



## **The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 2: Lifeworld & System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason**

*Jürgen Habermas, Thomas A. McCarthy (Translator)*

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Jürgen Habermas opens Volume 2 with a brilliant reinterpretation of Mead and Durkheim and then develops his own approach to society, combining two hitherto competing paradigms, "system" and "lifeworld." The strength of this combination is then demonstrated in a detailed critique of Parsons's theory of social systems. Concluding with a critical reconstruction of the Weberian and Marxian treatment of modernity and its discontents, Habermas sets a new agenda for the critical theory of contemporary society. The combination of historical and theoretical sweep, analytical acumen and synthetic power, imagination and engagement mark this as one of the great works of twentieth-century social theory.

## **The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 2: Lifeworld & System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 2: Lifeworld & System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason for online ebook**

### **Thomas says**

This book is comically dense. I felt like a tool reading it. But it does the trick.

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### **Mary says**

What's not to love? The man has "Figure 36. The human condition."

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### **Vanya Ztahelskij says**

I was actually surprised by how thoughtless Habermas' critique of Marx was, relying as it does on the Weber/Lukacs reading, and the whole base/superstructure trope. For those of you who heard about this famous duality and want to critique Marx based on it: Marx said this ONCE, and with contextual specificity. He didn't really believe you could just dump the social on top of some stool called "economy" (this is an economist reading).

Habermas also seems to think Marxism can't account for the welfare state, or the other somewhat underhanded tactics Capitalism has used to keep itself afloat through ever worsening financial crisis. I think he would be hard pressed to find a Marxist economist who isn't dealing with this currently, not to mention Marx himself being relatively clear on how capitalism won't abide a barrier, and has historically come up with extremely remarkable ways to keep moving. Habermas doesn't deal with the core of Marx's real addendum to the political economic discourse of the time, namely that its core isn't just the commodity relation, but surplus-value. While scooting around Marx's ideas about value in general, he never actually gets at the core factor, which is that the surplus-value relationship which is inherent to Capitalism is inherently exploitative, and no amount of restructuring will cure this fundamental ailment. There is no real "pacification" of class antagonism, and we are beginning to see Marx's foresight on this matter now. Habermas posses another fundamentally poorly framed question when he wonders why modern resistance is declassed in a way (as in coming from students rather than workers). Firstly I don't think anyone looking at the conflicts happening around the world in the 60's could be so deluded as to not understand the class interaction of situations like Vietnam, and secondly he perhaps should relook at the class positions of many students.

Not to mention his claim that Marx somehow ignores or subsumes culture in this severe way...

A few other problems with Habermas:

-The idea that we have to work from the assumption that language has an inherent drive toward consensus/understanding (and that somehow this is not teleological in a hard sense because its merely "goal-oriented"). The abstract theory of language that serves as the foundation of his entire method is simply terrible. His system falls apart without its fallacious starting point being assumed.

-Economy and State are considered in isolation from culture, those making the problem remarkably similar to a bad reading of Marx in that his problem is these “systems” (economy, state) invading the “lifeworld” (culture, language). How economy is not a cultural and linguistic practice is totally beyond my comprehension. It seems like there is just some mystical assumption about how economy just flows on its own, and any mention of the ruling classes and their historical and current role in shaping that interaction are ignored (what about imperialism!?)

-The appeal to general political “legitimacy”, which eliminates all forms of political struggle save communicative action. The assumption that we can rationally talk out our problems and thus solve any dispute, and that this is the only legitimate way to do so, leaves a great deal to be desired.

-In his theory of communicative action, regulative validity claims are subject to acceptance (in the Yes or No dichotomy of responses to validity claims) based on their normativeness, which seems problematic if this is the type of speech act which we use to request or regulate others.

-An inability to fold art/poetry into his proceduralist account of communicative action towards satisfying reason leads him to put it wholly outside the world. The autonomous realm of art is just a mythology, whether from those who wish to validate it, or from those who say it is not reasonable enough.

-Linguistic Kantianism based on “regulatory ideals” is a one way ticket back to Hegel’s critique of universal morality. How can Habermas claim to have an intersubjective account with this monstrous presupposition looming all of our discourse? (I understand the attempted tripartite of objective, inter-subjective, and subjective, I just think it fails to come through.)

-The problem of “social order” and its explanation has never been a satisfying frame for my understanding of social systems (stemming from Parson’s social integration theory). Marx describes our economic condition as anarchic, and I tend to agree. Phrasing the problem in such a way as to assume that there is a relative degree of social equilibrium really misses the power relationships at the bottom of even the most basic agreements (though I generally sympathize with Habermas in that he is responding to post-structuralist power analysis). I think Parson’s critique of Hobbes is missing the main thrust of the Hobbsian argument, which is that fear of violent death accounts for “social order”—this is lurking closer to the surface than we often realize. This is the difference between a “crises” model that recognizes the internal contradictions of the capitalist system, and a “consensus” model; one wonders if Parson’s had a window in his ivory tower. Habermas at least tries to explain why our society is in perpetual crisis (“systems” invading “life-world”), but that our “natural culture and language” is bent towards rejection of systems seems more than arbitrary, it is down right anti-dialectic.

-ANTHROPOCENTRISM, only humans have language, the environment and the animals are just going to have to deal with our decision.

-ETHNOCENTRISM, being situated in and being the self-proclaimed heir to western philosophical/linguistic thought, the backwards cultures that have yet to evolve to western standards of rationality are just waiting to be subsumed, and receive this prescriptive division from immediate mythological binding ( ala Durkheim).

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### **Josh says**

God this thing is dense. I only read about a quarter of both volumes for school but one day I will read the whole thing and then I will be a TRUE GENIUS.

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### **Lorin says**

Excerpt from my book, Dynamic Markets Leadership, all rights reserved:

Where people are not yet altruistic and creative enough, there will be powerful pressures to keep up with those advanced competitors that have already made the transformations needed for high performance in dynamic markets. That is, the drive toward creative cooperation within the organization does not come from the warm, fuzzy values of religion or philosophical idealism; it comes from the cold, hard need to keep up with competition among organizations in highly dynamic and sometimes chaotic markets. The mission of the NPC is to take the mystery out of these processes and make both these harsh market demands and our required (now seemingly impossible or paranormal) transformations intelligible and therefore also reasonable. Habermas said,

“...political domination has socially integrating power only insofar as disposition over means of sanction does not rest on naked repression, but on the authority of an office anchored in turn in a legal order. For this reason laws need to be intersubjectively recognized by citizens; they have to be legitimated as right and proper. This leaves culture with the task of supplying reasons why an existing political order deserves to be recognized.” (p. 188)

So culture is a lot more than arts, crafts, and values. What is happening at the business level of society is that the reasons a political (or executive) order deserves to be recognized are no longer tied to their top-down, unilateral, often vicious chain of command. Instead, a transformational leader serves those affected by his or her work and therefore can demonstrate that good reasons are involved with our mutual participation in distributed leadership through new structures of consciousness

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### **Bengjaw says**

non-dominating interaction/communication can be a cure for our sick society

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### **Justin Evans says**

This is a difficult book to rate, since it's obviously very important/influential. And the horrific style could bias anyone against it. But I finally settled on two stars. Why?

\* Habermas' theory is meant to be an advance beyond previous critical theories. He argues that their focus on consciousness philosophy (broadly speaking, an individualist approach to social theory, which assumes that individuals are the primary bearers of meaning) leads them into all sorts of problems. But his interpretations of those previous critical theories are, not to put too fine a point on it, appalling. He misreads Hegel; he misreads Marx to such a great extent that one might almost believe he'd never even read \*Capital\*; and his take on earlier critical theorists is more or less limited to Horkheimer's 'Eclipse of Reason.' Habermas' main criticism of Adorno is that Adorno seeks a solution to the problems of modern societies in a kind of irrationalist mysticism. It is no surprise that almost all of his evidence for this is taken from books \*about\*, rather than \*by\* Adorno. (Good rebuttals of Habermas' readings of Hegel and Marx can be found in Pippin's 'Idealism as Modernism,' and Postone's 'Time, Labor and Social Domination' respectively.)

\* For Habermas, the main problem with previous critical theories is that they don't seem to be grounded. Habermas sees a strict dichotomy here. Either you ground your theory by taking on a universalist perspective, or you lapse into relativism. Because critical theory has tended to avoid universalism, it must be relativistic. This is tied to his failure to understand Hegel's work. Hegel shows that the dichotomy between universalism and relativism is flawed; that something can be grounding without being universal. On this

approach, critical theory is right to find its foundation only in an immanent critique of the present, without a universalist standpoint.

\* Habermas claims to find his universalist standpoint in language. He argues that any speech act assumes the possibility of rational agreement, and that this can be a basis of a critical theory. Language becomes the inalienable repository of freedom and reconciliation. This is where Habermas' rejection of 'consciousness philosophy' hurts him most. Why is it that language can remain more or less pure? He has no answer for this question. 'Consciousness philosophy,' of course, would argue that since language is bound up with consciousness; and since consciousness somewhat obviously cannot remain 'pure' in an impure world; then language itself cannot remain pure, and cannot be the universal standpoint Habermas seeks.

\* Finally, Habermas tries to combine two sociological approaches: systems theory and action theory. He never asks, however, if these theories themselves might be reflections of actual social problems which cannot be merely 'combined' at the theoretical level. A critical theory will show the problems with these theories, and explain how to move past them. Habermas does not do this, because he accepts Daniel Bell's thesis of 'end of ideology.' Theories are now just different standpoints from which we view the same content, not reflections of that content itself. Again, a bit more 'consciousness philosophy' would have led Habermas to see that this separation of form and content - which he sees as a key moment of modernism - is theoretically untenable.

\* On a somewhat more obvious level, this was a theory designed for a welfare-state world. This world collapsed just as these volumes were being published in German. Habermas himself said, in an interview around the time they were being published, that this work assumed such a welfare state world ("The Dialectics of Rationalization," in 'Telos'). The disappearance of that world made it clear that 'power' was no more than a handmaiden to 'money.' The best recent work of critical theory, Postone's book mentioned above, makes this argument very well.

That's all substantive stuff. On a less high-falutin' level, this book is horrifically written, spends far too much time summarizing previous sociological theories, and shows a frankly bizarre addiction to unnecessary, quasi-scholastic hair-splitting. For those interested in critical theory, I recommend reading the 'intermediate reflections' and 'concluding reflections.' Otherwise, it's like reading a freshman-comp paper written by a staggering genius.

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### **Stefan Szczelkun says**

This was more interesting and radical than Volume 1. Used as my main theory in my 2002 PhD and critiqued using Foucault.

<http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/ph...>

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