CHAPTER III

Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas: An Exposition
As may be imagined, Kantianism has made a great stir, not only in the field of philosophy, but also in the fields of psychology, theology and socio-political philosophy. As a matter of fact, Kant is the philosopher of enlightenment rationality. Postmodernity is a critique of modernity in general and Kant's enlightenment rationality in particular. A critique of enlightenment rationality implies a critique of Kant. Among post-modernists who strongly criticize Kant are the Frankfurt scholars like Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Jürgen Habermas (1929- ). These critics, each in their own way, have attempted to go ahead of Kant, either by offering an amendment of Kantianism or by making Kant relevant in the changed intellectual climate in Europe and America. In this chapter, Habermas's critical theory (communicative action, hermeneutics and universal pragmatics) in relation to his predecessor contemporaries like Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse is discussed.

This chapter has been divided into four sections. In section-1 the basic issues concerning modernity and post modernity and the basic philosophical quest of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse have usefully been analyzed. In section-2 Habermas's views on knowledge and interests as explained in his famous work *Knowledge and Human Interests* would be expounded. In sections-3 Marxian
notion of alienation and Weber’s instrumental rationality have been taken into account and it has been presented in Habermasian perspective. Section-4 deals with Habermas’s theory of communicative action and communicative rationality and its criticism.

**Section – 1**

**Postmodernity: Critical Theory – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse**

In order to understand a philosopher, one should know the philosophical currents of that time. Jürgen Habermas is a 20th century contemporary philosopher. In order to have better understanding of his philosophy, the distinction between modernity and postmodernity and its main trend – the critical theory would be discussed with special reference to Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, with their kind of critical – theory that influenced Habermas the most. After that Habermas’s place in the development of critical theory would be discussed. The relation of postmodernity to modernity would be formulated and it would also be postulated how a postmodernist rejects the idea that postmodernity is a denial of modernity. They say: it is a reconstruction, reinterpretation, an attempt to give a new meaning to modernity. This is what the spokesman of postmodernity, Jean-Francois Lyotard says, “The whole idea of post-modernism is perhaps better rethought under the
rubric of rewriting modernity.¹ Postmodernity of the critical theory retains many aspects of the Cartesian – Kantian – Hegelian modernity, yet they reject the norms of strict logic and rationality, which characterize the latter. This relationship could further be analysed on the basis of central and the marginal issues in modernity.

“At the centre of modernity are such issues as human subjectivity (the cogito, the transcendental consciousness and the Giest, rationality, unity, science, morality, freedom and so on) whereas at the margins of modernity are such issues as madness, fantasy, demon, deception, sexuality, pluralism, discontinuity, irrationality and fragmentation. Postmodernity underestimates the central issues of modernity and overestimates the marginal issues. In postmodernity, reality follows diverse models, which are rich in conflicts, history is viewed from ruptures and mutations and there is a radical negation of totalitarian thinking. “In marginalizing, delimiting, disseminating and decentering the central works of modernist inscriptions, the postmodernists, I have expanded the horizons of modernity.”²

Modernity breaks with the endless reinterpretation of traditional (classical) themes, topics and myths; and postmodernity

operates at the places of closure in modernity, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and breaks with tradition. To be modern means to search for new self-conscious expressive forms. To be postmodern is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate and decenter the primary and often secondary works of modernist inscriptions. It implies the line of demarcation between modernity and post modernity remains a matter of uncertainty because postmodernity operates at the edge of modernity.

The Dialectic of Enlightenment: The Conception of Negative Dialectics

The Institute of Social Research, namely, Frankfurt School which was in real sense post modern in its thought was founded in Germany in 1923. Theodor W. Adorno, Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse are the prominent representatives of this School. One of the most distinctive features on the intellectual landscape of the last decades of 20th century is the intensity of western modernity. Hard questions have emerged about the predominant modern understanding of reason, subjectivity, nature, progress and gender. With the exception to the last topic, (gender) these questions emerged in this century in their most powerful form in the philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer. In 1947 Adorno and Horkheimer published their Dialectic of Enlightenment, developing
the claim that the systematic pursuit of enlightened reason and freedom had the ironic long-term effect of endangering new forms of irrationality and repression. These critiques had an immense impact both on initial shape of work of Jürgen Habermas and on its continued evolution. Their (Adorno, Horkheimer) real effect was not one of convincing alternative moral political vision, rather it brought prevailing interpretations of reason, progress, nature and subjectivity to a new level of explicit questioning. These intellectual assaults coupled with shattering world events of mid twentieth century, have ensured that modernity’s self understanding will never have the level of self-assurance that it once possessed. And yet, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* one could still detect an appeal being made to some idea of reason and freedom that might provide the illumination, however weak and uncertain, necessary for fending a path out of modernity’s difficulties. Their appeal to reason and freedom had its roots in the pre-World War II era when they had been among the founders of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. The Institute members carried out a wide range of philosophical and social investigations sharply critical of the economics, politics and culture of western societies. Although they considered themselves to be on the left politically, their attachment to Marxism became looser

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4 Ibid.
and looser, and Horkheimer coined the term “critical theory” in the 1930s to describe their stance. As originally conceived, critical theory would have the role of giving new life to ideals of reason and freedom by revealing their false embodiment in scientism, capitalism, the “culture industry”, and bourgeois western political institutions. The members of the Institute were forced to flee Nazi Germany, and most of them got settled in the United States. It was during this time in exile that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written. After the war was over, Horkheimer and Adorno reestablished the Institute at the University of Frankfurt. Among one of the young philosophers who was associated with it was Jürgen Habermas. During this period, Horkheimer and Adorno became even more disillusioned about the world around them. Adorno began to articulate a mode of thinking which he called “negative dialectics”\(^5\) that resisted any affirmative thinking whatsoever about ethics and politics. And Horkheimer was drawn increasingly towards theology. Habermas, however, resisted these changes of direction.

However, it is not possible to go into all the details of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For the purpose, of this chapter only those aspects where Adorno seems quite preoccupied with Kant would be discussed. It is a very well known fact that the thrust of Adorno’s book is to show the failure of the enlightenment to liberate

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\(^5\) Ibid, p. XI.
humanity from tutelage. Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to lay out, "the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into new kind of barbarism." Adorno (in particular), seeks to sustain and create capacities for new and genuine critical thinking. Although he was steeped in the thought of Kant, he attempted to break the grip of closed systems of his time. Adorno’s basic problem was the question of the existence of Kant’s transcendental-self. By questioning the foundations of epistemological means, Adorno rejects "Kant’s transcendentalism".

Adorno has intense distrust in the doctrine of spirit and the categories of knowledge. He is indignant at the very thought of humanity’s invasion of self, and has no faith in human freedom and reason. Adorno suggests, “we live in a world completely caught in a web spun by the bureaucracy, administration and technocracy. The individual is, in his view, a thing of the past: the age of concentrated capital, planning and mass culture has destroyed the possibility of personal freedom. The capacity of critical thinking is dead and gone. Society and consciousness are ‘totally reified’, they appear to have the qualities of nature to possess the status of given and unchanging forms. The method that Adorno adopts outside Kantianism could be

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6 Ibid.
8 Please note a later revised version of the same series has been edited by Paul Barker.
9 Ibid, p. 301.
described as "negative dialectics" or "immanent criticism". For him negative dialectics operates within the "force field"\(^9\) between the claims that are made about reality and reality itself. There is no theory which would hold good for every time and place.

Adorno argues that imposition of categories by Kant is dogmatic and orthodox approach to social reality. For Adorno, man and his place in the world is a product of the interpretation of the concepts and this interpretation is never exhausted, only certain representation of reality can provide an adequate approximation of concepts.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno, along with Max Horkheimer, vehemently criticizes the enlightenment rationality developed by Kant. Both Adorno and Horkheimer say, "From now on, matter would be at least mastered without any illusion of ruling inherent powers (in it), of hidden qualities. For the enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect".\(^{10}\) This was the first major criticism of European enlightenment in this century. "Enlightenment is totalitarian, the implication was that Nazi totalitarianism was a product of enlightenment liberalism, whose central thrust is to establish human domination over everything and to eliminate that which resists such

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\(^9\) Ibid. p. 305.

domination,”\textsuperscript{11} declared Adorno and Horkheimer. They also say that, “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The enlightenment’s attempt was to captivate nature and to keep it in the straight jacket of abstract Reason, which it misinterpreted as the scientific reason”.\textsuperscript{12}

As stated earlier, Adorno recognizes the difficulty in establishing any system of knowledge on an indubitable basis of certainty. It was Kant who had declared that scientific knowledge was synthetic \textit{a priori}. Kant’s position of scientific knowledge is very close to Newtonian physics, which in turn has developed out of the Cartesian – Galilean Mechanics. But we have gone ahead of Newtonian physics. Now we know that all proofs are tentative, and can be questioned by subsequent experience. Science as something existing and complete in a certain respect, is the most objective thing known to man. But science in the making is as subjective as any other branch of human endeavour. So much so, that the question ‘what is the purpose and the meaning of science, receives quite different answers at different times and from different sorts of people’.

Adorno has an intense distrust in science and the enlightenment rationality. Adorno’s ‘negative dialectics’ or the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
'immanent criticism', or the 'critical theory' is neither a pure 'scientific theory' nor a pure 'philosophy'. Critical theory is located, in Habermes's phrase, to anticipate a later discussion, between 'philosophy and science'. This makes the critical theory as negative dialectics which sets us not only to describe but also to criticize vigorously the existing social norms without recourse to either the fundamental concepts of the enlightenment rationality (i.e. reason, freedom, truth) or the value-free model of science. Habermas has criticized Adorno severely, but still he has immense influence of Adorno.

Now let's take up study of a political thinker who has exercised some influence on contemporary American thought in general but a great deal of influence on the younger generation in particular, namely, Herbert Marcuse.

Marcuse's Reason and Revolution: A Vision for Theory and Practice

Marcuse's wide-ranging interests covered all the streams of thought phenomenology, existentialism, German Idealism, the nature of the individual, the problem of socialism, Marxism and critical theory of society. What gave unity to all these concerns was Marcuse's commitment to the task of developing critical theory in the light of the deficiencies of the classical Marxism. However, it is
not possible to go into all the details of Marcuse’s work. The study on Marcuse would be confined to his major work *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941). The later publication of this book includes an Epilogue written in 1954, in which the author briefly analyses the developments and changes in social and political theory, occasioned by the challenge which the Soviet Union presents to our philosophy of society and the individual. He is not particularly impressed with Marxism as it operated in Soviet Union. He describes it as a “repressive, puritan morality rationalized on the basis of scarcity and external threat”.\(^{13}\)

Marcuse has criticized Hegel and Marx on the one hand and logical positivism on the other. Marcuse’s work regards Hegel’s philosophy as dialectical, rational in contrast with the ‘positive philosophy’ that arose after Hegel’s death and which undertook ‘to subordinate reason to the authority of established fact’ (R&R, p.xv). Marcuse, however, sees the roots of positive philosophy in the reaction against critical rationalism. Marcuse recognizes, Hegel’s dialectical reason as the basis of a powerful critique of empiricism. In Marcuse’s interpretation, the empiricist attack on universals restricts theoretical knowledge to ‘the given’, to the customary

\(^{13}\) Vaidynathan S. Iyer, In Article on “Herbert Mascuse”, *The Times of India*, July 30, 1972.
transitions and habits, and is thus an "abdication of reason".\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, Marcuse asserts that ‘critical reason’ can become a social force that will help to break all fetters which keep the individual in a state of bondage and help create society, which conforms the demand for freedom and happiness...\textsuperscript{15} Marcuse interprets Hegel’s categories as categories of emancipation. Reason is a critical and oppositional principle and spirit of contradiction stands at the center of Hegel’s thought. It is ‘understanding’ which provides exhaustive analysis of existing contradictions. Reason gives unity by negating the bonds and fetters in order to realize the higher potentialities. “True existence begins only when the immediate state is recognized as negative, when beings strive to overcome their deficiencies and develop their potentialities”.\textsuperscript{16} After this Marcuse brings out an important concept in Hegel that has influenced Marx. As he says, “critical reason is thus a vehicle of liberation and emancipation and in accordance with the dialectical view of reality, all reality is seen as a process of becoming, change and development”.\textsuperscript{17} Marx applied Hegel’s dialectic to study society in general and capitalists society in particular. Marx argued that capitalism was a system of antagonisms and contradictions which was bound to perish and give

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p. 66.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid, pp. 100f, 130ff.
\end{itemize}
way to dynamically oppositional elements, like Being and Nothing in Hegel's logic or capital and labour in Marx's social theory.

Marcuse criticized Hegel, Marx and the positivists vigorously. Against positivists, he argues that critical theory defends certain values which transcend the given order and facts providing the criteria within which 'the facts' can be evaluated. Critical theory is committed to freedom. "In present situation of material and intellectual culture, the problem of value is, in the last analysis, identical with the problem of freedom. The conditions of matters of fact have become so unified that the one idea-freedom covers all that is good, right and admirable in the world. And all efforts to place the value of freedom on the same scientific level with other current valuations is an effort to freedom". Against the tendencies towards conformity like those of positivism, Marcuse is concerned to elucidate the central categories of Hegel's dialectic. In this way he provides a revealing account of the categories and method of his own critical theory. Marcuse gives a systematic analysis of Hegel's dialectic on which he bases the emancipatory elements of his critical theory. It would be appropriate to mention Marcuse's critical theory by way of his 1960 preface "A Note On Dialectic" to show how emphasis on the power of 'negative thinking' and the 'great refusal' is rooted in the Hegelian dialectic: ".... dialectical thought thus

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becomes negative in itself. Its function is to breakdown the self-assurance and self contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs". Marcuse never abandoned his commitment to dialectic and throughout the post war period to the end of his life, he remained stuck to the 1930’s critical theory project. Marcuse was in agreement with Adorno and Horkheimer that technological development would not lead to liberation and emancipation. He criticized the Marxist notion that progress was automatic, that as the means of production become stronger and better, the corresponding new relations of production will automatically emerge. And in a sense, science and technology is that which brings about that change. Marx and most Marxists assume that progress in the development of productive forces especially technology will lead to contradictions with absolute capitalist relations of production. Marcuse, like Adorno and Horkheimer, saw that technology itself was serving as an instrument of domination that strengthen even absolute and oppressive capitalist relations of production.

\[19\] Ibid, p. 147.
Marcuse’s major contribution is his analysis of how the mass media keeps on churning our one dimensional thought which is systematically digested by man, and the repetitive self-validating assumptions behind it are accepted by him as self-evident truths. The result is a widespread craze for consumer goods which develops into a distorted second nature of man. Consumer capitalism renders the oppressed section insensitive to their original discontent, by stimulating their trivial material desires which can be easily satisfied. Under the spell of gratification of these trivial desires, the genuine urge for freedom disappears on the industrial society of today, he believes that a new kind of slavery has come into existence, a slavery which is determined “neither by obedience nor by hardness of labour but by the status of being a mere instrument and reduction of man to the status of a thing”.20 This is the pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing.

Marcuse believes in a new kind of society and a new kind of man, and he believes that they are both desirable and attainable (the only alternative to it being nuclear suicide). He believes in a non-repressive civilization, a civilization in which nature will be experienced primarily as contemplation, violent and explosive attempts will cease, and man will be actively engaged in display, in

20 Ibid.
the free manifestation of potentialities. In a truly free civilization, Marcuse believes, that all laws are self-given by the individuals.

The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas: Rationality, Social Theory and Political Philosophy

Last but not the least among the critical theorists is Jürgen Habermas who became associated with the Frankfurt School after the Second World War. Habermas’s philosophical journey begins with a departure from the positions of Horkheimer and Adorno’s later years, but it is a departure that Habermas has always felt better retains the spirit of Frankfurt School’s pre-war period. His *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* appeared in 1980, which criticized not only Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida but also Horkheimer and Adorno. Habermas’s project had two major components: First, he sets himself the daunting task of developing “more comprehensive” conception of reason, by which he meant that it was not reducible to the instrumental technical or strategic calculations of an essentially monadic, individual subject. Moreover, it was only in terms of such a broader conception that one could begin to sketch the outlines of an “emancipated” or “rational society”.

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He deals with most of the themes developed by earlier critical theorists. In addition, he has sought to achieve a thorough going synthesis of developments in social science and philosophy. The most striking feature of Habermas's approach is the range and complexities of human inquiry. He has chosen ways in which he weaves whatever he finds coherent on the whole.

The effort to think about reason differently appears first in 1965, in Knowledge and Human Interest: A General Perspective, his inaugural lecture delivered upon assuming a professorship at Frankfurt. The thesis was soon expanded into a book in the same name. There, he postulated the existence of three anthropologically deep-seated interests of human beings, to which three categories of knowledge and rationality correspond. We have "knowledge constitutive interests" in the technical control of the world around us, in understanding others, and in freeing ourselves from structures of domination: a 'technical', a 'practical' and an 'emancipatory interest'. Following Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas found that modern society has fostered an unbalanced expansion of the technical interest control: The drive to dominate nature becomes a drive to dominate other human beings. Habermas's speculation upon how to alleviate this distortion revolves around reasserting the

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rationality inherent in our 'practical' and 'emancipatory' interests. Moulding these two interests in a distinctive fashion, Habermas announced that the rational basis for collective life would be achieved only when social selections were organized "according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived in communication free from domination."  

Habermas agrees with Kant that there are basic structures, rules and categories that are presupposed by reason (Kant) and communicative action (Habermas). Communicative action is dialectical in formulation. It means that dialectical dialogue will incorporate all contradictions, oppositions and differences between one culture and another, and will try to transcend and sublate them, so that it becomes all inclusive and can evolve as a global culture.

With the detailed discussion of critical theory, now being Habermas’s critical theory with special reference to his theory of knowledge and theory of communicative action is dealt in detail.

Section – 2

Habermas’s Epistemology: Knowledge, Interest and Action

The aim of this section is to introduce the major work of Jürgen Habermas and show its significance for ethics, social theory and philosophy. After close analysis one can say that there is a unity

23 Ibid, p. 284.
of perspective in Habermas's thought. Nevertheless, around 1970s some distinctive new themes and directions began to emerge which can be seen in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*. These include the ideas of communicative rationality, universal pragmatics, communicative ethics. Through the 1970s Habermas refined and modified these ideas. In 1981, he published the German edition of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. This massive and complex work combines the various stands of his recent thought into one systematic vision of modernity and critical theory. Therefore, the present analysis will focus closely on these two texts and the subsequent essays and books will be considered in later section.

If one studies Habermas's life one can make out that he was shocked by the discovery of the horrors of the Nazi regime. He was a teenager when Second World War ended. This experience has made a lasting impact on him. His primary analysis at that time was why a culture (German tradition of Kant, Hegel, Marx) that had given rise to the themes of critical emancipatory reason and the concrete realisation of freedom were so dominant that it provided fertile soil for the rise of Hitler and Nazis. As he says, "At the age of fifteen or sixteen, I sat before the radio and experienced what was being discussed before the Nuremberg Tribunal, when others instead of being struck silent by the ghastliness, began to dispute the justice of the trial procedural questions and the question of jurisdiction,
there was that first rupture, which still gaps. Certainly, it is only because I was still sensitive and entirely offended that I did not close myself to the fact of a collectively realized inhumanity in the same measure as the majority of my elders".24

As we know 'rupture' and a 'break' with the immediate past was the primary disorienting experiences of Habermas during his student days. Therefore, Habermas became concerned and started rethinking the tradition of German thought. That sense of rupture opened him to a serious encounter with other intellectual traditions and movements such as American pragmatism of Peirce, Mead and Dewey, Linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstien and Positivism. He felt a strong affinity with pragmatists vision and understanding of radical participatory democracy. He had returned again and again to critical encounter with Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Parson. And he came to the conclusion that reason, freedom and justice were not only theoretical issues, but practical tasks to be achieved -practical tasks that demanded passionate commitment. In this order he gave his theory of communicative action-which postulates that by consensus only we can achieve the emancipatory goal.

A significant impetus to Habermas's development was the return of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt after World

War II. Here Habermas became an assistant to Adorno in 1956 – a 
mentor who had profoundest intellectual differences with Habermas. 
As Habermas himself says, about Horkheimer and Adorno’s 
*Dialectic of Reason* “That gave me the courage to read Marx 
systematically and not simply historically. Reading Adorno had 
given me the courage to take up systematically what Lukacs and 
Korcer represented historically; the theory of reification as a theory 
of rationalization, in Max Weber’s sense. Already at that time, my 
problem was a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of the 
modernity from the viewpoint of the realization— the deformed 
realization — of reason in history”.25

One of the most distinctive aspects of his philosophy has been 
its commitment to a universalistic perspective on rationality and 
ethics. This appears in Habermas’s notion of universal pragmatics. 
The second important aspect of his philosophy was the necessity of 
developing a sophisticated defence of modernity by communicative 
action. /

In this section, a beginning will be made to examine 
Habermas’s conception of communicative action, and to show why 
he thinks that it constitutes a universalistic perspective on normative 
legitimacy. The formal elaboration of theory of communicative 

**25** Ibid.
action and rationality comes only with the linguistic turn in Habermas’s thinking which can be traced in his earlier writing such as Knowledge and Human Interest. Thus, it will be useful to start from Knowledge and Human Interest.

It is Habermas’s contention that human species organizes its experience in terms of a priori interests or cognitive interests or knowledge guiding interests. He argues that there is a ‘basis of interests’ which follows from an understanding of humans as both tool making and language using animals: they must produce from nature what is needed for material existence through the manipulation and control of objects and communicate with others through the use of inter-subjectively understood symbols within the context of rule governed institutions. Thus, human kind has an interest in the creation of knowledge which would enable it to control objectified processes and maintain communication. Habermas starts his discussion on reason. His effort to develop a more comprehensive conception of reason initially took form of a critique of the ‘positivistic self understanding’ of science. The claims of positivism about knowledge, reason, and moral and political values can be summarized in three propositions: first, that the hypothetical deductive model is the only genuine form of knowledge in both the natural and the social sciences; second, that
this form of knowledge is value free; third, that the domain of values and norms is taken to fall outside the scope of rational discussion.

Max Weber’s Theory of Rationalization: A Critique of Instrumental Reason

Reason, from Habermas’s perspective can enable us scientifically to explain the ‘natural and even the social world’. It can predict and grasp the empirical consequences and assess the cost of compiling means to achieve specified ends. “But it is beyond the scope of reason to justify the ends or warrant universal norms.”

Theory of rationalisation was one of the major problems of Habermas’s project. By 1968 the positivist tradition which had its origins in the nineteenth century and was revitalized and refined by the logical positivist, was already under severe attack. But one cannot underestimate the extent to which the positivistic temper pervaded and dominated intellectual and cultural life. Habermas, in this context, is speaking of positivism in broad encompassing manner. For this purpose, Habermas criticizes Weberian type of rationality.

Max Weber has tried to interpret the world historical process of modernization as process of progressive ‘rationalisation’. Since ‘rationalisation signifies an increase in rationality Weber can be

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called the heir of an enlightenment tradition. For enlightenment history appeared as a progress towards reason, and this progress towards reason, however, has assumed a highly ambiguous meaning for Weber. Weber analyses 'the transition to modernity as a process of rationalization, in which the social sciences are bound to play an increasing role. Rationalisation, therefore, for Weber is a set of interrelated tendencies operating on various levels and pointing towards increasing formalization, instrumentalisation and bureaucratization according to an internal systemic 'logic' or necessity.

For Weber "rationality" and "rationalization" are not only analytical or destructive categories by which he analyses the structures and genesis of modern societies. They have an irreducible normative connotation which links up with more comprehensive idea of reason. The primary issue here is not merely philosophical or theoretical. Weber's methodological skepticism is itself an echo and expression of his sociological analyses. He argued that the hope and expectation of enlightenment thinkers was a bitter and ironic illusion. According to him the legacy of the enlightenment was the triumph of Zwechrrationalitat purposive – instrumental rationality (i.e. the type of rationality exhibited in the choice of the most efficient means for realizing predefined goals; such as rationality tied up with the increase of economic or administrative efficiency.
This form of rationality affects and infects the entire range of social cultural life. The growth of Zweckrationalisstat (instrumental rationality) does not lead to the concrete realization of universal freedom but to a creation of an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no escape. As he says "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or wherever at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of conclusive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said, 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.'"27

To meet the challenge of Weber and to justify the possibility of a viable critical theory of society, it is necessary, according to Habermas, to rethink the question of rationality and rationalization processes. Here, the central problem of Habermas is to show the inadequacy of exclusive instrumental or strategic rationality. As Habermas says,

"what constitute the idea of socialism, for me, is the possibility of overcoming the capitalistic simplification of"

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the process of rationalization (to use Weber’s terminology) simplification, that is, in the sense to dominance of cognitive instrumental aspects through which everything else is driven into the realm of apparent irrationality.”28

According to Habermas, the historical process of increasing Weberian rationalization of the world represents a threat to the full potential of human beings to bring reason to bear on the problems of their social and political existence. The significance of this threat for the first time was showed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s the Dialectic of Enlightenment. They argued that the “unparalleled success of modern western civilization in freeing itself from the constraints of natural world the increasing development of science and technology did not bring with it the freedom envisaged by enlightenment thinkers, but rather ever more effective and subtle forms of domination.”29 However, inspite of their emphasis on reason and the possibility of a “rational society” in which reason, freedom and justice would be harmoniously linked, Horkheimer and Adorno were never very successful in developing a coherent notion of reason.

28 “Interview with Jürgen Habermas” Interviewed by Deter Hanster and William Via Riyin, trans., Ron Smith, In New German Critique, 18 Fall, 1979, p. 43.
Habermas’s discussion of Weber’s work is dominated by the claim that Weber’s theory of rationalization processes (characteristic of modern societies) has two aspects. One aspect concerns the mode of rationality opened up by the process of disenchantment, in which religious world views no longer provide a key to meaning. The other aspect concerns the mode of rationality characteristic of capitalism. As Habermas puts it:

“Unfettering normative contexts and releasing communicative action from traditionally based institutions – that is from obligations of consensus – loads (and overloads) the mechanism of reaching understanding with a growing need for coordination. On the other hand, in two central domains of action, institutions are displaced by compulsory associations – and organizations of a new type; they are formed on the basis of media that uncouple action from processes of reaching understanding and coordinate it via generalized instrumental values such as money and power.”30

In this order, Habermas formulates his own distinction between life world (action oriented understanding) and system (action oriented towards success) in the light of his reading of

Weber. At the same time he criticizes Weber's emphasis on the logic of the system over that of the life world. In Habermas's case, it is the logic of communicative rationality in the life world that motors systematic development. However, change is so complex and rapid that the mechanisms of co-ordination characteristic of the life world (action oriented to understanding) are unable to cope. They become substituted by steering media which co-ordinate via strategic action and eventually recoil on the life world which gave rise to them in the first place. It is this dualist conception of modern capitalist society and related issues that Habermas then takes up through analysis of works of thinkers like Mead, Durkheim, Parson.

Habermas's Attack of Positivism: A Critique of Empirical-Analytic Science

Habermas' attack on positivism is directed primarily against the claim that the validity of science is independent of any normative commitment on the part of the scientist. In particular, Habermas wants to question whether scientific knowledge is in fact really "released from every normative bond".31 According to Habermas, positivism reinforced technocratic consciousness. On Habermas account, scientific knowledge while is a necessary condition, it is certainly not sufficient for human emancipation.

Habermas regards the critique of positivism as a necessary prolegomenon to the re-establishment of philosophy as critique. He takes as his task "to reconstruct the prehistory of modern positivism with the systematic intention of analyzing the connections between knowledge and human interests." It is with this problem in mind that he begins to work towards his theory of knowledge guiding or knowledge-constitutive interests which emerge to full bloom in Knowledge and Human Interests. Therefore, before coming to Habermas’s knowledge guiding interests, it should be mentioned that there was another closely related feature of the older generation of Frankfurt thinkers that troubled Habermas is that the critical theory identified itself with the Marxist legacy. (This would be discussed in detail in section 3 of the chapter).

In Knowledge and Human Interests the outlines of Habermas’s first systematic synthesis began to become clear. His major theses were summarized in the inaugural address, he gave at the Frankfurt University. He distinguished three non-reducible “quasi transcendental” cognitive interests: the technical, the practical and the emancipatory interest. Each of these cognitive interests is itself rooted in a dimension of human social existence: work, symbolic interaction and power. As he says “The approach to the empirical analytic sciences incorporates a technical cognitive interest; that of the historical hermeneutic science incorporates a practical one; and
the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the emancipatory cognitive interest that, as we saw, was at the root of traditional theories”. 32

Knowledge and Human Interests: The Rational Reconstruction

As we know both Horkheimer and Adorno had considered one of the primary task of critical theory which is the elucidation of the embeddedness of scientific research in the larger context of the reproduction of capitalism and thus in the world of conflicting social interests. Habermas’s theory of knowledge guiding interests attempts to perform this kind of task but in a more radical way by locating science in relation to certain anthropologically deep-seated interests of the human species as a whole.

By a technical cognitive interest, Habermas did not mean to suggest that the empirical – analytic science to be understood as technical applied discipline. Rather this type of inquiry is based upon a model of negative feedback where prediction plays a central role and where there are established procedures for the confirmation and falsification of empirical hypotheses and theories. It is because empirical analytic science has this form that it lends itself to powerful knowledge. Habermas did not criticize this form of knowledge. His point is that it is only one type of knowledge. It is

not to be taken as the canonical standard of all forms of knowledge, as positivistically minded philosophers of science presupposed that the empirical – analytic sciences provide the model for all legitimate knowledge. As he says,

"Empirical analytic knowledge is thus possible predictive knowledge. However, the meaning of such predictions, that in their technical exploitability, is established only by the rules according to which we apply theories to reality".  

Habermas attempts to locate science in relation to certain anthropologically deep seated interests of the human species as a whole. The validity of science cannot according to this view, be separated from the underlying "interest" of man in the domination of nature which allows the material reproduction of the species.

However, human species also has another universal interest, its "practical interest" in maintaining that level of inter-subjectivity which is achieved in ordinary language communication and is necessary for the reproduction of man as a social cultural being. According to Habermas, "It (practical interest) is distinguished from the technical cognitive interest in that it aims not at the comprehension of an objectified reality but at the maintenance of the

33 Ibid, p. 308.
inter-subjectivity of mutual understanding, within whose horizon reality can first appear as something".34

Habermas is sympathetic with philosophers who were influenced by the "hermeneutical tradition"35 which exposed the false 'objectivism' and scientism of those who claimed that empirical analytic sciences are the proper measure and standard for all legitimate scientific theory. The historical hermeneutic disciplines are governed by the practical interest of furthering of an understating. He is of the view that hermeneutic understanding in its very structure is designed to guarantee, within cultural traditions, the possible action orienting self understanding of individuals and groups as well as reciprocal understanding between different individuals and groups. It makes possible the form of unconstrained consensus and type of open inter-subjectivity on which communicative action depends. He says,

"The historical hermeneutic sciences gain knowledge in a different methodological framework. Here the meaning of the validity of propositions is not constituted in the frame of reference of technical control....... Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning......... The

34 Ibid, p. 176.
verification of law like hypothesis in the empirical analytic sciences has its counterparts in the interpretation of texts. Thus, the rules of hermeneutics determine the possible meaning of the validity statements of cultural life".36

Although Habermas has appropriated the insights of the hermeneutic tradition, especially insofar as it illuminates the distinctive character of understanding, interpretation and communicative symbolic interaction, he has been sharply critical of its implicit historicism – its own hidden form of positivism. The hidden positivism becomes evident when it is mistakenly claimed that one can understand and interpret forms of life and bracket critical rational evaluation of these forms of life. As it is known that Habermas's most basic and challenging thesis is that we cannot even make sense of the concepts of meaning, understanding and interpretation unless we rationally evaluate the validity claims that are made by participants in these forms of life. We must be able to discriminate what participants themselves count as reasons for their actions and this requires a performative attitude on our part where we assess what they 'count' as good reasons for action with reference to 'out' standards of rationality".37 Richard Rorty, who has

36 Ibid. p. 307.
evaluated the concept of validity claims, absolutizes the perspective of the observer whereas Bernstein remains within the perspective of the participant and enters into a debate of ethnocentricism. But Habermas objects and criticises Bernstein as well as Rorty in his article “Questions and Counter Questions”. In this regard, he states,

“... it is for this reason that Bernstein from the start locates the moment of unconditionness built into the universalistic validity claims of our communicative practices in the horizon of practical reason; he finds in the communicative infrastructure of the life world a practical postulate, one that is dictated by reason itself. He refuses to regard the procedural unity of rationality within the historical and cultural multiplicity of standards of rationality as a question that is accessible to theoretical treatment”.  

According to Habermas, a critical social science is a dialectical synthesis of the empirical analytic and the historical hermeneutic disciplines. Habermas’s synthesis comes into clear focus when we go to the third type of cognitive interest: the ‘emancipatory interest’. This interest is at once derivative and the most fundamental cognitive interest. If reflected upon the forms of

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knowledge and disciplines guided by the technical and practical interests, we realize that they contain an internal demand for open, free, non coercive communication, according to Habermas, one can 'derive' the emancipatory interest from what is presupposed by the technical and practical interests. But an emancipatory interest is basic in the sense that the interest of reason is in furthering the conditions for its full development; the demand for non-distorted communication becomes fully explicit. Furthermore, one can begin to grasp the practical implications of disciplines that are governed by an emancipatory interest. Non-distorted, reciprocal communication cannot exist unless we realize and institute the material social conditions which are required for mutual communication. Habermas says that a critical social science which is at once empirical and interpretative has as its goal in the discovery of monological knowledge. "A critical social science, however, will not remain satisfied with this. It is concerned with going beyond this goal to determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed. This is the level of consciousness of those whom the laws are about. Thus, the level of unreflected consciousness, which is one of the initial conditions of such laws, can be transformed."39 This is an

39 Ibid.
interest in reason, in the human capacity to be self-reflective and self-determining to act rationally. As a result of it, knowledge is generated which enhances autonomy and responsibility, hence it is an emancipatory interest. Therefore, according to Habermas, this interest is at once derivative and the most fundamental cognitive interest. If reflected upon the forms of knowledge and disciplines guided by the technical and practical interests, we realize that they contain an internal demand for open, free, non-coercive communication. According to Habermas, one can 'derive' the emancipatory interest from what is presupposed by the technical and practical interests. But an emancipatory interest is basic, in the sense that reason reaches to its full development through this. Of course, to this end, a critically mediated knowledge of laws cannot through reflection alone render a law itself inoperative but can render it inapplicable. The methodological framework that determines the meaning of the validity of critical propositions of this category is established by the concept of self-reflection. The latter releases the subject from dependence on hypostized.

**Habermas's Epistemology: A Critical Evaluation**

Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests* in general and his theory of knowledge constitutive interests in particular have been subjected to extensive criticism on a variety of grounds. Though
Habermas had touched upon fundamental issues that preoccupied modern western thinkers in a variety of fields, he had integrated his narrative account with a systematic examination of the basic cognitive interests and different forms of knowledge. He explored the relation of these cognitive interests to the dimensions of social existence and action. Habermas’s work got so much of attraction among intellectuals because he thought to vindicate and revitalized a theme that has also been central for western philosophy.

Habermas’s project is also not very convincing and is open to a number of criticisms. It is worth pointing out a few of the problems as they have implication for the very nature of his enterprise.

Habermas’s work proceeds at a number of different levels. Beside the fact, it is often difficult to follow the nature of the argument that provides the basis for these categories. For example, it is unclear in Knowledge and Human Interests, what precisely is the mode of argument that establishes the interest (quasi-transcendental), therefore, the validity and utility of the categories often remain questionable.

Habermas’s theory of knowledge came under severe criticism on a variety of grounds. Thinkers like R.J. Bernstein, Richard Rorty, Ginsberg, McCarthy have criticised Habermas’s Knowledge and Human Interest. Here, it will be endeavoured to point out some of
his critics and again a mention would be made of the reply that was
given by Habermas himself in “A postscript to Knowledge and
Human Interest”, it was added as Appendix to Knowledge and
Human Interest.

1. The most glaring flaw, which Habermas himself recognized, is
the basic concept of the reflection and self-reflection. There are
at least two logically distinct concepts of reflection which
Habermas had fused together. The first concept derives from the
Kantian sense of the self-reflection of reason upon the condition
of its employment, where reason can self-reflexively come to
grasp the universal and necessary conditions for the very
possibility of theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, second
concept of self-reflection is one that aims at freeing a subject
from dependence on hypostatized powers. Although these two
concepts of self-reflection are logically distinct, but they are
closely related. Bernstein who was critical of Habermas’s failure
regarding this distinction says, “Habermas fails not only to make
this crucial distinction fully explicit in Knowledge and Human
Interest, he slides from one pole to another. Thus when he
proposes that Marx’s critique of ideology and Freud’s therapeutic
psychoanalysis are models of critical sciences based upon self-

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This post-script was written for the second German edition of the book Knowledge and Human Interest, and originally appeared in English translation in the September, 1972 issue of Philosophy of the Social Sciences.
reflection, he emphasizes the second sense of emancipatory self-reflection without adequately elucidating the dialogical character of communicative rationality that is proposed by them. 41

2. The second major flaw is closely related to the first one. When Habermas classified the knowledge constitutive interests as "quasi-transcendental" he was really identifying a targeted problem of which there is no proper solution. These cognitive interests are not merely contingent or accidental. They are basic and unavaoidable, rooted in what we are as human beings. Consequently, they approximate the epistemological status of transcendental claims. As Bernstein says,

"Habermas has always been sympathetic with the idea that we can identify basic structures, rules and categories that are presupposed by reason and communicative action. But he has also been extremely skeptical that such an inquiry can be carried out by pure transcendental philosophy. A critical social science, which develops genuine scientific empirical hypotheses, demands a break with this legacy of pure a priori transcendental philosophy. But in Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas had not yet shown us how we can at once justify the claim that there are unavoidable necessary

universal conditions of communicative action and rationality, and maintain that these can be discovered and warranted in a scientific manner". 42

3. The third flaw radicalizes the first two difficulties. The third criticism is that his scheme constitutes a mode of philosophical foundationalism. It is the key for understanding what has been called, "linguistic turn" – a shift required in order to justify his most fundamental intuition. Habermas came to realize that the orientation of "philosophy of consciousness" and "the philosophy of the subject" obscures and even blocks the way to grasping the intrinsic inter-subjective and dialogical character of communicative action.

4. The fourth shortcoming in Knowledge and Human Interests can be seen as a "promissory note" which had not yet been redeemed. While discussing his critical social science, Habermas directed his attention primarily to the idea or the possibility (in the Kantian sense) of such a science, not to its substantive development, considering the fact that intellectual climate theorists were also voicing their skepticism about the real historical possibility of a critical social science in the face of these multifaceted challenges. As Bernstein says, "... When Kant

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42 Ibid.
began his critical project and took up the question of metaphysics, he realized that one first needed to ask whether such a "science" is possible and how it is possible. So Habermas's first task was to show the viability of a critical social science. But he had promised much more..."\(^43\)

Therefore, one can argue that Habermas also has failed to show that the structure of knowledge and explanatory claims has enhanced the problem with his conception of the empirical analytic and hermeneutic sciences. Moreover, the whole notion of a 'quasi-transcendental' interest can be called into question. For attempting to bring together a transcendental and naturalistic approach to knowledge, Habermas is caught in a dilemma, 'either nature has the transcendental status of a constituting subject: or nature is the ground of subjectivity' and therefore, cannot, be simply a constituted object. The theory of cognitive interests appears to entail both an objectivist ontology of nature and a conception of nature as a more abstraction required by thought. Habermas's attempts to unite these perspectives are not convincing.

Another problem in the philosophy of Habermas is the project of emancipation and it is necessary for a theory such a Habermas's to identify the subject of emancipation. The question arise: to whom

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
is critical theory addressed? How, in any concrete situation, can critical theory be applied? These issues are only discussed at a most abstract level. The theory of the relationship between theory and political and moral life is not developed properly and hence it develops a gulf between theory and practice. Since the development of the theory of communicative competence, the relationship between truth claims sustained in discourse and those indicated in the process of enlightenment has been obscure. It appears that a 'rational consensus attained in a context that approximates the ideal speech situation-is, for Habermas, the ultimate criteria of truth or of the correctness of norms. But while critical self-reflection might be argued to be a necessary condition for this kind of discourse, it is not a sufficient condition.

To summarize, we can derive few conclusions from Habermas's theory of knowledge and human interests:-

1. Three knowledge constitutive interests are three categories of knowledge.

2. Each of the interest is expressed in a distinct methodological approach to the generation of knowledge.

3. It is only in the light of these interests that knowledge can be comprehended.
4. Habermas's epistemology is not transcendental in the traditional Kantian sense: there is not a historical transcendental subject, rather the subject of the constituting activity is the human species.

5. Cognitive interests are, thus, transcendental from the point of view of the generation of human knowledge, but are themselves naturalistically grounded.

6. The cognitive interests exemplify both human continuity with nature and power over nature, in the sense that nature is the product of the constituting activity of people. As Habermas himself says, "thus interests can be neither classed with those mechanisms of steering animal behaviour that we can call instincts nor entirely severed from the objective context of a life process."^{44}

7. The three interests deal with three realm of world of objects as given (technical), the inter-subjective realm (practical) and self-reflective realm (emancipatory). This is the process of evolution.

8. Autonomy and responsibility are pre-requisite for emancipatory society.

9. The philosophy is futuristic as it deals with emancipatory goal.

Habermas confronted the criticisms directly, when difficulties have been pointed out by his critics. He also appreciated the criticism of his analyses and tried to sort it out, and “A Postscript to knowledge and Human Interests” was added to its another edition where he says, “On the contrary, the unrectedly intensive and far ranging discussion about it has raised on many questions that “I would have to write a new (and different) book if I wanted to deal with all of them in a systematic way.” Later he wrote Theory of Communicative Action Vol-I and II in the coming years in response to the above criticisms.

Section – 3

Marxist Notion of Alienation: An Analysis by Habermas

Before coming to Habermas’s theory of communicative action, some issues which are relevant for Habermas, in developing his thought would be discussed. Firstly, Marxist notion of alienation and its analysis by Habermas, and then Freud’s psychoanalysis and his influence on Habermas would be discussed.

A thinker like Habermas who explicitly rejects nostalgic, romantic, and utopian visions of socialism, sometime shows his

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commitment to socialism as he says, "socialism is not dead, nor will it rise again. The possibilities of 'actually existing socialism' are exhausted, but 'socialism - as - critique' remains a source of hope."46

According to Marx, political economists objectify the aspects of alienated labour in corresponding commodity fetishes. Regarding alienation from productive activity, the reality is that labourers sell their labour - power to capitalists who control conditions under which they work. The related commodity fetish is that all sorts of human labour have a quantitative different social unity of various sorts of labor. Under capitalism, human beings are also alienated from their products. This is because workers produce and capitalists appropriate not as part of a collective effort, but as isolated private individuals.

As Marx says, "... A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labor, from his life activity and from his species - life, is that man is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself he also confronts other men..... Human alienation, and above all, the relation of man to himself, is first realized and expressed in the relationship between each man and other men. Thus in the relationship of alienated labor, every man regards other men

according to the standards and relationships in which he finds himself placed as a "worker". Marx is of this view that the corresponding commodity fetish is that, given the equality of all sort of human labor, all products have a quantitative equivalent form or exchange value equal to the labor power required to produce them. The fetish obscures the qualitatively different social use-value of various commodities. Last, as this implies, people are alienated from one another and, hence, from their species being. The reality here is that individuals interact only in exchange.

Under capitalism, then, workers are in exile, unable to claim their powers and to satisfy their needs, including the need to make sense of the world... “Thus the labor of this individuality will no longer appear as labor but as the full development of action itself, from which natural necessity in its immediate form has disappeared because natural necessity has been replaced by historically created necessity.”

When Marx demystifies commodity fetishes by revealing their origins in the capitalist class relations, he does not mean to imply that political economists misinterpret reality. Because according to him, reality itself is distorted. By exposing these distortions, Marx


fosters the class consciousness necessary for a socialist revolution, 
Socialism becomes a “politics of return” - the reunion of humanity 
with itself. As Marx says, “At a certain stage of their development, 
the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the 
existing relations of production, or - what is but a legal expression 
for the same thing - with the property relations within which they 
have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the 
productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins 
an epoch of social revolution.” 49

What is left of Marx?

However, Habermas says that Marx has failed adequately to 
situate his critique of political economy in the context of ‘crisis of 
capitalism’. Instead of recognizing history, according to Habermas, 
“as a variable source of experience provided by the socially concrete 
life - world, Marx retains residues of First Philosophy that is, 
Hegel’s logic of history.” 50 These appear in three problematic 
assumptions in Hebermas’s view. They shall be discussed here one 
by one. First, Habermas questions Marx’s concept of labor as human 
self-creativity, which according to him, is inspired by Hegel. 
According to Habermas, through labor, people learn how to

49 Karl Marx, “A Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”, In Karl Marx 
dominate the natural world and develop instrumental or technical knowledge. However, it is social interaction that is our distinctively human capacity. Interaction requires inter-subjective recognition of roles and norms, or the social integration of internal nature. Habermas argues, that individuals and societies undergo a process of moral cognitive development from pre-traditional through traditional to post traditional consciousness. Current levels of learning are reflected in their basic structures and core values. According to Habermas, expansion of the productive forces can not explain the development of inter-subjective capacities. Interaction (or communicative action) follows its own revolutionary path. This means that class conflict no longer is the motive force in history because conflict only leads to revolution and for evolutionary path there is no need of conflict. Societies are now bearers of evolution and individuals are integrated into them. According to him, Marx missed the potential for emancipation—and domination—in the sphere of an interaction. But here we can see Habermas has given over emphasis to interaction, but when interaction fails, dialogues are simply impossible, then total change in the means of interaction is needed, that’s what Marx meant when he talked of productive forces, class consciousness and conflict.

In his second criticism, Habermas brings us to criticism of Marx’s historical materialism. While criticizing Marx, Habermas
gives his concept a life world and system. Therefore, it is worth discussing these concepts in detail. Societies are not totalities whose parts are even ultimately determined by the level of development of their productive forces. Habermas distinguishes between life world and systems, each of which he further divides into private and public sphere. The life-world is the locus of moral—practical knowledge or relations of meaning shared in families and workplaces (private) and in political actions and opinions (public). It is coordinated though communicative action—that is, action oriented toward reaching self and mutual understanding. As Habermas says, “A life world is correspondingly rationalized to the extent that it permits interactions that are guided ...... directly or indirectly — by communicatively achieved understanding”.

The Concept of Life World and System: An Evolution of Communicatively Shared Process

Habermas formulates the distinction between *life world* (action oriented towards understanding) and *system* (action, oriented towards success) life world is the key methodological term in Habermas’s later work. It is in the life world that social and economic structures interpenetrate with action and consciousness. He introduces the concept of life world or the *lebenswelt* as the

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“correlate of processes of reaching understanding. Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a life world.” Habermas argues that the life world ‘stands behind the back of each participant in communication’. He sometimes refers to life world as the background consensus of everyday life and often as the ‘store house of knowledge’ that is passed from one generation to the next. As he says, “the life world also stores the interpretive work of preceding generations.”

‘Life world’ (lebenswelt) is the key methodological term in Habermas’s works. It is in the life world that social and economic structures interpenetrate with action. The life world is the substraction of our conscious world views – and all our social actions. The life world is defined to contain the background of shared meaning that makes ordinary symbolic interaction possible and, further, it now explicitly includes all those structural components (institutions, normative structures and social practices) that make social reproduction possible.

“The lay concept of the life world refers to the totality of socio cultural facts and thus provides a jumping.”

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
This concept of life world is interested analytically with systematic aspects of social life that properly are co-ordinated through action oriented towards understanding, i.e. through the mechanisms of communicative rationality which enable understanding. This concept of life world is contrasted analytically with systematic aspects of social life, which under capitalism are instrumentally oriented through strategic rationality. The life world / system duality reflects the duality between communicative and strategic rationality and provides the contexts for the complementarity of different methodological approaches to the sociological explanation of the social world.

"Life world / system reflects different aspects of empirical reality and that the distinction between them is much clearer analytically than in practice."\textsuperscript{55} The concept of the life world is not used by Habermas as a purely descriptive term to describe aspects of social life coordinated through symbolic interaction, instead it is used as it were, the prosily for what are identified as its transcendental perspirations in communicative rationality. Life world carries with it the utopian potential of the hypothesis of reason established through formal pragmatics and supported by a theory of rational evolution.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p. 150.
In contrast to life world, political (states) and economic (market) system are coordinated through the steering media of money and power, as Habermas thinks. Habermas argues that Marx failed to anticipate both the stability of capitalism and the bankruptcy of socialism because his argument lacked distinctions. But here one point should be added that Habermas is a liberal thinker, who wants to save capitalism from the challenges of socialism, directly he is not criticising socialism but in the name of consensus model he is ignoring one important point that historical materialism has proved that in every epoch of time, history is divided into two antagonistic classes – property-less and bourgeoisie. When society is divided into two major antagonistic classes, how can genuine interaction be possible?

Third, Habermas argues that Marx confuses the dynamic with the logic of historical development of post traditional identities manifested in universal principles of morality and justice as progress. But according to Habermas, these developments are not the unfolding of reason in history. As he puts it, “Historicizing the knowledge of an essence…. only replaces the teleology of Being with that of history. The secretly normative presuppositions of theories of history are naturalized in the form of evolutionary
concept of progress.”

In contrast, Habermas maintains that moral – cognitive developments only create the logical space for new forms of social organisation. The capacity of a society to adjust and to grow (which is established by its boundary conditions and learning capacities), determines when, indeed, fundamental changes occur. And these changes must be determined by the participants. Habermas insists that, "in a process of enlightenment there are only participants." It is the convergence of knowing and doing, the self conscious creation of a socialist society, which ends human exile. The task of critical theory is limited to identifying the formal conditions which make emancipation possible.

According to Habermas, by conceptualizing humans as producers, societies as totalities, and history as process, Marx reverts to a Hegelian inspired theology and anthropology. Habermas reconstructs historical materialism, in part, to expose "peculiar

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58 Ibid.

disproportion” between Marx’s “practical inquiry” and his “philosophical self-understanding”. Of course, one can ask whether Habermas makes a similar move. Is he sufficiently reflective about the origins of his history of communicative rationality in his life world? This problem is to be discussed and examined in the next section of the chapter. But one can say that Habermas agrees with Marx that the rational kernel of dialectics is applicable to the history of humanity, to the historical epoch over to the epochal nature of history. But he fundamentally differs from Marx particularly with Engels that dialectics is operating in nature also. He regards dialectics in two aspects – one which is applied to the history of life world in terms of historical processes and the other dialectics is a story instrument of critique.

Section – 4
Action, Rationality: The Normative Discourse

In this section Habermas’s conceptions of communicative action and communicative rationality would be discussed to show why he thinks they constitute a universalistic perspective on normative legitimacy. Habermas’s interest in rationality has been evident from his earlier writings. It will thus be useful to begin the present analysis with the brief overview of the problem of

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rationality. Then a turn will be made to a discussion of theory of communicative action.

Habermas's project, which emerged in the 1960s, established a conceptual framework out of which he has continued to work till the present. There have been many modifications and elaborations. But he says 'My research programme has remained the same since about 1970.' His research project has two major components. First, he sets himself the daunting task of developing a "more comprehensive" conception of reason, by which he meant one that was not reducible to the instrumental - technical or strategic calculations of an essentially nomadic, individual subject. Moreover, it was only in terms of such a broader conception that could begin to sketch the outlines of an "emancipated or rational society."\(^\text{61}\) This idea became the guiding thread of Habermas's project. He soon found, however, that it could not be adequately fleshed out using the epistemological framework of knowledge – constitutive interest.\(^\text{62}\)

**The Communicative Competence: A Rational Structural Analysis**

Therefore, he decided instead to pursue his aims through an exploration of ongoing "communicative competence". He derives the communicative competence from the "performative aspects of

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speech which are presupposed by the ability to utter, not any particular speech act, but speech acts as such" - or what he calls "universal pragmatics". As the term suggests, speech acts have double structures: speakers simultaneously say something (assert a proposition / do something to establish a relationship).

**The Universal Pragmatics: A Reconstructive Language Analysis**

Drawing upon ideas developed by, among others, Chomsky in linguistics and Austin in the theory of speech acts, Habermas argues that, 'communicative competence' can be rationally reconstructed. He states the core idea behind this as follows:

[Universal pragmatics] thematizes the elementary units of speech (utterances) in an attitude similar to that in which linguistics does the units of language (sentences). The goal of reconstructive language analysis [such as that initiated by Chomsky] is an explicit description of the rules that a competent speaker must master in order to form grammatical sentences and utter them in an acceptable way .... It is ..... assumed that communicative competence has just as universal a core as linguistic competence. A general theory of speech actions would thus describe exactly that fundamental system of rules that adult subjects master to the extent that they can fulfill the conditions for a happy employment of sentences in utterances, no

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63 Ibid, p. 51.
matter to which individual language the sentence may belong and in which accidental contents the utterances may be embedded."\(^{64}\)

Habermas is concerned to investigate the validity basis of speech; for successful communication. In his view, for a successful communication, a series of validity claims are needed that have a cognitive character. He develops the thesis that any one acting communicatively 'must raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated [or redeemed: *einlosen*]'\(^{65}\)

Universal pragmatics directs attention to the 'infrastructure of speech situation in general' (the "rules for using sentences in utterances"). This infrastructure can be unfolded by examining the 'relations to reality' in which every sentence is embedded through its being uttered. Each sentence is situated in relation to external reality, normative reality (the realm of socially recognized expectations, values, rules, etc.) and inner reality (the arena of intentions). Through language subject is involved in process of demarcation: (1) from an environment that he objectifies in the ...... attitude of an observer; (2) from an environment that he conforms to or deviates from in the ............. attitude of a participant; (3) from


\(^{65}\) Ibid, p. 2.
his own subjectivity, that he expresses or conceals in a first person attitude; and finally (4) from the medium of language itself.”

Of all validity claims that can be attached to a sentence only intelligibility or comprehensibility can be ‘fulfilled immanently to language’ – a sentence must be grammatical, it must conform to an established system of recognized rules for use of language.

The expression of communicative competence is not dependent on particular epistemic presuppositions and concepts, but rather upon the extent to which a speaker causes “sentences in general to be engaged in the universal pragmatic functions of representation, expression and legitimate interpersonal relations”.

Habermas recognises the importance of linguistic competence, that is, mastery of language specific rules and words in formulating understandable propositions. However, speakers’s natural languages are always represented through “dialogue constitutive universals” such as verb forms (assertions, interrogatives, imperatives) and personal pronouns (I and You, We and They), and so forth. These reveal the inter-subjective factors – reflexivity and reciprocity – that make mutual understanding possible and competent speakers must be able to give reasons for their claims and willing to grant others the same rights as themselves. According to Habermas, speakers

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66 Ibid, p. 66.
demonstrate communicative competence through mastery of the ideal speech situation. He defines ideal speech as "inter-subjective symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity among the partners of communication". Habermas presents these symmetries as linguistic conceptions of truth (unconstrained consensus), freedom (unimpaired self-representation), and justice (universal norms), respectively.

The Communicative Rationality: A Practical Discourse

As Habermas makes a shift from epistemology to theory of language, he begins with a general question on account of communicative rationality. He begins the question - how language has the ability to coordinate action in a consensual or cooperative way as opposed to forced or manipulated one? In other words, how does the employment of language in contents of interaction produce mutual agreement on a course of action? What are the criteria of communicative rationality which is established by speech acts of communicatively competent actors. Habermas claims that the speech acts of communicatively competent actors conform to a set of rules, some of which establish the criteria of communicative rationality. What Habermas calls, "rational reconstruction" is the task of

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rendering what is universal competence or implicit know-how into a set of explicit rules." He is reconstructing formal - pragmatic rules in this case. Here one can see that Habermas has presumed that there is a difference between consensual agreement and simple compliance and he grounds this presumption in a reconstruction of the pre-theoretical knowledge of competent speakers and actors. Competent speakers and actors can themselves distinguish the cases in which they are using any means possible to bring about compliance, including deceit, manipulation or over right coercion. Moreover, according to Habermas, even this capacity to force compliance can be shown to rest on the possibility of acting communicatively. That is, the “communicative” use of language to reach agreement is the “original” mode of language use upon which its ‘strategic’ use to bring about compliance is parasitic. In order to make this argument Habermas turns to Austin’s distinction between illocutionary and pre-locutionary effects.

**Austin's Speech Act Theory: A Linguistic Accountability**

Austin distinguishes the locutionary aspect of a speech act which designates its prepositional content from its illocutionary and pre-locutionary aspects. By its illocutionary aspects, he refers to the action speaker performs in saying to such actions as promising,

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avowing, or commanding. By pre-locutionary acts, Austin designates
the effect the speaker produces on the hearer.\textsuperscript{70} For his part,
Habermas distinguishes between two sorts of illocutionary effect—
first, the understanding and second, the acceptance of a speech act
offer and then three sorts of perlocutionary effects.

But question arises, how does a speech act offer use in
cooperative acceptance and agreement? Habermas argues, first, that
accepting a speech act offer requires accepting all the grammatically
regulated effects that follow from it. Secondly, the possibility of
accepting these effects rests upon the guarantee that the speakers
implicitly raise to redeem the validity claims contained in the speech
act offer, if challenged. As Habermas says, “A speaker owes the
binding .... force of his illocutionary act not to the validity of what
is said but to the coordinating effect of the warranty that he offers:
namely to redeem if necessary, the validity claim raised with speech
act.”\textsuperscript{71} But if the acceptability of speech act offers rest on the
possibility of redeeming the validity claims they contain, then the
acceptability of speech -act offer is also tied to reason. Language has
the ability to achieve mutual understanding and to coordinate action
in a consensual or co-operative way because its original,
communicative use involves raising validity-claims and supporting

\textsuperscript{70} For details refer to, J.L. Austin, \textit{How to Do Things With Words}, (Cambridge: Masahersets

them, if challenged. Thus Habermas, ends the statement by arguing that, "In all the cases in which the illocutionary expresses not a power claim, but validity-claim, the place of the empirically motivating force of accepting a speaker's guarantee for securing claims to validity."\textsuperscript{72} He expressed the same views in some other reference, "both ego, which raises a validity claim with his utterance, and other, who recognizes or rejects it, base their decisions on potential grounds or reasons."\textsuperscript{73} Such rules describe the competence an actor has for reaching an understanding, Habermas wants to argue that the universal core of many and varied things speakers do, in uttering sentences - is to situate those strings of symbols in a system of validity claims. When a speaker orients himself towards understanding – that is engaged in communicative action – his speech acts must raise, and he must be accountable for, three rationality or "validity claims"-truth, normative legitimacy and truthfulness/authenticity.\textsuperscript{74} Only if a speaker is able to convince his hearers, that his claims are rational and thus being worthy of recognition, can there develop a "rationally motivated agreement or consensus on how to coordinate future actions".\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 288.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p. 99
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, pp. 69-70.
From the perspective of communicative action, utterances can be assessed as rational or irrational because they raise criticizable validity claims, that is, one which is fallible and open to objective judgment. As Habermas says, "in contexts of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able when criticized, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations. We even call someone rational if he makes a known desire or an intention, expresses a feeling or a mood, shares a secret, confesses a deed, etc. and is then able to reassure critics in regard to reveal experience by drawing practical consequences from it and behaving consistently thereafter."

Thus, in developing the ability to speak and act, each individual acquires the know-how required to differentiate the three dimensions of validity, and that which is also required to employ the standards appropriate to each dimension for the purpose of assessing particular claims. For a given agent, this know-how may be more or less but interrelated competences in the dimensions of cognition, speech and action.

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76 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
The development of this communicative competence depends upon the development of particular but interrelated competences in the dimensions of cognition, speech and action. Each of these can be reconstructed theoretically as a system of rules over which an agent has mastery. The scheme Habermas has in mind links up with the work of others, such as Chomsky and Peaget and has following forms. (For the purpose of this thesis there is no need to go into details of these thinkers).

Communicative competence, as the mastery of rules for raising and redeeming the different types of validity claims, encompasses:


2. “Speech competence” (sprackkompetenz): mastery of the linguistic rules for producing situations of possible understanding:

   (a) mastery of the rules for producing grammatically well formed sentences (Chomsky’s “linguistic competence”).

   (b) mastery of the rules for producing well-formed utterances (universal or formal pragmatic rules).

Habermas’s specific contributions to this schema fall under categories 2b and 3. The former are the rules which enable a sentence to take up one of three formal “universal pragmatic functions of language” which correspond to the three validity claims “to represent something in the world, to express to speaker’s intentions, and to establish legitimate interpersonal relations. It is only on the basis of having taken up these cognitive, expressive and interactive functions that an utterance can assume in specific contexts. The system of rules which communicatively competent subjects must have mastered can be constructed, according to Habermas, in a general theory of speech action.77

But what concept of rationality is required here if one has to make sense out of the way reason grounds mutual understanding and the co-operative coordination of action. With Habermas’s answer to the “validity basis of speech”, the logical progress is now made to move to the concept of reason which is suitable to the function of redeeming validity.

77 Jürgen Habermas (1979), Op. Cit., p. 27.
Habermas’s account of western rationality begins with the assessment of teleological or goal directed actions. His views on “cognitive instrumental” view is simply that concept which assumes certain goals or life plans as given and focuses on the most effective means of achieving them. Habermas claims that this concept “has, through empiricism, deeply marked the self-understanding of the modern era”. But he also contends that crucial to it is its connection to criticizable knowledge. Teleological action presupposes knowledge about the situation in which one wants to intervene as well as knowledge of what means are available and what the consequences of the action might be. In all these respects, however, one can be mistaken and one can be shown to be mistaken by others, who can point to consequences, circumstances, or means that one has overlooked. But once one acknowledges, the criticizability of our knowledge, one has already expanded the concept of rationality beyond narrow instrumental dimensions to include an assessment of the presuppositions or assertions in which one claims effectiveness for one’s means and truth for one’s knowledge of situations and consequences.

Goal directed actions and assertions, Habermas claims, involve the same knowledge content employed in different ways. In the first case, prepositional knowledge allows for a successful

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intervention in the world while it allows for 'an understanding among participants in communication'. Both forms of knowledge are susceptible to criticism in so far as both contain knowledge that can be contested. One can be wrong about the situation in which one intervenes to realize one's goals and one can be equally wrong about the claims one asserts as objectively true. Still this difference affects the concept of rationality, whereas the rational adjudication of a teleological action involves the potentially monological - assessment of its actual success. With regard to the expression of the prepositional knowledge presupposed by the action rational adjudication involves the necessarily dialogical - capacity to defend one's beliefs and assertions against challenges and hence to give reasons that others can accept.

The Theory of Communicative Action: A Goal Towards Emancipation

But if this is the case, it becomes clear that reason still has a broader application than pertaining either to the assessment of teleological actions, or to the defense of the prepositional knowledge embodied in assertions. If, in these cases the idea of rationality is connected ultimately to the willingness to defined criticizable validity claims, then this connection also applies to other sorts of
expressions in which one also raises criticizable validity claims and also tries to defend them. To restate Habermas’s viewpoint,

“In content of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticized, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate. We even call someone rational if he makes known a desire or an intention, expresses a feeling as a mood, shares a secret, confesses a deed etc., and is then able to reassure critics in regard to the revealed experience by drawing practical consequences from it and behaving consistently thereafter.”  

Hence, only if one withdraws the concept of rationality entirely from inter-subjective communication, one can restricts its province to the instrumental domain. But it can not be done unless one also accepts a naïve realism according to which there is no need to ground one’s beliefs about the world in consensus because the world is immediately and identically accessible to all without inter-subjective checking or collaborative interpretation. Once one moves

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80 Ibid, p. 15.
beyond "the ontological presupposition of an objective world", however, to an inquiry into the ways in which "the world gains objectivity", by "counting as one and the same world for a community of speaking and acting subjects," one has moved to a communicative concept of reason that also must include the way in which norms, expressions and evaluations count as valid. It has been observed earlier that the power of language to coordinate cooperative action lay in the rational or validity basis of speech. It has now been seen that the concept of rationality must extend beyond the question of the rationality of assertions or teleological actions to include a wider spectrum of contexts in which validity claims are raised and redeemed. Still, Habermas differs on depending upon their structural or "formal pragmatics" features. Claims to the truth of statements and rightness of actions and norms of actions require a discursive justification to which claims to truthfulness or sincerity are not subject. Habermas also exempt from discursive justification "a type of expression that is not invested with a clear -cut validity claims, namely, evaluative expressions". There are such preferences and desires as the 'desire for a vacation', or 'the rejection of military', 'a preference for

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82 Ibid, p. 16.
autumn landscapes' and, in his view, stand midway between merely subjective self-presentations and normative regulations.

The Theory of communicative Action: A Consensual Model

In Section-I of this Chapter, a connection between conceptions of rationality and corresponding conceptions of action was drawn. Habermas argued that this kind of connection is in fact a necessary conceptual one. As he puts it, when a social scientist chooses a conception of action, he also necessarily establishes the framework for a concept of rationality. This link is a result of the fact that, in the choice of a conception of action, a social theoretical, implicitly makes certain "ontological assumptions about the possible relations between actor and world, and the 'world relations' the theorist imputes to the actor establish, in turn, a particular framework for the 'possible rationality of actions'." Habermas demonstrates this by analyzing three different conceptions of action and corresponding frameworks they establish for the rationality. His arguments about their inadequacies and what must be done to remedy them will link up to his theory of communicative action.

First is the teleological model. According Habermas, this model of action presupposes a relation between the actor and a world of "states of affairs", either presently existing or producible through

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83 Ibid, p. 75.
action. The actor relates to this world both cognitively-through opinion about it and volitionally, through intentions to intervene in it. These two possible relations to an objective world can be rationalized respectively, according to the criteria of “truth” and “effectiveness” as success. 84 Second is the norm guided model, in this model the actor can relate not only to an objective but also to a social world. “A social world consists of a normative context that establishes interaction which belong to the body of justified interpersonal relations”. 85 In so far as actors share such a context, they share a social world. Now this normative context exists as a categorically distinct world only when it is recognized as valid by actors; that is, it maintains an ‘ought’ quality for them (Otherwise this context simply becomes another feature of the objective world). Third one is the dramaturgical model. In addition to the teleological and norm-guided models of actions, there is a third one which is somewhat less prominent in the social sciences, the dramaturgical. Habermas attributes the initial development of this model to Erving Goffman. Here the focus is not specifically on how an individual pursues a strategy or follows a set of normative expectations, but rather on how the performance of any action reveals something about the actor’s subjectivity. More particularly, in the performance

84 Ibid, pp. 87-88.
of actions, an individual represents his subjective world in a specific way to an audience of other actors. This subjective world is "defined as the totality of subjective experiences to which the individual actor has privileged access."\(^{86}\)

**The Communicative Model: Orientation Towards Understanding**

The foregoing survey of the major alternative conceptualizations of action has brought to the surface a correlation between the three types of validity claims mentioned and the different actor-world relations implied in these alternatives. Presumably Habermas would consider this fit between his scheme of validity claims and the predominant models of action to be no accident, but rather one sort of evidence supporting his argument about the universality of these claims. Now, after the three above mentioned models, a move is now made to discuss the fourth, which is the most important one- *The Communicative Model*.

What distinguishes the communicative model of action is that ordinary language competence is now envisioned as giving actors the capacity to use the entire system of world relations and validity claims in a distinct fashion for the purpose of coordinating action. As it has been argued earlier in this thesis that, communicative action is an action, oriented to reaching an understanding, and what

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\(^{86}\) Ibid, p. 61.
Habermas is specifically interested in how language can function as "a medium of unhindered understanding." Within this model, actors are conceived of as seeking an understanding in regard to some practical situation confronting them, in order to coordinate their action consensually. Reaching an understanding requires "a cooperative process of interpretation aimed at attaining intersubjectively recognized definitions of situations".

Within the communicative model, actors are envisioned as being able to relate simultaneously to all three of the aforesaid world (objective, social and subjective). Moreover, they can relate to them reflectively, in the sense that they have the competence to differentiate the three types of relations and select one or the other as the most appropriate for interpreting a given situation and working out an agreement on a common definition of it. Thus, the three modes of the world relations together constitute a "commonly imputed system of coordinates, which actors have at their mutual disposal to aid them in understanding one another."

Actors within the communicative model are not only accorded the competence to dispose reflectively over the three world-relations, but also the competence to assess the rationality or

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87 Ibid, pp. 94-95.
88 Ibid, pp. 69-70.
89 Ibid.
irrationality of one another’s actions according to all three of the respective sets of criteria (truth success; normative legitimacy; and truthfulness/authenticity) which are implied by the different world relations.

Thus, is the model of communicative action, speech acts are the medium in which actors who are oriented towards a cooperative of their different plan of action ‘mobilize the potential for rationality inherent in ordinary language. The potential is only partially identified in the other models of action, since they each focus on only one validity claim and one world relation’.90 The communicative model, on the other hand can fully illuminate the ‘rational internal structure’ of the process of coming to an inter-subjectively valid agreement, and it is only such an agreement that can, in turn, constitutes the basis of a form of co-operation, the rational motivating force of which is reducible neither to its accordance with strategic calculations nor to its fit with a normative structure whose validity is socially prescribed.91

Is Emancipation Possible?

From what has been discussed so far, it should be evident that much of the philosophical weight associated with the concept of communicative action rests upon what is packed into the ideas of

90 Ibid, pp. 94-95.
91 Ibid.
understanding and reaching rationally motivated agreement. When
the concept of understanding is being discussed it is useful to recall
the Habermas's formal pragmatics aims at giving an account of what
is required in order to understand the meaning of an utterance or
speech act rather than a sentence. If sentential meaning is
understood, then one knows the truth conditions of a sentence. The
meaning of "an utterance is that, a sentence employed
communicatively is understood only when certain other conditions
are known which make that utterance acceptable to a
hearer". Habermas says that, we understand a speech act when we know what
makes it acceptable and from the standpoint of the speaker, "such
conditions of acceptability are identical to the conditions for his
illocutionary success".92

These conditions are specified by Habermas as follows,

"A hearer understands the meaning of an utterance when,
in addition to grammatical conditions of well-formedness
and general contextual conditions, he knows those
essential conditions under which he could be motivated by
a speaker to take an affirmative position on the claim
raised by the speaker".93 These last conditions are broken
down into two further categories: conditions of

93 Ibid, pp. 297-98.
fulfillment, which refer to the sort of succeeding orientation or action, a given speech act typically requires "conditions of ... agreement which refer to the conditions under which the claim raised in the speech act ought to be agreed to".94

If these conditions are satisfied, a hearer can be said to understand the utterance. But Habermas also sometimes uses the phrase "reaching an understanding" in a way which makes it synonymous with reaching an agreement, more specifically an agreement that the relevant claim is in fact warranted. The idea of a kind of rational agreement must be achieved if a communicative coordination of action is to take place. The key question here is the exact source of the motivation to agree, remembering again that it cannot be reduced to either strategic complementarity of interests or to the coherence of a possible course of action with a conventional context.

Knowledge of, how one tests the different claims, according to Habermas, is something which is intuitively available to communicatively competent speakers. In other words, they have an intuitive sense of what the proper guidelines would be for testing claims and coming to a consensus on whether given claims are

94 Ibid, p. 298.
warranted or not. For the truth-fullness or authenticity of claim, the proper test is constituted by comparing a speaker’s expressed intentions with his ensuing actions. In discourse, according to Habermas, actors orient their communication to the sole purpose of coming to a “rational consensus” on whether or not a specific claim is supportable.

Here one sees what ultimately inspires Habermas’s particular way of envisioning how reason binds actions together. As he tells us, “the concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying consensus bringing force of argumentative speech in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction assure themselves of both the unit of the world and the inter-subjectivity of their life world”95

The real problem in Habermas’s above ‘maximal’ sense of understanding lies somewhere else. The difficulty revolves around his argument that the question of rationality arises unavoidably for social science, at methodological level. It was shown above that in order to understand an utterance, an interpreter would have to know the conditions under which he could be motivated to say “yes” to the

claim raised by that utterance. But an interpreter cannot understand what would have motivated someone without bringing to mind the reasons with which a speaker would, (if necessary) and under suitable conditions defend the validity claims.

This has been called by Richard Bernstein, 'the most basic and challenging thesis'. Thomas McCarthy has explained the difficulty very precisely. He argues that "our ability to understand any given reason depends on our communicative competence, because it provides us with the sense of what it means to act on reason in general from the fact that we cannot understand reasons as reasons without relying on our own competence to judge validity, convey, soundness and the like, it does not follow that we have to actually or implicitly "take a position" on [particular] reasons in order to understand them. Interpreters raised in pluralistic cultures and schooled in cultural and historical differences are quite capable, it seems of understanding symbolic expressions without taking a position on their validity – not, to be sure, as ideally neutral observers, not as interpreters without a language, and standards of their to serve as a hermeneutic starting point, but as individuals whose primary and professional socialization have schooled them in

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appreciating differences of belief and practice, ‘bringing (other people’s reason to mind “while suspending judgment or them”’.

The upshoot of this line of criticism is that, although Habermas’s general approach to understand utterances is focused on the conditions of acceptability – which may be plausible, but the specific assertion he makes about the necessity that the hearer/interpreter actually ‘take a position” in order to understand is not feasible.

To bring this chapter to a close one can say that in the Theory of Communicative Action emphasis is placed on the hypothetical standing of the universal rules transcendentally deduces through formal-pragmatic analysis. These hypothetical reconstructions can at best be supported by being checked against the instructions of empirical speakers in different contexts, but they can not be decisively legitimated. Habermas characterizes the rational internal structure of communicative actions in terms of “(a) the three world-reations of social actors and the corresponding concepts of the objective, social and subjective worlds; b) the validity claims of prepositional truth, normative rightness; and sincerity or authenticity; c) the concept of a rationally motivated agreement, that is, one based on the inter-subjective recognition of criticizable

validity claims; and d) the concept of reaching understanding as the cooperate negotiation of common definitions of the situation.

At the end of his tour through the history of social theory, Habermas has identified the key elements of his own critical social theory. Three elements are crucial to this theory: first, there is the concept of communicative rationality or action and its utopian potential. Second, there is the identification of life world as the realm of communicative rationality and system as the realm of instrumental rationality. Third, there is an evolutionary theory about the relations between these two concepts of actions in the histories of life world and system.

According to Habermas, in this mature articulation of his theory, the strong transcendentalism of earlier formulations of his thought has been overcome. Although still acknowledging the significance of the Kantian philosophy in his work, Habermas sees himself as having evaded its dangers and complexities. These issues would be examined in the next chapter.

In conclusion one can say that Habermas’s work has been central to rejuvenating radically democratic expectations such as these, in large part because he has re-thought radical democracy within a broad and uniquely comprehensive theory of communicative action. From Habermas’s perspective, radically democratic ideals
reside in the close relationship between a discursive nature of political judgment and democratic institutions. His theory of democracy through communicative action places discourse at the center of democratic theory, concerned both as a means of resolving disputes and enabling collective action, and as a measure and justification of democratic institutions and processes.