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The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld

Habermas borrowed his idea of the lifeworld from Edmund Husserl, but, to understand the role this idea plays within his theory, one needs to turn to the work of Georg Lukács, where the ‘humanity’ or ‘soul’ of workers allegedly protects them against the full effects of reification.1 The lifeworld concept is expressly designed to counter the view that the encroachment of exchange relations on human life has been an unmitigated disaster. With this concept, Habermas takes aim at first-generation critical theorists who claim that human beings are not only increasingly reified, but that reification meets little or no resistance from its victims. If the optimal organisation of relations of production requires the co-ordination of people from whom all vestiges of life have been drained, individuals now satisfy this requirement in order, paradoxically, stay alive. Under late capitalism, ‘[t]he will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity’.2 Stating, in an interview, that his primary concern in The Theory of Communicative Action was to ‘develop a theoretical

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1 Lukács 1971, p. 172.
apparatus with which the phenomenon of “reification” (Lukács) could be addressed’, Habermas claims that the view of reification offered by first-generation critical theorists fails to ‘exhaust the analytic resources’ of modernity that he articulates in his theory of communicative action.3

At the end of the first volume of The Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas contrasts Lukács’s view of reification to that of Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Although he will also modify Lukács’s claim that something in the ‘subjective nature of human beings’ resists reification,4 Habermas nonetheless concurs with the Hungarian philosopher that reification has limits. Against Adorno and Horkheimer, then, who ‘do not agree with Lukács’ view that the seemingly complete rationalization of the world has its limit in the formal character of its own rationality’,5 Habermas argues that the functionalist rationality of the economic and political subsystems is restricted by its very one-dimensionality. It confronts a ‘unity of rationality’ that lies ‘beneath the husk’ of everyday practice.6 The univalent rationality of the subsystems conflicts with the multivalent communicative rationality that characterises action in the lifeworld. Although it can undoubtedly be damaged by them, communicative rationality inherently resists the colonising incursions of functionalist systems.

Habermas explicitly bases his distinction between system and lifeworld on Emile Durkheim’s distinction between two modes of societal integration: system integration and social integration. Communicative action in the lifeworld is integrated ‘by a normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus’, whereas action in the economic and political subsystems is integrated ‘by a nonnormative regulation of individual decisions that extends beyond the actors’ consciousnesses’.7 However, system and lifeworld are distinguished in other important ways as well. Characterised by functionalist rationality, the economic and political subsystems also secure the material reproduction of society as a whole. By contrast, the lifeworld is geared towards the symbolic production and reproduction of its structural components: culture, society, and personality. Symbolic reproduction is achieved through ‘a cooperative process of interpretation’ in which lifeworld members ‘relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective

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3 Habermas 1993, p. 170.
4 Habermas 1984, p. 368.
5 Habermas 1984, p. 377.
6 Habermas 1984, p. 382.
7 Habermas 1987a, p. 117.