, and eventually sociology as simply the progress of social theory "from lore to science." Like the fragmentation of Marx's thought into separate domains, it is a division which extracts a price: the gradual erosion of the practical intentions which once served as a coordinating reference. The crucial question, as Habermas saw it in his 1961 Marburg inaugural lecture, went as follows:

... how can the promise of practical politics—namely, of providing practical orientation about what is right and just in a

given situation—be redeemed without relinquishing, on the one hand, the rigor of scientific knowledge, which modern social philosophy demands . . . ? And, on the other, how can the promise of social philosophy, to furnish an analysis of the inter-relationships of social life, be redeemed without relinquishing the practical orientation of classical politics?16

Without denying that the more rigorous scrutiny which the social sciences have brought to practical questions must be regarded as a progress in enlightenment—and here Habermas distances himself from more traditional proponents of the classical understanding of politics such as Leo Strauss, Wilhelm Hennis, Joachim Ritter, and Hannah Arendt—Habermas is concerned with distinguishing this real progress from the merely illusory enlightenment wrought by "scientism": the view that science is not simply "one form of possible knowledge" but rather the sole form in which knowledge is possible.17 In his analysis the "scientization of politics" takes place on at least two levels: (1) on the level of theory as a transformation of the various disciplines of practical politics and (2) on the level of practice as a transformation in the nature of political decision-making.

The Classical Doctrine of Politics and its Fate. Habermas has, on a number of occasions, analyzed the transformations which accompanied the emergence of the modern social sciences from the corpus of classical practical philosophy.18 On the most general level, the entire process can be understood as a restructuring of the relationship between the categories of praxis, poesis, and theoria. In Aristotle's account, praxis—human action oriented toward a goal—was distinguished on the one hand from the contemplation of an unchanging cosmos (theoria) and on the other from the production of useful artifacts (poesis). A good action (eupraxis) must be understood neither as some-

16 Ibid., p. 44.
17 Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 4.
between the external world of natural processes, the internal world of individual needs and desires, and the social world of commonly shared values and norms. These distinctions—which Habermas embraces as the positive and undeniable achievement of modernity—are threatened by the tendency, also endemic to modern societies, to conceive all three worlds in terms of the logic by which external nature has been mastered.

Thus the reduction of praxis to poesis which Habermas observed in the history of political and social thought is by no means simply a theoretical category mistake. To the extent that decisions which would in principle require the informed consent of citizens are posed as technical dilemmas which only experts should address, the theoretical effacement of the distinction between praxis and poesis finds a concrete and practical parallel. In his most recent discussion of the problem, Habermas has argued that the evolution of capitalism has been marked by a paradoxical and potentially crisis-ridden intrusion of technical and strategic modes of problem-solving—fully appropriate, he argues, for addressing problems of system-stabilization—into the life-world, a category which Habermas no longer uses in the Husserlian sense but rather reinterprets in terms associated with the tradition stemming from Wilhelm von Humboldt's comparative cultural linguistics as those general communicative competences which make agreement possible. The life-world accomplishes such tasks as the reproduction of cultural norms, the maintenance of social integration, and the socialization of individuals, problems which are by no means resolved by the solution of technical problems of material reproduction.

Hence the progress of scientific and technological rationality can, according to Habermas, lead to a paradoxical result:

\[^{25}\textit{Ibid.}, 1: 80-85, 125-126.\]
\[^{26}\textit{Ibid.}, 2: 208-216; for earlier analyses, see Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Toward a Rational Society}, translated by J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp. 50-122.\]
Let's give our Marxist hearts a shock: capitalism was quite a success, at least in the area of material reproduction, and it still is. Granted it has indulged from the beginning in an enormous plunder of traditional forms of life. But today the imperatives built into the dynamics of capitalist growth can only be fulfilled through a substantial growth in the—let us say—monetary-bureaucratic complex. Therefore, we observe and feel and suffer an “overspill,” an encroachment by the system on areas no longer at all related to material reproduction.27

The consequence of this “overspill” is a “pathologizing of the life-world”—an erosion of the medium of communicative interaction through which the tasks of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization are carried out and a consequent proliferation of such pathologies as a loss of meaning on the level of cultural reproduction, anomie on the level of social integration, and individual psychopathology on the level of socialization. Hence the great paradox of the transition to modern forms of social organization: “the rationalized life-world enables the rise and growth of subsystems whose autonomous imperatives self-destructively strike back at it.”28

Sketched this quickly, it may be difficult to see what sets Habermas’s account of the self-destruction of enlightenment apart from such earlier and perhaps better-known studies as Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man, Horkheimer’s Eclipse of Reason, or Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment. Habermas, however indebted he may be to his forerunners, has nevertheless rightly insisted on some important differences which set him apart from them. First of all, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, like Weber before them, assumed that the culprit here was Western rationality as such and hence were forced to conceive of any alternative as a break with Western rationality as a whole.29 Habermas, in contrast, has

29 Ibid., 2: 491. For more detailed criticisms of Adorno, see Jürgen Habermas, “Urgeschichte der Subjektivität und versilberte Selbstbehauptung” and “Ein philosophierender Intellektueller,” both in Habermas, Philosophische-politische Profile
traced the malaise to an antinomy within the progress of modernity which could be resolved without abandoning those achievements of enlightenment which remain for Habermas undeniable: the uncoupling and differentiation of various institutional systems in the life-world such as culture, personality, and society; the introduction on all levels of a distinction between form and content in the analysis of concepts, norms, and principles; and the resulting institutionalization, in the form of democratic means of political decision-making or the "pedagogization" of education, of modes of reflection on the symbolic reproduction of the life-world.\(^{30}\)

Second, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno assumed that this triumph of scientific and technical rationality engendered a seamless web of repression which foreclosed the possibility of resistance by insuring itself against all potential crises.\(^{31}\) Habermas, as has been seen, argues in contrast that the very process of the scientization of the life-world is plagued by serious contradictions and threatened with potential crises.

This second difference is closely related to a third. The earlier generation of critical theorists maintained a tacit orthodoxy in their assumption of the continued validity of the analysis of reification developed by Marx in the discussion of the fetishism of commodities in Volume 1 of *Capital* and elaborated by Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. They were thus forced to keep looking for signs of revolt in those classes which Marx had pinpointed. But Habermas has argued that Marx cannot serve as an adequate basis for the critique of the scientization of the life-world since he, in a crucial sense, abets the process with his failure to develop a clear distinction between *praxis* and *poesis*.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 1: 489–534 traces the development of the "critique of instrumental reason" from Lukács to Adorno and Horkheimer.
Labor and Interaction. The distinction between labor and interaction is of fundamental importance for Habermas's reconstruction of Marx's philosophy of history with a practical intent. The distinction, first introduced in a study of Hegel's Jena Philosophy of Spirit and subsequently developed in an analysis of Marx's conception of ideology critique, has been subjected to extensive criticism and reformulation in the years since its original appearance. It will not be possible to examine here the degree to which Habermas's analyses of Hegel and Marx stand up to critical scrutiny—although it should be noted in passing that Habermas tends to have a rather cavalier attitude toward what he terms "philological questions" about the accuracy of his reconstructions of other thinkers' arguments. Rather, we must be content with sketching the main contours of the initial distinction as developed in Knowledge and Human Interests before highlighting, in the next section, some of the most crucial changes Habermas has been forced to make.

As presented in Knowledge and Human Interests, the distinction can be read on at least three levels. Taken on what Habermas terms a "quasi-transcendental" level, it can be understood as a distinction between a technical cognitive interest in the prediction and control of mute objects and a practical cognitive interest in the maintenance of mutual understanding.


32 See the one-paragraph settling of accounts in Jürgen Habermas, "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests," translated by C. Lenhardt, Philosophy of the Social Sciences 3 (1973): 165-166.

33 For a more complete discussion of the implications of the distinction, see McCarthy, The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas, p. 23.
between subjects capable of speech and action. On a methodological level, it can be understood as a distinction between the sciences which are guided by these respective interests: on the one hand, empirical-analytic sciences which aim at an extension of technical control over nature and, on the other, hermeneutic and cultural sciences which aim at an extension of understanding between individuals and cultures. Finally, on a sociological level, the distinction can be understood as an analytic device for noting, in empirical situations where both categories will always be interwoven, the degree to which given institutions serve to further the extension of technical control or to further the maintenance of social integration.

Habermas's critique of Marx rests on a distinction between Marx's actual empirical analyses and his theoretical understanding of their import. Habermas argues that while Marx's empirical analyses comprehend the history of the species "under categories of material activity and the critical abolition of ideologies, of instrumental action and revolutionary practice, of labor and reflection," his theoretical reflections on his own methods constantly deploy "the more restricted conception of the species' self-reflection through work alone." The consequences of the effacement in Marx's methodological writings of the distinction between labor and interaction are at least three-fold. First, and minimally, it leads Marx to construe his critique of ideology along the lines of the natural sciences, thus concealing the practical intentions of his philosophy of history under the guise of a logic of technical mastery. Second, it leads, in the discussion of automation undertaken in the Grundrisse but not incorporated into Capital, to a more serious misconception: Marx is tempted to view emancipation from domination as a direct consequence of the ever-increasing mastery of nature that capitalism promotes. Third, it leads to the paradoxical result that Marx is never able

35 Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 42; also pp. 52–53.
36 Ibid., pp. 44–60.
to make good on his claim that struggles between classes constitute the central dynamic of history since an analysis of history as a dialectic of forces and relations of production shows only how technical mastery of nature is extended. It does not address the crucial issue of how actors come to challenge the unequal distribution of the benefits which this technical mastery produces.

The remedy Habermas proposes for these defects in Marx's account is twofold. First, it will be necessary to reformulate Marx's account of the self-constitution of the human species so that the "history of industry" is not the sole "open book" from which the development of the powers of the species is to be read. The evolution of the species also takes place in normative dimensions such as law, religion, morality, and the evolution of world-views. Second, it will be necessary to focus more closely on the peculiar status of ideology-critique: unlike the knowledge which the natural sciences employ in the study and mastery of a world of objects which are treated as separate from the species, the knowledge gained from the critique of ideologies turns back on the species itself. It represents a process of practical enlightenment in which new insights react upon the very process which is being studied. Both of these aspects are crucial for Habermas's projected revitalization of Marx's philosophy of history with a practical intent. Without the distinction between labor and interaction, the dialectic of progress loses its differentiated character and becomes either a limitless optimism in the beneficent consequences of the extension of science and technology or a boundless pessimism in the face of a seamless web of technological domination. Without the conception of ideology-critique as self-reflection, the philosophy of history elaborated under the first aspect will be devoid of practical intentions. The dilemma Habermas has faced since Knowledge and Human Interests is that his elabora-

tion of the specific character of his reconstruction of historical materialism has foreclosed any simple view of the practical intent this history can be claimed to manifest.

Social Evolution

Criticisms of the conception of critical theory sketched in Knowledge and Human Interests have led Habermas to reformulate his view of the nature of critical theory and to conceive of history in a way which differs markedly from the "philosophy of history with a practical intent" which was his earlier project. We shall first survey the revisions Habermas has made in his understanding of historical materialism and then sketch the basic arguments of his more recent theory of social evolution.

Revisions: A Reconstruction of the Evolution of Competences. In response to the criticisms directed at Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas has made at least three important revisions in his project. First, he no longer sees critical social theory as contributing to the self-reflection of a species which reproduces itself through labor and interaction. Rather, critical theory is concerned with the elaboration of systematic reconstructions of social evolution. Second, this replacement of reflection by reconstruction is tied to a related shift of focus from the progress of a collective subject to the evolution of universal competences. Third, Habermas is now concerned "to free historical materialism from the ballast of its philosophy of history" and accordingly prefers to speak of an evolution of species competences rather than of a history of a species subject.

The shift from reflection to reconstruction was initially motivated by critics of Knowledge and Human Interests who

---

argued that Habermas had given an overly idealistic account of the way in which practical reflection shaped the development of the species and further stressed that Habermas could not employ the therapeutic situation in psychoanalysis—in which the analyst frees the analysand from constraints by aiding self-reflection—as a model for the relationship between social criticism and its audience without introducing serious distortions.  

Granting much of this criticism, Habermas made a distinction between reflection and reconstruction, arguing that while "self-reflection brings to consciousness those determinants of a self-formative process of cultivation and spiritual formation (Bildung)" and thereby "embraces the particulars, the specific course of self-formation of an individual subject," rational reconstructions deal instead with "anonymous rule systems" and hence "do not encompass subjectivity." Self-reflection leads to insights which are "rich in practical consequences" by disclosing the pseudo-objectivity of habitual patterns of behavior and thus making what was once unconscious subject to conscious decision. Reconstructions, however, have no such immediate practical consequences. They render explicit previously implicit sets of rules which govern a specific competence but in so doing do not necessarily alter the way in which an individual would perform such actions.

The most that Habermas is willing to claim for such reconstructions is that by providing a general framework for critical social theory they may serve reflection in a more mediated fashion without engendering it. Reconstructive sciences such as logic, linguistics, cognitive developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, and Habermas's proposed theory of social evolution are examples of a type of knowledge which should not be


equated with empirical-analytic sciences—in the 1971 Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas described their status as that of "'pure' knowledge." But one must also be careful to set them apart from the more immediately practical concerns of hermeneutic sciences.42

The second revision in Habermas's original project, the shift from a focus on the historical formation of a universal species subject to an analysis of the evolution of universal competences, follows from the displacement of reflection by reconstruction. In recent years Habermas has been concerned with avoiding a danger he sees in the way Marx spoke of class consciousness, class interest, and class action. Habermas has warned that such expressions might lead one to suppose that attributes such as consciousness, interest, and action can simply be transferred from an individual to a collectivity.43 To avoid this, one must not approach history as a unified process, bound together by the accomplishments of a universal subject—as Lukács did in History and Class Consciousness when he argued that the proletariat was the "identical subject-object" that German idealism had sought in vain in order to give coherence to world history. One must speak rather of the evolution of competences which are universal in that their development can be traced across a number of epochs (e.g., the evolution of legal argumentation) but which cannot be viewed as the accomplishment of any one subject or group of subjects. Thus while "the self-producing subject of history was and is a fiction," it is in no way meaningless to examine the evolution of sociocultural systems in terms of their "politically consequential institutionalization of discourses."44

From this follows the third revision. With the "practical

44 Ibid.
intent” of this reconstructed historical materialism already placed in suspension, Habermas further questioned whether ideology critique could any longer “draw upon the guiding thread of philosophy of history.”45 Reconstructions of the development of competences are, in a strict sense, no longer histories. They do not offer narrative accounts of the deeds of identifiable persons and groups, nor do they record specific events. Rather, they elucidate the development of a competence through a series of logically connected stages which need not be traversed by any identifiable person or group. Evolutionary explanations neither need nor permit translation into that narrative form which is the hallmark of historical accounts.46

Consequences: A Differentiated Theory of Progress. These revisions entail major changes in Habermas’s earlier hopes for a revitalization of Marx’s philosophy of history with a practical intent. The proposed reconstruction of the evolution of competences is neither a philosophy of history nor is it animated by practical intentions. However, Habermas is insistent that his project remains a reconstruction of Marx’s historical materialism rather than its rejection.

Much in the reconstruction will be, of course, unacceptable to more orthodox Marxists. As has been seen, Habermas totally rejects the notion that historical materialism should concern itself with the emergence of a collective subject somehow representative of the interests of the species as a whole. He also rejects the idea that the pattern of development traced by historical materialism will be necessary, continuous, irreversible, and unilinear.47 Transitions between one stage and another are necessary only in the sense that if—for reasons

42 Habermas, “Reply to My Critics.”
44 Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,” in Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, pp. 140–141.
which are contingent—there is a further development beyond a given stage, it should take that form whose general character can be sketched by the theory of social evolution. It is possible for the theorist to construct certain, more advanced stages on logical grounds alone—for example, Habermas's argument that Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in order to attain logical closure, demand the addition of one further stage. It is possible for the theorist to construct certain, more advanced stages on logical grounds alone—for example, Habermas's argument that Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in order to attain logical closure, demand the addition of one further stage. It is possible for the theorist to construct certain, more advanced stages on logical grounds alone—for example, Habermas's argument that Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in order to attain logical closure, demand the addition of one further stage. It is possible for the theorist to construct certain, more advanced stages on logical grounds alone—for example, Habermas's argument that Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in order to attain logical closure, demand the addition of one further stage. It is possible for the theorist to construct certain, more advanced stages on logical grounds alone—for example, Habermas's argument that Kohlberg's stages of moral development, in order to attain logical closure, demand the addition of one further stage.

It is not, however, possible for the theorist to specify in an unequivocal fashion the subject or group of subjects that could attain such competences or to indicate the empirical preconditions which might lead to the attainment of such competences. Further, the fact that progress has been made does not prevent reversals from taking place: Habermas cites the case of fascist Germany. Nor can one assume that evolution will be continuous—Habermas's theory could incorporate cases of moral stagnation that would be the equivalent, in the normative realm, of Marx's Asiatic mode of production. Finally, given the number of evolutionary units and the number of discrete competences at stake, there is no reason to assume that evolution will be unilinear. "Many paths," Habermas writes, "can lead to the same level of development. . . ".

Thus Habermas's insistence that accounts of social evolution must take into account the development of those "learning processes . . . that take place in the dimension of moral insight, practical knowledge, communicative action, and the consensual regulation of action conflicts" and which follow an "internal history" that cannot be reduced to the development of productive forces breaks decisively with Marx's insistence that law, religion, and morality have no history save that caused by their connection with the evolution of production. Nevertheless he insists that his account is both "historical" and "materialist." It is materialist insofar as he stresses that the crises

---

48 Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Development and Ego Identity," ibid., p. 90.
49 I owe this analogy to a comment by Ken Baynes.
50 Habermas, "Toward a Reconstruction," p. 141.
which result from "unresolved, economically conditioned system problems and ... the learning processes that are a response to them" still remain the central dynamic of social evolution.\textsuperscript{52} Habermas assigns to normative structures a far greater role than Marx did, arguing that they alone can resolve the crises which system problems produce and thus function as the "pacemaker of social evolution." But the ever-failing heart (if one may torture the metaphor further) remains the economic base and Habermas is willing to grant that "culture remains a superstructural phenomenon. ..."\textsuperscript{53}

Thus Habermas's reconstruction of historical materialism culminates in a differentiated theory of progress which gives no quarter to a boundless optimism in the progressive character of the extension of productive forces—since such unfettered expansion of technical competences will lead only to ever greater "pathologization of the life-world"—and yet preserves a hope that on the level of normative structures a progress in enlightenment is possible. To speak of an evolution of normative structures, however, presupposes that it is possible, in spite of Habermas's modifications in the structure of historical materialism, to share Marx's conviction that history has an immanent teleology. "When we speak of evolution," Habermas argues, "we do in fact mean cumulative processes that exhibit a direction."\textsuperscript{54} To speak of a "dialectic of progress" is to argue that the stages of this evolutionary process can be ranked according to some standard. The extension of human mastery over nature—the unquestioned benchmark which Marx took over from the Enlightenment—is by itself not sufficient. Thus Habermas is forced to find a standard for evolution in that domain which, with the progress of scientific and technical rationality, has been increasingly abandoned to relativism: the domain of moral development. To do this he


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 98.

\textsuperscript{54} Habermas, "Toward a Reconstruction," p. 141.
must find a presupposition which is "universal and unavoidable—in this sense transcendental" and yet which is not necessarily fulfilled in practice and thus is capable of serving as a goal for action. Habermas's claim—perhaps his most controversial one—is to have found such a presupposition through an analysis of communicative action.

Language and Action

Human beings act and if questioned about their actions are capable of giving reasons for them. When further questioned about their responses, they are capable of discussing the reasons they have given. It is on this obvious and at first glance unexceptional feature of social life that Habermas bases his reconstruction of historical materialism. Speakers operate under a "transcendental constraint"; to engage in discussion is necessarily to make a series of commitments—the precise details of which may only gradually become clear—which are the ultimate presuppositions on which any understanding is grounded. As Habermas stated in his Frankfurt inaugural lecture:

Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus. Taken together, autonomy and responsibility constitute the only Idea we possess a priori in the sense of the philosophical tradition. Perhaps that is why the language of German Idealism, according to which "reason" contains both will and consciousness as its elements, is not quite obsolete. Reason also means the will to reason.

Speech is oriented toward an unconstrained consensus which is never realized in any actual discussion. It thus furnishes Habermas with a foundation which is simultaneously a goal, a

55 Ibid., p. 177.
57 Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 314.
standard against which the progress of enlightenment may be measured which is both immanent and transcendent.

This ideal of an unconstrained consensus—or, as he has put it more recently, the experience of an “undisturbed intersubjectivity”—should not be understood solely in terms of a community of speakers. Habermas has insisted that one should approach this communications community “in the first place as a community of interaction and not of argumentation, as action and not discourse. . .”

This ordering of emphasis emerges clearly in Habermas’s most recent work. Abandoning an unwieldy manuscript which had taken its start from debates in analytic philosophy, Habermas turned in his Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns to an analysis which takes its point of departure from the problem of the rationalization of social action.

Communicative Action. Habermas’s account of communicative action allows him to reformulate his earlier distinction between labor and interaction in a way which is both more precise and more forceful. A reconstruction of the communicative competence of social actors allows Habermas to distinguish, on the one hand, between “action oriented toward success” and “action oriented toward understanding” and, on the other, between the social and nonsocial situations which action addresses. Thus within “action oriented toward success” Habermas distinguishes between nonsocial instrumental action and socially situated strategic action, while his category of “action oriented toward understanding” can take place only within social settings as “communicative action.”

Since he is now dealing with competences which actors employ rather than a distinction made on the level of “quasi-transcendental interests,” Habermas is able to make a much stronger claim about the status of these distinctions:

58 Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, p. 159, n. 16.
60 ibid., 1: 384–387.
I am in fact supposing that the actors themselves, in every phase of interaction, can know—however vaguely and intuitively—whether they are adopting a strategic-objectivating attitude towards other participants or are oriented to consensus.... subjectively the two basic attitudes that discriminate between action oriented to success and action oriented to understanding can by no means be understood only as different analytic aspects of the same behavior.\(^{61}\)

Subjects may, at times, be mistaken about their true motives, and it is possible to have "systematically distorted communication" in the form of a concealed strategic action in which the deception involved is unknown to both participants.\(^{62}\) But the distinction is something more than a theoretical artifice: it is a distinction which any competent actor may be expected to invoke.

Further distinctions can be made within the sphere of communicative action itself. Speakers find, already embedded in the conventions of the life-world, distinctions between external nature, society, and internal nature.\(^{63}\) Language has the capacity to articulate and relate these worlds in ways which respect their differences. Thus competent speakers should be able to take up different attitudes and assess the different claims made within these different attitudes. In communication concerning external nature, speakers take up an "objectivating attitude" and claim to offer a true representation of the facts. With respect to society, speakers take up an "interactive attitude" and claim to judge the rightness of rules governing relations between individuals. Finally, with regard to internal nature, individuals take up an "expressive attitude" and claim to give a truthful disclosure of their needs and desires. Speakers also have recourse to modes of argumentation for each of these domains which follow patterns of progressive radicalization differing from case to case. Finally, overarching all of these forms of communication is the possi-

\(^{61}\) Habermas, "Reply to My Critics."

\(^{62}\) Habermas, \textit{Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns}, 1: 442-446.

bility of an even more general discussion concerning language itself which is devoted to clarifying the claims speakers make with regard to any of the three levels under discussion.64

The degree to which these potentialities of communication have been elaborated gives Habermas a standard which may be used to judge the level of rationality achieved in different societies. After a discussion of the differences between modern and mythical world-views, Habermas argues that the claim which modernity may make to possessing a greater potential for rationality than traditional societies is grounded not on the difference between their respective technical achievements but rather: (1) on the degree to which modern societies have been able to sustain a differentiation of object domains, validity claims, and communicative attitudes; (2) on the degree to which speakers in these societies are able to take up a critical and reflexive attitude toward the society in which they live and the claims which they make; (3) on the degree to which specific modes of argument have been clarified and subjected to differentiated learning process; and (4) on the degree to which the life-world has been uncoupled from systems of purposive-rational action to allow for a more critical scrutiny and further interpretation of the claims made within communicative action.65

The Thorn of Modernity and the Difficulties of Enlightenment. At the heart of Habermas's defense of enlightenment, then, is an argument that the differentiation of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic discourses is the peculiar "signature and thorn of modernity."66 In a recent interview he stated, "... I want to keep the sense of discourse alive in a situation which objectively forces one not to mix questions of truth with questions of justice or taste." And then, reflecting on what he had just

64 Habermas, "What Is Universal Pragmatics?", pp. 65–68.
66 Honneth et al., "Dialectics of Rationalization," p. 29.
said, Habermas made it clear that these distinctions require no small effort to sustain them:

This is expressed in an obstinate Kantian manner; but I have accustomed myself to this neo-Kantian jargon in the last ten years, and I am somehow relieved that I can say it so casually. I have never dared to say it in this manner—"this bureaucratic departmentalization of aspects of reason." Adorno would have said.67

In order to take up the cross of modernity, Habermas has had to distance himself from the entire modus operandi of the Frankfurt School's critique of enlightenment.

There have been well-posed objections from even Habermas's most sympathetic critics, objections which he has been able to answer only by taming that Kantian obstinancy, which, after all, is but one of the roles he has managed to master. Thomas McCarthy has questioned whether we could learn from traditional cultures how we might "put our fragmented world back together again" and whether it might be possible to engage in a dialogue in which both modern and traditional societies would be participants in a common project of mutual enlightenment.68 In response, Habermas has stressed that the point of his theory of rationality is not to facilitate that separation of "us" from "them" which is the fatal hubris of enlightenment. Rather, the point is to "become aware of what we, in the course of our learning process, have forgotten."69

Habermas's counsel is neither a Weberian acceptance of the fate modernity has prepared for us nor a rejection of modernity in the name of a lost golden age. The challenge is rather to find ways—ways which speech alone makes possible—of bringing about "a reconciliation of the decayed parts of modernity."70

67 Ibid.
69 Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 2: 588.
70 Honneth et al., "Dialectics of Rationalization," p. 28.
Habermas is aware that this reconciliation has neither a guarantee of success nor even a clearly defined group of agents who might make the reconciliation in practice which no theory can assure. Seyla Benhabib has noted an antinomy in Habermas's recent work which parallels certain aspects of the argument of the second part of this essay. The more Habermas turns toward a theory of modernity elaborated in terms of an evolutionary theory of discursive rationality, she argues, the further removed does the prospect of an emancipated society appear, for a counter-factually conceived structure of discursive rationality articulates an emancipatory idea that cannot guide emancipatory praxis, since it belongs to the concrete life-history of no social subjects, but to the evolutionary potential of the species in general.71

Habermas has tried, in the concluding section of his most recent book, to make such a connection with new social movements which could, with effort, be viewed as reacting to the technification of the life-world which he has analyzed.72 This may be asking too much of a reconstruction of the evolution of species competences with few illusions about its lack of practical intents. The attempt to interpret social movements in light of an evolutionary theory always runs the risk of falling into that peculiar ventriloquism in which the theorist construes certain silences in political and social movements as signs of what has been silenced and—in the name of "emancipatory praxis"—attempts to lend these movements a voice. Emancipation, if it is not to become such a mystifying trick, may have to content itself with the more modest task of sketching out what potentialities lie open, regardless of what agents may or may not be on hand.

Finally, in the face of Habermas's rather sweeping statements about where language is headed, more skeptical readers

72 Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handels, 2: 575–583.
might question whether manipulation, distortion, and ambiguity can be so easily segregated off from communicative action as Habermas's dichotomy of communicative and strategic action suggests. Against Walter Benjamin’s statement that "there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the true sphere of 'mutual understanding,' language," we might do well to invoke Benjamin's other dictum:

... pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I.G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force.

But this objection is not an unfamiliar one for Habermas. It was his essay on Walter Benjamin, and not this essay on him, which brought those two quotations together and fused them into a monad which announces both the promise and the limitations of a theory of communicative competence. Perhaps it is well that Habermas has not cultivated the advised mistrust in reconciliation too vigorously. There is no shortage of critics of enlightenment today. But there are few left to state its case as forcefully or carefully as he.

75 Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," p. 59.