

The Life-World and the Two Systems

Prof. Peter Krey, June 21st, 2002

(Expanded November 8, 2004)

Juergen Habermas has been called one of the two greatest sociologists in the world today. (The other is the late Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002).) His theory about the life-world and the two systems is a sophisticated social model, archetype, or construct by which to understand and criticize the present late-stage of capitalistic society today.

To oversimplify what is a very comprehensive and complex theory: Habermas argues that the life-world is based on communication, agreement, and consensus. The economic and political systems require instrumental rationality for the sake of control. His theory posits situations embedded in broader "horizons" that are in turn grounded in the life-world.

No matter whether one starts with George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) from basic concepts of social interaction or with Emil Durkheim (1858-1917) from basic concepts of collective representation, in either case, society can be conceived from the perspective of acting subjects as *the life-world of a social group*. In contrast, from the observer's perspective of someone not involved, society can be conceived only as a *system of actions* such that each action has a functional significance according to its contribution to the maintenance of the system. [\[1\]](#)

Note that the subtitle of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2 is "A Critique of Functionalist Reason." {I believe the main functionalist Habermas had in mind was Talcott

Parsons (1902-1979)}. Habermas follows George Herbert Mead and Emil Durkheim. Mead moved from the model of society as a self-regulating system, according to which every event or state is ascribed a meaning on the basis of its functional significance to a communication-theoretic model, according to which actors orient their actions by their own interpretations. [\[2\]](#)

From a linguistic angle, "communicative actors always move within the horizon their life-world" -- a life-world which now can be defined as "a culturally transmitted and a linguistically organized reservoir of meaning patterns." [\[3\]](#)

The complexity of this definition moves from language through discourse, to culture and values, to society and its institutions, and to persons and their speech-acts. In his words, everyday praxis yields three life-world spheres: 1/ culture 2/ society 3/ personality, where **culture** denotes a reservoir of shared knowledge and pre-interpretations, **society** a fabric of normative rules, and **personality** a set of faculties or "competences" enabling an individual to speak and to act. [\[4\]](#)

Modernization, roughly, is the replacement of implicit by explicit meaning patterns. (Such a statement seems to be a sociological version of the Freudian teaching that psychoanalysis makes the unconscious conscious.)

Habermas begins to use his model to critique our society when he speaks about the deleterious colonization of the life-world by the systems {following Karl Marx's (1818-1883) thesis of internal colonization}. Modernization does not entirely coincide with the differentiation of communicative structures or components for Habermas (to follow Dallmayr's analysis), because material production cannot be discounted. Long range social

development involves not only the internal diversification of life-world components but also the growing segregation of symbolic-communicative patterns from productive endeavors governed by standards of technical efficiency. This is a process, which can be described as an **"uncoupling"** of the systems and the life-world, to use Habermasian language. Once systems are no longer merely coordinated with communicative patterns but begin to invade and subdue these communicative patterns of the life-world, then the uncoupling of the systems and life-world is converted into the direct **"colonization of the life-world."** That means the communicative patterns of the life-world are subjugated to alien standards of technical control.[\[5\]](#) The life-world, by-and-large, characterized by value-rationality begins to be eclipsed and absorbed in instrumental rationality, making persons become means to political and economic ends not in their interest, nor under their control. A climate of communal agreement is necessary in the life-world, whereas systemic imperatives prevail in the systems.

(According to Don Kapiere, history professor at Los Medanos College, it is the aim of **"Habermas' to restore the praxis of communal agreement, that is, authentic democracy, about human ends."**) [\[6\]](#)

In the life-world, force [in the sense of coercion] and discourse cannot be connected. The life-world is at no one's disposal. As the higher value it needs to be guarded from the systems.[\[7\]](#)

From a Kantian perspective, I submit that people in the life-world have become mere means to alien ends, and the objective systems have become the ends in themselves. But the systems exist for the sake of the people in the life-world and the

people in the life-world do not exist for the sake of the systems. Habermas states that social relations become regulated only via money and power. I would add that genuine relationships of trust enjoyed for their own sake become heteronomous in the Kantian sense, which is the condition of being under a rule or domination of another. Money and power and the things they purchase become what people love and people become used as commodities. To "reify" means to convert or regard someone or an abstraction as a concrete thing. But as ends in themselves persons are not merely objects or things, but are also sacred, transcendent beings. [\[8\]](#)

Habermas gives one explanation of the uncoupling of system from the life-world in the following way:

"On this plane of analysis the uncoupling of system and lifeworld is depicted in such a way that the lifeworld, which is at first co-extensive with a scarcely differentiated social system, gets cut down more and more to one subsystem among others. In the process system mechanisms get further and further detached from the social structures through which social integration takes place. As we shall see modern societies attain a level of system differentiation at which increasingly autonomous organizations are connected with one another via delinguistified media of communication: these systemic mechanisms - for example, money - steer a social intercourse that has been largely disconnected from norms and values, above all those subsystems of purposive rational economic and administrative action that, on Weber's diagnosis, have become independent of their moral-political foundations." [\[9\]](#)

Habermas' theory about the colonization the life-world by the economic system points, among other things, to the problem of

the marketplace colonizing the academy, basic information, and news, entertainment, and government. Why do the corporations control the media, television, and radio, and have the right to brainwash people to become consumers? **(Don Kapiier adds that all the fragments of the former life-world are repackaged as market items. Techné subverts phronesis. The "means" subvert the ends.)** (Definition of **phronesis**: wisdom in determining ends and the means of attaining them. *Phronein* in Greek means to think.) **Don Kapiier continues that Habermas' praxis "recovers" the inherited life-world and rationally "perfects" it.)**

Does a university turn out products? Is a university the same as a business, a company? Have students become products who have to sell themselves? Have things become ends in themselves, and human beings become disposable? **(Don Kapiier sharpens my take on Habermas by adding that the "totaling market" requires endless consumption.)**

This is a very inadequate study of Juergen Habermas' Life-world and the Two Systems. Again, we could spend the whole course on Habermas. We have to limit ourselves to several important questions and then move on. Can you now understand what Habermas means by the uncoupling of the life-world from the systems?

[\[1\]](#) Juergen Habermas, the Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Life-World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason, translated by Thomas McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), page 117. Prof. Robert Bellah at the University of California at Berkeley, first introduced me to the life-world and two systems of Habermas.

[\[2\]](#) Ibid., page 118.

[\[3\]](#) Fred R. Dallmayr, "Life-World and Communicative Action," Working Paper #20 - Scott Mainwaring, editor, (University of Notre Dame, Helen Kellogg Institute, June 1984), p. 14.

[\[4\]](#) Ibid., p. 15.

[\[5\]](#) Ibid., p. 16-17.

[\[6\]](#) I thank Don Kapiier for criticizing my lecture.

[\[7\]](#) Ibid., p. 15-17. These short descriptions have been gleaned from the concise pages of E.R. Dallmayr's study.

[\[8\]](#) From my perspective, persons are the authors of science and the subjects of history.

[\[9\]](#) Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2, page 154.

[Subscribe to Scholardarity](#)