The present paper was to a major extent stimulated by the genuinely fruitful debate between Deborah Cook and Gordon Finlayson in *Historical Materialism*.¹ The debate was about whether it is Habermas’s or Adorno’s version of the theory of modernity that can make the stronger claim as a critical theory of society. More specifically, the crucial question at issue is whether it is Habermas’s theory of modernity in terms of the rationalisation of the lifeworld, or Adorno’s appropriation and reformulation of the Hegelian concept of determinate negation (which constitutes the core of his *Negative Dialectics*) that can grasp society from the viewpoint of its possible transformation, through a historically specific theory of social constitution.

Arguing that Habermas already applauds the realisation of reason in contemporary society in his work, *Between Facts and Norms*, legitimating thereby the existent state of affairs and rendering social criticism superfluous, Deborah Cook turns to the Adornian arsenal of dialectical concepts such as contradiction

¹ Finlayson 2003; Cook 2003.
and determinate negation in order to account for the normative basis of social criticism.

On the contrary, for Finlayson, it is Adorno’s ‘negativism’ which rules out the possibility of critique. This is because Adorno argues repeatedly that society has become completely reified. This means that domination has increased to such an extent that, by controlling everything, it prevents the formation of any critical consciousness and therefore a critical theory – including that of Adorno himself. Thus, for Finlayson, the only viable path to a normative basis of social criticism is that offered by Habermas’s theory of communicative action.

The latter ties the criteria and conditions of social criticism to the rational potential implicit in the everyday practices of linguistic communication. Habermas’s normative theory of society, which poses the conditions of possibility of justice and autonomy, takes the form of a pragmatic theory of meaning whose crux consists in the insight that linguistic understanding [Sprachverstehen] and reaching understanding with another person [Verständigung] are indissolubly interwoven. As Maeve Cooke has convincingly argued, the Habermasian performative evaluation of reasons inherent in the so-called illocutionary speech-acts is significant in two respects: on the one hand, it lays the ground for a deliberative conception of democracy, ‘in which personal and public autonomy are key values, in which citizens hold one another rationally accountable and in which potentially transformatory public deliberation is given a central place’.2 On the other, it points to a post-metaphysical yet non-defeatist conception of rationality in a twofold sense. First, rationality is anchored in this world and can be rationally translated into a universal feature of human interaction. Second, the immanent rather than otherworldly account both of truth and justice (moral validity), does not make them conditional on the contingency of historically and culturally specific forms of life. On the contrary, it claims a context-transcendent conception of truth and justice, in the sense of being universally applicable and cognitively interpreted. This idea of a context-transcendent rationality is mainly inspired and governed by the cleavage between the idealising presuppositions of argumentation and actually existing practices. The Habermasian subscription to a context-transcendent conception of truth and moral validity is linked to his attempt to formulate a standard for criticising...