

# **Rationalisation, Nihilism and Metaphysics**

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## Summary

This thesis is concerned with the theme of modernisation as rationalisation in Jürgen Habermas's social theory. It starts, in section I, with an exploration of the origins of the rationalisation thesis in Max Weber's work. We will see that he represents rationalisation as the proliferation of a formal rationality throughout various social spheres due to technological advance. This formal, technical means-rationality drives out reasonings about substantive ends. Hence, the Weberian theme of rationalisation represents a species of nihilism.

Habermas, as we see in section II, reformulates Weber's sociological framework in terms of purposive action oriented to success and communicative action oriented to mutual understanding. Put simply, the former deals with means, the latter with ends. Habermas furthermore locates social spheres that house patterns of purposive and communicative action, namely respectively the system and the lifeworld. Like Weber, Habermas identifies the tendency for the system to drive out reasonings about ends, i.e. to 'colonise' the lifeworld. This colonisation thesis is Habermas's central diagnosis of social pathologies in modern society.

In section III, I will turn to a second-order analysis of works in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in order to criticise Habermas's notion of purposive rationality and the system. I will argue that Habermas's Weberian depiction of rationalisation as a nihilist social force tends to become a metaphysics, because Habermas theorises technical rationality as a norm-free instrument. This produces theoretical blindness with regard to institutional biases in the system. Furthermore, I will argue that, if we imagine that Habermas remedies this theoretical problem by revising his conception of purposive rationality, his colonisation thesis will become untenable because the distinction between technical and political reasonings now becomes too messy.

In this thesis, then, I hope to show that Habermas's naive picture of technical rationality leads him to adopt a conception of modernity as threatened by a nihilist social force, while this conception can only be interpreted as a metaphysics. I argue, moreover, that if one wants to give up this metaphysics, one also has to give up Habermas's central critical thesis: the colonisation thesis.

We talk as if these parts could only move in this way, as if they could not do anything else. Is this how it is? Do we forget the possibility of their bending, breaking off, melting, and so on? Yes; in many cases we don't think of that at all. We use a machine, or a picture of a machine, as a symbol of a particular mode of operation.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

# Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction: <i>Rendementsdenken</i>	3
I: Max Weber and the Rationalisation Thesis	7
II: Jürgen Habermas and Rationalisation	16
III: The Neutrality of Technical Reason	29
IV: Conclusion	45
Bibliography	49

## Acknowledgements

Education and learning are strange things. They require, I think, a certain openness and flexibility, a willingness to pursue the unknown. The unknown, however, is not a very practicable principle for running a modern university, or for running anything at all for that matter. As a result, the openness and fluidity required for university education tend to become rarer and rarer. During the run-up to the writing of this thesis, nevertheless, I have had the luxury of enjoying a truly open education. And I want to thank some people for this luxury.

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## Introduction

Depending on your point of view, this academic year saw either the occupation or re-appropriation of two buildings of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). First, from 12 February onwards, students of the initiative *The New University* entered and refused to leave the Bungehuis, the seat of the board of the Humanities Faculty. Their eviction on the 24<sup>th</sup> was answered with a large student demonstration the next day, which crescendoed into their taking over the Maagdenhuis, which counts as the seat of the board and administration of the UvA as a whole, as well as that of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Unlike the ‘occupations’ in the sixties and seventies, the students were not alone: the teachers quickly joined them under the banner of *ReThink UvA*. Together, they protested against ‘the many-headed wolf of Management’.<sup>1</sup> Many-headed, because it turned up in the guise of bureaucratisation, profit-driven policy, budget cuts, de-democratisation, lack of transparency, and many other guises. One slogan specifically began to capture all those aspects of the problematic and so came to spearhead the protests. This was the cry of ‘rendementsdenken’. Literally, the term means thinking in terms of return on investment. Perhaps it could be translated as something like bottomline thinking, because it essentially denotes a kind of thinking that reduces all matters to technical-financial ones.

The fundamental intuition of the protestors, the one epitomised by the term ‘rendementsdenken’, it seems to me, is not an entirely new one. The idea that modernisation comes with a loss of freedom, a narrowing of political space, can be found in a wide variety of writers in the tradition of critical social theory. With the spread of capitalist markets and the thickening of bureaucracies (especially in state structures) via the proliferation of scientifically informed techniques, modern societies seemed to have come to exhibit a highly technical, even mechanical character. An important question now became how wide the margin still is for human agency. It seems that the protestors felt that this margin became increasingly thin, they felt governed not by humane values, but by technic-economic considerations.

Rationalisation theory represents a type of modernisation theory that has always been concerned with these themes, and I presume it counts as one of the inspirations (if not *the* inspiration) for the notion of ‘rendementsdenken’. Originating in the writings of Max Weber, this approach theorises modernisation as the becoming socially effective of different types of rationality: rationalisation. Styling to some extent, rationalisation is conceived of as the proliferation of instrumental reason, the type of technical rationality that is concerned merely with means rather than ends. This process of rationalisation should then be criticised using a different type of rationality, one that is concerned

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, ‘Het Academisch Manifest: Van een Bezette naar een Publieke Universiteit’ in *Krisis: Tijdschrift voor de actuele filosofie*, 2013, issue 3 via <<http://www.krisis.eu/content/2013-3/krisis-2013-3-01-halffman-radder.pdf>> [latest access: 9-8-2015].

with ends rather than means. In so far as modern societies are dominated by a means-rationality, they are typified by a ‘*rendementsdenken*’ that does not expend energy on setting ends or values. And to the extent that such values are absent, ‘*rendementsdenken*’ or instrumental rationalisation counts as a form of *nihilism*.

I think that the emergence of a popular notion such as ‘*rendementsdenken*’ signifies the societal relevance of critical theory like rationalisation theory, even though philosophers of new generations of critical theory such as Axel Honneth have aimed to supersede the ‘rational-theoretic narrowing of social critique’ in academia.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I will not concern myself directly with ‘*rendementsdenken*’, although this notion does symbolise an important aspect of the social context in which this thesis is situated. I will, however, have a glance at the viability of the reason-theoretic approach of Jürgen Habermas, who arguably counts as the rationalisation theory’s most prominent exponent of the last century.

Habermas reformulates Weber’s rationalisation thesis in terms of an opposition between two types of action, namely purposive action and communicative action, and their corresponding social spheres, that is, system and the lifeworld. He then interprets societal modernisation as the particular institutionalisation—i.e. rationalisation—of both these rationality-types in various societal spheres. Economic and administrative action take place in the system that grows in complexity, while the lifeworld (consisting of communicative institutions such as the press, parliaments, universities, etc.) harbours increasingly refined processes of rational deliberation that cannot be reduced to economic agency. On the contrary, communicative action can be used to overcome the social force of purposive rationalisation. Now, the peculiar play between these two social spheres and their patterns of social action, forms the key to a critical interpretation of modern society. We can see this, for example, in the central pathology of modern societies according to Habermas: system’s ‘colonisation’ of the lifeworld. This signifies the typically modern situation which Weber already identified, namely the situation in which means-ends-reasoning pushes out deliberation about ends. It signifies, in Habermasian terms, that purposive action overextends into contexts that require communicative action.

Over the years, a vast amount of secondary literature has amassed on Habermas’s whole corpus of work. As regards his social theory, by far largest portion of it concerns itself with Habermas’s major conceptual innovation: the concept of communicative action (or, communicative rationality). This is, after all, the tool that Habermas provides for surpassing the stalemate of critical theory, for breaking out of the iron cage that Weber had identified. Particularly renowned is the criticism of

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<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, trsnl. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 73.

‘postmodern’ authors, like Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty, that the universalist pretensions of communicative reason represent an unwelcome metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> All this attention for communicative rationality, however, has perhaps caused that Habermas’s other rationality-type—purposive rationality—is typically overlooked.<sup>4</sup> This is even stranger considering that purposive or instrumental rationality functions as the basic premise of Habermas’s rationalisation theory. Hence, Habermas’s premise of societal rationalisation as the rampant proliferation of nihilism—that which communicative reason needs to criticise—often goes unchecked.

In the neo-discipline of Science and Technology Studies (STS), however, there has emerged a general criticism of a neutral instrumental reason. That is to say, authors working in STS have deconstructed the conception of instrumental reason as a type of reason that is concerned merely with means, as a type of reason that functions, in other words, like a neutral instrument. On the contrary, research in STS tends to show that purposive rationality is always already socially mediated. In this thesis, I will present a second-order analysis of literature that deals with the deconstruction of the picture of neutral technical rationality. Particularly, I will refer to Andrew Feenberg, who has also applied this general criticism of technical rationality to the critical theory of a range of philosophers, such as Heidegger, Ellul, Marcuse and Habermas himself.<sup>5</sup>

The leading question of this thesis can be formulated as follows: taking into account the advances in the field of STS, can we still make sense of Habermas’s central, Weberian, intuition that modernisation is fundamentally characterised by a nihilist force of rationalisation that tends to illegitimately overextend into an increasing number of social spheres?

To answer this question, I will first, in section (I), introduce this central intuition, i.e. theme of rationalisation, by providing a synopsis of Max Weber’s first exploration of this theme. In section (II), then, I will put forward Jürgen Habermas’s position on the thematic. We will see there, in other words, how Habermas upgraded or updated Weber’s theory of rationalisation. In section (III), I will begin with directly answering the research question by an extensive reflection on the nature of instrumental reason in Habermas’s account using insights gained in the field of STS.

The answer I will give to the research question is that we cannot make sense of Habermas’s central intuition, because the premise of this intuition, the premise that modernisation is

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trns. Bennington and Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) and Richard Rorty, ‘Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity’ in Richard J. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity* (Worcester: Polity & Basil Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> James Johnson remarks in 1991: ‘[N]owhere in the secondary literature can I find a sustained, critical discussion of the place of strategic action in Habermas’s broader project.’ In ‘Habermas on Strategic and Communicative Action’ in *Political Theory Vol. 19, No. 2* (May, 1991) via <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/191661>> [latest access 13/8/2015], p. 196. As far as I can tell, not much has changed from 1991 up to now.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (New York; London: Routledge, 1999).



characterised by a process of nihilist rationalisation presents Habermas with a dilemma. If, on the one hand, Habermas clearly defines the contours of a nihilist, technical, succes-oriented rationality —which he in fact does—, he commits himself to a metaphysics of instrumental reason. By this I mean that his account theorises the social world as having a certain *essence*: instrumental logic. Using the aforementioned insights of STS, I will show that this metaphysics wrongly presumes technical rationality as clearly separated from social contexts. Hence, I will criticise this horn of the dilemma by challenging Habermas’s basic premise, namely that rationalisation is form nihilism: an absence of substantive ends. Moreover, I will argue that this metaphysics allows for a clear interpretation of the colonisation thesis, but that it at the same time results in a theoretical blindness with regard to system’s development in its own sphere, that is, with regard to institutional biases that emerge within the system.

If, on the other hand, Habermas would take seriously the findings in STS, precisely the inverse would occur. He would be able to criticise the functioning of the system on its own terrain, but now the idea of system’s overextending into the lifeworld becomes questionable. For if we lift the dualism between politics and technology, between reasoning about means and reasoning about ends, we lose the ability to indicate when the former intrudes into the domains of the latter. So, for example, we could say that the technocrat’s technical solutions are inappropriate in a political discussion. But if we would question the idea of a non-political technical solution, then we would simultaneously question the idea that it could be ‘inappropriate’ in certain discussions.

The dilemma shows, I believe, that Habermas’s basic premise, namely that modernisation is marked by the proliferation of a nihilist force of rationalisation, is fundamentally flawed and can only be remedied by relinquishing his central critical thesis, i.e. the colonisation thesis.

## I. Max Weber and the Rationalisation Thesis

Max Weber (1864-1920) introduced the notion of rationalisation in its sociological designation, and it is one of the central concepts of his oeuvre. And even though the word rationalisation calls to mind the process of Western modernisation, it does not mean anything so specific for Weber: ‘Rationalism is an historical concept which covers a whole world of different things.’<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as with many other key terms of his work, Weber does not give an outright definition of rationalisation, but one has to infer the meaning of the notion from the way he uses it, what role it fulfils throughout his work.<sup>7</sup> Remaining at a very general level, then, we can say that rationalisation signifies the way in which rationality coordinates, organises and arranges various aspects of social life.

One could thus speak of the rationalisation of India by way of analysing the organising rationality or culture of Hinduism, like Weber in fact did. His most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05), should be viewed as a part—an important part to be sure—of his vast study into the various world religions and the organisational societal structures connected to them. In this way, Weber takes cultural notions and examines their exemplification in society, which he views as ‘a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history’.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Weber’s study into Western capitalism, this approach can be contrasted to Marx’s materialist political economy, but beware that Weber does not neglect the material elements of social life. Scattered throughout *The Protestant Ethic* are references to socio-economic factors of the rise of capitalism, such as the inherited tradition of Roman law, separation of productive enterprise from the household and the existence formally free wage-labourers.<sup>9</sup>

It is true, however, that Weber’s rationalisation thesis is understood as indicating only the Western form of modernisation (Occidental rationalism). From now on, I will follow this convention and refer to this specific process of modernisation with the term rationalisation. And so,

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<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trns. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> As Alan Sica tells us: ‘Weber was inconsistent in his technical use of terms, and there is no firmly definable *locus classicus* to which the reader can turn for an unambiguous statement of Weber’s global intentions.’ Alan Sica, ‘Rationalization and Culture’ in Stephen Turner, *The Cambridge Companion to Weber* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 51. For example, we find terms like ‘intellectualisation’ and ‘rationalism’ that appear to have the same import as ‘rationalisation’.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> In his introduction, Anthony Giddens mentions six such factors. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. xvi-xvii.

in order to figure out how rationality has become historically effective in the West, we first need to establish the different types of rationality that can become the basis of rationalisation. Now Weber distinguishes between various types of social action that are characterised by different reasoning-processes. For example, he singles out ‘affective rationality’ as a concept to make sense of action done on the grounds of an emotion. There are, however, two types of rationality specifically important as they are more indicative of modern consciousness and/or more capable of being institutionalised. These two types are what Weber calls purposive rationality (*Zweck-rationalität*) and value-rationality (*Wert-rationalität*). Let us look at them in that order.

Weber defines purposive rationality as an action ‘that is, determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as “conditions” or “means” for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends’<sup>10</sup>. The classic example of this type of reasoning is figuring out the most efficient path (means) to a set location (end). More generally, we can say that instrumental rationality is fundamentally concerned with weighing and ordering means, ends and consequences.<sup>11</sup> But we must be clear here that purposive rationality concerns itself only with ends insofar as they are redescribed into means. For instance, an action may be instrumentally rational *if* it achieves the best consequences; *if* it picks out the best means to a specific end (which may or may not be ‘the best consequences’); *if* a specific end is appropriate to the means and consequences. What is crucial for purposive reasoning, then, is that these factors are considered as *conditioned* on something else.

Conceptually opposite to this conditioned rationality stands a type of reasoning that is concerned with *unconditional* factors: value-rationality (*Wert-rationalität*). This is a type of action that follows from a conscious belief in some value—whether ethical, aesthetic, religious, political, etc.—without regard for the consequences. There is no ‘if’ involved here. An example of this type of action would be a principled pacifist who refuses to go to war even though such a war might save a lot more lives as a consequence. Value-rational action thus signifies an action that is done for its own sake; or one that is done in a calling (*als Beruf*), but we will return to the notion of a calling shortly.

As we can see, these two types of rationality stand diametrically opposed to each other: one is conditioned, the other is not. So then it follows that an action is either purposive or value rational—either it is or is not conditioned. But Weber quickly remarks that it is not as easy as that, for the types of social action and rationality that he has identified are ‘ideal types’ and it is ‘seldom if ever that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed

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<sup>10</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline in Interpretative Sociology*, ed. Günther Roth and Claus Wittich, transl. Ephaim Frischoff and 8 others (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1978), p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

pure types'.<sup>12</sup> The ideal-typical designation of an action to a certain type of rationality is a kind of nominalism that, contra positivism, is not concerned with truth as correspondence to an objective reality, but that deals with our making sense of the social world by way of making abstractions. This relaxes the ideal type's connection to truth and, rather, invites a pragmatic judgment toward its suitability: 'The usefulness of the classification for the purposes of this investigation can only be judged in terms of its results.'<sup>13</sup>

Weber thus rightly announces that purposive and value rational action may be mixed in multiple possible ways. For example, one could determine the end of an action on the basis of an unconditional value, and then determine the means to that end instrumentally. In another way, even the end of an action may be determined instrumentally with regard to a broader system of values, and then even these values may be weighed against each other purposively-rational. According to Habermas, Weber calls the combination of the weighing of means and the weighing of ends formal rationality as opposed to substantive rationality.<sup>14</sup> This formal rationality is the type of doubled-up instrumental rationality that does not make any reference to ultimate, unconditioned ends (substance), but that is able to operate within a system of rational calculation, ordering and coordination. We will return to the notion of formal rationality shortly. Let us first look at how Weber construes the play of our two opposed types in the emergence of Western capitalism, which he considers the 'the most fateful force in our modern life'.<sup>15</sup>

According to Weber, the rise of capitalism is tied to the advent of the spirit of capitalism, which, in its turn, resulted from the ethic of Protestantism. In what follows, I will treat of them in that order. So firstly, capitalism itself is introduced by Weber as 'the pursuit of profit, and forever *renewed* profit, by means of continuous, capitalistic enterprise.'<sup>16</sup> It thus has nothing to do with the acquisition of wealth for comfort or enjoyment, but is typified by the constant re-investment of material goods in a rational, systematic and calculated way. The possibility of such calculation of investment, Weber tells us, rest fundamentally on the rational organisation of formally free labour. So capitalism is equated with the continuous pursuit of profit through a systematic organisation of free labour.

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<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*., p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trnsl. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 171. Hereafter, I will refer to this work as *TCAI*.

<sup>15</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. xxxi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxi-ii.

The spirit of capitalism links right up to this characterisation of capitalism itself—it is actually more or less a repetition of its theme, a reprise. According to this spirit, profit is never a means to material comfort, spontaneous enjoyment of life or some other hedonistic end. Instead, profit should be pursued for the sake of profit; investment for the sake of renewed investment. As Weber remarks: ‘Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs’.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, the spirit of capitalism makes material acquisition into the ultimate purpose of man.

The Protestant ethic is crucially tied to the concept of a calling, or *Beruf*. According to Weber, Luther introduced this notion into our language with his translation of the Bible during the Reformation. This notion pointed to the orderly fulfilment of a person’s this-worldly duties as a task set by God and as the road to salvation. Calvin added to this emphasis on this-worldly asceticism the doctrine of predestination. Whether you were part of the elect lay hidden in God’s cosmological master plan, and there was no of knowing whether you were in or out. This proved an unbearable burden to the followers of Calvin and thus led to two pastoral advices. First, it became an absolute duty to consider oneself as chosen, since lack of certainty indicates a lack of faith. Second, this self-confidence was to be attained by intense worldly activity via the doing of ‘good works’ in a calling. Working in a calling was framed in terms of *certitudo salutis*, ascertaining God’s blessing.<sup>18</sup>

Here we find the crux of the Protestant ethic: working in a calling was no longer for the sake of actually attaining salvation, but merely for the sake of psychologically ascertaining it. Working in a calling became a sign, rather than a means. This meant that this-worldly labour became an end in itself, it represented an unconditional imperative toward the ‘systematic rational ordering of the moral life as a whole’.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this imperative applied to the rich and poor alike. Having material wealth was no excuse to sit back and enjoy it, but the latter was psychologically sanctioned with lack of certainty of getting into heaven. A waste of money, or a ‘[w]aste of time [was] thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins’.<sup>20</sup>

This links right up to capitalism and its spirit of continuous reinvestment and the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. Weber points out that the Protestant roots of this particular ethic ‘died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness.’<sup>21</sup> Capitalism today, he says, ‘rests on mechanical

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<sup>17</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

foundations' and 'needs its [the spirit of religious asceticism] support no longer.'<sup>22</sup> This leads to Weber's famous image of modernity as an 'iron cage', the experience of being locked up in the fateful mechanism of economic rationalisation. 'The Puritan wanted to work in a calling', he records, 'we are forced to do so.'<sup>23</sup>

Zooming out, we see that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism carry within themselves a paradox of rationality. On the one hand, this spirit acknowledges the existence of an unconditional end, namely the acquiring material wealth through a systematic ordering of life. This unconditional end, on the other hand, was traditionally viewed as merely a means to a greater end that has now become absent, i.e. attaining salvation. So what started out as a pattern of action that was purposively rational now has no purpose that functions as a reason for engaging in such action. The Protestant rationalisation of life knows no other reason, no end, no purpose, no legitimation other than itself—and so it seems to have started to legitimate itself. This means that one would be tempted to think that purposive rationalisation had turned into an transcendent value of its own, that is, that it had turned into its very opposite: value-rationality.

According to Weber, however, purposive rationalisation cannot in the end function as a type of value-rationality, as the type of rationality that brings forth the kind of unifying values that allows us to legitimate patterns of instrumental action. For rather than *unifying*, Weber holds that the process of instrumental rationalisation *differentiates* modern society into separate value spheres that grow increasingly incompatible, such as science, morality and art. For example, the scientific enterprise has been rationalised in and through institutions such as universities, research societies, laboratories, methodologies, textbooks, research practices and standards, etc. The question whether these institutions add to the moral perfection or beauty of society is inappropriate since the values of the good and the beautiful belong to other socio-cultural spheres (i.e., law and art). Science merely aims for the true, not for the good and the beautiful. In a rationalised world, then, we can only say: it is true that the true is true, it is good that the good is good, etc. But not: it is good that the true is true, or it is beautiful that the true is good.

Rationalisation thus leads to the disintegration of unifying values rather than becoming one itself. It becomes a force that drives out overarching ends like mythical, religious or other transcending ones. And with myths gone, Weber remarks that intellectualisation or rationalisation results in 'the belief that *if we only wanted to we could* learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things—in principle— can be *controlled*

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<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

*through calculation*. This, however, means the disenchantment of the world.<sup>24</sup> Rationalisation has led to the disenchantment of the world, which denotes the loss of unifying values in modernity. More specifically, the disenchantment thesis signifies the way in which Calvinism has placed God beyond the horizon of our world and made Him and His plans inaccessible. The other-worldly can no longer figure in our explanations about and justifications of this-worldly affairs. As Alain Touraine puts it, disenchantment means 'the break with all forms of interpenetration of the sacred and the profane, or of being and phenomena'.<sup>25</sup> The various forms of social activity in modernity, Weber holds, can no longer be unified, justified or explained by pointing to any transcendent values.

Disenchantment and rationalisation thus mutually reinforce one another. A rationalised world has specialised its activities to such an extent that myths can no longer hold it together; but the driving out of mythical elements results in the confidence that modern society can in fact be rationalised. We can see this more clearly by looking into the social factor that is, next to the rise of capitalism, 'for the most important part' the driving force of rationalisation, namely progress in 'science and scientifically oriented technology'.<sup>26</sup> Science contributes to the process of rationalisation by presenting rational explanations and predictions about the natural and the social world. Furthermore, science produces technologies that have practical application and so enhance our mastery and control over the natural and social world. Moreover, the success of science and the effectiveness of technology reinforce our conviction that there exist no extra-rational forces, i.e. that our world is the only one.

We can concretely see how techno-science has effected rationalisation by considering the extensive deployment of knowledge and techniques in social organisation, notably in the bureaucratic state and the capitalist market, but also, e.g. in symphony orchestra's, football clubs and citizen initiatives. It is difficult, for example, to think of any student organisation that does not rely on clerical techniques and structures, such as a board with a president, secretary and treasurer; general member meetings; laws and statutes; supervisory boards; databases and archives ordered in spread sheets; committees to administer those databases; double-entry accounting, etc, etc. And even if someone were to organise a student union on a different basis, he or she would have trouble getting it through the official requirements of the Chamber of Commerce. Modern social organisation is thus characterised by a proliferation of the formal rationality that we know from technology and capitalism.

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<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' in John Dreijmanis (ed.), *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, transl. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), p. 35.

As we saw above, formal rationality denotes a consistent instrumental rationality, i.e. a rationality that weighs both means and ends. What formal rationality signifies is thus basically the various levels at which instrumental rationality is able to operate. When we take all these levels together, we get a system of means and ends. This system, we might say, represents the form of formal rationality. Because formal rationality is fundamentally concerned with this system (i.e., with ends conditioned by the system), rather than with any substance outside the system (i.e. unconditioned by the system), such a rationality is formal rather than substantive. And as we can see from the role of the conditioned and the unconditioned, formal rationality is a species of instrumental rationality, as substantive rationality is a kind of value-rationality. For Weber, the perfect example of such a formal system is capital accounting in terms of money: '[money] is formally the most rational means of orienting economic activity'.<sup>27</sup> After all, vastly different things, such as graduation rates, parking revenue, staff activities, etc, can all be administered, evaluated and compared in terms of euro's (i.e., in a system of capital and thus without any reference to extraneous elements).

Another great example of such a system is formal law. The distinction between formal and material law is analogous to formal and substantive rationality. Hence, Julien Freund, an eminent Weber-interpreter, records that '[f]ormal law is ... the totality of the system of theoretical law all of whose rules are based solely on legal logic, without reference to any considerations extraneous to law.'<sup>28</sup> Material law, then, is the type of law that does take into account extra-judicial elements, notably ethical values. Thus, a system of formal law allows for the institutionalisation of formal rationality, i.e. rationalisation. In other words, this system is made up of a collection of techniques that consequently exemplify a technical, formal, instrumental rationality: 'Juridical formalism enables the legal system to operate like a technically rational machine.'<sup>29</sup>

Weber now understands the Western modernisation process precisely as the advance of such technically rational machines into the various spheres of society. Formulated simply, then, occidental rationalisation denotes the proliferation of formal rationality in our everyday world and its various cultural spheres, such as science, morality and art. Rationalisation is crucially bound up with scientifically informed technologies, both because such technologies exhibit purposive rationality and allow for its institutionalisation through formal organisation. Thus, Julien Freund tells us that rationalisation is 'a purely practical development brought about by man's technological

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<sup>27</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 86. Do not be fooled by the qualification 'economic action', for Weber also submits that 'calculable rules is the most important [element] for bureaucracy.', *ibid.*, p. 975.

<sup>28</sup> Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, transl. Mary Ilford (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 254.

<sup>29</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 811.



genius' which has as its aim the 'achieving of greater efficiency and productivity.'<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Andrew Feenberg, refers to rationalisation as 'the generalization of technical rationality as a cultural form, specifically, the introduction of calculation and control into social processes with a consequent increase in efficiency.'<sup>31</sup>

We have already noted how the rise of instrumental rationality tends to prevent the emergence of unifying values, and even tends to drive out existing ones, that could serve as unconditional ends. This type of disenchantment as a result of rationalisation goes to the heart of what for Weber signifies the modern condition. Modernity is typified by the expansion of an empty purposive rationalisation that serves no purpose other than itself. Put differently, its formal rationality operates within self-referential systems that do not legitimate themselves by referring to extra-systemic values. On the contrary, formal rationality tends to push out all forms of value-rationality. In this way, the proliferation of formal rationality through rationalisation represents the rise of nihilism. Thus, for Weber, the modern condition with its critical dance of diverging rationalities, is at heart paradoxical: '[A]s rationalisation increases, the irrational grows in intensity.'<sup>32</sup>

Weber now views this diverging materialisation of rationality-types as a chance for *critique*. Modern society has simply become the wrong kind of rational. In opposition to purposive rationality, then, Weber considers value-rationality to be the crowbar with which the modern subject might open up his world once again. Put differently, value-rationality provides a critical way to re-enchantment. Weber the sociologist, however, was unable to produce such a critique, because he recognised a strict dualism between fact and value. The scientist, therefore, ought not to engage in critical theory but must concern himself only with facts. Thus, although science can help a person to discover what values he holds dear (so that he 'finds and obeys the daemon who holds the threads of *his* life'), critique is fundamentally a matter of politics.<sup>33</sup> That is why the politician who works in a calling is a crucial figure for Weber, for he alone is able to fight bureaucratic petrification. The 'stirring of the prophetic spirit', which is to say the value-reasoning by a charismatic political leader may effect a force against the merciless process of rationalisation.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the promise of critique is, for Weber, located in the sphere of politics and not science. His followers of the *Frankfurter Schule*,

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<sup>30</sup> Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 129-30.

<sup>32</sup> Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

however, welded the politics and science together and seized the Weberian opportunity for the production of Critical Theory.

## II. Jürgen Habermas and Rationalisation

The Weberian theme of sociological critique has thus become central in the tradition of Critical Theory. This tradition, which is centred around the Frankfurter Schule, has aimed at critically describing socio-cultural modernisation processes from the perspective of institutionalised rationalities. Thus, to take an example, Herbert Marcuse introduces his magnum opus *One-Dimensional Man* with an endorsement of what we identified as Weber's fundamental paradox of modernity: '[society's] sweeping rationality, which propels efficiency and growth, is irrational.'<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Habermas proclaims that modernity is a project of reason yet to be completed.<sup>36</sup> Axel Honneth designates the focus on socially effective rationalities the 'innermost core of the entire Critical Theory tradition, from Horkheimer to Habermas.' He continues: 'According to that tradition, the process of social rationalization through the social structure that is unique to capitalism has become interrupted and distorted in a way that makes pathologies that accompany the loss of a rational universal unavoidable.'<sup>37</sup> In this section, I will present an exposition of Habermas's version of the rationalisation thesis in his *Theory of Communicative Action* and, at some points, compare it to Weber's account.

Habermas's two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* is an ambitious project that takes the reader on a historical tour de force along classical social theorists, such as Weber, Durkheim, Lukacs, Adorno, Talcott Parsons and Marx. This is intended not as a trip through the museum of social science, but as an 'historical-reconstructive' enterprise in which Habermas treats these authors systematically because they 'have remained contemporaries.'<sup>38</sup> Habermas further tells us that he is dealing primarily with three 'topic complexes'. First, he wants to expand the theoretical field of rationality beyond the narrow notion of purposive rationality that was so central to Weber. Secondly, he wishes to construct a two-level theory of society that is able to view society both in terms of system and lifeworld. Finally, he aims to develop a critical theory of modernisation that is able to diagnose social pathologies on the basis of the hypothesis of system that is encroaching on the lifeworld. Like Weber did implicitly, Habermas explicitly states that his theory of

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<sup>35</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xliii-xliv.

<sup>36</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity an Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Seattle Bay Press, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, transl. James Ingram et al., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 140.

communicative action is tailored to and departs from the ‘paradoxes of modernity’.<sup>39</sup> Hence, we are dealing with the theme of the ir/rationalisation: the growth of the irrational as a result of rationalisation.

For Habermas, it is no historical coincidence that sociologists—with Weber in front—have taken rationality as the central means for interpreting the Age of Reason. Fundamentally, Habermas believes that actions and action-complexes can only be properly understood on the basis of the reasons given for them. This means, more specifically, that a theory of society has to account for the theme of rationality on three levels: meta-theoretical, methodological and empirical.<sup>40</sup> The meta-theoretical level refers to basic action-theoretic concepts that provide us with a vista to their rationalisation in social structures. The methodological aspect designates the social theorists’ interpretive angle from which he is able to make sense of such social action. Finally, the empirical matter points to the way in which these action concepts can be said to have been institutionalised in the social world through the process of cultural or societal rationalisation.

More specifically, Habermas immediately situates himself within the rationalist problematic of the Critical Theory tradition that germinated in Weber and had ended in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: how do we move beyond the stalemate of an all-consuming instrumental rationalisation? According to Habermas, Weber committed himself to the picture of society as an iron cage from the start because of his action-theoretic presuppositions. The cognitive-instrumental agent, who intends to bring something about in the objective world on the basis of a belief about this world, can be rationally criticised only on the basis of truth and effectiveness. Is his belief about the world correct? And are the means he chooses to intervene in it the most efficient for doing so? If the answers to these questions are ‘yes’, the action can be said to be rational.

Cognitive-instrumental action (or synonymously: purposive action) is thus the type of action that is essentially characterised by a means-ends reasoning: the action is oriented toward a pre-set purpose. Habermas reformulates this to his phrasing that such an action is ‘oriented to success’, by which he means that the agent in question desires the appearance of a certain state in the world.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he distinguishes between two subtypes of purposive rational action, namely instrumental and strategic action.

Instrumental action, he says, and the exact formulation will turn out important here, is an action considered ‘under the aspect of following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an

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<sup>39</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. xl.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

intervention into a complex of circumstances and events.’<sup>42</sup> Instrumental action is technical, mechanical: a machine or technical device would be able to do it. It is a simple following of steps in order to manipulate the natural world. Strategic action denotes basically the same type of reasoning, but now with regard to other human beings. It is a cognitive-instrumental intervention into the social world with the aim of influencing a rational interlocutor, something we call manipulation. It is the following of steps, the choice of most effective means, in order to manipulate the social world.

When we fold instrumental and strategic action together, we get the picture of a purposive agent that is bent on the domination of the natural and social world. It is, in other words, the familiar picture of the destructive modern subject that Habermas wishes to transcend. He admits: from this perspective, the Weberian perspective, the ‘telos inherent in rationality appears to be *instrumental mastery*’.<sup>43</sup> But he adds, in Wittgensteinian fashion, that the context of truth and effectiveness is not the only context in which we speak of rationality. And it is in those other contexts of rationality, the ones that Weber had missed, where the promise of the modern project is located.

So what are these contexts? They are bound up with the context of communication, or communicatively coordinated action. By turning to communication, Habermas shifts away from a philosophy of consciousness—of which Weber’s subjectivist action theory is an example—and toward a philosophy of language. For how are the manifold of goal-oriented actions of individuals supposed to lead to a more or less orderly social world? Not because of a semi-metaphysical force such as an invisible hand, says Habermas, but because of the rational way in which communication through language structures our social interactions. This communication should now be thought of as having a pragmatic nature, that is, what counts is not so much its propositional content (what it says), but what is achieved by it (what it does). After all, the rationality of purposive action was limited to propositional contents relating to the objective world, and it is those limits Habermas wants to supersede. Thus, he sets out to rationally reconstruct the formal-pragmatic presuppositions of communicative action. That is to say, he wants to know what it means to understand an utterance, which is the basic unit of communication.

Habermas concludes: ‘We understand a speech act when we know what makes it acceptable.’<sup>44</sup> He explains that every time an agent makes an utterance, she raises three validity claims that can be redeemed, if necessary, by presenting reasons for them. These three validity claims correspond to the three basic actor-world relations, so that we make separate claims concerning truth (regarding

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<sup>42</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 285.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

the objective world), normative rightness (social world) and truthfulness (subjective world). As is often the case with Habermas, these three types of validity claims in their turn connect right up to the three basic Weberian value-spheres that he identifies, namely science, morality and art. The validity claims can be defended or criticised on the basis of rational argumentation. In this way, Habermas expands the area of rationality from merely purposive, formal, technical action—criticisable only in terms of effectiveness—into the wider sphere of communicative rationality that is accessible on the levels of truth, rightness and truthfulness.

Usually, the validity claims are raised by a speaker and accepted by a hearer tacitly. In this case, there is no need to thematise any of the claims and communication proceeds smoothly. However, there can arise cases where the hearer does not accept the claims raised by the speaker and where the hearer asks the speaker to make good his validity claims, i.e. to adduce reasons for them. These cases represent what Habermas calls the practice of discourse. Now since discourse signifies a practice of argumentation, the rules of rational argumentation count as the rules of discourse. Those rules include norms on various levels, such as logical norms of consistency, social norms of accountability and sincerity, and norms of equality, non-coercion, etc—these rules, in sum, warrant that the best argument wins out. Now these rules are implicit in the practice of discourse, they are, say, the rules of the language-game of rational argument. As such, they must be presupposed by anyone playing this game. That is why Habermas dubs them ‘idealizing pragmatic presuppositions’.<sup>45</sup> These presuppositions are necessary and universal, since even someone who argues, by speaking, that one need not presuppose these rules is at the same time presupposing them in their acting—they are thus involved in a ‘performative self-contradiction’.

Returning to the theme of overcoming purposive rationality, we can thus say that it is in the contexts of communicative action, and more specifically in the contexts of raising, defending and/or criticising the three types of validity claims, that the modern subject is able to overcome the spread of nihilism in a rationalised age. So now how do purposive and communicative rationality relate to one another?

To begin with, ideal-typically, purposive and communicative action are mutually exclusive. As we saw, the former is oriented to success. The latter, on the other hand, is oriented to reaching understanding (*Verständigung*). This reaching understanding is characterised by an agreement that is rationally motivated. Put differently, in the case of a speech act, the process of reaching understanding succeeds if a hearer understands what makes the validity claims of a speaker acceptable and thus (however implicitly) takes a yes/no position on these claims. For Habermas, speech (language-in-use) as such always rests on these validity claims, which are based on

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<sup>45</sup> Habermas cited in James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 43.

rationality: 'Reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech.'<sup>46</sup> Speech thus originally serves the rational harmonisation of social action by bringing speakers and hearers into a rationally motivated consensus (*rationales Einverständnis*). This means that Habermas not only designates purposive and communicative action as mutually exclusive, but also indicates the former as the *original* and the latter as merely 'parasitic' on the former.

On a side note, there is a certain ambiguity in the terms *Verständigung* and *Einverständnis*. In German, these words have the connotation of both understanding and agreement. One common criticism of Habermas's theory of meaning is that understanding an utterance—i.e., knowing what reasons might be presented to make it acceptable—is not the equivalent of agreeing to an utterance—i.e. accepting those reasons as valid. And while it would be possible to explain social order on the basis of shared agreement, it might not be enough to base this on the idea of a simple shared understanding.<sup>47</sup>

Now there are multiple ways in which Habermas attempts to argue for his thesis that purposive action is parasitic on communicative action. For instance, there is the typically phenomenological suggestion that the cognitive-instrumental agent always already has to presuppose an intersubjectively shared lifeworld before he is able to interpret his action in his realist-philosophic way.<sup>48</sup> Centrally, furthermore, he points to the fact that arriving at a rationally motivated consensus simply cannot be accomplished without speech. Purposive action, on the other hand, can reach its aims by simply intervening in the objective world. For example, a politician could manipulate a voter into voting for him simply by pointing a gun at the voter. In this way, the politician will probably achieve his goal, but obviously not on the basis of the voluntary acceptance of reasons by the voter. The voter was not rationally motivated, but was caused to vote. On the other hand, if the politician would want to motivate the voter to vote for him on the basis of reasons, there would be no other way to achieve this than by means of language.

In the language of speech acts, Habermas contends that the illocutionary action of a speech act is that of reaching understanding. This means that the speaker in a speech act wants to achieve a certain goal on the basis of rational consensus. At the same time, the perlocutionary effect of a speech act is the results the speech act has. For example, by asking someone to open the door, the door will be opened. The illocutionary element of the speech act can now be ignored, so to say, in order to establish a perlocutionary effect. For instance, an someone wants you to open the door, so

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<sup>46</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 287.

<sup>47</sup> See for an instance of this objection: Thomas McCarthy, 'Reflections on Rationalization in *The Theory of Communicative Action*' in Richard J. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity*.

<sup>48</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 14.

he tells you that there is a fire in the room. This would be an instance of strategic action. The true aim of the speech act is hidden, no reasons were given (not even implicitly) and the hearer could not voluntarily accept the speech act. Strategic action, in other words, *misuses* the speech act for some external purpose. It relies on the nature of the speech act, which consists of illocutionary and perlocutionary effects, and thus on the telos of reaching understanding, in order to achieve an unrelated end. In this way, strategic action is parasitic on communicative action.

This speech-act-theoretic argument paves the way for, or hints at an important methodological point that Habermas is trying to make: we cannot interpret the whole of society on the basis of an image of a cognitive-instrumental agent, like the image of *homo economicus* in neoclassical economics and game theory. Likewise, Habermas's expansion of this limited view of society constitutes his criticism of Weber's narrow picture of rationalisation.

What we are arriving at now is the thematic of bridging the perspective of the agent and the perspective of society. This is an important thematic for Habermas, for he wants to safeguard the possibility of autonomy for the modern subject. Like we cannot view the whole of society in cognitive-instrumental action-theoretic terms, we cannot understand society solely on the basis of systems that are governed by an instrumental logic that goes over the heads of the people that figure in them. So how does Habermas connect his theory of action to his theory of society?

In an important sense, Habermas mirrors his theory of society to his theory of action. Purposive and communicative action take place in separate spheres, namely system and lifeworld. These spheres are governed by the two varieties of rationality (purposive and communicative) that structure their respective action-types. These spheres thus represent abstract entities that are analytically distinct. At the same time, however, they designate material institutions such as the state, the market (system), the family, mass media (lifeworld). So let us look at the notion of the lifeworld first.

The idea of the lifeworld is borrowed from the phenomenological tradition, from Husserl via Schutz to Luckmann. As an alternative to 'lifeworld', Habermas also quickly mentions Wittgenstein's 'forms of life'. The concept of the lifeworld denominates the background against which our acting and speaking makes sense, it is the 'horizon within which communicative actions are "always already" moving'.<sup>49</sup> This background is made up of our shared cultural and linguistic patterns, such as shared world views, codes of conduct, ethical norms, judgements of taste, etc. It consists, in other words, of the substance that figures in communicative action.

The lifeworld is not unchangeable, but neither can it be altered in its entirety in one go. We can pick out, thematise bits of the lifeworld while other parts of it necessarily remain in place. After all,

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<sup>49</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 119. Hereafter, I will refer to this work as *TCAII*.



our thematising does not make any sense when we remove the background against which *it* has its life. Now in moving against this background—transmitting it, renewing it, adapting it, etc—, we engage in communicative action. Communicative action thus serves the reproduction of the lifeworld, which entails cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation.<sup>50</sup>

Communicative action can be institutionalised in the lifeworld to various degrees. That is to say, practices that are based on giving reasons with regard to the three actor-world relations (truth, rightness, truthfulness) have materialised in diverse modern institutions such as universities, parliaments and museums. Such institutionalisation of lifeworld practices, that is, of communicative action is what Habermas calls the *rationalisation of the lifeworld*. It is this type of rationalisation that Habermas opposes to the rationalisation identified and reviled by Weber and other members of the Critical Theory tradition. It is, for Habermas, why the modern project is still viable.

Purposive action, on the other hand, takes place in what Habermas comprehensively calls system. He appropriates this notion from Talcott Parsons's systems theory, which views society as a multitude of self-regulating action systems that can be described in terms of functionality and purposive rationality. That means that these systems structure parts of complex modern society and can be described by the 'counterintuitive' approach of the social sciences, i.e. an approach that refers neither to intersubjective interactions nor to an accountable 'subject' in the system. On the contrary, systems can be described simply as generalised patterns of goal-oriented social action.

Habermas holds—again following Parsons—that action systems are guided by steering media, which delinguistify social interactions. The two media that Habermas picks out are those of money and power, which regulate the two main subsystems of modern society, namely the market and the state. In the interactions in such formally organised domains as a ministry, for example, agents need not rely on communicative coordination of action, but can take a short-cut through such costly procedures by pointing (however implicitly) to instituted power relations. Such subsystems, then, represent a 'norm-free regulation of cooperative contexts' in which the steering media do the talking.<sup>51</sup>

These actions systems of the market and the state are responsible for the material reproduction of society, or, as Habermas puts it, for the 'maintenance of the material substratum of the lifeworld.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> More specifically, Thomas McCarthy sums it up very concisely: 'Thus, to the different structural components of the lifeworld (culture, society, personality) there correspond reproduction processes (cultural reproduction, social integration, socialization) based on the different aspects of communicative action (understanding, coordination, sociation), which are rooted in the structural components of speech acts (propositional, illocutionary, expressive).' See Thomas McCarthy's introduction in Habermas, *TCAI*, p. xxv.

<sup>51</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 150. See also p. 154, 171. Habermas repeats the phrase 'norm-free' rather often.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Moreover, these subsystems of action assist communicative action in holding together society via what Habermas dubs ‘system integration’. As modern society gets more complex and differentiated, elements from the lifeworld are depoliticised and organised via the subsystems in order to relieve the burden on communicative action and the lifeworld. In other words, system integration helps communicative action with holding society together.

Thus, Habermas does not consider purposive rationality or system *in themselves* evil. On the contrary, they fulfil important functions in modern society, particularly the effective production of goods and services. Furthermore, because the lifeworld is dependent on the material reproduction of society, the whole of society cannot be exhaustively represented on the basis of communicative hermeneutics. Habermas goes so far as to say that this signifies an ‘*immanent critique* of the hermeneutic idealism of interpretive sociology’.<sup>53</sup> And of course this is why Habermas insists on developing a two-level theory of society.

Conversely, system cannot be pictured independently of the lifeworld. As I noted above, Habermas’s picture of society mirrors his picture of action. And purposive action is parasitic on communicative action, just like system is parasitic on the lifeworld. To be more precise, Habermas tells us that system has to be ‘normatively anchored’ in the lifeworld. This anchoring has to do with legitimation: what legitimates the existence of these subsystems? The answer to such a question cannot come from system, since its norm-free sociality lacks the substance or meanings required to phrase such an answer. Hence, the answer comes from the lifeworld.<sup>54</sup> As we can observe, this theme echoes Weber’s discussions on the uprooting of formal rationality in modern society. Societal domains that exemplify means-ends-reasoning require the justification in terms of ends that cannot be formulated through such instrumental reasonings.

The differentiation of system and lifeworld represent two separate types of rationalisation. The growing in complexity of system represents what Weber had diagnosed of the fateful force of our times. The rationalisation of the lifeworld means the increasingly refined institutionalisation that releases the potential of communicative rationality. But because they both rationalise, there occurs a ‘second-order differentiation process’, which differentiates them from one another and leads to the gradual ‘uncoupling of system and the lifeworld’.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it is precisely through this process that

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<sup>53</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 151. Italics added.

<sup>54</sup> To be a little bit more precise. The answer does not come in the shape of a declaration or whatever, but in the form of an institutionalisation. In the case of money, this is done by bourgeois civil law (contract and property); in the case of power, it is done via the legal-public organisation of offices. Comprehensively, Habermas says the two steering-media are anchored in the lifeworld via formal law. See Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 270 and 309.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-155.

system and lifeworld come into being at all—and it is this process that is at the heart of the general process of modernisation, the becoming modern of traditional societies.

Furthermore, this process of uncoupling turns the anchoring of system in the lifeworld into a pressing matter, because there is the risk of the lifeworld becoming dominated by the increasingly autonomous material imperatives of system. For Habermas, whether this risk will be contained is up to history: ‘Both are conceivable: the institutions that anchor steering mechanisms such as power and money in the lifeworld could serve as a channel *either* for the influence of the lifeworld on formally organised domains of action *or*, conversely, for the influence of the system on communicatively structured contexts of action.’<sup>56</sup>

So for example, our democratic institutions, which institutionalise our communicative reasonings about public matters, should be able to withstand the financial-instrumental demands of capitalist enterprise if these threaten our ability for collective will-formation. The tension between such demands of system and lifeworld have recently been exemplified by the debate around the TTIP trade treaty. Proponents of the treaty—dare I say: the lobby of Big Business?—point to economic gain, whereas its opponents reply that this economic gain is obtained by relinquishing juridical authority of democratic institutions. The European Parliament has now accepted this treaty, which could thus be viewed as a channeling of the influence of system on the lifeworld. But, of course, they could have rejected it, and then the lifeworld would have set the limits for system.

What Habermas fears is the ‘mediatization of the lifeworld’, which is the encroachment of the steering-media on communicatively structured parts of society. As we saw, Habermas does not mind the introduction of system mechanisms to help maintain society *per se*. But the mediatisation of the lifeworld turns into a ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ when goal-oriented patterns of interaction replace communicative interaction in societal sectors in which cultural reproduction is at stake. The colonisation, then, represents the replacement of what cannot be replaced, i.e. the delinguistification of communicative practices. This means the intrusion of system on what properly belongs to the lifeworld.

The colonisation of the lifeworld means, in other words, that the anchor becomes increasingly cut off—it means that the force of instrumental rationalisation tends to become autonomous and no longer refers back to the lifeworld.<sup>57</sup> For Weber, the same process was exhibited by the uncoupling of the Protestant ethic from the mechanical foundations of capitalism. Habermas thus concurs with Weber that the proliferation of instrumental reason—the expansion of ‘norm-free’ organisation to more and more societal domains—means the rise of nihilism.

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<sup>56</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 185.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

The colonisation thesis thus signifies the threat that there are no longer any values or ultimate ends to back up the rise of patterns of instrumental reason. Hence, the colonisation thesis echoes the tendency identified by earlier generations of critical theory, which is that administration has the tendency to become total.<sup>58</sup> To an increasing extent, modern action systems merely have the aim of increasing the complexity and intensity of the system, which, in turn, is done for the sake of increasing the complexity and intensity of the system. And because the system cannot harbour any communicative deliberation about non-instrumental ends, autonomy is made impossible. This means that no actor can be held responsible for the direction society is heading; there are merely self-regulating systems. And that, represents the end of history.

Such is the modern threat that Habermas wishes to counter with his account of the lifeworld and communicative action. This threat is the essence of the colonisation thesis: the advance of a nihilist system at the expense of the lifeworld.

In the institutions of politics, the process of colonisation can be recognised most clearly in the phenomenon of technocracy. Technocracy reduces politico-practical questions to technical matters, which can best be resolved by independent experts in reference to techno-scientific knowledges. Technocracy thus denies the element of *choice* in political action and the latter now simply becomes a matter of system management. In technocracy, in other words, no reference is made to ends or substance other than those already present in the system.

In the institutions of science, we might regard the current situation in Western universities as emblematic. The protest cry of ‘rendementsdenken’ might well be viewed as a metonym for the banishment of communicative practices in the university. The question the student protests raise is: how is the university anchored in the lifeworld? How do we legitimate its existence? Rather than thinking and talking about these questions, ‘rendementsdenken’ appears to imply that we simply turn to system-imperatives and point to a positive return on investment (*rendement*). Rather than fundamental research, then, we should expect a bigger focus on research that carries the potential for valorisation. Equally, rather than an emphasis on Bildung, we should expect more attention for graduation-rates (‘study-success’) and human capital (via labour market orientation). But the answers embraced in ‘rendementsdenken’ are of course merely a deference of a genuine answer, for what is the reason for aiming for a larger return on investment? The increasing absence of *that* reason represents the advent of modern nihilism, i.e. the increasing colonisation of the lifeworld.

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<sup>58</sup> We must note here that for Habermas, administration can never become truly total, but merely displays the *tendency* to become total. The lifeworld can thus never become completely colonised.

In rough outline, then, Habermas' thesis of the colonisation of the lifeworld is a repetition of the theme of Weber's rationalisation thesis.<sup>59</sup> The uncoupling of system and the lifeworld mirrors the modernisation process captured by the methodical-rational ordering of the numerous spheres of culture, that is, by the process of rationalisation. The colonisation of the lifeworld, in a next step, signifies system's overstepping its bounds and mirrors Weber's uprooting of purposive rationality from the soil of value-rationality. This is where rationalisation turns malicious and pathological. The malaise of modernity is thus in both Habermas's and Weber's pictures represented by an institutionalised formal rationality run amok.

Fortunately though, both Weber and Habermas hold out the possibility for critique. For Weber, this critique could be exercised via the value-reasoning of the modern politician. In Habermas's case, it can come by way of communicative reasoning and the redemption of rational validity claims. What these types of reasoning have in common is their situation within the discourse of autonomy, or on the matrix of means and ends. For the socially embodied forms of instrumental rationality are concerned fundamentally with means. They are instruments for achieving societal ends, like human freedom, universal solidarity, etc. But the setting of such ends is beyond the purview of instrumental logic. In order to make sense of the means, then, we need to pick out the ends by way of that other type of rationality, value or communicative. If we fail to do this, modernity will be characterised by a soulless instrumentality that has no other purpose than itself. For the modern subject, this means heteronomy.

This diagnosis of an instrumentally rationalised modernity is the sociological counterpart of Nietzsche's nihilism. The means picked out by instrumental reason are, as Habermas insists, 'norm-free' and ethically neutral. That is because they are mere means. The ends, on the contrary, are necessarily substantive in some sense or other. The uprooting of purposive rationalisation thus means the depletion of all values in society, it means nihilism.

At the same time, however, this is where Weber and Habermas part ways. For Weber, the disenchantment of the world expresses a loss of meaning. Weber mourns the demise of metaphysics, and champions a return to overarching values in the form of re-enchantment. When Weber talks about ends, in other words, he means nothing less than *unconditioned ends*. It is only that qualification that differentiates these ends from the ends that are weighed in purposive action. And he is explicit that those conditioned ends are not enough.

Habermas, on the other hand, disagrees with Weber that disenchantment has eroded all meaningful discussion about ends. On the contrary, Habermas does not wish to return to a metaphysical politics, but distinguishes purposive rationality and communicative rationality 'within

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<sup>59</sup> Habermas himself is quite explicit in his updating Weber. See for example, *TCA II*, p. 312.

the realm of profane action'.<sup>60</sup> For him, then, communicative rationality is concerned with *conditioned ends*, which he considers to be sufficiently substantive. In this sense, Habermas's communicative rationality is itself still a species of formal rationality in Weber's sense: it makes no reference to any values outside of its own sphere (to absolute values), it is holistic rather than foundationalist.

What becomes clear here, is that any author of rationalisation theory that wishes to remain outside the metaphysical tradition ought to give up the idea of re-enchantment and unconditioned reasonings. For what counts as metaphysical is precisely that which is not bound (i.e. conditioned) by any language-game. The post-metaphysical rationalisation theorist, then, has somehow to account for different types of reasonings within a system of means and ends. In other words, he or she has to attempt to differentiate within formal rationality in Weber's sense. Habermas's distinction between reasonings oriented to success and reasonings oriented to mutual understanding is such an attempt.

The most well-known, and perhaps most important, criticism that Habermas has had to endure is the charge that this attempt has failed—the charge that communicative rationality turns out to be metaphysical. According to Jean-François Lyotard, for example, Habermas's project still represents what he calls a 'meta-narrative'. With meta-narrative Lyotard designates precisely the type of overarching, unifying value-system that for Weber could fuel re-enchantment—it is what we would ordinarily call metaphysics. According to Lyotard, Habermas presents the overarching narrative that holds that 'humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularisation of the "moves" permitted in all language games'.<sup>61</sup> Lyotard turns especially to the universally valid rules of discourse. These rules are not bound by any of the multiplicity of language-games, but transcend them and then move on to commensurate their multiplicity. For Lyotard, this represents a clear case of metaphysics that, as a result, has the tendency to exercise 'terror' over this multiplicity of language-games.

Richard Rorty even interprets Lyotard as faulting Habermas for even feeling the need to legitimise the workings of communicative reason in such an elaborate way—and I can only imagine that Rorty would agree here. There is no need for any (quasi-)metaphysical unification, and the angst or inclination to practice metaphysics is merely the last remainder of the stronghold that modern philosophy exercises over our philosophical imagination (these are the kind of urges that

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<sup>60</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 190. See also Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 101: '[T]he teleological structure is fundamental to all concepts of action. Concepts of *social action* are distinguished, however, according to how they specify the *coordination* among the goal-directed actions of different participants'. All actions are teleological, that is, goal-oriented, i.e. conditioned by an end.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, transl. Bennington and Massumi, p. 66.

Wittgenstein keeps directing our attention to). Thus, Rorty reproaches Habermas: ‘He is scratching where it does not itch.’<sup>62</sup>

But this scratching, so agrees James Tully with both Rorty and Lyotard, is ‘a threat to free and critical thought and action because it consists in universalizing one conventional type of critical reflection and excluding others.’<sup>63</sup> As an example, Tully notes that Habermas’s quasi-transcendental argument concerning the types of validity claims precludes a political discussion about whether rightness has a priority over goodness, or vice versa. In this way, Habermas’s philosophical theory excludes a ‘civic humanist such as Charles Taylor’ from engaging in a political discussion about this matter. The charge of metaphysics is thus not purely a theoretical matter, but has political consequences. It is now precisely this kind of political exclusion that Tully identifies that Lyotard means when he speaks of the tendency of metaphysics to result in ‘terror’.

In this thesis, however, I do not want to elaborate on whether Habermas’s account of communicative reason is based on a metaphysics, although I tend to agree with the ‘postmoderns’ in this matter. In the rest of this thesis, rather, I will examine Habermas’s account of that other type of rationality, namely instrumental reason. Using insights from the neodiscipline of Science and Technology Studies, I will argue that Habermas’s conception of the nihilist system and its purposive rationality, too, display the tendency to become a metaphysics.

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity’ in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, p. 164.

<sup>63</sup> James Tully, ‘Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection’ in *Political Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Sage Publications, May, 1989) via <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3072620>> [latest access: 8/8/2015], p. 191.

### III. The Neutrality of Technical Reason

As we have seen in the last section, Habermas's mature social theory as we find it in the *Theory of Communicative Action* presents an update of Weber's old rationalisation thesis. Rationalisation for Weber consisted in the proliferation of purposive rationality in and through techno-scientific progress. For Habermas, this process was captured by uncoupling of system and lifeworld via their increasing differentiation (dual rationalisation) due to technological development. The colonisation thesis grants, but only in a second step, Weber's worries about the spread of 'norm-free sociality' and patterns of instrumental action throughout societal spheres that require value-laden social action. Either way, the close association of instrumental reason and technology is at the very base of the narrative of modernisation that these authors are telling.

There is a certain picture of technology and its logic work in this tale modernisation. It is this: technology is a neutral instrument which can be made to serve various ends. A hammer, for instance, can be used to build a house and to bludgeon someone's face in. Neither of these ends, however, is internally connected to the hammer. Instrumental reason is the rationality of the instrument, which is oriented toward a certain end, but never concerned with that end vis-a-vis other ends.<sup>64</sup> Technology, on this picture, is ethically neutral—it is a mere means. Technical rationalisation, then, is the spread of neutral means and the disappearance of ends, either in society in its entirety (Weber) or in the system and, increasingly, in the lifeworld (Habermas).

Remarkably, the notion of technology is almost completely absent in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*. What we can see, however, are traces of his earlier engagements with technology. For example, in one spot, Habermas uses 'technicizing of the lifeworld' as a synonym for the colonisation of the lifeworld: '[T]he transfer of action over to steering media appears from the lifeworld perspective both as reducing the costs and risks of communication and as conditioning decisions in expanded spheres of contingency—and thus, in this sense, as a *technicizing of the lifeworld*.'<sup>65</sup> The technicising of the lifeworld signifies the reduction of practical matters (in the lifeworld) to technical problems (in the system), to be solved by patterns of purposive action that exemplify technical rationality.

Another example of such a trace is the definition Habermas gives of instrumental action, which he represents as an action considered 'under the aspect of following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events.'<sup>66</sup> Not only

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<sup>64</sup> As we saw in the case of Weber, *zweck-rationalität* also consists in the weighing of different ends, but these ends are in those cases a means to the end of realising a world view or system of values.

<sup>65</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 183. Original italics.

<sup>66</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 285. I have also referred to it above.



does he here equate following technical rules with the criterion efficiency, he relates both of them directly to instrumental action. This definition of instrumental action echoes his earlier definition of ‘work’ or purposive-rational action in *Technology and Science as “Ideology”*, where he states that ‘[i]nstrumental action is governed by *technical rules*’ and that such action ‘organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to criteria of an effective control of reality’.<sup>67</sup>

In this text, *Technology and Science as “Ideology”*, Habermas involves himself in the theme of technology and its rationality. He situates himself in opposition to Herbert Marcuse, who remarked that ‘the traditional notion of the “neutrality” of technology can no longer be maintained. Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put ... Technological rationality has become political rationality.’<sup>68</sup> Following Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse acknowledges the political domination inherent in technology. In contrast to the tendencies of technocracy—which technicises politics—, Marcuse suggests that we move to a liberating New Science, a New Technology, i.e. the politicising of technology.

Habermas rejects this as an outright impossibility. According to him, Arnold Gehlen has proven that ‘there is an immanent connection between the technology known to us and the structure of purposive-rational action’.<sup>69</sup> Technology simply serves to replace or relieve the various instrumental functions of the human organism, such as the motor apparatus, sensory apparatus and, finally, the brain. Habermas concludes that ‘[t]echnological development thus follows a logic that corresponds to the structure of purposive-rational action’.<sup>70</sup> Technology inherently and exhaustively signifies neutral instruments; technology develops and works according to the purposive logic that we find in the system.

There are, however, significant reasons to question Habermas’s account of technology and technical rationality. Andrew Feenberg, who engages in critical theory mainly on the terrain of Science and Technology Studies (STS), has done just that. That is, he has extensively criticised social theory like that of Habermas on the basis of its being ‘anathema to contemporary technology studies’.<sup>71</sup> For if the neo-discipline of STS has achieved one thing, then it has to be the deconstruction of the picture of neutral technical rationality: it has demonstrated that technology is

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<sup>67</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Technology and Science as “Ideology”’ in Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, transl. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 91-92. Original italics.

<sup>68</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. xlvi-xlvii.

<sup>69</sup> Habermas, *Technology*, p. 87.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, p. 130.

social through and through.<sup>72</sup> In what follows, I will—following Feenberg—set out the main points of the deconstruction of the picture of neutral technology and discuss in detail its implications for Habermas’s theory of rationalisation.

The deconstruction of the picture of neutral technical rationality is put by Feenberg in terms of the move from determinism to constructivism. Technological determinism, like that of Habermas, wrongly holds that technological progress is determined by the autonomous functional logic of technology. This logic, moreover, is dictated by the laws of efficiency: the path that technology will follow is the most efficient path. Technological development, then, can be explained wholly in isolation from social factors, i.e. solely in reference to its internal instrumental rationality.

Technological determinism, according to Feenberg, is based on two premises. First, it presumes technical progress follows a unilinear course or fixed track, namely the course dictated by efficiency. It presumes, in other words, that the technology we find around us is here because it simply works better than competing technologies. A premise like this one can get social theorists like Habermas into difficulties with respect to the growing body of work that constitutes post-colonial studies, for it commits such social theorists to a view of modernity as singular rather than plural.<sup>73</sup> The degree of modernisation could, on this view,—at least in part—be measured by the extent to which system has differentiated out in its unilinear path. This means that societies with alternative differentiations of their market and administrative systems can only be described as backward, technically inferior and/or lagging behind in modernisation. Second, technical determinism presupposes that social institutions must adapt to the technical base. Since technologies develop according to their own inner logic, the social world must follow the autonomous technological progress. For example, banning or steering the development of peer-to-peer file-sharing technologies has no effect. Rather, the business models of music and film industry have to change.

Contrary to the thesis of technical determinism, however, researchers in the field of STS have demonstrated that technological progress is fundamentally *underdetermined*. This thesis of underdetermination is known as the Duhem-Quine thesis and holds that there are never sufficient logically compelling reasons to prefer one scientific theory over another. This insight was made famous by Thomas Kuhn, who argued that while logical considerations could give one reasons for accepting or rejecting a theory within a paradigm, one could never completely explain the opting for

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<sup>72</sup> This is not a strange idiosyncrasy of Feenberg, but widely accepted. See, for good overviews of Science and Technology Studies, Philip Brey, ‘Theorizing Technology and Modernity’ in Thomas Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds.), *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) and Sergio Sismondo, *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, S. N. Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’ in *Daedalus Vol. 129, No. 1* (MIT Press, Winter 2000) via <[http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027613?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027613?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)> [latest access: 8/8/2015].

one paradigm over the other wholly on rational grounds.<sup>74</sup> In order to explain the emergence of new paradigms, therefore, one had to turn to extraneous influences, to social ones, and analyse how precisely the social pervaded the technical-scientific in a sociology of science.

But surely, one could now object, the social rationality that influences the design and development of technology simply takes on the shape of economic efficiency (in contrast to technical efficiency). If two competing technologies work equally well, then whichever is cheaper will win out. Now this problematic takes us to the heart of the matter at hand: socially effective technical rationality. What STS tends to show is that economic efficiency, too, cannot sufficiently explain the course of technical matters, because having economic efficiency as an arbiter of progress presupposes clear and fixed criteria of what counts as efficient in each case, and those criteria are picked out socially. Feenberg gives the example of Windows graphical interface that won out over MS DOS not because the latter was less efficient or more expensive (it was in fact more efficient and cheaper), but because the general role and user base of the computer changed almost entirely (say, from a machine for programmers to one for secretaries).

The design and development of technology is dependent on a host of social factors. Feenberg illustrates this with a study conducted by Pinch and Bijker about the historical development of the bicycle.<sup>75</sup> The bicycle that we know now is the result of a struggle over what were two different technologies: a racing bike and a means of transportation. The bike with the large front wheel, that we know from old pictures, was quicker than the bike with equal-sized wheels, but was also more unstable. It had, in other words, advantages and disadvantages. Just like its alternative. After a disagreement between different social groups (say, the racers and the travellers), then, eventually the safe design won out and was able to incorporate all subsequent technical advances until it grew into the bike we know now.

The social struggle over the bicycle is rather innocent, but the struggle over technology can take on politically salient forms. For example, at the moment of writing, we are witnessing a political struggle over the technological course of development of Bitcoin. At stake is the size of the blocks of the 'blockchain', which is a public ledger that contains all transactions that are made with Bitcoin. The current block size allows for a rather limited amount of transactions each second, but it does allow ordinary users to download the blockchain in its entirety, thus safeguarding the decentralised character of Bitcoin. This means that, on the one hand, people who view Bitcoin as an

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>75</sup> Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, 'The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts' in Wiebe Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes and Trevor Pinch (eds.), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

alternative means of transaction want to increase the block-size in order to allow bitcoin-capital to flow more swiftly. On the other hand, political anarchists who view Bitcoin as an alternative, not so much to Paypal and Ideal, but to fiat currencies such as the dollar and the euro, object to the increase on the grounds that the political essence of Bitcoin will be lost.<sup>76</sup>

Constructivism, as opposed to determinism, holds that the future shape of Bitcoin is up to history, like the fate of the bicycle once was. Constructivism, in the definition of Feenberg, argues that ‘the choice between alternatives ultimately depends neither on technical nor economic efficiency, but on the “fit” between devices and the interests and beliefs of the various social groups that influence the design process.’<sup>77</sup> If the thesis of constructivism is correct, i.e. the social pervades the technical, then technology exemplifies not a kind of universal technical rationality, but at least in part a political and social one. What a critical sociology of technology ought to do, then, is to investigate and analyse the particular politics that has materialised in particular technologies.

Langdon Winner’s *Do Artifacts have Politics?*, one of the classic texts of STS, offers astute examples of this. He distinguishes between two ways in which politics can become effective in technology. First, a technical system can come to embody social values because of its situation in a particular socio-material constellation. As an example of this, he points to Manhattan bridges that were expressly designed to be very low, so that the busses could not pass under them. Although these bridges do not possess an unchanging politics, their placement in Manhattan prevented poor and black people, who did not have cars and so needed to take the bus, from visiting the beaches on Long Island. The low bridges in this particular application, then, contained a racial and class bias.

Secondly, technology can be inherently political. This means that a technology requires or strongly prefers a certain socio-political arrangement. In this context, he refers to Plato’s comparison of the state with a ship and summarises: ‘no reasonable person believes that ships can be run democratically.’<sup>78</sup> Equally, Friedrich Engels held that the modern factory inherently required authoritarian, hierarchical control of the workforce. Langdon himself offers the example of the atom

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<sup>76</sup> Everett Rosenfeld, ‘Bitcoin’s “War” Could Threaten Its Survival’ via <<http://www.cnbc.com/2015/07/23/bitcoins-war-could-threaten-its-survival.html>> [latest access: 8/8/2015].

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 79. I think this definition also shows the importance of not overstating the case for constructivism and so ignoring the role of considerations of efficiency. Such views, perhaps like constructivism, run the risk of turning into a dubious idealism. What must be stressed at all times is not the uni-directional influence of the technical on the social, nor that of the social on the technical, but the continuous *co-determination* of both.

<sup>78</sup> Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 31.

bomb: ‘its lethal properties demand that it be controlled by a centralized, rigidly hierarchical chain of command closed to all influences that might make its workings unpredictable’.<sup>79</sup>

In sum, research in the field of STS has demonstrated time and again that the design and development of technical artefacts is socially mediated. This means that technology is not a neutral instrument that functions according to an isolated technical rationality, and it means that technologies do not come about through the unfolding of such a technical rationality.

These findings in STS are highly relevant for Habermas’s social theory, because, as we saw above, Habermas explicitly borrows his picture of instrumental reason from the technical sphere. Like Weber before him, he regards the invention and proliferation of new techniques and technologies—and the rationality inherent in them—as crucial to the process of modernisation. For example, in *Technology and Science as “Ideology”*, Habermas notes that since the end of the nineteenth century, science and technology (and especially their intertwinement) have become the leading productive force in capitalism. If the picture of rationality at the bottom of Habermas’s narrative of modernisation should be misguided, then that would constitute a significant critique of his project. Let us zoom in a little on Habermas’s conception of technical rationality.

As we saw, Habermas distinguishes between the rationality of an action and the rationality exhibited by patterns of action in social spheres, i.e. system and lifeworld. System and lifeworld are concepts that attempt to capture the predominance of respectively purposively rational patterns of behaviour and communicatively structured social action. To be clear, there is no place in society where we will encounter solely either purposive or communicative rationality. Habermas does, however, suggest a ‘rough and ready way’ to locate the boundaries between system and lifeworld based on the predominance of one or the other type of social action. For system, the two main representatives are the capitalist economy and bureaucratic administration. The lifeworld, on the other hand, is comprised of private spheres (notably the nuclear family, but also neighbourhoods and voluntary associations) and public spheres (communicative networks, such as the press, mass media, fora, etc.).<sup>80</sup>

But, again, Habermas does not wish to say that all action in formal organisations is purposively rational. In such organisations, however, communicative action is curtailed by the fact that actors ‘can have recourse to formal regulations, not only in exceptional but in routine cases’.<sup>81</sup> In the last instance, an official need not explain herself, but merely has to point to formal arrangements. So it seems, then, that there is something to this distinction between system and lifeworld: it captures the

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<sup>79</sup> Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, p. 34.

<sup>80</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 310 and 318-319.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311-12.

difference between how people act toward one another in the marketplace and in the local tennis club. But precisely because there is something to it, the analytic distinction between system and lifeworld tends to become reified. As Honneth remarks: '[Habermas] thus unintentionally lets the analytical distinction pass over into a difference between empirical domains of phenomena so that in the end the fiction is produced of a society divided into communicatively and purposive-rationally organized domains of action.'<sup>82</sup>

There appears to be a dilemma for Habermas here. Either the distinction between system and lifeworld is empirical, in which case it would be a rather sloppy empirical distinction, since no contrast so dramatic can be found in social reality. Or the distinction is analytic, which would solve the problem of an absence of empirical referents, but now the colonisation thesis loses critical force. For how are we to determine at what point system colonises the lifeworld; how would we locate the empirical boundaries of an analytic entity? Can Habermas have his cake and eat it too?

The concepts of system and lifeworld are ideal-types. As we saw in section I, ideal-types are purified abstractions that allow us to see patterns that do not appear directly as empirical fact. It is a way to refer to such abstract notions as 'capitalism', 'modernity', 'market', etc, without having to qualify them to such an extent that nothing remains of them. But of course such abstractions have to connect up to the empirical world to some extent, for otherwise they would be no more than hollow cries. This means that viable concepts always exhibit a certain duality between abstract analyticity and empirical application. Indeed, philosophers like Gadamer and Wittgenstein have shown how these two are always implicated in each other. A concept and its application co-determine each other<sup>83</sup>; the meaning of a concept cannot be understood in isolation from its use.<sup>84</sup> And Gadamer and Wittgenstein are two philosophers on whom Habermas bases himself in important respects.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, our dilemma here is a false one. But then how *do* we judge the appropriateness of such concepts as system and lifeworld? For starters, we will have to judge whether they allow us to make sense of the world, whether they have a sensible application in the social world. But we cannot now judge it solely on whether it 'fits' social reality, on whether it can be laid against reality like a ruler.<sup>86</sup> After all, such an ideal-type will always come up short. More importantly, however, the

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<sup>82</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trsnl. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 256.

<sup>83</sup> Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trsnl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), especially part II.4.2.

<sup>84</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trsnl. Anscombe, Hacker en Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 95.

<sup>86</sup> See section 2.1512 of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

purpose of an ideal-type is precisely to move away from positivism and its ideal of a detached representing of social reality. The proponent of the ideal-type considers positivism a variety of metaphysical thinking characterised by a realist ontology and a representationalist epistemology.

The potency of an ideal-type should thus not be judged on the basis of truth as correspondence, but it should be judged *pragmatically*. It means that concepts such as system and lifeworld should in the last instance be judged by how effective a role they play in our language-games, i.e. how useful they are. This grounds the theoretical in the practical, like Gadamer grounds scientific method in hermeneutics and Wittgenstein grounds our speaking in our acting. Furthermore, this pragmatism puts, for an important part, the critical in critical theory. A critique of positivism and some form of pragmatism has from the start been an integral part of Critical Theory, and Habermas does not stray from this path.

It seems to me that the distinction between system and lifeworld can be justified in light of the foregoing considerations. As I noted above, it allows us to make sense of the difference of behaviour on the stock exchange and on a family weekend. Furthermore, it does provide the conceptual apparatus for criticising those instances where market-thinking intrudes into spheres of life where it is inappropriate. As it stands, it thus allows us to do precisely what a Weberian rationalisation theory should do: criticising the proliferation of a norm-free means-rationality at the expense of a rationality that permits deliberation about normative ends. It allows us, on a sidenote, to make sense of such a slogan as ‘*rendementsdenken*.’ The distinction between system and lifeworld enables us to do this even though markets and bureaucracies are never fully shaped by purposive rationality and, likewise, universities and families are never fully structured by communicative reason.

In what follows, however, I want to argue that the distinction between system and lifeworld—and as a result, Habermas’s rationalisation thesis as a whole—becomes problematic in yet another way. That is, I will argue that the role of system in Habermas’s two-level theory injects this theory with an ambiguity that, even though Habermas aims to convert it into a synthesis, turns out to become a dilemma.

This ambiguity manifests itself in Habermas’s stance toward system integration, which he, on the terrain of the lifeworld, condemns as the proliferation of a colonising nihilist reason and, on the terrain of the system itself, praises for ‘delivering the goods’. More specifically, Habermas includes the system perspective in his two-level theory of society for two main reasons. Firstly, he does not want to disregard the societal benefits of system integration. And secondly, the more important one for our purposes, he wants to connect his theory up to several strands in social science, notably to Parsons’ systems theory. Parsons himself was deeply influenced by Weber. Moreover, among these

strands of social science are also ‘decision-theoretic and game-theoretic approaches in economics, sociology and social psychology.’<sup>87</sup>

What these approaches have in common is that they start from a picture of a cognitive-instrumental agent, the type of agent that Charles Taylor called the ‘punctual self’.<sup>88</sup> As we have already seen above, Habermas self-consciously accepts this picture as the basis of the systems part of his social theory. This type of agent acts according to a logic of a neutral technical instrument oriented toward successfully achieving a determinate end. As we saw in the previous paragraph, Habermas accepts this type of agent in order to retain the various benefits of the systems approach and system integration. An entirely different reason for accepting this picture, however, is so that he can attack it head-on for being too narrow.<sup>89</sup> After all, the critique that the naive picture of instrumental agency is ‘parasitic’ on communicative action, like system is parasitic on the lifeworld, forms the foundation of his colonisation thesis. So as we see, Habermas both wants to both conserve and criticise this picture in his two-level theory. This ambiguity, as we will presently see, puts Habermas in a very weird spot.

Philosophers like Charles Taylor, who have no intention of keeping anything of the naive picture of agency, can simply completely demolish this picture. Taylor, for example, simply points to the hidden ontological assumptions of this picture. According to him, this picture presupposes a kind of social atomism in which individuals are prior to society; it also presupposes society as an objective world in which the instrumental agents can intervene. Habermas chooses a similar strategy, and hesitantly commits the picture of the instrumental agent to a realist ontology: ‘The first [goal-directed action], which for the sake of simplicity I shall call the “realistic,” starts from the ontological presupposition of the world as the sum total of what is the case’.<sup>90</sup> Here, he probably already foresees the fact that he would also have to accept this kind of metaphysical ontology at least with regard to one part of his social theory. But, he will have thought, this does make it easier to criticise the colonisation of the lifeworld on the basis of a broader phenomenologically-informed ontology.

Furthermore, instrumental action, for Habermas, appears to be a real thing rather than merely a nifty assumption for doing social research. He tells us that the distinction between strategic and communicative action is not simply analytic, but can be used to pick out actual, empirical instances

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<sup>87</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 85.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> In section II, we saw that he set up this Weberian picture precisely in order to overcome this overly narrow view of social agency.

<sup>90</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 11.



of behaviour. This should be done on the basis of whether the participant in social action ‘adopts either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding’, and these attitudes can be picked up on by way of ‘intuitive knowledge’.<sup>91</sup>

So now we have a number of elements concerning system-rationality that we can put together. We have a neutral, technical-instrumental picture of rationality; we have the ontological implications concomitant with this picture; and we have the embodiment of this picture of rationality in techno-science as the driving force of both the capitalist economy, bureaucratic administration, and an increasingly large part of society as a whole. When we add all these elements together, we get an ontological picture of a system propelled by the advance of a purposive rationality—more or less the original picture of Weberian rationalisation.

On this picture, the system is concerned merely with efficiency rather than values, merely with means rather than ends. In that sense, as we have seen, the system-rationalisation of more and more spheres of society represents the rise of *nihilism*. We come to see the system as an autonomously operating machine that annihilates all value-laden and communicative practices in society under the banner of efficiency. The unstoppable development of technology, the exploitation of capitalism, the thickening of bureaucracy—these are all just the different faces of the ‘animated machine’ that marches on precisely if no-one does anything, i.e. if no-one opposes it with substance through the process of communicative deliberation.<sup>92</sup> In the case no-one acts with an eye to properly established ends, we lose our autonomy at the hands of the system; we become mere heteronomous means for the further proliferation of that system. The system thus appears as the default setting of the social world, ‘running on automatic’.<sup>93</sup> The nothingness of the nihilism is, then, not an absolute nothingness, but the absence of proper (or, properly established) ends. Consequently, what remains when we strip the social world of autonomous action is the metaphysical substratum of the social world consisting merely of means-ends-rationality: the system.

What’s more, this reveals a hidden essentialism in Habermas’s account of system. For the essence of the metaphysical substratum is the criterion of efficiency itself. It is the default force of instrumental reason that propels the system in its uni-linear track, namely the track that is most instrumental to other instrumentally established ends. In this way, Habermas finds himself in a camp with neoclassical economists who hold that efficiency is the “soul” of the market, and that

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<sup>91</sup> Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 286.

<sup>92</sup> The expression ‘animated machine’ is taken from Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 1402. See also Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 307.

<sup>93</sup> Gregg Lambert, *Report to the Academy (RE: The New Conflict of the Faculties)* (Aurora: Davies Group, 2001), pp. 92-93.

any outside intervening force could thus only be in the way of this inherent efficiency.<sup>94</sup> And, we have to believe that this was his plan all along by developing a social theory that incorporates systems theory.

We can see the essentialism of efficiency in Habermas's definition of instrumental action, which, the reader will be reminded, he described as an action considered under the aspect of 'following technical rules of action'.<sup>95</sup> As we have also seen, Habermas views such rule-following as a mechanical, instrumental, a-social operation. Wittgenstein in his notes on rule-following, however, has explicitly set out to deconstruct the Habermasian picture of technical action: 'The machine ... seems already to contain its own mode of operation.'<sup>96</sup> This picture cannot, he concludes, be true, since a rule never contains the rules for its own application: 'no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule.'<sup>97</sup>

What, according to Wittgenstein, determines the connection between the rule and its application are our customs and practices signified by the notion of a language-game. Knowing how to follow a rule, then, still counts as mastering a 'technique', but the kind of social technique that one acquires through training and education into a language-game.<sup>98</sup> The Habermasian picture of technical rationality, in denying the role of the language-game, commits itself to a picture of a 'rails invisibly laid to infinity' in some kind of Platonic heaven.<sup>99</sup> But we cannot now, says Wittgenstein, consult this Platonic heaven in playing the language-game, that is, in our acting, so this picture cannot do any actual work: it is merely a picture.

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<sup>94</sup> Feenberg notes that Habermas stance thus precludes a Marxian critique of such neoclassical economics. That is, what Marx did is to show that market failure was no externality—a deviation from the ideal-type—but an inherent part of how markets function in their necessarily social contexts. Thus, rather than being able to say that "the market" does not exist (even at the level of ideal-types), Habermas needs to concede this point if he still wants to criticise market-imperatives (the soul of the market) invading the lifeworld.

<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Habermas defines strategic action as an action considered under the aspect of '*following rules of rational choice*'. My italics. See Habermas, *TCAI*, p. 285.

<sup>96</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §193.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, §201. See also the example of the pupil completing the sequence of  $n+2$ , who continues with the sequence  $n+4$  after a 1000 in §186. This sceptical remark can be viewed as a cousin of the Duhem-Quine thesis and the problem of induction.

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.*, §198: 'I have been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now I do so react to it.' And §202: 'That's why "following a rule" is a practice.' The language-game, then, is not simply the field in which to deploy the technique one had acquired prior to the language-game, but, rather, the language-game constitutes what it means to deploy this technique. To speak with Gadamer, that other inspiration for Habermas, we do not first have the rule and apply it only in a second step, but the application co-constitutes the rule itself.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, §218.

Saying that something is merely a picture is the Wittgensteinian phrasing for calling something a metaphysics. The picture denotes a way of viewing that denies its being situated within a language-game. So in the case of Habermas's instrumental reason, Habermas comes to hold that the workings of this type of rationality are not bound by any language-game. Formulated differently, instrumental reason, on this picture, is unconditioned by any system—it does, therefore, not live up to Habermas's ambition to differentiate within Weberian formal rationality.<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, the charge that Habermas's rationality-type is not bound by any language-game was precisely the form of Lyotard's criticism of communicative rationality. It means, quite simply, that Habermas's account of instrumental rationality is metaphysical.

Summing up then, Habermas subscribes to a picture of the system as the substratum of the social world, which has as its essence the logic of instrumental rationality. In this way, the central premise of rationalisation theory, the premise of nihilism, represents a metaphysics of instrumental reason.

This metaphysics now allows us to make a sharp distinction between the system and the lifeworld. And that distinction, in turn, allows for an as clear as possible framework for interpreting the cases in which system oversteps its bounds. It does not, however, equip us with any tools to criticise the development of system on its own terrain. After all, Habermas's systems approach assumes the picture of a neutrally rationalising system. But, as we have seen, research in the field of STS tends to show that mere reference to an isolated technical rationality cannot explain the development of technologies.<sup>101</sup> The system will therefore become imbued with biases, such as the institutional racial or gender biases that research in the humanities is continuously uncovering. Habermas, however, has no way of picking up on these biases, because they will remain invisible to the perspective that assumes system develops according to norm-free patterns of goal-oriented behaviour.

Equally, we cannot adopt the participant perspective of communicative rationality to criticise system in its proper social spheres. The norms that become embodied in the diverse social institutions of system do not take on the form of communicatively structured processes. Such norms, rather, enter the system in media-specific form. As such, they escape from 'the intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice, and [are] henceforth accessible only to the counterintuitive knowledge of the social sciences.'<sup>102</sup> And we have already seen how these norms are not accessible to this counterintuitive viewpoint either. Thus the critical dualism of purposive

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<sup>100</sup> And this resulted from Habermas's wish to do away with Weber's idea of disenchantment, but to keep Weber's related idea of nihilism.

<sup>101</sup> This empirical evidence reinforces the conceptual point regarding the metaphysics of instrumental reason.

<sup>102</sup> Habermas, *TCAII*, p. 173.

and communicative rationality runs into trouble here, as the social injustices internal to the machine-like structures in society now remain invisible to either type of rationality. These injustices slip through Habermas's critical net.

Above, I briefly mentioned that Habermas's ambiguous stance toward the system would turn out to be a dilemma. A metaphysics of instrumental reason that is blind to the biases of the system forms one horn of this dilemma. Now, I want to turn to the other horn of the dilemma, which revolves around the 'relaxing' of the dualism of system and lifeworld with regard to value-neutrality. To be clear, I do not think that Habermas can simply ignore the metaphysical contours of the system, since he has self-consciously set it up in terms of a neutral instrumental rationality, realist ontology, empirical referents, etc. But let us now imagine that this was all exaggerated, that, for example, the picture of the cognitive-instrumental agent serves not as an ontological position, but as a methodological assumption. In a word, let us imagine that the distinction between norm-free sociality and normatively-laden practices gets 'deflated'. For only if Habermas would recognise that purposive-rationality is always already mediated by social or normative considerations, would he be able to discern systemically embodied ends and thus be able to criticise the system on its own terrain. This would, then, require a considerable expansion on his two-level theory of society, turning it into (at the least) a three-level theory which incorporates various approaches. I will call this, hereafter, 'the expanded view'.

Andrew Feenberg appears to think something like this is a viable approach for Habermas. He even thinks this is what Habermas is doing in his later writings on law, where Habermas works from the idea that 'pure' moral norms and specific legal norms mutually determine each other. According to Feenberg, Habermas would be able to do the same with regard to abstract and concretely situated technology: 'Like law, sometimes technology is overextended, sometimes it is politically biased, sometimes it is both. Several different critical approaches are needed, depending on the case.'<sup>103</sup> It seems to me, however, that Habermas precisely cannot say that technical mechanisms—from technology to bureaucracy—are sometimes *both* overextended and biased. This is, I think, exactly the dilemma Habermas is now facing.

To be sure, on the expanded view, we can observe it when the system comes to embody political biases. We are now able, in other words, to criticise the injustices that result from system operating in its proper social sphere. But now it seems to me that the idea of the system colonising the lifeworld has become quite problematic. For if we take the central intuition of Habermas's social theory, the intuition that nihilist reason is eating up our communicatively structured activities, then we can see that this no longer applies. There is, after all, on the expanded view, no longer a strictly

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<sup>103</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 180.

nihilist system. The point of the colonisation thesis was that norm-free system activities neutralised those practices that required our collective deliberation about norms. But if we take out the premise of a norm-free system, then that system can no longer do such neutralising.

Let's concretise this a little. We could imagine a debate about policy measures in a university institution. The case at hand requires a *choice* concerning the ends the university wishes to strive for, the values it wishes to represent, the norms it wants to embody, etc. System would here be colonising the lifeworld if this choice would be bypassed and the university board would simply choose the policy that was most efficient, for example, which would be the most profitable. It would seem here that norm-free market-imperatives have invaded a practical, normative matter; that the board seems to have reduced a practical issue to a technical affair. But of course, with an expanded non-naive theoretical framework, this could not at all be the case. The choice for 'the most efficient' policy would constitute a political choice in its own right. There would thus be no colonisation, for there was nothing—no norm-free sociality—to do the colonising.

Strangely, Habermas seems to wish to concur with the criticism that the technocrat misses the point that even his policy suggestions are political choices rather than technical solutions. But this merely seems to be so. For Habermas tells us, in the *Technology*-essay, that '[t]he concealment of [the difference between purposive-rational action and interaction] proves the ideological power of the technocratic consciousness'.<sup>104</sup> It's not that the technocrat's suggestions are not technical solutions, but it's just that such technical solutions have no place in democratic deliberations—this is the colonisation thesis in a nutshell. Thus the technocrat denies the distinction between system and lifeworld, and in doing so, his system imperatives colonise that lifeworld. But, on the expanded view, we should say that the technocrat was in fact half-right. Indeed, there is no dualism between norm-free technicalities and normative politics. This, however, does not mean that everything can be technique, but rather that everything is politics.<sup>105</sup>

For the critique of a neutralising system to work, there first needs to be neutrally developing system. Because only if the system acts like an autonomously operating machine, can that machine's encroachment on the lifeworld be criticised for its neutralisation (annihilation) of normatively-laden parts of social life. Put differently, for Habermas to be able to criticise the technocrat, there first needs to be a technocrat. In fact, the colonisation thesis is paradigmatically exemplified by the bureaucrat taking over the politician's job, thus turning a practical matter into a

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<sup>104</sup> Habermas, *Technology*, p. 107. 'Interaction' is the forerunner of communicative action.

<sup>105</sup> A statement such as 'everything is politics' may seem grand, but it has a rhetorical character. Moreover, the reverse, that some things are able to withdraw themselves from politics, because they simply 'are' can only be a species of metaphysical ontology. The right thing to do, I think, is to lift the dualism between politics and technique altogether and insist on their co-determination. Cf. footnote 67.

technical affair, i.e. technocracy. The bureaucrat can now be criticised for forgetting or even concealing the dualism of technicality and practicality, strategics and communication.<sup>106</sup> But how are we to judge that the technocrat is colonising political processes when we do not think technocracy is even a possibility?

Leaving the dualism between means and ends aside for a short moment, I want to turn to another core intuition represented in Habermas's colonisation thesis. It is the idea that we have to *talk about* the choices we make in the lifeworld, because otherwise the steering-media will take over and mute the conversation. This intuition is captured in the distinction between action oriented toward success and action oriented toward mutual understanding. The colonisation thesis, then, is not so much about means and ends, fact and value as about the way in which these ends and values get decided upon—i.e. by monological calculation vs. dialogical deliberation. Now the importance of this core intuition, that we must remain in conversation rather than closing it by pointing to technical facts, can, I think, hardly be overstated. The point is, however, that these steering-media cannot—on the expanded view—bypass the conversation. Of course, there are situations in which there are clear democratic deficits, where political matters are either discussed behind closed doors or dealt with by civil servants as a marginal matter.<sup>107</sup> But the more interesting cases of colonisation of the lifeworld take place in communicative contexts.

These are the cases in which political discussion or democratic deliberation is dominated by references to efficiency, economic growth, GDP, return on investment, etc, rather than the ends and values that signify our collective will. A term like 'rendementsdenken' attempts to catch the narrowness of such discussion. The policy we choose, so runs the often hidden but sometimes explicit assumption of the technocratically inclined politician, should simply be the one that is the most efficient, that realises the most economic growth. On the Habermasian scheme, such references to efficiency, to purposively-rational considerations ('rendementsdenken'), are precisely a way of non-talking. These references short-circuit the conversation by pointing to technical facts, whereas we are not dealing with what *is*, but with what *ought to be*. And this bypassing of communication represents, Habermas holds, system's colonisation of the lifeworld.

On the expanded view, however, we recognise that technical considerations are always social through and through, that efficiency is never an isolated parameter that can end matters. We recognise, then, that the speaking in politics in a purposively-rational fashion, can never be a form

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<sup>106</sup> See also Habermas, *Technology*, p. 105: '[W]ith the institutionalization of scientific-technical progress ... men lose consciousness of the dualism of work and interaction.'

<sup>107</sup> The latter case, it seems to me, cannot be considered as an instance of colonisation of the lifeworld, but as system going about its ways. For example, the design of the bridges in Manhattan was probably conducted in a clerical, depoliticised way, but still turned out to be a politically imbued process.

of non-talking. The term efficiency serves as a political value as much as freedom or equality, and it needs as much explanation as the latter two—efficiency needs to be embedded in a web of beliefs, in a horizon, in a paradigm, in a language-game, or what have you. It is, in other words, not a constant in the system, but a variable in it. There is no strict dualism between politics and technology, and there is thus no dualism between a talking and a non-talking. It follows, then, that there is no colonisation by the one of the other.

Habermas thus falls for the ideological illusion that Marcuse warned about. Technology or technical policy solutions appear neutral, whereas they embody values that are convenient for specific social groups—just like the bike appears like a neutral thing, whereas it turned out to be the outcome of a social process. This means that there is a reversal here: the technocrat does not dress up mere means as ends, but he dresses up ends as mere means. His technical suggestions do not represent a non-talking that pretends to be a talking, but a talking that pretends to be a non-talking.

The technocrat is effective, then, to the extent that people actually buy into the idea that his suggestions are merely technical, that his suggestions are *in fact* more ‘realistic’ than another, i.e. better attuned to a social reality ensouled by efficiency. And, it follows, all other values that we might want to realise can only be achieved at the expense of said efficiency. That is, values or ends need to be *bought*. This means that every time we push for the realisation of properly established ends, we open ourselves up to the blackmail of efficient performance<sup>108</sup>, or to a trade-off model.<sup>109</sup> For example, environmentalists have been struggling with the charge that a green economy is admittedly more desirable, but that it can only be attained at an unacceptable expense of economic prosperity.<sup>110</sup> For the technocrat, then, it turns out to be very convenient if social theory concluded his way of talking is a non-political non-talking that merely follows the optimal cost/benefit-ratio. In this way, Habermas comes to reinforce what he means to criticise. This means that if we judge Habermas’s distinction between actions oriented to success (‘a non-talking’) and actions oriented to mutual understanding (‘a talking’) pragmatically, like we should, then we have to at least conclude that it has very unfortunate effects.

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<sup>108</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv: ‘Be operational [...] or disappear.’

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, p. 92.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93. We can see, notes Feenberg, that the trade-off model is ideological by looking at similar cases from the past. The idea that the abolition of admittedly unjust practices could simply not be paid for has also turned up regarding slavery and child labour. The abolition of child labour, for instance, led not to a simple loss in prosperity, but to a radical change in our society and economy which redefined the parameters of what efficiency and prosperity mean. Such cases also indicate the untenability of any position that views efficiency as a constant.

## IV. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have posed the question of whether we can still make sense of Habermas's Weberian thematic that holds that modernisation is at heart typified by the proliferation of the nihilist force of rationalisation that tends to colonise normatively-laden socio-cultural practices. In attempting to answer this question, I have argued that the basic premise of rationalisation as a nihilist force is fundamentally mistaken, and that giving up this premise also means giving up the colonisation thesis (if one denies the existence of nihilist rationalisation, then one must deny the idea that it is colonising the lifeworld).

To put it differently, we can say that Habermas's ambiguity toward the systems perspective and system integration resurfaces in many irksome places. Habermas attempts to turn this ambiguity into a virtuous critical synthesis, but, I think, ultimately fails. We can see this if we dramatise the implications of Habermas's two-level theory of society, as I have attempted to do to small or larger extents. The ambiguity in Habermas's social theory, then, turns into a dilemma which has as its direct result that Habermas's diagnosis of the central pathology of modernity—the colonisation of the lifeworld—is both theoretically untenable and practically undesirable.

If, on the one hand, Habermas takes very seriously the intuition of a rampant nihilist reason at the heart of modern societies, he ends up subscribing to a metaphysics of instrumental reason. The conceptual notion of the system gets reified into a metaphysical entity. Habermas does that in multiple ways. He associates the system with a realist ontology and he interprets purposive-rationality as a pure, mechanical following of rules. Furthermore, even if this were not the case, the notion of system *behaves* like a reified entity. For example, it is the driving force of capitalism and bureaucracy that takes on autonomous forms and that must, in all its rampant autonomous growth, be contained by lifeworld practices. And the essence of this system, the propellor of system integration, is an a-social, norm-free instrumental reason.

This metaphysics, moreover, has the following consequences. The sharp distinction between system and the lifeworld offers a clear basis for critique. That is to say, when the purposive-rationality of the system overextends into social areas in which it is not at home (i.e., the lifeworld), this rationality-type can now be rationally evaluated and condemned by that other rationality-type, i.e. communicative reason. The clear distinction between these two spheres, thus, allows for a clear interpretation of the colonisation thesis. However, at the same time, the patterns of purposively-rational behaviour that make up the system cannot now be criticised in their proper social spheres such as the market and the state. This means that institutional biases that enter the system in media-specific forms must remain invisible to Habermas's social theory.

If, on the other hand, Habermas could somehow 'relax' the distinction between system and lifeworld and expand his social theory so that it would recognise the sociality of instrumental



reason, precisely the opposite ensues. In this case, Habermas would be able to criticise—using the expanded view of technical rationality—the institutional injustices internal to the system on its own terrain. However, now the critical idea of the colonisation of the lifeworld becomes problematic. For if we lift the dualism between norm-free and normative sociality, between deliberation about means and about ends, between action oriented to success and action oriented to mutual understanding, we also lose the ability to clearly discern the former colonising the latter.

It seems to me that such is the dilemma that Habermas faces precisely because he departs from the premise of a nihilist reason that threatens to overextend into inappropriate social spheres. The dilemma consists in the fact that his social theory would have either to commit to a social force that tends to become metaphysical or to blur the boundaries of that force to such an extent that the ‘overextension’ part of the theory becomes problematic. In this light, it is no coincidence that both of Habermas’s rationality-types have been and can be criticised for becoming metaphysical. Giving them such a strict edge is the only way to save the central critical thesis of the *Theory of Communicative Action*: the thesis that system tends to colonise the lifeworld.

Moreover, we have also noted briefly that the dualism of system and lifeworld has the perverse effect of reinforcing the parameters of the criticised. It provides credibility to the technocrat in the sense that his views appear neutral, technical and more realistic—technical, but merely inappropriate. This commits political critique to a trade-off model in which desired values and ends can only be pursued at the expense of prosperity or efficiency. The relaxing of the dualism on the expanded view lifts the strict contrast between technical and political rationality. This means that, if the views of the technocrat still seem to be simply the most efficient, this appearance now does not result from his usage of a fundamentally different type of rationality, but from specific social arrangements and power relations.

This, I think, casts a fundamental doubt on the sociological purview of Habermas’s sociology of reason. For it means that viewing social situations while departing from pre-set conceptions of rationality will result in a theoretical blindness to a host of crucial sociological factors. What social theory needs to do, it seems to me, is not to dismiss the politician’s claim to efficiency out of hand for being a mere technicality, but precisely to investigate and identify the hidden moral agenda’s, social contexts, power relations, and so on. This means that what appears rational cannot now be taken as a given, but is precisely the object of study. For instance, if the technocrat’s views appear rational, then the question is *why* his views appear rational, or why they appear as one specific type of rationality rather than another one—e.g., what or who determines when a statement is a form of talking or non-talking?

This reverses the status of rationality-types in Habermas’s sociological framework: they move from being the explanans to explanandum. We saw a similar kind of logic in the reversal of the

relation between means and ends (or, talking and non-talking; technique and politics) in the functioning of the 'technocrat'. Does the technocratically inclined politician deal merely in technicalities, while dressing it up as politics? Or does he deal in politics, while dressing it up as technicalities? Choose either position and you can accuse the other position of falling for an ideological illusion.<sup>111</sup> This is exemplified by the Marcuse-Habermas debate. Habermas says to Marcuse that he got tricked by the universal technology that passes off as politics, whereas Marcuse can criticise Habermas for getting deluded by the neutral appearance of technology that was in fact invested with class-interests. Now while it may appear that the reasonings in this thesis lead to a Marcusean position, I think the reversal of the status of rationality-types really opens up an interesting question: does a sociology that is spearheaded by a conception of different rationality-types still represent the most interesting way of doing social science?

We can pose this question in another way as well. Do we (a) want the various rationality-types as the explanandum of social theory, do we (b) want them as simultaneously explanans and explanandum or (c) as neither? Answers (b) and (c), I think, can be regarded as a move 'beyond' a Habermasian rationalisation theory of which (c) would be the most radical. Marcuse's approach can be regarded as an instance of (b), while an example of (c), it seems to me, would be the works of Jean-François Lyotard, especially *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard wants to retain the thematics we have been dealing with in this thesis, while his phrasing indicates he wants to move away from the paradigm of rationality. For instance, Lyotard poses the question of modern legitimation in a way that reveals both the wish to regard 'rationality' as an explanandum as well as explanans, while relinquishing the vocabulary of rationalities: 'who decides [sociality/justice] what knowledge [rationality/science] is, and who knows [rationality] what needs to be decided [sociality]?'<sup>112</sup> Similarly, Lyotard identifies a social process that is akin to rationalisation, which he dubs 'performativity'. Performativity is both connected to technology and capitalism, but can only function *within* specific language-games, so that it is both social and technical.

Whether a moderate position (b) or a radical suggestion (c) will prove more desirable is a matter for another time and place. What I hope to have shown in this thesis, however, is that one should exercise caution in critically interpreting modern society through the lens of Habermas's pre-set

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<sup>111</sup> It seems to me that most Habermasians intuitively want to hold both positions at the same time. For example, a Habermasian might say that the technologies of a technocrat turn into pathological politics once applied in the lifeworld. It seems to me, however, that such a line of defence ignores the chiasmus at issue here (means that were in fact ends, or ends that were in fact means).

<sup>112</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 9. The brackets are meant to indicate that Lyotard can be read as interrogating Habermas: who decides what instrumental rationality is? Like the form of the validity claim of 'rightness', Lyotard feels that this should be decided not by the philosopher, but by the sociologist. Lyotard thus points to an irony in Habermas, for the latter positions himself like an expert, a technocrat of reason.

rationality-types. For to point to the appearance of these rationality-types is never to tell the whole story, but requires further sociological explanation. This means, as I have attempted to show, that we cannot diagnose society's pathologies by referring to system's colonisation of the lifeworld. Instead, we have to find new, additional concepts for engaging in the kind of critical theory that can help us to make sense of our world and times.

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